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March Madness brackets are about luck and some guessing

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[Kathy Fairbanks](#) can't name a single player competing in March Madness. She couldn't tell you which coaches are most talented. Actually, she hasn't watched a [college basketball](#) game all season. Still, the partner in a Sacramento public affairs firm has spent the week filling out an [NCAA Tournament](#) bracket – as she has for the past 14 years – because history has shown it can pay off big in the bragging-rights arena. Fairbanks, 44, won her long-running pool among lobbyists, political staffers and reporters the first time she played in 1996, and tied for first in 2006. "That's why this is fun," she said. "You can not know anything and still win."

About 45 percent of American workers have participated in an office pool, according to [Spherion Staffing Services](#) in [Fort Lauderdale](#), Fla. The most popular event is the [Super Bowl](#), with 68 percent of office-pool participants putting their money on pigskin; March Madness follows with 56 percent. Most entry fees are less than \$20, Spherion found.

But how do people make their picks? There are those who watch all season, study the numbers and listen to the pundits. And then there are those who decide a little less scientifically – by picking which mascots they like best, what uniforms are the most attractive or which schools are in cities they like.

Fairbanks thinks she makes as informed choices as she can, not having watched any of the games – she follows the experts' picks. That is, except when her alma mater, [UCLA](#), is in the field.

"Then I have to factor my interest in seeing them succeed and win," she said.

The [NCAA](#) Tournament, which starts in earnest today, goes beyond [college basketball](#) and is entrenched in mainstream culture, said sports sociologist [Tim Delaney](#), an associate professor at [State University of New York](#) at Oswego.

The words March Madness are used to sell everything from cars to cookware this month. And in the office, a pool can be as important to morale as placement of the [water cooler](#), Delaney said.

Regardless of their prevalence, office pools involving money are illegal. In [California](#), participants of pools with less than \$2,500 at stake could face a speeding-ticket-like infraction and \$250 fine.

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[Mark Kreidler](#), co-host of the morning show on sports talk station KHTK (1140 AM), fills out a bracket for fun each year, he said.

His strategy: Create a first draft and put it down. "Then I come back to see if I still like it," he said.

Part of the appeal of the tournament is the top teams are good, but the playing level drops off quickly, Kreidler said. So upsets are common, especially in the later rounds.

There are some patterns established over the years – the 16th seed has never beaten a first seed, a surprising number of No. 12 seeds upset No. 5 seeds, and all four top seeds have made it to the Final Four just once.

Joe Lunardi is ESPN's bracketologist, meaning he predicts which 65 teams will end up in the field. He got 64 right this year.

When it comes to actually filling out his bracket for his family's pool, however, Lunardi has been beaten by his now-12-year-old daughter and, more embarrassingly, his cocker spaniel Murray.

"At the end of the day, if you win, you have to have some luck," said Rob Stutzman, 41, a Sacramento political consultant who won in a pool of business associates in 2007. "The year I won, of course, I never admitted that."

Stutzman, a college basketball fan, admitted staying up late to watch ESPN this week for last-minute injuries and other news. It also helps that he went to school in San Diego at Point Loma Nazarene University, which isn't in the NCAA.

"I have the advantage of not being blinded by loyalty to a school," he said. "All the Cal alums are going to be suckers and have them winning in the first round."

Rob Farmer, 32, a Sacramento DJ, won all four of the pools he was in last year. He thinks it's because he makes sure to watch every conference tournament and believes he has seen every team play before he fills out his brackets each year.

"With all my big talk, I'll probably do awful this year," he said.

Jim Kozimor, the former Sacramento Kings announcer who now hosts a KHTK show, has this approach when he fills out his brackets. He trusts the NCAA committee's seeding. And then he does opposite whatever the most vocal guy in the office is doing.

"It's the blowhard strategy," he said. "The loudest guy in the office is usually the most wrong."