

Headline: Dear NCAA, 68 is a magic number — please stop messing with it

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Social: Staff Writer Sean McQuillan argues why March Madness should remain a 68-team field.

The big dance is perfect. The tournament's history has solidified some of the best basketball players ever. Whether it's a projected lottery pick in the NBA Draft or a 5-foot-5-inch point guard from a Loyola Chicago — shoutout to Sister Mary Jean — these players are a part of the reasons why sports fans consider March Madness a spectacle in all of sports.

But a [debate](#) emerged over the past few years, calling for an expansion of the tournament to 76 teams. I couldn't disagree more.

March Madness has history and prestige

Back in 1939, eight college basketball teams gathered for what would become the most beloved sports chaos harbinger of all time — the NCAA March Madness Tournament. In other words, a sport's fans' heaven.

The Oregon Ducks, a team probably best known at the time for rain-resistant uniforms and for having to surface the Tillamook Wildfire Burns near campus during that time, stormed through the bracket to claim the first-ever title, destroying the Ohio State Buckeyes 46-33. And thus, the madness began.

Of course, back then, it was a quaint affair — eight teams, a couple of games and probably some guy in the crowd complaining about how fast-paced basketball was ruining the fundamentals of layups and rebounding.

Fast forward to today, and we've got 68 teams yearly, a billion brackets and at least one coworker who swears they have the perfect Cinderella pick before their bracket inevitably crumbles by round two. Everyone has that friend who claims, "This bracket was my first," while meanwhile, it was more likely than not the 56th bracket they had made.

Speaking of madness, the term March Madness actually dates back to 1939, when Illinois high school official Henry V. Porter first used it to describe the unpredictable excitement of basketball. However, it was not until CBS reporter Brent Musburger used the phrase during the 1982 tournament that it made its way to the NCAA tournament.

Little did these two know, they were predicting a future where people would pretend to learn in class while sneakily watching basketball on their laptops.

The tournament's field has skyrocketed over the years, going from a simple 16-team bracket in 1951 to a 32-squad bracket in 1975 and then finally expanding to 64 teams in 1985. In 2011, the [First Four](#) was added, giving us four extra games to overanalyze and just enough time to convince ourselves that a 16-seed is totally going to pull off the impossible this year.

The TV ratings and the money-making machine

I could talk about this section for frankly, hours on end. But, it's better off short and sweet with just two names — Bird and Magic.

Larry Bird's Indiana State team lost to Magic Johnson's Michigan State team 75-64 at the Special Events Center in Salt Lake City on March 26, 1979. An estimated 35.1 million people watched the NBC program of the showdown — college basketball's spark to what it is today — which was a money-making machine.

The financial rise is astounding. CBS paid about \$16 million a year for the broadcast rights in 1982, and in the present day, the NCAA has a media rights agreement with Warner Bros. Discovery (TBS, TNT, and TruTV) and CBS that is worth more than \$1 billion a year until 2032. You read that correctly — \$1 billion. Approximately 85% of the \$1.2 billion in money that March Madness brings in annually for the NCAA goes back to schools and conferences, making up the majority of the organization's operational budget.

The schools are those that do not have the NIL of Duke or Kentucky. It is important that schools such as Bryant and American receive revenue so they can build up their respective programs and turn March Madness into an even more competitive playing field. It is what makes upsets possible at the end of the day.

The Greatest Show

Dear NCAA, this is no longer a letter from a sports journalist, but rather a fan. The March Madness tournament has made 68 one of my favorite numbers for a reason, and it is because of you.

Divergent views inside the NCAA over the competitive feasibility of expanding both the men's and women's tournaments are among the many complex financial concerns that could delay a decision on expansion.

With a methodology that is unrivaled in American sports, the March Madness bracket has developed over the past 40 years, and many in the NCAA are proud of its legacy.

The enjoyment of watching underdogs like Yale go up against Texas A&M, or the thought of Robert Morris beating Alabama, is what makes this tournament so special, and not some boring SEC matchups that we have seen many times before.

NCAA — keep it at 68, and let “The Greatest Show” run its course, or should I say, let the madness take its toll.