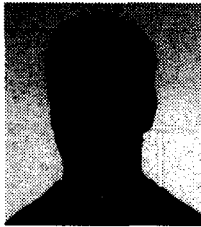


Low tournament TV ratings signal bleak future for college basketball

BY PETE STRELLA
Assistant Layout Editor



This year's NCAA tournament was one of the most exciting in recent memory. So exciting that, ESPN has already proclaimed three of the games to be "instant classics": a UNC-Wilmington/Maryland game featuring Drew Nicholas' last second 3-pointer, the double overtime thriller between Arizona and Gonzaga, and the Kansas/Syracuse championship game. These are the games that all college basketball fans want to watch.

And that is precisely what is so disturbing about the tournament's decreased television ratings. Despite the tournament's plethora of exciting games, ratings were down 16 percent from last year, and were the lowest since CBS began broadcasting the games in 1982. And no, it wasn't because Greg Gumbel is almost unbearable to listen to.

It's because college basketball has a serious problem retaining and recruiting star players. Even with Dwayne Wade, Carmelo Anthony, and T.J. Ford in the mix, the young talent in basketball is going right to the NBA as soon as they can. And nobody blames them. There aren't too many people who will pass up a multi-million dollar contract for an education and no paycheck.

Consequently, the talent pool of NCAA is diluted and lacks depth to the extent that the idea of paying college players has been debated. As absurd as it sounds, that's how serious the situation is. This won't happen, however, because the NCAA knows that this would only further diminish the appeal of its amateur status (some already question whether NCAA Division 1 football and basketball are truly amateur sports).

There seems to be no solution. Even allowing players drafted by NBA teams to participate in the NCAA for a time wouldn't work. The fact that the player would receive a signing bonus takes away from the amateur atmosphere.

Also, it would set up the NCAA as simply a minor league to professional basketball, which it is not. NCAA tournament ratings outdraw the NBA finals on a regular basis.

The NCAA tournament's unpredictability and excitement will always appeal to the American television audience, but college basketball needs star players to uphold its tournament's coveted status.

For example, Syracuse freshman Carmelo Anthony put forth a legendary effort in this year's tournament and has every reason to declare eligibility for this year's NBA draft. But college basketball needs him around for one or two more years.

There's a slippery slope at work. College basketball players used to stay for three to four years. Now it's one or two if they're lucky. It could end up where all top recruits avoid college basketball completely.

College basketball fans need players whom they know will make it to the next level. And though there will always be high school players that slip under the professional radar and into the college ranks, the NCAA needs them to be around for more than two years.

It's true that war coverage has held much of our nation's attention in the past weeks, which is most likely a big factor for lower college basketball ratings. But the scary part is that NASCAR ratings over the same time span dropped by less than half, and were down only one point from the NCAA semi-final games.

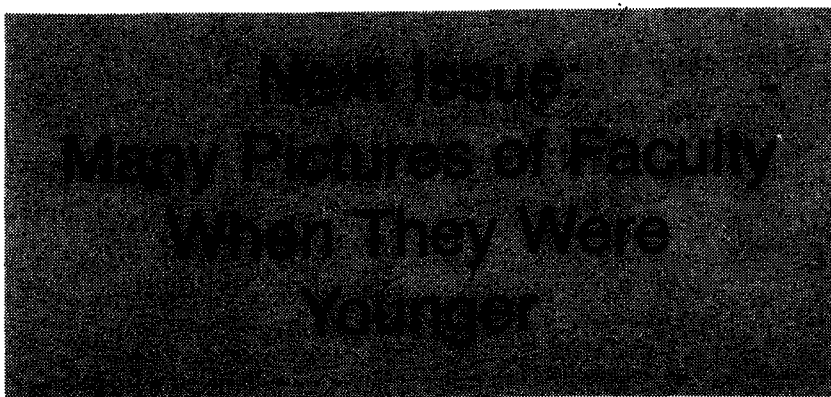
Since I expect that our country will not be at war by next March, time will tell if the NCAA TV ratings will return to its normal level. But I see many problems for NCAA basketball in the near future.

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Photo by Stacy De Angelo

Pete Strella offers proof of our staff's dedication, taking an extended nap between lengthy editing sessions



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