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## Resources

## Latest News

### Latest News

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Publish date: Oct 15, 2010

## Site selection and tournament timing a balancing act for DI women's basketball

*NCAA Division I women's basketball turns 29 this year, and while there's nothing particularly special about the anniversary, the number of issues converging on the game make 2010-11 a potentially notable year for the sport that has grown exponentially in the level of play, its popularity and exposure, and the competition from more schools pouring resources into the game. With all of that comes the pressure to win while maintaining the very integrity on which the sport is grounded. What makes women's basketball great? How does it grow? What are the threats?*

*The final part of this series looks at preliminary-round site selection, the timing of the tournament – and the timing of the regular season itself.*

*Part 1 explores the evolution of Division I women's basketball.*

*Part 2 examines whether women's basketball is mature enough to expand its tournament bracket.*

**By Gary Brown**  
NCAA.org



Tennessee coach  
Pat Summitt

Tennessee head coach Pat Summitt says if the Lady Vols could host first- and second-round games in the Division I Women's Basketball Championship every year, they would probably always lead the tournament in attendance.

She's probably right, given previous crowds that have flocked to Knoxville when it is a tournament site.

However, the legendary coach is quick to add, "But that's not fair, and I want it to be fair."

Therein lies the crux of the matter for the Division I Women's Basketball Committee as it contemplates the preliminary-site format in the game's pinnacle event: how to balance competitive equity, growing the game, and the business realities during tough economic times.

It's an issue the committee has wrestled with from the beginning. Campus sites draw crowds, though usually only if the home team is participating. Neutral sites expose the game to a broader fan base, but women's basketball fans tend to follow their teams more than the sport, so neutral sites – when attempted – haven't drawn as well.

Campus sites bring other quandaries. If the sites are predetermined and the home team doesn't make the field, the empty seats become the story. And top seeds that don't host have to face lower seeds on their home court, which fans, coaches and media have complained about in the past.

To be sure, the committee has tried its share of options. After two decades of preliminary-round sites based on seeding, the committee ushered in the predetermined-site format in 2003 as part of a progression to grow the game. At the time, attendance in those rounds was at its peak, averaging about 6,500 fans per session.

Hoping to build off that momentum, the committee went to an eight-site format in 2005, but the change did not produce the anticipated results at the gate. First- and second-round attendance plummeted from 214,290 in 2004 – the last year of the 16 predetermined sites – to 135,591 in 2005. Only 90,483 fans attended the eight sites in 2006, followed by 114,932 and 140,249 in 2006 and 2007, respectively.

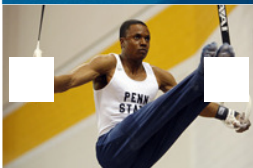
In the summer of 2007, the committee called for a revision to the 16 predetermined-site format, which meant adding eight more sites to the eight that already had been selected for 2009 and 2010.

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**Women's basketball committee continues review of issues:** The Division I Women's Basketball Committee continued discussions during its October 18-20 meeting in Indianapolis regarding championship bracket size, playing dates, game times and formats for selecting preliminary-round sites.  
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NCAA vice president Sue Donohoe

The committee continually studies the preliminary-round format in an attempt to maximize in-venue attendance while providing a championship atmosphere for the student-athletes and optimizing television ratings.

As is the case with bracket expansion, a number of models have been studied, including one that would award sites strictly to the top 16 seeds. A model that would combine elements of those two (similar to the pre-tournament site selection in baseball) also has been proposed.

If the committee does recommend a change, it would not be implemented before the 2012 championship.

"Obviously, the committee has a challenge with how best to balance the student-athlete experience, access for the fans, the appeal for television and the overall growth of the championship," said Sue Donohoe, NCAA vice president of Division I women's basketball.

**Attendance or equity?**

One of the committee's top priorities for growing the championship is increasing in-venue attendance.

The NCAA already is in its third year of awarding marketing grants for institutions to apply toward growing their regular-season attendance, and the annual "Pack the House Challenge" adds more incentive for individual schools and conferences. The committee is viewing preliminary-round site formats through the same in-venue attendance lens.

While that might put competitive equity lower on the eye chart, many coaches know that it's necessary at this stage of the game.



Hartford coach Jennifer Rizzotti

Jennifer Rizzotti, the head coach at Hartford, said that if competitive equity were the absolute goal, then the eight-site model affords more opportunities for neutral-court matchups in the first and second rounds. In the current format, the chances of getting a neutral-court game in the second round are much slimmer.

"Speaking from the perspective of a team that is probably not going to be a host site very often," Rizzotti said, "I would prefer to have fewer sites so that you have a better chance of not playing on someone's home floor right away. But I also believe that we need to do what we can to advance the game – and if that means picking the best sites to get the best crowds, then I am all for that."

"We all have to put aside our desires for what might be best for our individual programs and figure out what's best for everyone. It's not just about where we coach at this moment, but about where we want the game to be in five or 10 years."



UCLA coach Nikki Caldwell

If that means a higher seed traveling to the lower seed's site, that's OK with UCLA head coach Nikki Caldwell.

"I say let the teams battle throughout the season and let the top seeds and home sites fall out that way," she said. "If you end up having to play on the road, well, hopefully you've prepared your team enough through your nonconference schedule and the conference schedule to be able to play in a hostile environment. As a competitor, 94 feet is 94 feet and rim is rim."

"Also, in March, teams don't think much about playing before a partisan crowd, because it's one and done. You have a different sense of urgency when you play on the road in March."

**Tournament timing**

In addition to where the first and second rounds are played, the committee also will be talking about *when* they're played.

The current Saturday-Monday, Sunday-Tuesday format began with the revised ESPN contract in 2003. To some extent, that format mitigates the overlap with the men's first and second rounds, but the broadcast windows on Saturday and Sunday have traditionally been restricted to early afternoon and late evening.

That will ease somewhat with the new men's contract that makes multiple Turner broadcast platforms available, in addition to CBS. Starting this year, the new broadcast windows for the women on Saturday and Sunday will be noon, 2:30, 4:30 and 6 ET, which eliminates the 8:30 slot.

But the committee will continue to review whether shifting the playing days for the first and second rounds to a Friday-Sunday and Saturday-Monday format would benefit the championship.

**A one-semester sport?**

With all of the out-of-the-box thinking going on in women's basketball, nothing is more beyond the boundaries than contemplating a change in the regular season itself.

Patriot League Executive Director Carolyn Schlie Femovich is heading a task force of Collegiate Commissioners Association members and other stakeholders to consider broader approaches to growing women's basketball – including whether the game should be a single-semester sport.

That idea emerged in men's basketball several years ago, too, but never got out of the gate. It may not generate much momentum on the

Though some people like the current model because it offers two days (Monday and Tuesday) during which the men aren't playing, others worry that the early weekdays aren't as attractive to fans. The highest attendance for the first and second rounds came in 2004, when the current Saturday-Monday, Sunday-Tuesday format was in vogue.

In addition to the playing days for the preliminary rounds, stakeholders in the women's game also have contemplated moving the entire tournament back one week. That would be a significant shift since it would affect the regular season, conference tournaments and broadcast opportunities, but some people think it would help grow the championship.

It's all part of a larger and puzzling calendar that the women's basketball community is trying to assemble. The mission remains the same as it was in 1982 – grow the game, enhance student-athlete opportunities and provide the best possible championship experience. Only now, the landscape is far more complex and the pressures to succeed are more daunting.

"The stakeholders who are trying to figure all of this out have the same passion and love for the game that they always have," Donohoe said. "The committee and our other constituents who engage in discussions and contemplate changes that could serve as a catalyst for growth have put the game in good hands."

**First / Second Round Attendance**

Year	Sessions	Total att.	Avg. per session
1982	16	32,737	2,046
1983	20	32,876	1,644
1984	15	36,678	2,445
1985	16	44,517	2,782
1986	24	50,780	2,116
1987	24	61,740	2,573
1988	24	82,068	3,420
1989	32	101,848	3,183
1990	32	102,621	3,207
1991	32	109,553	3,424
1992	32	131,097	4,097
1993	32	135,198	4,225
1994	48	212,812	4,434
1995	32	152,968	4,780
1996	32	173,284	5,415
1997	32	158,476	4,952
1998	32	177,423	5,544
1999	32	199,866	6,246
2000	32	199,793	6,244
2001	32	208,801	6,525
2002	32	212,175	6,655
2003	32	204,213	6,382
2004	32	214,290	6,697
2005	24	135,591	5,650
2006	24	90,483	3,770
2007	24	114,932	4,502
2008	24	140,429	5,851
2009	32	131,156	4,099
2010	32	141,460	4,421
Totals		3,789,865	4,582

women's side, either, but people are at least talking about it.

Schlie Femovich's group surveyed all 31 conferences and got enough feedback to warrant further discussion. She's not necessarily a proponent of the change, but she is determined to explore the possibilities of growing a game she respects.

"Certainly the idea of restructuring the entire playing and practice season for any sport is dramatic," she said, "but the important piece is that we are looking at what kind of strategic initiatives at the institution, conference and national level could make a difference. We need to focus on initiatives that grow attendance and public awareness of the game."

Schlie Femovich acknowledged that changing the regular season would affect everything from conference tournaments and the NCAA tournament to academic time for student-athletes and TV opportunities for conferences and the NCAA itself.

But survey respondents appeared willing to engage: Are we really talking about one semester or about shifting the season by a week or two? Are we talking about fewer games in a shorter time? If you shift away from the men's basketball season, do you lose that sense of when basketball should be played?

"There was the usual caution about change," Schlie Femovich said. "Most of the respondents wanted to see more research on the effects a one-semester approach would have on class time and whether there would be any other benefits.

"The survey was really more of a way to stimulate discussion."  
– Gary Brown

