

# Madness Memo: Day 1

*Duke survives a scare, two double digit seeds advance, and a discussion around non-conference scheduling tactics*

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Day one of the NCAA tournament last season spelled out something that we were afraid to realize: it would be a more chalk tournament than we had ever had. Only one double digit seed ended up advancing to the second weekend in 2025, and it was coached by John Calipari so it did not really count, if we are honest with ourselves.

In 2026, we were very nearly in for an insane turn of events to throw us off our trail. Number one overall seed Duke was lined up against sixteenth-seeded Siena. In the words of Maliq Brown, the Blue Devils "...assumed it would be a cakewalk." It was nothing close to that.

The Saints and Blue Devils battled back and forth in the opening minutes, and it was tied 14-14 with 13:53 left after Cameron Boozer sank two free throws. Duke never led again until 4:25 left in the second half, when Isiah Evans hit a driving layup to take the lead 63-61. With Duke down as many as 13 points, including an 11 point halftime deficit, it looked like Siena may have been on their way to something special.

While they didn't look like the top overall seed at all, Duke ended up pulling it together for a six point victory. The last time a national champion opened up the tournament with a single digit victory was 2014 Connecticut, who needed overtime to defeat tenth-seeded Saint Joseph's. This Duke team is much better and far more talented than that Husky squad, and perhaps it was a wake up call that Jon Scheyer's squad needed.

With Patrick Ngongba out in the short term and Caleb Foster sidelined indefinitely, Duke was already shorthanded. Siena themselves were not injured, but they played short handed. All five starters played all forty minutes. Coach Gerry McNamara (former Syracuse standout guard) went with his guys that were winning. It nearly paid off. It is easier in hindsight, but perhaps the shots that fell short and loose rebounds that went Duke's way in the final minutes was partial skill, partial fatigue. The Saints battled, but they lost. Duke was tested, but they won. How it affects the Blue Devils for

the rest of March remains to be seen, but from the jump, it is clear this tournament will not be anything like 2025.

Elsewhere, two double digit seeds were able to scratch out victories. The High Point Panthers, who finished the regular season 30-4, were a trendy pick to upset fifth-seeded Wisconsin. The Badgers had finished the year relatively hot, and were a game winning shot from Yaxel Lendeborg away from reaching the Big Ten title game.

It took all season, but High Point's Chase Johnston made his first two point basket of the season in Thursday's first round game. His layup with about eleven seconds left sealed the deal for High Point, who earned their program's first NCAA tournament win. Johnston was typically a three point specialist, but it was his old fashioned deuce that paid the difference for the Panthers. Wisconsin came into the tournament soaring— then the Panthers shot them out of the sky.

During the nightcap, Caleb Wilson's absence did not seem to phase sixth-seeded North Carolina for much of their game against eleventh-seeded VCU. The Tar Heels began hot, with Henri Veesar (26 pts, 10 rebs) playing the star. He led Carolina to a 19-point second half lead, which was then depleted by VCU over the final push of the second half. It was Terrence Hill's huge stepback three in overtime that gave VCU the lead after the Rams had come back in stunning fashion to tie the game. North Carolina crumbled, and VCU stepped up.

With two mid majors winning on Day One, High Point's coach Flynn Clayman had some comments after the game that drew some attention. "I know how good of a team we are....," says Clayman, "...but nobody would play us....but they gotta play us in this tournament." Clayman's comments come in a season where Miami University went 31-1 out of the MAC, and was (somewhat) controversially included in the tournament field. Miami (OH) did not play a Quad 1 opponent— in part, according to Coach Travis Steele, because no high major teams would agree to schedule them.

Teams like Miami (OH), High Point, VCU, and others are in a strange spot. They are not good enough teams where a high major would consider beating them a strong win. However, they are very much good enough to beat high majors, which would hurt the big schools' overall team sheets and tournament prospects. Miami (OH) was criticized as a team that nearly went undefeated, but would stumble in the tournament when they finally met a worthy opponent. They were sent to Dayton for the First Four, where they defeated SMU out of the ACC. Their next game comes against sixth seed

Tennessee on Friday in the first round proper. High Point, after their marquee win over a high major opponent, moves on to play fourth seeded Arkansas.

Many believed that the mid-major Cinderella was finished after last season. In truth, most who believed that were TV talking heads who do not watch college basketball until the tournament, and then voice their opinions on a topic that they know nothing about. High Point, VCU, Miami (OH), and perhaps some others might prove them even more wrong this year. Siena nearly beat Duke, we must not forget. This tournament still has the juice, and anyone who doubted it simply was not paying attention.