

Life and the NCAA Tournament

Who doesn't love the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament, better known as March Madness? There was a time in my life that I would be able to attend many of the games in person but the demands of pastoral ministry in North Carolina have left that near impossible these past seventeen years. So, like many NCAA enthusiasts I am resigned to living out the excitement at home as I check my brackets daily. The odds makers stated that eighty percent of everyone that completed a bracket had lost after the first game. My bracket is usually busted two weeks in. But the real value of the NCAA Tournament for me is in the life lessons. The games were more meaningful for me to watch, as I stayed clued in for how I could relate it back to everyday life. As you watch the Final Four consider some of these lessons:

1. **I don't always get to play another game.** So often in life we approach our opportunities, friendships, and relationships like we always have tomorrow. There is a day called, "too late" when we no longer get to pursue our greatest dreams, hopes and aspirations. While you are still playing (have life) pursue your greatest hopes now, while you can.
2. **Games are won when the basics are mastered.** I remember my father teaching me how to dribble a basketball when I was a very small child. He placed folding chairs in the basement of our home teaching me to dribble with both hands. Yes, we see remarkable plays but the team that can make free throws, dribble, pass, play solid defense and make few mistakes is going to win the game. Like life, games are won not based on sensational play but solid and stable play. Spend your life being solid, making few mistakes and being accountable and responsible on the court of life.
3. **My weakest areas must be developed.** I am sure we have all seen games lost over missed free throws or low percentage shooting. In life, we assume that our strength in an area will automatically compensate for my weakness in another. This is not true. I have seen preachers with great style but no substance. This is always a formula for long-term failure. Each of us must identify where we are weak and then develop a strategy for strengthening that area. It is in the strengthening of our weaknesses that we take the strain off our strengths. This is essential because when our strengths get strained, they get reduced to weaknesses.
4. **My mental game is as important as my physical game.** Have you ever seen players make mental mistakes? Of course. This is usually a result of fatigue or frustration. Games are lost when our head is not in it. This is where compartmentalization comes in. We must learn to focus on the matter at hand. Admittedly, this is a difficult discipline. I am learning this requires a regular purging of the emotions that are not associated with my current activity. In basketball this means not allowing the frustration of the last play to hinder me on this next possession. Keep the past in the past. Keep the present in the right container remembering that not everything even deserves a container.

5. **Learn to anticipate what's next.** Rebounding is so important in basketball because you can't score without the ball. Time of possession in every sport is important. Anticipating when and where the ball is coming off the rim or backboard is required to be a good rebounder. So often in life opportunities pass us by because we had no clue what was about to happen next. One reason I have learned to pay attention to politics is that very little happens over night. A new or expanded highway may take five or ten years to complete but the result is a subsequent increase in real estate values. When we have an idea of what is next, we can be in place ahead of time and benefit from good positioning.
6. **Assists matter.** One of my old basketball coaches would remind us that there needed to be "three touches" before someone shot the ball. Nobody like a "ball hog." When I was running ball in North Philadelphia, it was not uncommon to hear someone say, "Give up the rock, man." In basketball and in life we must learn to share the ball and to help other people score. We all win when the people we share life and experiences with succeed.
7. **Expect the unexpected.** In any NCAA game an upset is possible. A key player can be injured or just have a bad game or some ninth or tenth man could get hot from just past the arc and have the game of his life. Yes, anything is possible. I am learning to live my life with a spirit of expectation and anticipation because any day could just be the day when the unthinkable and unexplainable occurs in my life. I look forward to that day.
8. **A work ethic is essential.** Hustle, man! I loathe seeing an easy score because an opposing team didn't hustle down the court. I learned from my father the value of hard work. The game is played on both sides of the court and both require our absolute best efforts. Too often we turn in marginal or sub-par performances because we simply didn't give it our best.
9. **Don't wait until game day to make the play.** I remember being a young minister laying out my Bible on the iron board and preaching my sermon in the mirror. I still made mistakes in the pulpit, but I made fewer of them because I was already working on the plays. Practice. Practice. Practice. And remember it is not practice that makes the master, but perfect practice makes the master.
10. **Everyone needs a coach.** Those players aren't out there by themselves, and we are not in this life by ourselves. They have people to develop their skills, draw up plays and evaluate their performance. All of us need people in our lives to evaluate us on the court of life. With each passing day I am learning the value of having people that can speak into my life and that I will listen to. They are making me better.

Who did you have winning the NCAA Championship? What life lesson have you learned? I welcome your feedback