

## **NCAA Final Four – So Long to Cinderella?**

**The college basketball season concludes over the next four days as the NCAA Women’s Final Four (on ESPN) takes place tonight in Tampa and the Men’s Final Four will be played tomorrow night on CBS.** The women’s game has generally been top heavy and the trend continues this year with three No.1 seeds. The only No. 1 seed to fall short of the Women’s Final Four, the University of Southern California (USC), lost star guard JuJu Watkins in the second round to a torn ACL and faced 11-time champ and No. 2 seed Connecticut (often referred to as “UConn”) in the regional final.

**All four No. 1 seeds in the men’s bracket reached the Final Four for the second time** in tournament history (previously 2008). **There has been a noticeable lack of “Cinderella” teams advancing in this year’s tournament, leading to speculation that the transfer portal and NIL will significantly reduce the occurrence of a lower seeded team making a deep run.** Arkansas was the lone double digit seed (No. 10) in the Sweet 16 but the Razorbacks were one of 14 teams from the Southeastern Conference (SEC) that made the field and the program was active in the NIL market for its players. Seven double digits seeds have reached the Final Four since tournament expansion in 1985, including six No. 11 seeds. Four times an 8 seed reached the title game, but only Villanova won the championship in 1985.

### **The Matchups**

In the first game of tonight’s women’s bracket on ESPN, **defending champ South Carolina is a 5.5 point favorite over Texas.** This will be the fourth meeting between the schools this season with South Carolina winning two of three, including the SEC Tournament championship game 64-45. **UConn is a 7.5 point favorite in the second game over UCLA.** The women’s championship game is set for Sunday. Tampa’s Amalie Arena is the host for the third time in 11 years.

**The men’s semifinals in San Antonio’s Alamodome features a battle of SEC teams in Florida and Auburn (Saturday 5:09pm) followed by Houston and Duke.** Florida is a 2.5 point favorite to advance to the title game and won the regular season meeting at Auburn 90-81 in early February. Duke is a 5.5 point favorite over Houston. The Alamodome is hosting for the fifth time and first since 2018.

### **TV Ratings**

Overall, the men’s tournament ratings are up 1% from last year and 3% from two years ago. The ‘First Four’ play in games were up 20% in part due to the participation of major brands like Texas and North Carolina. **The first two rounds averaged 9.3 million viewers, the best ratings since 1993.** Sweet 16 games were down 6% from the previous year and Elite Eight games were down 10% from last year’s Easter weekend.

**Viewership for the women’s tournament declined from the prior year, which was fueled by the Caitlin Clark phenomenon, but significantly up over 2023.** The women’s tournament is part of an 8-year, \$920 million media rights deal with ESPN that includes 40 NCAA championships. The men’s tournament is a separate media rights agreement with CBS and Turner Sports, for an annual payment of \$891 million through 2032.