



## HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL

# Think Kentucky's Sweet Sixteen is struggling? Take a look at other states.

BY JOSH MOORE

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Sweet Sixteen attendance isn't where it once was, but it has ticked upward along with live-stream viewership over the past couple of years.

A total of 96,527 fans turned out for the 101st Whitaker Bank/KHSAA Boys' Sweet Sixteen last week in Rupp Arena. That was the highest total attendance for the eight-session event since the 2014 tournament, which drew 101,683 people to downtown Lexington, and was up from last year's total of 92,437.

It was the fourth straight year that total attendance was below six figures, the longest such streak since a five-year stretch from 1958-1962.

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This year's best-attended session was the first one of the tournament — a twin billing of Corbin-Estill County and Scott County-Trinity. A mountain team, a first-time challenger and two teams who were considered favorites to win it all brought in a crowd of 15,271.

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The tournament is far from its heyday in 1987, when a record 140,266 showed up, but it remains one of the highest-attended state basketball events in the nation.

“I tell other states our attendance is down a little bit and they laugh at me,” KHSAA Commissioner Julian Tackett said. “You mean you’re not happy with 10,000 (for the finals)? Well, you don’t understand.”

## Hoosiers

Indiana, often cited along with Kentucky as the most basketball-hungry state, hosts four state championship games every season at Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis. The state semifinals and other preceding rounds are held at various sites around the state over the course of several weekends, so it makes 1-to-1 comparisons to Kentucky’s Sweet Sixteen difficult.

It’s less difficult to compare the championship round, though. Last year’s attendance for Indiana’s four championship games — divided into two sessions — was 34,980, an average of 8,745 per game. Last year’s finals between Bowling Green and Cooper — the only title game in Kentucky — drew 11,346.

Attendance for this year’s finals between Covington Catholic and Scott County was 12,637, making it the most well-attended championship since 17,315 fans watched Madison Central beat Ballard for the 2013 title.

Indiana will hold its 2018 championship games this Saturday.

## Elsewhere

Indiana has two million more people than Kentucky. How does our tournament fare against those held in similar-sized states?

Louisiana’s population is about 200,000 more than that of Kentucky but the state awards 12 state championships — seven public and five private. The total attendance for its “Marsh Madness” events — during which the semifinals and finals are played for all 12 championships — was 36,018.

Oregon, which has a population of about 400,000 fewer than Kentucky, awards six boys’ and six girls’ champions over the course of six separate events held at six different sites and each lasting three or four days. The combined attendance for all six tournaments this year was 77,545.

Alabama, which has 500,000 more people, holds its seven boys’ and seven girls’ basketball championship games in conjunction with one another during the first week of March. Three-day attendance — Thursday-Saturday — for the 14 finals this year was 33,829 — an average 2,416

fans per game. The Thursday-Saturday total for the Kentucky boys' tournament and was 58,386, and swells to 78,250 if the girls' Thursday-Saturday totals are included; Kentucky doesn't play its championship games until Sunday.

Delaware has about 3 million fewer people than Kentucky but is worth mentioning because it is the only other state that doesn't classify basketball. The total attendance for its 2017 boys' state tournament — five rounds played over 12 days — was 19,928.

Texas, the second-largest state in the union, awards six boys' basketball champions. Semifinals for each class are held at one site on Thursday and Friday with all six finals played on a Saturday; total combined attendance for the nine-session event in 2016 was 80,805.

## Streaming success

This was the first year that NFHS Network streaming statistics were made available to the KHSAA.

The 15 tournament games — which required a paid subscription — generated a total of 17,787 live views, an average of 1,186 views per game. The semifinals bout between Scott County and Warren Central generated the highest live-view total — 2,154 — with the first-round game between Corbin and Estill County (1,653) coming in second. The championship game and Covington Catholic's first-round matchup with Apollo each had 1,553 live views.

A total of 17,435 live views occurred for the 2017 tournament, buoyed by 3,156 fans who streamed the quarterfinals game between Bowling Green and Scott County that year.

The 2016 tournament — the first year for which numbers are available — had only 5,813 live views; the highest-watched game was the first-round matchup between Mercer County and Paul Laurence Dunbar (802 views). That tournament, which attracted 88,170 fans, also was the lowest-attended event since 1994.

It's only a three-year sample, but the upward trend in attendance and live-streaming viewership seems to fly in the face of the oft-heard assumption that making the games available as part of a streaming subscription negatively impacts attendance.

Alabama, Louisiana and Oregon were not yet able to provide their live-stream reports.

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