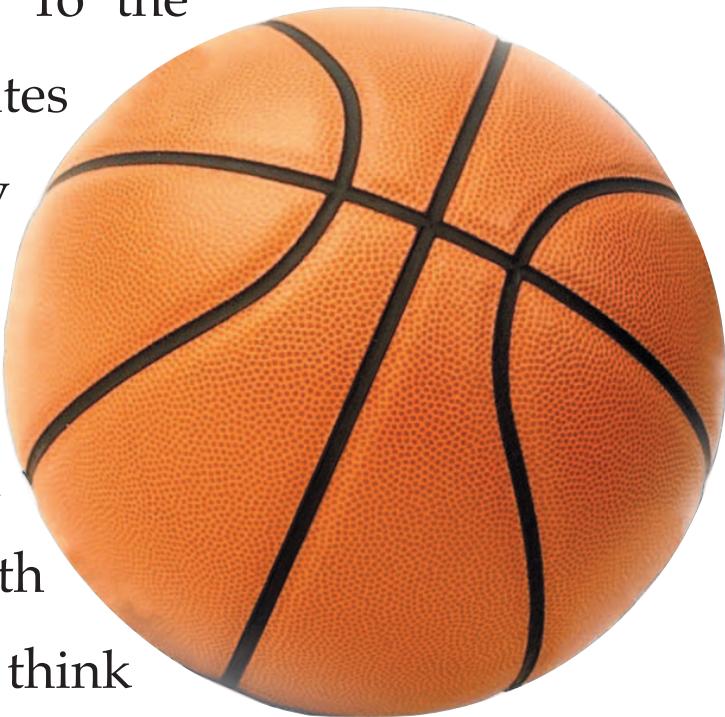


March is madness

It's also Miracles and Magic

By Kevin Faris

Recently, a website named basketball.org used some of the tools offered at Google (seriously, what can't Google do?) to discover which states most frequently create basketball-related searches. To the surprise of no one who has spent at least five minutes within the Commonwealth's borders, Kentucky ranked number one. Rounding out the list were other states where college, not professional, basketball reigned supreme: Kansas, North Carolina, and Indiana (and yes, I know that Indiana and North Carolina both have NBA teams, but seriously, if you think the residents of those states would rather see the Pacers or Bobcats win over the Hoosiers or Tar Heels, then you need to stop hanging out with Michael Phelps).



As the calendar turns from February to March, the frequency of those searches is only going to increase. Because, as every college basketball fan knows, March is the time for the NCAA Tournament, often referred to as March Madness. And sure, IU won't be there, UK may not be there, Kansas probably won't repeat, and UNC ... well, they will probably be the favorites to win it all, unless Roy Williams screws it up or the refs start calling Tyler Hansbrough for traveling. One of those is more likely to happen than the other, but that is another point for another time. March Madness will descend for most fans of college basketball, but where Kentucky separates itself from the other states on this list is in the realm of high school basketball. While the other states all play high school basketball, none of them have an all comers state tournament that crowns a single champion. Not even Indiana, which at one point arguably had a more famous high school state tournament than Kentucky, follows this formula, instead choosing to crown four champions from their four classifications, much like Kentucky does for football. What this means is that March in Kentucky, with our State Tournament and the UK Wildcats, is too big for just Madness. In Kentucky, March is Madness, Miracles, and Magic.

Madness is insanity, craziness; the idea that what is happening is just too irrational to believe. Madness is the upsets that don't make sense and yes, Madness happens. It happens a lot. In the NCAA tournament, you have teams like George Mason knocking out the predicted champion Connecticut in 2006, or Stephen Curry and Davidson mowing through major conference teams to advance to the 2008 Regional Finals, before losing a nail biter to eventual champion Kansas. Madness is when the two seed falls to the 15th seed in the first round: Santa Clara (and Steve Nash) over Arizona in 1993 or Hampton over Iowa state in 2001.

At the high school level, three teams that played in Rupp Arena last year won't even advance to the Regionals this year, as University Heights, Greenwood, and Paintsville all fell to late game heroics at the hands of their district foes. Overtimes, last second shots, costly turnovers, and free throws that just miss. When the teams that should win, the defending champs, the top seeds, the pre-season picks, lose, what else can you call it? So often, the teams that should win do. Madness is what happens when they don't, and Madness is what we root for, unless you're the team that is supposed to win.

In 2004, when UK lost in the 2nd round to UAB, during a year where they went undefeated in the SEC and were a solid pick to make the Final Four, I couldn't even read or look at a sports page for over a week. I routinely felt sick in my stomach whenever anyone even mentioned the idea of basketball. I didn't want to see the highlights replayed over and over while some talking head screamed, "That's why they call it March Madness!!!" I contemplated going camping, conveniently forgetting the fact that I don't really like camping, because I wanted to escape any and all means of information. Madness is when something happens that is not supposed to happen. Teams like North Carolina, UConn, and Pittsburgh, or Scott County and Ballard, all favorites to win it all, are rooting for Madness to happen this month as much as the country is rooting for a George W. Bush comeback.

Which brings us to the opposite of Madness and that is Miracles. Madness is what the commentators and the fallen team call the upset. The winning teams, and their fans, see it as a Miracle.

When Western Kentucky advanced to the Sweet Sixteen (By the way, did you know that "Sweet Sixteen" is trademarked not by the NCAA, but by the Kentucky High School Athletic Association? The NCAA uses it with the permission of the KHSAA, but that little slogan is ours. Suck it NCAA!) of the NCAA Tournament, on the back of Ty Rogers' heroics that was a Miracle. Now, it was a Miracle born of hard work and execution, but it was still a Miracle. 12 seeds are not supposed to advance that far in the NCAAs, but they did. In October of 1980, gas explosions destroyed most of Simon Kenton High School. In March of 1981, they won the Sweet 16. That was a Miracle. In 1995 Breckinridge County faced down the best team from Kentucky's largest city, Pleasure Ridge Park of Louisville, and won. The small counties and schools are not supposed to beat the big teams from Louisville and Lexington, but sometimes they do, and while it might be Madness for the teams from the big cities, it's nothing but a Miracle for the small schools. Even when teams

eke out a victory over Kentucky's own "Hoosiers"-esque story, Elliot County, en route to the 2008 Sweet 16 title. And it is Magic that Elliot County hopes to ride again, as a school of 325 students from a county with only 7000 residents, enters the tournament as a favorite, hoping this year to complete the Miracle. And if you haven't read, heard, or seen Elliot County play, then you may be missing not just the best sports story in Kentucky, but one of the best sports stories in the country, as Pat Forde of ESPN introduced the homegrown talents of twins Ethan and Evan Faulkner and Jonathan Ferguson to the world.

Scott County hopes the Magic of the regular season will carry them through to their second title in three years. Vee Sanford of Lexington Catholic hopes the Magic will allow him to do what his father Vince could not: win the State Title. Ballard, Jeffersontown, and Shelby Valley will be among the teams hoping for some Magic of their own this March.



Photo by Alex Orlov

from Kentucky are not involved, Rupp Arena can still host a Miracle in March. In 1985, the greatest upset in the NCAA Finals occurred when Villanova knocked off Patrick Ewing and Georgetown. This could have been Rupp Arena's revenge on the Hoyas for defeating the Wildcats in the 1984 Final Four, in which case I think Nova owes us a thank you. In 2002, Mike Davis and IU knocked off the number one seeded Duke Blue Devils. Rupp Arena cheering loudly, and proudly, for Indiana? If that's not a Miracle, I don't know what is.

And that leaves Magic, the one factor every team wants. Magic is what can help the favorite teams avoid the Madness, and Magic is what can help the underdog teams complete the Miracle. Magic is what stopped the Madness in 1992 when a rag tag bunch of kids from UK almost beat the defending champion Duke. Magic and the lack of a man on the inbounds passer, but mostly Magic. (Seriously, Christian Laettner is number one on my list of people I will kick if I ever meet him in person. Osama Bin Laden is number two.) Magic is also what happened in 1998 when a different UK team stormed from behind to upset a different Duke team, thus ensuring a Miracle. This year, Magic may be the only thing that will allow UK to keep their consecutive NCAA Tournament streak alive.

Magic is what helped Darius Miller and Mason County

Years from now, when the people who brought us Google bring us something even better, there is no doubt that the citizens of Kentucky will continue to dominate the searches for basketball. Perhaps those searches will be for the players who make their mark over the next few weeks. Will a UK player ascend to the status of Scott Padgett and Cameron Mills, local kids who provided the Magic for a Wildcat title run? What high school players will join the illustrious list of Sweet 16 alumni that includes NBA players Derek Anderson, Wes Unseld, and OJ Mayo, NFL players Brian Brohm, Michael Bush, and Andre Woodson, coaches John Pelphry and Travis Ford, and Commissioner of Agriculture Richie Farmer?

Who will have the Magic?

Who will cause the Madness?

Who will create a Miracle?

No one knows, and that's what makes this time of year so special. ■

The KHSAA Sweet 16 begins in Lexington March 18.

You can read Kevin Faris regularly (on topics ranging from sports to the Bacon Explosion) at aceweekly.blogspot.com. Bookmark it.