Opinion

NCR Voices



Players battle for the ball at the opening tip-off between the Marquette Golden Eagles and the Connecticut Huskies at Madison Square Garden March 16 in New York City. (OSV News/USA TODAY Sports via Reuters/Brad Penner)



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March Madness has come late this year. The first round of games began last week on March 21 and the men's basketball Final Four in Phoenix won't conclude until the national championship game on Monday, April 8. The women's championship game will happen the day before in Cleveland. Late or not, we need March Madness this year more than ever.

The NCAA basketball tournaments have supplanted any and all other domestic sporting events for their ability to capture the nation's attention. The NFL and Major League Baseball playoffs include far fewer teams. The Stanley Cup playoffs are exciting but hockey doesn't come close to basketball in terms of the number of people watching. The same goes for professional tennis. Professional basketball lacks the human drama of college ball: The pro players will return to their mansions win or lose, and most will be back next year while some of these college ball players will never be seen on TV again and others will be joining the NBA.

Sixty-six teams spread across the country started the tournament last week. There are huge universities like the University of Texas and the University of North Carolina and small schools like Stetson University in DeLand, Florida, with a little more than 4,000 students and Wagner College in Staten Island, New York, with only 2,200 students. There are Catholic schools and public schools and a Mormon school. East Coast and West Coast, North and South, Midwest and Great Plains, all are represented one way or another.

And if the school you root for loses, you can always stay tuned and root against Duke.

Filling out a bracket has become a national pastime. Stars from other sports, like Kyle Tucker from the Houston Astros and Tank Dell from the Houston Texans, as well as Dallas Stars hockey player Matt Duchene, all filled out their brackets, carefully choosing the winner in each of the six rounds of games. By the time we reach the "Sweet Sixteen" later this week, most people's brackets will have been blown up by upsets. The NCAA tournament always yields some stunning upsets, which is one of

the reasons it is such a great tournament.

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President Joe Biden filled out a bracket, proving he is a regular Joe. So did former President Barack Obama. Former President Donald Trump did not. Normally, Trump has good radar for the zeitgeist but not on this one.

Obama was the first president to fill out a bracket, and he was criticized, rightly, for only filling out a bracket for the men's tournament. Biden has selected No. 1 seed University of South Carolina to win the women's tournament.

Jimmy Fallon has already made a joke about Biden's bracket: "Biden relates to UConn, because they both have a 38% chance of winning again." Of course, UConn will have to beat four more opponents to make it to the top spot, including some difficult teams, and Biden only had to beat Rep. Dean Phillips to make it into the championship.

Biden is well advised not to make any major announcements that can be delayed until after the tournament is complete. In 2020, he ran promising to return the country to normalcy, to help overcome the polarization. That hasn't been easy, and the president, any president, as leader of a party as well as of the government, can never really be too effective at overcoming polarization.

What Biden can do is not hog the cameras and put off any major announcements until after the tournament. Let the country forget about politics for a few weeks and revel in the unbelievable rebounding of Kamilla Cardoso and the shot-making of Paige Bueckers, the dominance of Zach Edey in the paint and sweet touch of Tristen Newton's jump shots. Let the focus be on the kids for a few days. And let the nation watch when the opponents shake hands after they win or lose, and be reminded that civility is still possible.

Part of "getting back to normal" means living in a country where politics doesn't dominate the culture. March Madness is a chance to set politics aside for three weekends in a row. If Trump wants to intrude, let him. Biden should kick back, enjoy the games and see how his bracket holds up.