



History of the Great Eight and CHAMPS/Life Skills Partnership

At the 1992 NCAA Final Four in Minneapolis, Minn., Raycom Sports founder **Rick Ray** and Executive Vice President **Ken Haines** met with **Tom Odjakjian** and **Loren Matthews** from ESPN about forming a partnership to pursue the possibility of creating a preseason college basketball event.

At that time, ESPN was in its final season of the ACC/Big East Challenge and was looking for quality programming to replace the popular event. Raycom had a strong background in television syndication and event management and was a natural partner to make such an event come to life.

The decision was made to create an event that featured the top eight college basketball teams in the nation in an early season common site tournament that would be attractive for television, fans and the teams involved.

The first formal planning meeting for the event was held in New York in September, 1992, with officials from Raycom Sports and ESPN present. An initial strategy was developed for all areas of planning the event, including team selection, event structure, dates, site, television format, sponsorships, pairings and how to tie them all together.

The goal which emerged from that first meeting was to attract the eight "best" teams in college basketball. It was discussed that a pool of the top seven teams, along with one at-large slot reserved for the national champion, would be selected to participate in the event.

At that point, the first version of the event contract was drafted and the first pool of teams were selected to receive invitations. The initial team selection included Duke, Georgetown, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, North Carolina and UCLA. Later, Michigan and Louisville were queried about their interest in the event.

"We were hoping to attract the best teams we could," said Ken Haines. "Fans of college basketball want to see the best teams face each other early in the season."

After receiving feedback that some teams were reluctant to participate due to the team selection format, the partnership returned to the drawing board to determine how to sell the event to all parties involved. One format that was discussed involved selecting a pool of eligible teams, based on all-time NCAA Tournament finishes.

The Partnership decided instead, to select a formula that included the eight regional finalists from each year's NCAA Tournament. Those teams not accepting the invitation would be replaced by teams based on their placement in the final post-season rankings.

About that same time, the partnership began discussions with the **Division 1A Athletic Directors' Association** regard-

ing its potential involvement in the event. The Division 1A AD's would be able to assist the partnership with team selection and would receive valuable exposure and funding for their student-athlete life-skills program, **CHAMPS**.

In December, 1993, the partnership finalized the event format with an agreement refined to include the Division 1A Athletic Directors' Association and the CHAMPS program became the charity of the Great Eight.

A national media teleconference was held to announce the Raycom Sports/ESPN partnership and the creation of the Great Eight. Kansas head coach Roy Williams and Cincinnati mentor Bob Huggins participated in the call, which received a large amount of attention by the media nationwide. The event was officially under way.

Arena selection quickly became a primary point of interest for the partnership. A request for proposal was sent to all arenas in the eastern and central times zones with a capacity of 17,000 or more which were not on campus sites.

On February 2, 1994, a press conference was held at The Palace of Auburn Hills announcing it as the site of the inaugural Great Eight.

The first Great Eight field began to take shape the weekend of March 24-25, 1994, when the eight regional finalists of the 1994 NCAA Tournament were determined. Seven of those eight would eventually accept bids to play in the inaugural Great Eight including Arizona, Boston College, Connecticut, Duke, Florida, Michigan, Missouri and Purdue with Connecticut being chosen to round out the field.

Four games were played at The Palace over two evenings in November 1994 before more than 35,000 college basketball fans; the best contest being a nail-biter between Missouri and Purdue with the Tigers squeezing out a 69-66 victory.

After two years in The Palace, the event was moved to the United Center in Chicago, home of the NHL Chicago Blackhawks and the NBA World Champion Chicago Bulls.

"Having this Tournament in Chicago on an annual basis puts Chicago back on the college basketball map in a very big way," said Jerry Reinsdorf, chairman of the Chicago Bulls.

Another milestone in the history of the Great Eight occurred at the 1996 NCAA Convention where the membership passed legislation granting the festival "exempt" status. This important piece of the event's puzzle allows each eligible team to participate without having to count the event against its maximum schedule of 27 regular-season games, making the Great Eight even more attractive to the country's top basketball programs.





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CHAMPS Life Skills Conducts Clinic With Great Eight Participants And Chicago Area Children's Groups

Athletes Against Drugs and James Jordan Boys & Girls Club Charity Groups Participate

Chicago, IL -- CHAMPS Life Skills, in conjunction with the Great Eight Tournament, conducted a children's clinic earlier today in the United Center. The clinic involved children from Chicago area schools, through the Athletes Against Drugs program, and the James Jordan Boys & Girls Club participating with Rhode Island, Michigan State and Duke. Each school dedicated a portion of it's practice time (last 15 minutes) to interacting with the children. Players spoke to the children about life experiences and the value of staying in school before splitting up into small groups and working on basketball skills.

CHAMPS (Challenging Athletes Minds for Personal Success) and it's Life Skills program jointly sponsored by the Division 1-A Athletic Directors Association and the NCAA which is designed to address the total development of the student-athlete. The program's goal is to develop individual skills necessary to bridge the gap from college life to professional life, and make meaningful contributions to their communities in the process. The CHAMPS/Life Skills program consists of five vital components: academic excellence, athletic excellence, personal development, service and career development.

"We were delighted that these teams participating in the Great Eight decided to take a portion of their practice time and dedicate it to helping motivate local area children," said Dr. Gene Hooks, director of CHAMPS Life Skills. "In following with the CHAMPS Life Skills components, this clinic not only benefited the children but it helped to build maturity and character in the players as well."

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