March Madness in workplace

By Hal Habib, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer
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It's not about the money. A good cynic snickers every time he hears that phrase, but in the case of NCAA Tournament office pools, well, it really isn't about the money, is it?

Because long after the $75 you've won has been spent buying everyone pizza to prove you're such a swell person, only one time-tested reward remains -- the chance to prance into work and, in a chipper voice, remind your humiliated co-workers, "I HAD THE ZAGS!!"

"The money's nice, but I'd rather have the bragging rights," says one office pool player. The man, a construction worker, would identify himself only as Will. Must be an ego thing, because when he's asked what it's like to hold those bragging rights, he says: "I can't tell you. I haven't won yet. You just try to walk away (from the winners). You try to hide."

Whether you're wimping out and going with Arizona and Kentucky or taking a stab at Florida or Pittsburgh (Will's team), March Madness offers a unique bonding opportunity for executives and secretaries, clerks and managers, to join as one in saying, "Huh? What's an IUPUI?" Then we pass out our Xeroxed brackets and wait for the chance to shriek, "Jaspers! Knew it all along!!"

"It's great," says Courtney Yergens, 29, a real estate broker from Boca Raton who has won "once or twice," which qualifies him to supply his full name. "Usually you end up losing the next week, but for that day, you're king of the hill."

There's no way to say for certain how many millions are at stake in NCAA office pools, but chances are you've either participated in one or worked in an office that has held one. There are people today who study office pools, Web sites that analyze them and Web sites that analyze the Web sites. There are people such as Edward Kaplan, a professor at Yale, and Brad Carlin, a professor at Minnesota, who admit they have spent a "mind-boggling" amount of time trying to unlock the secrets to winning these things.
Most of the time, Kaplan has more important things to worry about -- little things such as presidential elections and smallpox risks -- but a few years ago, he contracted a severe case of office pool fever.

"I was attending a conference overseas on serious stuff and I had jet lag, so I was up in the middle of the night," says Kaplan, 47. "You can do two things: You can go see the nightlife or you can write computer programs for basketball tournaments, and of course I did the latter. It's a very hookable problem, as evidenced by the fact that you called me to ask about it."

Kaplan and his fancy little computer placed in the 99.79th percentile in that CBS SportsLine contest, the most dominant performance by a computer since HAL in 2001: A Space Odyssey.

"My last Final Four team didn't come through," Kaplan says. "So the moral of the story is don't bet on Tulsa."

Kaplan now will toss out something like the probability of Creighton making noise in The Big Dance to perk up students when they're slumping in their desks, and he makes no apologies for it.

"What's the most important problem in the world right now?" he asks. "It's obviously March Madness."

Carlin and a former student put their heads together and published a paper titled How to Play Office Pools If You Must, which tells you everything you need to know about how deep in the pool he is.

"There's some pressure at work," Carlin says. "You have a guy organizing a pool, and you feel like a dweeb if you're the only guy on the sidelines with a big pool. Certainly it has the appeal of a lottery: You put in a few bucks and the payoff might be several hundred dollars, so you have the notion of a cheap thrill. And it makes the games more interesting to watch."

That's the case for John Challenger, CEO of Challenger, Gray & Christmas, an outplacement firm with a Fort Lauderdale office.

"Maybe this is the reason the NCAA Tournament has kind of come of age in the last decade," says Challenger, whose company analyzed the effects of pools in the workplace. "It's made it up to the big leagues, like the Super Bowl and the World Series. Maybe the reason is you've got all these guys like me, and gals, who get in a pool, then start watching it. There's a raison d'être there for turning on that tube, reading the newspaper, finding out who the players are and what the personalities are."

A raison d'être? That's what Challenger calls it, but Robert Van Reeth calls it something else.

"Second-degree misdemeanor," Van Reeth says. "Illegal. Unlawful to be on the result of any trial or contest of skill, etc. Florida State Statue 849.14."

Who is Van Reeth, and who invited him to this pool party, anyway? He's the assistant chief for West Palm Beach police, and in a stern
voice he points out you could face six months in the naughty kind of slammer and a $500 fine for participating.

We ask him if he has ever been in an office pool, and suddenly he's not so stern.

"I've been in a few," he says sheepishly. "I didn't realize they were illegal. I'm the first one to admit that. All of a sudden I got hit right between the eyes and said, 'You're kiddin' me?' No. The bottom line is, it ceased immediately."

Van Reeth is beginning to sound stern again, so we figure it's a good time to point out that The Palm Beach Post has a policy forbidding office pools. He sounds pleased.

"We're not going to have a SWAT team going in there," he says.

In truth, you're more likely to see Austin Peay hoisting the trophy in New Orleans on April 7 than you are a cop cracking your office pool ring. The few times the West Palm Beach police have uncovered pools, they usually told the offenders they're illegal, so knock it off.

"Right now our No. 1 priority is preventing terrorist attacks," a spokesman for the FBI in Miami says. "I don't think our best resources would be served investigating office pools. There aren't people going out and actively getting into office pools and setting up a sting."

There are exceptions. One organization had a pot that swelled to $90,000. You might have heard of it: Enron.

The $5 office pool bust

And there are other exceptions that might make your head spin.

Claire Newell was tending her business as technical support specialist for the Rhode Island department of elementary and secondary education in 1992 when two men came knocking on her door.

"Wow," Newell thought. "Who's these two good-looking guys?"

"We're from the state police," they said. "We're inquiring about an office pool."

"Oh, God," Newell said. "Are you serious?"

Next thing she knew, she was at headquarters, booked and fingerprinted over a $210 pool that cost $5 to enter. The prosecutor wouldn't drop the case, but in the end, Newell got her revenge.

First, she ended up with a year of unsupervised probation, thanks to lawyer David Cicilline, who represented her pro bono. He's kind of important in Rhode Island nowadays -- he's mayor of Providence. Second, she never got it expunged from her record "because I think it's funny," says Newell, 45. And finally, she maintains a certain level of celebrity that peaks every March. The question "Who do you like?" inevitably comes up at family reunions, and when she got called for jury duty once, she got to look her prosecutor right in the eye again.
"The judge even asked me, 'Well, whatever happened with that? I had the lawyers all around me. 'Wow. You're that woman?'

"I think it's funny now. At the time I didn't because I could have lost my job. I think back and it's an only-me type thing."

**NCAA opposes them**

One person who has little sympathy is Bill Saum. He's the NCAA's director of agent, gambling and amateurism activities. The NCAA frowns on office pools. A lot.

"We think it sends the wrong message," Saum says. "We would encourage folks to do what I would call 'bracket selection contests.' Fill out the bracket, have the same people in it, see if I can pick better than you, but let's not put any money in it.

"Having said that, I don't want to appear naive. Is putting a buck in a pool going to have an impact on the tournament? No, it's not. But it's where you draw the line. Once you get past a dollar, the significance in the amount of money that's entered varies from individual to individual. We're aware of pools where it costs hundreds of thousands of dollars to participate."

They're also aware of Internet contests involving their broadcast partners, CBS and ESPN. The NCAA successfully lobbied CBS to drop its affiliation with a Las Vegas site, but ESPN.com continues to offer a $15,000 contest. Saum said the NCAA is leaning on the network to be a "positive broadcast partner in regards to sports wagering."

But don't pools increase interest in the tournament?

"We don't believe that the pool increases viewership or the popularity of the tournament," Saum says. "We don't believe betting does. There's no study that exists that I'm familiar with. It is certainly something I've read people say, but think about some of the people who participate in pools that you have been around. Those people don't sit down and watch the tournament. Certainly on Monday morning they come and see where they are, just for fun, but they're not watching the tournament. And the people that are watching the tournament would watch it anyway. So our position is betting does not bring more viewership."

"They're nuts," Challenger says. "They have to hide themselves behind a massive wall."

**A boost for companies?**

Challenger, who is in two pools, took into account the average hourly wage of workers and a variety of other factors and concluded that if the average worker spent 10 minutes a day talking about the tournament these next few weeks, it will cost employers $1.4 billion. Yet Challenger -- a CEO himself -- doesn't think this is bad.
"All in all, with the strain over the war, with the sour economy and the job insecurity, I'd say this is the kind of thing companies ought to be embracing. That lost productivity is a gigantic number, but companies need to find ways to bring their people together."

Frank Scanlan sees two sides to it. He's the media affairs manager for The Society for Human Resource Management, which in January 2002 conducted an unscientific online survey that showed 71 percent of companies either allow pools or aren't worried about them. In a 1999 SHRM survey, 56 percent of respondents said productivity was unaffected by pools.

"There are employees who are morally opposed to gambling in the workplace," Scanlan says. "Nearly every state has laws against this type of gambling, and they may have employees who have had an addiction to gambling, so it's something employers need to be concerned about. It can help camaraderie, it can help with projects down the road, but there's also a downside."

Pools come in all shapes and sizes, with scoring systems basic or so complex you're better off letting the Internet calculate your standings. Jacksonville-based Enter Sports Inc. runs an Internet contest called "March Madnet," and it says something about the money-vs.-bragging rights issue that even though the contest no longer offers cash -- only T-shirts and trophies -- it still gets about 23,000 entries.

"You know how it is in sports," Enter Sports President Steve Cheski says. "They play for the glory as much as for a chance to compete. It's amazing. We'll open it up Sunday night, and as soon as we open the contest, people start playing, which always amazed me because they really haven't had time to look at the brackets."

(Warning to bosses: You might want to skip this next paragraph.)

"They're playing from the office," Cheski says. "As a matter of fact, we can watch the traffic peak on the hour, starting at 8 a.m., then 9 a.m., and it goes like that until about 1 in the afternoon. I'm assuming that's because of the time zones."

So there you have it. The countdown is on until 8 a.m., or 9 or 10 a.m., on April 8. That's when the pools will end -- and the talk will really begin.

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