

The 14 things you need to know

Tips to help you pick teams brackets in your office pool.

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The staff at Dell Sports' PickHoops.com shares some of things it has learned with picking a bracket in an office pool:

1. Establish expectations: you're going to need luck

Predicting the outcome of a basketball game cannot be done with certainty. It is going to take a some luck to win any bracket contest. But there are some things you can do to take best advantage of your luck.

2. Know your goal: beat the no-upset bracket

Any fool can pick a no-upset bracket, and many do, so consider that someone in your pool will. The no-upset bracket is going to beat roughly 85 percent of human-picked brackets in a given year. You're competing against the other "lucky" 15 percent.

3. Know your pool size: how many is 15 percent?

If your pool is small (10-20 or so), the lucky 15 percent is 2 or 3 players. Play it to beat only them, so that means a bare minimum of solid upsets. If you're in a massive pool (many hundreds and up), you need a miracle to win. And you have to pick for your miracle to happen. Your semifinal picks have to be exact or nearly so. Pick realistically but leave no upset unturned.

4. Know your scoring system

The simplest kind of scoring has a flat number of points per round, offering no bonus for correctly picking an upset. In this scoring system, you should not overdo it in picking upsets.

5. Make sure your chosen winner is likely to be a contestant.

This is especially true in rounds 2 through 4. You might look at a No. 4 seed and think they have a good shot at beating the top seed in round 3. But don't forget that the No. 1 seed has an 86 percent chance of playing in round 3, while the 4th seed, on average has a 44 percent of playing. You don't get points for predicting who will lose. You only get points for selecting who will win. You can't afford to have many games where your winning selection doesn't even play. Now if the 1st seed falls to the 16th seed, you don't have to worry as much because most everyone else in the pool will get that pick wrong too.

6. Lean away from local favorites.

If you steer away from the local teams, there is a good chance you can distinguish yourself on that alone, and have a lot fewer co-leaders to overcome based on the nonregional team's games.

7. Put historic stats into perspective.

If a team has won a national championship, there is a 5 percent chance of a repeat. Of the 65 teams in the tournament, on average each team has about a 1.5 percent chance of winning. So the defending champion

on average does better than most teams. Detailed analysis shows that the defending champion does do slightly worse than expected based on seeding.

8. Be very cautious with “common” upset picks

There is a very good chance that, each year, at least one 12th seed will beat a 5th seed. Unless you have studied the teams and can identify a 12 seed that is particularly strong and/or a 5th seed that is particularly weak, you should not haphazardly pick such an upset.

9. Don't forget that no one is invincible

In years in which there is an overwhelming favorite, you can distinguish yourself from the crowd by picking the second most likely team. Generally, before the last round only two entrants will have a chance to win the pool. You want to be one of them. If you pick a strong team that not many others pick, you have a better chance of being in the battle than if you pick the same team as many others.

10. When in doubt, lean toward the major conferences

The strength of each conference varies from year to year, but it is easy for a good team to fly below radar throughout the season if they are competing in a powerful conference.

11. Don't hastily go below a third seed to make the semifinals

Almost every year someone below the third seed makes the semifinals. But if you pick a team below the third seed, chances are good that you're going to pick the wrong team.

12. Do your homework

There is much to be learned from online analysis. However, nothing is guaranteed. Look for teams who are hot. And look for teams with experience.

13. Look for “value” if your pool's scoring offers bonuses for picking upsets

For example, if your scoring system offers a bonus of “seed difference times points per round” for correctly picking upsets, it is actually statistically more worthwhile to pick Nos. 10-12 seeds in the first two rounds

14. Work extra hard for the “close” picks

The Nos. 8 vs. 9 game is almost a toss up. Historically, No. 9 has done better (55-45 percent), but even that edge has little statistical significance. The No. 7 seed has a 63 percent-to-37 percent edge over No. 10. Very likely, those who correctly pick these games right will be on top after the first round. Those who pick a lot of upsets outside these games generally fall behind.

For more, go to pickhoops.com/_php/advice