

Reaching Sweet 16 a status symbol worth savoring

Surviving the first weekend gives you the status of a term in use for nearly 100 years but with more cachet in recent times

By Stephanie Kuzydym March 23, 2015 Updated: March 24, 2015 9:20 a.m.

Sports



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Ken Kavanagh's ring caught the attention of the stranger sitting next to him on the plane. The athletic director's keepsake, celebrating Florida Gulf Coast's 2013 voyage from obscurity to the national spotlight, is inscribed with words that carry special meaning.

NCAA Sweet Sixteen.

"Oh, you're that school in Florida," the stranger said. "Boy, were you guys just so much fun to watch."

The nation watched two years ago as the 15th-seeded Eagles pulled off two straight upsets that changed the tiny Florida school forever. Its run showed the impact of reaching the second weekend of the NCAA

Tournament, the Sweet 16. That phrase holds a special power for the Cinderellas, the powerhouses and college basketball fans throughout the nation.

"There are 351 schools in Division I, and if you finish in the Sweet 16, that puts you in the top 5 or maybe even top 4 percent of all schools," Kavanagh said. "To me, it's a mark of excellence."

More Information

SouthRegional

Friday's games at NRG stadium

(2) Gonzaga 34-2

(11) UCLA 22-13

6:15 p.m., CBS

(1) Duke 31-4

(5) Utah 26-8

8:45 p.m., CBS

This week, Houston will host No. 1-seeded Duke, No. 2 Gonzaga, No. 5 Utah and No. 11 UCLA in the South Regional semifinals. Including this year, Duke and UCLA have combined for 61 Sweet 16 appearances. Gonzaga has made six Sweet 16 appearances, the last five under 16th-year coach Mark Few. Utah has made 10 Sweet 16 appearances, the last a decade ago.

"Our main goal is just to win the national championship," said forward Alex Poythress of undefeated Kentucky, the Tournament's No. 1 overall seed, which made its NCAA-record 42nd Sweet 16.

Said Kavanagh: "Unfortunately, some people ... put too much emphasis on winning a national championship or going to the Final Four."

That's because to the non-Kentuckys of the world, the designation of the Sweet 16 has changed the way teams and fans view the Tournament as well.

Kentucky High School Athletic Association commissioner Julian Tackett may work in the same state as the Wildcats, but even he knows the goal for a one seed and a 15 seed isn't the same.

"There are people who their goal is not the national championship," he said. "It's not possible, but they want a way to recognize their athletes that lasts forever. ... We like names, we like little catchphrases, but I haven't heard one for the round of 32 or the round of 64."

But what does the Sweet 16 mean, and where did the phrase come from?

The phrase actually has circulated for nearly 100 years, thanks to the Kentucky High School Athletic Association. It wasn't officially trademarked by the KHSAA until 1988 in describing its postseason basketball tournament.

In 1998, a trademark agreement was reached between the KHSAA and the NCAA, allowing the NCAA to use the term for its postseason

basketball tournament. Tackett told the Houston Chronicle that the sides agreed on a one-time payment of around \$50,000. NCAA assistant general counsel Chris Termini verified the NCAA did make a one-time payment but wouldn't confirm the amount. Both sides said that as long as the KHSAA holds the trademark registration, the NCAA can use the trademark, as well as sub-license it to its corporate partners and licensees.

"I'll add that we have protections in place that if Kentucky stops using it, we would have the right to step into their shoes and own it," Termini said.

The NCAA also owns the trademarks to "NCAA Sweet 16" and "NCAA Sweet Sixteen."

"A lot of teams that make it to that level - the Cinderella stories and even the large schools that we expect to get there - value that designation," Termini said.

Catching on nationwide

As the phrase has grown, so has the marketing around it. The concept has helped draw attention to the NCAA, to schools that reached the round of 16, and to Cinderella stories like Florida Gulf Coast. But to understand how the concept of the Sweet 16 came to be, you must follow the money.

Follow the money, back before Duke versus Butler in 2010, before Magic versus Bird in 1979, back to 1968. UCLA at 13-0 was taking on Houston at 14-0. John Wooden versus Guy V. Lewis. Lew Alcindor versus Elvin Hayes. No. 1 versus No. 2.

It was the first NCAA regular-season game to be broadcast nationwide in prime time, and it established the relationship between college basketball and national media attention.

If you've followed the money back that far, the dollars show you college basketball and viewership went hand in hand. With more money came more broadcast rights, with more rights came more viewership, and with more viewership came a desire to have more than 25 teams compete for a national title.

Follow the money forward to 1975, when the Tournament expanded from 25 teams to 32 to allow multiple teams from the same conference. That is when the concept of the Sweet 16 was truly born, believes college basketball historian John Matthew Smith.

"It's significant that you're one of the top 16 teams in the Tournament, in the country," he said. "Before, with just 25 teams, it wasn't as big of a deal."

But the Sweet 16's roots? They were planted in 1968, right here in Houston, in conjunction with the UCLA-UH "Game of the Century" at the Astrodome.

The concept of the Sweet 16 swelled with the expansion of the NCAA Tournament. It grew to 64 teams in 1985 and to 68 in 2011.

Follow the money to coaching incentives, too. Most men's college basketball coaches have incentives written into their contracts for making certain rounds of the Tournament.

For Texas A&M's Billy Kennedy, making the Tournament is worth a 12th

of his base salary, or \$41,667. He makes another 12th if he reaches the Sweet 16, meaning a sixth of his salary, or \$83,334, can be earned as a bonus if Kennedy takes the Aggies to the round of 16. As for University of Houston coach Kelvin Sampson, he receives \$10,000 for each win in the first and second rounds, \$15,000 for a win in the third round, and \$20,000 for a win in the Sweet 16. In total, that's \$70,000, and it doesn't include winning a conference regular-season or tournament title.

Sweet amount of cash

Then there's Texas coach Rick Barnes. He makes \$125,000 for just making the NCAA Tournament. Barnes' contract states that he makes \$30,000 more for reaching a second game and \$35,000 more for reaching a third game, bringing his Tournament bonuses to \$190,000.

Follow the money to new trademarks, like the one born out of FGCU's Sweet 16 "Dunk City," after the Eagles laid down street basketball-like dunks in the Tournament.

"Like in Houston years ago with Hakeem Olajuwon and Clyde Drexler with 'Phi Slama Jama,' " Kavanagh said. "It personifies what the team was."

Kavanagh referred to a small school making the Sweet 16 as Florida Gulf Coast's "stop and smell the roses moment."

It means more than the impact on campus, which includes increased merchandising, a 40 percent spike in student applications, and the corresponding two-point average increase of the ACT score for students.

It's a whirlwind experience Kavanagh wishes fans appreciated, rather than compared to even bigger moments. It becomes a benchmark, one that a still-developing program can't expect to reach consistently.

Follow the money to NRG Stadium, where Smith believes in a ballpark estimate that every Tournament game a team wins is worth between \$275,000 to \$300,000 in revenue for its conference.

"The more you play, the more you can make for your school," Smith said.

So what does making the Sweet 16 really mean for a school?

About a half-million dollars.