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FILE PHOTO: TARA STIEGLITZ

ROLLING OUT THE RED CARPET A different format for Nationals may have seen the Bears go, and be less sad.

Pushing for change in CIS

Debate rages over the structure of the hockey National championships

NICK TAYLOR-VAISEY
The Fulcrum

OTTAWA (CUP)—Ottawa was the focal point of Canadian university women's hockey from 16–19 March, as the University of Ottawa hosted the CIS National Championships. The tournament included six teams from across the country, but some are wondering if they were the best the league had to offer.

Several of the results in the round-robin portion of the tournament were washouts, as the McGill Martlets, Wilfrid Laurier Golden Hawks and Alberta Pandas ran away with games against the other three teams in the tournament. At the same time, strong squads in Ontario—evenly matched with many teams in the tournament—were left out due to the championship's six-team limit. Some critics of the six-team structure argue that the conference hosting the tournament shouldn't automatically have two berths. Currently, each of the four conferences gets a spot, with the other two spots going to the host conference and the conference that won the previous year. This year, two of the four Québec conference teams—Ottawa and McGill—were in the tournament, and had McGill won the final over Alberta, only one Québec team would

have been left out of next year's event, which will again be held in Ottawa.

Karen Hughes, the head coach of the University of Toronto Varsity Blues women's hockey team, is among those who think the tournament format deserves re-examination.

"Something where there are two teams from each conference might work," she said. "But it's hard, because there are only four teams in the [Québec conference]...[Ontario] has more than twice as many teams, and only one spot. The level of competition is definitely there; I don't think we would have been out of place at Nationals."

The current tournament structure divides competitors into two three-team pools. If a team splits its games against its fellow pool competitors, and each team in the pool has a record of a win and a loss, goal differential determines who will play in the final.

At the 2004 tournament, such a situation occurred. At the time, Golden Hawks head coach Rick Osborne complained that although his team beat the Gee-Gees in the round robin, it was Ottawa that advanced on goal difference to the final game against the Pandas. He said that although his team has learned how to play the current format, he would welcome any changes.

"There's talk of it going to eight [teams], with a couple from each conference in the country. That would be good," he said. "I think for women's hockey, you would like to have the best teams in the final six, as opposed to always giving the host conference the extra team."

But not everyone agrees. Peter Smith, head coach of the Martlets, scoffed at the idea that the tournament structure should be reconsidered.

"The format is good. It involves the entire country, and I think that's important for the development of women's hockey," he said. "I think it's competitive. On any given day, whoever happens to be firing best can win."

Gee-Gees head coach Shelley Coolidge said she had no problem with the tournament structure, defending her team's performance over the weekend. Although her team was shut out in the round robin by a combined score of 10–0 at the hands of the Golden Hawks and Pandas, Coolidge blamed it all on bad bounces.

"We beat Laurier in exhibition earlier in the season, and we tied Alberta [as well]. Alberta was nervous playing against us in the first period of our game," she said. "So the competition is there—we simply couldn't get it going this weekend."

THE MEN'S PERSPECTIVE

The men's tournament follows the same format as the women's except that the defending champion's conference doesn't get an extra berth; it switches conferences year-to-year. Eric Thurston's Golden Bears hockey squad might have benefited from a CIS tournament that featured eight teams, however, he doesn't feel that's the proper way to address the situation.

"The final six is the way to go," Thurston said. "[But] I don't like the wild card that rotates around—it's easy to say when you lose and you want that

[so you can go]—but I would prefer that the top two teams from each conference go, and if you're hosting, that's one of your two."

Thurston also noted that the current format of CIS playoffs that sees teams play three games in three days needs to be looked at for revision. He pointed to the women's finals being played on a Monday as reason why the tournament could start Friday and still give teams a day off before the gold medal game. This would help keep teams from wearing down in a National final.

"[CIS] needs to let players be their best so the best team does win. Guys are completely exhausted and worn-out, and they don't get to showcase the best hockey," he said.

Finally, Thurston would like to see CIS look at altering the way the tournament breaks down and adopting a round-robin format similar to the Memorial Cup, where the top team after the round-robin gets into the final while the second and third teams play in a semifinal.

Paul Owen