

The bracket lives before the games

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By JIM O'CONNELL

The Associated Press

Drop the pen. Everybody knows no ink makes contact with a bracket sheet until Monday night at the earliest. Until it's deadline time, pencils are preferred.

It's tempting to make big decisions about your picks while you're still waiting for the fourth region to be unveiled. Don't. In the next 10, 12 hours you will hear so many nuggets of information and reasons to change your mind that you will, over and over.

That, folks, is real March Madness.

To add to your confusion, here a few thoughts and tips about the 2013 bracket.

There weren't any really fervent arguments when the bracket was revealed.

Gonzaga being the fourth No. 1 seed caused a ripple of controversy because it revived an old argument: BCS conference vs. the mid-majors. If the Bulldogs weren't a No. 1, Miami probably would have gotten it.

The last of the at-large selections again weren't full of emotion or indignation. Again, it was BCS

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vs. mid-majors with La Salle and Middle Tennessee State being the last two in the field instead of the likes of Virginia, Maryland and Iowa, all big-time programs with small-time nonconference schedules.

Don't read anything into this about Gonzaga not being a deserving No. 1 who is capable of winning the four games that get you to the Final Four. The Bulldogs, who go 10 deep in the rotation, have a big front line led by 7-footer Kelly Olynyk and a solid backcourt featuring Kevin Pangos.

For those still wearing black after the last Big East tournament as we know it, eight Big East teams were selected for the field of 68, the most of any conference. It is the fourth straight year the Big East has had at least that many teams selected, including an NCAA-record 11 in 2011. The Big East has had at least eight teams chosen six times since 2006.

No other conference has ever had eight teams chosen for one field.

And if you want to look ahead and hope for a final farewell for the Big East next month, history says you'll be happy.

The conference has had five schools make a Final Four appearance in the last four years, including Connecticut's remarkable title run led by Kemba Walker in 2011.

Even though Thursday begins the 2-day national basketball holiday when the tournament gets underway in earnest, don't forget today and Wednesday. The games officially known as the "First Four" will be incorrectly called the play-in round but they could be the springboard to the "Final Four" — as they were for VCU in 2011.

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Today at Dayton, it will be North Carolina A&T against Liberty, the lone team in the field with a losing record, in a matchup of 16 seeds and Middle Tennessee facing Saint Mary's, Calif., in a matchup of 11s.

On Wednesday, it's LIU-Brooklyn meeting James Madison in a 16 matchup and Boise State facing La Salle in a game between 13 seeds.

When VCU made its run to the Final Four, the Rams beat Southern California in a game of 11 seeds, No. 6 Georgetown, No. 3 Purdue, No. 10 Florida State and top-seeded Kansas. They lost to Butler in the national semifinals.

There were a slew of big upsets this season, or at least games considered upsets at the time. With teams ranked No. 1 losing seven times this season and a run with a different No. 1 for five straight weeks, it became apparent that there would be a pretty sizable pool of teams worthy of advancing to the Final Four.

But don't get carried away with trying to find the low-seeded team that will make you memorable around the office.

A team seeded fourth or better has won the championship the last 24 years, since sixth-seeded Kansas, led by Danny Manning, won it all.

A wise old TV announcer named Bill Raftery once told me the smartest thing to do when radio hosts would ask you for your Final Four was to keep changing it so at least people in one city

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will think you're smart.

Here's a grasp at a Final Four (check someplace else to see if I'm smart):

MIDWEST: It's hard to pick against top-seeded Louisville after the way the Cardinals have played during their 10-game winning streak that included the Big East tournament. This, however, is by far the toughest of the regions. No. 2 Duke, with Ryan Kelly back in the lineup, is in it, along with third-seeded Michigan State which gets to play its first two games in nearby Auburn Hills, Mich. Then there's Saint Louis, the team filling the bill of everyone's "chic" pick.

Even with the depth of the bracket (Memphis, Oklahoma State, Creighton, Cincinnati), it's still too hard to pick against Rick Pitino leading the Cardinals to a second straight Final Four.

WEST: The talk was all about Gonzaga getting its first No. 1 seed and keeping aloft the banner for the non-BCS schools. The other seeded teams are Ohio State, off a win at the Big Ten tournament; New Mexico, a team a lot of people are still waiting to make up their minds about; and Kansas State, a team that would have had a great season if not for Kansas, which beat the Wildcats three times.

Wisconsin is here and that's about as scary a name as you can get in your bracket, especially when the Badgers are the second team you face in a weekend and you have only one day to prepare. Arizona is coming off a tough loss that sure looked like a bad call. Notre Dame is dangerous when the 3s are falling but so is every other team.

Ohio State played a brutal schedule through February and into March. Gonzaga didn't. Why not have another Final Four repeater in the Buckeyes?

SOUTH: Another really interesting group of seeds. No. 1 Kansas has made its three-game losing streak seem like months ago. Georgetown had been on a very solid 12-game run until the Hoyas ran into Syracuse in the Big East semis. Third-seeded Florida was everybody's pick a couple of weeks ago and the Gators even got players back from injuries but they have struggled in close games. Michigan rounds out the group and the Wolverines have to find a way

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to follow the lead of star guard Trey Burke.

The Jayhawks will keep riding freshman Ben McLemore on the wing and veteran Jeff Withey inside for yet another Final Four repeat.

EAST: Indiana spent the most weeks this season as the No. 1 team in the AP poll so the Hoosiers are right at home as the top seed. Miami, the veteran team with the sophomore point guard in Shane Larkin, can't let not being the No. 1 seed affect them. The No. 3 seed is Marquette, a Big East tri-champion which came up flat in the Big East tournament. Syracuse is the fourth seed, coming off the devastating loss to Louisville in the Big East title game when the Cardinals went from 16 down to 18 up in 13 minutes of the second half.

There's no reason to think any less of Indiana because it will be playing a second weekend in Washington instead of Indianapolis. The Hoosiers end the streak of Final Four repeats — because the other team in last year's national semifinals, Kentucky, is playing in the NIT after winning it all last year. __PUBLIC__