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THE JOURNAL REPORT: NCAA BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT

Some Tips for Becoming A Shark in the Office Pool

By **KEITH HUANG**
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For the college-basketball dilettante, taking part in an NCAA Basketball office pool can be fairly daunting -- so many games to pick, so many permutations and possible upsets -- especially if you haven't watched a game all year, or if you don't even recognize the teams' names.

But don't let that stop you. There are numerous ways you can improve your odds at picking winners, and possibly walking home with the jackpot.

First, don't expect perfection in your picks: Assuming that in any game both teams have an equal chance of winning, the mathematical odds of selecting all 63 games correctly are approximately 9.22 quintillion to one (a quintillion is '1' followed by 18 zeros, or a billion billion). To get some sense of how big that number is, see this rendering of a stack of approximately [one quintillion pennies](#).

When it comes to doing well in any office pool, a simple, less-is-more approach coupled with beginners' luck, might be the formula that will put you in the winners' circle. But here are some tips to help improve your odds:

Work backwards

"Start by deciding who you think will be the champion. You are now constrained to choose that team in all prior rounds," says Edward H. Kaplan, Ph.D., of the Yale School of Management. In 2001, Dr. Kaplan and fellow Yale professor, Stanley J. Garstka, co-wrote a paper entitled "March Madness and the Office Pool" because of their lack of success in such pools for more than a decade, according to Dr. Kaplan. (See [abstract](#))

"Most people start by working in the other direction -- who will win the first round games, and then who will win between those picked," Dr. Kaplan says. "The problem with this approach is that it is too localized -- you don't look at the big picture; for example, is one region slightly weaker than another?"

Working backward instead of forward, he says, "forces you to think both about how a team would fare against all possible opponents ... and also whether a team would even survive

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that long in the tournament to play the game in question."

Get a handle on historical records

How a team has played leading up to the tournament matters as much as the venue of its first- and second-round matchups, and there are myriad Web sites that can bring you up to speed on teams' performances. Also, pay attention to historical trends: #16 seeds simply do not beat #1 seeds, and few #15 seeds have ever made it to the second round. (See more [historical trends](#)).

Check out away games records

About.com's Brendan McGovern offers an [11-point checklist](#) for filling out your bracket, as well as this maxim: "A less talented, but more experienced team will usually beat a more talented, but less experienced team." Also, teams that can win away games are likely to fare well. "For all but the top seeds ... every game you play in the NCAA Basketball Tournament is a road game," Mr. Govern writes. On the other hand, sports-wagering site DogHouseSports.com warns against [getting "all sentimental for seniors."](#) Indeed, the notion of five seniors giving it one last shot at a championship might play well as a movie script, but the reality is that teams with the best players win, the site advises. The best players generally do not stay until their senior year, DogHouse points out, thus the best teams are not senior-laden."

AP Top 25 Poll

Here's an easy one: Pay attention to the [Associated Press top 25 poll](#). ESPN.com columnist Pat Forde suggests drawing this year's Final Four competitors from the top 17 teams. "Fifty-eight of the last 64 teams to play on the season's final weekend were ranked 17th or higher [in the second AP poll in February]," [Mr. Forde writes](#), adding: "The Final Four is generally reserved for teams that have firmly established their credentials by Valentine's Day."

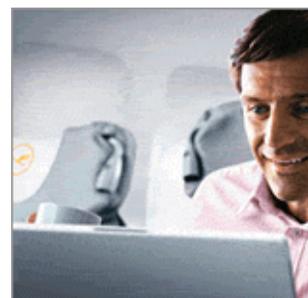
Play the Numbers Game

Mike Greenfield, who earned a Mathematical and Computational Science degree from Stanford University, has devised a ["Power Ratings" index](#) of teams. Similarly, Jeff Sagarin, who has been supplying [team ratings](#) for USA Today since 1985, and Kenneth Massey, a math Ph.D. candidate at Virginia Tech, also showcase their [statistical goods](#) for NCAA basketball.

It's a toss-up

Last year, Peter Tiernan, special reporter to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, focused on the burdensome toss-up games, which pit teams within three seed positions against each other. "Employing a strict higher-seed strategy to predict the outcomes of toss-up games results in only a 56 percent success rate," Mr. Tiernan writes. He offers interesting ["toss-up team" tips](#) for each round of the tournament. For example, "In the 33 Final Four toss-up games, the higher seed holds a 14-9 advantage over the lower seed," Mr. Tiernan writes.

Random rules



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Some off-the-cuff ideas were shared by sport writers in 2003, but they may still hold some value. Mike Douchant on Sportsline.com offered nuggets like "[Pick at least one Big East team](#) to lose in the opening round," while Jeff D'Alessio in Florida Today said to [avoid coaches with beards](#). "P.J. Carlesimo is the only one to take a team to the Final Four (Seton Hall, 1989)." And, finally, Stewart Mandel of SI.com, offered "[Eight Guaranteed Ways to Lose Your NCAA Tournament Pool](#)."

Listen to bracket junkies

And lastly, absorb the words of longtime bracket junkies whose years of agitation at playing -- and losing -- their own office pools have produced some interesting, albeit unpolished, pearls of wisdom -- though it's best to take these words at face value. For instance, Stewart Mandel of SI.com serves up a tongue-in-cheek guide for guaranteeing an office-pool loss: "Sure, you can spend the next three days poring over stats and matchups in search of any little edge, and that probably will help. But take it from me, You will not win."

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