

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Football's Power Lurks Behind the Men's Basketball Tournament

On College Basketball

By MARC TRACY MARCH 16, 2016

In a talk at the University of South Carolina last month, the president of the N.C.A.A., Mark Emmert, discussed how colleges outside the so-called Power 5 conferences were adjusting to a new competitive landscape.

The more modestly endowed universities, he said, compete without the billions of dollars in football-related revenue that their rivals in the bigger conferences enjoy, even as costs — including scholarships newly buttressed to cover the full cost of attendance — continue to rise.

“Everybody’s recognizing that is just the reality of the world,” he said.

Perhaps remembering that the growing financial divide came about in part because some of those bigger conferences had threatened to break away from Division I, Emmert added that most smaller universities in Division I were less concerned with trying to keep up than with simply maintaining their opportunities.

“That’s one of the reasons why March Madness is so popular,” he said, referring to the N.C.A.A. men’s basketball tournament, “because Mercer can go beat Duke, and for Mercer that’s a big deal.”

Still, with a football-driven financial aristocracy in college sports, many say a disparity in money is deepening an imbalance in competition. The days of the basketball bracket-buster from outside a traditional football power conference — programs like

Mercer, but also Butler and even Villanova, which held the No. 1 ranking for several weeks this season — may be over.

The new situation presents a perhaps unique challenge for the Big East, which put three teams in the Final Four the year Villanova won it all in 1985. The conference — which is in its third year of a new, basketball-centric alignment — still placed five of its 10 teams in the tournament this year, a proportion comparable to that of the Atlantic Coast Conference and the Big Ten, two Power 5 leagues. And the Big East was the country's fourth-best conference, according to both the N.C.A.A.'s Rating Percentage Index and KenPom.com. Yet in the two full N.C.A.A. tournaments that have taken place since the Big East morphed into its present incarnation, the league has had only one member make the round of 16.

“If you're asking me, do the five conferences have an advantage? Hell yes,” said Craig Esherick, a former coach at Georgetown now teaching sport management at George Mason. “It relates to the TV money coming in and the resources you can use to hire coaches, build facilities.”

Esherick added, “What I worry about is that, to me, the appeal of the N.C.A.A. basketball tournament — not football, and not women's basketball, either — is you have so many teams that can legitimately win games and compete for championships.”

The N.C.A.A. appears to recognize that a somewhat level playing field for its signature event, which happens to generate a vast majority of the association's revenue, is a priority, and potentially endangered. Last week, the N.C.A.A. announced a one-time disbursement of \$200 million to help Division I members supplement their scholarships.

At the same time, the N.C.A.A. men's basketball selection committee came under criticism this week after releasing this year's bracket, precisely because it seemed to favor major-conference teams at the expense of midmajors when it came to doling out the final at-large bids. Allowed in were Syracuse, Vanderbilt and Michigan; left out were less-prominent teams like St. Bonaventure, Monmouth and St. Mary's. The Power 5 conferences make up less than one-sixth of Division I's 32 conferences, yet half of the selection committee's 10 members hail from its institutions.

In explaining the disadvantage that basketball teams outside the Power 5 labor under, several observers circled around the same phrase: margin for error. A university that lacks major-conference football revenue can build a basketball team that competes

with Kentucky, Duke and the other traditional powers. But its path to do so is narrower.

“If you don’t have the resources of those upper-tier conferences, you have to be a lot smarter, a lot more careful,” said Mike Aresco, the commissioner of the American Athletic Conference. “I do think you can compete, but I’m not arguing that it’s easy.”

Clark Kellogg, a college basketball analyst for CBS, said that top programs outside the Power 5 were more likely to lack depth in their talent and that this shortcoming had a nasty habit of showing up in March, when teams must play opponents with widely varied styles of play with little time to prepare.

“The margin for error you have based on your talent and ability to play different ways — and usually, the more talent you have, the more you can play fast or slow, win with your defense or your offense — you’ve got more ammunition, and that lets you survive matchups,” Kellogg said.

Still, teams from outside the big-money conferences have made it to the Final Four in recent years: Wichita State of the Missouri Valley Conference; Butler, twice, before it left the Horizon League for the Big East; and Virginia Commonwealth and George Mason of the Colonial Athletic Association (V.C.U. is now in the Atlantic 10).

And it was only two years ago that a team from outside a Power 5 conference won it all. But that was arguably a rule-proving exception: The team was Connecticut, and it was the Huskies’ first season in the brand-new American after decades in the Big East, when that conference was the sixth to get a slice of what the former UConn coach Jim Calhoun labeled football’s “magical money pie in the sky.”

Some pointed out that the Power 5 programs had long enjoyed an advantage — “The Michigans of the world were dominating the basketball tournament before big, big media dollars got involved,” said Tom Yeager, the Colonial commissioner — but few would dispute that extra resources can expand any gap.

An instructive, if imperfect, analogy can be drawn with the cases of Cincinnati and Louisville, universities about 100 miles apart. Each has a respected basketball pedigree, and both are former members of the Big East. But when the old Big East broke apart a few years ago, scattering members into new leagues, Cincinnati landed in the American, and its budget indicated that it planned to spend a hair over \$6 million on men’s basketball last year. By contrast, Louisville, seen by Southern football powers as an

enviable rival, landed in the A.C.C., and it spent more than \$12 million on men's basketball in 2014, the last year for which figures are available.

"I don't see how all of that revenue they get for football is neutral for basketball," Commissioner Amy Huchthausen of the America East Conference said. "It doesn't all get spent on football. It gets spent on the whole athletics program."

As for the Big East, the league is still regarded as a power conference in basketball, with the history and to some extent the resources to back it up. Although it has a healthy basketball deal with Fox and need not support major football programs, it remains shut out of the football gusher.

"It's been a really good two, three years now as we've transitioned to the new Big East," said Lee Reed, Georgetown's athletic director. "When you think about the 10 schools and the deep history that we have, we're really well respected across the country."

He added, "I think it's way too early to start making judgments on March."

Val Ackerman, the Big East commissioner, agreed but added: "Our teams know it's not just getting in but how far you go that matters. At the end of the day, there's only one happy team, right?"

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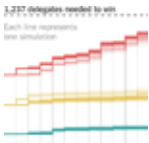
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