

Improving March Madness

Steve Burchett

Men's college basketball provides one of the most entertaining tournaments of the year. Sixty-four teams (or sixty-five, if you count the "play-in" game) make the "Big Dance," a single-elimination tournament that culminates in a national championship. Sometimes bigger schools are defeated by smaller schools that weren't expected to make it past the first round. One of these lesser, relatively unknown teams might even win a few games, and the media dubs them "Cinderella." Even if the prominent teams dominate, the tournament is still full of drama and enjoyable moments. This time of the year is affectionately referred to as "March Madness."

But it can be improved. I don't mean the actual tournament needs to be changed for the better (though I always question how certain teams were qualified to make the field of sixty-four!), but how *you* participate might need to be modified. Here are a few ways you can improve March Madness:



Beware of being a "couch potato."

I speak from experience on this one. I could sit on the couch and watch games all day. I like not only close games, but I also enjoy critiquing coaching styles and team strategies. I admit it: I am a recovering couch potato.

Is it wrong to sit and watch games for several hours in a row? Sometimes, but not always. Jesus did attempt to get away from the crowds with His disciples for some rest (Mark 6:31). However, when we decide to relax and watch a ballgame, we should remember that the New Testament is full of teaching about responsibilities like pursuing holiness (Hebrews 12:14) and losing your life for Christ and the gospel (Mark 8:34-38). We rest, take in a ball game, and even sleep, so that we are refreshed and ready to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Christ with zeal.

Involve your wife by encouraging her to fill out a bracket.

Every year before the tournament begins, a "bracket" appears in newspapers and on certain websites that shows who is playing whom and what the future matchups could be. Before a single game is played, thousands take this bracket and fill in the teams they think will win each contest. Most of our wives don't understand our joy in the competition (just like we don't identify with their love for shopping). However, these tournament brackets might be a way to involve our wives in the "madness."

Here's what you can do: Both you and your wife fill out your own brackets, and see who gets the most games correct. (My wife and I like to make the later games worth more than the first round games.) This may seem like a trivial endeavor, but small things like this, done together, can strengthen a marriage. Involving your wife shows her that you love her and have a disposition of kindness toward her (Colossians 3:19), and it will humble you when she does better than you!

Point out to your children players who exhibit hard work and integrity.

When a child is watching a game with you, highlight a player who may not be the highest scorer, but who plays hard defense and is not afraid to dive on the floor after a loose basketball. Say to your child, "That's the kind of Christian I want to be—hardworking and faithful to do even the painful things."

You might even find out that one of the players is a true believer. Watch how he reacts when a poor call is made against him, and ask your child, "Do you think he responded like a Christian when the referee made that bad call?" Redemptive conversations could become normal throughout the tournament.

Don't be miserable if your favorite team loses.

Perhaps you have heard someone say, "It's just a game." That's an accurate statement, but some individuals, including Christians, are depressed for days after their beloved team is defeated. Is there any good reason for such behavior? No. Paul writes, "Rejoice always . . . In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16, 18). If you have been redeemed by Christ, joy should be constant.

When we mope around after our team loses, we are forgetting about eternal realities. People all around us are sinners who will perish without Christ. Millions of people throughout this world are not thinking about who won the big game; they just want to know where they will get their next meal! Enjoy the tournament, but let's get serious about what really matters in this life and how we should engage people with the hope of the gospel.

"Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

(1 Corinthians 10:31)

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