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College Basketball Tournaments Wait for NCAA's Decision

Early-season tournament destinations in a holding pattern until start date is scheduled

Posted On : [September 3, 2020](#) By : [Matt Traub](#)



The Purdue Boilermakers face the Davidson Wildcats during the 2018 Charleston Classic. (Photo by Eric Lars Bakke / ESPN Images)

Last year's college basketball season ended with a COVID-induced thud and no championship to speak of. Like every other sport on the collegiate landscape, basketball spent the summer full of uncertainty. And as its scheduled start date for practices loom, a sport that bridges both the fall and winter seasons — finishing in the spring — still awaits an official start date. And nobody can yet speak with any certainty to where the season is headed.

Welcome to life as a college basketball fan.

One of the seminal early moments during the sports-event industry's reckoning with COVID-19 was the cancellation of the [NCAA Men's and Women's Tournaments](#) mere days before the tournament fields were set to be unveiled. Since this year's season is not yet official — [CBS Sports has reported that a proposed November 25 start date](#) will be sent to the Division I Council, which is scheduled to meet September 16 — there remain dozens of questions.

There is also the question of whether early-season tournaments should be held on delayed dates — and possibly serve as mini-bubbles for teams to get early games in their rotation. Complicating matters is whether the [Pac-12](#) and [Ivy League](#) will be participating at all. Both conferences, when they canceled fall sports, said they would not have any athletic competition until January 1, 2021, including basketball. The CBS report on a projected November 25 start date suggested possible movement on the Pac-12's side, but nothing about the Ivy League.

Those issues will all be in the front of several early-season tournament organizers' minds. For men's basketball, every Pac-12 team except for Washington was scheduled to be in a tournament — the one school that was not, [Washington, had a scheduled game against Tulane on November 14 in China already canceled](#). Penn from the Ivy League was scheduled to play in the Myrtle Beach Invitational, November 19–22 at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, South Carolina.

Early-Season Events on Hold

Most of the college basketball's early-season tournaments are organized by ESPN Events, which said in a statement: "ESPN Events continues to evaluate the next steps for our owned and operated events as conferences make decisions on their seasons."

But there are challenges ahead for many of the early-season tournaments. For instance, those with Pac-12 and Ivy League teams committed will have to figure out a replacement team if those conferences stick with their January 1 starts.

Other tournaments, meanwhile, will have to address what happens with states that have self-quarantine policies for visitors. One of those destinations is Hawaii, which has a 14-day traveler quarantine in place. Maui is home of one of the most well-known early-season tournaments, the [Maui Invitational](#), which this year is scheduled for November 23–25 and would have Stanford from the Pac-12 in addition to North Carolina, Indiana, Texas, Alabama, Davidson, Providence and UNLV.

“At this time, we expect the Maui Jim Maui Invitational to proceed as scheduled,” organizers said in a statement. “The Tournament is evaluating various contingencies should the event not be played on Maui due to the pandemic. Our top priority remains the health and safety of our players, staff and dedicated fans. The Tournament is working with participating schools and its college basketball partners to monitor the NCAA’s decision expected in mid-September regarding the start of the college basketball season to understand how it could affect the 2020 Maui Jim Maui Invitational.”

So many questions, so few answers — and deadlines fast approaching for decisions to be made. For destinations, a nervous wait continues.

A Desirable Event in Myrtle Beach

The [Myrtle Beach Invitational](#) faces the question of what will happen to its dates and, if it remains on a revamped schedule, what would happen with finding a potential substitute for Penn.

But uncertainty in some ways fits a tournament that was originally born out of chaos — the inaugural 2018 event was moved to Myrtle Beach after the Puerto Rico Tipoff had to relocate because of a hurricane. “(ESPN Events) had such a great experience here that they approached us about doing our own early-season tournament,” said **Jonathan Paris**, executive director of sports tourism for [Visit Myrtle Beach](#).



Villanova guard Collin Gillespie guards Baylor guard MaCio Teague during the first half of the 2019 Myrtle Beach Invitational championship game in Conway, South Carolina. (AP Photo/Gerry Broome)

This year's tournament is scheduled to have a regional connection with Charlotte competing, along with Missouri and Dayton, which have traditionally stout fan bases. Beyond that are a number of Power 5 conference schools with Nebraska, Pittsburgh and mid-majors Utah State and Loyola (Chicago).

Paris' destination is trying to plan for a pivot whenever changes come, not only to the basketball tournament but for the inaugural Myrtle Beach Bowl football game, which is tentatively scheduled for December.

"For us it's that mix of visibility and tourism," Paris said of the desire to host the basketball event, which has every game broadcast on the ESPN family of networks. "It's a lot of great publicity and visibility for the destination. From the tourism side, this event happens the week before Thanksgiving. That's traditionally a shoulder season for us."

An early-season tournament is valuable for any competing team because it gives them the chance to have multiple games in a short time frame ahead of conference play. And for Myrtle Beach or any early-season tournament destination, the ability to host multiple teams in one site may prove similar to a bubble environment that has proven so far successful for the NBA, NHL and Major League Soccer. The bubble concept for early-season events is an idea that was initially opposed by the NCAA but is starting to become more openly discussed.

“I think there is the opportunity to keep them in a bubble — I don’t know to the level of the NBA bubble,” Paris said. “We’re an attractive tournament for teams to play in because it’s early season, you get to come and make a trip out of it.”

Holding Their Breath in Charleston

There are plenty of benefits for destinations to host tournaments. You get diverse fan bases, a boost to the local economy and visibility on television. But admittedly, there are times when the schedules align and you also get a tournament with a great field.

This year’s [Charleston Classic](#) — held since 2008 — is slated to be just that this November 19–22. Tennessee, Florida State and Houston are all ranked in [ESPN’s Early Top 25](#). The hometown Charleston Cougars are back for the first time in four years and there are four other big names in Oklahoma State, Penn State, Seton Hall and VCU.

“It’s supposed to be our best field ever,” said **Kathleen Cartland**, executive director of the [Charleston Area Sports Commission](#). “Everything’s been really on hold in terms of recruiting alumni groups — we normally by now would send out correspondence and let them know things are happening tournament week. We feel like it’s going to take place and we have to be very positive and move forward with that.”



Florida's Keyontae Johnson holds the championship trophy after defeating Xavier 70-65 in the finals of the Charleston Classic on November 24, 2019 in Charleston, South Carolina. (AP Photo/Mic Smith)

Like in Myrtle Beach, the Charleston tournament is run by ESPN Events. Between fan and alumni groups coming to town, events such as golf tournaments for boosters and ESPN broadcasting games (and generating hundreds of room nights), Cartland said the estimated economic impact of last year's event was \$3.4 million.

"We organize a lot of get-togethers — I don't know what it will be like this year — but we see a good influx of visitors because of the weather and we're a top destination in the world, and that builds on the tournament," Cartland said. "It's been a great addition to our sports and event calendar."

Don't take it just from Cartland when it comes to Charleston as a destination; the statistics of any tourism survey bear out the region's attraction for visitors. And having the Charleston Classic, in whatever form it would take, would be a boost

for the city's sports scene. The city's professional women's tennis tournament, one of the most historic stops on the WTA Tour, was canceled this year as were as a series of recreational events.

"This is the next largest event that we're holding our breath for," Cartland said.

And it's not just Charleston. Destinations and fan bases throughout college basketball are waiting to see what this season will look like, with some answers likely in the weeks ahead.