

MARCH MADNESS

FIRST FOUR: MARCH 18 | FIRST-SECOND ROUNDS: MARCH 19-22 | SWEET 16: MARCH 27-28
ELITE 8: MARCH 29-30 | FINAL 4: APRIL 3 | CHAMPIONSHIP: APRIL 5

WATCH ▼

ALABAMA

The No. 2 seed Crimson Tide (24-6) is vying to become the first school to win football and basketball national titles in the same academic year since Florida in 2006-07.

LOYOLA-CHICAGO

The Ramblers (24-4) are trying to get 101-year-old Sister Jean into the tournament bubble to provide her traditional locker room pregame prayers for good luck.

GONZAGA

The Bulldogs (26-0) carry 30-game win streak into the NCAA Tournament as the overall No. 1 seed. At 92.1 points per game, Gonzaga boasts the nation's highest-scoring offense.



OKLAHOMA STATE

The Cowboys (20-8), led by standout freshman guard Cade Cunningham (above), have been the hottest team in the Big 12 over the past month, winning eight of their last 10 games.

BAYLOR

The Bears (22-2) average 84.4 points, which ranks third in the nation. Baylor beat then-No. 5 Illinois, 82-69, in December.



ILLINOIS

The Big Ten tourney champions (23-6) have one of the nation's top center-guard duos in Kofi Cockburn (17.6 points and 9.6 rebounds) and Ayo Dosunmu (above, 20.9 points).

MICHIGAN

The Wolverines (20-4) won the regular-season B1G title and had the conference's second-best field-goal percentage (48.3%) and the top defensive percentage (39.4%).



WELCOME TO INDIANA, BASKETBALL.

Pandemic brings tourney's shining moments — and many challenges — to Hoosier State

BY KEVIN BROCKWAY
CNHI Sports Indiana

The college basketball world will descend on Indiana this month, looking to crown a champion at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis on April 5 after the disappointment of the NCAA Tournament being canceled a year ago.

Can the NCAA and state of Indiana pull it off? That will be the big question in the coming weeks. In the tail end of a COVID-19 pandemic that has already claimed more than 500,000 lives in the U.S. and 2.6 million lives worldwide, there are never any guarantees.

The virus, as they say, remains undefeated. Two national powerhouses — Kansas and Virginia — were forced to drop out of their conference tournaments last week due to positive COVID-19 tests. Both remain in limbo, waiting to see if they will be cleared to enter the NCAA Tournament bubble set up at hotels in downtown Indianapolis.

Coaches, players and support staff of each of the 68 teams will wear Kinexon devices, designed to monitor all of their movements for contact tracing purposes.

"They will be tested and quarantined when they get here," NCAA Tournament Division I chair Mitch

Barnhart said. "They will be masked, socially distant, practice facilities sanitizing, all of the things that are in place for this to be an incredibly safe and healthy tournament."

"If the teams continue to do the great work they've done just to get to the tournament, we will have a very safe, very healthy 67-game tournament and will crown a champion."

Four teams — Louisville, Colorado State, Saint Louis and Ole Miss — have been put on standby as potential Field of 68 replacements. If a team is forced to withdraw in later rounds due to COVID-19, the opposing team will move on, via forfeit.

There will be fans, with capacity capped at 25% at all arenas. With the state of Indiana sitting at an average of 760 new COVID-19 cases per day this week, there is thought the tournament will be able to operate safely at the six venues — Mackey Arena in West Lafayette, Simon Skjott Assembly Hall in Bloomington and Hinkle Fieldhouse, Indiana Farmers Coliseum, Lucas Oil Stadium and Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis.

"Whether you are holding an AAU

Tournament or you are holding the NCAA Tournament, right now I think Indianapolis is the best place," Purdue coach Matt Painter said. "It's fan friendly. They've proven over the course of time with all the Final Fours that they've had that they can run a great tournament, and this is another example with all the different venues that they're going to have to use."

Like all NCAA Tournaments, this year's event should feature its share of drama, with top overall seed Gonzaga going for the first undefeated season in college basketball since Indiana in 1975-76. Teams have sacrificed spending time with family and friends, gone through daily COVID-19 testing and worked hard to get to this point. Players and coaches for all 68 teams have packed for what they hope will be a long stay.

Ohio State point guard and Indianapolis native C.J. Walker said he's just grateful to continue to get the opportunity to play in March. The Buckeyes enter tournament play a No. 2 seed, with the chance to cut down the nets at Lucas Oil Stadium in April.

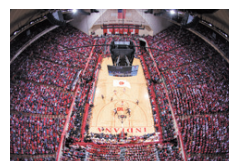
"I feel like these are tough times for everybody," Walker said. "So, we're just grateful for the opportunity. We're really happy."

VENUES



HINKLE FIELDHOUSE

Opened in 1928, "Indiana's Basketball Cathedral" serves as the home floor for Butler University. It is the oldest arena in NCAA Division I basketball.



ASSEMBLY HALL

Opened in 1971, Assembly Hall is the home of the Indiana Hoosiers. It is known as one of the loudest venues in college basketball due to its steep sides.



MACKEY ARENA

Opened in 1967, Mackey is the home court for the Purdue Boilermakers. Its domed aluminum roof makes it one of the loudest arenas in college basketball.



BANKERS LIFE FIELDHOUSE

Opened in 1999, the arena serves as the home floor for the Pacers and Fever. It has been recognized as one of the top venues in all of sports.



INDIANA FARMERS COLISEUM

On the Indiana State Fairgrounds, the venue opened in 1939. It is home to Indy's minor league hockey team, the Indy Fuel, and IUPUI. It hosted The Beatles' sole concert in Indiana in 1964.



LUCAS OIL STADIUM

Opened in 2008, the stadium is home to the Indianapolis Colts. Its retractable north end window offers spectacular views of downtown Indy.

A SHOT AT BASKETBALL HISTORY



At 26-0, No. 1 Gonzaga is vying to become the first undefeated team in college basketball since the 1975-76 Indiana Hoosiers went 32-0. The Zags are led by a trio of All-Americans — forward Corey Kispert, forward Drew Timme and freshman point guard Jalen Suggs — and showed they could play with anyone with non-conference wins over Kansas, Virginia, Iowa and West Virginia. Pressure could mount for Gonzaga on the bigger stage. A rematch with Luka Garza-led Iowa in the Elite Eight is possible, with the Hawkeyes the No. 2 seed in the West.

PICKING THE FINAL FOUR

CNHI Sports' Kevin Brockway (@KevinBrockwayG1) and Elton Hayes (@EHDC12) have broken down the brackets and selected these teams as their picks to make the Final Four:

KEVIN
Gonzaga, Illinois,
Florida St. and Baylor



ELTON
Gonzaga, Illinois,
Alabama and Baylor