

Lack of TV time won't hurt City of Palms Classic

When the 39th annual State Farm City of Palms Classic culminates with its title game on Wednesday, Dec. 21, it will do so for the first time since 2007 without a national television audience.

The 16-team high school basketball tournament, rated the best in the nation this season by maxpreps.com, withdrew from negotiations with ESPNU about televising the Classic this year because of a conflict between two sponsors.

The insurance company Geico has a sponsorship contract with ESPN this season. The company would have required tournament organizers to cover up all State Farm Insurance signage at Bishop Verot High School in order to televise the title game, said Ron Riley, executive director of Classic Basketball, Inc. The Classic begins Friday, Dec. 16.

"First of all, I wouldn't do that," Riley said of slighting State Farm in order to televise the tournament for the fourth consecutive year. State Farm will contribute \$40,000 to the Classic this year. The money goes toward paying the travel and hotel expenses of the visiting teams, which are traveling from as far as California, Las Vegas and New York.

"One of the core elements of why we've been so successful is we've been loyal to our sponsors," Riley said.

One year, Progressive Insurance had a sponsorship agreement with ESPN, but agreed to allow State Farm its signage during the title game. Representatives from ESPN and Geico could not be reached for comment.

"Geico wouldn't budge," Riley said. "We tried to negotiate for probably two months."

Riley said he had no hard feelings with ESPN or ESPNU (the station that had broadcasted the tournament) and would welcome future opportunities to get back on the network.

"We worked so hard to get on national TV," Riley said. "Being on ESPN absolutely was something we already wanted and were very proud to have. That brand gave us so much more credibility."

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Although the Classic won't be on national TV, it will not be lacking for national exposure. Seven of the tournament's 16 teams have been ranked this year in USA Today's Super 25, led by No. 2 Lithonia (Ga.) Miller Grove, a consensus top 10 team in the country.

No. 6 Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei, No. 7 Montverde Academy, No. 9 Las Vegas (Nev.) Bishop Gorman, No. 12 Reserve (La.) Riverside Academy, No. 18 Arlington (Tex.) Grace Preparatory Academy and No. 25 Gladstone (N.J.) Gill St. Bernard's School are all in the field of 16 teams.

"There's no question from the emails I've been getting and what the major recruiting sites have been saying that the ticket holders are excited about the field," Riley said. "Reebok announced its tournament power rankings. They ranked us No. 1 in the country, which is good to have."

THE 39TH ANNUAL STATE FARM CITY OF PALMS CLASSIC

What: 16-team elite high school basketball tournament
 When: Friday, Dec. 16-Wednesday, Dec. 21 (except for Sunday)
 Where : Bishop Verot High
 Tickets : \$100 reserved seating for all 36 games; \$75 general admission for all games; \$15 individual, general admission game-day tickets.
 Phone: Ron Riley, 671-9347
 Online: Cityofpalmsclassic.com

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