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DePaul president: All-Catholic conference 'never part of the plan'

by Brian Roewe

The college basketball season concluded this week, with Big East conference teams winning both the men's and women's tournaments. The victories signal an end of an era of sorts as the conference severs later this summer and the Big East name relaunches around a core of Catholic universities.

On July 1, the new league with an old name will become official, set to begin play at the start of the 2013-14 academic year. Its formation was the result of an amicable split among the former Big East's football and basketball schools -- the latter, coincidentally, being seven Catholic institutions.

Quickly nicknamed the "Catholic 7" by media and fans, the schools have represented a flurry of activity since the March 8 announcement confirming the breakup. So far, the conference has:

- Negotiated extrication from the Big East while retaining the name;
- Reached a media rights deal with Fox Sports 1 network for 12 years and reportedly \$500 million;
- Expanded to 10 teams by adding three additional schools: Butler University in Indianapolis; Creighton University in Omaha, Neb.; and Xavier University in Cincinnati;
- Hired Dan Beebe, former commissioner for the Ohio Valley and Big 12 conferences, to work with athletic directors to get the conference running by July;
- Begun the search for a commissioner by hiring the New York-based firm Russell Reynolds Associates to seek out possible candidates; and
- Retained Madison Square Garden in New York as its conference tournament site. (The arena has hosted the Big East tournament for more than 30 years.)

"We're just kind of working through the list," said Fr. Dennis Holtschneider, president of DePaul University, a founding member of the new Big East.

Other founders include Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.; Marquette University in Milwaukee; Providence College in Rhode Island; Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J.; St. John's University in New York City; and Villanova University in Pennsylvania.

In an interview Tuesday with *NCR*, Holtschneider provided insight into how the old Big East separated, the importance of doing so, and why the conjecture about the all-Catholic conference was no more than speculation.

Holtschneider said the decision to leave was not an overnight one but a progressive process that started as "kind of a quiet worry that grew to a group consensus as we watched these developments take place."

In 2011, what they watched was the seemingly constant swinging door of the conference, with four members announcing departures and five new schools set to join.

"The league was changing," he said. "It appeared to us that this was slowly eroding the Big East basketball brand as football was making its decisions, and that became greatly worrisome for us."

By the fall of 2012, the seven Catholic school presidents moved closer to invoking a clause in the league bylaws permitting its dissolution by a two-thirds vote. When it became clear they had reached the point of no return, all presidents of the collapsing conference collectively made a point to ensure the split reflected respectful collegiality more than a bitter college breakup.

"I don't remember the exchange of a single harsh word through this process with any of our former colleagues. This was a remarkably amicable separation," Holtschneider said, mentioning R. Gerald Turner of Southern Methodist University and Georgetown's Jack DeGioia as guiding the peaceful settlement.

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When terms were announced March 8, the Catholic 7 departed, taking the Big East name with it. The remaining schools eventually re-formed as the American Athletic Conference.

The aim of the Catholic school presidents was not to add to the conference reshuffling, Holtschneider said, but to stabilize its own programs and insulate them from further football-related realignment.

Such certainty would help recruit top players and coaches, he said, but also assist all students through an established, well-known athletic program, a possibly useful tool during career searches.

"[For DePaul students,] people recognize the name of the school where they've been educated. And that's not a small gift to give people, name recognition on their degree," he said.

The new arrangement also offers more media revenue. As non-football members in the old conference, they received \$1.5 million annually, according to ESPN. Their deal with Fox Sports could double that figure, with the payout as much as \$5 million annually per school.

While the presidents negotiated the terms of their departure, fan and media speculation pondered whether the Catholic 7 would seek other like-faith schools to join them in an all-Catholic conference.

Holtzheimer told *NCR* that was never the case.

"Never," he said. "That was never part of the intentionality of the group. It was never part of the plan."

Holtzheimer and other presidents smiled when they first heard the Catholic 7 moniker, and he admitted his relief that no one tagged them the "CYO League." But when asked if the presidents weighed the pros and cons of an all-Catholic league, he said it never entered the discussion.

"We never talked about that question. We never talked about the advantages of an all-Catholic league. We never talked about the disadvantages. It just wasn't part of the conversation," he said.

That the seven schools shared a faith reflected the reality that each gave basketball prominence over football rather than a foreshadowing of future intentions. That same emphasis on basketball became the leading criteria for candidates to round out the 10-team league.

"We definitely wanted schools that had shown success and a commitment to success because it's going to be important for us to be a very strong league in a larger competitive arena where we're going to have to establish ourselves again," Holtzheimer said.

The addition of Butler, a private but nonreligious school, helped cool off any dreams of a faith-based league. Should the league expand further -- an option not currently on the table -- Holtzheimer said the league wouldn't limit the search to Catholic schools exclusively, such as the much-rumored Saint Louis University and the University of Dayton in Ohio.

For now, the new Big East has turned its attention to more pressing tasks. The league bylaws could be completed by the end of the week, then attention can turn toward getting a commissioner in place by the summer. Add to that hiring a conference staff, locating its headquarters, and finalizing schedules and officiating.

There's still much to be done before the Big East relaunches, but each check off the list moves them closer to that brand and farther from the Catholic 7 nickname.

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