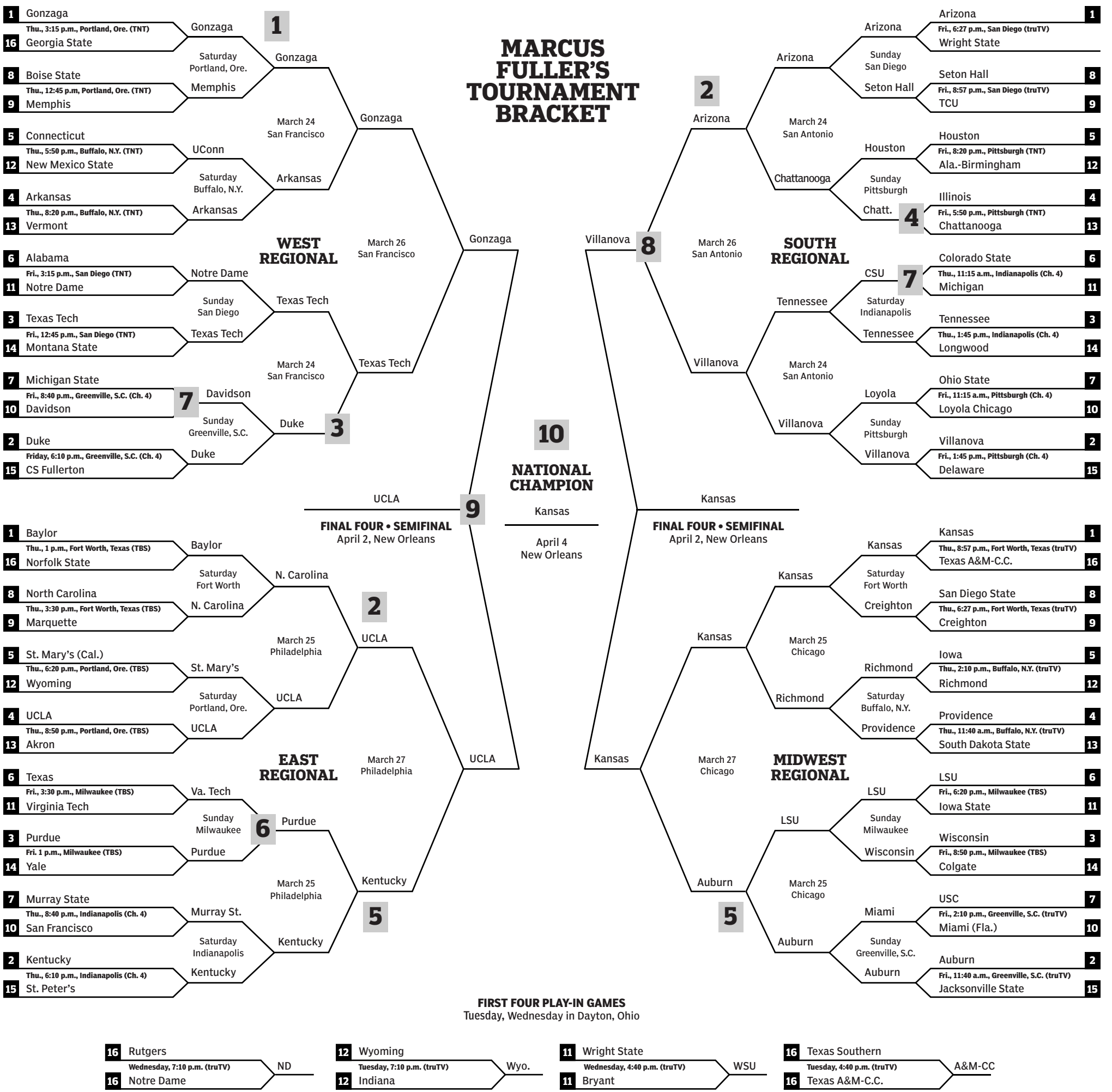


COLLEGE BASKETBALL

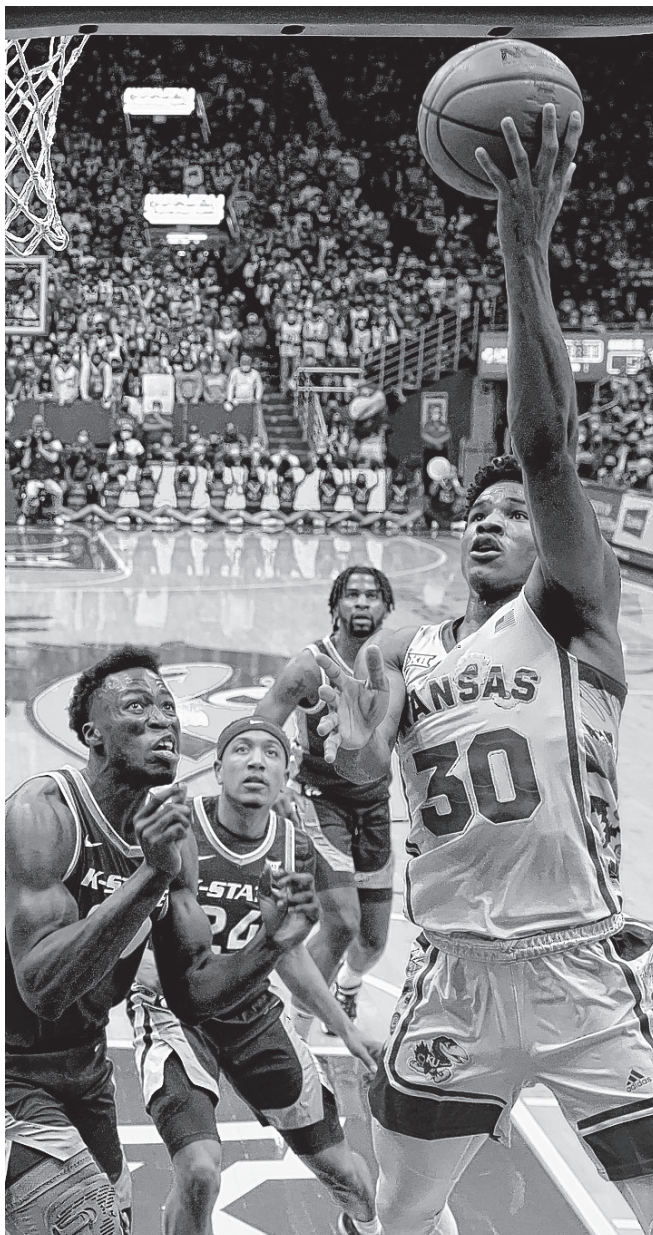
MEN'S NCAA TOURNAMENT

It feels like Jayhawks' year

Here's a few intriguing story lines and predictions to watch for from Star Tribune college basketball insider Marcus Fuller as the men's tournament tips off Tuesday.



- Zag snag:** Gonzaga's quest to return to the NCAA title game gets an early second-round scare when the nation's top frontcourt of Chet Holmgren and Drew Timme faces arguably the country's most athletic big man in Memphis freshman Jalen Duren, who had 21 points and 20 rebounds in a 85-69 victory over Central Florida in the American Athletic quarterfinals.
- Pac-12 respect:** For the second consecutive season, the Pac-12 only landed three teams in the NAAs, the lowest of the major conferences. No. 4 seed UCLA and top-seeded Arizona, though, have Final Four potential coming out of the East and South Regionals, respectively.
- Coach K's last dance:** Hard to believe the greatest college basketball coach ever is calling it quits. Duke is still a national title contender. Sadly, like his final home game, it probably will end in disappointment. Getting past the Sweet 16 is iffy, but in no way blemishes an amazing career.
- Moc your bracket up:** Tennessee Chattanooga could be a popular 13-4 upset pick against Big Ten co-champion Illinois in the first round in Pittsburgh. If the Mocs can handle Kofi Cockburn, there's no bigger opponent keeping them from a Cinderella run to Sweet 16.
- SEC bias:** You heard of the football bias for the Southeastern Conference, but the league is loaded in hoops, too. Don't be surprised to see five SEC teams in the Sweet 16, most from any conference. Auburn and Kentucky just missed being No. 1 seeds.
- Big Ten busts:** No conference received more NCAA bids than the Big Ten's record-tying nine selections this year. But quality means more than quantity. Purdue and Wisconsin are the highest seeds, each at No. 3. And the Boilermakers will make it consecutive years with only one Big Ten team reaching the Sweet 16.



- Minnesota ties:** Freshmen Holmgren (Gonzaga) and Kendall Brown (Baylor) are on the two best teams with Minnesota natives. But Davidson's Mike Jones and Colorado State's David Roddy are two former local standouts who could be the reason their squads upset Big Ten opponents Michigan State and Michigan in the first round, respectively.
- Cats claw:** Five programs with big cat mascots have a good chance to make the Elite Eight, including three with the nickname Wildcats. Arizona and Villanova can guarantee one Cat will get the glory when they claw it out for a Final Four berth from the South region.
- Bruins are back:** Remember how cool it was to see Jalen Suggs' buzzer-beating half-court shot against UCLA to get Gonzaga into the title game last year? Well, imagine what the Bruins felt coming so close to playing for it all. They returned just about everyone from that team to get back to the Big Dance.
- Self-help:** Jayhawks coach Bill Self's use of the transfer portal was brilliant to help bolster an already solid roster of returning talent, including Big 12 Player of the Year Ochai Agbaji, Christian Braun and David McCormack. Storied programs Kansas and UCLA meet for the NCAA title for the first time ever, ending with KU's first championship since 2008.



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Kansas star guard Ochai Agbaji left several Kansas State defenders in his wake driving for a layup. Photo by CHARLIE RIEDEL • Associated Press