

## *Preface*

The NCAA Men's Basketball National Championship Tournament—"March Madness"—has become one of the highlights of the American sporting landscape. Television ratings remain high and broadcasting rights continue to soar for this event that is nestled in between February's Super Bowl and Daytona 500 and April's Master's Golf Tournament and Major League Baseball's Opening Day.

The setup of this single elimination basketball tournament lends itself to a particular type of second-order participation that is easy and entertaining. Indeed, filling out one's own bracket and entering into a pool to see who can predict the most games accurately has become, along with Fantasy Football, the ways in which we most fully invest in big-time sport in America.

The lure of filling out brackets is that it is so uncertain. Rarely does the top overall seed win the event. Upsets abound, and we are drawn to this type of uncertainty. Rarely does a year go by without multiple mentions of underdogs, Cinderella stories, and upsets. The uncertainty, therefore, is much of the draw.

Uncertainty, luck, and unpredictability are pervasive in sport, and they create a paradox that gives our games much of their allure. Sports are games of skill where the individual, individuals, or team that exhibits the greatest amount of the skill or skills central to the sport have the best chance to win. However, as central as the display of skill is to sport, luck and uncertainty counteract to create a balance between fully deterministic events and fully whimsical events. In other words, we often know which team or individual is best and *should* win, but the outcome does not always follow.

March Madness reveals this paradox as well as any sporting event. With each team given a particular seed, spectators have concrete ways of knowing which team *should* win. But March Madness has its name because of how often the favored team does not win. And in a one-off, forty-minute game to decide who moves on, virtually anything can happen.

Early on, the NCAA tournament benefited from some luck in its infancy. The inaugural 1939 event—well before basketball had become a popular television sport—ended poorly. The tournament had low attendance and lost money. The second year, however, fate intervened. Indiana University won the 1940 Eastern Regional hosted nearby in Indianapolis. Kansas University

won the 1940 Western Regional in nearby Kansas City. Thus, the 1940 event benefited greatly from the large local fan turnout for tournament games featuring local teams.

However, this luck—Indiana and Kansas were probably not the favorites going into this tournament even though methods of speculating on relative ability were primitive in 1940—can be explained away. Early basketball even into the 1940s suffered from severe regionalism. The large majority of so-called national tournaments at any level of the game were won by local teams who benefited from local officials, local practices, local equipment, local crowds, and local courts that would have been somewhat foreign to visiting teams. Kansas and Indiana should have won their regionals because the games occurred in their territories. These games were played their way. Such was the nature of the game during its first half century.

The NCAA tournament was third on the scene. In 1939, two events already existed—what is now known as the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) tournament in Kansas City and the National Invitation Tournament (NIT) in New York City. Thus, sustainability was not a given for the NCAA tournament. After an inaugural event that lost money and a 1942 event that barely made any, the NCAA's future was not certain. Moving to Madison Square Garden in New York City for the 1943 Eastern Regional and Championship Final was the single most important move that put the event on its path to the success that it has today.

And yet this move also came alongside more good fortune for the tournament. In 1943, when the NCAA and NIT champions met immediately after the conclusion of both tournaments in a game for the Red Cross's War Fund, NCAA champion Wyoming pulled off an upset over NIT champion St. John's (a "home" team) in overtime that may have been one of the most thrilling games in the history of basketball. This game firmly branded college basketball in the hearts of local fans, and it proved that the NCAA tournament's quality of participants was at least on par with the NIT, an event that was more prestigious at the time.

One year later, a team of young men from Utah who were either too young or physically unqualified for the military won the NCAA tournament and also knocked off NIT champ St. John's in the Red Cross Classic. The NCAA's champion Oklahoma A&M then beat NIT victor DePaul in 1945. Thus, the NCAA had beaten the NIT in three straight one-off games. Had these games gone to the NIT winner, the legacy of each of these tournaments may have been different. One bounce going a different direction, one nail in the Garden floor raised a millimeter more, or the thick smoke-filled Garden

air lowering just an inch may have affected the outcome of early tournament games and, accordingly, the legacy of each event.

*Making March Madness* chronicles many of the games that made March Madness madness. Indeed, as many journalists reported, so many of the early college basketball tournament games exhibited the thrilling finishes that have come to trademark the obsession we have with the event. *Making March Madness* also chronicles the administration of the early college basketball tournaments. Contrary to popular belief, the National Association of Basketball Coaches (NABC)—the group that created the NCAA tournament—did not give away its tournament to the NCAA for covering its debt after losing money in the inaugural 1939 tournament. The NABC ran the initial tournament only with the blessing of the NCAA in the first place. The NCAA gave its name to the tournament while the NABC leaders ran it. This relationship continued through the early years, but the NCAA slowly took more control—financially and otherwise.

For all the madness on the court during the early years, the NCAA and NABC tournament administrators made some shrewd decisions that helped take its event from a poorly attended afterthought into one of the greatest on the American sporting calendar. Amid the caution of post-Depression America in the late 1930s and the austerity of our nation during World War II, it is quite amazing that any of the three major “national” tournaments survived at all. But that they began and even grew during these times is a testament to both the acumen of their organizers and the overwhelming interest Americans have in sport.

*Making March Madness* is the story of the inception and early years of men’s college basketball postseason tournaments. The history of women’s college basketball and postseason tournaments is another, albeit shorter, history that falls outside of the scope of this project because of the time frame studied. However, the histories run parallel in some sense. Indeed, the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) inaugurated a national basketball championship tournament in 1969 only to have it overtaken and essentially killed off when the NCAA began administering a women’s basketball postseason tournament in 1982—not unlike the way in which the NCAA overtook the NIT event. The NCAA used its power to leverage its member schools to participate in its events rather than that of its competitors. The NCAA’s takeover of the AIAW and NIT events occurred much later than the epoch this book details. And yet, these legally contested changes in the modern college basketball landscape offer evidence of the residue left by the early years of college basketball’s postseason history.

Accordingly, *Making March Madness* describes the history of men's college basketball, how its postseason championship tournaments came about, how they grew, and how they dealt with the punch in the gut college basketball received in the form of a widespread basketball gambling and point-shaving scandal in 1951. These "early years" reveal the challenges, struggles, and triumphs that college basketball experienced to gain a foothold for its climb into the American sporting pantheon alongside baseball, football, and everything else we now cherish in the sporting landscape.