

2026 SM Sports Bracket Walkthrough

Picking every NCAA tournament game in the 2026 NCAA Tournament

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Wednesday, March 18th, 2026

In year two of a treacherous and foolish exercise, I will be picking every NCAA tournament game. Winners, losers, Cinderellas, stars, surprises, and all of March's magic will be predicted precisely, for better or for worse.

EAST REGION

FIRST ROUND

(1) Duke vs. (16) Siena: Only two 16s have ever beaten a one seed, and unfortunately for Siena, there won't be a third this year. Even if they are a tad banged up, Duke should roll. **(1) Duke wins.**

(8) Ohio State vs. (9) TCU: Ohio State ended the season on a higher note, winning four straight before falling to Michigan in the Big Ten tournament. TCU's resumé is absurd, with insane quad one wins and head scratching quad three and four losses. This one is impossible to pick really, but Bruce Thornton is the difference for the Buckeyes. The leading scorer in Ohio State history will not go down without a fight. **(8) Ohio State wins.**

(5) St. John's vs. (12) Northern Iowa: St. John's finished the season 19-1, including a Big East tournament title game win over new age rival Connecticut. The Johnnies are defensively strong, led by one of the country's best big men in Zuby Ejiofor, and will play with a chip on their shoulder for being seeded on the five line (they should have been a four.) Pitino and St. John's will avoid an upset. **(5) St. John's wins.**

(4) **Kansas vs. (13) California Baptist:** In March Madness lore, it is never a good sign when a school most people have never heard of is matched up across your favorite team. The Lancers of Cal Baptist have played just one team this year who is playing in March— they lost to BYU 91-60. They have a top 60 defense in America, but even this year's Kansas team should not be bipolar enough to lose this one. It might not be a blowout, but Darryn Peterson will of course be the difference. (4) **Kansas wins.**

(6) **Louisville vs. (11) South Florida:** Mikel Brown Jr. is the latest victim of the freshmen will-they-won't-they injury bug. With his health in potential limbo, attention turns to South Florida. The Bulls won a weak American Conference, but finished 41st in KenPom— above the likes of Missouri and UCF, and a hair below VCU and TCU. The Bulls are an intriguing team who play fast. It is a trendy upset pick, so perhaps I am falling victim to that trend, but I will take the Bulls. (11) **South Florida wins.**

(3) **Michigan State vs. (14) North Dakota State:** Tom Izzo is back in March to nobody's surprise, and this year's team is one of my favorites. Jeremy Fears Jr. continues to be one of America's best guards, and Coen Carr is a human highlight reel. State's stifling defense should be enough to slow down the Bison, who will be in for a short stay this March. (3) **Michigan State wins.**

(7) **UCLA vs. (10) UCF:** UCLA was a preseason Final Four pick of mine. I had no idea the team wouldn't gel and that Mick Cronin would be so angry, although that second part should have been obvious. The Bruins ended up finding a bit of a stride in February to avoid any stress, and even took down Michigan State in the Big Ten quarterfinals. Donovan Dent and Tyler Bilodeau's health will be key, as both lie in limbo ahead of this game. After a hot start, UCF fell by the wayside as the season wore on. I like it to be a close game, but I think UCLA eeks this one out. (7) **UCLA wins.**

(2) **Connecticut vs. (15) Furman:** The Huskies' kryptonite this year seemed to be St. John's, but they were otherwise a solid team in the hunt for a title. Although the later rounds may cause some worry, this Furman team should not bother UConn too much. If Silas Demary Jr. is fully healthy, his defense and Tarris Reed Jr's low post dominance should be enough. (2) **Connecticut wins.**

SECOND ROUND

(1) **Duke vs. (8) Ohio State:** I am not sure when the health of Patrick Ngongba and Caleb Foster's absence begins to play a role for Duke, but I don't think it is this game.

Although Bruce Thornton is a key danger, Duke's defensive presence should be enough to stifle him. Cameron Boozer was America's best player this year, and he will flex extra muscle with the two injuries for the Blue Devils. (1) **Duke wins.**

(5) **St. John's vs. (4) Kansas:** Kansas is such a difficult team to predict, and St. John's seems to be trending at the right time. Even if Darryn Peterson plays, it is unclear how long or how effective he would be, especially against this Red Storm defense. I do think St. John's will be officiated far more strictly outside of Big East play, but this team is good enough to outlast the streaky Kansas squad. (5) **St. John's wins.**

(11) **South Florida vs. (3) Michigan State:** USF's offense (61st in efficiency) would likely struggle against Michigan State's highly ranked defense (13th in efficiency). While the Bulls have not lost since January 31st, they have not played a tournament opponent since their win over UMBC in December. Jeremy Fears Jr. may be the difference for State here. USF's story is great, but Michigan State is the better team and should advance. (3) **Michigan State wins.**

(7) **UCLA vs. (2) Connecticut:** Let's get eyes and ears on the post game press conference for this game, regardless of the result. Mick Cronin, who hates the east coast, and Dan Hurley, who would deem a squirrel jumping in front of his car as an impediment to his national title chances, square off in Philly. How does UConn defend Donovan Dent? It's unclear if they can clearly stop him, but the Huskies do have the overall defensive advantage. The difference could lie in the perimeter for UConn. Does Alex Karaban heat up? Can Solo Ball reach his three-point ceiling? I would expect this to be the closest second round game in the east, and the Huskies have enough to get by UCLA. (2) **Connecticut wins.**

SWEET SIXTEEN

(1) Duke vs. (5) St. John's: *This* may be where the health of Patrick Ngongba can really affect Duke. Zuby Ejiofor is going to get his regardless, although Cameron Boozer can absolutely hold his own defensively. It isn't just Boozer's offensive production that staggers people; he also reels in 10.2 rebounds per game. Getting on the glass against this Johnnies team is key. If Duke is able to keep St. John's from getting second chances, I believe their offense works healthily enough to keep rolling. St. John's shooting struggles could be the fall against a stingy Blue Devil defense ranked 2nd in efficiency.

(1) Duke wins.

(2) Connecticut vs. (3) Michigan State: UConn has been somewhat streaky for a while. Their season finale loss at Marquette and no show in the Big East title game have shown their floor. Turnovers have plagued UConn all season long, and Sparty can feast on that defensively. Outside of Fears, the shooting of Kur Teng and Jaxon Kohler can hurt this UConn team, who is prone to let teams get hot from three. Tarris Reed Jr. would need a monster game down low to prevent Michigan State from getting their way in the paint, and Fears' quickness can match up well with Silas Demary Jr. 's strength in the backcourt. It will be close, and although UConn beat State in a preseason exhibition, I think Izzo gets the better of Hurley in the one that counts. **(3) Michigan State wins.**

ELITE EIGHT

(1) Duke vs. (3) Michigan State: These two giants matched up at the Breslin Center earlier this year, with Duke taking a 66-60 victory back home. Cameron Boozer's second half surge led the way for Duke, but it was also Caleb Foster's 12 points that helped the Blue Devils get the road win. They will not have Foster by this point in the tournament almost definitely, barring a medical miracle.

Cayden Boozer can more than deputize for Foster, but there is something to be said about such a lineup change this late in the season. Both teams have colossal defensive statures, and both teams work hard on the glass. Duke's offense certainly ranks higher, but it is difficult to get this far or farther without your best backcourt available. Jeremy Fears Jr. has been reliable all year, and if he takes control late in the game, it may be too much for Duke to overcome. Cameron Boozer has been a one man wrecking crew all year, but I don't think Duke has enough this time around to get away from the Spartans. It's another Duke-State March classic. **(3) Michigan State moves on to the Final Four.**

SOUTH REGION**FIRST ROUND**

(1) Florida vs. (16) Lehigh/(16) Prairie View A&M: No trouble here, the Gators' bid for a repeat title lives on. **(1) Florida wins.**

(8) Clemson vs. (9) Iowa: Iowa's offense runs strictly through Bennett Stirtz. Essentially any action they have, from screens to rolls to pump fakes, all are done to get Stirtz an open look or a lane to drive. Clemson has a top 20 defense, but only two double digit scorers. Iowa's active hands on defense can counteract Clemson's offense, and Clemson's physicality could stifle Iowa on the offensive side of the ball. Neither team feels like they have too much of an edge, but I would go with the team who has the best player on the floor. Give me the Hawkeyes. **(9) Iowa wins.**

(5) Vanderbilt vs. (12) McNeese: Vanderbilt was somehow not a four seed, and they also received a tough first round draw with this pesky McNeese team. The Cowboys went 28-5 and have not lost since February 2nd. Although this McNeese team was a trendy and successful upset pick last year, this Vandy team is playing hotter and better at the right time. Tyler Tanner and Duke Miles are one of the country's most formidable backcourts, and they should be enough to avoid the upset here. **(5) Vanderbilt wins.**

(4) Nebraska vs. (13) Troy: This will be the year that Nebraska finally gets their program's first NCAA tournament win. The shooting and defense of Fred Hoiberg's Cornhuskers is more than enough to get by Troy, who are outside the top 140 in offensive and defensive efficiency. **(4) Nebraska wins.**

(6) North Carolina vs. (11) VCU: This is yet another trendy upset pick that I am falling victim to. Health truly matters in March, and Caleb Wilson's injury has severely hampered Carolina's production. VCU, on the other hand, has lost just once since January 10th en route to the Atlantic 10 automatic bid. I think the Rams get this one. **(11) VCU wins.**

(3) **Illinois vs. (14) Penn:** Welcome back to March, Fran McCaffrey! He returns to the tournament against a former Big Ten opponent in Brad Underwood. Illinois' offense is just too strong, led by freshman sensation Keaton Wagler. This one feels easy. (3)

Illinois wins.

(7) **Saint Mary's vs. (10) Texas A&M:** Talk about contrasting styles. Saint Mary's plays slow and methodical. Texas A&M plays as if their team bus will explode if they let the shot clock get to 10 seconds. Bucky Ball meets Bennett Ball, but Texas A&M's wins have truly not been impressive. Saint Mary's isn't necessarily a world beater, but they have enough to get this done. (7) **Saint Mary's wins.**

(2) **Houston vs. (15) Idaho:** I looked into this game to truly try and find a reason why Houston shouldn't destroy Idaho. I could not find one. (2) **Houston wins.**

SECOND ROUND

(1) **Florida vs. (9) Iowa:** This is just an unfortunate matchup for Iowa. Nobody really matches up well with Florida's prolific frontcourt, but Iowa's one way offense is particularly vulnerable. Florida ranks top ten in both offensive and defensive efficiency. They can hold Iowa off on both accounts. (1) **Florida wins.**

(5) **Vanderbilt vs. (4) Nebraska:** One win is enough for the Huskers. The Vandy offense seems to be rolling, and Nebraska's offense can go streaky if their threes are not falling. It is difficult to envision the two guards for Vanderbilt not having an advantage over Nebraska. (5) **Vanderbilt wins.**

(11) **VCU vs. (3) Illinois:** The Illini offense is too strong to lose this early, even if their defense has let them down at times and ranks outside the top 25 in America. Nobody on VCU's roster is as naturally gifted as Keaton Wagler, and a big scoring game from him should push Illinois through. (3) **Illinois wins.**

(7) **Saint Mary's vs. (2) Houston:** This Houston team is on a mission, and no Gaels will be getting in the way of any Cougars en route to Houston's revenge tour. Saint Mary's will put up a valiant effort, and it may be closer than we think, but Houston should prevail. (2) **Houston wins.**

SWEET SIXTEEN

(1) Florida vs. (5) Vanderbilt: In the SEC tournament semifinals, Vanderbilt found the secret to beating Florida. They hit double digit threes, and Florida hit 5. Three point shooting has been a struggle for Florida all year, so they have had to use their dominant frontcourt to really succeed. The development of Xaivian Lee and Boogie Fland's partnership in the backcourt has raised their ceiling greatly, but I think Vandy's backcourt works better together and has more upside overall. It may take another strong shooting night, but let's get weird. They always say it's hard to beat a team three times, but nobody said they can't do it twice. **(5) Vanderbilt wins.**

(3) Illinois vs. (2) Houston: This is a juggernaut matchup. Illinois' insane offense matched up with Houston's prolific defense. Kingston Flemings vs. Keaton Wagler. Houston's rebounding vs. Illinois' firepower shooting. Who wins? The team that defends better. Houston is always one of the most physical teams in America, and they are bigger and stronger than Illinois. It might be a boat race, and it might be one of March's most intense games, but the revenge tour moves on. **(2) Houston wins.**

ELITE EIGHT

(5) Vanderbilt vs. (2) Houston: There is some potential controversy here, as Houston would be playing a de facto home game in Houston for the regional final. While bracketing principles certainly allow for this, it makes for a massive advantage for the second-seeded Cougars.

Houston is great on all sides of the ball, and the Commodores would need a near-perfect offensive performance to stay in the game. Vandy does not match up too well with Houston on paper, and I don't believe it will be any different on the court. I think the Cougars make it to the promised land for the second year in a row and the third time in the last six seasons. **(2) Houston moves on to the Final Four.**

WEST REGION**FIRST ROUND**

(1) Arizona vs. (16) Long Island: It will unfortunately be fins down for this one. Arizona wins comfortably. **(1) Arizona wins.**

(8) Villanova vs. (9) Utah State: Is everybody in America choosing Utah State to win this game? That is truly what it feels like. The reason people aren't too confident in this Nova team is because of their team sheet. They have no signature non-conference wins, and went 0-4 against the top two teams in the Big East. Utah State won the Mountain West outright and has a lethal scorer in MJ Collins Jr. **(9) Utah State wins.**

(5) Wisconsin vs. (12) High Point: If High Point was matched up with literally any team other than Wisconsin, then I would most likely pick them. However, this Wisconsin team seems to simply be flying. It took a near-buzzer beater from Yaxel Lendeborg to keep the high octane Badgers out of the Big Ten tournament title game. They can shoot from downtown like nobody's business and will take care of a feisty High Point team. **(5) Wisconsin wins.**

(4) Arkansas vs. (13) Hawai'i: In this astounding class of freshmen, Darius Acuff Jr. has gotten the most buzz over the last month. He won SEC Player of the Year, and he will continue this reign into the second round. **(4) Arkansas wins.**

(6) BYU vs. (11) Texas/(11) NC State: I would pick the Wolfpack over Texas in the First Four, but neither team would beat BYU. I think pretty much every potential lottery pick freshmen this year has the opportunity to have a "wow" game. AJ Dybantsa probably has the most upside to do it multiple times. Let's go with the Cougars. **(6) BYU wins.**

(3) Gonzaga vs. (14) Kennesaw State: The Owls of Kennesaw State do not seem like a team that could take down this Gonzaga squad. Even with Braden Huff's health in question, Gonzaga should get by here no issue. Key word: *should*.. **(3) Gonzaga wins.**

(7) **Miami (FL) vs. (10) Missouri:** I love this Hurricanes team. In Jai Lucas' first season, they have truly exceeded all expectations. They are led by Malik Reneau (transfer from Indiana) and Tre Donaldson (transfer from Michigan). I know the game is in St. Louis, but this Missouri team was teetering on getting sent to Dayton for the final month of the season. (7) **Miami (FL) wins.**

(2) **Purdue vs. (15) Queens:** Purdue has righted some sort of ship with their Big Ten tournament title, but even if they hadn't, I don't foresee Queens doing anything goofy here. (2) **Purdue wins.**

SECOND ROUND

(1) **Arizona vs. (9) Utah State:** A nice western time zone battle out in San Diego. Utah State can really score, and they will definitely give Arizona fits. I think the Aggies are probably the ninth seed most likely to give the one seed real trouble in a second round game out of the entire field. Arizona, as usual, will pull away in the end. (1) **Arizona wins.**

(5) **Wisconsin vs. (4) Arkansas:** This is a truly debilitating choice. I am incredibly high on this Wisconsin team, but I know how good Darius Acuff Jr. is. The Razorbacks are more physical and athletic, which could pose some threats in tight spaces and on the glass. However, Wisconsin's sharpshooters are liable to get hot any time. As much as Darius Acuff Jr. intrigues me, Wisconsin's threat to get hot from the arc is a gamble I am willing to take, in a close one. (5) **Wisconsin wins.**

(6) **BYU vs. (3) Gonzaga:** It is very, very tempting to take BYU here. As aforementioned, AJ Dybantsa is a true threat to just take over a game. He is the nation's leading scorer, and is also taking plenty more shots due to Richie Saunders' season ending ACL injury. Braden Huff's injury hurts my confidence in the Zags. BYU will always have the best player on the floor. (6) **BYU wins.**

(7) **Miami (FL) vs. (2) Purdue:** I get it. Everyone is back on the Boilermaker train now that they beat Michigan in the Big Ten title game. Braden Smith is back to cooking and their frontcourt was dominant. This team has yet to prove that they can consistently guard from game to game, especially in a short turnaround situation like the NCAA tournament. I don't see Purdue getting very far. (7) **Miami (FL) wins.**

SWEET SIXTEEN

(1) **Arizona vs. (5) Wisconsin:** The team with the highest shooting ceiling (Wisconsin) against the team with the highest tournament ceiling (Arizona). People seemed to let Arizona somehow fly under the radar after they took a few losses while Michigan and Duke took all the headlines. Even Florida seems to be a more trendy pick, but the consistency and composure of this Arizona team can send any team packing. **(1) Arizona wins.**

(6) **BYU vs. (7) Miami (FL):** The Hurricane train ends here. It is hard for AJ Dybantsa to take all of the offensive load, but Miami's defense is not necessarily strong to contain him along with Robert Wright III. Keba Keita should be dominant down low, and BYU's high octane offense should move them on to the Elite Eight. **(6) BYU wins.**

ELITE EIGHT

(1) **Arizona vs. (6) BYU:** It is an all Big 12 finale in the West region. After watching BYU as the season wore on, you would have been hard pressed to find anyone who would pick them to win even two games in March. However, matchups are everything in March. How can any team match up with the country's leading scorer and perhaps best draft prospect?

If you are Arizona, you have shown you have the answer to this. Two games against BYU in Big 12 play. Two wins. Now, don't get it twisted. AJ Dybantsa was dominant in both games. He scored 24 in the first game, and a game-high 35 in the second game. However, Arizona's team as a unit proved they are enough to more than BYU's stardom. Brayden Burries has developed into one of the country's best guards, the defensive prowess of Ivan Kharchenkov and Motiejus Krivas can prove to give any team fits. Even if Dybantsa puts in a legendary performance, Arizona is a stable and true pick to make it to Indianapolis. They should not waver in their third game against the Cougars. **(1) Arizona moves on to the Final Four.**

MIDWEST REGION

(1) **Michigan vs. (16) Howard/(16)UMBC:** Go ahead, pick UMBC in the First Four. Get them in a 1-16 game again. This one ends differently. (1) **Michigan wins.**

(8) **Georgia vs. (9) Saint Louis:** The Billikens started incredibly hot, but are now limping into March after their wild A10 semifinal loss vs. Dayton. Georgia is a good team and got some good wins in the SEC. Neither of these teams seem as dangerous as I would like. I will take the Billikens (I guess). (9) **Saint Louis wins.**

(5) **Texas Tech vs. (12) Akron:** How difficult is it to play without your best player? North Carolina will tell you it isn't easy. JT Toppin's season-ending injury spells doom for Texas Tech. They started just fine without him, but have since dropped a few games and are now in a situation where losing is simply not an option. Akron ranks top 65 in KenPom and won a conference title in a league with a team that went 31-1. These Zips can score. (12) **Akron wins.**

(4) **Alabama vs. (13) Hofstra:** Remember when I said we should get weird? Let's get really weird, then. The arrest of Alabama's second leading scorer Aden Holloway on Monday morning has given me intense doubt in Alabama. With all of the drama they endured this year regarding their Charles Bediako situation, I can't see that this one doesn't mean bad things to come for the Tide. Hofstra only ranks within the top 100 of offensive and defensive efficiency, but this Alabama team may be out of sync. I get it, this one's a little wonky. (13) **Hofstra wins.**

(6) **Tennessee vs. (11) Miami (OH)/(11) SMU:** I am truly sorry to say this: SMU rolls Miami (OH) in the First Four. Too physical, too athletic, and Boopie Miller will be the best player on the court. Tennessee, however, will be able to handle the Mustangs. (6) **Tennessee wins.**

(3) **Virginia vs. (14) Wright State:** For a second, I thought about picking the Raiders. Just for a second, though. Ryan Odom has done a marvelous job in his pilot run at Virginia. I think he gets his first win here. (3) **Virginia wins.**

(7) **Kentucky vs. (10) Santa Clara:** Last year, Drake was matched up against Missouri in the first round. Essentially nobody picked Mizzou, and it didn't feel like an upset when eleventh-seeded Drake won by 10 points. This game is this season's version of that scenario. Kentucky, who was an SM Sports preseason Final Four pick, has fallen so far off the wayside that it is hard to envision them winning even one game. Santa Clara made it safely off the bubble and rank top 25 in offensive efficiency. The Broncos win. **(10) Santa Clara wins.**

(2) **Iowa State vs. (15) Tennessee State:** I have seen some buzz about Nolan Smith's Tennessee State team being a somewhat dark horse upset pick here. I am much too confident in this Cyclones team to really give any credence to that. They defend too well. **(2) Iowa State wins.**

SECOND ROUND

(1) **Michigan vs. (9) Saint Louis:** Saint Louis was at one point one of the more intriguing stories in the sport. They fell from the six-seven seed range down to the nine line on Selection Sunday, which drops them into a second round date against the Wolverines. Michigan is too big, too athletic, too strong, and just too good. **(1) Michigan wins.**

(12) **Akron vs. (13) Hofstra:** How about this one, huh? Both teams would have taken advantage of their first round opponents dealing with extraordinary circumstances. Before you know it, there's a Sweet Sixteen slipper ready to be fitted. Akron has the most upside. Stronger offense, as well as a stronger team sheet altogether. **(12) Akron wins.**

(6) **Tennessee vs. (3) Virginia:** The Cavaliers have not really had any signature wins during the season, and this would be one of the first ones for Ryan Odom's squad. They play slower as they did under Tony Bennett, and also rank high defensively. This Volunteers team just doesn't have much buzz or zip to it at all. **(3) Virginia wins.**

(10) **Santa Clara vs. (2) Iowa State:** This great Broncos season will end here. Iowa State is just a level above Santa Clara. **(2) Iowa State.**

SWEET SIXTEEN

(1) **Michigan vs. (12) Akron:** Oh boy. How big is this spread? What a season it would be for Akron. Unfortunately, they would bow out like Joe Pesci in *Goodfellas*. Ushered in welcomingly to the next room—the next round, in this case— before an ambush unloads. Michigan should roll easily. **(1) Michigan wins.**

(2) **Iowa State vs. (3) Virginia:** This Cyclones team has too many offensive weapons. Virginia is a great team who plays well together, but sometimes, the best players win the games over the best teams. Milan Momcilovic is a flame thrower, and Joshua Jefferson is still one of the most underrated players in America. I think Iowa State pulls away here, somewhat comfortably. **(2) Iowa State wins.**

ELITE EIGHT

(1) **Michigan vs. (2) Iowa State:** How fitting that the region of chaos ends with the most chalky regional final of all four regions. Michigan's defense matches up pretty well with Iowa State's defense here. The Wolverines have the edge in size on offense, as well as athleticism. Iowa State might have a higher shooting upside, but the weapon Michigan has at all corners of the court is terrifying just to think about.

This was probably the hardest time I had thinking about a winner. So much talent and great coaching on both sides, but Michigan is Michigan for a reason. I think the Wolverines take it in a classic. **(1) Michigan moves on to the Final Four.**

FINAL FOUR

(3) **Michigan State vs. (2) Houston:** Houston and Michigan State, two teams who lie outside the top 50 in America in three point percentage, would meet in Indianapolis if the bracket holds my way (it won't). It is against modern basketball wisdom to believe a team who is poor shooting from behind the arc to win a title. However, with the right draw, a player having a career night, and a little bit of luck, pretty much anyone can get to the Final Four.

Getting to the Final Four (winning four games) and actually winning a national championship (winning six games) are two vastly different achievements. The separation between the two is vast, and only the elite can actually win those extra two coveted games. In the Final Four, the best four teams are not always there— but the best of the four there almost always wins. It comes down to other factors, more than simply which team do we think is truly better.

Houston and Sparty are both defensively strong (top 15 in efficiency) and offensively productive (top 25 in efficiency). Both teams have an experienced coach with Final Four history, and both front courts look to dominate the glass. Where does the difference lie?

Houston will have the best player on the floor. Kingston Fleming. Jeremy Fears Jr. is obviously magnificent, but Flemings is a sure fire lottery pick. His athleticism and composure is astounding for his age, and he probably wins the battle of the backcourt.

Sometimes, it comes down to individual battles. These teams are built somewhat similarly and play slower tempos. There has to be a difference, and the difference is in the dogs. Houston has a dog, and it's Kingston Flemings. **(2) Houston moves on to the title game.**

Arizona vs. (1) Michigan: The Wildcats and Wolverines spent the season trading blows as the best team in America. When Michigan stumbled, Arizona kept on trucking. When Arizona struggled, Michigan kept moving forward. Both earned top seeds, and both teams were coveted favorites when the tournament began.

LJ Cason's injury for Michigan is key. Arizona's defense, ranked third in efficiency across America, is led in the backcourt by Brayden Burries. Koa Peat and Motiejus Krivas anchor the paint. Elliot Cadeau has been phenomenal for Michigan, but when there needs to be a change of pace, Cason was key for Dusty May's squad.

On the other hand, Michigan just has some of the best athletes. Yaxel Lendeborg is an NBA prospect at the forward spot who can guard the team's best backcourt player. Aday Mara is a seven footer who affects every shot and drive just by sticking up his hand. Trey McKenney somehow does not get shine on this stacked team, despite being one of the most talented freshman in the tournament field.

This should be the best, closest game of the tournament. The reason I would take Arizona is because they feel like the most consistent and composed team. Jaden Bradley, the Big 12 Player of the Year, hasn't even been mentioned in this capsule until now. I want the ball in his hands in crunch time more than anyone else on the court from either team.

Michigan may have more talented players, and at the moment it seems like they have the most NBA talent. But Arizona has been the best *team*— not just a collection of players. Arizona has the edge. **(1) Arizona moves on to the title game.**

NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

(2) Houston vs. (1) Arizona: An all Big 12 battle for the title. This would be the first time a title game was made up of two teams from the same conference since 1988, when Danny and the Miracles of Kansas took down Big Eight rival Oklahoma.

Choosing this game came down to head vs. heart. What does my head say? Arizona beat Houston twice, including in the Big 12 title game. They have been more consistent all season long. Neither of their two losses (at Kansas, vs. Texas Tech in overtime) are horribly puzzling. Houston lost six times, and showed at times they could be challenged by lesser opponents (overtime against Syracuse, nine point home win over Middle Tennessee). Arizona has the Big 12 Player of the Year, and ranks top five in offensive and defensive efficiency. My head says they are the pick.

My heart? I watched how heartbroken Emanuel Sharp was at the climax of last year's title game loss against Florida. I saw him jump up, change his mind, lose his dribble, and lose the game for the Cougars. I saw him bent over, afraid to look at anyone on the court after his error. I saw a depleted Kelvin Sampson on the sideline. My heart says Houston, and maybe even Sharp, get their happy ending.

Arizona has played consistently from the beginning of the season until the end. Houston has at times looked vulnerable, and other times unstoppable. Kelvin Sampson has been here before, Tommy Lloyd has not. Houston's players were just here last season. Two of Arizona's three best players were not even in college last season.

Arizona doesn't just not make threes— they rarely even take them. Houston turns the ball over 8.5 times per game, the lowest per game mark in all of America. Arizona is top 60 in blocks per game, with Motiejus Krivas getting nearly two per game himself.

We can go back and forth with statistics all day and all of the night. Arizona is fantastic, and Houston is wonderful. Both teams are well coached, both teams are defensively wired, and both teams are hungry for a title. Houston has somehow never won a title. Arizona just has one, nearly thirty years ago now. Whomever wins would give the Big 12 their third national title in the last six seasons.

My head and my heart are in a battle. I know Arizona is better, but a Houston win would taste sweeter. Tommy Lloyd getting a title would be well deserved for his success this year. Kelvin Sampson getting one would complete a fairy tale that began last year in San Antonio.

I believe in fairy tales. Tommy Lloyd may get another chance soon enough. Kelvin Sampson might not. My heart wins again. **(2) Houston wins the national championship.**