

UCLA finds cure for March Madness



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Point Blank

It's that time of year again, sports fans! Everyone has that wide-eyed look of anticipation for the greatest three weeks of college basketball. To put it another way, March Madness is upon us. The weekend of April 1 will pit the remaining four teams in Division I against each other in the King Dome in Seattle for the NCAA Championship.

As the season began to wind down, the bubble teams tried to scratch and claw their way into the field, with some teams finishing strong to improve their standing. The conference tournaments helped some teams — Florida International jumps to mind — while hurting others: Georgia and Georgia Tech both failed to make the field.

This year's 64-team field holds some surprises in the four brackets, while other teams are conspicuously absent from the field. I can't conceive of any major upsets in the opening round, but I don't consider 8-9, 7-10 or 6-11 upset games because those teams are usually evenly matched.

It's time to get those office pools going, and I'm sure everyone knows which teams they think will lead them to the promised land. It seems everyone becomes basketball experts this time of year, with their own angle on picking the games.

Well, I'm also going to play that role of basketball expert and wade my way through each bracket in an attempt to find the remaining four teams. I think the chances of most of the teams in the field hinge on the play of their big men, and the team that plays the paint will go the deepest into the tournament.

Let's take a look at the brackets.

West

Final Four Entry: UCLA

The West is clearly the strongest bracket, with two former No. 1's, UCLA and Connecticut, holding the 1 and 2 seeds. The Bruins are a strong team led by Ed O'Bannon and should make travel plans for Seattle. UConn has faltered in the last few weeks and doesn't look as dominant as it was at the beginning of the season.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL TOP 25

The Top 25 in the Associated Press college basketball poll. Teams are listed with their ranking in previous poll.

1. UCLA (1)
2. Kentucky (3)
3. Wake Forest (7)
4. North Carolina (4)
5. Kansas (2)
6. Arkansas (5)
7. Massachusetts (8)
8. Connecticut (6)
9. Villanova (13)
10. Maryland (10)
11. Michigan (9)
12. Purdue (14)
13. Virginia (11)
14. Oklahoma State (19)
15. Arizona (12)
16. Arizona State (18)
17. Oklahoma (16)
18. Mississippi State (15)
19. Utah (22)
20. Alabama (20)
21. Western Kentucky (23)
22. Georgetown (24)
23. Missouri (17)
24. Iowa State (nr)
25. Syracuse (21)

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The real strength of this bracket comes from the presence of Mississippi State and Maryland, my pick for UCLA's and UConn's regional opponents. These two teams are led, respectively, by strong big men Errick Dampier and Joe Smith, both of whom can dominate games.

The marquee first-round match-up is definitely Missouri-Indiana. Both teams are strong, but Bob Knight knows how to win tournament games, and the Tigers struggled at the end of the season.

East

Final Four Entry: UMass

The East bracket is the second strongest of the field. Wake Forest used a strong ACC Tournament, or should I say a strong performance from Randolph Childress, to solidify a No. 1 seed. UMass is a very good 2 seed that can dominate the field if it plays to its potential, which it hasn't shown a penchant for doing consistently.

Big Country Bryant Reeves should carry Oklahoma State to a regional against Wake, while Villanova takes huge momentum into a face-off with UMass.

Look for Stanford to knock off UNC-Charlotte in the only semi-upset in the bracket.

Midwest

Final Four Entry: Arkansas

Kansas is a shaky No. 1 seed in a fairly weak bracket that screams Arkansas. The Razorbacks are still the team with the best 10-man rotation in the nation. And they should knock off Cro-Magnon man Greg Ostertag and the Jayhawks.

Virginia stands in the way of Kansas' showdown with the Razorbacks. The Wahoos could beat the Jayhawks if the game wasn't in Kansas City. Purdue will ride the momentum of its second-straight Big 10 Championship to a regional with Arkansas.

Louisville has the team to beat Memphis in the opening round for a small upset, but will face the Boilermakers in the second round.

Southeast

Final Four Entry: Kentucky

Even though this bracket has two of the best teams in the nation, it's still the weakest bracket overall. The regional final has an incredible Kentucky-North Carolina written all over it.

Michigan State should ride the shoulders of Shawn Respert into a regional with the Tar Heels, while Oklahoma will be the Wildcats' regional victim.

The only interesting first-round game is Iowa State against a highly overrated Florida team.

Final Four: Seattle

NCAA Champion: UCLA

The Final Four will be highlighted by the third meeting of the season of Kentucky and Arkansas. Kentucky has the Razorbacks' number this year and should demolish Arkansas from outside, but the game will be physical and take its toll on the Wildcats.

UCLA should win a yawner with UMass. The Bruins are just too athletic for the Minutemen as Ed O'Bannon makes his bid for NCAA Tournament MVP.

The final will pit a beat-up Kentucky team against the destiny-minded Bruins. UCLA will win a highly competitive final and take the title out west for the first time in the '90s.



NCAA MEN'S BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT



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