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Goin' back to New Orleans?

Jack Styczynski

Special Report

The NCAA Tournament's return to New Orleans for the first time since Katrina served as a test case for whether the Big Easy could handle another Final Four. There's still no easy answer, and finding one is among the least of the city's problems.

Goin' back to New Orleans?

By Jack Styczynski

NEW ORLEANS – From Michael Jordan to Keith Smart to Chris Webber to Hakim Warrick, the city of New Orleans has provided some of the most memorable moments in NCAA championship history.

So in a post-Katrina world, should the Final Four come back?

Before rushing to say yes, the city needs the event to aid its recovery, know that the Big Easy is not the best basketball burg. The waiting list for Saints season tickets tops 25,000, and team attire is tremendously trendy; a Riverwalk souvenir shirt shop is a shrine to the Sugar Bowl; but from Tchoupitoulas to Pontchartrain, hyping hoop hardly happens.

Throughout the week leading up to the NCAA sub-regional here, the city was noticeably uninfected with March Madness. No banners around town promoting the event, no more than moderate coverage in the local news media, no buzz on Bourbon Street. In fact, if not for the reporter needed to file this story, not a soul would have been watching the tournament selection show or the 64/65 play-in game on the respective big screens of two popular haunts. One bartender wearing an LSU cap had never heard of Niagara, wasn't sure when the tournament games were coming to town and wasn't aware that they'd be played in the cozier, 18,500-seat New Orleans Arena rather than the spacious Superdome next door. The smaller facility still fell thousands short of a sellout.

"It's really a football city," says veteran *New Orleans Times-Picayune* sports columnist Peter Finney. That much remained obvious when only 100 or so fans were on hand to watch open team practices in the arena the day before first-round play. Main attraction: defending national champion and top-seeded Florida. Price of admission: free.

In fairness, New Orleans has more urgent matters to attend to right now, not to mention regionals and sub-regionals do not carry the same cachet as a Final Four. However, other venues succeed with the former. The Meadowlands, with its large population base, sells out nearly 20,000 seats long in advance via a lottery ticket sales system. Syracuse, with a smaller population and dearth of tourist lures, routinely draws 30,000 to the Carrier Dome. Although another sub-regional is scheduled for 2010, New Orleans just seems better suited to hosting the Fi-

nal Four, which is more of a destination event that can take advantage of a destination city – particularly a moderate-sized one that was basically sliced in half by a natural disaster.

Unfortunately, the everyday headlines don't inspire much confidence. For example, a rash of shootings in the city the weekend prior to the sub-regional included one at a busy intersection in broad daylight. A Tulane University professor also released a study that found New Orleans to have the highest murder rate in the nation. "Ninety-five percent of the time, young druggies killing young druggies," Finney says. The area around the Superdome doesn't totally escape the bad news either. An old motel building overrun by vagrants had to be demolished due to repeated fires there since Katrina.

The list of woes continues. Swaths of the city still without electricity. A lack of doctors and hospital beds. Businesses struggling or closed. Red tape getting government funds. New canal pumps malfunctioning. FEMA trailers ("candominiums"). Insurance battles. Suicides.

That's not to suggest there is no good news. The New Orleans Police Department recently graduated its first class of recruits since the hurricane. Habitat for Humanity is one of several groups doing excellent volunteer work in the neediest communities (see sidebar story). Donald Trump maintains that he'll have a new tower built in the Central Business District within three years. The Superdome and Convention Center are completely restored. Last but not least, the French Quarter and most tourist favorites are fine, including the old-fashioned streetcars and the *Steamboat Natchez* Mississippi paddlewheeler.



The Lakeview area visited by Billy Donovan's Gators remains largely vacant.

When in town for the sub-regional, some teams – including Billy Donovan's Florida squad – toured devastated neighborhoods. "We had the opportunity to practice over at Delgado Community College and the bus driver took us through that Lakeview area and some areas that were really hit hard, and I don't know if people truly understand the recovery that is going on in this city and the amount of disruption that's happened," Donovan said. "You're talking about 18 months removed from that storm and to see blocks and blocks and blocks of empty and vacant homes, some homes not there at all, people trying to pick up and start over, it's a very, very humbling experience."

Yet Donovan advocates bringing a Final Four back to the city. "I think having New Orleans as a site for the Final Four in the future would be a great thing. It's a great city and it's had a lot of great events here, and if it would help in the rebuilding process financially, I think it would all be good."

John Calipari has taken his Memphis team to the city's Ninth Ward twice and on his most recent visit found the area significantly cleaner than it was right after the storm, albeit still mostly uninhabited. He foresees recovery taking at least 10 years but shares Donovan's sentiments regarding the Final Four. "You've got to do it here again, because this is the best place for a Final Four," Calipari says. "They should have it here every third year."

Ditto Arizona's Lute Olson and probably almost every other coach. "I think you'd have a hard time finding anybody that didn't feel good about the (Final Four) being held here," Olson says.

Now it's a matter of convincing NCAA decision makers. That will be the job of the Greater New Orleans Sports Foundation and its executive director, Jay Cicero. Final Four events from 2012 to 2015 will be up for bid soon. "It's our understanding that the process will begin this summer and will end next summer," Cicero says. "It will be a year-long process of site visits, bid documents, answering questions that the NCAA or the committee may have about New Orleans, and I think having the first/second round here answers a lot of the questions they may have post-Katrina."

One man who can attest to that is Craig Littlepage, the Virginia athletic director whose five-year term on the NCAA Division I men's basketball committee ends this summer but who represented the body at the sub-regional in New Orleans and came away impressed. "The city of New Orleans, the staff of the New Orleans Arena, Tulane University and the Greater New Orleans Sports Foundation validated the committee's commitment to being in New Orleans this year. Every comment made to me by the participating institutions' representatives – ADs and head coaches, in particular – was positive."

The empty seats don't seem to cause any concern.

So the biggest question regarding another Final Four in New Orleans might not be if, but when. Finney would rather not rush it. "The longer it is, the better," he says, suggesting eight to 10 years might be an appropriate time frame, barring further catastrophe. "This area (around the Arena and Superdome) pretty much dodged a bullet; the French Quarter really dodged a bullet, but a lot of spots, it's going to be 10 or 15 years before they get back."

Coveting a Final Four as soon as possible, Cicero disagrees. "I don't think that matters one single solitary bit," he counters, pointing out that the city has already hosted the Bayou Classic, Sugar Bowl, New Orleans Bowl and a men's basketball sub-regional since Katrina and will host the BCS national championship, NBA All-Star Game and a women's basketball regional in the first quarter of 2008. "If he's insinuating it's better if we wait, that we'd have more ability to come back, no, we can handle those events now because the infrastructure, the hospitality industry is back. We're missing a couple hotels, but for the most part, we've got 30 of the 38-thousand rooms back already. I understand that perspective ... and that's why it's our job to kind of educate everyone on the realities of what you can do and what you can't do here, and we definitely can do big events in New Orleans – now."

That's the argument Cicero and New Orleans will have to make to the committee. "They need to show they are capable of putting the organization and infrastructure together to support a Final Four with all of the associated events," Littlepage says. "Based on my observations in New Orleans, there is an outstanding organization in place and a desire of those involved to deliver a great championship tournament. There are signs that everyone locally is committed to the recovery efforts moving forward. We remain in regular contact with officials throughout the Gulf Coast to assure we are aware of the progress on all fronts. As the committee begins to look at future Final Four sites, that dialogue will continue to assure that the decisions the committee makes are in the

Ol' college try of a different sort

NEW ORLEANS – If you watched or attended the sub-regional games in New Orleans this March, you might have noticed the Habitat for Humanity logos on the court. After hurricanes struck the Gulf Coast in 2005, the NCAA committed \$2.5 million for a three-year partnership with the organization. In the next five years, the New Orleans affiliate plans to build 1,500 houses in Southeast Louisiana. Habitat provides capital – not charity – to partner families. In lieu of a down payment, they contribute 350 hours of "sweat equity" to the building of their homes and those of other partner families. Homeowners pay back the cost of their house through a 20 or 30 year interest-free mortgage.

Much of the construction of these homes is done by volunteers. To promote this effort, Tulane student-athletes framed a house outside the New Orleans Arena during the first round of the tournament. Among them was women's basketball player and Baton Rouge native Jami Montagnino, who had friends in New Orleans evacuate to her grandfather's house as Hurricane Katrina approached the city. This was her first experience working with Habitat. "It's a great project and it gives you a great sense of pride to be able to come out here and support your city and the people of New Orleans, because they've supported us as a basketball team and as a community, so we're glad to put something back," Montagnino said.

Also lending a hand was football player Michael Parenton. Unlike the hoopsters, the football team was already on the Tulane campus for the fall 2005 semester as Katrina approached, so Parenton and his teammates evacuated to Jackson, Miss., on cramped buses. "It took us about five hours to get to the airport, which generally takes about 20 minutes, and it ended up taking us 10 hours in total to get to Jackson," he said. "We spent the night on the floor there in a basketball gym, and the power went out because the storm ended up rolling through there as well."

The next day, the players were told their first game was cancelled, school was closed and they were going to Dallas for an indefinite time.



Tulane women's hoopsters help rebuild the city.

It was on the way to Texas that they first saw TV coverage of what had happened in New Orleans.

A year and a half later, Parenton was thrilled to be helping Habitat. "This is awesome. I love it," he said. "I think this is a great experience. Personally, I've never done any construction work in building houses. I've painted a lot, but I think this is a great opportunity."

Aside from the Tulane athletes, hundreds of college students from around the country volunteered with Habitat's New Orleans affiliate during the week of the sub-regional, which coincided with spring break at many universities.

Among the numerous schools represented were Alaska-Fairbanks, Boston University, Dartmouth, Georgetown, Georgia, Idaho, Liberty, USC, Utah State, Vermont and Washington State, swelling a normal volunteer contingent of approximately 250 to over 700. And the school spirit seemed to be at a higher level than that displayed at the games in the New Orleans Arena.

Not so good for the NCAA, but definitely good for rebuilding New Orleans.

– Jack Styczynski

best interest of everyone, especially with a focus on making the tournament experience great for every participant and every fan.

"In that way, New Orleans will be no different from any other bid city."

One advantage New Orleans has in soliciting the committee is its four previous Final Four hosting experiences, tied with Indianapolis for the most since 1982. "From our past experience, I know what they're looking for," Cicero says. "They're looking for the quality of hotels. They're looking for a facility that can seat a minimum 40,000 and that can be a world-class venue for their event. They're looking for transportation questions – can the city handle the transportation needs of their group and their visitors? Traffic control, security, everything associated with these events ... It's not just us they're going to be asking; they're going to be asking every city the same thing."

Littlepage anticipates competition from Atlanta, Dallas, Detroit, Houston, Indianapolis, Phoenix, San Antonio and St. Louis. Atlanta just hosted the Final Four this season, and San Antonio will do so again next year. Domes in Detroit and Houston will host for the first time in 2009 and 2011, respectively. In 2010, the Final Four will return to Indianapolis in a new dome now under construction. Dallas and Phoenix apparently want to join the rotation

with new domes nearby. St. Louis last hosted in 2005. New Orleans last hosted in 2003.

The Superdome, which boasts the four largest championship game crowds, might be due. Reconfiguring seating to put more fans closer to the action – and other renovations to the facility – could improve the odds further.

Cicero obviously hopes so and will preach the gospel of New Orleans to anyone who'll listen. "We're on an education process – educate everyone on why you can have your event here, why it can be first class, why your fans can come here and enjoy great basketball, great venue, great hotels, great city," he says, especially to those who might still be wary of traveling to the Big Easy. "We want them all to go home and tell everybody they know that you can go to New Orleans, and you can still do everything you wanted to do, used to do, and have a great time. Go there, because they need you; this is the best way we can help – coming to New Orleans and spending some money and enjoying yourself."

Adding to that pitch, the most poignant comment about New Orleans and its people might have been made by Nevada head coach Mark Fox at the conclusion of the sub-regional, a thought the site-selection folk might take to heart.

"I certainly hope people don't forget about them as they rebuild."