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Great 8 must up the ante

Without exemption, tourney likely over

By Rick Morrissey
College Basketball Writer
December 10, 1999

If the Great Eight is to survive, money might have to ride to the rescue. Organizers are considering paying more to teams in an effort to save the event from extinction.

The NCAA is on the verge of taking away the tournament's exemption, meaning teams would have to count the Great Eight against the allotted 27 games each school is allowed to play during the regular season.

The organizers would have to decide whether significantly increasing the per-team payout from \$100,000 will be enough to make top teams want to keep a spot open on next year's schedule for the Great Eight.

That likely would mean top teams giving up one home date, and that would mean a lot of money for big-time programs.

"You would have to figure a way to pay teams more to justify them potentially losing a home game," said Ken Haines, executive vice president of Raycom, which puts on the event along with ESPN. "Is there a way to increase sponsorship? Is there a way to increase ticket sales? How much more would we need to pay each team? Those are the things we'll be exploring.

"It would be a shame for the event to go away. It has become a franchise event. It's arguably the best college basketball event out there short of the Final Four. We're not going to give up easily. But I'll be quite candid: I'm not overly optimistic because it's a severe blow in losing the exemption."

Haines said it would take a "significant increase" in payouts to make a difference. Michigan State coach Tom Izzo said he's not sure even that would help.

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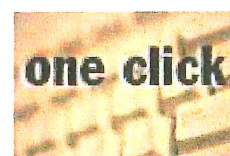
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"It would be harder for most schools to do it because the question would be: Why? Why wouldn't Michigan State and Kansas schedule home and home against each other and make more money?" Izzo said. "Or play a team of lesser ability and get the victory against your 27 games?"

The NCAA gives exemptions to several tournaments each year, most of them in Hawaii, Puerto Rico and Alaska. The exemptions allow participating teams each to play three games that don't count against the NCAA's season limit. Most of the tournaments were created to give networks more college basketball programming during holidays. A team normally can play in only one exempt tournament.

The NCAA has allowed the Great Eight to operate somewhat outside that profile. It's a tournament that takes eight of the best teams from the season before and pairs them up for four games over two days.

"If ESPN and Raycom can save it, that would be great," said Steve Schanwald, the Bulls' director of marketing and one of the people who helped put on the games at the United Center.

"Our understanding was that this year already was a one-year reprieve. The NCAA wanted to cancel it even before this year's tournament but (it) granted us a one-year reprieve on the basis that we had made a long-term commitment to the tournament.

"I'm not optimistic, but if it's on life support and there's a glimmer of hope, that would be awesome. We'd love to keep it."

Said Dave Brown, ESPN's manager of programming: "We will make every effort to try to save it. We're going to do what we can to change the NCAA's mind. That's business."

Business hasn't been very good, at least in terms of attendance. The Great Eight averaged about 13,000 fans each night at the United Center. As in past years fans had to buy both days, with the top package costing \$240. But that doesn't fully explain why there were 10,000 empty seats Tuesday, the first night.

"It should have drawn better," Schanwald said. "You're bringing seven out of the top 10 teams in the country, there's no reason this building shouldn't be packed. You look at how we packed the building for Duke-Illinois. You look at how Illinois-Kansas (Dec. 18) will be packed, and you look at how Duke and DePaul was packed last year. You wonder how you can bring four great games to a great sports town like Chicago and have 13,000 or so.