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March Madness with a Twist

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - MARCH MADNESS WITH A TWIST
MARCH 18, 2021

After a year with no "March Madness" that turned into one of the maddest years of our lifetime, the calendar has rolled through twelve months and the lure of television money has resurrected "March Madness." Some things look very familiar.

The NCAA, whose very existence depends on "March Madness," a term on which it has a trademark, is once again suing anyone bold enough to use the term. Each year some car dealer or marketing genius will use the term and get slapped down by the NCAA. If a term is used that is even close to "March Madness," the NCAA will swing into action against them.

For the second time in five years, Virginia Urology has attracted NCAA ire. In September, Virginia Urology was granted permission by the patent office to use the term "Vasectomy Mayhem." The NCAA has filed a complaint against Virginia Urology in a sort of distant replay of a 2016 complaint filed when the urology firm used "Vasectomy Madness" in its advertising. A lawyer for the NCAA claims that the NCAA has control over both "March Mayhem" and "Midnight Madness." To be clear, the NCAA does not control use of "Vasectomy," at least not yet.

Perhaps Virginia Urology should claim that they are a not-for-profit organization that trains amateur student urologists and, therefore, cannot be charged with profiting off the NCAA.

Another thing that looks familiar are some of the participants in March Madness. Kelvin Sampson, who left a trail of NCAA violations at Cleveland State University, returns to March Madness leading the University of Houston. Rick Pitino is returning to the Big Dance with his fifth different team. This is Pitino's latest resurrection from NCAA violations that cost him previous jobs. When he left for Greece on his rehab tour, I wondered how long it would be before he returned as a head coach in college basketball. The answer was not long, as Pitino was hired as the head coach at Iona University two years after he left for Greece. Another perennial NCAA violator, Bruce Pearl, now at Auburn, will not return as Auburn placed itself on a one-year post-season ban.

Of more significance during this strange season, one in ten college basketball games did not take place as scheduled. Four major teams were forced to withdraw from their conference

tournaments. Now a field of 68 teams is set for the Big Dance in Indianapolis beginning this week. It appears now that the tournament will begin with all the participants making it to the starting gate.

How likely is it that a team will be eliminated by Covid? The season may provide a clue. By early December hundreds of games had been postponed and cancelled by Covid-19. Jay Bilas said that if the NCAA was making the decision to start the season in December rather than earlier, it certainly would have postponed the start of the season until the Covid surge had slowed. Two weeks ago, Bilas said that the NCAA should have cancelled all Conference Tournaments. It did not with TV money on the line.

Also, Iona Coach Rick Pitino had argued that the season should not start until the New Year. As it turned out Iona went through a fifty-one day stretch in which they did not play, and then in February cancelled more games as their season ended. All of this thanks to Covid-19.

The Big 12 was hit very hard by Covid with the still undefeated Baylor team having to cancel six games in late January. West Virginia went through a three-game, two-week pause, and their big game against Baylor was postponed. Over at the Big Ten in January, Michigan had a four-game pause; Michigan State a three-game pause; Penn State a four-game pause; Nebraska was sidelined over two weeks, and on and on it went, day after day and week after week, right into the conference tournaments.

Will this pattern be avoided in the so-called March Madness bubble in Indianapolis starting March 18? The teams will live in a bubble at an Indianapolis hotel and will not leave their rooms between games except for meals and practice.

The first warning shot has already been fired as six referees, some regarded as the best in the business, have already been sent home from Indianapolis over Covid issues when one of the six tested positive.

All of this is, of course, in service to television and money. For television, the NCAA provides content. For the NCAA, television provides money. It is a sweet arrangement. March Madness is the major source of income for this organization that controls the teams and players with little compensation. Players are not really student athletes; they are simply "content" that is exploited by television and the NCAA to their own profit.

The NCAA insists that its primary concern is the health of the athletes in making all these "safety" decisions to send several hundred young men and young women across the nation to come together to entertain the nation. If even one athlete contracts Covid and has even minor lasting effects, will this be worth it? The NCAA's commitment to the health of the athletes is further demonstrated with the announcement that as long as a team has five eligible players it can play. I anxiously await the opportunity to see ten young student athletes, five a side, play forty minutes of basketball without a substitution, or five student athletes trying to keep up with a full squad running up and down the floor.

Yes, the NCAA really does care.

If asked if March Madness should go forward under these conditions, most people in college athletic administration, including college presidents, would say yes. Most of the players would also say yes as they dream the dreams of the Final Four and playing at the next level.

I confess that I will no doubt lend my eyes and ears to the spectacle of March Madness, but will do so with strong reservations. That doesn't make it the right thing to do.

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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