

The Postseason in DIII

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February 2003

As everybody knows, Division III in the NCAA is organized according to principles that differ in some important and fundamental ways from DI and DII, presumably because DIII member institutions have fundamentally different objectives for their athletic programs. However, as usual, it is often not entirely straightforward how to apply the relevant principles in particular situations, or to put this another way, it can be difficult to know what to do, even if we know what we stand for.

I am a relatively new Faculty Athletic Representative, but perhaps I am not alone in being unsure about how to apply the fundamentals to the question of postseason play in DIII. In this essay I present a line of thinking that seems to me to lead to some clarity as to what is at stake and what members should be focusing on as they ponder the issue. We will see, I think, that many of the arguments given at the national level for increasing the scope of postseason contests are not compelling, given the nature of the division. But even so, the intuitions of so many athletes and coaches who favor bracket expansion do in fact have a justifiable basis. My hope is that if we see more clearly what that basis is, we'll be in a better position to make wise decisions about what to do.

Let me begin by attempting a sort of mission statement for DIII athletics:

Intercollegiate athletics should reinforce and enhance the kind of experience we want all students at our institutions to have. In particular, athletics should give students the opportunity to face significant physical and mental challenges with sustained effort in a safe and supportive environment, in a way that does not conflict with the broader objectives of higher education. The primary goals of varsity athletics are long term, and focus on how the undergraduate experience enriches the lives of graduates and the communities in which they live. They include encouraging personal growth and developing life-long relationships with teammates and others involved in the sport. Competitions should be intense but fair, and evenly matched to the extent that all athletes feel they have a good chance at winning every time a contest is engaged. Athletics should be fun, at least most of the time.

This obviously needs some polish, but it has what seems to me to be the most important points, i.e. consistency with the broader mission, benefits focused on the athletes and thus only indirectly on the institution, and the joy of a good game. Like just about everything else at the institution, the emphasis is on what is best for the student in the long run.

If this is near the mark, there are two main reasons why liberal arts colleges should devote significant resources to intercollegiate athletics. The first, and probably most important, is the relationships between people that sports encourage. Friendships formed

on the practice field, in the gym or pool, in the weight room, on the busses, at the postgame parties, often last lifetimes, and are among the most precious possessions a graduate takes away from the college. Sport cuts across the lines of income and ethnicity, and frequently gender, much like the academic courses do. They build trust, and a sense of what can be accomplished through sustained cooperative effort.

The second is to provide the opportunity for the student to perform publicly under pressure. This is important because some of the great things that students will go on to do in their lives, those things that will have the most impact on other people, are often public, and take skill and courage focused on a graceful and effective performance. If, a point down with seconds to play, you've toed the line for one and the bonus, you know that it changes how you think of yourself, and how you will react the next time the pressure is on and the stakes are high. Coaches and athletes alike look forward to "the Big Game" from the first day of practice. Anticipating it makes those long strenuous workouts seem worthwhile. It's the match that gets the attention of friends, classmates, teachers, fans and media, that has the potential to bring glory and admiration. You want your sweetheart to be there. It is the experience that people recall years later when asked what it was like to play that sport. If you make a movie or write a book about sports, this is what will take up the final scenes or chapters. In short, though it sounds a bit corny to say it, the Big Game really does build character, and in fact it builds the kind of character liberal arts colleges are designed to produce.¹

The easiest way to deliver the Big Game experience is to have broadly accessible national tournaments, and I will suggest later that this is one of the best arguments for such tournaments at the DIII level. But first it might be useful to survey what I gather are the mainstream bread and butter arguments for tournament expansion that surface repeatedly, in my experience at any rate, at national NCAA conventions. We will see, I think, that all of them are weak, and do not justify the escalating costs, both financial and educational, of the championships process.² I then elaborate on the rationale for providing a Big Game whenever possible, and try to outline the implications of the rationale for thinking about the structure of DIII.

¹ There are two other frequently mentioned arguments that seem very weak to me, because they are misdirected. One favors "a sound mind in a sound body" but in this case early morning campus-wide jumping jacks would do just as well, and do it for more students at less cost. The Chinese university I taught at in the early 1980's actually did something very much like this. Maybe compulsory toe touching is going a bit far, but this argument really applies to physical education and not intercollegiate athletics. The other argument is that sports have a salubrious effect on the atmosphere on campus, over and above the effect it has on the athletes themselves. This might be true at some institutions but at practically all DIII schools, which are my focus here, the effect on campus life in general is tiny compared to the enormous cost of athletic programs, and all the other things happening on campus.

² It's this weakness that perhaps explains why Cedric Dempsey, the outgoing NCAA president, in his farewell address to the association, challenged DIII schools to lessen the influence of national championships.

It is safe to say that all constituencies of DIII, i.e. athletes, coaches, ADs, FARs and even presidents are in favor of national championships. (I say *even* presidents because they have ultimate responsibility for the health of the institutions, and thus may a certain wariness brought on by observing what has happened in DI.) All of the major arguments I have heard appeal to fairness, a fundamental principle that is of overwhelming importance to the NCAA. An argument grounded on fairness has a much better chance of success than one that doesn't, much like an argument from my daughter in favor a new car has a better chance of success if it relies on safety and gas mileage rather than on sex appeal, even though it may be the latter that is uppermost in her mind. Nevertheless, all such arguments that I have heard for the expansion of the brackets are, as she might say, lame.

I am aware of three arguments worth taking seriously, and they all are species of what is sometimes called the "quality" issue, i.e. that a primary goal is to insure that all of the best teams qualify to play. I call these "the upset argument", "the arbitrary decision argument", and "strong conferences" argument. Here they are, with their refutations.

The Upset Argument

If a conference is awarded an automatic bid to the postseason (an AQ) for the winner of its conference tournament, it is possible that the best team in the conference might not qualify by virtue of having been upset in the tournament. This is unfair. Expanding the brackets would make it possible for the conference champion to qualify even if they don't win the conference tournament.

Refutation: This is a good argument for the elimination of conference tournaments. Conferences should not expect the NCAA to clean up messes that they make. If you have a conference tournament, that's the risk you run. If you don't like this risk, then don't have the tournament.

The Arbitrary Decision Argument

I'll give this argument as it was articulated by an AD at the recent NCAA Convention:

I was on the committee to choose at-large bids for the volleyball tournament. We had only four spots, but there were eight teams that were clearly qualified and deserved to be in. The decision was very difficult. Expanding the brackets would make it possible for all or at least most of these deserving teams to participate.

Refutation: When this AD searches for a new volleyball coach, he will get applications from many deserving people with the right credentials to do the job. The decision will be difficult, if he is lucky. The cost of saving this administrator the pain of making a difficult decision, in this case, say, six volleyball coaches, is much too high. So, we expect him to make the decision, even though he will need to disappoint some worthy people. In the case of the teams, everyone knows the spots in the tournament are limited, and always

will be. Administrators will need to make tough choices and some pretty good teams will not get in. It might not be fair to everyone, but this is the nature of the thing.

The Strong Conferences Argument

Imagine a situation where Conference A has three nationally ranked teams, and Conference B has none. The team that wins the Conference B championship (suppose it's The College of the Little Sisters of the Poor) goes to the tournament. In Conference A, it seems clear that even the third place team is probably superior to LSP and thus it's unfair they are left out while LSP is in. Expanding the brackets goes part way at least toward fixing this problem.

Refutation: This happens in the NFL every year. In fact, it seems clear that unless we let *everyone* into the tournament, there will always be a little unfairness at the margins. (That's why even the selection for a huge tournament, like Men's DI basketball, is controversial.) Somebody is bound to be outside looking in at an inferior team. Once again, it seems to me that this is simply the nature of tournament selection, and there is no way to avoid it.

If these were the only arguments in favor of expanding tournaments, no rational person who was paying for them would go along. Notice that none of them focus on the long term growth of the student, and thus don't really dovetail with the primary motivation of the membership. However, there is one rarely stated argument that I found surprisingly hard to refute. At first I thought it would be a pushover, but the more I pondered it, the more I thought it was very strong. It was given at the FARA national meeting by an FAR from a DIII school on the west coast. Discussing legislation that would expand the brackets in postseason tournaments, she said, (paraphrasing)

I'm in favor of this because I've seen how exciting it is for the students to go to a tournament game. It seems to mean so much to them that I would even give up one of my own classes to let them go.

(This is actually a pretty brave thing to say amongst a bunch of FARs.) I am definitely not in favor of giving the students whatever they think they want, which is what this might seem like at first. But as I thought about it more, it seemed to contain the germ of a stronger argument. Months later, at the NCAA Annual Convention, I rode the bus to the Great Saturday Reception (this year held at Disneyland) with an AD from a very small DI school. Making conversation, I said to him, "I'm wondering something. When your men's basketball team starts the season, they know that they have no realistic chance of winning the national championship. So, what do they take as their motivation?"

"Oh, that's easy," he said. "They play to get into the tournament. We haven't been in it in years, but we have a new coach and were excited about our prospects. We probably will never beat the likes of Duke, but we want to go to the dance."

It dawned on me not long after that why having a goal that was almost sure to result in your team being made into mincemeat by a national powerhouse on network television was a sensible goal to have. That game would be a Big Game. The campus would be lit up, and the events surrounding the contest would make lifelong memories, win or lose. It's like that for just about every team or individual that qualifies for a postseason event, including DIII schools, and including my own school Carleton College. (We are a school, one might say, unapologetically focused on the intellect. But even so, we happen to have a nationally ranked women's basketball team this year, and their story in this week's *Carletonian* is on page one.)

So, here, put more baldly, is the best argument I know of for bracket expansion. A Big Game can be such an important event in the lives of our students, that it only stands to reason that we try to let more people have the experience. We can try to make selection as fair as we can and easy for administrators, but these aren't rationales for letting more teams in. We let more teams in simply because it's a great experience for a young person to *be* in. This is true for most teams even if they lose.³

So, I think this is a pretty strong argument, but, is it good enough? On this point, I'm not sure, because, like most people in the NCAA, I don't have a good sense of the costs, both in terms of the financial costs of a larger tournament itself (which are partially known) but also in terms of the effects that it has on athletic programs.

So personally I'm still undecided about bracket expansion. I voted against it every chance I got, since all the arguments for it I was hearing up until then seemed unpersuasive. But it passed at the convention overwhelmingly (306-59 with 3 abstentions⁴).

While we're at it, though, we might ask, Is the Big Game Argument a good argument for having national championships at the DIII level in the first place? Or, might there be better ways to give students the Big Game experience? Here, too, we need first to clear away at least one popular but pretty weak argument for having the tournaments:

The Human Nature Argument

³ I've thought some about why coaches and ADs don't use this argument more, and instead rely on ones that I think are weaker. (Some I've heard are so weak I'm embarrassed to mention them.) For one thing, as I mentioned, its strength is deceptive, and it is not based on fairness, which is the guiding light of the NCAA. Also, in this kind of environment, a coach should take as his or her goal for the program entry into the tournament, just like the D1 school I mentioned above. It's what you use to motivate athletes, attract recruits, lobby administrators. Expanding the brackets makes reaching the goal easier, which one might think was a good thing. But maybe putting things this way is seen as wimpy. But wimpy or not, I think it is the most effective argument I know.

⁴ Theoretically, this means that fully three-quarters of the chief executives at DIII institutions favor bracket expansion, since, again theoretically, it's the CEOs that control the vote. (There are a little over 400 schools in the division.)

It's human nature to want to know if one is really the best. Athletes will always wonder how their club stacks up against other teams, not only locally, but also nationally. The tournament is the way to find out who is really the best.

Refutation: People (maybe especially Americans) might have similar sorts of wonders for all kinds of things they care about. (How do I stack up as a teacher, a father, an FAR?) Sports is maybe the one area in which we sort of get answers some of the time. In this sense, unlike the two reasons for athletics I gave earlier in this essay, to try to satisfy athlete's curiosity on this point runs *against* the grain of what we are trying to accomplish. For the tournament is then an instance of something that happens nowhere else in life. Determining a national champion really doesn't help anyone do anything. If the goal is only to satisfy curiosity, the tournament is really a waste of resources. Besides, at DIII the answer to the question is already clear. No DIII team is the best in anything. National champions are only the best (maybe) on this artificial island called Division Three.

If we are going to have national championships at this level, we had better find a reason that dovetails with the mission of the member institutions. As I've indicated, one possible reason to have them is that they guarantee a Big Game finale for about 15% of the member institutions in any given sport. If I am right that being in a Big Game is a useful part of character development, something that will pay positive dividends to students when they later find themselves in other, nonathletic pressure-packed situations that are, in the long run more important, then liberal arts colleges have a good reason to want a postseason tournament.

But of course it isn't the only way to achieve this goal. In *The Game of Life* (p.11), James Shulman and William Bowen relate the story of Yale football coach Tad Jones, who, back in 1922, told his team: "Gentlemen, you are about to play for Yale against Harvard in football. You will never again do anything so important in your entire life." Obviously, Coach Jones was a little goofy, but it seems to me (unlike Shulman and Bowen, I think) that building up the game in the minds of the players is, on balance, a good thing. I don't know who won that game in 1922, but I think it is safe to say that players from both squads went on to do significant things in their lives. I think it is likely that to have been in that game, to feel that pressure, to keep their heads as the emotions swirl, to hear the crowd, to see how months if not years of careful preparation can pay off when the stakes are high if you keep your focus, in short to be a part of a great event, can't help but prepare a person well for important things to come. This is why we encourage intercollegiate athletics for everyone.⁵

⁵ In my experience, it is wrong to think that women want to play sports because they just want to play, just want to participate, as one sometimes hears in discussions of Title IX. Almost every female athlete I've talked to about this wants more than that, just like her male counterparts. They, too, want the Big Game, and it seems clear that it helps them just as much as it helps the men.

So, any way we deliver the Big Game experience would work. Tournaments are nice because they are a predictable vehicle for this, but there are obvious drawbacks as well. (They're expensive in a number of ways, and not everybody goes.) Hated (at least for the day) archrivals also work. As we think about reconfiguring the environment in which liberal arts colleges play their sports, I think we should take care to build in everywhere we can the opportunity to participate in the public, high-pressure event. Athletes want it, and it's good for them. How exactly to do it is a very complicated issue, but I hope to have shown that not *all* the reasons given for wanting to do it are unpersuasive. If I am right, we have a good idea what we are buying when we sign up for national tournaments. If we can get a better handle on the costs, we will be able to better judge if the purchase is a wise one.