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TOP STORY

WKU mens's basketball

Column: Credit to C-USA for trying to catch committee's attention

League is trying new scheduling format in effort to secure more bids, improve seeding

BRAD STEPHENS bstephens@bgdailynews.com 2 hrs ago

Western Kentucky Hilltoppers guard Josh Anderson (center) drives to the lane during WKU's 67-66 loss to Marshall in the Conference USA Championship March 10 at The Ford Center at The Star in Frisco, Texas.

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Conference USA might as well try something new.

C-USA has turned into a one-bid league for the NCAA Tournament, and its representative each year has been buried down the seed line.

The league has put only its conference tournament champion into the Big Dance each season since 2013. No C-USA team has received a seed higher than No. 12 in the NCAAs over the last five years.

Conference USA was the nation's 11th-best league in 2017-18, per Ken Pomeroy metrics.

Three C-USA squads – Middle Tennessee (No. 45), Western Kentucky (No. 47) and Old Dominion (No. 64) – finished in KenPom’s top 70, and all three missed the NCAA Tournament.

Conference USA Tournament champion Marshall earned the league’s automatic bid and was handed a No. 13 seed.

So in a year when C-USA sat just outside the top 10 of the conference rankings, it managed only a single No. 13 seed in the NCAAs.

“The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and hoping for a different result,” WKU athletic director Todd Stewart told the Daily News last month. “Whether it’s fair or not, Conference USA has become a one-bid league and the team getting the one bid hasn’t had a great seed.”

C-USA announced last month a new men’s basketball scheduling format designed to catch the NCAA Tournament Selection Committee’s attention.

Conference USA schools will still play 18 league games.

Over the first 14, they’ll play their travel partner home and away – that’s Marshall in the Hilltoppers’ case – and the other 12 programs once.

Teams will then be arranged into tiers for their final four conference games.

The teams ranked Nos. 1-5 in the league standings after 14 C-USA games will play games against each other down the stretch. Teams ranked Nos. 6-10 and those ranked Nos. 11-14 will follow suit within their respective groups.

If WKU can sit fifth place or better after 14 league games, it’ll have four games at the end of the season against Conference USA’s four other best teams – two at home and two on the road.

Those games offer the chance for quality, late-season wins. They also let a team avoid games against bottom feeders that don't enhance – and, with a loss, weigh down – a team's resume.

Mark Adams is a former college basketball coach who works as an analyst for ESPN.

He consulted with C-USA coaches and administrators in formulating this new scheduling system.

Adams has long been an advocate for leagues like Conference USA. On his Twitter page, @EnthusiAdams, he highlights “Do More With Less” games where teams with lower budgets defeat those with more resources.

In an email to the Daily News, Adams noted that over the last five years, 95 percent of NCAA Tournament at-large bids have gone to teams from eight conferences that spend the most money.

Tournament selectors have put increased emphasis on schedule strength. Teams in powerful leagues that play 16-20 conference games get more chances for quality wins and therefore hold an advantage over teams from leagues that aren't as strong across the board.

Conference USA's new scheduling format is an attempt to close some of that gap.

“I spoke with Dan Gavitt, NCAA senior vice president of basketball, while I attended the C-USA meetings in Destin,” Adams said. “Mr. Gavitt told me that the committee will surely take notice, and this is an innovative approach that will create compelling late season matchups.”





“He told me anytime you can create great matchups in the late-season conference schedule, the committee will surely be watching.”

There will be some scheduling quirks that come with this new format.

WKU and Marshall could potentially play each other four times a season – twice in the first 14 games, once in the final four and once in the C-USA Tournament.

Conversely, the Hilltoppers are now guaranteed just one game per season against rival Middle Tennessee.

The Blue Raiders are paired as travel partners with Alabama-Birmingham, another school that’s been a frequent foe for WKU since it joined Conference USA in 2014-15.

The new scheduling dynamics will take some getting used to for all involved, including fans. When they buy season tickets, they won’t know exactly who they’ll be watching the final two weekends of the regular season until February.

There’s also no guarantees that the new scheduling formats will result in multiple bids and higher seeds for C-USA schools, though that’s certainly the hope.

“It is a well thought out, data-driven strategy born from listening to all stakeholders,” Adams said. “We never lost sight of the unanimous goal to enhance the seed of the C-USA Tournament champion and position a team that has an outstanding season but falls short in the tournament as a possible second bid.”

This new system may or may not yield the desired results, but the previous format wasn't working. Coaches, administrators and officials correctly decided it was time for something new.

This is worth a shot.{&end}

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Brad Stephens

Bowling Green Daily News sports reporter primarily covering Western Kentucky football and men's basketball.

