

THE SPORTIER

The Game of the Year

Nobody expected UCLA to make it out of the first two rounds, much less to the Final Four. UCLA's tournament run began in a First Four play-in game against fellow 11-seed Michigan State. The First Four games, started in 2011, consist of four total games. Two of the games feature the four lowest-seeded automatic bid teams, and the other two games feature the four lowest-seeded at-large teams. Both UCLA and Michigan State were among the four lowest at-large teams that received a chance to make the tournament. Throughout the whole game, it seemed as though Michigan State was going to take that spot in the Big Dance. Trailing by 11 at the half, UCLA only held a lead for 14 seconds. In the second half, while UCLA trailed for much of the game still, even trailing by 5 with 1:29 left to go in the game, they were able to pull out the victory in overtime. This win, while it may have indicated to many that UCLA was not a team capable of hanging with the programs that they would have to later face, was just the start of a miraculous run in the tournament. UCLA beat 6-seeded BYU in their first matchup in the tournament, then 14-seeded Abilene Christian, 2-seeded Alabama, and then 1-seeded Michigan. This historic run made UCLA just the second First Four team to make it to the Final Four (the first was 2010-11 VCU). While they had made a magical Cinderella run so far, even beating a one-seed in their previous game, facing the best team in the nation in Gonzaga was going to be an extremely difficult challenge, as many saw this game being a blowout.

Gonzaga had by far been regarded as not only the best team in the tournament, but the best team in the whole country up until their Final Four matchup. The number 1 overall seed in the tournament, the Zags ended their season 26-0. The last team to finish their regular season undefeated was the spectacular 2014-15 Kentucky team, headed by now-NBA All-Stars Karl-Anthony Towns and Devin Booker. Even though they ended up losing in the Final Four that season, there have still been 7 total undefeated regular season teams to win the tournament: San Francisco (1955-56), North Carolina (1956-57), UCLA (1963-64, 1966-67, 1971-72, 1972-73) and Indiana (1975-76). While still a rare occurrence in the big picture, the Gonzaga team this year has been on another level. Especially in a season that has been so unpredictable, exemplified by large programs such as Duke and Kentucky not making the tournament, and others like North Carolina and Kansas exiting early, there has been no team close to touching Gonzaga (all but 1 regular season and tournament game was won by 10+ points). That is, until yesterday night.

UCLA was the most difficult competition that Gonzaga had faced all season. UCLA's game planning of staying strong defensively and limiting Gonzaga's deadly transition offense was intact for much of the game. This plan was so successful, in fact, that UCLA held a 6-point lead over Gonzaga with 4:55 left in the first half. Leading the way for UCLA was sophomore Johnny Juzang. Juzang, who poured in 28 points against Michigan in the previous round, had battled multiple injuries just in the tournament. In the First Four matchup against Michigan State, Juzang injured his ankle in overtime. Juzang then scored 27 against BYU the following game. Against Michigan, he again injured his ankle. In his matchup with Gonzaga, he dropped 29 when it was all said and done. In the Final Four game, Gonzaga was able to knock down key shots to end the half with a one point lead over UCLA. The second half continued to be neck-and-neck, though Gonzaga seemed to be slightly more in control by the 11:25 mark of the second period, where they held a 7 point lead. Just like the rest of the game, though, UCLA continued to defy the odds. From this point until 8:42 in the second half, UCLA went on a quick 6-0 run to close the gap. And again, from this point forward, the game was as even as could be. UCLA was putting up a great fight, even taking a lead near the 6 minute mark, but Gonzaga's high powered offense continued to fight back. What seemed to be like the sequence of the season came at a crucial time in the game, with 2:00 remaining on the clock. Gonzaga freshman Jalen Suggs rose up to block a dunk attempt by UCLA, and to finish it off, he made a long bounce pass to teammate Drew Timme, who threw down an emphatic slam.

Even though this only gave Gonzaga a two-point lead, it seemed as though this would be a huge momentum shift for them. Yet again, though, UCLA proved the doubters wrong. Juzang returned with a layup that knotted up the game at 79. Gonzaga and UCLA both scored again, but UCLA ended up with the ball with just 18 seconds to go. Tied at 81, Johnny Juzang took the ball in for a layup at the last second, but in an unforeseen turn of events, he was called for a charge. Drew Timme, who had 4 fouls in the game up to that point, just one away from being sent to the bench for the remainder of the game and giving Juzang a potential free throw opportunity, stepped into the lane and put his body on the line. While the call will forever be up for debate, whether it was a truly a charge or instead a blocking foul on Timme, this move prevented a seemingly clear UCLA win. In overtime, Timme's presence was felt, as Gonzaga was lucky he did not foul out. The first six points of overtime for Gonzaga were scored by Timme, and after his scoring streak was finished, the Zags held a 2 point lead. The following possession, Gonzaga nailed a three, taking a 5 point lead with just 1:17 in the game, a dagger that put UCLA in an extremely tough position. Out of the timeout, it was clear that UCLA would need to take a three at some point if they wanted to have a chance at Gonzaga. For a team that ended the night shooting a fantastic 47.1% from behind the arc, it was certainly possible. And just like that, UCLA took a risk and made it work. Out of the timeout, Jamie Jaquez, Jr., one of the top 3-point shooters on the team, took a contested three from the corner, and nailed it. 2 point lead for Gonzaga. In the ensuing possession, Gonzaga's second-leading scorer, Corey Kispert, missed a three-pointer, leaving the door wide open for UCLA to either tie or take the lead. With just 6 seconds left, and the ball in Johnny Juzang's hands, he released a shot... missed. In a matter of seconds, he was able to recover the rebound from a lucky bounce in his direction, and an easy layup went through the net, tying the game at 90. Now, with just 3 seconds to go, the ball behind their own basket, everybody thought the game was going to go to a second overtime period. The underdog UCLA had seemingly just secured their second chance at defeating the almighty Gonzaga Bulldogs. Just like every single aspect of this game, everybody thought wrong. Jalen Suggs, who had made one of the best plays of the season in the previous half, took three dribbles up the court, and launched a near half-court jump shot. Suggs began running off to the side of the court, because he knew exactly what would happen next. Miraculously, Gonzaga had battled with 11-seeded UCLA in what may be the greatest game in tournament history, surrounded by the likes of 2016's National Championship buzzer-beater by Villanova, or Christian Laettner's 'The Shot' that sent Duke to the Final Four in 1992. Jalen Suggs, who had an offer to play quarterback at Ohio State, knew what was coming next. The ball hit the backboard, and just like those two occasions, it dropped through the net. Gonzaga escaped a scary overtime battle with UCLA, 93-90.

Championship Monday: I vs. I

The first time since 2005 that the top two overall teams in the tournament will face off in the National Championship will tip off at 9 pm on Monday. Gonzaga and Baylor, both teams who have had their own tight games throughout the tournament, have survived the tournament to make it to the biggest stage in college basketball. Both Gonzaga and Baylor are vying for their school's first National Championship, though Gonzaga appeared in this game much more recently. 1-seeded Gonzaga lost to 1-seeded North Carolina in the 2017 National Championship game, while we'd have to look all the way back to 1948 to find Baylor's last appearance in the title game. Gonzaga's 31-0 season will face its final match in Baylor. Will they be able to go completely perfect, the first team to do so since Indiana in 1976, or will Baylor leave a stain on the legacy of this historic team?

Game Prediction

Gonzaga defeats Baylor, 93-86



Sources:

[NCAA](#), [Business Insider](#), [SB Nation](#), [Sports Illustrated](#), [Sports Reference](#), [NCAA](#), [ESPN](#), [ESPN](#), [Draft Kings](#), [ESPN](#), [CBS Sports](#), [247Sports](#), [Orange County Register](#), [USA Today](#), [ESPN](#), [ESPN](#)