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NCAA tourney likely headed to 68 teams; TBS to join CBS in airing every game

By Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — The NCAA is on the verge of expanding the men's basketball tournament from 65 to 68 teams beginning next year and announced a new, $10.8 billion broadcasting deal with CBS Sports and Turner Broadcasting today that will allow every game to be shown live for the first time.

"This is an important day for intercollegiate athletics and the 400,000 student-athletes who compete in NCAA sports," interim NCAA president Jim Isch said. "This agreement will provide on average more than $740 million annually to our conferences and member schools."

Any move had hinged on the NCAA's $6 billion, 11-year television deal with CBS. The deal, signed in 1999, had a mutual opt-out until July 31 and the NCAA took it amid speculation that ESPN might become a partner in one of the most popular and lucrative tournaments in sports.

Instead, the NCAA struck a 14-year agreement with CBS and Turner Broadcasting System Inc. The deal, which runs from 2011 through 2024, will show every game live across four national networks for the first time in the tournament's 73-year history.

Sean McManus, president of CBS News and Sports, said the "new strategic partnership" was a core asset — and a profitable one.

The men's tournament last expanded in 2001, adding one team to the 64-team field that was set in 1985, and talk of tweaking March Madness again had generated a lot of criticism from fans and bracket-fillers worried about watering down the competition.

The NCAA studied expanding the tournament to 68, 80 or even 96 teams, with the latter option likely enveloping the 32-team NIT. But the NCAA said that the Division I Men's Basketball Committee unanimously passed the 68-team proposal and it will be reviewed by the Board of Directors on April 29.

The proposal is strictly for the men's tournament. Another NCAA committee is looking at whether to expand the women's tournament or keep it in the current format.

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