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## It's science, sink or swim in NCAA tourney pools

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Did you finish your picks yet? Did you finish your picks yet?

It's a level of excitement that prompts the guy in an adjoining cubicle to spend 20 minutes making copy after copy of tournament brackets. Even worse, it leads your husband or boyfriend to grab a spot on the couch and refuse to move for four straight days.

That folks, is the real essence of "Bracketology" — sizing up seeds and potential playmakers, only to toss vandalized sheet after sheet in the trash before finally deciding who has the most potential to pull a first-round upset in Thursday and Friday's first round games of the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament.

Which begs the most important question of all: what's the method behind March Madness?

"It's certainly an inexact science," said Jim Reck, a Wisconsin Badgers fan and alum from Green Bay who roots for his favorite team but forgoes pick 'em pools this time of year.

How inexact? Well, Reck joked that his wife, Nancy — who doesn't follow college basketball except for the Badgers — won her office pool a few years back by picking teams "with the best uniforms."

Hey, if it works ...

Truthfully, Nancy said she doesn't remember what motivated her to fill out brackets at random that year. But she finished in first place, which didn't make the "real" know-it-alls in her school pool all that happy to be bested by a NCAA newbie.

While no method is the right method, Terry Dell, president of Dell Sports, said you can't "argue with the math" this time of year.

Membership to Dell Sports sites like PickHoops.com offers bold lessons in bracket management. PickHoops.com displays multiple scenario demos that can help amateur bracketologists assess their level of risk with each match-up. As the tournament rages on, the site computes scores based on hypothetical late-round battles and also lets contestants know what results are needed for them to accumulate the most points and eventually win.

"You have to look at it like a science, just like math, and strip emotion away from the contest," Dell said. "Look at it like a mathematical situation, and you can really increase your odds substantially by just covering up the team names and playing the seeds by historical advancement. Sure it takes the fun out ... but that's why the joke is, we can really have just about anyone pick a bracket with about 94 percent accuracy."

Historically breaking down which seeds have the best chance of advancing "only gets more accurate with time," said Dell, who for his own picks generally opts for a risk assessment of 15 to 21 percent. But telling die-hard Wisconsin Badgers fans to think with their heads instead of hearts isn't an easy proposition.

"Oh yeah. I will pick with my heart for the Badgers all the time," said Steve Pipp, a Wisconsin fan and alum who watched the Big Ten Tournament championship game Sunday at Titledown Brewing Co. in Green Bay.

"To be quite honest with you, the rest of it, I don't follow that closely. I'll look at seeding but don't study or spend too much time."

Conversely, Jevon Jaconi of Luxemburg loves to crunch numbers. The NCAA hoops fan participates in low-level Calcutta auctions, or a tournament bid structure where the payoff directly hinges on the size of the pot and the size of bids being placed.

For preparation, he uses an Excel spreadsheet that utilizes a mathematical model called Markov chains to determine the optimal bid rate for each team. As an example, Jaconi places higher value in his pool on Louisville, USC, Connecticut and Drake — or strong seeds with a good chance to win a few games but not overwhelming favorites. Popular picks like North Carolina, UCLA, and at least locally, Wisconsin, lead to overbidding and an uneven return, he said.

"You establish a ballpark figure, and if North Carolina has a 20 percent chance to win, and I can get them for 18 percent of the value, maybe I'll consider that a good bet," Jaconi said. "At 23 percent, they're not a good buy. It's kind of like doing stocks."

If that method is too convoluted, there's always the time-honored option of relying on game-based knowledge. It's how Dirk Huenink of Green Bay makes his picks, though he admits, "I never win."

"It's always the wife of somebody nobody knows in the pool," Huenink said with a laugh. "I watch a lot of games, so I see guys play and then I think to myself, 'Oh, they're really good' and I come in biased. People without biases usually win."

Case in point: Taylor Brzana, a Carroll College student from Green Bay who said for the past few years, she's picked teams according to where she'd like to visit.

"So if Arizona played Tennessee, I would rather visit Arizona. I would pick Arizona to win that game. And I would do this for the entire pool," Brzana said in an e-mail. "In high school, one of my classes always had a contest and I won one year and placed second the next year because I chose this strategy."

Hmmm. Too bad Hawaii isn't in the tournament.