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DOC'S SPORTS

MARCH MADNESS



BETTING GUIDE

NCAA TOURNAMENT PREVIEW

MARCH MADNESS BETTING GUIDE

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SOUTH

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



AUBURN (1)

ST. FRANCIS/ALABAMA ST. (16)

NO. 1 AUBURN TIGERS (28-5)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Auburn was the best team in college basketball this year...until March. Auburn stumbles into the NCAA tournament with three losses in four games (0-4 ATS) after a 27-2 start. But whether it was wear-and-tear or this team losing focus, they have not been playing their best ball lately. Four of Auburn's five losses this year have come against teams that are currently either No. 1 (Duke, Florida) or No. 2 (Alabama, Tennessee) seeds in the NCAA Tournament. It is still worrisome that this team, featuring seven different players that have scored 20 or more points in a game, has been so beatable recently. Auburn hasn't survived the opening weekend in the last three tournaments, including an embarrassing first round loss to Yale last season as a 14-point favorite. The Tigers have made the Sweet 16 just once in 20 years. The eventual national champions have gone an amazing 108-24 ATS over the last 22 years. So, if you do think Auburn is going to cut down the nets get ready to bet on them early and often. Eventual national champions have gone 16-6 ATS in their opening game the last 22 years.

FIRST FOUR:

NO. 16 ST. FRANCIS RED FLASH (16-17)

The Northeast Conference representatives are a true Cinderella and the only team in the tournament field with a losing record. The Red Flash won three straight games in the NEC Tournament by exactly three points, taking the lead in the final 10 seconds in all three games. They upset the NEC's top seed in the conference championship game, winning outright as 11-point underdogs, and this is St. Francis' first appearance in The Big Dance since 1991. NEC squads are 1-32 all-time in the first round, and this squad is the definition of "Just Happy To Be Here."

NO. 16 ALABAMA STATE HORNETS (19-15)

The Hornets are bad on offense (No. 270 in adjusted efficiency). They are bad on defense (No. 256 in adjusted efficiency). But they are the SWAC champions and they are going dancing. The Hornets were the No. 5 seed in the conference tournament. They won three games – all by five points or less – in the conference tournament to cap a 10-1 run down the stretch. Four of those 10 wins came by two points or less and earning this bid was the top of the mountain for this program.



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SOUTH

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



MICHIGAN ST (2)

NO. 2 MICHIGAN STATE SPARTANS (27-6)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Tom Izzo is a well-known maven of March. His Spartans are the last Big Ten team to win a national title (way back in 2000) and this year will be Sparty's 27th consecutive NCAA Tournament appearance. Izzo doesn't just make The Dance, though; his teams usually advance. Michigan State has won its opening round game in 17 of its last 20 tournaments. This year's squad won the Big Ten regular season championship while going 17-3 and they've gone 22-4 since Thanksgiving. Michigan State averages 78.5 points per game even though they are No. 344 in the country in 3-point shooting (30.2%). This team likes to play downhill and they attack the offensive glass. The Spartans are in the Top 20 in field goal defense (No. 18) and 3-point defense (No. 3) and they love to turn that defense into offense. The Spartans have been raking in cash at the window, going 19-6 ATS in their last 25 games and 8-1 ATS in their last nine. No. 2 seeds are 41-7 SU in Round 1 over the last 12 years. But a No. 2 has been upset in three straight tournaments.

BRYANT (15)



NO. 15 BRYANT BULLDOGS (23-11)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

On New Year's Day, Bryant was just 6-9 heading into the start of America East play. The Bulldogs took off in conference play, going 14-2 to win the regular season title before taking three tournament games on their home court by an average of 14 points per game (2-1 ATS). The Bulldogs snapped a three-year run of league titles by AE powerhouse Vermont. Bryant is No. 22 in the nation in scoring (82.1 PPG) and has four players averaging 11.4 points per game or more. This team has size, with all five starters standing 6-foot-6 or taller, and star guards Rafael Pinzon (St. John's) and Earl Timberlake (Miami) each started their careers at high-major programs. The Bulldogs are just the second No. 15 seed since 2008 to rank in the Top 50 for average height. The other was Norfolk State in 2012 when they upset No. 2 Missouri.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

Michigan State has been money lately. But their recent ATS success means that the sportsbooks have pumped up the line in this game about three points too high. I think Bryant has enough size and athleticism to stay competitive in this game and not get run out of the gym. Michigan State should cruise to a win but I don't think Izzo is going to push his starters hard enough to get past this line.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: BRYANT +17.5



SOUTH

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



IOWA ST (3)

LIPSCOMB (14)



NO. 3 IOWA STATE CYCLONES (24-9)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The Cyclones brought back their top four starters from a team that earned a No. 2 seed in last year's tournament and a berth in the Sweet 16. Iowa State boasts an outstanding backcourt with starters Tamin Lipsey and Keshon Gilbert and super sixth man Curtis Jones. Jones is an exceptional scorer off the bench and one of the top sixth men in the country. Injuries are an issue for this squad heading into the tournament, however, with Lipsey and Gilbert both missing games in the Big 12 tournament. They are both battling groin injuries and playing without either of them will severely lower the ceiling for this squad. Iowa State went toe-to-toe with Auburn in Maui back in November, losing 83-81, and at full strength they can beat anyone in the country. There have been some high-profile upsets by the No. 14 seeds in 2021 and 2023. However, No. 3 seeds are 13-7 ATS in the first round of the last five tournaments.

NO. 14 LIPSCOMB BISON (25-9)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Lipscomb won the Atlantic Sun's automatic bid with a victory in the conference championship game played on their home court. It was sweet revenge for the Bison, who lost in the ASUN Championship Game in front of their home crowd last March against North Alabama, the team that they beat this year to punch their ticket to The Dance. Lipscomb is one of just three teams in the country that have four players that made at least 45 3-pointers while shooting 35.0 percent or better. The Bison have four starters – Jacob Ognacevic, Will Pruitt, Joe Anderson and Gyasi Powell – that fit the bill. Anderson was on fire in the ASUN Tournament, going 16-for-27 from 3-point range, and this team is 17-0 this year when they shoot 39 percent or better from deep. The Bison were in the Top 40 in the country in 3-pointers per game, shooting nearly 27 per contest. And if this team gets hot from deep, they could be a handful. Atlantic Sun teams are 7-3 ATS in the first round over the last 10 years, but they are just 1-3 ATS the last four years.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

This game is impossible to predict until we know the status of Lipsey and Gilbert. If they both play and are healthy then Iowa State should take this one going away. But if the Cyclones are missing their two top guards they might have a hard time shaking a team that has a lot of sharpshooters.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: LIPSCOMB +14



SOUTH

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



TEXAS A&M (4)

YALE (13)



NO. 4 TEXAS A&M AGGIES (22-10)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

At one point this year the Aggies were 20-5 and ranked No. 7 in the country. The Aggies limped to the finish of the regular season, though, going 2-5 SU and ATS in their last seven games. This is a vintage Buzz Williams team, meaning that the Aggies will absolutely harass their opponents with end-to-end defensive intensity. It also means that the Aggies are offensively challenged, though, as guards Wade Taylor and Zhuric Phelps are the only guys on the team that average more than 10 points per game. Texas A&M shoots just 41.9 percent from the field (No. 322) and 30.7 percent from 3-point range (No. 332) and a lot of times their best offense is just throwing it at the backboard and hitting the offensive glass. That's never a recipe for success in the NCAA Tournament. At least one No. 4 seed has lost in 28 of the last 39 tournaments. And No. 4 seeds are just 4-4 ATS in the first round of the last two tournaments and 8-16 ATS in the last six dances. Only twice in the last eight years have all four No. 4 seeds won their opening game.

NO. 13 YALE BULLDOGS (22-7)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The Ivy League representatives have lost only once since Christmas, rolling their way to regular season and tournament titles. They proved in their conference tournament that they can win multiple ways, holding off Princeton in a 59-57 grinder before running past Cornell 90-84 in a championship shootout. Yale has now made its way into four of the last five NCAA Tournament fields, and this is coach James Jones' fifth appearance in the last 10 years. The Bulldogs were a No. 13 seed in last year's tournament and pulled off a shocking upset, beating Auburn 78-76 as a 14-point underdog. Only three of the seven guys that saw 11 minutes or more in that game are back. That trio does include leading scorer John Poulakidas (19.3 PPG), who hung 28 on Auburn in the upset. Yale lost by only eight at Purdue this season and by just three at Minnesota. Only one of their losses this season was by more than eight points. Jones has gone 4-2 ATS in his NCAA Tournament career, winning two first-round matchups outright. They are 3-1 ATS in their tournament openers.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

I do think that A&M is going to be able to advance past the Ivy League representative here. Ivy League teams are just 8-12 ATS in the first round over the last 20 years despite being popular underdog picks. This feels like too many points for the Aggies to lay considering how they can struggle offensively. I am looking for a low-scoring game and the Aggies will win but won't cover.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: YALE +7



SOUTH

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



MICHIGAN (5)

UC SAN DIEGO (12)



NO. 5 MICHIGAN WOLVERINES (25-9)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Michigan head coach Dusty May burst onto the scene two years ago while leading Florida Atlantic to a mesmerizing Final Four run. Now, in his first year in Ann Arbor, May has guided the Wolverines back to The Big Dance for the first time since 2022. Michigan is fresh off a Big Ten tournament championship, winning their first three postseason games after closing the regular season with three straight losses. Michigan has a unique lineup, featuring seven-footers Danny Wolf and Vlad Goldin playing together. Wolf takes the role of stretch-four while Goldin, who was a key cog on May's teams at FAU, is a traditional pivot. The Wolverines have played a ton of close games this season, going 11-4 SU in games decided by four points or less. May has proven his chops in March and has an interesting veteran team. But can they continue their good fortune in close games? Big Ten teams are 54-34 ATS in the Round of 64 since 2011.

NO. 12 UC SAN DIEGO TRITONS (30-4)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

This is only UCSD's fifth season at the Div. I level and their first year of eligibility for the NCAA Tournament. The Tritons have won 30 games and currently hold the nation's longest winning streak at 15 in a row. During this streak, only two teams have stayed within single digits of UCSD, and they are on a 13-2 ATS tear. In fact, UCSD has been one of the best bets in college hoops this year, going 23-7 ATS. This team excels at creating turnovers while also being exceptional at taking care of the ball themselves. They are No. 4 in the country in steals, No. 8 in points allowed (62.0 PPG) and No. 21 in field goal defense (40.2%). The Tritons don't have a regular taller than 6-foot-8 but have had success against larger teams. The backcourt of Ani Tait-Jones and Tyler McGhie combine for 37.4 points per game, and this squad only plays seven guys consistently. San Diego opened their season at San Diego State and pushed the Aztecs to the limit before losing just 63-58. They also went on the road and beat a Top 50 Utah State team in December. They are legit.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

No. 12 seeds have been excellent over the past 12 years, going 28-16 ATS in the first round. At least one No. 12 seed has won outright in 85% of NCAA tournaments over the last four decades and this looks like a decent spot for an upset. If Michigan has a letdown after their Big Ten title they could be going home early.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: UC-SAN DIEGO +2.5



SOUTH

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



MISSISSIPPI (6)

UNC/SAN DIEGO STATE (11)

NO. 6 MISSISSIPPI REBELS (22-11)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

This is it for this group. Seven of Ole Miss's top eight players are seniors (they have 10 seniors on the roster) and only one of their five starters – Matt Murrell – has spent more than two seasons in Oxford. You have to think that these veterans aren't going to take the potential end of their college careers lying down. The Rebels are one of the smallest teams in the field, with three starters at 6-foot-4 or shorter and their tallest rotational player, Malik Dia, standing just 6-9. Chris Beard's teams are always tough defensively, but this Rebels group is pretty mediocre on that end of the court. Ole Miss is just 7-9 since starting the season 15-2. They are long on experience but short on high-end talent. And I think asking for Virginia Tech transfer Sean Pedula to carry this team through the opening weekend is too much to ask. No. 6 seeds are a horrible 11-21 ATS over the last eight tournaments. And multiple No. 6 seeds have lost in the first round in 11 of the past 14 tournaments (including three last year).

FIRST FOUR:

NO. 11 NORTH CAROLINA TAR HEELS (22-13)

The Tar Heels were the last team in the NCAA tournament field. They shouldn't have made it at all. In fact, it is a joke that UNC was given an at-large berth considering that they went 1-11 SU against Quad 1 foes this year. They beat UCLA in December by two points. That's it. That's one of only two wins they have against teams in the NCAA field. The other? They beat American on Nov. 15. That said, just because the Heels shouldn't be in The Dance doesn't mean they can't make some noise now that they are here. We've seen that story before.

NO. 11 SAN DIEGO STATE AZTECS (22-13)

This is San Diego State's fifth straight NCAA appearance and this team was in the championship game just two years ago. In the first month of the season SDSU beat UC San Diego, Creighton, and Houston, three other highly regarded teams in the field. That, along with SDSU's recent tourney success, tells me that they aren't scared of anyone. The Aztecs started the 2023 tournament 4-0 ATS. Throw that out, as they are just 1-7 ATS in their other eight tournament games over the last four years.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

An upset from one of the First Four survivors has almost become a given in NCAA tournament betting. Major conference teams that win in the First Four have gone on to win their second game (against a first-round opponent) in 12 of the last 13 years. That includes last year when Colorado took out Florida 102-100 after a First Four win over Boise State.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: SDSU/UNC WINNER



SOUTH

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



MARQUETTE (7)

NEW MEXICO (10)



NO. 7 MARQUETTE GOLDEN EAGLES (23-10)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

This Marquette team is tough, physical and experienced. This group overachieved after losing point guard Tyler Kolek from a team that was a No. 2 seed in last year's tournament and made the Sweet 16. Senior Kam Jones is one of the most impactful players in the country on both ends of the court and fellow vets David Joplin and Stevie Mitchell are competitors to the core. Marquette peaked earlier in the season, though, and they have been leaking oil. The Golden Eagles have lost seven of their last 12 games and they have just two wins over NCAA tournament teams since Jan. 3. Head coach Shaka Smart has lost in the first round six times in his last eight NCAA tournament appearances, including going just 2-4 SU in his opening game since leaving VCU for Texas and now Marquette. Smart's teams are just 3-9 ATS in their last 12 NCAA tournament games and Marquette is just 1-3 ATS in the tournament the last three years. A win or two feels like the ceiling for a team whose arrow is pointing downward.

NO. 10 NEW MEXICO LOBOS (26-7)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Dickie Pitino is doing his darndest to work his way out of his dad's shadow, taking the Lobos back to the NCAA tournament for a second straight season after a nine-year program drought. Four of their top seven players from last year's tournament team came back and led the Lobos to a Mountain West regular season title while going 17-3. This group also scored nonconference victories over solid teams like UCLA, USC and VCU. The Lobos are a very physical defensive team, led by anchor Nelly Junior Joseph. Guard Donovan Dent is the linchpin of the attack, scoring 20.5 points per game while shooting 49.6 percent from the field and 37.3 percent from 3-point range. Mountain West teams are a pathetic 26-60 straight up in the NCAA Tournament over the last three decades. Teams from the MWC went 4-6 last year, with Colorado State winning a First Four game and San Diego State surviving the opening weekend and going to the Sweet 16. But this league has been a dud for most of this century.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

These two teams are almost mirrors of one another. They are both tough, physical, defense-first teams. And the Dent vs. Jones matchup should be outstanding. New Mexico beat UCLA and USC this year so they are more than capable of beating high major teams. It's just too hard to trust Pitino and you can't ignore how bad the Mountain West has been in the tournament the past 25 years.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: MARQUETTE -4



SOUTH

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



LOUISVILLE (8)

NO. 8 LOUISVILLE CARDINALS (27-7)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Louisville made an inspired run to the ACC championship game to cap one of the biggest turnarounds in the country. A blue-chip program, the Cardinals were an embarrassment the last two years while going just 12-52 SU and 5-35 in ACC play. Enter new head coach Pat Kelsey, erstwhile of Charleston (who he took to back-to-back tournaments) and a load of transfers and suddenly Louisville is back. The Cardinals are one of the oldest, most experienced teams in the country, with six of their top seven players seniors. Louisville doesn't use much of its bench (they were bottom 15 in bench minutes) and I wonder what this team has left in the tank after their run in Charlotte last week. Louisville also beat just one NCAA tournament team all season (Clemson). The Cardinals are a chuck-and-duck 3-point team, averaging nearly 30 threes per game. And they had to play last week without the ACC's top 3-point shooter, Reyne Smith. Check the veteran guard's status for Louisville's opening weekend.



CREIGHTON (9)

NO. 9 CREIGHTON BLUEJAYS (24-10)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The Big East runners-up are March Madness's version of an NPC (non-player character). Creighton is always just kind of there in the tournament – this is their fifth straight appearance and their 10th in the last 13 dances – but they are rarely a true contender. Creighton has made the Sweet 16 in three of their last four appearances and have two of the best, most experienced players in the tournament in guard Steven Ashworth and center Ryan Kalkbrenner. Kalkbrenner is the four-time Big East Defensive Player of the Year and – this stat is amazing – he has never fouled out in his 166-game career. He averages 19.4 points and 9.0 rebounds per game this year and can do it inside and out. Ashworth will be 25 years old in May and is just a savvy veteran leader. Greg McDermott has covered the spread in three straight first round games. But he is just 10-14 ATS in his last 24 NCAA tournament games and Creighton is destined to be a chapter in a better team's tournament story.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

This should be one of the best games of the opening round. Both of these teams are coming off deep runs in their conference tournaments. Neither utilizes a deep bench so the advantage will be to whomever is better rested. Ryan Kalkbrenner should dominate the interior in this one but Louisville is better on the perimeter. If the Cardinals are hitting shots they should survive.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: LOUISVILLE -2.5



EAST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



DUKE (1)

AMERICAN/MOUNT ST. MARY'S (16)

NO. 1 DUKE BLUE DEVILS (31-3)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The Blue Devils are THE public team in college basketball. Love them or hate them, they are a staple of March Madness. And this year they happen to have one of the best teams of the country. The ACC champs are one of the most efficient teams in the country on both ends of the floor, finishing No. 13 in points per game (83.5) and field goal percentage (49.1%) on offense while also coming in at No. 6 in points allowed (61.4) and field goal defense (38.2%). You read that right: the Blue Devils outscored opponents by an average of 22 points per game this year. Duke's top player is freshman phenom Cooper Flagg, who led the team in points, assists and rebounds. Flagg injured his ankle in the ACC Tournament last week and his status is questionable for Duke's opening round. Fellow freshman Kon Knueppel is the team's No. 2 while veterans Tyrese Proctor and Sion James provide support. Duke is just 6-9 ATS in their last 15 NCAA tournament games. But winning the conference tournament without Flagg proved that they are one of the favorites to cut down the nets in San Antonio.

FIRST FOUR:

NO. 16 AMERICAN EAGLES (22-12)

The Patriot League Champions boast uncommon continuity, bringing back 75 percent of their minutes from last year's 16-16 team. American pushed ACC foe Virginia to the limit back in December, losing just 63-58, and the Eagles play at one of the slowest paces in the country, taking an average of 20 seconds per possession. Over the last six years, the Patriot League reps have lost by an average of 11.2 points per game, including a 17-point beating in 2021 and a 25-point loss in 2024.

NO. 16 MOUNT ST. MARY'S MOUNTAINEERS (22-12)

Head coach Donny Lind is taking the Mountaineers back to the NCAA Tournament in just his first year on the bench. The 38-year-old hasn't even been at the school for a full 12 months but coaxed a surprise conference tournament title out of the league's No. 5 seed. This will be Mount St. Mary's first trip to the NCAA Tournament since they left the Northeast Conference three years ago. This team is rough offensively, turning the ball over on 21.7 percent of their possessions (No. 359).



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EAST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



ALABAMA (2)

ROBERT MORRIS (15)



NO. 2 ALABAMA CRIMSON TIDE (25-8)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Alabama is back in the NCAA tournament for the fifth straight year with Nate Oats at the helm. This is the third time during that five-year run that the Crimson Tide have been a No. 1 or a No. 2 seed and this program was in the Final Four just last year. There's nothing confusing about how Alabama wants to play. They play at the fastest tempo in the country and they want to score, score and score some more. They are the No. 1 scoring team in the country, averaging an astounding 91.6 points per game, and they are No. 6 in the country with 29.6 3-point shots per game. Naturally, when you can score at that clip defense is optional. And Alabama is No. 355 in the nation in points allowed (81.1%). Alabama is just 6-6 ATS in the tournament during this recent four-year run but they are on a 15-7 ATS run heading into The Dance. When a team can score at the rate that this one can, that club will always be enticing to bettors and Alabama can cover any number. But "defense wins championships" is still a thing.

NO. 15 ROBERT MORRIS COLONIALS (26-8)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Bob Morris waltzes into The Big Dance on a 10-game winning streak, rolling to the Horizon League regular season and tournament titles. Leading scorer Kam Woods transferred here from N.C. State, where he was a member of last year's dramatic Final Four run with the Wolfpack. Woods helped trigger a massive turnaround for a team that went just 10-22 last year. The Colonials are back in the NCAA's for the first time since 2014. They actually won the NEC Tournament – and the league's automatic bid – in 2020, only to see the tournament get cancelled due to COVID. Last year's Horizon representative, Oakland, upset Kentucky in the first round (before losing to N.C. State in overtime) to snap an 0-11 mark for this league in tournament games. Horizon League teams are also just 4-8 ATS in their last 12 appearances despite covering the spread in back-to-back years.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

Alabama can really pick its score here. The Crimson Tide might have a hard time getting up for this game, which is being played on Friday afternoon in Cleveland, so don't be surprised by a slow start. Once Alabama gets rolling, though, they are almost impossible to stop. Robert Morris may keep this one competitive for 10-15 minutes but the Crimson Tide simply have too much firepower.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: ALABAMA -22.0



EAST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



WISCONSIN (3)

MONTANA (14)



NO. 3 WISCONSIN BADGERS (26-9)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

This Badgers team is somewhat of a program paradox. Unlike what we've seen in Madison the last 40 years, this Badgers team can score. A lot. They average 80.8 points per game and Wisconsin is No. 24 in the country in 3-pointers per game (28.1). Transfer Jon Tonje is good for 18.9 points per game and is one of the most efficient scorers in the nation. Seven-footer Steven Cowl is a dead-eye shooter and point guard Max Klesmit a solid facilitator. Wisconsin hasn't been to the Sweet 16 since 2017 and they suffered a 12-5 upset last year when they lost to James Madison as a 5.0-point favorite. Wisconsin is just 1-6 ATS in the NCAA tournament dating back to 2017. Montana will be the 21st team rated outside the Top 150 that Wisconsin has faced in the last four years. Their average win in those games has come by 17.8 PPG. They've won 11 of those previous 20 games by 20 points or more, including three of four this season. How much will Wisconsin have left in the tank for this opening round game after playing four games in four days in the Big Ten tournament last weekend?

NO. 14 MONTANA GRIZZLIES (25-9)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The Grizzlies are no strangers to The Big Dance, making it to the NCAA Tournament for the eighth time in the last 20 years. Montana won the Big Sky Tournament for the first time since 2019, breaking a three-year stranglehold on the league's automatic bid by rival Montana State. The Grizzlies have gone 14-1 SU and 12-3 ATS in their last 15 games. They have a lot of different guys that can put the ball in the basket, with four double-digit scorers and six guys that average 8.8 points or more per game. Montana is No. 3 in the nation in field goal offense, making a whopping 49.8 percent of their shots from the field. Big Sky teams have gone just 3-39 straight up and have scored 61 or fewer points in 11 of the past 17 NCAA Tournaments. The Big Sky reps have gone just 3-13 ATS in the Round of 64 since 2007, 2-10 ATS since 2011 and are just 1-7 ATS in the last eight tournaments.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

Montana played three tournament teams back in November: Oregon, Tennessee and Utah State. They lost those games by 31, 35 and 12 points, respectively. The Grizzlies aren't great defensively and I don't think that they are going to be able to match Wisconsin shot-for-shot here. The Badgers are a sleeper team in this region and I think they start their tournament on the right foot.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: WISCONSIN -16.5



EAST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



ARIZONA (4)

AKRON (13)



NO. 4 ARIZONA WILDCATS (22-12)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

It has really been a roller coaster season for the Wildcats, who are back in the tournament for the fourth straight year. Arizona lost five of seven games during a nonconference stretch and then lost gigantic center Motiejus Krivas for the season. The Wildcats responded by winning 13 of 14 games and playing their way into the Top 10. Then came five more losses in eight games. Followed by inspired upsets over Kansas and Texas Tech in the Big 12 tournament and a run to the conference title game. So which Arizona team will show up this week? This is a physical, athletic team that is battle-tested by playing the No. 4 most difficult schedule in the country. Senior guard Caleb Love (16.6 PPG) is one of the best and most explosive scorers in the country. He is the type of player that keeps both teams in the game with his erratic play and he would love to add one more chapter to an interesting postseason career. Love has played in 10 NCAA tournament games. In his team's three losses he's gone 2-for-22 from 3-point range. Tommy Lloyd's teams are just 1-6 ATS in the NCAA tournament the last three years.

NO. 13 AKRON ZIPS (28-6)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The Mid-American champs have lost just once so far in 2025, going 21-1 SU since New Year's Day. The Zips dominated MAC opponents this year, winning their 17 regular season games by an average of 11 points per game and scoring 90 or more eight times in 21 games. Akron was clearly the best team in this league. But they needed an amazing comeback in the league title game, as they were behind by 18 in the first half. They didn't take the lead until senior Nate Johnson's game-winning shot with two seconds to play. Akron is one of the shortest teams in the field, with just one starter taller than 6-foot-3 and no one on the roster taller than 6-8. The Zips are No. 11 in the nation in 3-point attempts per game (29.2), and they hit them at a 36 percent clip. Ten different guys average at least 15 minutes and six points per game, and Akron loves to play at a frenetic pace. The MAC is 6-2 ATS in its last eight Round of 64 games, with three wins in the past six years. MAC squads are 17-9 ATS in their first game dating back to 1999 (0-2 ATS L2Y).

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

This Akron team is no pushover. They dominate the MAC, and Mid-American teams have been solid underdogs in the NCAA tournament over the past three decades. However, this team lost to the only three Top 100 teams that they played this year by an average of 13.8 per game. They haven't faced any team from a major conference this season and this is a big step up in class. We are going against the public with this one.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: ARIZONA -14.0



EAST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



OREGON (5)

LIBERTY (12)



NO. 5 OREGON DUCKS (24-9)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Dana Altman's team is quietly one of the most dangerous in the field. This team won a preseason tournament in Las Vegas, beating Texas A&M, San Diego State and Alabama along the way. At one point this team was ranked No. 9 in the country before a five-game losing streak in Big Ten play dropped them to the NCAA tournament bubble. The Ducks also won eight straight before bowing out in the Big Ten tournament semifinals and this team is more than capable of busting some brackets. T.J. Bamba and Nate Bittle are an outstanding inside-out duo, with Jackson Shelstad and sixth man Keeshawn Barthelmy joining them at over 10 points per game. The Ducks have seven seniors, most of them well-traveled transfers, and this group is physically and mentally tough. Altman has been fantastic for bettors in the NCAA tournament, going 16-7 ATS in his last 23 games. In 20 of the last 37 years there have been more than one team seeded No. 5 or worse in the Elite Eight.

NO. 12 LIBERTY FLAMES (28-6)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Ritchie McKay's squad won Conference USA in just their second season in the league, shooting their way past CUSA foes with one of the best 3-point teams in the country – on both ends of the court. Liberty is No. 21 in 3-point shooting (38%) and No. 1 in the nation in 3-point defense, holding their opponents to just 27.6 percent from deep. Four different players on this roster hit at least 41 percent of their 3-point shots, and that doesn't even include super shooter Kaden Metheny. Metheny went 16-for-31 (51.6%) from deep in the CUSA Tournament while averaging 20.3 points across their three postseason wins. Liberty beat Kansas State and McNeese (who is also in the tournament) to win the Paradise Jam in the Virgin Islands back in November, so they have proven their mettle on neutral sites against tournament-caliber opponents. Liberty has gone 19-9 ATS this season, including covering the number in seven of their last 10 games, and will be a popular underdog pick. At least one No. 12 seed has won in the first round in 33 of 39 tournaments since expansion in 1985.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

This Oregon side feels like a boom-or-bust pick in this region. They will have a home crowd advantage here being able to play in nearby Seattle, whereas Liberty must make a cross-country flight. The Flames have enough shooters to keep this one interesting. And the 5-12 upsets are exceptionally common. I think Oregon will survive and pull away late to break the Flames' hearts.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: PLAY 'OVER' 139.5



EAST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



BYU (6)

VCU (11)



NO. 6 BYU COUGARS (24-9)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

After a brutal 73-72 OT loss to rival Utah on Jan. 18, BYU was just 11-6 and a non-entity on the national scene. Then they caught fire, going 13-3 SU and 12-4 ATS in their last 16 games to become a potential sleeper in the NCAA field. There is no secret to what this team wants to do: score. They are No. 28 in the nation in scoring (81.4 PPG) and in the Top 40 in both field goal shooting (48.7%) and 3-point shooting (37%). The Cougars are one of the deepest teams in the country, with nine players averaging 17 or more minutes and six or more point per game. Six-foot-nine freshman point guard Egor Demin is a future pro and averages 10.8 points and 5.6 assists per game. Richie Saunders is an explosive scorer on the perimeter while Mawot Mag is the main man in the paint. BYU's defense is below average. They don't force turnovers and they defend for one of the longest average possession lengths (18.1 seconds) in the field. BYU lost as a -9.0 favorite last year to No. 11 seed Duquesne. It is a new team with a new coach, but BYU is 0-3 SU and ATS in its last three tournament games.

NO. 11 VCU RAMS (28-6)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

In the 2010's, Virginia Commonwealth was an NCAA Tournament staple, making the field seven straight years from 2011-2017 and embarking on a shock Final Four run in 2011. Ryan Odom has the Rams back after missing last year's tournament due to a gut-wrenching loss in the Atlantic 10 championship game. VCU is one of the most experienced in the country, led by seventh-year senior Jack Clark and fifth-year seniors Joe Bamisile, Zeb Jackson, and Max Shulga. Bamisile, Shulga and Jackson were on last year's squad. And they, along with Clark, have played in major conferences. The best way to describe VCU's style is "attacking". Offensively, they love to run and assault the basket. Defensively, they are relentless for 94 feet, finishing No. 10 in the country in points allowed (62.7) and No. 11 in field goal defense (39.4%). The A-10 hasn't had a team in the Sweet 16 in 10 years. VCU was a popular upset pick as a No. 12 seed in 2023 but were blown out by St. Mary's. The Rams are on a stellar 12-4 ATS run but are 0-3 ATS in their last three tourney games since 2017.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

These are two very intriguing teams. BYU is becoming a trendy sleeper pick to go deep into this region. VCU's seniors are not going to go quietly and Bamisile and Shulga will be a handful for a Cougars team that has lapses on defense. The Cougars are too good, though, and the Rams should be getting more points in this matchup.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: BYU -3.0



EAST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



SAINT MARY'S [7]

VANDERBILT [10]



NO. 7 ST. MARY'S GAELS (28-5)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

St. Mary's is no longer a scrappy upstart mid-major trying to get some respect on the national scene. The Gaels have been ranked in the Top 20 for four straight seasons and they are going back to the NCAA tournament for the fourth time in a row. They have been a No. 5 seed – usually reserved for top teams from major conferences – each of the past three years. And the Gaels have managed to survive the first round and the dreaded 5-12 upset in two of the past three seasons. (They will be trying to do it again as a 7 seed). Augustas Marčiulionis, the son of NBA Hall of Famer Sarunas Marčiulionis, is the team's top scorer and go-to guy. Center Mitchell Saxen is the team's heart-and-soul. St. Mary's plays at one of the slowest paces in the country, sitting at No. 359 in tempo and No. 359 in average possession length. They try to frustrate opponents by controlling the ball. St. Mary's started the year just 3-10 ATS and they ended it going just 2-6 ATS in their last eight games.

NO. 10 VANDERBILT COMMODORES (20-13)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The 'Dores! Vanderbilt was one of the last teams in the field and are playing with house money this weekend. Head coach Mark Byington took James Madison to The Dance last year, knocking off Wisconsin in a 12-5 upset before getting bombed by Duke. Byington led the Commodores to their first NCAA tournament appearance since 2017. And if it feels like Vanderbilt just rode the tidal wave of hype that has been washing over the SEC for months it's because they did. Sure, Vandy scored some impressive wins over Tennessee, Kentucky, Texas A&M and Missouri. But those four marquee wins came by an average of four points per game and all but one came at home. Vandy is terrible defensively (No. 305 in field goal defense and No. 350 in 3-point defense) and they don't shoot well enough (No. 242 in 3-point shooting) to make up for it. At-large teams that finished below .500 in conference play are few and far between. And they have been horrible bets in the tournament.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

Vanderbilt is just happy to be in the field. St. Mary's expected to be here and they have been focused on this week for the entire year. Vanderbilt is just 7-11 SU in its last 18 games and this team didn't beat a single team in the tournament field outside of the SEC. St. Mary's blew out teams like Akron, USC and Utah this year and beat Gonzaga twice. I will back the more proven team.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: ST. MARY'S -4.0



EAST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



MISSISSIPPI ST (8)

BAYLOR (9)



NO. 8 MISSISSIPPI STATE BULLDOGS (21-12)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Chris Jans is taking the Bulldogs back to the NCAA Tournament for the third time in his three seasons in Starkville. This marks just the second time in program history that the Bulldogs have made it to the tournament three straight times, with the only other being four consecutive appearances from 2002-2005. The Bulldogs will be looking for their first NCAA Tournament win since 2008, though, and a lot of their success falls on the shoulders of sophomore guard Josh Hubbard. Hubbard (18.5 PPG) is the only player on the team to average over 12 points per game and is the offensive focal point. Mississippi State is No. 305 in the country in 3-point shooting (31.8%) and No. 329 in defending the three (36.2%). No. 8 seeds are just 8-16 ATS in the opening round of the last six tournaments. Miss State got bombed by Michigan State in an 8-9 matchup last year. They lost as a No. 11 seed in 2023, even though they were favored as the worse seed.

NO. 9 BAYLOR BEARS (19-14)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The Bears are one of the most erratic teams in the NCAA tournament field. They opened the season with a 38-point loss at Gonzaga. Three weeks later they became one of only four teams to beat St. John's. The Bears played four overtime games this year and half of their 14 losses this season came by four points or less. Freshman guard V.J. Edgecombe is electric and is a future pro. Fifth-year senior Norchad Omier is a double-double machine and was a starter on the Miami squad that made the Final Four just two years ago. The Bears covered the spread in both of their Big 12 tournament games. But prior to that Baylor was a horrific 5-18 ATS in their previous 23 games. Scott Drew has been a great bet in the NCAA tournament, going 10-4 ATS since 2019. That includes a 5-1 ATS run in 2021 to the national title that you definitely forgot that Baylor won. Drew has won six straight opening round games, going 5-1 ATS in those contests, and Drew is 10-1 SU in his last 11 opening tournament games. Five of the past six at-large teams with 14+ losses won their first-round game.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

This line opened at a 'pick' and was instantly bet up to Mississippi State -2.0. Most of the action here is coming in on the SEC side but I think that Baylor is the better team. You never know what Bears team is going to show up. However, Drew has been excellent in the tournament in his career and I think the Bears have more scoring options.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: BAYLOR +2.0



WEST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



FLORIDA (1)

NO. 1 FLORIDA GATORS (30-4)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The Gators rumbled to the SEC title and enter the NCAA tournament looking like the best team from the best conference in the land. Florida won its three SEC tournament games by an average of 11.7 points per game, blowing out No. 2 seeds Alabama and Tennessee along the way. The Gators haven't just been dominating on the court, they've also been crushing it at the window, going 21-5 ATS over their last 26 games and entering The Big Dance on a 12-1 ATS surge. Florida is No. 9 in the nation in scoring (84.5 PPG) and they have outscored their opponents by nearly 16 points per game. Florida lost 102-100 in their first round game in last year's tournament. We know they can score. But if they are a true title contender they will have to defend. Be careful of them having a letdown after their SEC tournament march last weekend. The Gators haven't made it through the opening weekend since 2014. And all four No. 1 seeds have made it to the Elite Eight just once in the past 14 tournaments.

NORFOLK ST (16)



NO. 16 NORFOLK STATE SPARTANS (24-10)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The MEAC Champions are a bit of an outlier in the NCAA Tournament field. Norfolk State shot the sixth-fewest 3-pointers in the country, taking just 16.7 shots from deep each game. Instead, this team is No. 10 in the country field goal shooting percentage (49.2%) because they attack the basket and try to get to the free throw line, where they shoot 76.1 percent. This is the third time in five years that Norfolk State has been in the field as a No. 16 seed. They won a First Four game in 2021 when they beat Appalachian State. But they lost to Gonzaga by 43 that season and to Baylor by 36 in 2022. This HBCU is just happy to be included and should be fodder for a top seed. MEAC teams have lost in their last seven first-round games by an average of 34 points per game. No. 16 seeds are just 2-154 all time against No.1 seeds. UMBC upset Virginia in 2018 and FDU beat Purdue in 2023. As of this writing, Norfolk State is the largest underdog in the field.



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WEST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



ST. JOHN'S (2)

OMAHA (15)



NO. 2 ST. JOHN'S RED STORM (30-4)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The Big East champions have been enjoying a Renaissance season under Rick Pitino. Thanks to an influx of NIL money, the Red Storm have been able to assemble their best team in decades, bringing success back to a long-dormant program. The Red Storm have only lost twice since Thanksgiving, going 25-2 SU in their last 27 games. St. John's has hammered the books all season long, going 21-11 ATS overall and 14-5 ATS in their last 19 games and their four losses have come by a combined nine points. This team is a throwback. They are a terrible 3-point shooting team, finishing No. 349 in the country at 29.9 percent. But they defend for days, they pound teams in the paint, and they bully opponents with their size, physicality and relentlessness. Guards R.J. Luis and Kadary Richmond combine to make around 25 percent of their 3-point shots. But they still average 30.8 points per game thanks to their ability to get to the basket. Be wary: no team that ever started the season unranked and went on to earn a top two seed has ever made it to the Final Four.

NO. 15 OMAHA MAVERICKS (22-12)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The Summit League Champions have won a school-record 22 games so far this year, and this is Omaha's first NCAA Tournament appearance. This program didn't enter Division I until 2012, and they won just 19 games from 2020-2022. The Mavericks are solid offensively, led by forward Marquel Sutton and his 19.1 points per game, and Omaha won't be scared to turn their first-round game into a shootout. Omaha is 18-3 SU over their last 21 games and have been a book-blistering 20-9 ATS in lined games this season. They are also catching a St. John's team that might be in a letdown situation after their coronation in New York City last weekend. There have been 12 times that Summit League teams have entered the tournament seeded No. 15 or No. 16. They've lost those 12 games by an average of 25.3 points per game.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

St. John's could have a letdown in this first round game. Last week they were in New York City cutting down the nets and enjoying a coronation. Now they are in Rhode Island taking on Omaha. No. 2 seeds are just 54-66 ATS (45%) over the last 30 years and it could be difficult for St. John's to get a blowout here.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: OMAHA +18.5



WEST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



TEXAS TECH (3)

NO. 3 TEXAS TECH RED RAIDERS (25-8)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Grant McCasland is taking the Red Raiders back to The Big Dance with designs on avenging last year's unsightly 80-67 loss to No. 11 seed N.C. State. Texas Tech has played some great basketball at times this year peaking at No. 9 in the national rankings after a 18-4 start and a thrilling overtime win over Houston on Feb. 1. However, Texas Tech played a very soft nonconference schedule and they have only beaten five teams (unless WVU makes it and they are) currently in the NCAA tournament field. In fact, since that win over the Cougars, Texas Tech's only two decent wins have come against Baylor and Kansas. The Red Raiders also have some serious injury concerns heading into the tournament. Starters Chance McMillian and Darrion Williams both missed Tech's Big 12 tournament loss to Arizona last Friday with injuries. They are the team's No. 2 and No. 3 leading scorers so be sure to check their status before considering any action on this group. In 2024, four teams seeded No. 5 or better lost their opener. An average of 3.2 teams seeded No. 5 or better have fallen in Round 1 the last 39 years.

UNCW (14)



NO. 14 UNC-WILMINGTON SEAHAWKS (27-7)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Head coach Takayo Siddle has won 21 or more games four straight seasons, and he has one of his deepest, most versatile teams this year. The Colonial Athletic Association has a long history sending feisty teams to the NCAA Tournament. CAA representatives have gone 0-11 in first round games dating back to 2013, but they have been very competitive in those games. Colonial teams have lost by eight points or fewer in five of the last 10 tournaments, including this UNC-Wilmington program doing it in 2016 (losing by 8) and 2017 (losing by 5). The CAA has seen 19 of the past 27 teams to represent the conference either win their first-round game outright or lose by single-digits. Admittedly, the league was stronger when it had teams like George Mason and VCU in it. But the league has 14 losses by just five points or less and a six-point loss by Charleston in 2023. CAA teams have lost their last four tournament games by 13, 6, 20, and 29 points. No. 3 seeds are 13-7 ATS against No. 14 seeds over the past five tournaments.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

There is no way to bet on this game without knowing the status of Texas Tech's starters. They played well without Williams and McMillan in the Big 12 tournament. Doing it with these stakes will be more difficult. There have been two No. 14 seeds to win outright in the last seven years. Wilmington probably won't be the next one but we think that they can stay within in the number against this banged up team.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: UNC-WILMINGTON +15.5



WEST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



MARYLAND (4)

GRAND CANYON (13)



NO. 4 MARYLAND TERAPINS (25-8)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Unranked to start the season, the Terps have been a revelation thanks to freshman phenom Derik Queen and a pair of overlooked veterans in Ja'Kobi Gillespie and Julian Reese. Maryland played one of the weakest nonconference schedules in the country. But they proved themselves by finishing in second place in the Big Ten regular season and outscoring all opponents by an average of 15 points per game. Maryland is in the Top 50 in both offensive and defensive efficiency and they have five guys, led by Queen's 15.7 PPG, averaging more than 12 points per game. The Terps do not have a deep team, with their starters logging 75 percent of the team's minutes and scoring the most points of any starting five in the nation. Lack of depth is a weakness, though. The Terps have won their Round of 64 game in each of their last three NCAA tournament appearances and in five of their last six. But Maryland has made just one Sweet 16 in the last 21 tournaments. This group is on a 7-3 ATS run over its last 10 games and No. 4 seeds are 21-7 SU over the last seven years.

NO. 13 GRAND CANYON ANTELOPES (26-7)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

This is becoming old hat for the Antelopes, who are playing in their third consecutive NCAA Tournament and their fourth in the five years since Bryce Drew has taken over the program. Grand Canyon pulled a 12-5 upset last year, knocking off St. Mary's 75-66 as a 5.5-point underdog before losing 72-61 to Alabama as a 5.0-point dog. They also covered the spread against Gonzaga as a No. 13 seed in 2023 and against Iowa as a No. 15 back in 2021. Four of the five starters from last year's squad are back. That includes their best player, Tyon Grant-Foster, who has been limited by injuries and issues this season. He's shooting only 39 percent from the field and 21.4 percent from 3-point range. But Grant-Foster scored 51 points in Grand Canyon's two tournament games last year and won't be shy. Grand Canyon shoots only 31.8 percent from 3-point range as a team (No. 303) and are a team that prefers to get into the paint. They are on a 6-1 ATS run and covered the spread in all three of their WAC Tournament games.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

The Antelopes were able to pull an upset in the first round last year. Could they do it again versus an ACC blue blood? Maryland has to make a long trip out to Seattle and this is not a team that played on the road much in the nonconference. This spread opened at 11.5 but has been bet down as a lot of action has come in on the Antelopes. We think they are ready for a fight.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: GRAND CANYON +10.0



WEST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



MEMPHIS (5)

COLORADO ST (12)



NO. 5 MEMPHIS TIGERS (29-5)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Penny Hardaway doesn't have his most talented team in his seven years on the Memphis bench. But he may have his best team. Hardaway has guided the Tigers to their third NCAA tournament appearance in the last four years. And he did so on the back of one of the best backcourts in the country, with transfers P.J. Haggerty (21.2 PPG) and Tyrese Hunter (14.1 PPG) combining to average over 35 points per game. Memphis beat Connecticut and Michigan State in Maui back in November, proving their bona fides, and followed that up with a nonconference road win at Clemson. Hardaway is not a strong in-game coach. And their lack of bench options (only seven players average more than 12 minutes per game) is a weakness. As long as Haggerty and Hunter have the ball in their hands this offense is going to score and this team is going to hang around. However, Hunter didn't play in the AAC title game and he is questionable with a foot injury in the first round. Memphis is the rare instance where a higher seeded team finds itself as an underdog.

NO. 12 COLORADO STATE RAMS (24-9)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The Rams are winners of 10 straight games and are the newly minted champions of a very competitive Mountain West Conference. This is back-to-back tournament appearances for Colorado State. The Rams blew out Virginia last year in the First Four before losing to Texas 56-44 in the Round of 64. It is also their third tournament showing in the last four seasons, but Colorado State hasn't won a first-round game (not counting that First Four win) since 2013. The Rams are playing their best basketball of the season at the right time and their wins during this streak have come by an average of 16.9 points per game. Forward Nique Clifford is an absolute beast. He is averaging 21.7 points per game over his last 17 games and 25.3 in his last six. This team has been a gold mine for bettors, going 10-0 ATS in their last 10 games and they are 17-4 ATS in their last 21. No. 12 seeds that played in the previous year's tournament have won 25 of 43 games against No. 5 seeds over the past 34 years.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

Memphis played the AAC championship game without Hunter. His status is crucial to Memphis' prospects this weekend. It is also telling the Colorado State, the lower-seeded team, is the favorite in this matchup. That has normally been an indicator to take the disrespected underdog. But if Hunter doesn't play then the Tigers are vulnerable against one of the hottest teams in the field.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: COLORADO STATE -2.5



WEST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



MISSOURI (6)

NO. 6 MISSOURI TIGERS (22-11)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Dennis Gates has a fearless Missouri team that takes – and makes – as many tough shots as any team in the country. Mark Mitchell, a Duke transfer forward, is the team's leading scorer and second-leading rebounder. Mitchell missed Missouri's SEC tournament loss with a knee injury and his status will be crucial for the Tigers this week. Super shooter Caleb Grill is one of the nation's top sixth men and senior guard Tamar Bates is the team's go-to guy. Missouri doesn't have any momentum heading into the tournament, losing four of their last five games and are just 2-5 since beating Alabama on Feb. 19. Gates won his first tournament game with the Tigers, upsetting Utah State as a No. 7 seed. Over the first 25 years of the 64-team tournament, No. 6 seeds won nearly 70 percent of their first round games. However, over the last 14 years No. 6 seeds are just 26-30 SU in their opening game. Since 2009, No. 6 seeds are just 29-31 SU.



DRAKE (11)

NO. 11 DRAKE BULLDOGS (30-3)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

This is the third straight NCAA Tournament appearance, and the fourth in five seasons, for the Missouri Valley Conference champions. Drake is looking for its first NCAA win since 1971, though, after a heartbreaking five-point loss to Washington State last year and a seven-point loss to future Final Four team Miami in 2023. This was supposed to be a rebuilding season for Drake, which lost its head coach and best player to West Virginia after last year's tournament. With an average of just 0.33 years of Div. I experience, this is one of the rawest rosters in the country. Drake beat Vanderbilt and Kansas State this year, showing that they aren't scared of teams from power conferences. The Bulldogs are No. 2 in the nation in points allowed (59.2) and beat teams with raw offensive efficiency and the slowest pace in the country, with their average possession taking 22 seconds. Since 2009, No. 11 seeds are 31-29 SU and 38-22 ATS and at least one No. 11 seed has won in the first round in 19 straight tournaments.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

It has been amazing what Drake has accomplished this year. They have one of the youngest teams in the field, and most of these players weren't even at this school last year. Drake won a nonconference tournament in Charleston in November, beating tournament team Vanderbilt along the way. The public is on the Bulldogs and expect an upset. We are going to bet against the public here though.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: MISSOURI -6.5



WEST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



KANSAS [7]

NO. 7 KANSAS JAYHAWKS (21-12)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

A lot of programs would be thrilled with a No. 7 seed and extending the longest streak of NCAA tournament appearances in the history of college basketball (35). But expectations are different in Kansas. And the Jayhawks have been underachievers this year. Kansas was the preseason No. 1 team in the country and got off to a brilliant 7-0 start that included wins over North Carolina, Michigan State and Duke. They have been barely over .500 since then, though, going 15-12, finishing sixth in the Big 12, and bowing out in their second conference tournament game. This group has the most experience of any team in the country. Built primarily through transfers, this group has not found any chemistry or consistency and they don't look like a group that enjoys playing together. Don't go broke waiting for this squad to fulfill its preseason expectations. It's probably not going to happen. Although, I wouldn't be thrilled at the prospects of facing this group in the second round if I were St. John's.

ARKANSAS [10]



NO. 10 ARKANSAS RAZORBACKS (20-13)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

John Calipari was run out of Kentucky and found his footing down in Fayetteville. He dragged this Razorbacks team to the NCAA tournament in his first season at Arkansas despite dealing with injuries and inconsistencies all year long. Freshman guard Boogie Fland was put out for the year in January. And the team's leading scorer, Adou Thiero, has missed the last six games and looks doubtful to play in the tournament this weekend. Arkansas still has some talent. Sophomores Zvonimir Ivisic and D.J. Wagner have both broken out and just scratched the surface of their potential. Jonas Aidoo and Trevon Brazile are obscenely athletic, and senior guard Johnell Davis made the Final Four with Florida Atlantic two years ago. However, this team is outside the Top 100 in scoring offense and defense and they are too erratic to be thought of as a true spoiler in the West.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

If Arkansas was at full strength I think that this team could knock off the sagging Jayhawks. I don't think Arkansas is at full strength. It has been a disappointing season for Kansas. They can still salvage something with a nice tournament run. I think they will be able to avoid the embarrassment of a first round upset.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: KANSAS -4.5



WEST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



UCONN [8]

NO. 8 CONNECTICUT HUSKIES (23-10)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The two-time defending national champs will try to join John Wooden's UCLA dynasty of the 60's and 70's as the only college basketball team to ever win three national titles in a row. (UCLA won seven in a row.) Spoiler alert: the Huskies aren't going to win three in a row, no matter how much Danny Hurley pisses and moans at the refs. Connecticut has been a mediocre team all season. They finished third in a down Big East and look nothing like the absolute monster UCONN teams we've seen the last two years. They lack the explosiveness, experience and high-end talent. Freshman Liam McNeeley has potential but isn't good enough to carry the offense. He has only scored 20 or more four times and the Huskies are 3-1 in those games. Solo Ball and Alex Karaban are solid two-way players. But, like McNeeley, neither is good enough win games against top teams by themselves. The Huskies are stout defensively and their offensive metrics are decent, especially their No. 9 free throw shooting percentage (79.1%). They are 12-0 ATS in the last two tournaments but I have low expectations for this group.

OKLAHOMA [9]



NO. 9 OKLAHOMA SOONERS (20-13)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Oklahoma went just 6-12 in SEC play this year. Think about that for a second. The Sooners, along with Texas, are the first teams in NCAA tournament history to make the field as an at-large team despite finishing at least four games below .500 in league play. Freshman Jeremiah Fears is the real deal and will be a future NBA star. Porter Moser is a proven March commodity and this Sooners squad has already proven that it can win big games on neutral sites, taking down Arizona and Louisville in the Bahamas back in November while winning the Battle 4 Atlantis. OU is just 4-3 in its last seven games. But those three losses all came by five combined points and they are 7-0 ATS in those tilts. Since 2011, there have been 15 teams that earned at-large bids despite losing 14 or more games. Those teams are 8-6 (one lost in the First Four) and five of the six losses came by exactly two points or in overtime. These teams probably don't deserve to be here. But they are going to fight like hell since they are. I expect the same thing out of OU.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

It is very difficult to bet against a Huskies team that is 12-0 ATS in the last two tournaments. The Sooners have only won seven times since Jan. 1 and only three times outside of their home state. Connecticut won't make another title run but we do think that they have enough to get past one of the weaker teams in the field.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: CONNECTICUT -4.5



1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



HOUSTON (1)

SIU-E (16)

**NO. 1 HOUSTON COUGARS
(30-4)****ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:**

Over the last seven years Houston has gone 209-34 straight up. You read that right: they've won 86 percent of their games over the past seven years. Some people thought that Kelvin Sampson's dynasty would slow down once they joined the Big 12. Nope. They are 62-9 over the past two seasons, 34-4 in league play while winning back-to-back regular season titles, and wrapped a tournament banner last weekend after coming up short in the Big 12 finals last year. Houston doesn't just beat teams. They destroy them. They've won their 30 games by 16 points per game and won their 19 conference games by a whopping 12.4 points per game. The Cougars have lost just one time since November, falling by just one point in overtime to Texas Tech while going 26-1 in that span. Houston has won 13 straight games and boast the No. 1 scoring defense in the nation, allowing just 58.2 points per game. Houston is just 10-10 ATS in the NCAA tournament since 2017 and just 3-4 ATS in their opening round games. But I wouldn't be in a hurry to bet against this nasty crew.

**NO. 16 SOUTHERN ILLINOIS-
EDWARDSVILLE COUGARS
(22-11)****ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:**

Hailing from the Ohio Valley Conference, SIU-Edwardsville is making the school's first-ever NCAA Tournament appearance. The OVC was rated as the nation's fourth-worst conference this year, and the Cougars played the No. 357-ranked schedule in the country this year. SIU-E's two best players are cousins, Ray'Sean Taylor and Brian Taylor. Ray'Sean was the OVC Player of the Year, and the two combined to average 31.3 points per game. This team did match up with two Big Ten powers this year, Indiana and Illinois. But they lost those two road games by 19 and 32 points, respectively. Teams from the Ohio Valley Conference that have been seeded No. 14 or worse are 0-17 straight up in the tournament. No. 16 seeds are just 51-69 ATS in the Round of 64 over the last 30 years. That is just a 42.5 percent success rate.

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1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



TENNESSEE (2)

WOFFORD (15)



NO. 2 TENNESSEE VOLUNTEERS (27-7)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

I like to remind everyone of this every single March: Rick Barnes did not make the Sweet 16 with Kevin Durant, D.J. Augustin and the core of a team that made the Elite Eight the season prior. True story. And the moral of that story is not to trust Rick Barnes. Barnes is headed to his fifth straight tournament, and his sixth in eight years with the Vols. Tennessee made the Elite Eight last year. But Barnes' teams have failed to survive the opening weekend in nine of his last 11 appearances dating back to 2009. He is 5-17 ATS in his last 22 NCAA tournament games and 11-23 ATS in his tournament career. The Volunteers have one of the easiest paths to the Sweet 16 of any of the No. 1 or No. 2 seeds. And this squad, led by dynamic senior guards Zakai Zeigler and Chaz Lanier, has bombed some very good teams this year. The Vols are one of the best defensive teams in the country. But they don't have much depth and I wonder how much they have left in the tank after an intense run to the SEC title game that featured battles with Auburn and Florida.

NO. 15 WOFFORD TERRIERS (19-15)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The Southern Conference representatives got hot at the right time, turning a mediocre 16-15 regular season and 10-8 conference record into a league title thanks to three straight SoCon Tournament wins. Wofford didn't win more than three games in a row at any point in this season, and it is not a surprise that this team was streaky given their overreliance on the 3-point shot. The Terriers were No. 22 in the nation in percentage of their offensive possessions ending in a 3-point shot while also finishing No. 20 in 3-point shots allowed. Wofford's offense exploded in the SoCon tourney, with five players averaging 12.0 or more points in their three-game run. This team shot 37-for-84 (44%) from 3-point range in their league tournament, and I'll be stunned if they are able to keep that level of execution going. In the last 12 tournaments, No. 15 seeds are 7-41 outright against No. 2 seeds, including three straight years with an outright upset from a No. 15 (2021-2023).



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1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



KENTUCKY (3)

TROY (14)

**NO. 3 KENTUCKY WILDCATS
(22-11)****ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:**

New head coach Mark Pope, formerly of BYU, has had a wild first season in Lexington. The Wildcats scored early season upsets of Duke and Gonzaga and when they beat Florida on Jan. 4 that put them at 12-2 and firmly inside the Top 10. They have been spotty since then, going just 10-9 and battling injuries to key players Jaxon Robinson, Andrew Carr and Lamont Butler. Robinson is out for the tournament, which lowers the ceiling for this team. Rugged junior Otega Oweh is the player to watch and the Wildcats take – and make – a ton of 3-pointers. Kentucky is No. 3 in the nation at 85.8 points per game and are in the Top 25 in 3-point shooting percentage (37.8%). Kentucky has lost in the opening round two of the last three years, including an ugly loss to Oakland last year as a 13-point Round 1 favorite. This program hasn't been to the Sweet 16 since 2019 and will have some work to do to snap that streak. The Wildcats are 1-10 ATS in all postseason games over the last four years.

NO. 14 TROY TROJANS (23-10)**ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:**

The Sun Belt Conference representatives dominated their league tournament en route to this automatic bid. The Trojans won their three postseason games by an average of 16 points apiece, and they have covered the spread in eight of their past nine overall. Troy is ranked No. 25 in the country in points allowed (65.4) and field goal defense (40.3%), and veteran coach Scott Cross utilizes a deep bench. Troy is 12-3 SU and 10-5 ATS in its last 15 games overall, holding nine opponents to 61 points or fewer in that span. Point guard Tayton Conerway was the Sun Belt POTY and does it all for this team, averaging 14.3 points, 4.8 assists, 4.6 rebounds and 2.9 steals per game. Last year's Sun Belt representative, James Madison, pulled a first-round upset, and teams from this conference have gone 3-0 ATS in the opening game of the last three tourneys. In the previous seven tournaments, No. 14 seeds are 2-26 outright against No. 14 seeds over the last seven years, with Abilene Christian (2021) and Oakland (2023) the only upsets.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

Reports are saying that Kentucky should get Lamont Butler back for their first round game after the senior missed all but eight minutes of the SEC tournament. Butler is a critical piece for this team. Troy is a young team and they don't have enough offensive firepower to keep up with the Wildcats here. The Trojans lost to Arkansas, Oregon and Houston this year by an average of 19 points per game.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: KENTUCKY -10.5

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



PURDUE (4)

NO. 4 PURDUE BOILERMAKERS (22-11)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Coming into the season, expectations were somewhat muted for the team that lost to Connecticut in last year's national title game. Gone was giant center Zach Edey and the consensus was that the Boilermakers would struggle without their mountain in the middle. That hasn't really been the case thanks to Big Ten Player of the Year Braden Smith and ultra-efficient forward Trey Kaufman-Renn. Kaufman-Renn averaged 19.7 points per game while shooting a jaw-dropping 61.2 percent from the field and 42.9 percent from 3-point range. Smith is the team's leader, constantly probing with the ball in his hand and contributing 16.3 points and 8.8 assists per game. Matt Painter has led Purdue to 10 straight NCAA tournaments. He's suffered three embarrassing first round losses, including falling as a No. 1 seed to Fairleigh Dickinson in 2023. That said, Painter is a healthy 23-14 ATS in the NCAA tournament and should have his guys ready to go. The top four seeds in a region have all reached the Sweet 16 intact just 20 times in 156 attempts (13%) over the last 39 years.

HIGH POINT (13)



NO. 13 HIGH POINT PANTHERS (29-5)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The Panthers survived a semifinal scare to eventually win the Big South Tournament and secure the North Carolina-based school's first NCAA bid ever. High Point will head to The Dance riding the nation's second-longest winning streak at 14 straight. They are also on a 7-1 ATS push, and this team is no joke, beating very solid UAB and North Texas teams this season in their two biggest nonconference games. High Point is No. 18 in the nation in points per game (82.4) and has a Top 10 field goal offense (49.4%) that can score inside and out. The Panthers will have some tough recent history to overcome for the Big South, though, as the conference representatives have lost by 32 or more points in three straight tournaments (35 PPG average loss). The league has only one NCAA Tournament win in its history, and they have lost their last 10 tourney games by double-digits, with the average defeat coming by 22.3 points.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

High Point beat North Texas and UAB, two quality mid-major teams, this season. And only one of their five losses this year has been by more than four points. This line opened at 9.0 and has been bet down by sharp money. Purdue should be good enough to avoid an upset but the freewheeling Panthers could push them to the limit.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: HIGH POINT +8.5



1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



CLEMSON (5)

MCNEESE (12)

**NO. 5 CLEMSON TIGERS (27-6)****ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:**

The Tigers were standouts in a down ACC this year. With the core from last year's Elite Eight squad back in the fold, Clemson quietly and methodically built a resume with 27 wins and a second-place finish in the ACC regular season. Senior guard Chase Hunter is the team's go-to guy while senior forward Ian Schieffelin is the unquestioned heart-and-soul. Senior center Viktor Lakhin was one of the most impactful transfers in the nation this year, and Clemson's dominance starts on the defensive end (No. 30 in points allowed) because of their anchor in the middle. Lakhin did not play well in the ACC tournament and you have to wonder if this team has peaked. The Tigers were under the radar all season, going 20-12 ATS, and they head to the NCAA Tournament on a 9-2 SU, 7-4 ATS run. This 5-12 seeding matchup has produced more upsets than any other in the first round over the last 30 years. In fact, only four times since 1988 has a No. 12 failed to upset a No. 5 in the first round, with the most recent time coming in 2023.

NO. 12 MCNEESE STATE COWBOYS (27-6)**ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:**

This is now back-to-back NCAA Tournament appearances for Will Wade and the Cowboys. Wade was run out of LSU due in part to recruiting violations, but he has brought his fast-paced, pressing system down to Lake Charles. What's impressive about this team is that Wade brought back only two starters from last year's No. 12 seed, infusing key transfers Quadir Copeland (Syracuse), Sincere Parker (St. Louis) and Brandon Murray (Mississippi) into the rotation without missing a beat. McNeese went on the road and took on Alabama and Mississippi State this season, losing by just 8 and 3 points, respectively, in two games against SEC foes. The Cowboys are 22-1 in their last 23 games. But because they were so dominant in the Southland Conference, the books caught up with them. McNeese is just 4-9 ATS in its last 13 games, and they didn't cover in their conference championship game. They will look for a better showing than the 21-point drubbing they took from Gonzaga last year in the tournament. Since 2013, No. 12 seeds are 27-16-1 ATS against No. 5 seeds.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

No. 12 seeds are 13-7 ATS and 12-8 outright in this round in the past five tournaments. And No. 12 seeds that played in the previous year's tournament have won more than half (25 of 43) of their games in the first round. McNeese played tight games with SEC opponents this year so they won't be scared to step up here against a team from a weak ACC. This one is a potential upset.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: MCNEESE +7.5

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



ILLINOIS (6)

XAVIER/TEXAS (11)

**NO. 6 ILLINOIS FIGHTIN ILLINI
(21-12)****ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:**

Illinois' results in the Big Ten tournament kind of sum it up for this erratic squad. They won their first postseason game over Iowa while scoring 106 points. Then they turned around and lost their second game to Maryland while being held to just 65. This is a young team, with just one senior (Ben Humrichous) and three freshmen among their top eight contributors. Offensively, the Illini are No. 11 in the nation in scoring (83.7). They take the fifth-most 3-point shots per game (30.1) but shoot a horrendous 31 percent from that range (No. 327). Their defensive metrics are decent. Although Illinois only forces turnovers on 12.7 percent of their opponents' possessions, among the five worst marks in the country. Last year's Elite Eight run was the first time since 2005 that Illinois survived the opening weekend and their Sweet 16 win over Iowa State was the program's first win over a team seeded No. 8 or better in 20 years.

FIRST FOUR:**NO. 11 XAVIER MUSKETEERS (21-11)**

Xavier is one of the most experienced teams in the country, with their players averaging 3.5 years of run. They have six seniors among their top eight, including stud center Zach Freemantle, who has overcome injuries throughout his career to earn one last dance. Xavier has been playing its best basketball down the stretch, going 7-1 SU and 6-2 ATS in their last eight games. They also want revenge against First Four foe Texas after the Longhorns knocked out the Musketeers in the Sweet 16 two years ago.

NO. 11 TEXAS LONGHORNS (19-15)

Prior to the SEC tournament, Texas had won just two of its last nine games. Hell, even with their wins in the SEC tourney they are just 8-13 in their last 21 games and 4-8 SU and ATS in their last 12. Yet here we are. Texas has senior role players orbiting around freshman phenom Tre Johnson (20.2 PPG). Texas has some decent pieces. What they don't have is a defined identity. Major conference teams that survive the First Four have won their second game (against a first-round opponent) in 12 of the last 13 years.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

I think that both Texas and Xavier are better than this Illinois team. Teams that win in the First Four are notorious for also winning their Round of 64 game and I think that either the Longhorns or the Musketeers are more than capable of pulling it off. Illinois has been too erratic all season and the Big Ten has been terrible in the tournament's opening round over the past decade.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: TEXAS/XAVIER WINNER

MIDWEST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS

Ucla

UCLA (7)

UTAH ST (10)



NO. 7 UCLA BRUINS (22-10)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The Bruins are back in The Dance after missing last year's tournament thanks to a 16-17 funk. This year's squad has talent, depth and experience and no clear weakness. However, after a four-game losing streak in early January dropped them to 11-6 head coach Mick Cronin basically had to call out his team as soft to get them back on track. That spurred a seven-game winning streak and UCLA's resume includes wins over top tier squads like Arizona, Gonzaga, Wisconsin and Michigan State. UCLA's offensive stats don't jump off the page. But that's because they play at the No. 301 pace in the country. Tyler Bilodeau is the closest thing they have to a go-to player on that end of the court and he averages just 14 points per game. The key for this team is center Aday Mara. The 7-foot-3 pivot only averages 12 minutes per game. They are 9-0 when he plays 16 minutes or more and Mara managed 22.1 minutes per game during that Big Ten winning streak. Cronin has made the Sweet 16 in each of his past three tourney appearances and we will see if he has another run in him.

NO. 10 UTAH STATE AGGIES (26-7)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Utah State and North Carolina were the last two at-large teams to sneak into the tournament field. This is Utah State's third straight NCAA appearance and, amazingly, they have made three straight tournaments with three different head coaches. Jerrod Calhoun's crew started the season with 10 straight wins and were 16-1, with an impressive road win at St. Mary's, heading into the teeth of Mountain West play. They are a mediocre 10-6 since then. This is an excellent shooting team, led by Ian Martinez. And they are No. 8 in the country in field goal percentage (49.5%). Utah State upset TCU as a 3.5-point underdog in the first round last year but are 1-2 ATS in the past two tournaments. Mountain West teams that are double-digit seeds went 1-4 SU last year and are a laughable 3-32 SU in their last 35 tournament attempts. The Aggies are just 4-10 ATS in their last 14 games and the arrow appears to be pointing down on this group.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

The Mountain West has been terrible for bettors and backers in the NCAA tournament. Utah State is considered one of the weakest teams in the field but they are a popular upset pick. As of this writing, over 80 percent of the action in this game is coming in on the Aggies. This feels like Lucy lining up the football for Charlie Brown once again. Go the other way.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: UCLA -5.5



MIDWEST

1ST ROUND MATCH-UPS



GONZAGA (8)

NO. 8 GONZAGA BULLDOGS (25-8)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

Mark Few is one of the greatest college basketball coaches to never win a national title. And he's not going to win it this year. Few is taking the Bulldogs back to the NCAA tournament for a remarkable 26th straight time. And even though this squad peaked at No. 3 in the country early in the season, they are also set up to end the season with the most losses of any Gonzaga team in the last 14 years. The Bulldogs played a lot of good opponents this year but they didn't beat a lot of good teams, going just 4-6 SU against Top 50 opposition. Gonzaga has four of five starters back from last year's Sweet 16 team and they are one of the 10 most experienced squads in the country. Graham Ike is a rock in the post and point guard Andrew Nembhard averaged 10.9 points and 10 assists per game for this group. Few has made the Sweet 16 nine straight seasons. He is just 24-34 ATS in his tournament career and Gonzaga is 5-9 ATS over the last three years.



GEORGIA (9)

NO. 9 GEORGIA BULLDOGS (20-12)

ROBERT FERRINGO'S ANALYSIS:

The year before head coach Mike White took over the Bulldogs (2022), Georgia finished 6-26. Now UGA has won 20 games in back-to-back season and they have worked their way back to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2015. Georgia played its best basketball down the stretch, and their resume includes impressive wins over St. John's, Florida and Kentucky. Freshman forward Asa Newell is a future lottery pick and sophomore guard Silas Demary is the team's leader in minutes and assists while also second to Newell in scoring. Keep an eye on sophomore guard Blue Cain. He won't wow anyone with athleticism but makes winning plays and is an impact player for White's group. No. 9 seeds are 20-12 outright against No. 8 seeds in the past eight tournaments. The Georgia-Gonzaga game had one of the most lopsided betting actions of any game after the bracket was announced, with 93 percent of the early tickets coming in on Gonzaga.

DOC'S MATCHUP ANALYSIS

Georgia was a team that I was very excited to bet on in their first round matchup. This team has been playing excellent basketball over the last few weeks. Unfortunately, this is a terrible matchup for the Bulldogs. Gonzaga may perform better this year now that they enter the tournament without heavy expectations.

CONSENSUS PREDICTION: GONZAGA -6.5



TIPS FOR FILLING OUT WINNING BRACKET

1. LATE TOURNAMENT GAMES MEAN MORE

It can be easy to get caught up in the excitement of the early potential upsets in March Madness. However, with standard scoring, half of the points available will be handed out in the last seven games of the tournament. Start your bracket with the Final Four and work backwards.

2. KEEP AN EYE ON THE MEDIA COVERAGE

One of the easiest ways for a team to get overvalued or undervalued in March Madness is the amount of media coverage they receive. Not only will the top contenders get extensive coverage, but a variety of underdogs will also share the spotlight. Cut out the noise and do your own research!

3. FOCUS ON THE FAVORITES

Look at March Madness Championship odds! These odds are set for a reason, and taking too many underdogs will drastically reduce your chances. The No. 1 seed has lost only twice in the first round, and the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd seeds have a combined record of 432-36 in the first round. The favorites will win often, and taking too many underdogs is a surefire way to bust your bracket.

4. DON'T GET CUTE IN THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

The underdog stories surrounding March Madness are truly special, but don't expect a 16 seed to win the National Championship. Since 1985, a top three seed has won the National Championship 34 out of 39 times. A number one seed is responsible for 25 of those wins, and this trend will continue. Have some fun with underdogs in the opening rounds, but your champ should be a top seed.

5. TRUST YOUR GUT

There will be countless expert March Madness brackets floating around online, but the reality is that no one has ever gotten a perfect bracket, and no one ever will. If there is a certain trend or team you have a gut feeling about, do not hesitate to make a bet on yourself. The aptly named March Madness has produced countless upsets, and the top seed reaches the Final Four just 39% of the time.

6. SPRINKLE IN EARLY UPSETS

Expecting a No. 11 seed to reach the Final Four is a tall task, but the opening round will be littered with upsets. The 5 and 6 seeds win their first round games only 39% and 35% of the time, respectively, which is much closer to 50/50 odds than you may have expected. The 7 and 8 seeds produce even more upsets, so don't focus too hard on seeding in these positions. Predicting a 16 seed to win is not a good idea, but a 2 or 3 seed has been bounced in the first round 34 times in 39 tournaments.

7. JUST RELAX, AND KEEP AN EYE ON THE PRIZE

The odds of a perfect bracket are 1 out of 120 billion, and the dream of a perfect bracket will likely evaporate on the first day of this tournament. The opening round is worth far fewer points than the later stages of this competition, and don't let an early exit spoil your March Madness. There are 63 games in the tournament to enjoy, and no one game will make or break your chances of a successful run.

SEED STATISTICS & TRENDS

TOP THREE SEEDS ARE SAFE FIRST ROUND PICKS

March Madness is known for its upsets, but they very rarely come against one of the top three seeds in the first round. The top three seeds are 432-36 straight up, including a sparkling 154-2 record for the No. 1 seed. The big favorites usually get the job done.

NINE OVER EIGHT

A surprising first round development has been the success of the 9 seed. The 9 seed is a surprising 81-75 over their eight seed counterpart. Lots of brackets will try to include plausible upsets, and the 8 vs 9 matchup will be a popular choice to take the underdog.

CLOSER THAN YOU MAY THINK

Seeds 5 through 7 have a winning record against teams 10 through 12, but not by much. They have a combined record of 291-176, for a win rate of just .623. Do not hesitate to take a 10th, 11th, or 12th seed that you think can pull off the upset.

TWO CONSISTENTLY BEATS THREE

In the Sweet 16, the 2 seed has been able to easily handle the 3 seeds. On paper, this should be a very close Sweet 16 matchup, but the 2 seeds have gone 33-19 in the March Madness tournament.

IT WON'T BE ALL NO. 1 SEEDS

Since 1985, only one March Madness tournament has seen all four No. 1 seeds reach the Final Four. To take it a step further, two or fewer No. 1 seeds have reached the Final Four in 35 of the last 39 years. It is unlikely they lose in the first two rounds, but they will start falling at the Sweet 16.

...BUT IT WILL BE AT LEAST ONE

Only two March Madness tournaments have seen all four No. 1 seeds get bounced before the Final Four. Upsets will happen along the way, but these teams are the No. 1 seed for a reason. Don't get too crazy with too many late round upsets.

FANCY YOUR CHANCES?

The odds of a perfect bracket are 1 in 120 billion if you closely follow the betting odds. Don't focus on a perfect bracket, but a winning one instead.



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BETTING FOR DUMMIES & NOVICE BETTORS

UNDERSTANDING THE TYPES OF BETTING: FOUR MAJOR TYPES

1. MONEYLINES

This is the most straightforward way to bet on the March Madness tournament. There are a total of 63 games to be played this month, and each one will have a winner and a loser. Just like the NBA, teams will play consecutive overtime periods until a winner is declared in each matchup. The seeding and margin of victory do not play a role in moneyline betting, as this straightforward wager is the foundation of sports betting.

2. TOTALS

Betting on the total is one of the best ways novice bettors can get involved in March Madness. For each game, a line will be set with -110 odds on both sides. In most March Madness games, this number is between 130 and 155 points. It doesn't matter if it is a one point thriller or a 40 point blowout, this type of bet is purely on the total points scored for both teams.

3. SPREADS

This is where things can get tricky. Due to the nature of this massive tournament, there will be plenty of mismatches in the early rounds. Using

the spread can be the best way to bet on these seemingly one-sided affairs. A point spread is used to balance out the line, so both sides have -110 odds.

For example, a No. 1 seed may have -2000 moneyline odds, with the underdog coming back with +1000 odds. There isn't much money to be made on either side. However, with a -19.5 point spread, both sides become playable. If you elect to bet on the favorite, you would need the 1 seed to win by 20 or more points to win your bet. Alternatively, if you think the underdog can keep it close, you would need the 16 seed to win by any number, or lose by 19 or fewer points to win your bet.

4. FUTURES

March Madness is one of the best sporting events to place future bets. You can bet on who the outright champion will be, with the potential for a massive payout. You can also bet on any of the 64 teams to reach the Sweet 16, Elite Eight, or Final Four. Their payouts will depend on how daunting your wager is, but a sharp wager can pay handsomely.

BETTING TIPS:

Seeding isn't everything: The Top 3 seeds will almost certainly steamroll their opposition in the first round or two, but even that isn't guaranteed in March Madness. The 5 seed is upset by the 12 seed an incredible 35% of the time, and there will be no shortage of upsets at this year's tournament.

Bankroll management: Managing a bankroll is crucial not only for March Madness, but also for sports betting as a whole. One unit represents 1% of your total bankroll, and Doc's Sports uses a 1-8 unit betting scale. Most bets will just be 1 to 4 units, and there is no reason to ever place more than 8% of your bankroll on a single wager.

BETTING TIPS & ADVICE

RECENT FORM MATTERS

It's easy to see how a team did on both ends of the court throughout the regular season, but the last few games are much better indicators of how a team will do in March Madness. College rosters see plenty of change over the 40-game season, and stats can be skewed by how a team did several months ago. Momentum is everything in college sports.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

The March Madness tournament will be played on neutral courts, but that doesn't mean all things are equal in terms of support. Games will take place nationwide, from Seattle to Cleveland, and New York to San Antonio. No team will have the benefit of home court advantage, but a team from New York would much rather play in New Jersey than California. This is not a trend that will be advertised, but the closer a team is to their neutral site, the better they will perform.

MONEY MANAGEMENT

It doesn't matter if you are a newbie or seasoned bettor, money management is everything. If you can't effectively manage your bankroll, it doesn't matter how much research you put in. Every profitable sports bettor understands that sticking to a unit size is the best indicator of long-term results. Don't blow your entire bankroll on any one set of games.

EXPERIENCE IS CRUCIAL

It is easy to assume each season brings a fresh crop of superstars to the tournament, but that is not always the case. Not only does having players with tournament experience go a long way, but coaches, trainers, assistants, and even janitors with experience can be the difference-maker. A winning dressing room isn't built overnight, and pay attention to the schools with historically strong basketball programs. UCLA, Kentucky, North Carolina, UConn, Duke, and Indiana account for 48% of the National Championship wins. While they aren't necessarily the favorites this year, taking a historically good school with a perceived weak program is a great wagering strategy.

ATS OVER SU RECORD

It is easy to see who is sitting on top of the regular season standings, but that doesn't mean they will necessarily do well in March Madness. Rather than looking at a team's win-loss record (SU), their against the spread (ATS) record is a far better sign of how well they have done. A team may have taken advantage of an easy schedule to cruise to the top, but they didn't do as well as expected against the spread. Alternatively, an underdog may have fallen short of taking down the Behemoths on their schedule, but if they were able to consistently cover the spread they will likely do so again in March.



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PARTY GAMES

FOR WATCH PARTIES

DRINK WHEN

The easiest drinking game to play at March Madness is Drink When... This game is as straightforward as it comes, as you will drink when a certain thing happens in the game. You can make up your own rules, or follow one of the many guides available online. Be wary of adding too many rules, as this game can quickly become confusing if there are dozens of things to watch for.

My personal favorites are:

Drink when someone misses a free throw

Finish your drink if they go 0/2 from the line

Drink when the broadcast brings up a busted or perfect March Madness Bracket

Drink when there is a jump ball

Finish your drink if they have to re-do the jump ball

Drink when there is a lead change

DRINK WHEN+

Everyone has heard of Drink When... but have you heard of Drink When+? This twist on the classic sports drinking game is perfect for your watch party. It is easy to see this game fall apart when the people paying attention are drinking and are being forced to remind the room that a rule occurred. With Drink When+ you will each select a specific thing to happen, and when your event occurs you get to give out a drink. You will want to make these props more common than the standard Drink When props, such as when one of the teams makes a three-pointer, misses a three-pointer, or there is a slam dunk. This is the perfect way to punish the unengaged viewers by piling on your drinks in their direction.

GAMBLING LOTTERY

It's common for your watch party to include non-sport bettors, and this is the perfect way to get them involved. Rather than buying pizza or drinks for the party, allocate some of your funds to a few free bets for your guests. Even a small \$10 bet will hypnotize a casual fan, and you will suddenly have an engaged watch party. Write out a few bets on paper, put them into a hat, and offer a random free bet to the casual sports fans.

QUICK HITS

A personal favorite of mine is Quick Hits. This gambling game involves making rapid-fire bets with your friends with no real loss or gain. You can play with money, drinks, or poker chips as your currency. To play, you will make instantly cashable bets with your friends, and either keep score on correct bets or take a drink on each loss. Quick Hits is a great way to make live bets without paying the exorbitant -120 juice most sites offer with these types of props. This can include:

Will we score on this possession?

Which team will take the next timeout?

Which team will score the next three-pointer?

Who will miss the next free throw?

Who will have the next turnover?

MONEY MANAGEMENT

TIPS & ADVICE

CONSISTENT UNIT SIZING

The term **unit sizing** gets thrown around often in the world of sports betting, and for good reason. Without a consistent unit size, you will not only be unable to accurately track your bets, but you will miss out on potential profits by changing up your unit size daily. By sticking to the same unit size and only changing the number of units on any given bet, you will maximize your chances of coming out on top.

NEVER CHASE LOSSES

There will be no shortage of upsets at this year's NCAA Tournament, and you will inevitably lose some of your bets. However, chasing your losses is the easiest way to put yourself in financial hardship. It can be tempting to double down when your team starts to fall behind or double the size of your bet on the next game to make up for a previous loss. While taking a losing day is never fun, losing a couple units can be easily recovered in the future. Unfortunately, if you start chasing losses and find yourself 5, 10 or 20 units in the hole from a single day, you run the risk of permanently damaging your bankroll.

AVOID PARLAYS

The sportsbooks will be tempting you to create parlays all tournament long. They will offer you a bonus for parlays, same game parlays, and will even create their own boosted parlays for you to bet with a single click. Contrary to popular belief, they are not doing this out of the goodness of their hearts. Parlays are the biggest money makers for sportsbooks and the biggest losers for March Madness bettors. The occasional two-leg parlay is not a problem, but stringing together several bets for an unlikely payout is not the way to make money on the NCAA Tournament.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHAT ARE UNITS?

One unit represents 1% of your total bankroll. For example, if you have \$5,000 allocated for gambling, one unit would be \$50. While you can change the quantity of units you bet based on your confidence level, you must never change your unit size. If you win a few bets and now have a bankroll of \$5,300, it doesn't mean you should immediately up your units to \$53. Stick to a unit size for several months before considering upping or lowering your limits.

HOW ARE UNITS USED?

Doc's Sports uses a 1 to 8 unit scale. A large portion of your bets will be between 1 and 4 units and can be adjusted based on the odds and your personal confidence level. When a March Madness line is mispriced, you can up your unit size into the 5 to 8 unit range. Under no circumstances should you place a bet of more than 8% of your bankroll, as that will leave you vulnerable to an unlucky bounce crippling your success.

HOW TO 100% GUARANTEE MARCH MADNESS WINNERS?

You can't. No matter how confident you are in any one bet, it is impossible to guarantee winning during the March Madness tournament this year. You can increase your chances of finishing in the green by following these tips, but nothing is guaranteed in the world of sports betting. It is called gambling for a reason, so make sure you only bet what you can afford to potentially lose.

