

Prep boys basketball: NCAA stance latest obstacle for moving City of Palms to FGCU's Alico Arena

By DANA CALDWELL

Tuesday, June 15, 2010

ESTERO — Don't look for the prestigious City of Palms Classic high school boys basketball tournament to make the transition from Bishop Verot to Florida Gulf Coast University's Alico Arena.

Not now. Likely not ever.

For years, tournament director Ron Riley has expressed interest in moving from Bishop Verot's John L. Nevins Gymnasium, the largest high school arena in Southwest Florida that seats up to 2,400, to 4,500-seat Alico Arena to accommodate more fans and to provide a more "high-end" venue.

For years, he's been frustrated and disappointed.

The most recent rounds of discussion began early this year and concluded last month after FGCU's athletic director for facilities Billy Blood presented Riley with a bottom-line figure for the proposed use of Alico Arena. The total was three times more than the cost of using Bishop Verot's gym, where the tourney has been held 15 years, and did not fully address issues like concessions, parking, security, banners, etc., Riley said, which likely would cost the City of Palms thousands more.

"The numbers were not close enough to consider this year, and if they don't get closer, it would be difficult to consider it at any point," Riley said. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it. We've got a successful operation, and it's a great relationship with Bishop Verot High School. Everyone lines up on either side of the issue -- some people feel we should stay, some people feel we should leave. It's a discussion point every year.

"Candidly, it's just good business to have that (FGCU) door open and hopefully have that opportunity. But my gut feeling is it's going to be extremely difficult to make it work. There are too many players -- from AD to president to administration to coaches to whomever ... there are too many things to fall into place to make all the stars align."

FGCU athletic director Ken Kavanagh, who finished his first year Tuesday after 13 at Bradley, and will have three children at Bishop Verot next fall, said current NCAA legislation concerning just such events affected the school's estimate to Riley. The legislation disallows college athletics programs from giving financial breaks to local sporting events hosted by third parties that could be seen as recruiting advantages.

Further, Kavanagh said, the NCAA mandates that in cases like this -- a tournament not hosted by a particular high school or the Florida High School Activities Association -- colleges and universities must conduct business as usual, meaning the top-notch, local-produced concessions fans are accustomed to at Bishop Verot could not be sold in Alico Arena.

"So we said, 'OK, if you guys want to come, Billy B. is the front person, and this will be the cost,'" Kavanagh said. "However, the aspect of the NCAA (not) allowing these events of high school athletes coming to college campuses is the biggest concern."

The whole concept of high school tourneys run by non-school entities at colleges and universities appears to be on the road to being quashed, Kavanagh said, perhaps as soon as a year from now.

"It's very difficult now -- and apparently it's going to be more so in the coming years -- to have these events on college campuses," Kavanagh said. They haven't finalized anything yet, but that's the way they're going, the major step they're taking."

Kavanagh was at a compliance seminar in Indianapolis, home of the NCAA, last month, when a presentation on this subject was given. He said he had previously talked to someone he knows with the NCAA about moving the City of Palms and all its concessions, etc., to Alico Arena. He said he even pointed out FGCU will have two men and one woman basketball player from Bishop Verot in the fall. But he said he was told, "(The NCAA is) really not going to want you to have an outside group run without Bishop Verot High School and staff," and that came at the 11th hour.

Kavanagh said he talked to one of the members of compliance after the session, and was told the NCAA "is really looking to distance themselves from outside third parties that they feel are profiting at the expense of prospective student-athletes. So that's what we were told and, at that point, we decided to not get this thing started if we're going to get the rug pulled out from underneath us in a very short period of time."

Kavanagh said the exposure to FGCU for not only lots of the country's best high school players, but also their friends, family and fans and an ESPNU audience was the main attraction for the university. ESPNU will again televise the third-place and championship games.

"We were willing to work through things, including some scheduling aspects for both practices and games from the men's and women's basketball side to make that happen," Kavanagh. "We were willing to do it if the rental agreements were what the NCAA would consider to be acceptable for us to do it to show them we weren't doing this outside of what the NCAA allows."

"I think Ron was looking for a multi-year understanding that we could continue to do this, and that was a big problem. We could not commit at this particular junction beyond one year because we had no understanding when the rule was going to be finalized. But based on direct communication with people who are very influential with the (NCAA) enforcement staff, to be honest, we did not want to in any way paint a picture that looked at all (like FGCU was skirting the rules)."

Even without the NCAA concerns, the earliest the City of Palms -- which is played six days in December, prior to Christmas; this year from Dec. 18-23 -- could have been held in Alico Arena would have been 2011 because there already is a scheduling conflict with an FGCU game.

Riley will announce Wednesday during a press conference that the tournament will remain at Bishop Verot for the upcoming 38th season. There never has been a contract between the City of Palms and Bishop Verot, which constructed its gym largely with the City of Palms in mind.

"Bishop Verot does everything we ask them to do," Riley said. "They've been there every step of the way. Whenever we looked at Alico, what we were looking for was a fair proposal. We know what we have at Bishop Verot is perfect. We know what we could get at Alico, if it could work. But it never seems to work."

Another concern for Riley is longtime Bishop Verot principal Chris Beretta no longer is at the school. Riley has not met John Cavell, who will assume Beretta's old post on July 1.

"He's been my primary contact point at Bishop Verot," Riley said. "I don't expect any surprises. But with a new administration, there are things that can happen. I have no fears for this year, but obviously over time, there could be an issue. Nothing's set in stone for the next five years."

Previous City of Palms sites were Edison Community College (1973-83, 1990, 1993), Cape Coral High (1984), Fort Myers High (1985-89) and the Harborside Convention Hall (1991-92).

The cost of changing over Germain Arena from a hockey facility, etc., leaves that it out of the picture, Riley said. So his upgrade and/or backup plan had been only Alico Arena.

"The only option we had from a standpoint of capacity, and then there's the obvious, the quality of the venue," Riley said. "There's no question of the high-end quality they could provide."

Connect with Dana Caldwell at www.naplesnews.com/staff/Dana_Caldwell



© 2010 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online