

# Some Pac-10 coaches support postseason tourney

Proponents say the television exposure would be good publicity for the conference heading into the NCAAs

By Jason Sykes  
The Washington Daily

SEATTLE — Women's basketball coach Harold Rhodes isn't bitter as he talks about what could have been, just wistful.

His Cougars' season is officially over now, having come to a close half an hour earlier when the final buzzer sounded in Washington's 81-63 victory. In reality, though, Washington State's season ended weeks, even months, ago after a five-game losing streak left the Cougars with a 9-12 overall record, a 3-9 Pac-10 Conference mark and no hope of receiving any postseason invitations on Selection Sunday.

However, the players refused to pack it in and entered last Saturday's season finale having won three of five and playing tournament-bound UCLA to a standstill.

"Everything has come together for us in the past two or three weeks," Rhodes said. "I think if we had a Pac-10 tournament we could cause a lot of problems for some people."

But that of course is only wishful thinking, at least for now.

The Pac-10 is one of only two conferences — the Ivy League is the other — that does not use a postseason tournament to decide which team is anointed champion and granted the league's automatic berth in the NCAA Tournament.

Rhodes is not alone in wanting to see the Pac-10 adopt a postseason format.

Both of the University of Washington's head coaches support it.



"I've always been a proponent of it," said Bob Bender, Washington's men's basketball head coach. "I think the advantages outweigh the disadvantages."

Women's head coach June Daugherty agreed.

"I think if we had it, we'd have a lot more [television] exposure at this time of year," Daugherty said. "So it would be good for the Pac-10 publicity wise, and I think it would be good to help get teams tournament-ready going into the NCAAs."

Jim Muldoon, the Pac-10's assistant commissioner, said seven of the 10 members endorsed a postseason format at last summer's meetings.

The problem is, eight years are required to make the change.

"Maybe the reason why [coaches don't want to change] is that the [NCAA Tournament] results, especially last year's, let you say 'Hey, the postseason tournament doesn't mean anything,'" Bender said.

That's something Lute Olson has long maintained. The coach of the defending national champion Arizona Wildcats touched on the subject in the Pac-10's weekly teleconference last week.

"I don't think the postseason tournament has anything to do with [NCAA success]

and never will," Olson said. "To me it's the most overrated thing in all of college basketball."

"People talk about how if you had a postseason tournament maybe another team could get in. [But] how many teams that are on the bubble would be knocked off?"

"It's a media thing more than anything else."

Dennis LaBissoniere has heard that line of argument before. As the Big Ten's assistant communications director, he was involved in the conference's decision to adopt a postseason tournament starting this year.

He said the biggest obstacle the conference ran into in making the switch was an adamantly opposed and extremely vocal minority.

"Some people in the conference felt that a tournament was not a positive step for Big Ten basketball and that it was not needed," he said.

LaBissoniere said the increased late-season exposure tournaments bring was a key selling point in winning the needed votes.

"I think they were persuaded that a tournament was a good way to focus attention on Big Ten basketball," LaBissoniere said. "We noticed as other conferences were having tournaments, a lot of attention was focused on them while we ran out our schedule and lost coverage."

Rhodes made a similar pitch for a Pac-10 tournament.

"From a national standpoint it gives resignation to the conference, and I just think we're missing the boat on it," he said.

"The selection committee is watching

ESPN and they're watching a lot of the [tournament] games that are going on, and everybody's talking about how this conference deserves six teams and that conference deserves six teams but no one's talking about the Pac-10.

"I think that hurts us this time of the year."

The 15-year Pac-10 veteran felt the Big Ten's switch would help his conference make a similar transition.

"I think some people are looking to see, 'O.K., the Big Ten tried it this year, how did it go?'" he said. "Well, it's going well."

LaBissoniere agreed.

"What happened this weekend was a very positive step toward keeping the tournament," he said, adding that the Big Ten commissioner called the tournament an "unqualified success."

The Big Ten, however, never had a tournament before this year; the Pac-10 experimented with one between 1987-90.

During those years, an average of three Pac-10 men's teams went to the Big Dance each year. In comparison, at least four men's programs have been selected every March since 1994. Five went last season, and four made it to the Sweet Sixteen with Olson's Wildcats bringing home the Pac-10's second national championship in three years.

"We've been through the Pac-10 tournament, and in my opinion, it hurt our league considerably in terms of how the teams went into the NCAA Tournament," Olson said. "The coaches in our league are well aware of how tough our conference is."

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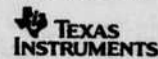
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