

# March Madness, end of Cinderella

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## FULL TEXT

March Madness is less than a month away, an annual rite of spring that captures the attention of college sports fans and the nation. Every team is working to enhance their resume for the selection committee, hoping to grab one of the 36 at-large bids.

Over the past five tournaments (since 2016), at-large bids have fallen mostly to teams in one of the seven power conferences (Atlantic Coast Conference, Big 10, Big 12, Big East, Pac 12, Southeast Conference and American Athletic Conference).

For example, in 2019 and 2021, just four teams outside these conferences received at-large bids. These mid-majors, typically seeded between No. 7 and No. 12, become the Cinderellas of the tournament when they upset power conference teams in the rounds of 64 or 32, with fans across the nation rallying behind them.

This year may be different.

The NCAA instituted rule changes in response to the disruptions incurred by COVID-19. These include a new college transfer rule that does not require sitting out a year and an extra year of eligibility for some players. These rules fomented roster instability and shuffling into player recruiting and retention. They may also have created unintended consequences across the college basketball landscape, inadvertently putting an end to the thought that any team is truly a Cinderella.

One group of players affected are those on mid-majors who could transfer to power conference teams without sitting out a year. In theory, this should widen the gap between power conference and mid-major teams. However, it also allowed blue-chip recruits on talent-rich teams to transfer to mid-majors to gain more playing time.

The extra year of eligibility rule change provides an unprecedented level of experience and maturity on a wide swath of teams.

Such changes appear to have created unusual parity that has allowed mid-majors to move up in the Selection Sunday food chain.

It is reasonable to expect no less than six mid-majors to earn at-large bids, with as many as 10 a clear possibility, particularly if some of the top mid-majors stumble in their conference tournaments.

Conferences such as the Mountain West, the West Coast, and the Atlantic 10 are poised to steal bids from power conference weaklings that rely more on their conference affiliation rather than their overall performance to sway the selection committee.

Teams such as Wyoming, Boise State and Colorado State out of the Mountain West are all poised to gain at-large bid if they lose in their conference tournament, with San Diego State sufficiently talented to steal the automatic qualifier. In the West Coast Conference, Gonzaga and St. Mary's are well-positioned to make the tournament, with San Francisco and BYU in the mix for at-large bids.

Loyola-Chicago out of the Missouri Valley Conference is well-positioned for an at-large bid if Northern Iowa or Missouri State grab the automatic qualifier.

The surge in quality among mid-majors, coupled with the softening of the low and mid-level teams in the power conferences, will make Selection Sunday more unpredictable than it has been for years.

This means that quality mid-majors, seeded between No. 7 and No. 12, will give top 20 teams fits in the Round of 32. Watching Auburn battle Wyoming or Kentucky taking on Murray State will be true David and Goliath matches

that the elite schools may be ill-prepared for.

Does this mean that one of these mid-majors will make it to the Final Four? Excluding Gonzaga, probably not. However, the path through so many mid-majors will make it ever more entertaining for fans to behold.

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CAPTION: Photo: Loyola Ramblers guard Lucas Williamson after a 59-47 win over the Southern Illinois Salukis at Gentile Arena on Jan. 25 in Chicago. JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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