

Volleyball Town, U.S.A.

No. 1 Ramblers figure to take part in first-ever NCAA Championship hosted at Loyola
By Joe Flaherty

It has been 88 years since the Windy City has played host to an NCAA Division-I Championship. You can look even further back and see that Loyola has never hosted one in its 144-year existence.

All of that will change this May. The focus of the volleyball world will center squarely on Gentile Arena for the Men's Volleyball Final Four and National Championship.

The Ramblers made their first-ever appearance in the Final Four last season, losing to UC Irvine in the semi-finals. But after bolting out to an 11-1 record and claiming the nation's top rank, the team has picked the perfect time to peak.

"When we lost last year, I went in the locker room and said 'guys, we got beat, but in 365 more days, the road to the Final Four goes through Joseph J. Gentile Arena,'" Carolyn O'Connell, Senior Associate Athletic Director, said. "I told them it's all in your hands."

O'Connell headlined the effort to bring the event to the Lake Shore Campus. As a former volleyball coach, she jumped at the chance to place a bid.

"It was about two or three years ago that the NCAA opened up the process," O'Connell said. "It was very competitive. What made us attractive was that the championship has not been in the Midwest for quite some time, and that the championship has never been in Chicago."

The NCAA doesn't disclose bid information with schools that are part of the process, but O'Connell assumes that the total amount of bids was similar to this year's process that included 18 venues.

There was another factor working in Loyola's favor.

"I guaranteed them a sell out," O'Connell said.

With the event still months away, O'Connell says nearly 1,000 all-session passes have been sold since they went on pre-sale Monday, February 10th. That's triple the number of tickets last year's host UCLA had sold by this time in 2013.

Earlier this month, Loyola defeated No. 15 Ohio State in front of nearly 2,000 fans at Gentile Arena. Not only did the victory give O'Connell a proof of concept, it also showed Head Coach Shane Davis how powerful of a recruiting tool the tournament can be.

"It gets kids into our gym, seeing the atmosphere, seeing our team, seeing the big crowds," Davis said. "With the Ohio State match we had some recruits here and thought

it was a great thing. They said they hadn't seen anything like it really, so it's definitely an advantage."

Davis also sees this as an opportunity for the sport of volleyball to grow in Chicago, especially at the middle school level.

"Hopefully we get some people bringing their kids out that are at those ages," Davis said. "It's different than when you go see a high school match. These guys are big and physical, and it's fun to watch... Hopefully it entices some people to give it a look or a second look."

But just a short time ago, Gentile wouldn't even have been considered to host an event of this magnitude. The arena-style seating renovations and the addition of the Norville Center during Loyola's "Re-Imagine" campaign were necessary for the school to even be a viable option.

With the stadium up to par and the team firing on all cylinders, the timing for hosting the event couldn't be any better for red-shirt senior Joe Smalzer. The opposite hitter and team leader has the chance to take home a national championship in his final match on his home court.

"It seems like all the stars are aligning," Smalzer said. "All we have to do is keep working hard and playing as a team and executing as we have been. It'll be a very, very rewarding thing if that should happen."

Sports Information Director Leo Krause said the Final Four is a "feather in the cap" for Loyola's Athletic Department. Smalzer feels it is a similar token of justification for the team.

"It'll show people in the Midwest that we can do it out here," Smalzer said. "We can host a Final Four and have teams in the Final Four hopefully. We're just always trying to extend volleyball from out on the West Coast."

The event will begin on April 29th with a new twist being unveiled for 2014. Six teams will qualify for the tournament as automatic or at-large bids, with the top two seeds receiving byes. The remaining four teams will play in a play-in round on the 29th, with the winners moving on to play the top two seeds on May 1st.

The winners of those matches will square off in the National Championship game on May 3rd at 7 P.M. The game will be carried on ESPN 2.

O'Connell said more ticket information will become available to the public in the coming weeks.