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Tomorrow (Feb. 1) is the last day for teams to register for the 2013 Girls High School National Invitational Tournament (NIT). The organizer – National Girls Coaches Committee (NGCC) – will be pushing registration until the final hour, hoping to attract the country's best teams to the three-division championship this May 18-19 in Racine, Wisc.

The NGCC is driving the NIT effort, but it's Wisconsin committee members John Klein (Divine Savior Holy Angels) and John Waliszewski (Catholic Memorial) who are actually hosting the event in their backyard. Aside from being good friends and former co-coaches, the two have been intimately involved with the NITs since its genesis in 2000.

"We're the only team that's been to every national tournament since 2000," Klein said of DSHA. "Back then, there were only six teams, and then it grew to 18. Before USA Rugby took over (in 2010), we had a three-division, 24-team tournament."

The Wisconsin duo, among other members, were eager to return to the 24-team format, but there was some resistance early on. The question became whether there were 24 nationals-ready teams in the country, and the integrity of the event came into question.

That's why the three divisions are important. Singling out eight high-caliber teams for the top division, DI, is easy. DII will essentially be a breeding ground for teams progressing toward the top tier. But there are a handful of squads that have applied that have never played at nationals and are unfamiliar to the NGCC coaches. DIII not only rewards those young teams that have higher aspirations but are still developing, but also provides a physical example of where they need to be in order to compete with the best..

“If you think about it, the opportunity to see the best teams at play is pretty rare,” Klein said. “But when you see them in action, it promotes the want to get to that level. That’s why we’re in athletics in the first place.”

Lakewood is a perfect example of such. In their first year at the NIT, they competed in DII after finishing third to DSHA and Kettle Morraine at the Midwest Championship. The Ohio squad ended up winning the DII NIT title, and the campaign shed a lot of positive light on the program. It was the catalyst the team needed to reach the next level, and Lakewood has competed in several finals – including 2012 – since their DII championship.

The NGCC has also made it easier for teams to commit to the NIT. In the past, teams were encouraged to qualify through their region, but that often meant late confirmation of their attendance and subsequent cancellations.

“Now, it’s better, more productive,” Klein said of the early application process.”The best teams can apply and then can make travel plans early.”

One team we’re really excited to see return to the national stage is Summit High School (Colo.). One of the top teams in the nation, Summit sequestered its play to the fall a few years ago, aligning with traditional high school sports and one season of play. But now coach Karl Barth and company are coming to Wisconsin this May, and that’ll make the top eight that much better.

Summit, too, returns to a more competitive field. That’s been one of the great pleasures for Klein, who is educated daily about the growth of girls’ rugby via the incoming registrations.

“Northern California is blowing up,” Klein said. “It was only a few years ago that the [Sacramento] Amazons were beating everyone by large scores, and now there are so many NorCal teams that want to come to the NIT. We’re also excited to have Utah here. We’ve been down there [for nationals] and saw Lowland when they filled in for Maryville (Tenn.). All kinds of new teams are applying – Elizabeth from New Jersey, Berkshire United from Massachusetts. I didn’t have much knowledge of these teams or that they wanted to compete. This is what we wanted, to showcase our wonderful sport.”

That's the great thing about the NIT: It serves as an essential, elite competition for the high-level squads, and pits developing squads against seven other teams from around the country, an unforgettable experience.

"I hope teams realize that this is their opportunity to play with the best of the best," Klein said. "We know there are layers, but look at Fallbrook. They came out of nowhere as a developing program, and are now two-time champs. If we don't have this forum, then Fallbrook stays in Southern California, blowing out teams. This is an opportunity for everyone to play outside their state at a much higher level. No matter what division you're playing in, you're still fighting for a national title, and that's something people can appreciate. It changes people's lives and they talk about it forever."

For more information on the 2013 Girls High School NIT:

Tournament Web site and Registration form

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