No other major sport squeezes in 63 games over three weeks and has as many nail-biting, buzzer-beating and giant-killing finishes as the annual NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament.

And no other major sporting event does more to transform casual fans into self-aggrandizing experts than that rite of March known as the NCAA Tournament pool. Be it at the office, among friends or now online, the task of prognosticating the results of all 63 games to capture prize money breeds greedy statistical crunchers, scouting report readers and armchair coaches full of bluster.

But before you complete the bracket for the pool and before you scan the special sports sections for a secret edge, be it at the office, among friends or now online, the task of prognosticating the results of all 63 games to capture prize money breeds greedy statistical crunchers, scouting report readers and armchair coaches full of bluster.

This doesn't mean your basketball knowledge and gut feelings don't count, but like the tourney itself, scoring well in a pool is a function of funny bounces, swallowed whistles, split-second decision making and dumb luck. In other words, it's a crap shoot, which is precisely the reason it's so fun to participate. So here are a few pointers before you start penciling in your picks:

- **Know the score.** Unlike hoops, pools have a variety of scoring options. The most common is you score more points for correct picks in later rounds, something such as 1-2-4-8-12-24 or a similar variation. Some prefer to pick each round separately (with or without point spreads) and take a composite record. This is the most fun, but also the most work.

- **See the floor.** Before you start scrawling your choices, anticipate potential matchups. Try to determine which team is the best in each region.

- **Think of the brackets in terms of mini tournaments, which helps you break down the matchups.**

- **Work backwards.** Pick your Final Four teams first, and fill in the blanks for every matchup down to the Elite Eight teams and fill them in all the way back. Do the same for any tournament based on their reputations, look at how a team got to the tournament and how experienced it is. Also consider common opponents, stuff like field-goal percentage, field-goal defense and rebounding. Teams that play solid defense and hit the boards are normally the teams that win.

- **Do your homework.** Before choosing teams based on their reputations, look at how a team got to the tournament and how experienced it is. Also consider potential matchups, common opponents and stuff like field-goal percentage, field-goal defense and rebounding. Teams that play solid defense and hit the boards are normally the teams that win.

- **Happy picking and let the madness begin.**

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