

Other Than No Trump, These Are the 5 Things to Expect From Tonight's Debate

It was supposed to be the last measuring stick event for the GOP presidential candidates before the first-in-the-nation Iowa Republican Caucus on Monday night.

Now, the FOX News Republican Presidential Debate to be held Thursday evening at the Iowa Events Center in Des Moines, sans one national—and now, Iowa—front-runner, is going to be an entirely different matter altogether. But there are some predictions we can make based on the other seven candidates who *will* be on the stage.

1. Turning on Ted

Without earning the mantle of front-runner, by virtue of being the next highest-polling candidate on stage, and standing front-and-center on Thursday night's stage, Ted Cruz now has a very large target painted on his back. Four of the remaining six candidates are all vying for the establishment vote, while a fifth is still stinging from having lost several of his father's key supporters to the Texas senator.

Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush, Chris Christie and John Kasich are all needing as many votes as they can get in Iowa to help propel their fire-line efforts in New Hampshire and South Carolina. It's a very crowded establishment lane, surprisingly so, this late in the Iowa Caucus race.

Meanwhile, Rand Paul is going to have a chance to knock some dents in Cruz's record with regard to personal freedom and liberties. And based on past experience, it's very unlikely Ben Carson will be able to provide much of a refuge from the storm.

If Cruz is going to win Iowa, this debate will be his baptism by fire.

2. Attack the Donald at Your Own Peril

Traditionally, attacking a candidate in absentia is considered particularly bad form. Moderator Megyn Kelly probably would like to get in a few free swings, but she risks damaging her credibility if she does so.

The other candidates already know what happens when they attack Donald Trump: their poll numbers go down.

It's altogether likely Kelly had some "gotcha" questions planned that she has since had to scrap, so there's hope that perhaps this opens an opportunity for questions that are more conducive to a real debate on substantive issues. That was sorely lacking the last time she was on stage.

3. Eleventh-Hour Surprises

It's hard to imagine there are any more surprises left to be unveiled at Thursday's debate. If the other candidates had something on Donald Trump or Ted Cruz, they've likely already launched it—with marginal results, at best.

There may be attempts to resurrect old controversies, but it's highly unlikely the voters are going to get any new "dirt" on anyone on that stage. Again, one can hope that means more time devoted to substantive debate on the issues.

4. The Biggest Loser Is ...

Hillary Clinton, outside of Ted Cruz, will be the night's biggest punching bag, and for good reason. According to sources close to the investigation, the FBI is ready to recommend an indictment for her classified emails scandal.

Her liberal record and distinct differences with most Republicans on policy issues will add more fuel for the fire.

Her camp may try to spin it as “sexism,” but there’s a good chance Carly Fiorina has put that notion to bed during the previous debates.

5. Meanwhile, the Biggest Winner Will Be ...

Veterans who have been wounded in combat and who have service-connected disabilities are going to be the real winners. Donald Trump has made a point of discussing their issues with the Department of Veterans Affairs throughout the course of his campaign, but by stepping away from the debate and focusing solely on fundraising for their charities, some real positive momentum could be built.

As for the debate itself, as Rush Limbaugh very eloquently put it during his show on Wednesday afternoon, by not showing up—and FOX News’ bungled reaction to it—it doesn’t matter what else happens. He wins the debate by not participating.

Ask Rand Paul how much it hurt his campaign to sit one out earlier this month. As we noted above, he’s back on the main debate stage after refusing to participate in the undercard debate, and his poll numbers moved upward.