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Do's and don'ts while filling out your bracket

By Jeff D'Alessio
FLORIDA TODAY

As the NCAA's senior assistant director of statistics, Gary Johnson can tell you the history of No. 14 seeds from the Southwestern Athletic Conference in opening-round overtime night games played in Boise.

But when it comes to filling a tournament bracket, the guy who monitors the RPI for the NCAA isn't even No. 1 in his own household.

"Many years ago when my oldest son Cory was just six years old, he picked the winners by 'the sound of the name of the teams,'" Johnson said. "In Thursday's opening round, he picked 12 of 16 correctly. On Friday, he picked 16 of 16.

"So my only advice is to go by the sound of the name of the teams."

Sounds like as surefire a strategy as any.

Brace yourself for the madness of March, which begins bright and early Monday morning with the rush to the office Xerox to copy off brackets.

If you want to win your office pool, here's a few NCAA Tournament do's and don'ts:

1. Keep it on the QT

First, a disclaimer: These tips are for entertainment purposes only.

Gambling, after all, is still against the law. Despite a Society for Human Resource Management survey that found that 30 percent of companies that responded acknowledge operating some sort of NCAA office pool, they are still illegal, though seldom cracked down on.

"Generally, they are not a major priority of law enforcement," Satellite Beach police commissioner Lionel Cote said.

The exception, Cote says, is when they're out in the public. A Satellite Beach restaurant which put brackets on the wall for patrons to fill in was asked to take them down by the police.

"Once you do it publicly, then it becomes more flagrant," Cote says.

2. Things to avoid

- No. 16 seeds. Since 1985, they're 0-72 in first-round matchups against No. 1s. "Stay away from 16 seeds unless you have a 1-900 psychic line and an accent," ESPN analyst Jay Bilas says.

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- Coaches with beards. P.J. Carlesimo is the only one ever to take a team to the Final Four (Seton Hall, 1989).
- Teams that go coast to coast. "If a Pacific time zone team has a 12:08 or 12:28 tip time in the Eastern time zone against an Eastern team, pick against 'em," Sports Illustrated college basketball writer Alexander Wolff says. "Travelers tend to be sluggish."

3. Count upperclassmen

The more of them a team has in key roles, the better usually its chance to advance.

"If you really want to win some money in your pool, pick teams that are deep and have good senior leadership," says Golden State Warriors rookie Mike Dunleavy, who played alongside senior Shane Battier on Duke's 2001 title team.

National champions Maryland (2002) and Michigan State (2000) were loaded with upperclassmen in their lineups, and it showed at tournament time.

Keep an eye on the Terps again, the only team in this week's USA Today/ESPN coaches poll with four senior starters in the lineup. Other veteran teams worth watching: top-ranked Arizona (three senior starters), Oklahoma (three), Cal (three) and Oklahoma State (three seniors and two juniors).

Despite the flood of underclassmen to the NBA in recent years, a senior has been named Most Outstanding Player of the Final Four in four of the last five tournaments.

But while seniors sizzle, freshmen often fizzle under the bright lights of March.

"Freshmen, even talented ones, can be unreliable come tournament time," says noted NCAA expert Jerry Palm, who operates the website CollegeRPI.com. "Teams like the Fab Five are the exception, not the rule."

Keep that in mind when you're analyzing Syracuse (freshman point guard and go-to guy), Illinois (all-freshman backcourt), Florida (two freshman starters) and Duke (three of top six scorers are rookies).

4. Ignore the experts

Pay extra close attention to the advice Billy Packer and other college basketball experts give during tonight's NCAA Selection Show (6-7 p.m., CBS).

Then go ahead and do the exact opposite.

"The office secretary, using colors and nicknames, can beat Mr. Expert," Boston Globe columnist Bob Ryan says. "And usually does."

5. Gonzaga over Goliath

From Bryce Drew to Hampton U., new Cinderella stories are told every March.

But how do you know which long shot to select?

Here's a few tips:

- Pick a few No. 12 seeds to make it to the weekend. Last year, three of them upset No. 5s in the first round (Creighton over Florida, Missouri over Miami, Tulsa over Marquette). The year before that, 12s and 5s split their tournament openers. In 2000, the 5s went 4-0, but got two serious scares (Florida over Butler, Kentucky over St. Bonaventure in 2 OTs).
- Pick mid-majors with a history of pulling off upsets. Gonzaga did it once, then again and again. Maybe the new Gonzaga is Creighton, which bounced Florida last year. Or North Carolina-Wilmington, which is back in the field a year after stunning fourth-seeded Southern Cal. "Remember that mid-major schools talent is the same as major schools," says former UCLA star Earl Watson, now a guard with the Memphis Grizzlies. Watch out for these school because a lot of these guys have been together a long time. Most teams don't have players leaving early for the draft, so they know each other."
- Pick upsets only to happen in first and second rounds. "The little guys rarely get past the Sweet 16, and the big points that win pools come later in the bracket," Bilas said.
- If they get in, bet on Butler's Bulldogs. "They're still pretty honked off for getting left out last year and are going to want to make a statement," Palm says.
- David Mihm, who operates the website bracketography.com, thinks Kansas, Pitt and Louisville could be ripe for a first-round upset.
- Here's a Cinderella story if we've ever heard one: Matt Crenshaw, the oldest player in Division I at 26, hit a fallaway jumper with one second left to power Indiana University Purdue University-Indianapolis to a 66-64 win over Valparaiso in the Mid-Continent Conference title game. The Jaguars are making their first NCAA Tournament appearance.

6. Think backwards

Instead of picking your first-round winners first, decide on your champion, then your Final Four teams, then your Sweet 16, etc.

"This forces you to look at the tournament as a whole," says Yale School of Management professor Edward H. Kaplan, who has studied tournament probabilities. "The danger in doing what most people do -- which is to pick first-round winners, and then second-round winners from playing off their first-round projections, and so forth -- is that such an approach assumes that your first-round projections are correct.

"They may well not be."

7. Coaching counts.

Good: Louisville's Rick Pitino, who's led six of his seven NCAA Tournament teams to the Elite Eight or better.

Bad: Cincinnati's Bob Huggins, whose teams have never knocked off a higher-seeded team but have lost eight times to lower seeded-teams.

Good: Kentucky's Tubby Smith, who won it all in 1998 and has been to four Sweet 16s in five seasons at UK.

Bad: Texas' Rick Barnes, whose teams have beaten a higher-seeded team just once in 10 tournament appearances.

"A good rule of thumb is to pick the team with the better bench coach when everything else seems to be fairly equal," says college hoops junkie Caulton Tudor of the Raleigh News & Observer. "So much of the NCAA comes down to taking the correct counteraction. The best bench coaches have an advantage in that regard. If the No. 11 seed has an obviously talented strategist, he almost always had a decent chance of beating a No. 6 team that relies almost entirely on talent."

8. Mull over Missouri

"Always pick one team from a power conference to make the Final Four which you otherwise wouldn't," advises Steve Richardson, president of the United States Basketball Writers Association. "This is my Arizona rule from the 1997 tournament."

Those Wildcats finished fifth in the Pac-10, then No. 1 in the nation.

Michigan's Fab Five never won a Big Ten title, but played for two NCAA titles.

Wisconsin's 2000 team went from sixth in the Big Ten to the Final Four.

One middle-of-the-pack team with upset potential this year: Missouri, which knocked off three higher-seeded teams last year as a No. 12 seed, and one in 2001 as a No. 9.

9. Pick with your head.

Not with your heart.

"Personally, I always pick Indiana to lose their first game," Palm says. "I'm a Purdue guy, and it's a conflict of interest to pick a team I don't want to win."

The hated Hoosiers have busted Palm's bracket on a few occasions, most recently last March, when they reached the championship game.

Not everyone agrees with this strategy. Bilas, for one, always picks his alma mater to win.

Of course, he went to Duke, where he played on Mike Krzyzewski's 1986 national runner-up.

"Go ahead and pick your alma mater to go all the way," Bilas says. "That way, if you lose, you'll at least feel loyal. Unless you went to a 16-seed school. Then go for the money."

10. Five to watch

You don't have to be Dick Vitale to know that Arizona and Kentucky are Final Four favorites.

Here are five lesser-known teams that could thrive:

1. Xavier. After his Owls were squashed by David West and the Musketeers earlier this month, John Chaney remarked, "This team is the best we've ever had in the Atlantic 10."

And that includes the 1996 UMass team which reached the Final Four.

"This team is much better," Chaney said. "They've got all the ingredients."

2. Creighton. Kyle Korver & Co. and looked mighty impressive Monday night, drilling top-seeded Southern Illinois 80-56 in the finals of the Missouri Valley Conference Tournament.

This is a better version of the 2002 Blue Jay model, which sent the Gators packing early.

3. Weber State. Back in the tournament for the first time since 1999, when Harold "The Show" Arceneaux and friends shocked North Carolina, the Wildcats are a first-round foe no one wants to draw.

The Big Sky champs went 17-0 against their conference competition and are eager to show they can do it on a bigger stage.

4. Wake Forest. The best team nobody's talking about won its first outright ACC title since 1962, set a school record for conference wins (13) and are led by senior forward Josh Howard, Fox Sports' National Player of the Year.

The Demon Deacons haven't done much in March -- their only Final Four appearance came in 1962 -- but this could be their year.

5. Central Michigan. If the Mid-America Conference regular-season champs get in, they could be a factor in the early rounds. Look out for 7-footer Chris Kaman, who ripped Ball State for 39 points and 22 rebounds and is considered by some to be the best true center in college basketball.

11. Bet on fast finishers

When seeding the 65-team field each year, the NCAA Selection Committee pays extra close attention to how a team fared in its last 10 games.

You should, too.

Go with teams that finished with a frenzy (Kentucky hasn't lost in 2003). Steer clear of teams that struggled down the stretch (Notre Dame has lost four of five, Cincinnati went 4-8 down the stretch).

12. History lesson

A few numbers to keep in mind when filling out your bracket:

- In the past 12 years, 44 of 48 Final Four teams came from the big six conferences (ACC, Big East, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-10, SEC).
- All four No. 1 seeds have never made it to the Final Four. Only three times have three No. 1s made it the same year.
- The Nos. 5 and 7 seeds have never won it all. Only one No. 4 seed (Arizona in 1997) has won a title. The No. 6 has won two titles (North Carolina State in 1983, Kansas in 1988).
- Since 1939, there never has been a Final Four in which all the teams began with a vowel. There goes your Arizona, Oklahoma, Illinois,

Austin Peay Final Four.

13. If all else fails . . .

Pick the meaner-looking mascot.

Says Bilas: "Wildcats beat Blue Jays, Panthers beat Quakers, etc. Most mascots beat St. John's or Miami, and it is good policy to stay away from weather systems, generally.

"The Demon Deacons are a tough call, though. There's nothing worse than an angry church official."

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