

THE SPORTIER

Round of 64: Upsets Galore!

Coming into this year's NCAA March Madness, we expected there to be several upsets, mainly due to how unusual the rest of this COVID-affected season has been. Even though we generally thought we knew what would happen, the Round of 64 was extremely unusual and unexpected. Here is a detailed look into what went down in the first two days of March Madness leading up to today's Round of 32 games:

Even though they are usually not a crucial part of the bracket, the First Four games have the potential to produce a team that will be competitive for a championship. In a surprising result on Thursday night, UCLA defeated Michigan State after trailing by 14 points in a First Four play-in game, which would send the winner to face 6-seeded BYU on Saturday. BYU, who gave number 1 overall-seeded Gonzaga a run for their money in the West Coast Conference Championship nearly 2 weeks ago, came out completely flat yesterday. Shooting just 3 for 17 from 3-point range, BYU also committed 10 turnovers, which turned into 11 UCLA points. UCLA was able to capitalize on a poor offensive night from BYU to capture an 11-point, upset victory. Speaking of First Four teams, the 2018-19 NCAA March Madness Tournament saw immediate losses for these teams in the Round of 64. On the other hand, if we look back to the first season that the First Four games were included, the 2010-11 Tournament, we stunningly saw 11-seeded VCU going from play-in game to Final Four. VCU, who won their First Four game that season, reached the Final Four after beating 1-seeded Kansas in the Elite Eight. So, UCLA's surprise win over Michigan State and their victory over BYU may prove to be promising for their future. Additionally, they get to face off against 14-seeded Abilene Christian after the latter knocked off 3-seeded Texas last night, which will be a much easier task to take on.

Only one 12-seed was able to pull off an upset over a 5-seed this season. A team that was predicted to finish dead last in their conference, the Pac-12, before the season began, 12-seeded Oregon State won the Pac-12 tournament, giving them an automatic bid to the Big Dance. They were then looking at a date with 5-seeded Tennessee, who had finished 4th in the SEC. And just like in the BYU-UCLA face off, we saw a horrific shooting night from one team and a great one from another. Oregon State, led by 7'1" center Roman Silva's 16 points, shot 47.6% from behind the arc, while Tennessee shot just 19.2% from the same spot. Oregon State won by 14 in the end, with their first tournament victory since 1982.

We were treated to not one, but two 13-over-4-seed upsets this past weekend. On Friday, North Texas took down the favorite Purdue in an overtime game that nobody saw coming. North Texas' leading scorer on the night, Javion Hamlet who poured in 24 points, had no Division I scholarship offers coming out of high school. Behind the efforts of Hamlet and his teammates, they never let Purdue have a lead past the second minute of the game. Even though this game went to overtime, it was not particularly contested during that time, as North Texas scored 9 more points than Purdue after regulation. Even though Purdue rallied late to force overtime, their efforts eventually fell short. The other 13/4 upset that we saw Saturday night was the defending champions Virginia take a loss at the hands of Ohio. A week before this past Friday, Virginia had a positive COVID-19 test within their program, forcing them to not only withdraw from the ACC Tournament, but also requiring them to quarantine for 7 days. The team was only permitted to have virtual meetings to communicate in terms of game planning, which clearly hurt the team in the long run. A game that was close all game long, with no lead bigger than 7 points for either side, Virginia struggled offensively in the second half and shot 35% from the field for the game. Ohio's Jason Preston and Ben Vander Plas both scored in double digits, helping Ohio score 62 points in a close game. Virginia's loss was the first time that a defending champion had lost in the first round since UConn lost to Iowa State in 2012.

Yesterday night, we also witnessed the first 14-over-3 upset since 2016. 14-seeded Abilene Christian, a program that received the promotion to Division I in 2018, shocked Texas in the final seconds of the game. Texas faced extreme turnover issues throughout the whole game, finishing with 23 turnovers. Additionally, Texas was held to just 24 points in the second half, which opened the door for Abilene Christian to overtake Texas' 5-point lead going into the half. The game began to get close very late, with Texas hitting a clutch go-ahead three pointer with 16 seconds left. Down by 1 point, Abilene Christian pushed the ball down the court. After a missed layup with 2 seconds left, Abilene Christian was fouled on a put back layup with just 1.6 seconds remaining. At the line was Joe Pleasant, the team's best three-point shooter at 47.6%, but a poor free throw shooter at 58.8%. Miraculously, Pleasant stoically knocked down both free throws, which allowed Abilene Christian to upset Texas for their first NCAA Tournament win in school history.

And, of course, last, but not least, was the upset that shocked the world, 15-seeded Oral Roberts over 2-seeded Ohio State. Entering Friday's games, 15-seeds had an 8-132 record against 2-seeds in the Round of 64, the most recent victory being 2016's Middle Tennessee over Michigan State. This made for just a 5.71 win percentage. Against the odds, Oral Roberts made that 9 victories. Oral Roberts, who has the nation's leading scorer in Max Abmas (24.4 points per game), was led by forward Kevin Obanor's 30 points. Ohio State, who was relaxed and dancing prior to the game, had a mediocre offensive night even though they scored 72 points (including overtime). They shot 21.7% from three and committed 16 turnovers, though they had 17 more total rebounds compared to Oral Roberts as well as shooting 7.6% better from the field compared to Oral Roberts. It was evident that Ohio State's defense was too relaxed at many times during the game, as Oral Roberts was able to many times find open looks close to the basket. Ohio State had a chance to tie the game in the final seconds of overtime, but Duane Washington, Jr.'s open three bounced off the rim.

Predictions: Round of 32

West	East	South	Midwest
(1) Gonzaga def. (8) Oklahoma	(1) Michigan def. (8) LSU	(1) Baylor def. (8) Wisconsin	<i>*(1) Illinois def. (8)</i> <i>Loyola Chicago</i>
(5) Creighton def. (13) Ohio	(5) Colorado def. (4) Florida St.	(5) Villanova def. (13) North Texas	(4) Oklahoma St. def. (12) Oregon St.
(6) USC def. (3) Kansas	(11) UCLA def. (14) Abilene Christian	(3) Arkansas def. (6) Texas Tech	(11) Syracuse def. (3) West Virginia
(2) Iowa def. (7) Oregon	(10) Maryland def. (2) Alabama	(15) Oral Roberts def. (7) Florida	(2) Houston def. (10) Rutgers

*Game started before publishing of this column

Did You Know?

After the conclusion of the Maryland-UConn game, in which 10-seeded Maryland defeated 7-seeded UConn, there were officially 0 correct brackets left. Before the end of this game, only three perfect brackets remained. In the 2017-18 NCAA Tournament, which featured Virginia's historic loss to UMBC as a 1 seed, brackets did not even remain perfect through the first day of the tournament. The final 25 brackets were busted right as UMBC won that game. In the 2018-19 NCAA Tournament, a man from Ohio selected a record 49 straight games correct before his streak ended when 3-seeded Purdue defeated 2-seeded Tennessee in overtime in the Sweet 16.

This tournament marks the first time that 4 teams seeded 13 or lower have advanced to the Round of 32.



Starting clockwise from top left: Ohio, Abilene Christian, North Texas, Oral Roberts

Sources: