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## Met with skepticism, CBI reaches culmination with championship

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OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) -College basketball's third postseason tournament is here to stay.

Rick Giles, the president of the College Basketball Invitational, said Thursday that the alternative to the National Invitation Tournament considers its first year a success and plans a similar event next year.

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In the shadows of the Final Four and the NIT, the CBI will crown its champion Friday night when Tulsa (24-14) hosts Bradley (21-16) in Game 3 of the championship series.

Initially met with skepticism as a tournament to crown the 98th-best team in the country, the CBI has gained momentum at least in the cities where the games have been played. Tulsa drew its second-largest crowd of the season in Game 1 of the

championship series, and Bradley had 9,014 fans - about 600 shy of its season average - on hand for Game 2.

More than 6,300 tickets had been sold for the decisive third game at Tulsa's 8,355-seat Reynolds Center.

Giles called the 16-team tournament a "terrific" success, in part because of competitive games and strong crowds that organizers couldn't have predicted.

For Tulsa and Bradley, it's been a chance to gain momentum after seasons that would have otherwise just been so-so.

"I think as that word gets out to others, I think both coaching-wise and administratively, that's going to have a big benefit for us," Giles said.

The tournament got off to a rocky start. The 16-team bracket didn't get finalized until after midnight on Selection Sunday, less than 48 hours before the first games were to be

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played.

Giles said one factor was a cease-and-desist letter that the NIT sent to the CBI a day earlier.

"That really got us all screwed up. They were telling teams, 'Don't play in this event. Don't talk to these guys,'" said Giles, the founder of The Gazelle Group, which operates the tournament.

The NCAA, which runs the NIT, referred questions to tournament director Christine Fallon. She did not return messages left by The Associated Press by phone and e-mail Thursday.

Giles said there are lessons to be learned from the inaugural event. He plans to contact the participants to ask what worked and what didn't, in hopes of improving next year's event. One expected change is that only two first-round games will be played on the Tuesday following Selection Sunday, instead of four. That will give two more teams additional time to prepare to play and also sell tickets.

Giles is happy with the format, which involves playing games on campus sites on days when there are no NCAA tournament games - similar to the 32-team NIT, but with a best-of-three championship series.

"We're not trying to replace or displace the NIT. We're not trying to run them out of business," Giles said.

Tulsa athletic director Bubba Cunningham admitted having a little apprehension about signing up for the first-year tournament, but the fact that he'd dealt with The Gazelle Group for preseason tournaments - including this year's College Basketball Experience Classic - allayed any fears.

"I think it's been a great experience for us. We were hopeful going into the season to go postseason and we thought we had really good momentum toward the end of the season," Cunningham said.

"We were really trying to get into something postseason, and I think that this tournament has really kind of filled the void that the NIT contraction and automatic qualification has created."

After the NIT cut down from 40 to 32 teams and gave out eight automatic bids to regular-season conference champions that didn't win their league tournament, there were 16 teams that didn't have their usual chance to get into the postseason.

"For our program right now, it's perfect," Cunningham said.

When deciding whether to pursue the CBI, Bradley athletic director Ken Kavanagh said he took into consideration the desire of the team's best players, including seniors Jeremy Crouch and Daniel Ruffin, to continue their careers.

Kavanagh called the CBI a positive experience and pointed out that less than one-third of Division I basketball programs play in the postseason.

"The more opportunities there are out there, I think it's good for college basketball," Kavanagh said.

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