



MARCH IS MADNESS: In addition to drawing a diverse demographic, like these female fans of Xavier, CBS has continued to refine its broadcasts to make it more appealing to both viewers and advertisers. AP

CBS still sees NCAA as slam-dunk

By HILARY KRAMER

Even as more star basketball players skip college and head right to the NBA, the NCAA tournament continues to be a boon for CBS.

With half of this year's first-round draft picks projected to come straight from high school or overseas, the NCAA no longer is the breeding ground for tomorrow's great NBA players.

Yet in 1999, CBS was willing to renegotiate an existing contract to enter into a \$6 billion contract with the NCAA for the rights to its basketball tournament through 2013.

Madness? Definitely. Mistake? Hardly.

Despite the constant and early turnover of players to the NBA, ratings for March Madness have soared. This year's opening day earned CBS its highest opening day ratings since 1993, and the four-day weekend ratings soared 53 percent over last year.

"With 65 teams from every section of the country, every viewer feels an affinity to a team," said Neil Pilson, a former president of CBS Sports. "There is even a real draw for

women, since they attended these schools or come from the region."

In addition to drawing a diverse demographic, CBS has continued to refine its broadcasts to make it more appealing to both viewers and advertisers.

Last year, the network added five minutes to the halftimes of early round games in order to cut to additional games and air a few more commercials. The result looks like a slam-dunk, enriching both CBS and the NCAA and raking in around half a billion dollars a year for the NCAA.

But can sports programming really survive without star appeal? In addition to losing stars directly from high school to the NBA, even when the tournament produces its own stars — like Carmelo Anthony or T.J. Ford — they bolt for the NBA early, leaving the NCAA looking for its next star.

The NCAA understands star appeal. College football features players with names as big as any pro football stars. But the hoops tournament may be operating on a unique kind of momentum.

"Having no big stars actually works in favor of the NCAA. The promotional activity is around the team, the university and the tournament rather than the stars," said Dean Bonham, CEO of The Bonham Group, a sports marketing firm. "It's a factor prompting advertisers to be more comfortable, since it lessens the likelihood of scandal tarnishing the sport's image."

Let's not forget about the ubiquitous March Madness office pool either, which engenders no insignificant amount of interest in the tournament for basketball fans and everyday folks alike.

In many ways, this probably fuels the tournament's consistent fan appeal over the years, translating into good value for CBS and its advertisers.

Not widely known, however, is that CBS is still actively trying to sell sponsorships — a right it acquired with the 1999 NCAA deal.

Pilson said he has no worries about CBS attracting more sponsors. "The NCAA has amazing resiliency and growth every year, because the public gets involved in picking teams and results," he said.