

5 Things You Can Expect From Thursday Night's Debate

Thursday night, the four remaining Republican presidential candidates will spar one last time before Super Tuesday II and its winner-take-all contests in Florida, Ohio and Illinois.

The debate begins at 8:30 p.m. EST on CNN and will be moderated by Jake Tapper. CNN's Dana Bash, Salem talk radio host Hugh Hewitt and *The Washington Times'* Stephen Dinan will join as questioners.

Here are five things we're pretty sure you can expect to see tonight.

1. More Aggressive but Less Personal

This is the last chance Marco Rubio has to defend his home turf in Florida. But it's also John Kasich's last chance to defend in Ohio, where he is governor. And it's the last chance Ted Cruz has to talk to a national audience before Tuesday about why he is a better alternative to Donald Trump.

The tone of the last debate got off the rails far too easily, perhaps strategically for Trump. When forced to actually deal with substantive issues, he had a little more difficulty. The others definitely took notice, and hopefully, they can force a more substantive debate tonight.

2. Cruz vs. Rubio

There's been the suggestion that the other candidates be strategic in their approach to Super Tuesday II in an effort to shut out Trump. The idea being they should push for a Rubio win in Florida, a Kasich win in Ohio and Cruz wins wherever else he can get them.

Cruz, however, has campaigned fairly aggressively in the

Sunshine State, which has seemingly gotten under Rubio's skin a little bit. The Florida senator has all but said so in his fundraising emails this week, so expect there to be a little bit of back-and-forth between the two of them.

3. Crowd Noise

This year, more than any other, the audiences at the debates have been far more raucous, particularly when the RNC has been handing out seats to the donor class. Those folks aren't particularly happy with any of the guys left on stage, so it will be interesting to see how they react Thursday night.

Trump wants to continue to establish himself as anti-establishment, because that has resonated well for him in all of the earlier states. He may want to do it a bit more subtly, but expect him to get in a dig or two at the GOP establishment. Cruz may do so, as well.

4. Better Questions

FOX News appeared to be looking for payback for Trump's earlier skipped debate in Iowa. Casual observers noted the adversarial role the moderators took with the front-runner, and seemed to have the opposite impact than perhaps they intended.

Throughout the year, CNN's debate panels have been more issue-focused. Expect better questions that are "tough but fair," and far more thorough than what we saw a week ago from FOX.

5. No Knock-Outs

Trump has made it clear he wants Rubio out of the race. Cruz has been a little less direct, but certainly would like to have a one-on-one race with the front-runner. And while his campaign is now on life support, this is Rubio's home state. He knows it better than anyone.

Barring someone losing his cool and sliding back into the

political gutter, it seems highly unlikely anyone is going to score a knock-out with this debate. The polling numbers have held fairly steady for the past month. It seems far more likely the knock-out is coming on Tuesday night.