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Geography Lessons

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As most sports fans and others who have become collateral damage know, the NCAA basketball tourneys are underway. The men's version started on Thursday, unless you count Tuesday, and the women began play on Friday. Aside from several exciting finishes in this first flurry of games, several other things are worth noting. Or, as they say on TV after a particularly exciting play or game, "This is what college basketball is all about."

What it is not about is a geography lesson. Sports leagues have historically been geographically challenged. The Atlanta Braves were once in the Western Division of the National League, and currently Salt Lake City is a member of the East Coast Hockey League.

When dealing with student athletes and an organization deeply devoted to academics, like the NCAA, you might expect some sense of geographic accuracy. If the student athletes in this year's tournaments actually pay any attention to the geography of the NCAA, they could be in some trouble.

In the men's bracket the nation is divided into four parts: West, Midwest, East and South. Looking at the venues of this weekend's games it might be difficult to guess which cities are where. Some are even located in two different regions, which of course offer an entirely different meaning to the term "twin cities."

As expected, Pittsburgh is located in the East region, but alas in the NCAA land it is also located in the Midwest region. Of course one could reasonably argue that Pittsburgh could be seen as either an Eastern city or a Midwestern city, but I doubt it could be both at one and the same time unless it exists in the

realm of sub-atomic physics. The same might also be said of Columbus, Ohio, that shares Pittsburgh's dual NCAA identity.

Other double identity cities are Louisville which is located in both the South and the Midwest, and Omaha which is located in the Midwest and the West. Charlotte, North Carolina, is located in both the South and the East, and that might be a bit of a surprise to the residents of this most Southern of cities.

The two major urban outliers are Jacksonville and Seattle. Jacksonville is located in the West, and those teams that started their quest will move forward to Los Angeles for next weekend's games. The Road to the Final Four is apparently I-10, connecting the west side of Jacksonville with downtown Los Angeles. Seattle is located in the South and the East, and therefore secures the honored position of the NCAA city of the greatest dual extremes.

In the Women's bracket, NCAA authorities have tried to dance around the geography issue by obscuring the location of the regions. The women's tournament eschews the direct geographic identities by using the names of cities for the brackets. There is no East, South, Midwest, and West, but rather Albany (likely New York rather and Georgia), Greensboro, Oklahoma City, and Spokane.

If we look behind the curtain the number of geographic gaffs are fewer in number, but still there are some eye catching bracket placements. As part of the Albany bracket there are two southern cities, one northeastern city, and Berkeley, California. In the Greensboro bracket the major misfit is Tempe, Arizona. The Oklahoma City bracket is reasonable with the exception of Stanford, California. The most challenged bracket in the women's

tournament is the Spokane Bracket which contains Corvallis, Oregon, as its only western venue, along with Durham, North Carolina, Knoxville, Tennessee, and most remarkable of them all, College Park, Maryland.

It is doubtful that anyone associated with either of these Tournaments knows "The Way to San Jose." Luckily there are no games there, although Stanford is in the real world close, it is in the vicinity of Oklahoma City in the New NCAA World Order. It might also be argued that the women have a better grasp on geography than men, but then we all knew that, as it explains why men never want to ask for directions.

One other thing to note about the NCAA, they apparently are seeking not only to confuse the country geographically, but also they have introduced a new counting system. In the new NCAA world the first and second rounds of the tournament are now the second and third rounds of the tournament. Those game played on Tuesday and Wednesday are no longer called play-in games" but have been renamed the first round games or the "First Four." The latter term has a nice symmetry with "Final Four," while "play-in" was dropped because that label was said to have devalued these games. This of course is not what devalued these games and changing the name does not revalue or increase the value of these games involving, as they do, eight teams judged to not be worthy of being placed in the regular geographically challenged brackets.

Other numbers that matter in March Madness are the TV ratings and the betting figures. The former have continued to grow year after year along with the revenues from the TV rights that go to

the NCAA, and the advertising revenues that fill the bottom line for the television networks.

As for the bettors the numbers are also quite impressive. More than twice what is legally bet on the Super Bowl is bet on March Madness. Estimates on what is illegally-bet run from a low of \$2.6B according to the FBI, to anywhere from \$12B to \$26B estimated by bookmakers. Beyond that are the local office pools that account for sums of a few hundred, to hundreds of thousands of dollars, depending on the affluence of pool members.

Suffice it to say that unless you are severely geographically challenged as is the NCAA, you should have no trouble finding the location of your nearest betting location to help relieve you of your cash. One bookmaker described Thursday as the biggest single day in memory.

Yet, one more of those supercilious "bright and shinning moments" for the skills at CBS to celebrate.

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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