Sheldon Jacobson: The transfer portal will disrupt March Madness

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FULL TEXT

An astonishing 1,768 men's college basketball players entered the transfer portal in November, the majority of whom were on Division I teams. With such a turnover of players, coaches are forced to revamp their rosters annually, integrating existing players, incoming transfers and freshmen into their system. The idea of four-year players has been turned on its head.

Every player can now test the transfer portal waters and seek alternative opportunities that can enhance their playing time or chance to play for a winning program on a more visible national stage.

Looking at this from a data and analytics perspective, the effect of such transfers is an increase in team performance variability. And anytime there is higher variability, teams push toward the extremes, both with improvements and degradations. This makes team performance far more difficult to predict.

Take for example the Pitt Panthers in the Atlantic Coast Conference. They tied for third in the ACC standings and made the NCAA tournament for the first time since 2016. Their top four scorers are all transfers. They have been significant beneficiaries of the transfer portal, using it to upgrade their roster in just one year, when they had a 11-21 record in 2021-22.

Out of the top 20 ranked players across the nation who used the transfer portal to switch teams, 14 are on teams participating in March Madness. Of these 25 players, 10 transferred from mid-majors.

So what impact will all these transfers have on March Madness? More Power Five conference team chaos. Given that most Power Five conference teams have been affected by the transfer portal, either with players transferring into or out of their programs, these teams' conference records have been more compressed.

Take for example the Big 12. Perennial power Kansas has not been as dominant this year, with four teams within two games of each other atop the conference standings.

Even a Big 12 bottom feeder like Oklahoma pulled off a 24-point upset of Alabama during the SEC/Big 12 Challenge, a team that was ranked No. 1 in February and earned the overall No. 1 seed in the NCAA tournament. Two of the four top scorers for Oklahoma are transfers, while two of the four top scorers for Alabama are freshmen, with the other two being transfers. No top team is immune from upsets when the chemistry of transfers comes together, or disintegrates, at unexpected times.

Outside of Purdue, the Big Ten finished the regular season with seven teams within one game of each other in the top tier of the conference standings. This level of parity set the conference up with six teams in the NCAA tournament seeded between six and 10.

In the Southeastern Conference, four of the five top scorers for Texas A&M are transfers. This made their out-of-conference schedule performance less than stellar, with Quad 4 losses to Murray State and Wofford, putting an anchor on their tournament seeding. However, as their team chemistry coalesced, they began to win, finishing in second place in their conference standings and earning a No. 7 Seed in the NCAA tournament.

The net effect of all the transfer portal chaos has been inconsistency, resulting in seedings that mismatch team capabilities.

The selection committee claims to treat every game the same, whether it is the first game of the season or the conference final. After more than 30 games playing together, those teams with early season eye-popping wins over

top teams may find themselves overseeded, while teams with early season upset losses may find themselves underseeded.

An example of the first type of team is Illinois, which had neutral-site wins against two top 10 teams, the University of California at Los Angeles and Texas. They also were blown out at home by Penn State. Texas A&M is a good example of the second type of team. Iowa is yet another team that has been wildly inconsistent, which lost at home to Eastern Illinois in late December while winning at Indiana in late February.

All this chaos created by the transfer portal ensures that March Madness upsets will be even more difficult to predict. Brackets will bust at alarming rates, with teams given no chance of advancing exceeding expectations. The data always guaranteed upsets. This year, upsets are certain to be even more ubiquitous, as middling high-majors find their mojo at the right time, as their transfer-laden rosters finally find their chemistry.

Who eventually gets crowned national champion has typically been one of the top 12 teams. Will the transfer portal disrupt this trend? We will find out on April 3. Until then, enjoy the madness.

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DETAILS

Subject:	College basketball; Teams
Location:	Texas; Alabama; United States--US; Illinois; Oklahoma
Company / organization:	Name: National Collegiate Athletic Association--NCAA; NAICS: 813990
Publication title:	Chicago Tribune (Online); Chicago
Publication year:	2023
Publication date:	Mar 15, 2023
Section:	Opinion - Commentary
Publisher:	Tribune Publishing Company, LLC
Place of publication:	Chicago
Country of publication:	United States, Chicago
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
Source type:	Blog, Podcast, or Website
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Opinions
ProQuest document ID:	2786928613