



Unless you're a douchebag malcontent who dislikes things like oxygen, cookies, or the moon, you'll agree that the NCAA basketball tournament is a good thing.

Actually, that's an hysterical understatement.

In the jagged landscape of American sport, the NCAA tournament is as close to perfection as possible - far closer to utopia than we probably deserve. Nothing else comes anywhere close.

Since the expansion to the 64-team field in 1985, it entered a cul-de-sac of divinity the new pope can only pray for. Easy to watch, easy to follow, delivering quality and quantity simultaneously.

We could sit here all day citing off the wondrousness that is March Madness (and just might if we're not careful), but just in the interest of fairness - and to appease any of those douchebag malcontents who often feel disenfranchised this time of year - let us pause for a moment to ponder the toddler-sized handful of ways in which the NCAA tournament is flawed.

To be precise, the only four specific things that are universally disliked about this otherwise wonderful experience:

1. The Play-In Games

Let's get this one out of the way right off the rip. If there's one staggering mistake the NCAA has made in the past 30 years - aside from not killing the University of Miami's football program before it had a chance to breed - here it is.

In the first place, expanding the field from 64 teams was a bad idea. For all the womany wailing about who's left out of the bracket every year, 64 teams is the optimal tipping point. Like 90-foot basepaths or a 100-yard football field. Don't fuck with it.

So adding four more teams into the mix is instant, microwavable bad karma. Still, it would be redeemable if you then tactically defined it for what it was: an excuse to get four more bloated big-money programs with 18-14 records into the tournament as at-large bids.

In other words, if the four play-in games matched the eight weakest teams in the field against one another, with the winners becoming the four No. 16 seeds, it would be both logical and reasonably fair.

But March Madness aside, the NCAA is rarely either, and it cunningly recognized that TV ratings for games as silly as this would be, to say the least, less than optimal.

So the NCAA tossed a couple more respectable games in there to anchor the Tuesday/Wednesday play-in doubleheaders. While the product may be slightly better in the short term, how in the world can you justify forcing, say, St. Mary's to play an extra game while vastly inferior Florida Gulf Coast kicks back with a glass of cava and bag of onion rings and watches a better team than itself have to fight to get into the tournament?

More frightening, the expansion to 68 teams opened the door to a whole separate play-in round. Doubtlessly, five years from now we'll be up to 76 teams, 96 by 2025.

At which point the tournament will devolve into the incomprehensible, tangled mess that is the College World Series.

2. Corporate Flooring

Even before we had the capability of flipping channels to watch simultaneous tournament games (again, well-played, NCAA), one of the most appealing factors of watching the first two rounds on television was the sense that this thing was encompassing the entire country, that the games were being played in a variety of different places.

The quickest way to figure out which game you were watching wasn't by catching a glimpse of the score or of the team's uniforms, but rather the floor on which they were playing. Even if there was nothing particularly unique about it, the varying colors and styles of the hardcourt in the various arenas gave each game its own personality and flavor - two things the NCAA evidently frowned upon.

Thanks to a penchant for "corporate branding," every single game in this tournament will be played on an identical-looking floor. The name of the arena and location is emblazoned across each baseline, but as far as the television viewer knows, each game is being played in the exact same place. And that place is purgatory.

It's the equivalent of dressing up kindergartners in military uniforms. Only not as cute.

3. Commercial Fatigue

The primary allure of the Super Bowl for the majority of its viewers is the spectacle of the commercials rolled out over the three-hour period. And it works every single year because you

pay off the ramp-up buzz with 30-to-60 seconds of glory for a particular product. And then, mercifully, it's over.

Imagine if the Super Bowl only had five new commercials. And they ran them over and over for the entire game. This is what the television experience of March Madness has become.

You don't notice it at first, maybe not at all during the first day of games. By day two, it becomes a low-grade fever, and by the end of the weekend, you're fully prepared to cut your own throat at a TV timeout rather than watch that same damned Applebee's commercial again.

The same with Bud Light. UPS. Coke. Allstate. Enterprise. And endless previews for a shit movie that's about to come out. By Sunday, you've been slapped across the face by the same commercial 59 times.

It's Madison Avenue's version of waterboarding. They're not so much trying to sell you a product as they are forcing you to buy it in exchange for them leaving you alone.

I think we all get that commercials are the necessary evil of this whole shabang. But is it too much to ask them to mix it up a little bit?

4. Automatic Bracket Pools

Back in the day, you'd get into an office tournament pool solely because somebody had their shit together.

Each year, the same dude would organize a pool, invite people to participate, keep score, and

provide updates to the participants over the next two weeks.

Regrettably, those days are over.

Today, a quadruped could both enter and initiate a pool. CBS and ESPN provide online brackets that you can fill out without ever touching your keyboard, and you can log in to check standings and scoring at anytime through the process. All the organizer has to do is copy and paste email addresses and not have a stroke.

The technology is wonderful, to be sure. But this is like giving the staff at Hot Topic a kettle drum of uranium and encouraging them to try to whip up a nuclear bomb for fun.

A good tournament pool should require at least a modicum of commitment and interest from both participants and organizers. Admit it - this year you're not even sure how many pools you're in.

Admittedly, I'm grasping at straws here.

But like the Roman empire or the Nixon White House, the NCAA tournament is far too powerful to be destroyed by any outside force. Its demise - if it ever has one - will originate from within.

By recognizing and addressing this quartet of blemishes, the NCAA can ensure its annual basketball bacchanalia will endure.

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