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MARCH MADNESS 2007

For the Gamblers, 1+2=5

By WILL LEITCH
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In March 2001, a couple of Yale professors, Edward Kaplan and Stanley Garstka, published a paper called “March Madness and the Office Pool,” a serious, academic look at whether the code of the [N.C.A.A.](#) tournament brackets could be cracked. This treatise ran 14 pages and contained the work of two dozen statistical minds focused on a singular, noble goal: how to win the office pool. The wonks ran algorithms derived from past tournaments. They ran computer simulations. They even studied the National Invitation Tournament, a masochistic endeavor if there ever was one.



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How’d they do? They achieved “overall prediction accuracies of about 58 percent,” the report reads. “But [did] not surpass the simple strategy of picking the seeds when the goal is to pick as many game winners as possible.” Scientific translation: their guess is as good as yours. Worse, even.

The N.C.A.A. tourney brackets, with their right angles and imposing branches, are a source of obsession at this time of year. And not just for sports fans. The research into winning a standard pool has been ongoing for years. Statistics and probability experts are annually besotted. Some, like Brad Carlin, a professor of biostatistics at the [University of Minnesota](#), just want to win their pools. (One dissolved a few years ago after he won three times in four years.) Just as many, though, are taken by a particularly difficult, if not impossible, math problem. “It’s purely academic for me,” says Hal Stern, the chairman of the department of statistics at the [University of California](#), Irvine.

The best current manifestation of all the research is the unfortunately named Web site [Poolologic.com](#), which is run by an affable North Carolina systems analyst named Tom Adams. It allows users to apply several methods currently in use — like Dr. Joel Sokol’s Pure LRMC rankings, which deal primarily with the simple probability of a team’s victory, a concept I don’t exactly understand, or another that relied on “random walking monkeys,” which I really don’t understand — not only to determine the best course of action, but also to predict how your opponents will do in the pool. But for all the theories’ science and permutations, Adams has won a pool only once.

So what, if anything, can these big brains impart?

Ignore seeding “trends.” Seeds are just numbers, after all; once they’ve been announced, they have no real connection to the games being played. It’s true that No. 12 seeds have

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historically done better than you would expect No. 12 seeds to do, but statisticians will tell you that this has nothing to do with an arbitrary number in front of a team name.

Stop watching games. The worst handicapper is one with a human bias. And the most prevalent bias is the fallacy that having watched a team all season confers an advantage. If you've been following Indiana all year, you are no longer rational about Indiana — or any of its opponents. And you can't dispassionately rank Indiana against teams you haven't seen, either. The trick: ignore basketball altogether. "The best handicappers are people who don't watch games at all," Carlin says. "The brain is one of the least effective predictive machines we have."

Listen to Vegas. The best source of data for statisticians trying to mathematicize the N.C.A.A. tournament is not a computer ranking or a margin-of-victory breakdown. It's the Las Vegas sports books. "They're the gold standard," Adams says. "It's simple wisdom-of-crowds stuff." That is to say, for all the Sagarin ratings and LRMCs and random walking monkeys, the best information comes from the place where sports fans collectively feel comfortable putting their money. That doesn't mean you just pick the Vegas favorite. It means you take your risks at the right time; if the Las Vegas spread is closer in a game than conventional wisdom might suggest, somebody knows something you don't. One person's eyes can't be trusted, but those of millions, strangely, can.

Take chances, but not big ones. The reason the blue-haired secretary in your office, who chooses winners based on jersey color, never actually wins the pool is because the tournament is never quite as random as we imagine. Sure, George Mason University was the shocker last year, but predicting that is near impossible. The goal is not necessarily to predict all of the games correctly, but to pick the right ones — the ones few others have chosen. Carlin says he "plays it straight" mostly, but he makes sure to pick an unconventional champion, a non-No. 1 seed. (Florida, a No. 3 seed last year, was a perfect example of this.) But how does he decipher which team to pick? "Just guesswork, really," he says. "You have to think counterintuitively." [?][?][?] WILL LEITCH

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