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Everything You Need to Know About March Madness

By Kirsten Ballard in [HEALTH](#)

Posted Mar 17 2014 - 9:00am

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We've digested the rest of our Super Bowl feast and finally gotten our sleep schedules back on track from [binge watching the Olympics](#) and now it's the most magical time of the year for college basketball: March Madness. March Madness is the name for the NCAA basketball tournaments. The games begin March 18, and whether you go to a basketball powerhouse university or you don't think your school even owns a basketball, it's easy to get obsessed with the brackets, smack talk and [school spirit](#).

March Madness, or, as many sports announcers refer to it, "the Big Dance," sends fans into a frenzy, hence the name "March Madness." More than 1,000 colleges are considered part of the NCAA, and of these, 68 men's teams and 64 women's teams enter the tournament.

It can be a lot to process, but we're laying out a simple guide to understanding the Big Dance so you can understand the method behind the madness and join in on the fun.

How it works



Unlike the bowl-game system of football, March Madness uses single-elimination to determine the winner of all the participants. Fans from across the nation wait in anticipation to see if their team makes it through the rounds: the First Four, the Second Round ("the Round of 64"), the Third Round ("the Round of 32" or "the Regional Quarterfinals"), the Regional Semi-finals (the Sweet Sixteen), the Regional Finals (the Elite Eight), the National Semi-Finals (the Final Four) and the championship round.

Teams are selected to participate based on their Rating Percentage Index (RPI), which is a measure of strength of schedule (whom they played) and how a team does against that schedule. A team's RPI

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is calculated through the team's ranking in national polls, its conference record, its road record, its wins versus ranked opponents and the way the team finishes the regular season (winning season or losing season). Of the 68 men's teams, 31 schools receive automatic bids after winning their conference, and 36 receive "at-large" bids. Of the 64 women's teams, 31 teams receive automatic bids and 32 receive at-large bids. At-large bids are given to teams that finished with winning seasons, and those teams are chosen at the discretion of the NCAA selection committee.

The men's teams are placed into one of four regions during Selection Sunday (the women's are announced on Selection Monday, one day later). The regions are named based roughly on the cities the rounds are played in—the East, Midwest, South and West. The regions are picked as neutral locations in centralized cities, like Greensboro, North Carolina, for the South region and Phoenix, Arizona, for the West. Teams cannot play on their home court, meaning nobody has the home-team advantage.

Within each region, each team is assigned a different seed number, with 1 being the best team. The seeds are meant to show each team's chance of winning.

Bracketology, explained



A bracket is a web that maps out the game play, illustrating how the teams advance to the championship game. Brackets look complicated at first, but it follows a flowchart pattern. If a team wins their first game, they advance to the next round.

Fans can participate in the madness by filling out their own brackets. This is the art of using rankings, guesswork and team loyalties to guess which teams will advance and which will eventually win the championship.

The brackets are available through [The NCAA](#), [ESPN](#), [NBC Sports](#), [CBS Sports](#) or a simple Google search.

After downloading a bracket, it is useful to look up the team's rankings (usually listed next to the team's name in the bracket) to "scientifically" guess which team will advance. "Cinderella stories" happen frequently, which is when a lower-ranked team upsets a top dog, and it is essentially guesswork to know who will win the seventh seed vs. eighth seed games. Fans can chose the winning teams based solely on ranking or by guessing randomly.

Once you fill out a bracket, you can enter it into a "March Madness pool," where your guesses compete against other peoples' brackets to see whose is the most accurate. Many websites that offer downloadable brackets also offer pools, but offices and dorm suites can also make their own pools. You can also get a group of friends together and form your own pool. These can be played for money, where all participants put in a lump sum of money and the winner takes the pool, or they can be played just for fun. "Winning" is [calculated by points](#) that are awarded based on how accurate the brackets are.

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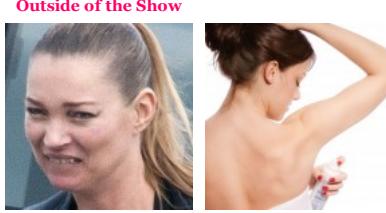
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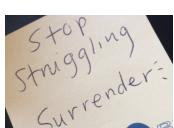
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bracket!

Fun tidbits from howstuffworks.com to keep in mind when filling out a bracket: The lowest-ranked team to win was a no. 8 seed. No. 11 seeds have made it to the Final Four. Only three times in history did a No. 1 seed not make it to the Final Four.

Celebrating in style



March Madness lives up to its name when it comes to celebrating. The winning team earns a giant trophy, banners for each round they advance through, rings, shirts, hats and bragging rights. The winning team also has a ceremony where they cut down the net.

[But you don't have to be a NCAA men's basketball player to get in on the fun.](#) Allison Perch, a junior

college's town. "Sports
d just casually watch," she

college-age fans. Many
h as block parties, rushing

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