The Vanderbilt Hustler's

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 14, 2012

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YOUR BRACKET: UNPREDICTABLE

JERRY BREWER

MCT Campus

Once again, it's time to analyze the most unpredictable tournament in sports.

In other words, don't remind me when 75 percent of this column proves false.

Some years, predicting the Big Dance is like playing chess and figuring out a Rubik's Cube at once. Other years, it feels ridiculously easy _ until you lose the next year because you didn't believe enough in Iona.

So, I offer these initial impressions about the latest field of 68 with a warning label: Consume this information, but trust your gut.

That way, we can share the blame for your busted bracket.

SEE **PREDICTIONS**, PAGE 7

FOUR WOMEN'S TEAMS THAT CAN WIN IT ALL

MARCUS HENRY MCT Campus

BAYLOR (34-0): It's not all about Brittney Griner for Baylor. The 6-8 junior is at the center of everything the Bears do, but she'll need help from the backcourt if the Bears expect to win their first championship since 2005. Sophomore guard Odyssey Sims has been a fine complement to Griner. If Sims continues her torrid play, Baylor should have no problems advancing to the Final Four.

STANFORD (31-1): The Cardinal might be the most underrated great team in the country. With the sister act Nnemkadi (21.8 ppg, 10.5 rpg) and Chiney Ogwumike (15.8 ppg, 10.3 rpg) roaming the paint, Stanford is a favorite to make a return trip to the Final Four. But the Ogwumike sisters are going to need help from their backcourt mates to bring home the hardware. Toni Kokenis (9.5 ppg) is the best of the backcourt bunch.

CONNECTICUT (29-4): The Huskies took a bit of a hit on the national stage after losing twice to Notre Dame and once to St. John's during conference play. The perception among some observers was that Connecticut was suddenly vulnerable. Connecticut avenged those losses, outscoring the Red Storm and the Fighting Irish a combined 137-97 in the Big East Tournament en route to the conference title. Connecticut's backcourt of Tiffany Hayes and North Babylon graduate Bria Hartley is as versatile as any in the country.

NOTRE DAME (30-3): Any team with a player like Skylar Diggins (17 ppg, 5.7 apg) has a chance to win a championship. Arguably the most talented guard in the game, Diggins played her best on the biggest stage. But the 5-9 junior has help from Natalie Novosel, Devereaux Peters and Kayla McBride, who are all averaging between 11 and 15 points. Notre Dame has one of the nation's most balanced attacks and will be very difficult to guard. ★

Dores go Dancing



photo: Chris Honiball/ The Vanderbilt Hustler

Senior forward Lance Goulbourne (5) thanks fans after beating Florida at Memorial Gym on Senior Night on Feb. 28. Florida received a No. 7 seed in the tournament's West Region.

MATT CITAK

Hustler Sports Reporter

Fresh off its victorious trip to New Orleans, the Vanderbilt men's basketball team is hoping to continue its current hot streak into early April. The Commodores are coming off the program's first Southeastern Conference Tournament championship since 1951, a feat that has many experts predicting a deep run for this experienced squad.

"This is one of my happiest days as a Vanderbilt head coach. When you invest a lot, you care a lot," said head coach Kevin Stallings at Sunday night's press conference following the Commodores' return to Nashville. "I think what I'm most proud of is the investment that's occurred by this group of young men in this program."

Stalling's recent track record in the NCAA Tournament does not seem to bother the head coach.

"I really felt like we lost last year's game because we lost the one the year before. I think we'll be looser this time around," Stallings said. "We all want to win. It's about the only thing now that this group hasn't done."

This year's starting lineup is one of the most experienced in the country, with SEC scoring champion John Jenkins being the only non-senior. This roster has not made it past the first round of the NCAA tournament, however, and the team realizes that its window for success will not be open forever.

"I was just talking about seizing the day, taking opportunities as they come and not letting them slip away," said senior forward Jeffery Taylor of his pregame speech before Vanderbilt faced Kentucky in Sunday's title game. "I just wanted the guys to know that (championships) don't come around a lot."

The Commodores are hoping to experience the same journey that took last year's UConn Huskies from the Big East Championship to the NCAA Championship, but it is not going to be an easy ride. Selected as a No. 5 seed in the East Region of the 2012 NCAA Tournament, Vanderbilt will face 12-seed Harvard on Thursday in Albuquerque, N.M. Tipoff is scheduled for 3:40 p.m. CT, airing nationally on TNT.

Making the program's first NCAA Tournament appearance since 1946, Harvard's bid for postseason play was strengthened by an impressive early season win over Florida State. The Commodores will have to contain Crimson forward Keith Wright, who enters the contest averaging 11 points and eight rebounds per game.

"It's going to be a 40 minute affair, and we're going to have to grind it out and get the win," said senior guard Brad Tinsley.

While the men's team will be off battling in Albuquerque, the Vanderbilt women's basketball team will be starting its quest for a tournament title right here in Memorial Gym.

"I'm thrilled about being home and hosting. I've been here 10 years and this is just the second time we've been hosting," said head coach Melanie Balcomb. "The atmosphere should be

After compiling a 16-1 record at home this season, the Commodores will look to carry over their success in Memorial to the tournament.

"That gives us much more confidence and we know it'll be a really great crowd," said SEC leading scorer and sophomore guard Christina Foggie. "We're ready to go."

The Commodores look poised to make a deep run in this year's tournament, but first must get past a tough Middle Tennessee team that beat SEC regular season champion Kentucky.

"It shows that they come hard and ready to play," Foggie said. "It doesn't matter what their ranking is, they're ready to play." ★

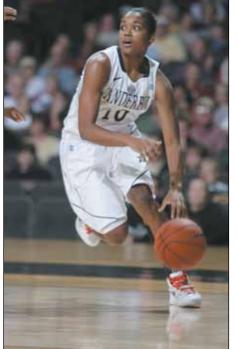


photo: Daniel Dubois/ VU Media Relations

After leading the SEC in scoring, sophomore guard Christina Foggie (10) and the Commodores will see local rival Middle Tenn. in the first round of the tournament on Sunday, March 18.

BY THE NUMBERS

VANDERBILT MEN -24-10 (10-6 SEC)

-Last 5 games: W-L-W-W-W -Key wins: Marquette, Florida, Kentucky Record vs. RPI top 50: 4-9

-NCAA record: 9-13 (13 appearances) Best finish: Elite 8 (1965) Last finish: First Four (2011) Coach: Kevin Stallings Overall record: 385-221 (.635) NCAA record: 7-7 (4-5 at Vanderbilt)

VANDERBILT WOMEN

-22-9 (9-7 SEC)

-Last 5 games: L-L-W-W-L -Key wins: Oklahoma, Georgia, LSU, Tennessee

Record vs. RPI top 50: 5-8 -NCAA record: 37-24 (25 appearances) Best finish: Final Four (1993) Last finish: First Round (2011) Coach: Melanie Balcomb Overall record: 400-197 (.670) NCAA record: 16-12

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Breakdown for the CAA East Regional

GREG LOGAN MCT Campus

BEST TEAM

Syracuse (31-2) has veteran leaders in Kris Joseph and Scoop Jardine, shot-blocking under the basket from Fab Melo and a sixth man in shooting guard Dion Waiters who can play a dominant role in the tournament. Orange coach Jim Boeheim lets the off-court controversies surrounding his team roll off his back like water off a duck. But as he said following a Big East Tournament loss, seniors Joseph and Jardine must step up their spotty play of late.

Ohio State forward Jared Sullinger is 6-9, 265 and a force under the basket, averaging 17.5 points and 9.3 rebounds while shooting 54.8 percent. But he also can step outside and hit three-pointers, which puts more pressure on the opposing defense.

BEST GUARD/PLAYMAKER

Wisconsin's Jordan Taylor was a preseason All-American who is an all-around threat, averaging 14.7 points, 3.7 rebounds and 4.0 assists in Bo Ryan's deliberate offense. Taylor is a smart player who makes great decisions and isn't afraid to take the big shot.

BEST PLAYER YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

Vanderbilt forward Jeffery Taylor labors in the shadow of shooting guard John Jenkins, but at 6-7, 225, he's a great complementary offensive threat. He averages 16.3 points, 5.7 rebounds, shoots 50 percent overall and 43 percent from three.

BEST GO-TO GUY

Vanderbilt guard John Jenkins is among the best shooters in the country, connecting at a 48.5-percent overall and 45.3 from three-point range. He averaged 20.0 points, and he's clutch at the line, hitting 84 percent of his free throws.

If there's going to be a major upset in this bracket, Vanderbilt is the leading candidate to take out Syracuse in the Sweet 16 as the Commodores showed in knocking off No. 1 Kentucky in the SEC Tournament final Sunday. Vandy has great shooters, but it's also inconsistent enough to lose to Cleveland State and Indiana State.

BEST MATCHUP

If the selection committee has done its job well, Syracuse and Ohio State should meet in the East final in Boston. The Buckeyes have a terrific playmaker in Aaron Craft, and forwards William Buford (14.8 points, 4.9 rebounds) and De-Shaun Thomas (15.5, 5.0) add firepower. But the player who might emerge as the difference-maker is Syracuse guard Dion Waiters (12.6), who can take over a game on offense or as a muscular defender.

BEST COACHING MATCHUP

West Virginia's Bob Huggins is making his 20th NCAA appearance with his third school, and Mark Few has built Gonzaga into a mid-major power that is making its 13th straight NCAA appearance. Huggins is more hard-nosed and gets more pro prospects, and Few takes a cerebral approach. Playing this game in Pittsburgh means it will practically be a home game for the Mountaineers, similar to Gonzaga's loss to Syracuse in Buffalo a couple of years ago.

FINAL FOUR

North Carolina, Kentucky, Syracuse, Missouri.

North Carolina should reverse its onepoint December loss to Kentucky in the championship game because the Tar Heels have the most imposing front line in the country with Tyler Zeller, Harrison Barnes and John Henson and a polished playmaker in Kendall Marshall. ★



JEFFERY TAYLOR, #44

Senior Guard

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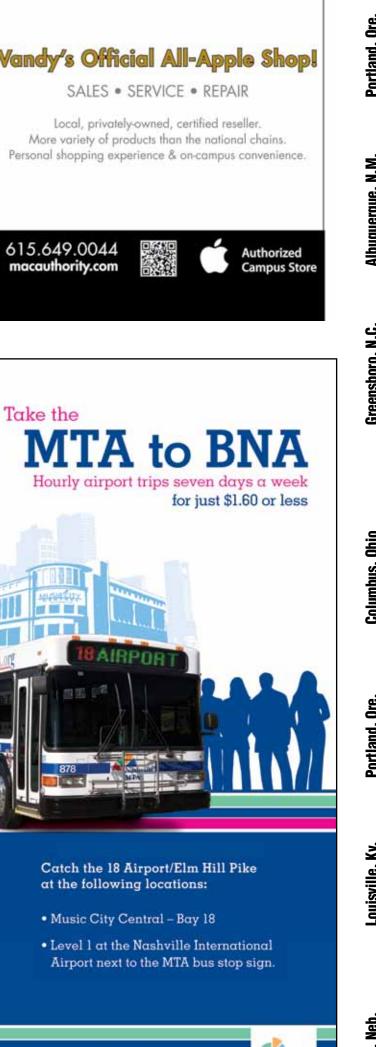


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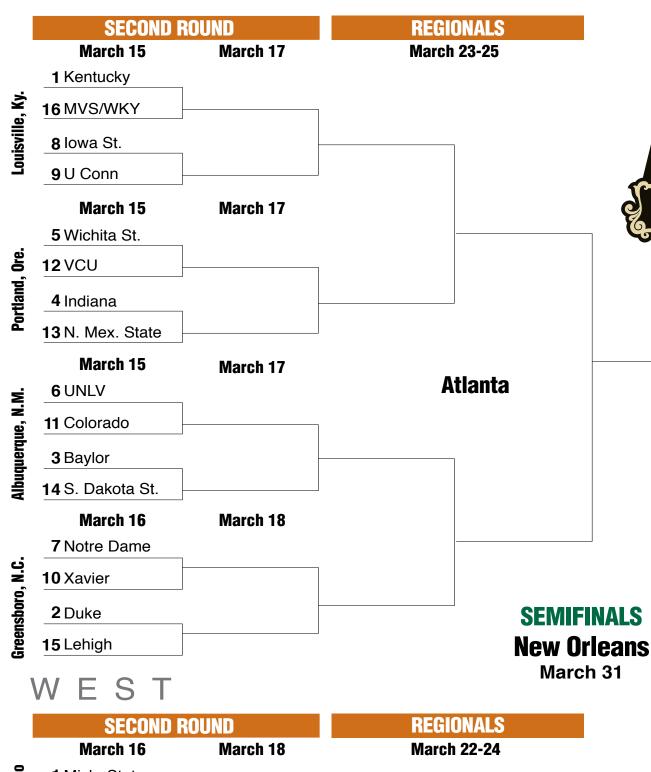
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	March 16	March 18	March 22-24
Columbus, Ohio	1 Mich. State		
	16 LIU Brooklyn		
	8 Memphis	_	
	9 Saint Louis		
	March 15	March 17	
Portland, Ore.	5 New Mexico		
	12 Long Beach St.		
	4 Louisville		
	13 Davidson		
Louisville, Ky.	March 15 6 Murray State	March 17	Phoenix
	11 Colorado State		
	3 Marquette		
	14 BYU/Iona		
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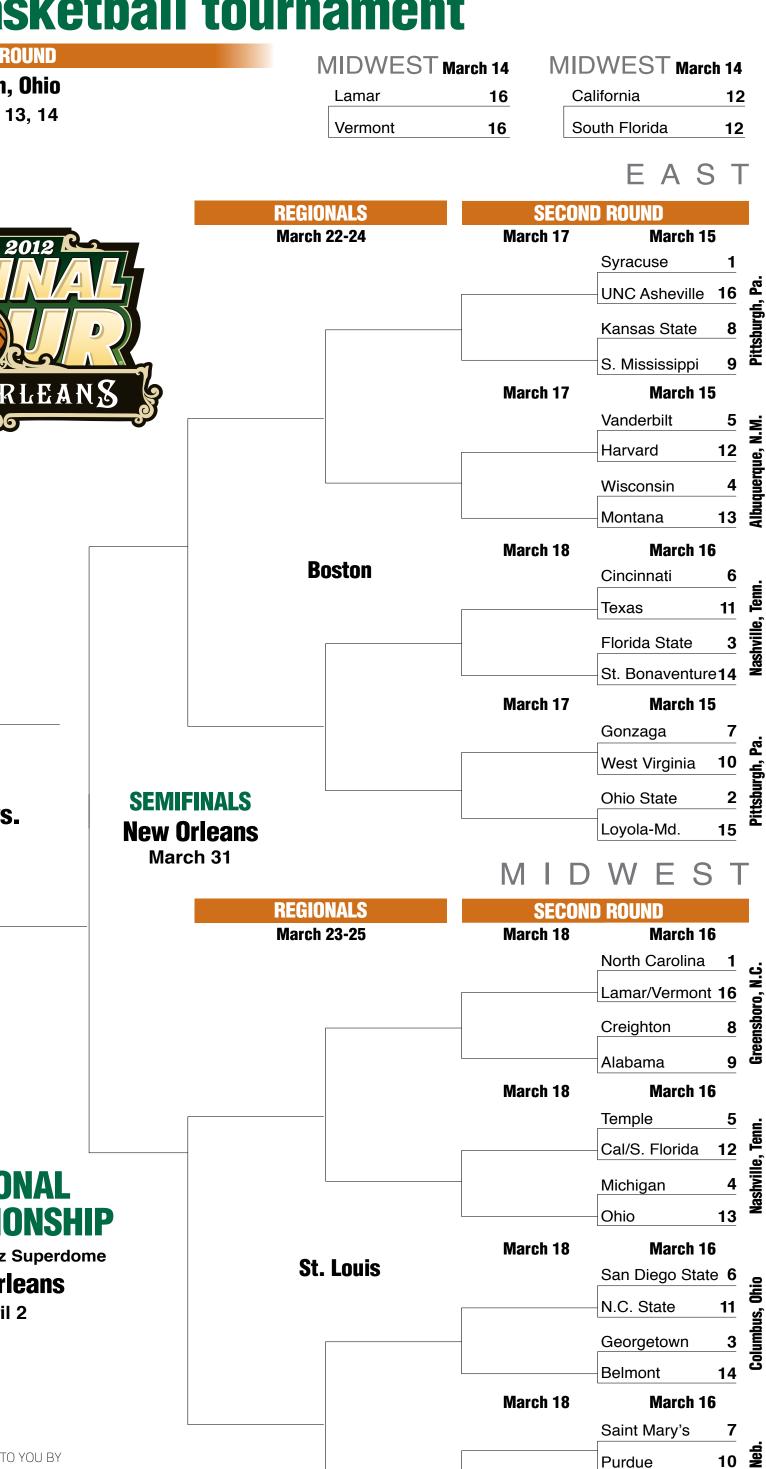
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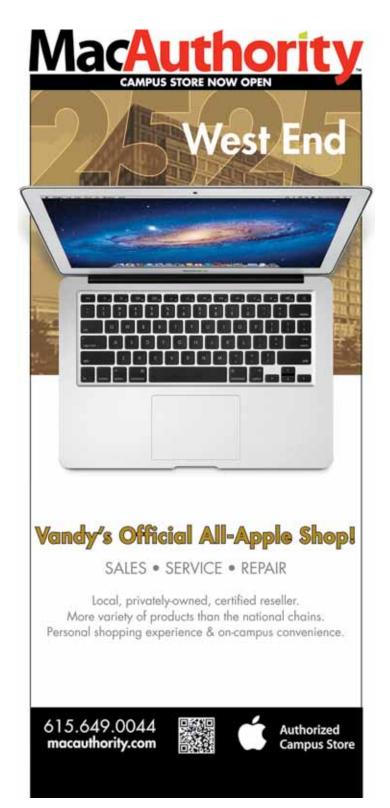
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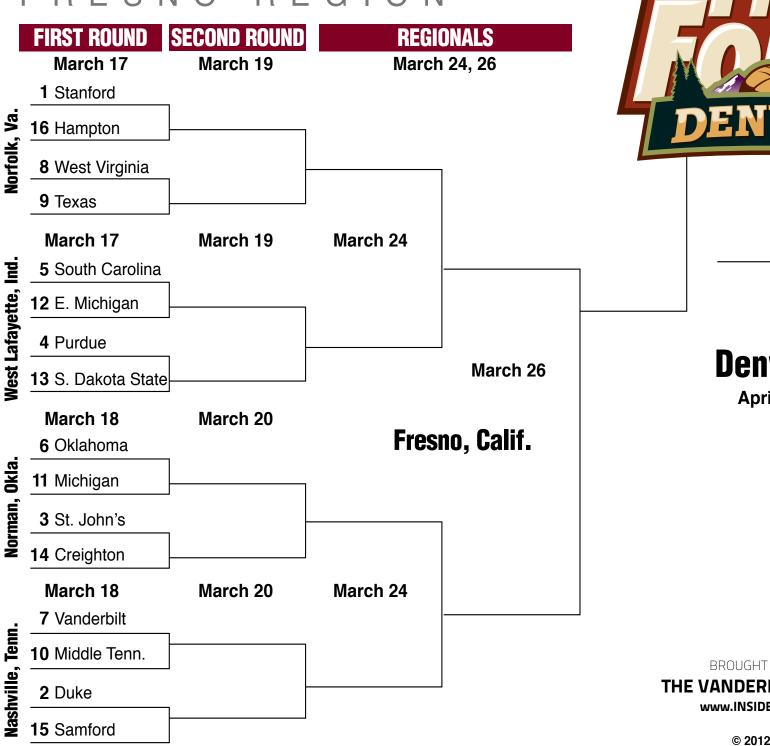
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PREDICTIONS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

BEST BET TO MAKE THE FINAL FOUR: KENTUCKY

The Wildcats (32-2), the No. 1 overall seed. have been the most dominant team all season. Sure, they lost to Vanderbilt in the Southeastern Conference championship game, but forward Anthony Davis is a defensive presence (4.7 blocks per game), as well as college basketball's best all-around player and the likely No. 1 pick in the 2012 NBA draft.

The Wildcats are the game's most talented team, with Terrence Jones, Doron Lamb, Marquis Teague and Michael Kidd-Gilchrist leading them. Youth and depth are issues, but they have a senior leader in Darius Miller.

The South Region is full of programs with great tradition (Duke, Indiana, Connecticut), but Kentucky has the clearest path to New Orleans.

HIGH-PROFILE TEAM LEAST LIKELY TO **MAKE THE FINAL FOUR: KANSAS**

The Jayhawks (27-6) were a mild surprise in the regular season and earned the No. 2 seed in the Midwest. But Kansas isn't very deep; four players average more than 30 minutes. They're too dependent on Thomas Robinson and Tyshawn Taylor to carry the offensive load. And coach Bill Self has had plenty of earlyround failures.

Kansas could go as far as the Elite Eight, but it wouldn't be surprising if it failed to advance past the first weekend.

MOST EXCITING TEAM THAT YOU DON'T KNOW: LONG ISLAND

The Blackbirds of Brooklyn play at a fast pace. They rank second in the nation in adjusted tempo, according to stats maven Ken Pomeroy. (Interestingly, Seattle University led the nation in that category.) But as a No. 16 seed facing Michigan State, the Blackbirds won't last long in this tournament. Don't be surprised if they play an exciting half or so against the Spartans, though.

BEST EARLY MATCHUP: VANDERBILT VS. HARVARD

Call it the Brainiac Classic. The two teams can play, though. Vanderbilt's John Jenkins might be the best shooter in the Dance. And Harvard is the most athletic, versatile and defensive-oriented team to come out of the Ivy League in quite some time.



photo: Pablo Alcala/ MCT Campus Vanderbilt's Festus Ezeli (3) challenges Kentucky's Anthony Davis (23) as he attempts a dunk in the second half of the SEC tournament championship game at New Orleans Arena in New Orleans. Louisiana, on Sunday, March 11, 2012. Vanderbilt defeated Kentucky, 71-64.

MOST DANGEROUS PLAYER: MARCUS DEN-MON, MISSOURI

There are plenty of lottery picks, from North Carolina's Harrison Barnes to Ohio State's Jared Sullinger, who will be better pros.

But Denmon (17.6 points per game, 40.9 percent on three-pointers) is a streaky senior guard who just might have a special tournament if he gets hot.

UNDERDOG MOST LIKELY TO SUCCEED: BELMONT

The Bruins have a terrific coach in Rick Byrd. They averaged 8.8 three-pointers a game. And they face a No. 3 seed that really isn't that good (Georgetown). They're 0-4 all-time in the Big Dance, including a one-point loss to Duke four years ago and a 14-point loss to Wisconsin a year ago. They also lost by one to Duke earlier this season. It's time for a breakthrough. ★



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