

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

March Madness

“

Not only is there more to life than basketball, there's a lot more to basketball than basketball.

— former NBA star and coach, Phil Jackson

The Ides of March? No, the Madness of March

Every year in March, 68 college basketball teams gather in gyms all across the country to compete for the national championship in a sudden-death (i.e. one loss and you're eliminated), winner-take-all tournament. ESPN commentator [Dick Vitale](#) calls it "the best three weeks in sports." Unlike college football where only the big-name schools get invited to play for a national championship, any school can win the basketball championship. And that's where the fun begins! Small schools like Loyola of Chicago (who made the Final Four in 2018) have just as much chance to win as powerhouses like Duke or the University of Kentucky. The only trick is earning the right to play in the tournament in the first place (more on that later).

Although the first college basketball tournament began in 1939 with the [Oregon Ducks](#) winning the title, the modern version of the tournament we watch today took hold in 1985 when the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) expanded the field to include 64 teams competing in a bracket-style tournament where winners advance and losers go home. Today, 68 teams are invited to play in the tournament, meaning that the champion has to win six consecutive games to claim the title. Simply making it to the Final Four (the last four teams remaining) is an incredible accomplishment in and of itself.

— Why is it called March Madness?

[According to Slate](#), the term goes "back to Illinois' statewide high school basketball tournament, which began in 1908." It was then picked up by CBS announcer Brent Musburger to describe the insanity and chaos that ensues when the top teams in the NCAA tournament are improbably upset by lower-ranking teams. But why "madness" and not something else, like "mayhem"? Because anything can happen and any team can win or lose on a given day, and the unpredictability can be quite frustrating. For example, in 2015 the undefeated Kentucky Wildcats entered the tournament as the strong favorite to win and become the very first team since 1976 to have an undefeated season. But they were shockingly and devastatingly upset by Wisconsin, their perfect season ruined.

But "madness" could also refer to the insane pop cultural phenomenon the tournament has become. For each of his eight years in office, former president Barack Obama filled out his own tournament bracket and released it to the public. NBA Hall of Fame player Kobe Bryant said the only thing he regrets in his life was never playing in March Madness. That's how big it is. In addition, so many adults skipped work or watched the games during work hours in 2017 that an estimated \$1.3 billion of revenue was lost in America. In fact, "[urologists reported](#) a national increase of up to 50 percent in the number of vasectomies scheduled on the days preceding the tournament." Why? So that men can be "out sick" for the beginning days of the tournament, when the highest number of games are being played. And such a phenomenon is also a huge revenue generator: "[American beer companies](#) see an increase in sales from 14 million barrels to nearly 18 million for the month and there's a near 20% rise in pizza orders across the country, too."

—— Who gets in and why?

Each year, the NCAA selection committee (consisting of 10 elected athletic directors and commissioners) meet throughout the season to determine who should be invited into the tournament. Their final decisions are released on "[Selection Sunday](#)" (i.e. the Sunday prior to the games commencing). In reality, the committee only selects 36 of the 68 total teams since 32 of the spots are set aside to be awarded to each conference champion. In college basketball, there are [32 Division 1 conferences](#) (SEC, ACC, Big 10, etc.), so the winner of each conference tournament automatically qualifies to play in March Madness. For the remaining 36 slots, who gets in and who gets snubbed isn't an exact science, and many schools in previous years have felt cheated by the committee for not being selected. Am I right Syracuse fans?

Once the teams are selected, each school is assigned a "seed," and then placed in one of four regions (South, East, Midwest, and West), which determines who they play, as well as their eventual path to the championship game. The committee does their best to place teams in their own geographic region, meaning Gonzaga, whose campus is in Washington, shouldn't have to travel to North Carolina to play their tournament games, but it is somewhat arbitrary, so lower seeds might not actually play near their region.

—— Wait, what's a seed and what's a bracket?

Good questions. Let's start with the bracket. As mentioned earlier, the tournament is divided into four distinct regions, each consisting of 16 teams. In each region, these 16 teams are pitted against each other in 8 opening round games. The winners then advance to face off against each other, and this continues until there's only one team left standing in every region (regional champion). The regional champions face off in the Final Four, i.e. the semifinals, to determine the finalists, who then compete for the championship. This is all visually represented is by a bracket ([check it out here](#)). As a team wins, they advance deeper into the bracket until fewer and fewer teams remain.

The seeds, then, are what determine where each team is placed in their bracket. In addition to determining which teams are in the tournament and in which region they'll play, the Selection Sunday committee also determines their rankings or "seeds," represented by a number from 1 (best) to 16 (worst). These seeds theoretically reflect which school is the best team in each region and which is the worst.

Ideally, the top seeds [are rewarded](#) by being given an easier path to the championship game: "First-round matchups are determined by pitting the top team in the region against the bottom team (No. 1 vs. No. 16). Then the next highest vs. the next lowest (No. 2 vs. No. 15), and so on. In theory, this means that the 1 seeds have the easiest opening matchup in the bracket." In fact, up until University of Maryland Baltimore County's [upset of Virginia](#) in last year's tournament, a 16 seed had never defeated a 1 seed in the history of the tournament. Beyond reflecting a team's ability and determining where they start in the bracket, the seeds have no other importance.

— So why do people talk about “filling out” their brackets?

As fun as it is to watch games and see how one's favorite team fares, there's another element to the madness that makes it even more engaging and, well, maddening. Fans can predict which teams they think will win each matchup (i.e. “fill out their brackets”) and see how their guesses match up with the actual results of the tournament.

And while doing this by oneself can be fun, it can be even more fun to see how one's predictions compare to others'. So people organize competitions (e.g. at the office or in the family or in a friend group) in which everyone fills out a bracket and perhaps puts in a predetermined amount of money. The brackets face off against each other, and whoever guesses correctly the most number of times wins (either the bragging rights or the money). Or if that's not exciting enough, sites like [ESPN](#) and the [NCAA](#) host even bigger, nationwide competitions online, with immense amounts of prize money on the line. In 2014, billionaire mogul Warren Buffett [offered \\$1 billion](#) to anyone who picked a perfect bracket. Maybe that's why so many people fill one out!

One of our staff members remembers filling out his bracket with his dad, then watching the games together to see which games they “won” or “lost.” It added a level of excitement and ownership to each game, even when their favorite teams weren't playing. Not surprisingly, both the internet and fantasy gaming has exponentially increased the popularity of watching the tournament and of filling out a bracket, with [17.3 million participants](#) playing in ESPN's 2018 Tournament Challenge.

— How do you decide which teams to pick?

Ok, this is where the fun begins! Whether you make your picks online or on a printed out bracket at home, choosing which teams will advance deep into the tournament and which teams will lose early is what makes the madness so special and personal. Here are 10 quick tips we've learned from filling out our brackets over the last several years:

1. Never, ever pick a 16 seed to beat a 1 seed. Yes, we know it happened in 2018, but go with chalk every time on this opening round game. Just trust us on this one.
2. Pick at least one 12 seed to win their opening round game. Except for 2007, a 12 seed has [upset a 5 seed](#) every year since the tournament was expanded to 64 teams. Watch, this year it will happen again.
3. The 8-seed-vs.-9-seed games are a toss up. Because these teams are so evenly matched, see who is playing closer to home or who had a stronger strength of schedule during the regular season, then go with that team.
4. Pick a team [in blue to win it all](#). Whether it's Duke, North Carolina, Kentucky, Villanova, or Kansas, 15 of the last 16 years a team wearing blue has cut down the nets at the Final Four. Yes, it's weird but true. Go blue!
5. Don't pick all four 1 seeds to make it to the Final Four. [2008 was the only year](#) all four number 1 seeds advanced to the final weekend of the tournament.
6. As the tournament advances, pick fewer and fewer upsets. Sure, an 11 seed can

- beat a 6 seed, but the odds of them winning again two days later are slim to none.
7. When in doubt, pick the tougher mascot. Can a terrier defeat a Tiger? We don't think so.
 8. Don't trust the Big 10. The last time a team from the Big 10 won the national title [was in 2000](#).
 9. Do trust the ACC. When in doubt, pick an ACC school. Duke, North Carolina, and Virginia should all be number 1 seeds and all three are capable of winning it all. Outside of that, Florida State, Syracuse, and Virginia Tech could also advance deep into the tournament.
 10. Pick the older team. Granted, one-and-done schools (teams filled with future NBA stars who only stay in college for one year) like Duke or Kentucky are the sexy selection, but winning it all with a bunch of freshman isn't probable. Look for teams that are junior and senior laden to weather the storm. Winning six games in a row takes discipline and experience, something that Villanova and North Carolina have proven most recently.

—— But isn't this gambling?

It depends. Fans can fill out brackets and compete with one another without wagering any money. If your family decides to each fill out a bracket to see who gets bragging rights, great! No harm, no foul. Entering a bracket on a site like ESPN is also fine, even though they award prizes to winners, because nobody actually wagers any money (it's free to play) and because they award gift cards instead of cash. However, any pool in which money is exchanged and prize money is rewarded is considered gambling.

[The American Gaming Association estimated](#) that, during 2018's tournament, 40 million Americans "bet \$10 billion on the tournament, much of it illegally as sports betting is not legal in most U.S. states." If you create a tournament bracket with money involved, you could be violating federal, state, or local laws that ban workplace or sports gambling of any kind. It's highly unlikely the FBI will investigate your son and his friends for betting on the tournament, but allowing illegal gambling on a small scale could be a slippery slope for individuals who might be tempted to engage more and more in this activity as they grow older. So keep it legal and safe by not wagering money.

You could have different prizes, though! For example, whoever wins gets to go to a restaurant of their choice. Or perhaps each family member could pick something they want as a prize (e.g. Mom might want the family to do the dishes for her for a whole week, or son might want a little more Fortnite time for a week), and if they win, they get that prize. Be creative in how you make it fun for everyone!

—— How am I supposed to keep up with it all when there are so many terms to know?

Learning the language is half the battle when seeking to navigate your teen's world. Whether it's the Oscars or Fortnite, most iconic cultural phenomena develop their own

insider vernacular, and the NCAA tournament is no different. As the event has grown exponentially over the years, so has its jargon. Understanding the terms will help you talk conversationally with your kids. To help you navigate the next three weeks, we've compiled a list of our very own "sweet sixteen" terms to help you make sense of the madness.

1. **The Big Dance:** Another name for the tournament.
2. **On the Bubble:** Teams with mediocre records that are sweating it out to see if they qualify for the tournament. Each year there are five or six teams wondering if they've done enough to earn a bid.
3. **Bid:** An invitation to the tournament. Teams that receive a bid are broken into two categories: At-large and automatic. 36 at-large bids are given to teams that did not win their conference tournaments, and 32 bids are given to teams that won their conference tournaments.
4. **Regional:** The NCAA tournament bracket is split into four regionals: South, East, West, and Midwest. The first four rounds of the tournament are played in regionals, with the Elite Eight serving as the regional championship games.
5. **Seed:** 68 teams earn bids to the NCAA tournament, and each one receives a seed from 1 to 16 that determines where the team will be placed in the bracket.
6. **First Four:** When the tournament was expanded to 68 teams, a new round was added to the format: The First Four. Four games, played on the Tuesday and Wednesday after Selection Sunday, determine which of eight teams advance to the first round of the tournament. These games aren't included in the various bracket challenges.
7. **Sweet 16:** The second weekend of the tournament when the field is reduced from 68 to 16 teams.
8. **Elite 8:** The last eight teams, i.e. the quarterfinalists. To make it this far in the tournament is quite an accomplishment.
9. **Final 4:** The last four teams in the tournament, i.e. the semifinalists.
10. **Cutting Down the Nets:** The winner of the tournament traditionally cuts down the nets on each goal as a way of celebrating their victory. Most schools place these nets in trophy cases on campus.
11. **Mid-Major:** A lesser-known team from a small conference outside of the big six (ACC, SEC, Big 10, Pac 12, Big 12, Big East).
12. **Picking Chalk:** Only selecting the favorites in each game to win. Don't do it, nobody will like you.
13. **Upset Special:** When a lower-seeded team defeats a higher-seeded team.
14. **Buzzer Beater:** A last-second, [game-winning shot](#) (we see you, [Kris Jenkins](#)).
15. **Busted Bracket:** Describes the state of your bracket when the teams you picked to make it to the Final Four lose early in the tournament.
16. **Cinderella:** A lower-seeded team that advances further than anyone expected.

— **OK, 68 games in 3 weeks?! That seems out of control.**

It definitely can be, now more than ever. Years ago, you or your classmates might have

been guilty of sneaking out of class and into the teachers' lounge or library to get a peek of the few games that aired on CBS at the time. FOMO was as real in the '80s as it is now. But today, young viewers don't have to physically sneak out of class or wait until the 6 o'clock news to find out who won and lost. They can watch every single game on their devices under their desks or, at the very least, refresh their bracket apps to get score updates every few seconds.

Thanks to technology and more channels, it's possible to watch every game from start to finish if one desires. One can use a DVR to record each game [on CBS, TNT, TBS, and truTV](#), then replay every second. Or, if that's not convenient enough, [NCAA.com](#) and the [March Madness Live app](#) will be streaming every game live for free. Starting in mid-March, games start at noon eastern and go well into the night, so young fans can be tempted to binge upwards of twelve hours of basketball a day for three weeks! It's important that we model and teach them a balance during this frenzied event. If their favorite team is playing during math class, we'll need to help them set aside their sports passion and focus on the job at hand.

In order to help them manage the urge to watch all the games, here are some helpful suggestions:

- 1. Set Daily Limits.** Just like you probably already do with Netflix or YouTube, set daily limits on how many hours your kids watch the games. Thankfully, there's almost always three or four games being broadcast simultaneously, especially in the beginning, so even if you only allow them to watch three hours or so, they can take in several of the most exciting matchups.
- 2. Give It A Rest.** Since the games are only played Thursday through Sunday, tune-out of the national viewing conversation during the rest of the week. Sites like ESPN will show non-stop replays and game analysis the entire month, but don't buy into the hype. Enjoy the games, then turn them off. Getting caught up on all the off-court conversations leaves little room for healthy balance, school/work, spiritual formation, or life itself.
- 3. Control Emotions.** Many teens are so invested in their favorite teams that watching these sudden-death games produces anxiety and/or anger. If they can't handle the games appropriately, don't watch the game live and do find out the results of the game before watching. If their team wins, great! If not, then they'll be prepared for the outcome and not get so worked up. This could save your teen (or you...) two hours of heartache.

— Can brackets bring my family together?

Strangely, yes, they can! We know families who have an annual tradition of sitting down together prior to the tournament to fill out their brackets, then watching the games together to see who picked the most games correctly. Unlike video games or even some board games that have age-limits, anyone can play. Even small children can pick who they want to win based on team colors or the mascot they like the best (as strange as it sounds, it's sometimes not a bad strategy!). Even children who aren't that into

sports but have a competitive side can find the experience exciting.

If you or one of your kids really enjoys this time of year, it could be fun to create your own family tradition around the tournament. Print out a bracket for each member of your family, or, better yet, use technology to do it for you. Enter the [ESPN Tournament Challenge](#) and create your own family group, and then use the online tool to make your picks and track your progress. You could even buy a cheap trophy at a second-hand shop and award it to the family winner each year. Who knows, years from now you just might have some sweet memories to pass down to the next generation. Unique sporting events can be a fun way to bring your family together to just enjoy each other—something that may be rare during your kids' pre-teen and teen years.

— How do I help my teenager keep a healthy perspective of the tournament and the bracket challenges?

With the non-stop media coverage and the almost tribalistic fan-based loyalty, it's easy to see how some students (and adults!) can obsess over March Madness and turn their love for their team into something incredibly unhealthy. Sporting events can be a proving ground for character, discipline, and courage—but they can also become idolatrous if taken too far. Here are a few questions to help you and your teen determine if your love of the game has become a religion of its own.

- **Do I determine my self-image from sports?** It's easy to feel pride or a sense of meaning when your team wins, as if you've accomplished something yourself. It's also just as tempting to self-loathe or spiral into insecurity when your team loses, especially if friends make fun of your team when they fail. If the outcome of a game played by people you will never meet affects your self-image, it's probably time to do some serious soul-searching.
- **Can I still enjoy the beauty of sport when my team loses?** Let's face it, your favorite team can play a great game and still come up short. In 1992, Duke and Kentucky met in the NCAA Tournament and played the "[greatest game ever played](#)." Duke's Christian Laettner hit a last second shot to send his team to the Final Four. Kentucky lost the game...but did they? They played their hearts out. They achieved excellence even in defeat. They exceeded their own expectations and went down as one of the most beloved teams in the history of college basketball—all in defeat. That's saying something. Unfortunately for Kentucky in this particular game, the team with the ball last won the game. Can we celebrate that, or is everything driven by the final outcome?
- **Have I lost friends over sports?** It's easy to do. Sports create the ultimate "us vs. them" mentality in which every fan base believes their team is ultimately good while the rival is ultimately bad. If we can't appreciate the good guys and girls on both sides of the field, we'd probably do well to step back and re-evaluate our team allegiance.

- **How do I react to losing?** Winning is easy. It doesn't develop character, but losing sure does. When your favorite team is ousted from the tournament, how long does it take to get over their loss? Minutes, hours, days? Does their loss negatively impact how you talk to and treat your family? Does your anger spawn other actions that breakdown trust or unity in your home? A recent study showed that [domestic violence increased dramatically](#) in NFL cities when the home team lost. How horrible. That meant thousands of people took their anger out on a spouse or child instead of learning how to control and dismiss their frustrations in healthy ways.

If this tournament seems to have become too important in your teenager's life, it's possible they won't realize it or *want* to acknowledge it. If that's the case, before talking to them about it, make sure to examine your own life first. Perhaps they learned the mentality from you in one way or another—maybe you don't obsess over basketball, but is there something else that takes up a lot of your time and becomes all-consuming at times? If so, repent of that and ask for forgiveness from God and your family. If you do that, your teenager will be much more likely to listen to you when you talk to them about their own issues.

When you do bring it up, don't let it be in the heat of the moment or when you're upset at them. If they're being moody or angry because of the tournament, wait until they've calmed down a bit to calmly talk with them. Sometimes when addressing sensitive topics, it makes sense to do so when you don't have to be eye to eye, like when driving in the car or engaging in an activity, so as to reduce some of the awkwardness and tension. Above all, make sure that you communicate you're on their side and that you bring this up *because* you want God's absolute best for them. Check out our [Parent's Guide to Tough Conversations](#) for more tips.

— One Shining Moment

There's been a dark cloud looming over college basketball lately. The integrity of the sport has been called into question several times due to the [hypocrisy of the NCAA](#), a decades-long [academic scandal](#) uncovered at the University of North Carolina, and [the Adidas shoe scandal](#) that continues to reveal the slimy side of recruitment as coaches and players from schools like Kansas, Arizona, NC State, USC, and Creighton have been implicated in a "pay for play" black market ring. In addition, LSU recently suspended head coach [Will Wade](#) after being caught on an FBI wiretap offering to give illegal money to a recruit. It seems we've just breached the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the depths to which schools will go to "just win, baby."

But just when you think all the innocence of college sports has been lost, a story like [Sister Jean's from 2018's tournament](#) renews one's hope in amateur sports. Instead of focusing on the darker side, let's celebrate the goodness of the game, like the faith of [UVA's Tony Bennett](#), who handled his team's shocking loss in the 2018 tournament with a level of grace and character hardly seen in today's world. Or maybe focus on the resurgence of classy coach Rick Barnes at Tennessee, who finally has a program capable of winning the national championship.

Regardless of its setbacks, college basketball has a lot to celebrate, and nothing highlights that more than the playing of the sports anthem “[One Shining Moment](#)” by David Barrett just minutes after the winner is crowned. Since 1987, this video montage has closed out the tournament, making it one of the most bitter-sweet traditions in any sport. The song is “about the thrill of victory, the agony of defeat: the monster dunks and the buzzer beaters and the crying piccolo girls and everything that makes basketball worth watching and worth playing and [worth loving](#).” We dare you to watch it without crying or getting chills. “Every kid who takes the stage knows the song, knows the lyrics, knows what it means, dreams of stepping foot on that platform on Monday night and that song has been dedicated to them.”

Ultimately college basketball and its March Madness pinnacle is the great equalizer. In most sports, and frankly in most of life, the big guys almost always win. Think of the Patriots in the NFL or the Alabama Crimson Tide in college football. Even before the season begins, odds are that the richest, biggest teams generally win. But the NCAA Tournament levels the playing field enough that almost any team has a chance—maybe that’s why Americans and our teens love rooting for the cinderella.

— Related Axis Resources

- [A Parent's Guide to Tough Conversations](#)

— Support Axis to Get More Resources Like This!

Thanks so much for purchasing this Parent Guide from Axis! As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit ministry, Axis invests all proceeds from your purchases back into the creation of more quality content like this. By purchasing this and [other content](#) from Axis, you support our ministry, allowing us to come alongside you in your parenting and/or discipleship journey. We couldn’t do it without you!

We’re creating more content every day! If you found this guide helpful and valuable, check out axis.org/guides each month for new Guides covering all-new topics and for other resources.