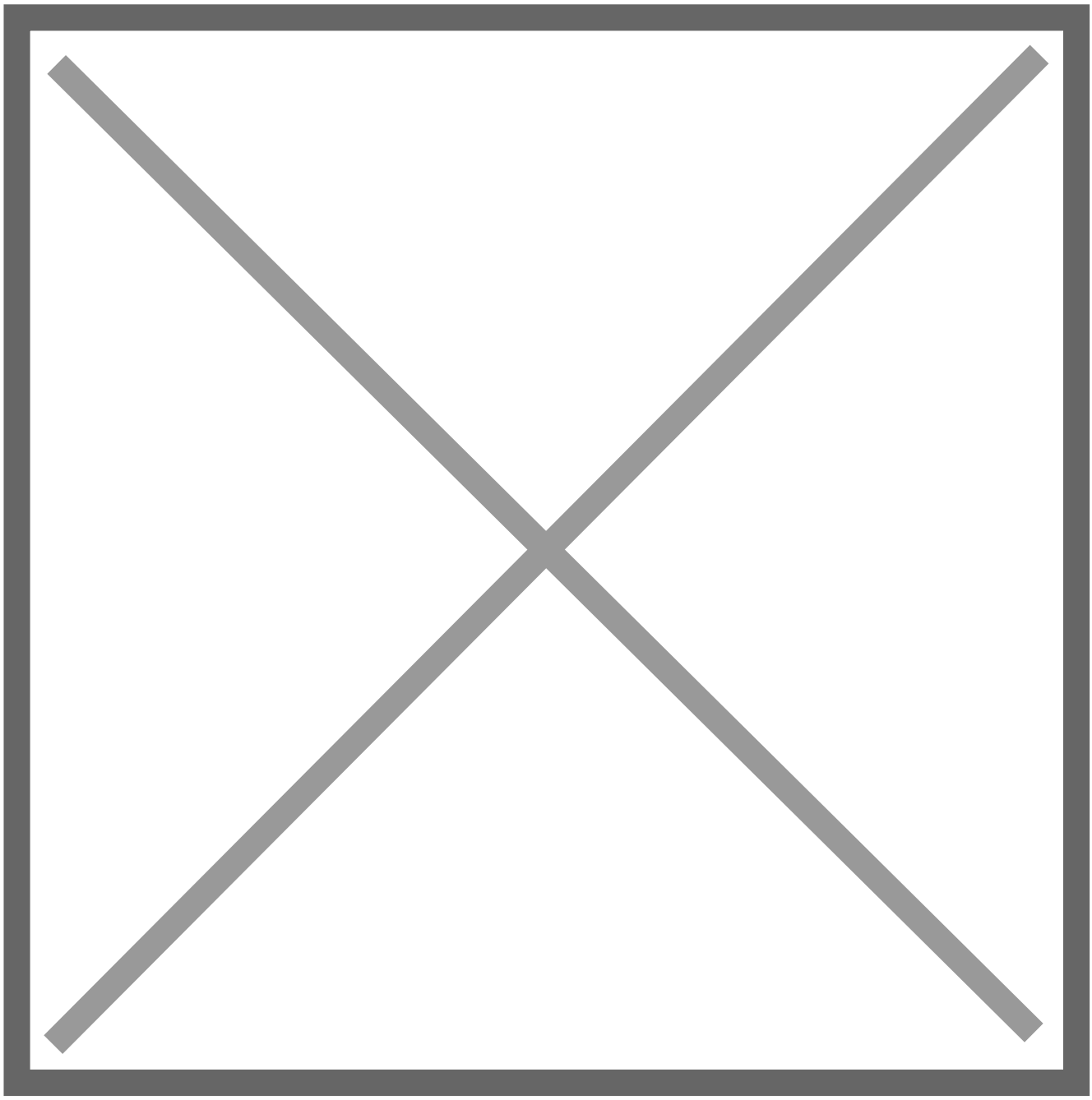


Xavier Musketeers guard Ryan Conwell (7) dribbles the ball defended by Texas Longhorns guard Tramon Mark (12) in the second half of a March 19, 2025, game during the NCAA's "First Four" elimination round at UD Arena in Dayton, Ohio. Xavier beat Texas 86-80. (OSV News/Reuters/Imagn Images/Rick Osentoski)

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Dayton, Ohio — March 20, 2025

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As is typical for this time of the year, college basketball enthusiasts smile more broadly, exhibit a bit more bounce in their step, and maybe even hold the door for complete strangers.

March Madness has arrived.

With the highly anticipated NCAA Division I tournament commencing this week, 64 aspiring programs ponder the possibility of cutting down the net and raising the tournament championship trophy toward the rafters at the Alamodome in San Antonio April 7.

Left in a pile of tear-strewn Kleenex, however, 63 fan bases will be forced to accept the "wait 'til next year" mantra.

Before the official six-round extravaganza officially begins, eight different teams met in Dayton, Ohio, to compete in an oft-confusing "First Four" elimination round March 18-19 — four games among the four lowest-seeded automatic qualifiers and the four lowest-seeded at-large recipients — before the first-round games tip off. The four winners advance to the official field of 64 March 20-21.

Eight Catholic programs received bids, three of which needed to survive "First Four" contests before reaching the field of 64.

On March 18, 16-seed St. Francis (Pennsylvania) dropped a 70-68 decision against 16-seed Alabama State. (That evening 11-seed North Carolina beat 11-seed San Diego State 95-68.)

On March 19, in another meeting between 16-seeds, Mount St. Mary's defeated American University 83-72. Also on March 19, in a come-from-behind win, 11-seed Xavier University beat fellow 11-seed Texas for the rights to advance,with an 86-80 victory.

If any Catholic program can finish the journey on top, St. John's University represents the most realistic hope. Currently ranked fifth in the country, the Red Storm snared their first Big East Conference championship since 2000 and brings a gaudy 30-4 record into their March 20 meeting against 15-seed Omaha.

"I am very blessed for this opportunity," said second-team All-American RJ Luis Jr., the Big East Player of the Year and tournament Most Valuable Player. "There's not that many second chances in life, so when the opportunity presents itself, you've got to grab it by the neck. I mean, I'm just truly happy. This is incredible just to come from last year to this year and to see the transformation."

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Whenever NCAA tournament chat dominates the landscape, the name "Gonzaga" almost always finds its way to daylight. The Zags have appeared in 26 consecutive NCAA tournaments and reached 14 Sweet 16's, six Elite 8's, two Final 4's, and two finals.

Led by seniors Graham Ike (17.1 points per game, 7.5 rebounds per game) and Ryan Nembhard (10.8 ppg, 4.9 assists per game), the West Coast Conference champs take a 25-8 record and eight-seed match-up against nine-seed Georgia on March 20.

St. Mary's College (Moraga, California) posted an overall record of 28-5 and program-record 17-1 mark in the West Coast Conference before losing to Gonzaga in the tournament final. The seven-seed Gaels meet 10-seed Vanderbilt on March 21.

With four players averaging double digits in scoring, led by senior guard Augustas Marciulionis and sophomore forward Paulius Murauskas, balance has been a key ingredient for the Gaels.

At 23-10, seven-seed Marquette will be favored when they tackle 10-seed New Mexico on March 21. While second-team All-American senior Kam Jones has eclipsed 2,000 career points and is a finalist for the Lute Olson National Player of the Year with averages of 19.3 points and 5.9 assists, senior David Joplin has amassed 13.8 points and 5.5 rebounds per game.

Although they were unable to solve mega-tough St. John's in the Big East championship, Creighton University takes a 24-10 record and a nine-seed into a battle with eight-seed Louisville on March 20.

One of only five teams in the country with at least one NCAA tournament victory in each of the last four seasons and one of five to have reached three of the past four Sweet 16's, the Blue Jays greatly rely on 7-foot, 1-inch senior Ryan Kalkbrenner.

A graduate of since-closed Trinity Catholic High School in St. Louis and a four-time Big East defensive player of the year, the third-team All-American led the Big East in rebounds (8.8 per game), blocks (2.7), and field-goal percentage (.655) while adding a conference second-best scoring average of 19.4 points.

In the 86-year history of the NCAA tournament, seven different Catholic schools have corralled a composite 10 championships. Along with solo crowns by Holy Cross (1947), LaSalle (1954), Loyola Chicago (1963), Marquette (1977), and Georgetown (1984), the University of San Francisco seized gold in 1955 and 1956 while Villanova University took home the top prize in 1985, 2016, and 2018.

Could that number increase by one? Of course. After all, anything can happen during March Madness.