

What would Coach K say? March Madness: March Madness

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In Chicago winter lingers well into March, like a house guest unaware that she's worn out her welcome. But some of us hardly notice; we're mesmerized by the NCAA basketball tournament involving 65 teams from Division I schools.

What makes this tournament so entertaining and engrossing? Jim Delany, commissioner of the Big Ten Conference, thinks that people tend to identify with sports teams to make up for the loss of community and sense of larger meaning. If Blaise Pascal were around, he'd likely say we are diverting ourselves from the cares of this world and from the final reality—death. An anthropologist would say there's something tribalistic going on: it's my team against yours.

But none of these explanations explains the particular appeal of basketball's March Madness. Part of the appeal is that only 15 players are needed on a basketball team. That means that small schools, which can't compete in other sports, can have success in the NCAA tournament. Also, basketball is simply a beautiful game. Watching a well-played collegiate game is as much an aesthetic experience as going to the ballet, with the added drama of not knowing how it will end.

There is a dark side to March Madness and to all big-time collegiate sports. Athletic shoe companies have put their footprint on the game, offering the major programs millions of dollars for advertising. There is more money at stake with the TV contracts. "If [NCAA basketball] isn't a business," says the inimitable coach Bobby Knight, "then General Motors is a charity." The NCAA knows it has a good thing: it has trademarked "March Madness."

And success on the court is not matched by academic performance in the classroom. At many universities, academic admissions standards are subpar for athletes, and the schools don't provide the resources needed to help athletes succeed in the classroom. This year 30 of the 65 teams that made it into the men's tournament do not meet the NCAA's minimum academic standards. From the entering class in

1997, only 44 percent of NCAA basketball players had graduated by the year 2003—a sorry outcome given that fewer than 1 percent of Division I players make it into professional basketball.

But still fans watch. And they'll be there until the evening of April 3, when the winner of the tournament is crowned, the nets are cut down and the highlights of the tournament are shown on video while the song "One Shining Moment" is played.

Following the NCAA tournament may be like chasing after the wind, as Coach Koheleth would say. Who really cares—how many even remember—that the University of North Carolina won the tournament last year (other than UNC fans and foes)? Yet there is comfort in another part of Coach Koheleth's advice—to take delight in the little pleasures of this life, perhaps especially because they are so fleeting. Enjoy the games and eat, drink and be merry—in moderation—for someday we won't be around to enjoy the madness.