

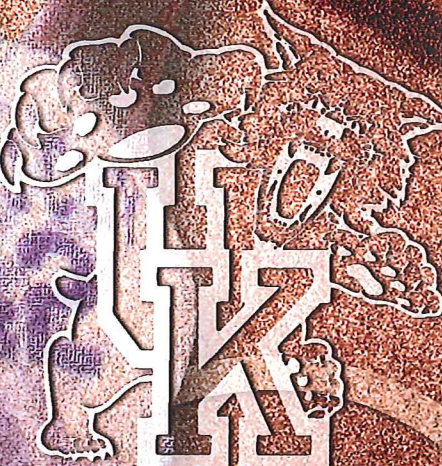
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Great Eight

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THE GREAT EIGHT

B A S K E T B A L L C L A S S I C

How Raycom and ESPN formed The Great Eight

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.

Thus, 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 and pairings.

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 regarding its potential involvement in the event. The Division 1A ADs would be able to assist the partnership with team selection and would receive valuable exposure and funding for their student-athlete life-skills program, C.H.A.M.P.S. International Sports Properties (ISP) was selected to coordinate operations for the event.

In December, 1993, the partnership finalized the event format with an agreement refined to include the Division 1A ADs and ISP, and the C.H.A.M.P.S. program became the official 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 time 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. Also announced was a national ticket lottery and the official logo, featuring the event's first title sponsor, DIRECTV.

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.

The field of the second Great Eight took shape in the summer of 1995 with five of the eight regional finalists accepting their invitations. Included in that field was the 1995-96 consensus preseason number one pick, Kentucky, along with Arkansas, Kansas, Massachusetts, Michigan State, Oklahoma State, Virginia and Wake Forest.

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. "We're very excited to be able to showcase our city to the college basketball world. Chicago is the greatest sports town in America, and we are confident Chicagoans will enjoy the privilege of annually watching the country's best college basketball programs."

The field for the third Great Eight included Cincinnati, Georgetown, Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi State, Purdue and Wake Forest.



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.

The field for the fourth Great Eight was announced in July and includes repeat appearances by Kentucky, Kansas, Purdue and Arizona. Participating for the first time in the Great Eight are North Carolina, Louisville, Utah and Providence.