

ISSUE EIGHT: DIVISION III CHAMPIONSHIPS

Identification of Issue

Future growth of Division III through the addition of new members will begin to impact national championships access ratios, bracket sizes and championship timeframes in many team sports by the year 2016. If growth trends continue and current access ratios stay the same, several team championships (i.e., men's and women's basketball, men's and women's soccer, baseball, softball, volleyball) will confront significant challenges by 2016.

Background

National championships are an important component of the programmatic offerings of Division III, and championships funding represents approximately 75% of the divisional budget. The current championships program in team sports is based upon the concept of automatic qualification (AQ) for conference champions. At present, entrance to the national championship in team sports is either through a conference's "Pool A" AQ slot (with related "Pool B" slots allocated to independents) or through at-large bids ("Pool C"). Each national championship (with the exception of football) is conducted within a three week timeframe. Current championships policy and related legislation provides one berth for every six and a half institutions sponsoring a team sport. At present the practical limit for a three week championship bracket, which maintains reasonable limits on frequency of play and related travel as well as a consideration of the academic commitments, is 64 teams. If the current access ratio of 1 berth for every 6.5 sponsoring institutions is maintained that establishes a practical limit of 416 total member schools sponsoring the sport before difficulties arise.

Since 1990, approximately 120 new members have joined the division. Projections bring the total membership to approximately 480 by the 2020 academic year. By 2011, the sports of women's basketball, soccer and volleyball will reach the maximum bracket size of 64 if the current access ratio is maintained. In another two years, men's basketball, men's soccer and softball will also reach the maximum bracket size.

Growth will limit the access members have to championships, as brackets cannot grow indefinitely. A further product of membership growth will be the creation of new athletic conferences that are eligible for AQ. An increase in the number of conferences and therefore the number of teams that automatically qualify for championships through "Pool A" also will reduce the number at-large "Pool C" championship bids available.

Membership growth also affects championships from a financial perspective. Larger championships cost more.

The current rubric of 75% of the Division III allocation budgeted toward championships (approximately \$15 Million in 2007-08) may have to be reconsidered in light of the increase in membership and championships expenses.

In conclusion, membership growth impacts access to championships and in turn, raises the question of championships financing.

Division III Philosophical Principles

Division III Bylaw 20.11 contains the Division III philosophy statement that presents the division with guiding principles for governing championships. While section (m) notes that Division III institutions should “give primary emphasis to regional in-season competition and conference championships,” section (n) states that institutions should “support student-athletes in their efforts to reach high levels of athletics performance, which may include opportunities for participation in national championships.”

Division III Bylaw 18.01.1 presents the purpose of NCAA Championships: “NCAA championships are intended to provide national-level competition among the best eligible student-athletes and teams of member institution.” Additionally, Article 2.15 contains the guiding principle of postseason competition: “The conditions under which postseason competition occurs shall be controlled to assure that the benefits inherent in such competition flow fairly to all participants, to prevent unjustified intrusion on the time student-athletes devote to their academic programs.”

These guiding principles and purpose provide the Association with a context through which all rules and regulations governing the championships must be examined. The rules, then, become the means to balance the opportunity to compete at the highest level with proper boundaries to ensure the athletes remain students first.

Identification of Options

In the Division III membership survey, the governance structure posited a number of options to manage the impact of growth on championships. The options were: 1) Expansion of the championship format, 2) Increase in the number of mid-week contests, 3) Elimination of Pool C (at-large) berths to preserve automatic qualification to all conferences, 4) An increase in the

minimum size of conference sponsorship needed to maintain the automatic qualifier; and 5) A change to the access ratio to limit the field to 64. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of support for these options ranging from strong support to strong opposition.

Summary of Survey and Membership Feedback

Overall, there was strong support for the current championships structure in terms of access, length and financial allocation. Over 97% agree or strongly agree that Division III members should have the opportunity to qualify to participate in a national championship. A solid majority of responses (76%) disagree or strongly disagree with the elimination of at-large bids, while 83% opposed the elimination of conference AQ.

In terms of the structure of the championship, 59% support the current access ratio, one opportunity for every six and one-half institutions sponsoring a team sport. A little more than one-quarter of respondents indicate a preference for a higher access ratio, or decreased access to championships, while 14% expressed interest in a lower ratio, or increased access. The current maximum (except for football) for the number of weeks to conduct the championships is three. 86% of schools indicated a preference for that maximum.

The question of allocation of the divisional budget was also raised. 68% of survey respondents indicated a preference for the current allocation of 75% to championships initiatives. 20% supported a greater allocation to non-championships initiatives, while 12% supported more money for championships.

During the town hall forums, the survey findings were supported further by comments from the attendees. Some of the main points raised were:

- There appears to be significant support for the current championships program and the balance between regular season and postseason opportunities. Championships access is an important concept for prospective and enrolled Division III student-athletes. The concept of regional championships does not generate a lot of support.
- There also appears to be general comfort with the approach expressed in the survey – cap team sports at 64 as necessary and adjust subsequent access ratios accordingly.

- Growth likely will trigger the need to revisit the “Pool A/B/C” concept. The number of conferences (and related “Pool A” AQs) will continue to grow. The number of independents will likely continue to shrink (reducing the need for separate “Pool B bids”). There will be real pressure on “Pool C” “at-large” bids as they are reduced by the growth of Pool A.

Recommendations for Further Consideration

1. Change the access ratio policies, as necessary, to limit the championships field in team sports to 64. This appears to be the most viable option for the division to explore.
2. Establish related sports sponsorship projections, and corresponding bracket and “Pool” timetables, as appropriate, in both team and individual sports, through 2020.
3. Identify necessary bracket enhancements and related costs for planning purposes.
4. Emphasize the quality of the student-athlete experience as a priority in future championships discussions.