

March Madness 2018

The Traits of Champions, The Making of a Cinderella, and A No-Nonsense Approach Building A Rock (Chalk)-Solid Bracket

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With Selection Sunday impending and the final sizing for Cinderella's slippers being completed in the next couple of days, the time has once again come for the best tournament in the world (sorry World Cup and Minnesota State High School Hockey fans). The eyes of the country are once again diverted for a three-week stretch toward the ultimate sports binge-watching experience of the year—at least among those involving unpaid amateurs (DeAndre Ayton notwithstanding). Billions of dollars in relative productivity will be lost and lunches will become half-day vacations in places of employment from coast-to-coast only to see that one coworker who can name little more than Duke, Carolina, and his or her alma mater emerge victorious for the second time in five years over the office Jay Bilas and/or Nate Silver in the local bracket challenge.

College hoops fans have been treated to storybook Cinderella runs all the way to the Final Four and traditional blue-blood programs clashing for championship banners in recent years. Two years ago, Marcus Paige hit a miracle, double-clutch three-point shot with only seconds remaining to tie the game before Kris Jenkins buried a thirty-foot shot as time expired to win the championship. Props to Roy Williams' squad for being able to get up off of the mat and climb the mountain last year (even if it was the most boring title game since UConn/Butler). Within the last decade and change, March Madness has gifted fans two unlikely runs to glory by UConn led by diminutive backcourts, back-to-back championship game journeys by Brad Stevens' Butler teams as a 5 and an 8 seed, respectively, and previously rare Final Four attendance by double-digit seeds George Mason (11 seed in 2006), VCU (11 seed in 2011), Wichita State (11 seed in 2013), and Syracuse (10 seed last year). We have seen two seeds get beat convincingly in the first round of games (which, thankfully, is once again referred to as round one and the play-in games are referred to as just that), including Michigan State losing soundly to Middle Tennessee last year, Georgetown getting run over by Lob City (A.K.A. Andy Enfield's Florida Gulf Coast squad) in 2013, Duke losing to C.J. McCollum's Lehigh team, and Missouri being bounced by Kyle O'Quinn's Norfolk State team in 2012.

That about reaches the nostalgia quotient for this article. Besides, the hours between the conclusion of CBS' Selection Sunday show and Thursday at noon/11c (shout out, Minnesota) are about underprepared gambling and proving that you are some combination of luckier and more knowledgeable about college hoops than every one of your Facebook friends and office mates. Sprinkle in some favoritism towards alma maters, hasty internet research, and feeling obligated to choose at least one 5/12 upset, and presto!, you have the 2018 edition bracket. For better or for worse, though, this year is a bit light on true powerhouse teams from both a tradition and from an analytical standpoint (don't @ me, UVA, Nova, MSU, Duke, and KU fans/alums. Ralph Sampson, Scottie Reynolds, Mateen Cleaves, Jay Williams, and Mario Chalmers, respectively, aren't walking through that door). With that in mind, and without further ado, let's break down what has historically produced a bracket that is will be a source of pride when handed in by lunch on Thursday.

Bracket construction will be developed with a middle out strategy (you are welcome, computer science majors and "Silicon Valley" fans). Subsequently, several teams will be categorized statistically in the following form:

Team Adjusted Offensive Efficiency* (rank)/Adjusted Defensive Efficiency** (rank)/Eff. Margin (rank)
(These numbers could change very slightly based on Saturday and Sunday games)
Short prediction and discussion of team and its chances to make each stage of the tournament.
Grade: (I.e. first round upset potential, Sweet Sixteen lock, Final Four favorite, etc.).

*Offensive efficiency is the number of points a team scores per 100 possessions.

**Defensive efficiency is the number of points a team allows per 100 possessions.

Disclaimer: This author is not a professional gambler, nor does he play one on T.V. (not wealthy/good-looking/algorithm-oriented enough for either role). Take what you will from this data and analysis, but please don't get too mad if an upset happens. Turns out, upsets happen. That is why this is fun. So, before the FBI disqualifies a quarter of the field for paying top players (cough Arizona, Duke, Kentucky), let's go!

Step 1: Pick Your Champion and A Tentative Final Four

Sure, it is fun to pick an under-the-radar team to ride all the way to the championship game, and the all-mascot selection method gets lots of attention every year, but if you are serious about getting an "A" grade in Bracketology class this year, there are some fundamental strategies that have historically yielded strong brackets, especially when choosing Final Four teams.

When filling out a bracket, it is beneficial to first select a champion and then branch out. When selecting teams that will meet on Championship Monday, here are some characteristics that almost all eventual champions over the past 25 years have possessed:

1. Your Champion should be a top-3 seed.
 - 19 of the past 22 champions have been top-3 seeds.
2. Champions are ranked in the AP pre-season poll.
 - 28 of the past 32 champions have been ranked in the pre-season poll. The exceptions were the Carmelo Syracuse team, the first Gators championship team, the Kemba UConn team, and the ultimate Cinderella 1985 Villanova team.
3. Championship game participants are often top-20 in offensive and defensive efficiency. Preferably top-15.
 - Every champion in the past decade has been in the top twenty of offensive AND defensive efficiency.
 - All but the 2011 UConn team were top ten offensive efficiency.
 - KenPom adjusted rankings or more general Eff. rankings work here.
 - Exception-UNC was a top-5 offensive team last year, but was the 24th ranked defensive team going into the tournament last year. They were 3rd in total efficiency
 - Make sure a team is very strong on at least one end of the floor
4. Champions have a regular season margin of victory of at least 10 PPG. Very strong contenders are in the 12-15 PPG range.
 - Final Four Teams beat teams by at least 8 PPG. Preferably 10.
 - Ten of the past twelve champions have been in the top-5 in margin of victory.
 - **Literally no other statistic correlates to a championship run better than an elite margin of victory.**
5. Championship contenders have a player that will be drafted in the 1st round of the NBA draft (preferably in the lottery). They should also have a guard that will be drafted.
 - No team has won the NCAA tournament and not had a player drafted in the last 25 years.
 - The only team that made it to the title game without a draft-bound point guard was Michigan State in 2005, though Kalin Lucas was the Big Ten Player of the Year.

6. Final Four teams should be in the top 35 of the KenPom rankings. Preferably in the top 20. Championship game teams should be in the top 20 (lone exception was Butler in 2011).
 - When looking at ranking systems, choose KenPom over RPI/BPI every time.
7. Final Four teams should have a coach that has been to at least the Elite Eight in the past. Kevin Ollie and Brad Stevens are recent exceptions, but Ollie was on Jim Calhoun's bench prior to taking over for him, and Brad Stevens had three future NBA players on his teams and is perhaps a top-5 basketball coach in the NBA right now.
8. In choosing which teams to advance in the Final Four, consider if a team has had some level of success against high-quality competition.
 - A poor record against top-25 teams is not a death sentence, but it is highly discouraging for Final Four and especially championship contenders.
9. Championship contenders should have at least a .750 winning percentage, and any team not named Villanova, Xavier, Gonzaga, or Cincinnati should be from a Power Five conference.

So which teams fit these criteria? As noted earlier, a few of the blue blood teams are down this year. Of the teams that are ranked in the top 15, only Duke and Gonzaga are in the top-twenty in both offensive and defensive efficiency, and Gonzaga's strength of schedule is, per usual, bad.

Selecting Mid-Round Games

After the dust settles on the first weekend and as the Sweet Sixteen begins, a majority of teams remaining are talented and equipped to make a title run. Matchups become much more important when selecting winning teams. Here are a couple of characteristics that can make this process a bit more palatable:

1. You are pretty safe eliminating any 12 seed or lower at this point. The sweetheart run through the first weekend was memorable, but it's time for the big dogs to eat now.
2. Dominant players and great coaches start to shine here. If a team has both, they are best equipped to move forward.
3. Veteran leadership, especially in the backcourt, becomes more important as teams start to equilibrate in terms of size and athleticism. Also, trapping and pressing become more difficult as athleticism and skill increase (closed-circuit to Bob Huggins).
4. In games of like versus like (For instance, the potential second round Auburn/Clemson game), generally choose the team with the superior NBA or All-American talent.
5. Take note of a team's health. For instance, Auburn might be able to get past Charleston and even Clemson on talent alone, but Kansas) would present a seemingly insurmountable level of challenge.
6. Again, if the players (especially the backcourt) and/or the coach have advanced to the Sweet Sixteen in past years, their likelihood of advancing further rises significantly.

The Making of a Cinderella

There will be upsets. However, don't miss the forest for the trees when filling out your bracket in the first and second rounds. Sure, we can all think of a time that a colleague or friend correctly picked a 14 seed to beat a 3 seed, but that same person likely didn't tell you about the two 5/12 matchups and the 4/13 matchup that they got wrong. No amount of first round foresight will supersede selecting 75% or more of the Elite Eight and Final Four participants, but having a Final Four team eliminated on Thursday or Friday can really hamper your brackets' viability. Furthermore, as your bracket pool becomes larger, each point on your bracket becomes increasingly important. With all this in mind, let's look into what makes a strong upset candidate and some strong principles for picking winners in the first and second rounds.

1. Advance all 1 and 2 seeds. Statistically, you are better off automatically moving these teams into the round of 32, even with the relative increase in 2/15 upsets in the past ten years.

- If you do choose to pick a 15 to beat a 2 seed, choose that team to lose in the round of 32. Only one (Florida Gulf Coast) has advanced to the Sweet Sixteen.
 - 2 seeds win their first-round game over almost 94% of the time, and incorrectly eliminating a two seed that advances to the Elite Eight or the Final Four can break your bracket quickly.
2. Look at the Las Vegas game lines. If a team is favored by four points or more, that team is a strong candidate to advance. Granted, teams that are 6-10 point favorites will likely lose in the first round, but the early lines are good markers for which underdogs to take a closer look at. Also, 10 seeds will often be favored over 7 seeds, and some 11 seeds might even be favored over 6 seeds. Target these teams for first round upsets.
 - 8/9 seed designations are irrelevant. Look at the Vegas spreads to determine which team is the favorite, and then go to the matchup to determine which team you like better. Many times a 9 seed will be an underperforming major conference team that is still better than the mid-major 8 seed.
 3. When looking at potential 3/14 upset and 4/13 upsets, look for teams that have an NBA player on their roster.
 - CJ McCollum's 15-seed Lehigh team beat Duke
 - Kenneth Faried's 13th seeded Morehead State beat Louisville
 - Kyle O'Quinn's 15th seeded Norfolk State beat Missouri
 - RJ Hunter's 14th seeded Georgia State beat Duke

Colin Sexton and Alabama fit this mold nicely. Mo Bamba and Texas will have trouble scoring enough to win more than one game. The scouting report is out on Trae Young, and it is unlikely that he can beat Duke by himself. Ergo, this isn't the strongest year for NBA-talent-driven upsets outside of Sexton.

4. When looking for upset candidates, look for teams that have been to the tournament before or that have a coach that has been to the Big Dance in the past.
 - This year, that includes
5. Don't be beholden to math, but don't ignore it, either.
 - 5 seeds beat 12 seeds about 64% of the time. That amounts to one or two upsets per year.
 - 6 seeds beat 11 seeds at the same 64% clip, meaning that the math would suggest one or two upsets per year.
 - 7 seeds win their first-round matchup 60% of the time, meaning that two upsets here is not uncommon.
 - The 8/9 matchups are a toss-up. Literally.

Rather than picking a set number of upsets in each seed-pairing group, you will probably be better off selecting 7-10 upsets overall with a relative bias towards picking 5/12, 6/11, and 7/10 upsets. Again, choose 8/9 matchups based on matchups (and Vegas lines).

6. In terms of what to look for in upset-minded teams, look for teams that have veteran playmakers in the backcourt and/or teams that are dominant on the glass. Teams that can cause havoc from the perimeter can heat up enough to beat teams that are more talented in a one game scenario, and teams that are dominant rebounding teams can shrink games enough to win a war of attrition in a single game.
 - Teams that fit the offensive mold are Nevada, Seton Hall, NC State, Davidson, and Creighton.
 - Teams that fit the defense and rebounding mold are Clemson, Texas A&M, Texas (can't score), Loyola Chicago, and Alabama.
7. Don't pick upsets against teams that are playing in their own backyard. It is hard enough to pick big-time upsets in the first place, so it is even more unlikely that it will happen when the opponent is playing a pseudo-home game.

8. Take at least one double-digit seed into the second weekend. Preferably two. Neither of those teams should NOT be a 14 seed or lower, either.

First Tier: Championship or Bust

Virginia: 116.1 (28th)/84.2 (1st)/31.9 (1st)

Analysis: This might be Tony Bennett's best defensive team to date, which is saying something given the prowess that UVA has showed on that side of the floor for over half a decade. The difference is that this year's team has guys who can get buckets if shots aren't falling or in late game situations, where even Mike Scott, Justin Anderson, Malcolm Brogden, and London Parrantes had trouble saying the same for past editions of the UVA model. The most apparent knock on the championship résumé is the lack of any player who is projected to be drafted, let alone to go in the first round, and the 28th-ranked offensive efficiency is a bit low for a classic championship contender. With that said, the Hoos' defense will keep them in every game, and if Ty Jerome, Kyle Guy, and Devon Hall can generate enough offense from the perimeter, UVA has as reliable a chance as any to roll into the Final Four as any team (barring a Sweet Sixteen Matchup with Arizona). Fortunately for Bennett's teams, teams that are just outside of the upper-Escalon have had more success in the past decade than in the past, and UVA is best in the country in total efficiency margin, which bodes well for them (Gonzaga and UNC were first and third last year, respectively). The forwards will likely have some trouble against athletic bigs once they reach the third weekend, but they were able to handle Duke and Carolina's frontcourt already this season. Pencil in the Hoos to be playing on Easter weekend barring a horrific and unexpected shooting slump on the second weekend.

Grade: Final Four frontrunner, Championship Co-Favorite.

Matchup Notes: UVA was the unlikely one seed to draw the Arizona buzz saw. If they can get past DeAndre Ayton and company, they should be able to out-Cincinnati Cincinnati or any other team that emerges from the bottom half of the bracket. If it Kentucky that emerges in the 4/5 match up, the Wildcats have enough skill and scoring ability at each spot on the floor to also give Virginia a lot of trouble. Even Creighton in the second round is going to make the Hoos work to advance. Still, no team works better than the Hoos on a game-by-game basis, and if Bennett and the crew can get past Arizona/Kentucky, the boys from Charlottesville have a great chance to advance to the Final Four and beyond.

Villanova: 127.2 (1st)/ 96.2 (23rd)/ 31.0 (2nd)

Analysis: Nova is the anti-Virginia, so to speak, as they boast the best offensive efficiency in the country. Don't just write that off as being a product of the Big East, either, as Xavier, Butler, Creighton, and Seton Hall are all established tournament teams, and the conference as a whole is on par with the power 5 conferences (save the ACC). Josh Hart might be competing with Lonzo Ball for minutes with the Lakers now, but Jalen Brunson and Mikal Bridges still make a heck of a frontcourt/backcourt duo to the tune of 36.9 points per game, and they fulfill the adage of having a first round draft pick (Bridges) and a draft-able guard (Brunson). Donte DiVincenzo spaces the floor on the offensive end to provide plenty of drive-and-kick and drive-and-finish chances for the high-powered 'Cats offense, and Spellman has been a fiend on the glass all year to help kick-start the transition chances that Nova relies on to collect easy buckets. The lone concern for the Wildcats is that if several shooters go cold, they don't have an endless supply of frontcourt size to outduel guys like Bagley and Ayton, especially late in games. Strong offensive teams that can match their scoring output will give Bennett's team trouble, especially after the first weekend. Even so, with all of the firepower they run out on offense every game, they should blow by teams in the first three rounds and be a strong candidate to dance all the way to Final Four weekend (especially considering there won't be a pesky Wisconsin team to stand in their way this time around). Importantly, this could set up a contest between perhaps the two best looking coaches in college hoops between Tony Bennett and Jay Wright. Stay tuned.

Grade: Potential Final Four Team, Championship Contender If shots Are Falling

Matchup Notes: Colin Sexton is going to score a lot against them in round two, but they will still roll past The Tide and Press Virginia (probably). The bottom of the bracket could get messy, but it shouldn't produce any team that Nova can't handle. Nova will be a strong favorite to come out of the East.

Duke: 123.5 (2nd)/93.9 (10th)/29.6 (3rd)

Analysis: No mysterious back injuries for Coach K this year. His team next year might be one of the five most talented teams in NCAA history (but he's definitely not dropping bags for players or negotiating shoe deals. No way...), but that isn't stopping this year's edition of the Devils from being the most qualified team on paper to win K's sixth title. They check every single box: veteran coach, multiple first round draft picks, a senior (if a bit mercurial) guard, and a top-end offensive and defensive rating. With all due respect to Trae Young, Marvin Bagley has been the most dominating player in the country for much of year, and there are only a handful of guys in the field of 68 this year that will be able to slow down the healthy and rested top-five pick. Gary Trent provides spacing and ancillary scoring ability, and Wendell Carter adds even more length alongside Bagley to make uncontested chances at the rim rarities for opponents. Duke did have to switch to a zone defense midway through the season after getting torched by teams that could beat their perimeter players off the dribble, so teams that have four or five shooters (i.e. North Carolina) can really give Coach K's squad trouble on defense. At the end of the day, though, if Duke does trip up, they will have themselves to blame, likely in much the same way as they decided to take a couple of games off this year, especially when Bagley picks up some early fouls. The Devils are not individually great on defense, but since switching to primarily a zone, the Dukies have been markedly better at holding down their ACC opponents. Carter will be able to guard talented bigs for most teams to keep Bagley out of trouble, but teams that can challenge Duke at the rim and in transition and who have a sound system on defense are the teams that are most likely to give the Dukies trouble. UVA, Purdue, and Michigan State come to mind, as well as the more offensively oriented teams if they can get out to a fast start.

Grade: Championship Co-Favorite

Matchup Notes: Duke drew the most difficult bracket (I can hear the Crazies complaining already. Grayson Allen must be rubbing off). Still, they might have a point, as Rhode Island or Trae Young and friends are going to make them earn their trip to the Sweet Sixteen. There, they will most likely match up with Michigan State, which is a true battle of juggernauts in every way in what could be the game of the tournament. If they emerge there, it will just be a matter up getting up again for Kansas, who they should beat.

Michigan State: 120.1 (10th)/93.7 (7th)/26.3 (6th)

Analysis: The Spartans have the composition of a championship team, including two lottery picks in Jaren Jackson and Miles Bridges, a veteran head coach in Tom Izzo, an upperclassman guard rotation (Langford, Nairn Jr.), high-end efficiency statistics, and the two aforementioned wings who can get buckets in late-clock and late-game situations. Sparty does have a tendency to get bogged down against teams that place with a slower, methodical pace (see Northwestern, Michigan twice), and they are ranked 223rd in adjusted tempo, meaning that they don't get many buckets in transition. Expect to sweat out a couple of games if you are rooting for Sparty to advance deep into the tournament, though they have all of the tools to make it to the Final Four and beyond. If they dodge any of the great defensive teams (UVA, Cincinnati, Michigan), they could very well stroll into Easter weekend with another chance for Izzo to win his second national title.

***Closed-circuit to Myles Bridges: Slash to the basket and dunk over people. You aren't in NBA yet, so chill with the jacking threes philosophy until April 3rd).

Grade: Strong Final Four Contender

Matchup Notes: The Spartans are going to ball out if they want to get Izzo his second title. Assuming they get past a TCU team that can score the heck out of the ball, they will hit a matchup against Duke. Duke will almost certainly be favored in that game, and while MSU does have the shooting to beat the Duke zone, Izzo has been slow to mix up the lineup and move Myles Bridges to the four. They will likely be getting a couple of points against Duke, but if they do manage to win the battle of coaching legends, there is no one left in the tournament that they can't beat, including a potential matchup with Kansas in the next round.

Tier 2: If A Couple of Things Break Right...

North Carolina: 122.1 (4th)/97.3 (35th)/ 24.8 (7th)

Analysis: Despite losing Justin Jackson to the NBA (the Kings technically do qualify as an NBA team), the Tar Heels once again have quite a bit of firepower. Joel Berry has been healthier this season than he was down the stretch last year (though that bulky ankle is still lingering), Luke Maye has developed into a reliable and versatile scorer, and Theo Pinson has become the offensive engine for the Heels on a game-by-game basis. Frankly, UNC has had several games where they have been largely awful on defense, and Roy William's team has a tendency to get into track meets against teams that have less overall talent. With that said, Theo Pinson has been getting buckets every which way for close to two months now, and his emergence has given UNC the firepower to outscore teams in any given game. The Heels have particularly had trouble against teams that force them to slow down and play against man-to-man in the half court. However, they have been strong against the zone due in large part to their ability to play four or five guys at once that can extend it to at least eighteen feet. Carolina relies on the transition baskets that result from their top-fifty tempo, and teams like Virginia, Virginia Tech, and Michigan State were able to slow them way down on their way to running the Heels out of their gym. To its credit, UNC is battle test out of the ACC and from a couple of brawny non-conference games. However, the Heels are going to likely run into a few teams after the first weekend that are going to force them to play in the half court, and if Luke Maye isn't giving them thirty points off of elbow jumpers and if Berry isn't hitting his shots, the Heels have some of the characteristics of a team that could fall out of the tournament a round or two earlier than expected. On the other hand, this isn't this team's first rodeo, and they could jump out to early leads and ride their tournament experience and veteran moxie all the way to the Final Four (or at least one round better than Duke).

Grade: Final Four Hopeful, Sweet Sixteen Upset Candidate

Matchup Notes: Carolina can send flowers to the selection committee for a manageable trip to the Sweet Sixteen (though Providence would give them a good test out of the gate), at which point they will essentially be a better version of Michigan with more tournament experience. They would then mostly likely get Xavier or Ohio State, both of whom they will be equipped to handle. If Berry is hitting shots and Pinson keeps playing at his current level, UNC has a fairly easy road to making another Final Four appearance (**ducks to avoid stones from Michigan and Xavier fans).

Purdue: 123.3 (3rd)/96.7 (28th)/26.6 (5th)

Analysis: Purdue is solid. Matt Painter is a solid coach. Isaac Haas and Matt Haarms comprise a solid frontline. Carsen Edwards is a solid point guard. Dakota Mathias is a good shooter and floor spacer. This has produced one of the more efficient offenses in the country, especially in the half court, and this allows Purdue to handle teams it should beat essentially every time. The problem arises when their solid traits have to go up against teams that have a lot of firepower or that have enough size to compete with Haas and Haarms down low. Michigan State, Wisconsin, and Michigan were all able to play a grinder of a half-court game, collapse passing lanes and entry passes down to the bigs, and to play sound enough on defense and on the glass to prevent the Purdue offensive machine from wearing them down. Purdue isn't going to get blown out of any game, but against teams that can compete with them on the glass and tests them in transition, their history of unenthusiastic exits on the second weekend might rear its ugly head

once again. Even so, this is likely the best chance that a Matt Painter team has had to make a run to the final, as these Boilermakers have been more consistent and have better depth than even the JaJuan Johnson and E'Twuan Moore teams.

Grade: Sweet Sixteen Lock, Puncher's Chance At Final Four

Matchup Notes: Purdue is usually reliable in that they beat teams they are better than and rarely beat teams that they aren't. With that in mind, the Boilermakers should have enough firepower to get past Arkansas or Butler in round 2, though Arkansas will make them earn it. They lucked into a fairly easy lower half of the bracket with Texas Tech or Florida likely to emerge, both of whom Purdue has a good chance to handle. Still, until Matt Painter and company show it at least once, betting on Purdue in the second weekend and beyond is a risky errand.

Cincinnati: 114.3 (46th)/ 86.6 (2nd)/27.7 (4th)

Analysis: Cincinnati is diet Virginia. Almost as good as on defense, two stages below on offense, and fewer threats to score in the half court and late in games. Furthermore, the American Athletic Conference (AAC) doesn't hold a candle to the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), and even when adjusted for competition and tempo, Cincinnati is essentially a souped-up version of former Mick Cronin-coached teams. They lock teams down on defense as much as ever, they play at as slow a tempo as ever (322nd-ranked pace), and, though they are better on offense than in years past, they remain mediocre at best at scoring in the half court. Again, though, this is the best version of the Cincinnati model that has made mini runs in the tournament in the last five years, and that defense is going to keep them in every game they play. However, Cincinnati has lost four of the five games they have played against quality opponents (RPI top-thirty), and Cronin's Wildcats haven't been tested to any significant extent since November outside of the Wichita and Houston matchups. All told, Cincinnati has just enough firepower in Kyle Washington and Gary Clark to get to between 60 and 70 points, so after their first-round matchup, each game is going to be a nail-biter. It would appear that the 'Cats will fall a bit short on the offensive end at some point. The challenge is predicting where.

Grade: Sweet Sixteen Probable, Elite Eight Contender

Matchup Notes: Cincinnati is an interesting case. They were gifted a two seed, though a second-round matchup with Nevada would be an interesting matchup of offense versus defense. Cincinnati should be about a five-point favorite there, which puts them potentially up against Tennessee in what could be a 45-43 game. Betting on Cincinnati to advance beginning in the Sweet Sixteen will require sweating out some meat grinder games, so more power to you for every round they go.

Kansas: 120.4 (8th)/98.2 (51st)/22.2 (12th)

Analysis: A month and a half ago, Rock Chalk probably didn't belong anywhere within the Final Four conversation, but somewhere along with way, Bill Self decided that running the offense through Malik Newman would be a good idea, and Devonte Graham has emerged as a legitimate contender for National Player of the Year. Graham is operating an offense as well as anyone in the country right now (yes, that include Trae Young) as he has developed into a skilled passer and has impeccable vision both in the half court and in transition. Still, KU doesn't have the freakish rim protector that it has had in years past (see Joel Embiid and Jeff Withey, to name a couple). Their generally small size and propensity to let opponents rattle off runs on offense is highlighted in that even though Kansas plays in a high-octane BIG12 conference, they still give up a fair amount of points even after adjusting for the competition and pace. Kansas will certainly grab a one or two seed, so they will most likely make it to the second weekend on firepower alone. After that, they will have to rely on twenty points or more from Newman and for Graham to direct the flow of the game. Teams that can either match them shot-for-shot or that can make them grind out baskets in the half court will likely give them the most trouble. Even Bill Self would say that this is not one of the great iterations of a Kansas squad, but they will likely once again be knocking on the door of the Elite Eight and beyond.

Grade: Elite Eight Contender. Final Four Hopeful

Matchup Notes: Kansas should be able to outlast either Seton Hall or NC State, and though Auburn or Clemson's physicality will bother the Jayhawks, they should have enough firepower to dance to the Elite Eight. The bottom on the bracket threatens Duke or Michigan State, both of whom are more complete teams than Kansas.

Xavier: 121.5 (6th)/99.2 (62nd)/22.2 (10th)

Analysis: Xavier boasts a high-end coach in Chris Mack, some high-end firepower on the offensive end of the floor, some high-end individual talent in Trevan Bluiett, and a high-end, fast paced pace. In part because of that pace, X gives up a fair number of points, but they have been able to overcome the fairly porous defense against every opponent except for Arizona State (when they were good), Providence (twice), and Villanova (who is still good). JP Macura is a versatile perimeter player who can guard multiple positions on defense and score in multiple ways on offense. The aforementioned Bluiett can score in crunch time and power Xavier's offensive engine. Yet, with all that said, Xavier's good wins are countable on one hand, and they have been worked twice by Nova, who is likely more indicative of a top-flight Big East team. Mack is a heck of a coach, and he will have the Musketeers ready to go in each game, but any team that can match the team's offensive pace or that has a lot of size and athleticism on the low block is going to cause all kinds of trouble for Xavier.

Grade: Elite Eight Contender, Final Four Longshot

Matchup Notes: The top half of the brackets sets up nicely for the Musketeers. Ohio State would likely be the tougher of the OSU/Gonzaga matchup, but Mack should be able to devise a defense that can shut down KBD enough to slip into the Elite Eight.

Tier 3: If The Slipper Fits

Gonzaga: 119.9 (11th)/95.2 (17th)/24.7 (8th)

Analysis: This team lacks many of the players and firepower that made them the runners-up in last year's tournament. Neither Nigel Williams-Goss, Zach Collins, nor Przemek Karnowski are going to walk out of that tunnel to play for Gonzaga at any point, and the West Coast Conference is absolutely terrible outside of St. Mary's (who was snubbed, by the way. Syracuse? Really?). Gonzaga brings a balanced rotation, and Tillie and Norvell cut through WAC opposition twice a week. Expect Gonzaga to run over UNC-Greensboro, who is about on par with the competition that they face in conference play. If Ohio State can get past SDSU, though, expect Keita Bates-Diop to shred Gonzaga. The Zags are potentially good enough to squeak past the second round, but the Musketeers will most likely be waiting to dismiss them out in Los Angeles in the Sweet Sixteen.

Grade: Sweet Sixteen Contender, Elite Eight Longshot

Matchup Notes: Ohio State will be a pick 'em (should OSU beat SDSU). They will be getting a few points against Xavier.

Michigan: 116.0 (30th)/92.8 (6th)/23.19 (9th)

Analysis: Michigan is rolling into the tournament on the strength of a Big Ten Tournament win, including impressive wins over Michigan State and Purdue. Wagner and Abdur-Rahkman have blossomed the last month into high-end, versatile scorers, and Michigan's defense has developed into a top-ten operation. The challenges for the Wolverines will be if any team jumps out to an early lead on them. They play at a slovenly 333rd-ranked pace, and while they are functional in the half court, they like to run full sets that often take a significant chunk out of every shot clock. If they continue to play with the offensive efficiency that they have in the last two weeks, that will work fine. If they start off a bit cold in one of the weird first-round stadiums, including against a very good defensive team in Houston, they run the risk of getting into trouble. All told, Michigan is potentially the toughest obstacle in the way of Carolina making

yet another Final Four run, and if Mo Wagner can continue to emerge as a superb player on both ends of the floor, Michigan has an outside chance to wake up the echoes of the Trey Burke team that made it all the way to the title game.

Grade: Final Four longshot. UNC's biggest hurdle.

Matchup Notes: Houston is a very good team and has the ability to give the Wolverines a lot of trouble. The Wolverines depth and Beilein's tournament experience should power them into a matchup with the Tar Heels, where they will rely on their perimeter defense and solid half-court offense to grind out the high-powered Carolina machine. If they get past UNC, they will have to neutralize Trevan Bluiett to advance to the Final Four. They have played well enough in the last two weeks to accomplish both.

Arizona: 119.0 (15th)/99.6 (70th)/19.4 (21st)

Analysis: Wait, what is Arizona doing in this section? Is this the same team that lost three straight in November? The same team that almost had its coach resign? The same team that almost lost Trier to a PEDs suspension again? Yes, it is that Arizona team. They have the expected first overall pick in this summer's NBA Draft dominating on the offensive end in DeAndre Ayton (who will not be deemed ineligible before the tournament wraps up. We checked). Trier is back in business as of a week and change ago. Sean Miller is on a mission to get back at the NCAA and the rest of basketball. From a talent perspective alone, Arizona is easily a top-ten team in the country. Mix it all up, and you have a hyper-talented team that will strike fear into any coach that has to scheme to stop it, Virginia included. That inevitable Sweet Sixteen matchup will be a clash of titans, and while UVA should grind Arizona down and move on, it also would come as no surprise if Arizona comes out firing and rolls all the way to a Final Four appearance or more. It would be a tremendous story if Sean Miller, this year's villain of college basketball and likely subject of subsequent FBI investigation, can marshal his guys all the way to San Antonio, but stranger things have happened in March.

Side note-Arizona also stinks on defense, so teams that can score have the potential to run right past them if they aren't firing on all cylinders.

Grade: High-Risk, High-Reward Final Four Candidate

Matchup Notes: UVA will throw all kind of defenses and bodies at Ayton and company. After that, though, the Wildcats have a fairly favorable run to the Final Four.

Kentucky: 116.4 (25th)/ 96.0 (23rd)/20.4 (18th)

Analysis: Wait. WAIT. Yes, Arizona was just inflated into this category based on promise, but Kentucky and all ten of its losses? Kentucky has won seven of its last eight games, starts at least two NBA lottery picks, has freakish size and length at every position, and just ran through a respectable SEC in convincing fashion to roll into the tournament with some momentum. Remember just a few years ago when Cal led an eight seeded team all the way to the Final Four with arguably less raw talent than this current edition of the Wildcats possesses, and with SGA, Kevin Knox, and Diallo all pouring in major minutes during tournament time, Kentucky has all of the talent to knock off Arizona and then use that individual talent and firepower to fight fire with fire against Virginia. Kentucky is putting things together at the right time, and anyone who doubts the talents that the 2018 'Cats roll out every night does so at his or her own peril.

Grade: Same As Arizona

Matchup Notes: UK has plenty of size and athleticism to throw bodies at DeAndre Ayton, and then it has plenty of individual scoring ability to grind out buckets as well as pick up a few in transition against Virginia. The Arizona game will be a toss-up or thereabouts. Cal will have to has his guys dialed in against UVA. Anything goes if they get past the Hoos.

Tier 4: The Slipper Doesn't Seem To Fit, Better Wish Upon A Star

Tennessee: 114.8 (40th)/92.7 (4th)/22.15 (11th)

Analysis: Tennessee plays great defense and they are surprisingly good at isolation scoring in the half court. Admiral Schofield is an absolute beast in the post on both ends and is the motor that drives the Tennessee engine, and along with Grant Williams and Jordon Bone, Tennessee has outworked several teams to grab a three seed. The Volunteers have not incurred any notable bad losses thanks in large part to their stifling defense, but teams that come at them with a lot of perimeter scoring and shooting do tend to give them trouble, and great individual scorers like Colin Sexton and SGA have given them trouble in recent weeks. It will be hard for Tennessee to muster enough offense to advance all the way to the Final Four, but that defense will also keep them in just about every contest.

Grade: Elite Eight Contender, Potential Second Round Upset Victim

Matchup Note: Miami would be a much greater threat in the second round with a healthy Bruce Brown, but Lonnie Walker and company still have the punch to grind out a half-court game with the Volunteers. Assuming the Vols emerge unscathed, the impending matchup with Cincinnati might well devolve into a fist fight and will be a race to fifty, maybe fifty-five. Having Schofield to dump it to for late game buckets could prove to be pivotal here.

West Virginia: 119.2 (14th)/97.4 (39th)/21.8 (13th)

Analysis: Huggins still has the Mountaineers pressing, and teams that don't have the size or ball handling to deal with it are still flummoxed. WVU is giving up a few more points than in years past, but Jevon Carter also the best individual scorer that Huggie Bear has had since Kevin Jones or Da'Sean Butler. It is very difficult to press your way to six straight wins in the NCAA tournament (as West Virginia has found out in the past), but this year's edition of Press Virginia does mix the regular forced turnovers with a solid half-court offense. Villanova likely has too much ball handling and perimeter shooting for the press to dominate, but the smaller guards of Wichita should be a bit more concerned.

Grade: Sweet Sixteen Favorite, Longshot First Round Upset

Matchup Notes: Murray State is a team that has tournament experience, but West Virginia is simply a superior athletic group. Wichita has offensive firepower to burn, so if they can break the press and get out in transition, WVU could find themselves having to adjust on the fly. That matchup will be an interesting matchup of styles, but it WVU likely has a very slight edge to move on and try to knock off the vaunted Nova Wildcats.

Texas Tech: 114.0 (46th)/ 92.1 (3rd)/21.9 (12th)

Analysis: TT is a lockdown defensive operation, which is saying something in the BIG12. The Red Raiders come into the tournament having lost five of seven, though all but one game was close. The Raiders tend to have some trouble getting scoring outside of Jarrett Culver and Keenan Evans, and with Evans nursing a foot injury, they are a questionable bet going into the first week of the tournament. With that said, their three seed grants them a fairly favorable matchup, and the potential second round matchup with either Florida or St. Bonaventure/UCLA (shout out Woj if you are reading this by some miracle.) is their first true test. Florida has the ability to grind with them if it is hitting shots, but Tech will wipe the floor with them if they stifle them with a sound man-to-man game. The Bonnies are a highly skilled team that will have to be efficient on offense to keep up with the sheer talent that Tech brings to the table. With all that considered Tech sits at somewhere around a 50-60% favorite to reach the Sweet Sixteen.

Grade: Sweet Sixteen Solid Bet, Second Round Upset Candidate

Matchup Note: Purdue is better than Tech and should beat the Raiders if it the Boilermakers can get past Arkansas/Butler.

Tier 5: Miracles Happen

Auburn:

Analysis: A month ago, Auburn would have been in the conversation for a top-two seed and would be a terror for several teams in the tournament. However, with the loss of Anfernee McLemore, the Tigers have lost a huge percentage of their bite. Auburn should still run by Charleston, but their impending second round matchup against Clemson or NM State could spell the end of what was once destined to be a storybook season.

Houston:

Analysis: Houston is a solid team across the board. Unfortunately for them, so are San Diego State in the first round and Michigan in second round. Houston is one of the most primed teams for a decently surprising first round upset (Vegas agrees). Take the Cougars more than one round at your own risk.

Ohio State:

Analysis: Keita Bates-Diop is one of the best players in the country, and the Buckeyes have a favorable road to stun in the West regional. The Scarlett and Gray do have a tendency to drop an occasional bad game, but Gonzaga is no great team, and KBD is capable of having a transcendent performance that vaults the Buckeyes into the Elite Eight. With that said, the most likely outcome is that they bow out at the hands of Chris Mack and Xavier in the Sweet Sixteen.

Clemson:

Analysis: The Tigers are a nightmare defensively. Still, it is hard to win games consistently if scoring is a chore. Clemson has a strong chance to take down Auburn in the second round, but Graham, Newman, and Kansas will likely salute them goodbye in the Sweet Sixteen.

Wichita State:

Analysis: The Shockers play a lot like they have in years past. They spread the floor with an undersized group, try to force turnovers on defense to a certain extent, score a lot of points, and give up almost as many. They will likely run Marshall out of the building, but West Virginia also has a fair shot of running them off the floor two days later.

Florida:

Analysis: The Gators are an enigma. They look like world beaters against very good teams (Duke, Gonzaga, Kentucky) and then look disinterested and bogged down against mediocre teams. They also have very little size inside to protect the rim and clean the glass. An upset of Texas Tech is about the extent that this team can be expected to go, although they are every bit as talented as Purdue on paper.

Tier 6: Wake Up, You're Dreaming

Missouri: Michael Porter Jr. would have to play like the second coming of... Let's say regular season K-State Michael Beasley.

TCU: Nice offense. Stop somebody.

Oklahoma: Maybe if Blake Griffin was still playing, too.

Best Candidates For First Round Upsets:

1. Butler over Arkansas
2. Loyola Chicago over Miami

3. Texas over Nevada
4. San Diego State over Houston
5. Creighton over K-State
6. Oklahoma over RI

Longer Shots:

1. NM State over Clemson
2. Davidson over Kentucky
3. Buffalo over Arizona
4. Providence over A&M

Middle Seeds Equipped For An Extended Run

1. Arizona
2. Kentucky
3. West Virginia
4. Nevada
5. Florida
6. Rhode Island (watch out for the Duke iceberg)

With that, the 2018 Tournament Preview article reaches its merciful conclusion. If I missed anything, feel free to contact me on social media, @zkfortre. Good luck everyone, and, above all, enjoy the greatest tournament on earth.