

From the Bleachers: Breaking Down March Madness, Games to Watch, and Predictions



Photographer Alyssa Barber

Dominic Hoscher, FHNGameday.com editor, points to the field on the bleachers of FHN.

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It's the most wonderful time of the year... Or at least it is for college basketball fans. Over the course of the next three weeks, 68 teams will compete in the most popular and exciting tournament of all college sports. There'll be upsets. There'll be cinderellas. There'll be moments that give this time of the year its' name: March Madness.

This past regular season in college hoops was one of the more unique ones in recent history. Usual powerhouses such as Louisville and Syracuse underwent disappointing 2017/18 campaigns that saw the

Orange barely make the tourney (are in a play-in game with Arizona State for an 11 seed) and the Cardinals miss out entirely. There are numerous other teams like the second seeded Cincinnati

Cincinnati miss out on it entirely. Then there are surprising teams like the second seeded Cincinnati Bearcats, who enter the postseason with their best position since 2002 when they were a number one seed.

The opening four months of the season were full of surprises and upsets, which only sets the bar even higher for what fans should expect this March. In this week's column, you'll be provided with everything you need to know before the first teams hit the court, including the most exciting first round and potential matchups, and a prediction for who will win the NCAA tournament.

Tournament Information

When it starts and other important times and dates The first round of the NCAA tournament gets underway on Thursday, March 15 at 11:15 A.M. (all times are in central time) with Oklahoma taking on Rhode Island. The second round starts on Saturday, March 17 at 11:10 A.M., followed by the Sweet 16 on Thursday, March 22 at 6:09 P.M. and then the Elite Eight on Saturday, March 24 at 5:09 P.M. The final two rounds of the tourney open up on Saturday, March 31 at 5:09 P.M. for the Final Four, and the Championship game wraps the competition up on Monday, April 2 at 8:20 P.M. in San Antonio, Texas.

Where the games can be watched: The opening two rounds of the tournament will be televised across the network from CBS, to TNT and TBS, and then to truTV. The Sweet 16 and Elite Eight will be shown solely on TBS and CBS, and finally the Final Four and NCAA championship game will be broadcasted on only TBS. More information on the televising schedule can be found [here](#).

Matchups to Look Forward To

First Round:

9 Alabama vs. 8 Virginia Tech on Thursday, March 15 at 8:20 P.M. on TNT

In the opening round of the tourney, the most balanced games are usually between the eighth and nine seeds. This is the case again with the Crimson Tide and Hokies. Virginia Tech finished 7th in the ACC with a 10-8 record in conference play, and Alabama wasn't any better. The Crimson Tide finished below .500 in the SEC going 8-10, but did just enough in the SEC tournament to make the big dance.

The game could truly go either way as neither team outweighs the other by that much in any area. What it will likely come down to are the team's different approaches on offense. For Alabama, their attack revolves around superstar Collin Sexton who emerged as one of the top players in the college game this season. The Hokies, however, boast a more balanced offense as they had five players average over 10 points per game (PPG) in the regular season, creating many matchup nightmares for the Tide. Despite this, Alabama will overcome Virginia Tech as they have dealt with these type of offenses all year in a much more grueling schedule (3rd ranked strength of schedule or SOS) than the Hokies and will be led by their star in Sexton, who should have a big game on the big stage.

Prediction: 9 Alabama defeats 8 Virginia Tech 66-60

10 Oklahoma vs. 7 Rhode Island on Thursday, March 15 at 11:15 A.M. on CBS

One of the more commonly asked questions after Selection Sunday was if Oklahoma truly deserved their tournament position. After going 8-10 in the Big 12 with the 25th ranked SOS, these questions are more than warranted. Either way, the Sooners are in the tourney and will have a chance to prove themselves in the competition's first game as they'll take on seventh seeded Rhode Island. Rhode Island won the Atlantic 10 Conference, going 15-3 and imposing one of the strongest backcourts in the nation led by senior guard Jared Terrell and his 17.2 PPG.

The Rams earned the right to be ranked higher than the Sooners, but Oklahoma should still move on to the next round. Yes, they slept their way into the tourney and yes their record is less than impressive. What the game will ultimately come down to, as ESPN will let you know, is their star point guard Trae Young. With NBA scouts and the pressure of carrying his team on him, Young will be forced to adapt to the big moment and produce one of his own, which makes him one of the more dangerous players in the tournament. Behind their star man, Oklahoma will overcome the doubters and naysayers and keep their roller coaster of a season alive.

Prediction: 10 Oklahoma "upsets" 7 Rhode Island 72-62

Potential Matchups to Look Out for:

5 Kentucky vs. 4 Arizona in the Second Round

Two of the more recognizable programs in all of college basketball, Kentucky and Arizona pose a dream matchup for the second round. Both fan bases had hoped for better seedings in the South region, as both endured strong 2017/18 campaigns. Kentucky went 24-10 overall and finished fourth in the SEC and won their conference tournament, while Arizona had a record of 27-7 and won the PAC 12. They're two of the more well-rounded teams in all of college, and boast some of the top players in the country.

In Kentucky blue, star freshman Kevin Knox lived up to his five-star hype, averaging 15.6 PPG in the regular season. If Kentucky hopes to get past the opening weekend of the tournament, Knox will likely have to keep playing at this high of a level, especially if his team gets paired up with Deandre Ayton's Arizona in the second round. Ayton is one of, if not, the best players in the entire country and is heading towards being the number one pick in this summer's NBA draft. He's averaged an absurd 20.3 PPG and 11.5 RPG, while also tallying 1.9 BPG. Knox and his Kentucky have had a decent season, but Ayton and his PAC 12 winning Wildcats will prove to be too much for the Big Blue to handle if the two teams do end up meeting.

Prediction: 4 Arizona tops 5 Kentucky 82-78

8 Missouri vs. 1 Xavier in the Second Round

Number one seeds are often the favorites in their contests, and they will be again here, but there is no potential first seed vs. eighth/ninth seed matchup that is more intriguing than a potential Xavier and

potential first seed vs. eighth seed matchup and is more intriguing than a potential Xavier and Missouri one in the West. The Musketeers are coming off their first Big East title in the history of their program, and are led by one of the tournament's top players: Trevon Bluiett. Bluiett averaged the team's most points (19.5) and rebounds (5.7) per game, proving to be one of the more diverse attackers in the conference. Behind their key player, Xavier should feel confident in this potential matchup. But they shouldn't feel overly this way.

The biggest reason behind this is because of a certain player by the name of Michael Porter Jr. on the Tigers. Entering the season, Porter Jr. was a top three recruit according to multiple websites. In Missouri's home opener versus Iowa State, however, the star prospect suffered a back injury that would see him miss most of the season. He wouldn't return until just recently at the SEC tournament, where the Tigers lost in their first game against Georgia. Even though he isn't at 100%, a Michael Porter Jr. at around 85-95% is better than most of the players in the tournament.

There aren't many eight seeds that can say that they have one of the better players in the country at their disposal, but the Tigers have just that and make them a dangerous potential opponent for a strong Xavier team that has had one of the best years in their program's history.

Prediction: 1 Xavier avoids upset against 8 Missouri 76-74

Tournament Prediction

The NCAA Championship game will be between Arizona and the Michigan State Spartans. You heard it here first. Arizona, led by Sean Miller, and Michigan State, with Tom Izzo at the helm, are two of the more well-coached teams in the tourney. This can and will likely prove to be one of the biggest factors as to why both the Wildcats and Spartans will make it this far, as veteran coaches are usually better equipped for the March Madness environment. Between this and the talent on both sides, this pairing seems awfully likely.

As mentioned earlier, Arizona has one of the great players in the college game at the center position in Deandre Ayton, but he is not the only one to watch out for. Allonzo Trier (18.4) and Rawle Alkins (13.4) are the next two highest scorers on the team behind Ayton. This has helped the Wildcats become one of the more unstoppable offenses in the nation, averaging 80.9 points per game as a team.

Michigan State also has their fair share of elite talent. Miles Bridges, who averaged 16.9 PPG and 6.9 RPG, is one of the more talented athletes in college and one of the top prospects in the draft. With Ayton on the other side, the Spartans will need their superstar to also adapt to the big

Who would win a potential Arizona-Michigan State Championship Game?

- Arizona
- Michigan State

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stage and continue his monstrous season. Some of the other Spartans that could play both a key role in Michigan State making it this far and overcoming a team like Arizona are Nick Ward, Cassius Winston, Joshua Langford, and Jaren Jackson Jr., all of whom averaged over 10.0 PPG in the regular season.

Both Arizona and Michigan State consist of elite talent and strong coaching staffs, but only one of the two can win this potential Championship game. If the tournament comes down to these two, it'll be Arizona that lifts the trophy. The Wildcats finished the season with a similar record and a much more difficult schedule (55th SOS vs. MSU's 82nd). Facing that kind of adversity over the course of the regular season helps build a team for a long tournament run. This, plus the elite Deandre Ayton and Wildcats roster, will be why Arizona wins the 2018 NCAA Championship.

Prediction: Arizona wins NCAA Championship vs. Michigan State 75-72

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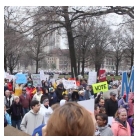
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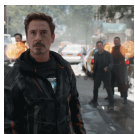
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