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CEDAR VALLEY

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Road to Final Four is Short's

By TINA HINZ
Courier Staff Writer

WATERLOO — The road to the NCAA tournament starts at Short's Travel Management in Waterloo.

Since 2003, the company has been arranging air travel for all NCAA-paid events. That includes the 65 teams in this year's Division I men's basketball tournament as well as the 64 women's teams and all 32 teams in the National Invitational Tournament.

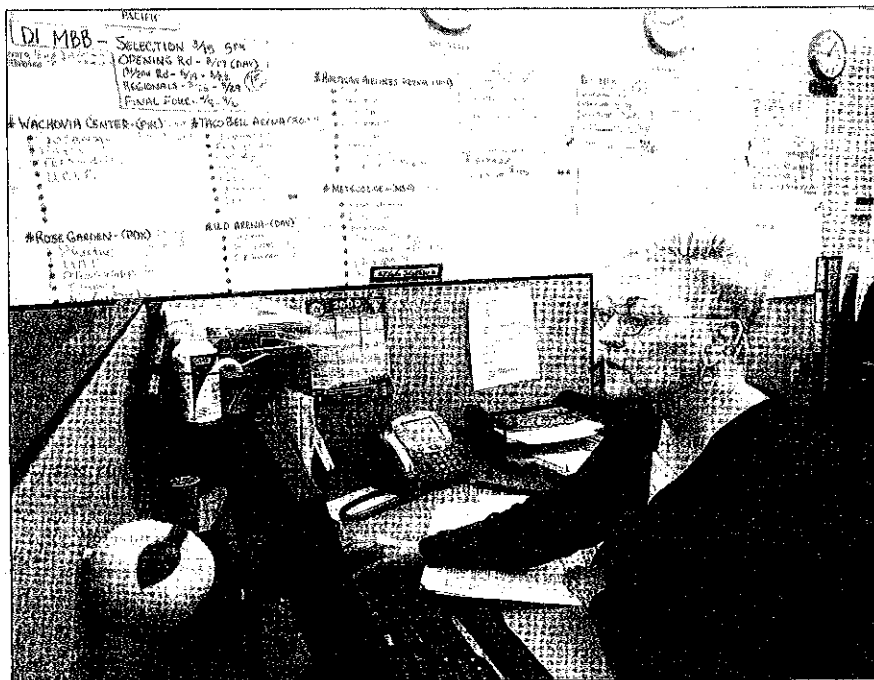
"This contract that we have with the NCAA is huge," said David Hughes, chief financial officer at Short's. "I don't think people in the Cedar Valley really have a good appreciation for how big this is."

The agents have only a few days to pull the job off, starting at 5 p.m. Sunday when the Division I men's pairings were announced. Doors to the NCAA wing at Short's were locked and windows covered to maintain confidentiality.

White boards cover the walls inside the main room of cubicles in the NCAA department. Color-coded sections map out which teams are going where, who's playing who and which travel agents are assigned to each team. Six clocks display the time zones across the country.

A connecting smaller room has floor to ceiling boards, like a "master control center," Hughes said.

Short's juggles numerous last-minute requests and must-have flights for 88 NCAA championships in 23 sports throughout the year. But March is its busiest time, when employees work



Agent Linda Matthias works on scheduling airfare for NCAA teams at the Short's Travel branch in Waterloo on Tuesday. Matthias has worked for the company for 13 years.

from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. or later some days.

Agent Linda Matthias has worked in all four departments at Short's during her 13 years with the company. She said the NCAA division is exciting, but also challenging.

"It's definitely the busiest. It's fast-paced, very fast-paced," she said Tuesday as she worked to find flights for women's teams and referees.

Short's borrows about 14 employees from other departments and branches to beef up its regular NCAA team of 19.

"You're talking roughly about

33 people, just boom," said Hughes, clapping his hands. "Gotta happen."

Short's prepares and sends schools' travel preferences to airline providers for rate quotes and availability. Bids for men were awarded Monday to commercial and charter airline providers and for women's teams Tuesday morning.

Teams within 350 miles of a site are required to use ground transportation.

Teams load their travel rosters, contact information and equipment into the Short's travel portal to share with the

airlines. Travel began as early as Monday for the two men's teams playing Tuesday evening in the opening round in Dayton, Ohio. Other teams took off Tuesday or will leave today. Women's teams begin traveling Thursday and Friday.

"It's all about the logistics of getting people from point A to point B," Hughes said.

Short's also moves game officials, including more than 100 for men's games and about 90 for women.

And the work doesn't stop there. When the final score determines who needs a ride

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David Hughes
Short's CEO

to another game and who is headed home, agents already are confirming flights.

"Of course, those that lose are antsy to get home, and those that win are anxious to move onto the next site," Hughes said. "So everybody's demanding."

A generator stands ready and waiting should systems go down. Short's also pays for two Internet connections.

"We can't let the NCAA down, so we have two contingency plans," Hughes said.

However they do it, Short's is establishing a reputation, Hughes said. More and more Division I universities are asking Short's to handle their regular sports season. Sports travel accounts for 29 percent of business at Short's.

And as soon as the March Madness is over, planning begins for next year, officials said. They're constantly looking for ways to improve processes, enhance Web-based systems, improve staff training and maintain strong communication with airline providers to be ready to work at lightning speed when the tournament rolls around again.

Its current NCAA contract can be extended through 2013.

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