Bob Teitlebaum

Is it really a holiday?

OKLAHOMA CITY, Okla. — One must wonder about holiday basketball tournaments when some of the attendance figures are reported.

The finals of the All-College tournament, for example, attracted only slightly more than 7,000 here Saturday night.

This is true in spite of the fact that Oral Roberts, a school located only 80 miles from this oil mecca, was playing 14th-ranked Southern California.

The sparkling new Myriad, site for the All-College tournament, seats better than 15,000 people. In the six sessions of the tournament, the average attendance hovered around the 3,500 mark.

Why? Some of the best college teams in the nation were present, yet the people didn't respond.

Oklahoma City has a population of nearly 500,000. The tournament is conducted by a group of prominent citizens who run around in gas-guzzling automobiles with little worry about the energy crisis. Most of them seem to have their own oil wells in the back yard.

"I really don't think the people around here deserve the tournament," said chairman Thurman Medley as he doffed his $50 10-gallon hat.

"Ticket-wise, not the crowd, we had the largest first night in history. But if the bodies aren't there (in person) it doesn't help." Medley was talking about tickets that are purchased, but not used. It's sort of a civic project.

This tournament, of course, is solid. It's had its troubles. A local newspaper pulled out as sponsor of this tournament, oldest among the college holiday basketball festivals, and an all-sports foundation took over. That was a number of years ago and the tournament is still one of the most prestigious.

But the thing is that the idea of a holiday basketball tournament has been imitated by so many people. On the week between Christmas and New Year's, there seems to be some kind of a college tournament at every whistle stop in the country.

Last year Virginia participated in the Firemen's tournament at St. Louis. Attendance there was a mere 3,000 per night.

Tech has been in biggies such as the Charlotte Classic, which drew around 5,000 per session; to the Presidential Classic, which couldn't fill a 3,000-seat gym at Fort Myer.

A school like Vanderbilt sells 15,000 seats to every regular season game. But its tournament, not on the regular season ticket, is lucky to draw 15,000 for two nights on most occasions.

The Holiday Festival is faltering in New York where college basketball is at an all-time low at Madison Square Garden. Some regular season games draw 1,500, but the Holiday Festival isn't that bad off yet.

The Big 8 tournament, with regional teams in the middle of conference territory at Kansas City, could draw only 6,000 for its semifinals.

DeVoe looks at tournaments

Tech Coach Don DeVoe can't really answer all the questions associated with going to a holiday tournament.

"I suppose," he said, "the real reason you go to a Christmas tournament is to give your kids a little exposure in a different part of the country.

"You always try to get the most prestigious tournament to see how good you do against competition from other parts of the country. A lot of times you don't do it for financial reasons because they don't pay that well."

Tech competed last week in the All-College tournament, but the appearance was booked before DeVoe came to Tech three years ago. The All-College is filled several years in advance, a dangerous thing as one knows when looking at the ever-changing fortunes of different teams.

"Actually," DeVoe added, "it gives our kids a chance to play in front of a few people. Our crowds wouldn't be that big at Blacksburg with the students gone."

This is a point in favor of tournaments. Most colleges can't draw at home during this period and would just as soon not play any games in their gyms. Students and faculty are on vacation and people in general are busy thinking about something else besides basketball.

The best tournaments

DeVoe believes there are only a few topflight tournaments. He rattled off the All-College, Holiday Festival, Far West Classic, Quaker City (although it is losing money) and Rainbow Classic.

"The Rainbow Classic," noted the Tech coach, "adds to recruiting if a kid knows that in three years he can spend Christmas in Honolulu."

But the Tech coach says the four-team tournaments are the best paying ones. He mentioned invitationals at Kentucky, Tennessee and Indiana.

"Tournaments at this time don't seem to have the basketball atmosphere. We've got a band here playing rock music. It's not like the situation on the road when you go to a place and the band plays a school song."

Nevertheless, DeVoe has booked two tournaments for next year and he's looking around for more in the future. Virginia keeps going to tournaments, and who wouldn't after a trip to Las Vegas.

What can slow the tournament craze? Certainly not a dislike over the conditions, even if they aren't perfect. Maybe the energy crisis. Hops to Las Vegas, Honolulu and here from the East Coast will become difficult.

Then we might be able to have something called the Bonsack Invitational. All we need is four teams, two officials, a ball and a few fans. Oh yes, don't forget the rock band.