

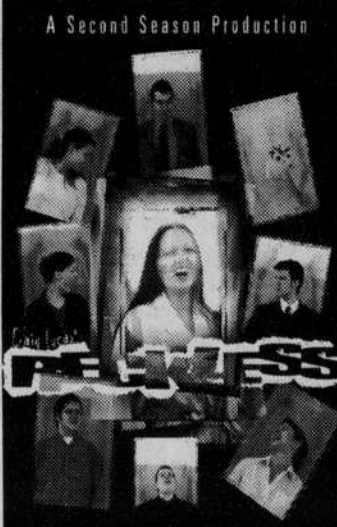
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Tournament's 'pod' system has its flaws

By Andrew Bagnato
Chicago Tribune

In an effort to ease travel and sell more tickets to early-round NCAA Tournament games, the NCAA this year created a "pod" system that allowed schools from different regionals to play in the same building in the first and second rounds.

It all made sense on paper. But the execution has been tricky. And the perception that some undeserving teams were given huge breaks may result in more tinkering next year.

One of the tournament's prime attractions has been the concept that all games are played on neutral floors. Of course, "neutral" is sometimes an illusion, as anyone who has played North Carolina in Charlotte or Greensboro knows. This year the committee gave up any pretense of neutrality. Maryland opens in Washington, D.C., a short drive from its campus in College Park. But few will quibble because the Terrapins earned the pampering — they're a No. 1 seed and they won the Atlantic Coast Conference regular-season title.

Heavier scrutiny will fall on Pitt and Illinois. The Panthers, a third seed who failed to win their conference, open the tournament in their own city. And the Illinois, a fourth seed, open in Chicago.

Plenty of others have gripes, including Notre Dame, which is seeded higher than Charlotte in the South Regional but will face a virtual road game against the 49ers in Greenville, S.C.

"How did the nine seed get to be the only team on the bus ride?" Irish coach Mike Brey asked. "They must know somebody on the committee."

Brey hasn't passed judgment on the system yet.

"I understand what they're trying to do," he said. "I think it's interesting that (No. 9 seed) Charlotte goes

two hours to Greenville, and we're an eight seed, and we don't go two hours to Chicago."

And Ohio State, the Big Ten tournament winner, is still wondering how it could sweep Illinois and wind up with a worse draw than them.

The Buckeyes are headed out to Albuquerque as the fourth seed in the West Regional, widely acknowledged to be the most rugged.

"It kind of seems a little wacky," Buckeye coach Jim O'Brien said. "It just reinforces the confusion ... how much I don't understand about how this works. Davidson, Miami, Missouri — for the four of us to go to Albuquerque seems a little bizarre to me."

Of course, coaches whose teams stayed close to home endorse the new system.

"Going to Pittsburgh is great for us," Cincinnati coach Bob Huggins said. "It's five hours away. We'll be able to sell as many tickets as they have available over there."

Selection committee chairman Lee Fowler acknowledged the inconsistencies, but said the change was worth it.

"There is travel still in this tournament," Fowler said. "We know that. We have cut it down, we hope."

"We're happy with what happened with our new system at this point in time where we can keep our athletes where their parents and families can see them."

The move nearly doubled — from 22 to 39 — the number of schools that will play in their own time zone the first weekend. Fifteen teams are traveling to a neighboring time zone, while five will cross two time zones and six will play three time zones away from home.

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Sports briefs

UO women golfers finish eighth

The Oregon women's golf team captured its best finish of the year as it placed eighth at the Pioneer Electronic Bruin Classic, played at the 6,116-yard, par 72 Menifee Lakes Country Club in Menifee, Calif.

Freshman Jess Carlyon shot a third round career-low 71 and placed fifth (73-78-71-222), the highest individual Duck finish this season. Senior Kathy Cho finished at plus-10 and tied for 15th with a 226 composite.

Overall, the Ducks shot a 925 in the three rounds. Oregon finished 49 strokes behind tournament champion Pepperdine, which shot a 12-over 876.

Up next, the Ducks will host the Duck Invitational, March 28 and 29 at the Mallard Creek Golf Course in Lebanon, Ore.

— from staff and wire reports

Western Kentucky surprised by seed

(U-WIRE) BOWLING GREEN, Ky. — More than 1,000 Hilltopper fans packed into two combined ballrooms in the Plaza Hotel's Sloan Convention Center Sunday, anxious to find out whom, when and where their beloved Western Kentucky men's basketball team would play in the NCAA Tournament.

A 76-70 win over Louisiana-Lafayette in the Sun Belt Conference Tournament championship last week guaranteed Western a seat at the NCAA table.

A measure of the national atten-

tion the Hilltoppers have earned was shown by CBS choosing Western as one of 10 sites to broadcast during the announcement.

Western's No. 9 seed in the Midwest Region of the NCAA Tournament drew cheers and applause from some Western fans.

"Ooooh!" Hilltopper coach Dennis Felton said, sounding like someone had pinched him.

He said before the pairings were announced that he expected a No. 7 seed or better.

"I didn't think we'd be any lower than seven," Felton said. "It's surprising, but then it isn't surprising because I've been trained to expect that kind of thing out of the NCAA."

An 8 or 9 seed was exactly where the Hilltoppers did not want to be, associate head coach Pete Herrmann said after winning the conference final. Those positions mean playing a nearly equal team — in this case, Stanford — and, in case of a win, almost ensure a meeting with the No. 1-seed Kansas in the second round.

"It's really clear that they favor the six power leagues," Felton said after the seeds were announced. "I clearly have no idea what the committee considers."

The Southeastern Conference placed four teams, the most of any conference, in the tournament with a 4 seed or better. Those included fourth-seeded Kentucky (in the East), whom Western beat in its season opener, and third-seeded Mississippi State (in the Midwest), which won the SEC Tournament. MSU.

— By Malcolm C. Knox
College Heights Herald
(Western Kentucky U.)



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