

# March Madness

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## SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE

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Sitting in the middle of March Madness it is easy to forget that this annual orgy of basketball and money is a relatively new phenomenon. It was the transformation of television with the arrival of cable and all-sports networks that turned the NCAA Basketball Championship into a national obsession. Whereas in 1960 it was impossible to see the NCAA finals on television outside the major markets, it is now possible to see every game in the six weeks of games involving 68 teams in every market. And if you can't see it on television you can see it on any number of other electronic devices.

The growth of this media monster began with the decision by ESPN to offer as many games as possible in the early rounds of the tournament. At first this seemed a foolish enterprise but it quickly proved to be a stroke of genius by the decision makers at the four-letter network. Before long the "suits" at CBS realized that there was money to be made by increasing its coverage of the games, and now CBS has captured all the games parceling some out to other cable outlets. March Madness hit full stride, was trademarked by the NCAA, and those violating the trademark faced court action and fines.

The money continued to mount as corporate America discovered the need to be identified with this springtime festival. The NCAA was funding nearly all its annual budget out of the proceeds from generous television contracts, college and universities were pulling in major dollars from their involvement in basketball, and coaches saw their salaries and perks rising geometrically. Only the players failed to reap the harvest.

In 1973 Walter Byers tried to find a network that would televise ten Sunday afternoon regular season games, and in addition he would throw in the rights to the NCAA tourney for FREE. In the end NBC bought the rights, sans Sunday games, for just over a million dollars.

With the coming of cable TV and ESPN as an all-sports network the landscape began to change. In its first agreement with the NCAA ESPN agreed to televise all NCAA championships not covered by a network contract. This meant that beginning in 1980 ESPN was able to broadcast all the games in the early rounds of the NCAA basketball tournament. College basketball on TV changed forever that year.

Quickly ESPN was in demand from customers who hounded their cable providers to carry the new network and the popularity of both ESPN and the NCAA tourney soared. Watching this success CBS took over all the games in 1991. By then the television contracts had reached \$28M per year. In 1999 CBS signed an 11 year \$6B dollar deal which translated to \$545M/yr. In 2010 that reached \$11B for 14 years or \$771M/yr.

All of this of course led to higher costs for commercial time and a need to expand the number of commercials per game. In 2014 this means that there are four media timeouts per half in each game, in addition to the four media timeouts there are several regular timeouts for coaches to call.

Watching at home it may seem that there are a lot of timeouts and that might be annoying. However if you are at home you can change the channel, be amused by the commercials, get a beer, or head to the bathroom to deposit an earlier beer.

If you are at the arena, as I happen to be last Thursday and Saturday, you can slit your wrists.

From the moment that a timeout was called on the floor until the ball was put in play was approximately three minutes and thirty seconds, give or take a few seconds. I was so annoyed by this on Thursday that I timed a few of these media timeouts on Saturday. That means that those in the arena sit watching nearly nothing for 28 minutes each game. Three and a half minutes is a long time when nothing is happening.

Beyond the annoyance to the fans the avalanche of timeouts in the college game breaks up the game into small segments, sometimes the segments can be less than one minute. Any team building momentum or flow to their offensive game are out of luck, while teams seeking to slow down the game get a major assist from television.

All in all this is a bad experience and I am certain I will never return to an arena for an NCAA tournament game, after being in attendance for all five the tournaments that have taken place in Orlando over the years. My absence will be of little consequence, and perhaps if a large number of fans stay away it will not matter to the NCAA or to the TV people. The irony is that the goose that laid the golden egg for the NCAA is now threatening to destroy much of the attraction of the tournament.

This is not what is meant by March Madness but it is a form of madness that needs to be marched out of the game.

On another topic, a few weeks ago I discussed the meaning of being a man and its relationship to sport. Over the past several weeks there has been considerable discussion of openly gay athletes in the NFL and the NBA. To judge from the reactions of a number of players the NFL has failed to turn boys into men through football, as the reactions have been those of adolescents who have displayed a remarkable insecurity about their own sexuality. Let's hope the comments of immature football players are not an indication of the failure of either football or American colleges and universities to educate young boys on the meaning of being a man.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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