

MEN'S NCAA TOURNAMENT

SOUTH REGION

Miller time for Alabama

Must-watch player • Brandon Miller, Alabama
A dark cloud covered Miller's season after his name was mentioned in the murder case involving former Crimson Tide player Darius Miles. Police said Miller delivered the gun eventually used in the shooting. Miller was not found of any wrongdoing, so the 6-9 freshman sensation kept playing to earn SEC player of the year — showing why he's a potential No. 1 draft pick.

Must-watch matchup • Creighton vs. North Carolina State
The sixth-seeded Blue Jays opened the season as a top-10 team before losing six consecutive games to fall out of the Top 25. But they regrouped to finish third in the Big East, led by 7-footer Ryan Kalkbrenner. The 11th-seeded Wolfpack were a bubble team most of the season. But they had impressive victories vs. Duke and Miami (Fla.) — and a close loss to Kansas.

Who could challenge Alabama?
Maryland's double-digit victory at Purdue earlier this season should put fear into the Crimson Tide, who are seeded No. 1 overall and could see a dangerous Big Ten opponent in the second round. Former Seton Hall coach Kevin Willard's NCAA tournament experience could come in handy for the Ter-rapins. They're a hard-nosed defensive-minded and athletic bunch with a hot-shooting guard in Jahmir Young.

MARCUS FULLER

EAST REGION

Edey, Purdue have big plans

Must-watch player • Zach Edey, Purdue
In a game that keeps getting smaller, Edey looms large at 7-4 and 305 pounds. In an era where the traditional big man is disappearing, Edey stands out. On a very good Boilermakers team that has a backcourt that can run hot and cold, Edey will have to shine for a deep run. He averaged 22.3 points, scored 24 or more in 15 games and had 26 double-doubles.

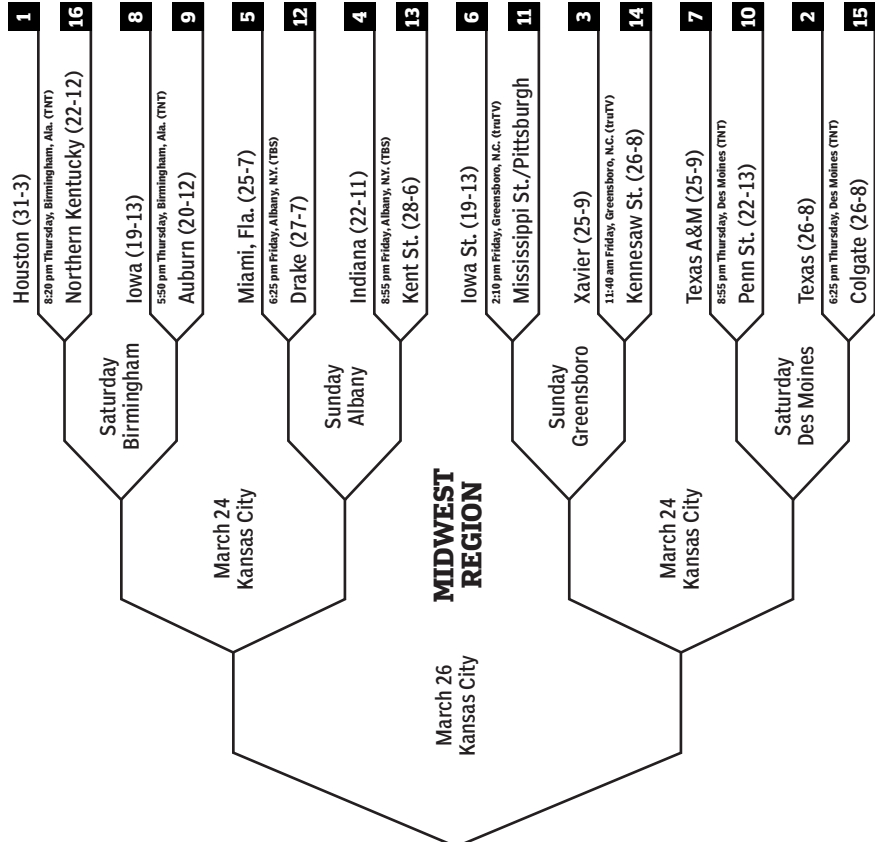
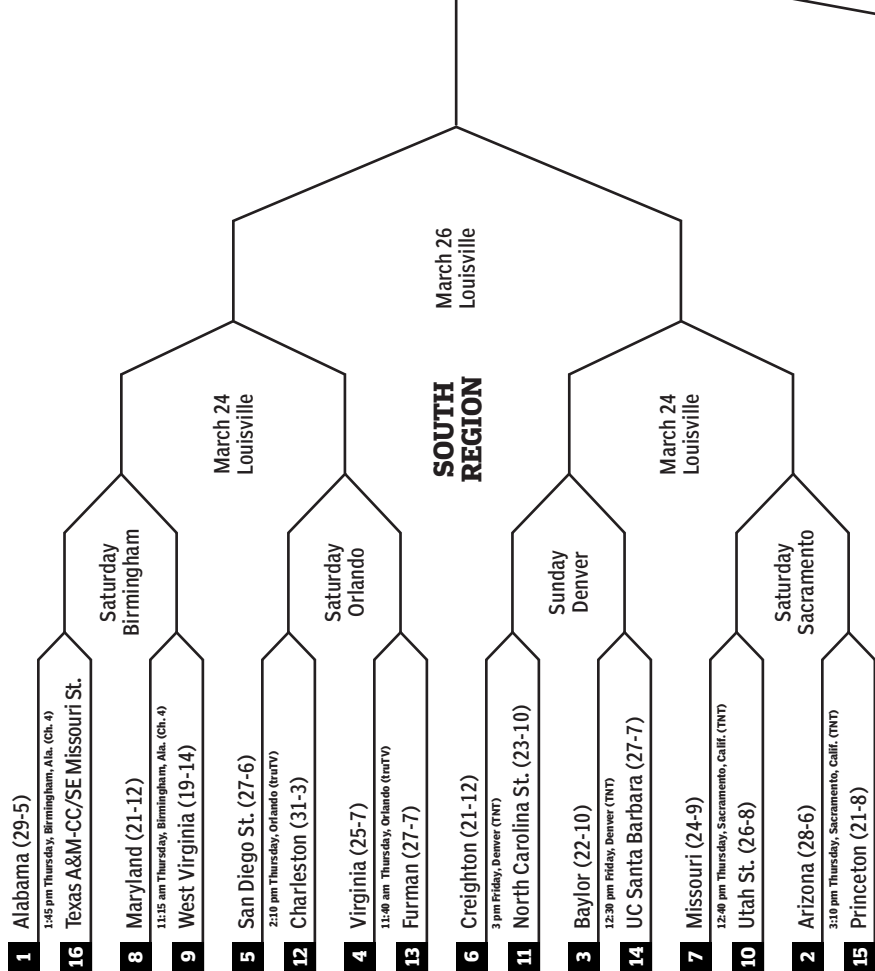
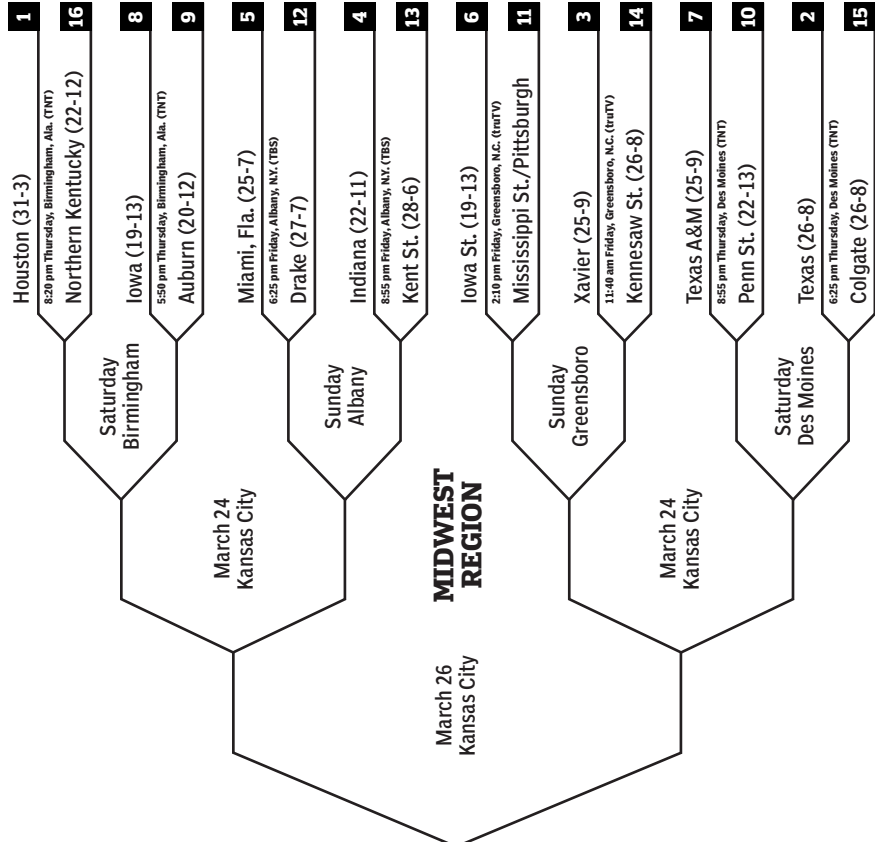
Must-watch matchup • Kentucky vs. Providence
Call it the Bryce Hopkins reunion game. Hopkins struggled for consistent minutes as a freshman at Kentucky last year. The result: He entered the transfer portal and landed at Providence. So, of course, the sixth-seeded Wildcats open the tournament against No. 11 Providence and the 6-7 Hopkins, who led the Friars in scoring (16.1) and rebounds (8.5).

Another run?
In his second season at Marquette, coach Shaka Smart has the Golden Eagles in as a No. 2 seed, the highest in school history, coming off both regular-season and conference tournament titles in the Big East. Could Smart — who coached Virginia Commonwealth to the Final Four in 2011, as a No. 11 seed that had to win a First Four game — be ready for another deep run?

KENT YOUNGBLOOD

MEN'S TOURNAMENT BRACKET

DEFENDING CHAMPION
Kansas



MIDWEST REGION

Indiana has star power

Must-watch player • Trayce Jackson-Davis, Indiana
Jackson-Davis returned to college to lead the Hoosiers back to national prominence. The consensus first-team All-America had a stretch where he was named Big Ten player of the week for four consecutive weeks. It might take that type of Herculean effort to get Indiana to its first Sweet 16 since 2016.

Must-watch matchup • Texas A&M vs. Penn State
The No. 7-seeded Aggies were one of the hottest teams in the country, winning 10 of 11 games before falling to No. 1 seed Alabama in the SEC tournament title game. You could argue Buzz Williams has a sleeper team to reach the Final Four, but what if they don't even make it past the first round? That's how tough this matchup is with the No. 10 seed Nittany Lions, who reached Sunday's Big Ten tournament final, losing by two to Purdue.

Minnesota flavor
Some teams with Minnesota ties have a shot at advancing here. The No. 4-seeded Hoosiers could do damage with Jackson-Davis and former Armstrong star Race Thompson in their frontcourt. Sixth-seeded Iowa State reached the Sweet 16 last year with help from former DeLaSalle star Gabe Kalscheur. Fellow Big 12 team Texas, a No. 2 seed, is led by Marcus Carr, Kalscheur's teammate with the Gophers.

MARCUS FULLER

WEST REGION

Gonzaga a threat yet again

Must-watch player • Drew Timme, Gonzaga
A 6-10 reason why the Zags are making their 23rd consecutive appearance in the NCAA tournament. Timme averaged 20.9 points and 7.3 rebounds for the third-seeded Zags. His 18 points in a one-sided victory over St. Mary's in the WAC title game made him the leading scorer in school history with 2,210 points.

Must-watch matchup • Kansas vs. Arkansas/Illinois
The Jayhawks got their second consecutive No. 1 seed and coach Bill Self back from the hospital Sunday. It is a feel-good story that figures to play out should Kansas make a run under Self, who sought help for chest tightness Wednesday. But Kansas will be challenged by either Illinois or Arkansas, particularly the long, lean Razorbacks in the second round.

Pitino's Iona swan song?
It didn't take long for speculation to start that Iona coach Rick Pitino would be jumping ship to replace the fired Mike Anderson at St. John's or Patrick Ewing at Georgetown. And it promises to be a lingering issue as Iona makes its second consecutive NCAA appearance under Pitino, who worked with St. John's President Rev. Brian Shanley when both were at Providence.

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