The NIT's better idea

BLACKSBURG — Southern hospitality must have been pleasing to NIT chairman Pete Carlesimo.

When introduced to the crowd of 9,400 here Monday night, the head of the NIT responded warmly with a big wave.

The crowd turned singularly toward Carlesimo to see who it is that runs what in years past has been called "the other" post season tournament besides the NCAA.

Carlesimo was happy, though, for the big crowd at Tech and the fact that his tournament once again seems to be thriving.

In the last few years the NIT had become something of a "local" tournament by spotlighting what was left of New York area college basketball teams after the NCAA had picked its field.

Those teams chosen from the New York area were usually matched in some favorable pairing against the best of the rest from across the nation.

With this format, the NIT was dying. It was strangled to death and the committee had even talked about having a reduced eight-team field this year.

Then the idea hit. Hold the first round at the home sites of the schools and see if the response was greater by bringing other areas into the mainstream.

Before it's over, the NIT should draw more than 100,000 for its eight first round games.

Most significant of this change is the State of Virginia. Two games, here and at Norfolk, Monday night drew 19,000. That's 500 short of the capacity of the Madison Square Garden. Two first round NIT games in years past would never have drawn this kind of crowd.

The NIT won't pay as much expense money. Eight teams travel while the other eight, instead of going to New York, are already within the general vicinity of the first game. Some will even be at home.

For example, it's much cheaper for Georgetown to spend a couple of nights in Blacksburg than it is in New York.

Instead of Oregon playing a first round game cross country in New York, it was less expensive to go to Tulsa, Okla., against Oral Roberts. And so on.

The new format also means a change in choosing NIT teams.

"I know we were criticized in years past," said Carlesimo, "for choosing so many area teams.

"But we had to do that in order to help first round attendance. Now we don't have to do it anymore."

The crowd that greeted Carlesimo was important in several respects. First for money.

But in the future, when Tech wants consideration for an NIT berth, the Hokies will have a selling point. It can hold a first round game and peddle tickets. That will still be the most important item for choosing future fields in the NIT.

Carlesimo's committee did its homework before selecting the field.

"We were considering Wake Forest if they had not gotten an NCAA bid," said the NIT boss.

"We had even gone as far as to lock up Greensboro (Civic Center) for a first round game."

Missouri told the NIT it wanted a bid only if it could have a first round bye, which would have been possible under the old format of 12 teams. That eliminated Missouri.

Carlesimo was also sure that had Marquette lost to Creighton a couple of weeks ago or Notre Dame dropped a game to San Francisco this past weekend, they might have been in the NIT.

"At least that was the information we had," he said. "Notre Dame was ready to host a first round game.

The Maryland controversy, howev-

NIT goes 'national'

From Page 34

er, is the one problem that Carlesimo has had to smooth over the past few days. He indicated more than ever that Maryland Athletic Director Jim Kehoe virtually tried to dictate first round terms for the Terps.

"When I got back to him for the last time Sunday night," said Carlesimo, "he told me he would pay the first round only in his building and only against a team on Maryland's schedule.

"I simply told him I withdraw our invitation. Nothing was ever said about him contacting Lefty Driesell (Maryland coach) to find out his wishes."

The NIT hesitated inviting Georgetown because of the Hoyas' injuries problems. That's why Georgetown didn't enter the field until Maryland made its strange exit.

"Even had Georgetown been in the field and we had a first round game with them against Maryland, it would not have been in Cole Fieldhouse," said Carlesimo.

"We would have played it in Washington (Landover, Md.)."

"But," said Carlesimo, "we've also looked into ticket selling at different sites. We know that some schools like Maryland have a big complimentary list and a large student section. This has had a lot to do with our (first round home site) choices."

Either way, Tech was a big winner here Wednesday night. The Hokies won the game, gave the fans their money's worth and were in on the rebirth of the NIT as a respectable post season tourney.

Carlesimo could wish for little more.