

THE SPORTIER

Let The Madness Begin

March Madness is just around the corner, with the First Four play-in games beginning this upcoming Thursday. This season has been highly anticipated for almost two years. After University of Virginia's 2019 March Madness championship run, following the most stunning upset loss against 16-seeded UMBC just a season prior, all sports fans have been waiting for one of the most exciting times of year to resurface.

Just as March 2020 was gearing up, the coronavirus shut down all sporting events in the US, not to mention almost all sporting events throughout the world. Not only did the lack of March Madness burst a gaping hole into the hearts of sports fans, but it left us with many unanswered questions. Would UVA, who was ranked 16 prior to the tournament, be able to defend their championship from just a season ago, this time with forward Mamadi Diakite leading the way? Would the surprise team, the overall 3-seeded Dayton Flyers, be able to stun the world and win their school's first National Championship, led by 2020 Naismith Player of the Year Obi Toppin? Would the number 1 overall team, the Kansas Jayhawks, be able to prove why they are considered a top-tier program and win their first title since 2008? Additionally, we would never get to see the possible upsets that not only shape March Madness, but could also boost players' draft stocks and increase their chances at finding a home in the NBA. Programs such as Liberty, Vermont, East Tennessee State, and Stephen F. Austin all had great, under-the-radar seasons that could have proven to be upset-worthy come tournament time. Unfortunately, we would never get those answers in 2020. Worst of all, players such as Obi Toppin never got to experience March Madness in their college careers.

Although there were many missed memories to be made with the cancellation of 2020's March Madness tournament, 2021 hopefully should prove to be memorable. Key word: **hopefully**. This past season of college basketball has looked very different. From extremely limited numbers of fans allowed in the stands, which made many arenas seem like high school gyms, to commentators announcing games from their homes, this season also saw many games get cancelled. As evidence of drastic changes, after December, the teams in conferences such as the ACC did not play non-conference games. While many conferences planned to have a normal season prior to the beginning of the season, the change was initiated by the Duke program, who pulled out of non-conference games out of an abundance of caution concerning COVID-19.

Even though it seems as though the tournament should be a lock to happen, some teams are still having issues regarding COVID. Though they are all eligible for the tournament now, UVA, Duke, and Kansas were all forced to withdraw from their conference tournaments due to positive cases within their programs. This turn of events was especially devastating to Duke, as they will not make the tournament with an at-large bid, and a conference tournament win would have given them an automatic ticket to the tournament. However, for them and other teams hovering on the bubble, there may be replacement teams prior to the start of the tournament in the event that a team is forced to withdraw due to positive tests of the coronavirus.

No matter how you look at it, this year will be extremely different. In the likely event that Duke does not make the tournament as a replacement team, it will be the first time since 1976 that the powerhouse programs of Duke and Kentucky have both missed the same tournament. On the flip side, we will get to experience Oklahoma State, the breakout program led by one of the projected top picks in the upcoming NBA Draft, Cade Cunningham. This year's tournament, although different due to many factors, should be just as if not more exciting than all of the previous tournaments.

Drew Brees Announces Retirement

In a move that was expected by most, *former* Chargers, and, more famously, Saints quarterback Drew Brees has announced his retirement after 20 seasons in the NFL. Brees, who will most certainly be a Hall of Famer, will be remembered as one of the greatest quarterbacks to ever play the game. Winning one Super Bowl, in the 2009-2010 NFL season, Brees will end his career as the NFL's all-time leader in passing yards (80,358), as well as ranking second in both passing touchdowns (571, behind Tom Brady's 581) and completion percentage (67.7%, behind Deshaun Watson's 67.8%). Brees has battled many injuries over the course of his career, which included multiple rib fractures this past season which likely pushed the 42-year old towards retirement. Brees was a great leader and an active member of the New Orleans community, as he was influential in the rebound of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2006. Brees will go down as one of the best quarterback to ever play football, and his one ring alone does not show how great of a player and leader he was.



The official 2021 March Madness bracket



Saints quarterback Drew Brees waving goodbye after his final game

Sources: