



College hoops are back in full swing and bettors are trying to take advantage of what are generally soft lines at the start of college basketball season. There are an insane amount of teams that play Division I college basketball, spread out over nearly 30 conferences and it's definitely hard for the sportsbooks to have a handle on all of these teams.

At the start of the season, not all games are lined, especially when Division I teams are playing local Division II or Division III schools. Bettors can have information overload at this time of year, trying to handicap the NFL, NCAA football and basketball, and the NBA. The locked out NHL would add even another dimension. That's why discipline is so crucial once the calendar hits November.

There are generally three positions that bettors are in. They're up money on football and want to keep riding the wave. They're breaking even on football and are ready for basketball season. They're getting killed in football and are so glad to have something else to focus on. No matter which one of these categories you fall into, betting is a cruel, cruel game. A profit of 15-20 units can melt away in a hurry with the bad beats that college basketball is prone to dishing out. You might back a NBA team on a night where they don't care very much and don't even get off the bus. You might miss some football news while concentrating on basketball and get locked into a bad wager.

Arguably, the best thing that a bettor can do at this time of year is narrow his or her focus. Stick to what you know. Odds are, you don't know anything about Marist or Siena, except maybe that they are schools in the northeast. You don't know who graduated, you don't know if they had coaching changes, and you don't know what to expect. So, the obvious answer is to stay away from betting them. A lot of schools are going to be like that in the early going. College basketball roster turnover is more difficult to keep tabs on than college football because of the amount of teams and the harder it gets to dig up news.

If you've been killing it on football, stick with it. You already have a good feel for the teams and for the market. If you've been successful betting the Big Ten or MAC, keep doing that. Staying focused on football will give you a lot of time to pick off bowl numbers. Outside of initial moves and some moves right before the games, the numbers stay relatively stale. You may be able to make much larger bets because of your knowledge of the teams and their relative strength.

But, since basketball is now the flavor of the month, here are some tips for betting both the NBA and college. First, the NBA. Be aware of travel situations. The NBA features a lot of back-to-back games and cross-country travel. In college football and basketball, travel is largely geographic for long stretches of the year. The NBA isn't necessarily the same way. The schedule is somewhat division-heavy, but everybody goes cross-country or has games in different time zones on successive nights.

Consider the overall nature of the NBA. Bench scrubs make multimillions. Every game doesn't matter as much in the NBA as at the collegiate level. Be aware of possible flat spots. If Boston is coming off playing Miami and has to play New Orleans the next night, they're prone to lay an egg against a lesser opponent. Similarly, Denver will get up for a big home game against the Lakers, but might struggle with Houston the following night. The playoff picture tends to decide itself fairly early on in the NBA as it features one of the biggest team-to-team talent gaps in sports.

Regarding college basketball, the schedule can become a real grind. Along with school, practices, and relationships, 18-22-year-old kids are required to cram a 30-35 game schedule between mid-November and early March. Pressure is always a big deal in college sports and hoops is no different. It is more of an individual sport than football, so a bad performance from a star player can be lethal.

Keep in mind that with college basketball, there are fewer key numbers than in football. College key numbers tend to be four, six, and seven. As a result, games around these spreads take extra consideration. One stat I like to look at is free throw percentage, specifically, for the guards. Teams with a late lead need to pad that lead at the free throw line. The difference between a cover and a non-cover, especially later in the season with tighter numbers, can be one lone free throw.

Another thing to keep in mind is how difficult it is to cover big spreads. A spread of 17 in college basketball requires at least five-to-eight possessions. A spread of 17 in football requires three possessions. That's a big difference. Not to mention, where a 17-point margin in football can still be fairly precarious, coaches have likely emptied their benches with a double digit lead on the hardwood. The teams good enough to cover big spreads in basketball could very easily be looking forward to a tougher opponent or taking the lesser foe for granted.

If you haven't noticed from this series throughout the year, sports betting is hard. There are so many angles to consider. Not only do you have to know the teams and matchups, but you have to bet according to what the spread is telling you. Then, on top of that, you have to play amateur sports psychologist. You have to gauge the pulse of the team, the morale, the situation – whether it's a look-ahead spot, a letdown spot, etc., and, above all, you have to try and put yourself in the mind of a professional athlete, something that most of us have zero experience with.

So, as the number of lined games continues to grow, make sure to stay disciplined and bet what you know.

Good luck and pick winners.