

THE MEDIA BUSINESS

Advertising

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The N.C.A.A. basketball tourney has graduated to the ranks of major sports-marketing events.

THE ardor of advertisers to affiliate themselves with the annual tournament of the National Collegiate Athletic Association is approaching levels that might even require a repunctuation, to March? Madness!

The 58th installment of the games — long known as March Madness for the fervor fans bring to the tournament and workers bring to the office pools — begins tomorrow. The elimination rounds will end with the final teams battling for the championships of collegiate basketball on March 31 in Charlotte, N.C., for the women and on April 1 at the New Jersey Meadowlands for the men.

Advertisers support the tournament by paying multimillion-dollar fees to join a program designating 20 brands as “official N.C.A.A. corporate partners”; among them are products sold by General Mills Inc., the Gillette Company, the Hershey Foods Corporation and Pepsico Inc. They also run advertising and promotional campaigns and buy commercials during coverage on the CBS broadcast network and the ESPN and ESPN2 cable networks.

That concentration of corporate resources — for instance, 150 advertisers have already bought all the commercial time available on CBS — has played an important part in increasing interest in the games.

“It’s more than a basketball bouncing up and down a court,” said Bradley Hunt, president of Gold Medal Management in Boulder, Colo., which represents Olympic athletes and the University of Colorado’s athletic department.

“It has reached an elite level of awareness to a broad society,” he added, “crossing that line from sports to entertainment.”

Brandon Steiner, president of Steiner Sports Marketing in New York, echoed him: “The N.C.A.A. has done a tremendous job. This is one event that touches a tremendous cross section of people.”

That is a powerful attraction for certain advertisers.

“The N.C.A.A. reaches a variety of our targets,” said Mike Goff, director for corporate sponsorships at the Sprint Corporation in Kansas City, Mo., “from the kid on campus to

alumni who are affluent, educated and what we call techno-savvy.”

Sprint has been a corporate partner for six years, he added, sponsoring promotions like a “Call the Final Four” contest, and is discussing resigning with the association.