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December is a stage for girls' basketball

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From the Super Bowl to the NBA Finals to Wimbledon to the World Series, every sport has its big stage. Girls' basketball is no different.

Each December, the thoroughbreds of girl's high school basketball teams make the Nike Tournament of Champions (TOC) in Chandler, Ariz., the marquis event for their sport. The tournament earned its reputation with steady growth over the years. The lineup has featured the participation of 84 teams that went on to earn their respective state championships that particular season. Ten of those teams went on to be voted as national champions in those respective years.

This year's Joe Smith Division (the strongest of 12 separate brackets) features 16 teams, nine of which are currently ranked in the ESPN HoopGurlz HS Nation Top 25. Making it a truly national event is the fact that 12 of the 16 spots in the Smith Division represent different states.



The Tournament of Champions gathers the best talent nationwide.

Overall the tournament this year features participants from 19 states from coast to coast. More high school teams are traveling these days and facing competition from outside their geographic region. While quite a few tournaments have been able to pull together solid fields of competitive teams none have been able to match the depth, strength and national scope seen in Chandler year after year.

The TOC provides some of the nation's best teams a chance to find out where they stand through head-to-head competition. With state champions in multiple classes across 50 states each season, the debate over who's the best among the best has generally been one of opinion and perspective. For years, no venue existed to bring together top tier teams from around the country to settle the argument on the floor. Today, teams scramble for the opportunity to be a part of this elite December slugfest to prove something to their competitors and, more so, to prove something to themselves.

The success of winning a state tournament is something that a team achieves in practice and game after game on the court. The respect of those who vote and the status of being on top of any poll are special but they're not the same as cutting down the nets and having the scoreboard to slam the door shut on any discussion over who's the best. The TOC may be the closest thing to that same feeling in a true national competition that you can find in high school basketball. For players, coaches and fans alike, it's exciting and it's challenging. It's revealing and it's rewarding. And often it can be very humbling.

For college coaches a December trip to Arizona is almost a given in their recruiting scheduling. With 86 teams participating in the first session Dec. 17-23 and another 47 taking the floor in the second session Dec. 27-31, it's a recruiter's dream.

Coaches already know who they're recruiting at each position and who they like in each class. If several of their top prospects are going to be on hand in Chandler, it would be a hard event to miss. Some will even fly in and out a couple of times while squeezing in their own team's last games before the holiday.

A tournament like this offers the chance to see prospects playing against a level of competition that they might not normally face during the regular season back home. Also, with teams playing four games in a five-day period it's a great time-saver and easy on the recruiting budget.

From an NCAA rules standpoint, each day a coach attends counts as one of their program's 100 permissible evaluation opportunities for each of their staff present. The real legislative "holiday bargain" is that they can watch an athlete play four separate games for the price of one of their limit of five that they have on each athlete.

Additionally, with six or seven time slots each day and all the gyms in close proximity, the opportunity to catch teams they might not normally see or younger players they may want to get a look at becomes a much simpler task and, again, is easy on the recruiting pockets.

For the individual player, the TOC provides multiple opportunities. The chance to compete with teammates in one of the most prestigious and competitive settings should be at the top of that list.

Secondly, the shot to put your game up against some of the nation's best talent seldom presents itself outside of the July evaluation period. Third, it doesn't hurt to take the floor in front of the multitude of recruiters sitting courtside.

If you're an underclassman, an unsigned senior or someone under the radar looking to create some interest, being in the right setting doesn't apply just to summer club ball. And lastly, Arizona in December. Isn't a forecast of 70 degrees and sunshine reason enough?

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