

LET THE MADNESS BEGIN

By: Brent Shockley, CFA, CVA

March Madness is upon us – with the first two of the “First Four” play in games of the NCAA men’s tournament airing tonight on TruTV. Play in games three and four for the men’s bracket will take place Wednesday night on TruTV. The Women’s “First Four” will be spread across Wednesday and Thursday nights on ESPN networks. The first round of the men’s bracket features 16 games on Thursday and another 16 on Friday across four networks, with the round of 32 over the weekend to determine the “Sweet 16.” The women’s first round action will be played Friday and Saturday and round of 32 on Sunday and Monday.

The women’s Final Four will be held on Friday April 4th at Amalie Arena in Tampa with the championship game on Sunday April 6th. The men’s Final Four is Saturday April 5th at the Alamodome in San Antonio with the championship game on Monday, April 7th, the same day the final approval hearing of the House vs. NCAA settlement, which could alter college sports even further.

TV Deals

The **NCAA men’s tournament coverage is carried by CBS and Turner networks (TBS, TNT, TruTV) as part of a \$8.8 million extension in 2016 for eight years ending after the 2032 tournament.** CBS games will stream on Paramount+ and Turner games will be streaming on Max. **The NCAA women’s tournament deal with ESPN is \$65 million per year. Last year’s women’s title game between South Carolina and Iowa was the most watched basketball game since 2019.** Some women’s tournament games rated higher than the men’s, generally featuring sharp shooting Iowa guard Caitlin Clark, defending champ Louisiana State, and eventual champion South Carolina, which posted a perfect 39-0 season. The women’s tournament remains bundled in an ESPN deal with other NCAA championship events but could be spun out in the future.

Brackets and Betting

It is estimated that **over 50 million Americans will fill out at least one March Madness bracket. Once the first four games have concluded and the field of 64 is set for first round action, there are over 9 quintillion possible outcomes. The American Gaming Association estimates \$3.1 billion will be ‘legally’ wagered on the men’s and women’s tournament in 2025.** This would represent an increase of 15% over last year, due to increased availability of legal sports betting options. In comparison, \$1.4 billion was wagered on Super Bowl LIX between the Chiefs and Eagles.

On the men’s side, 14 of the Southeastern Conference’s (SEC) 16 teams made the field of 68, most of any conference in the history, although we live in a different era with consolidation of major programs/brands into the SEC and Big Ten in the last year. **The men’s national champion typically is top 20 in offensive efficiency and top 40 in defensive efficiency. The top 5 teams in combined efficiency are Duke, Florida, Houston, Auburn, and Tennessee.** Others to keep an eye on include Alabama, Texas Tech, Gonzaga, Iowa State, and Wisconsin. Duke is a popular pick but the health status and effectiveness of star freshman Cooper Flagg bears watching after injuring his ankle in the ACC Tournament last week. Iowa State also has a key injury in Keshon Gilbert, its second leading scorer and assist leader. **On the women’s side, defending champ South Carolina is the odds**

favorite to win the crown followed by the Connecticut Huskies, UCLA Bruins, and Texas Longhorns.