

by Winston Cavin
Sports Editor

Contrary to anything Curt Gowdy may tell you, the Super Bowl is not the top sports event of the year. Not in North Carolina, at least.

What is, then? The annual Fiddler's Convention in Union Grove? No. It is the Atlantic Coast Conference basketball tournament.

The ACC tournament, always staged in the Tar Heel state, draws more attention, causes more excitement, and sparks more bookmaking than any other event of the year.

Yes, the ACC tournament is tops in popularity. Every year, the ACC teams throw the record books out the window and play for the coveted conference title, which at times doesn't seem worth all the hullabaloo.

The tourney was the brainchild of the newborn league's officials back in 1953. The conference, whose members had just withdrawn from the Southern Conference, was in

ACC tourney:

need of new financial support and somebody came up with the idea of having a basketball tournament.

The monstrosity may have been an excusable mistake back then, but now it is a ridiculous pain in the neck. The whole regular season becomes nothing but a three-month exhibition when the seven conference schools come together in March.

The idea was a strange one from the start. But, for love of the almighty dollar, the tournament has survived, and the demise of the event is as far away as ever. There will always be an ACC tournament, like it or not.

The tourney has a rich and colorful history, and another chapter will be written this week when another installment will be laid out in the Greensboro Coliseum.

The 1973 tournament is clouded in mystery and intrigue. As we go to press, no one knows just who will win it, or even who will play whom. One thing for sure is that only five schools have a chance to win the NCAA bid.

It seems that N.C. State, the conference powerhouse, and Duke, an also-ran on the rise, are ineligible for any post-season play this season because the NCAA found them guilty of recruiting violations. Both will participate in the tourney, however, as they are still eligible to win the ACC title. But if Duke or State wins the final game, their runnerup will represent the ACC in the Eastern Regional playoffs.

The situation is not unprecedented. In a controversial 1959 tournament, N.C. State beat North Carolina, 80-56, in the finals. But Carolina advanced to the regionals because State was on probation. In 1961, Carolina's fifth-ranked team, regular season champs, withdrew from the tourney because UNC was on probation. So this year's situation is not a first.

In the first round, Carolina will take on last-place Wake Forest, if current standings hold up. State will get the bye. Maryland should finish third, pitting the Terps against Clemson. Duke and Virginia should play in the first round.

Assuming Carolina and Maryland survive their first-round contests, the stage will be set for a championship game of sorts in Friday night's second semifinal game.

State will take on the Duke-Virginia winner and the Wolfpack should have little difficulty taking that one.

The Terps beat Carolina in College Park, 94-88, and Carolina returned the favor by stomping Maryland, 95-85, in Chapel Hill three weeks later. On a neutral court, we believe the Tar Heels will squeeze past the poorly-coached Terrapins.

Carolina should find State too tough to handle in the finals, but it won't mean much. Carolina looks like the team to win the NCAA bid and head for the regionals in Charlotte.



State's tiny Monte Towe poses king-sized threat

Whatever happens, the '73 tournament promises to be another memorable event, loaded with hate and rivalry.

It has always been this way, as a trip through the record books indicates. There have been 19 tournaments of which State has won six. Carolina ranks second in titles with five, followed by Duke (4), Wake Forest (2), Maryland (1) and South Carolina (1). Clemson and Virginia have never won a tournament.

The first tournament was held in March, 1954, and N.C. State ran off with the championship. The Pack downed Wake Forest, 82-80, in overtime to win it. State came into the tourney ranked fourth in the league, but Duke fell to the Wolfpack in the semifinals after being ranked 11th in the nation. Carolina lost in the first round to State, 52-51. Incidentally, the first 13 ACC tournaments were held in Reynolds Coliseum, a fact which may have helped State win all those tourneys.

State won the next two tourneys before Carolina broke the string in 1957. That was Carolina's undefeated season which saw Frank McGuire's Tar Heels go 32-0 and beat Kansas, 54-53, in the national finals.

In 1958, Maryland's fourth-seeded team beat Carolina in the finals, 86-74, to win the Terps' only title. State won the controversial 1959 affair after McGuire benched his Tar Heel starters at halftime. McGuire chose to save his starters for the NCAA regional game coming up three nights later. So Carolina won the NCAA bid without winning the conference championship.

In 1960, Vic Bubas' fourth-seeded Duke Blue Devils captured the school's first title. The Devils beat regular-season champ Carolina, 71-69, in the semis, then downed Wake Forest in the final. Carolina had beaten Duke three times that season, the lowest margin being 22 points.

Wake took it in '61 after top-seeded Carolina pulled out of the tournament. The Deacons beat Duke in the finals.

The Deacs made it two in a row in '62, beating Virginia, South Carolina and Clemson on the way to the title. Carolina lost in the first round that year, falling to the Gamecocks, 57-51.

Duke won again in 1963, beating Wake in the finals. Wake had disposed of the Tar Heels, 56-55, in the semifinals.

The nationally third-ranked Blue Devils made a mess of the 1964 tourney, beating

A hell of a way to choose a champ

the other three Big Four schools to win the title. Carolina was Duke's victim in the semis, 65-49.

The Wolfpack came back in '65 to win another one, beating nationally sixth-ranked Duke in the finals, 91-85. UNC didn't survive the first round of this one, losing to Wake Forest, 92-76.

The next year, 1966, was the year of the deep freeze. Dean Smith had his underdog Tar Heels hold the ball in the semifinals before giving in to the stronger Devils, 21-20. Duke had romped over Wake, 103-73, in the first round, and was heavily favored to win the tourney. Carolina beat Maryland, 77-70, to play in the semifinals.

Duke went on to win the title, 71-66, over State. It was the last time Duke would win an ACC tourney.

Carolina took over in 1967, winning the regular season title and beating the three North Carolina schools to win the tournament for the first time in 10 years.

Carolina took it again in '68, winning the regular season battle with a 12-2 record. The championship was won in the semifinals. Carolina had split two games with South Carolina during the season and the two teams met in the semis. Carolina was forced into overtime before pulling out an 82-79 win. State upset Duke, 12-10, in a stall, and in the finals, Carolina rolled to an 87-50 win. The Tar Heels finished second to UCLA in the 1968 nationals.

The next year saw one of the greatest individual performances of all time as Charlie Scott scored 40 points in an 85-74 final win over Duke. In the finals, Duke took a commanding 43-34 halftime lead before Scott let it all go in the final 20 minutes. For the game, Scott hit an unbelievable 17 of 23 shots as the Heels won going away. Carolina finished fourth in the nation that year.

State pulled the big surprise in 1970. South Carolina had romped through the regular season undefeated, 14-0. State ended in a second-place tie with UNC, both teams going 9-5. But in the finals, State held the ball and emerged with a 42-39 victory in double overtime. It was perhaps the biggest upset in tourney history.

South Carolina came back to win a hairy title in '71. It was the Gamecocks' last appearance in an ACC tournament, and Carolina had won the regular season title. The final was madness.

In the final game, Carolina appeared to have it wrapped up, leading 42-35, with six minutes to play. But going down the stretch, UNC missed some crucial free throws and the Cocks caught up.

The Heels led, 51-50, with seconds to go when Lee Dedmon tied up Kevin Joyce for a jump ball. Joyce was counted out of it because of his seven-inch height disadvantage. But Joyce somehow managed to tap the ball to teammate Tom Owens, who layed it in with three seconds left. The Gamecocks won it, 52-51. South Carolina proceeded to finish fourth in the Eastern Regional, while UNC went on to win the NIT championship.

The last ACC tournament found Carolina loping in as the regular season champ. The Tar Heels mopped up Duke, 63-48, and Maryland, 73-64, to win the title. Carolina received a first-round bye after the league's membership had shrunk to seven.

The Heels went on to Los Angeles and the national finals, where they finished third. Maryland won the consolation prize, the NIT affair in New York.

That brings us to this year's tourney, which will give everyone another chance to get excited over nothing. And this year, there may be two winners.