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# What March Madness Can Teach Us

Mike Collins

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## What March Madness Can Teach Us

Congratulations to the men's and women's basketball teams from NC State, Carolina, and Duke for their 2024 seasons! In fact, the wildness and wonder of the last few weeks and nine straight tournament wins for the Wolfpack men have been the essence of the term March Madness.

In addition to the excitement, fun, joy, and—sometimes—anguish we experience during this early-spring craziness, what might we learn?

Here are 5 valuable life lessons we can take away from March Madness:

1. **The Underdog Spirit:** Every year, lower seeds pull off upsets against the giants and push the belief that the event should be called Cinderella Madness. We are reminded that rankings and reputations aren't everything. The wins should convince us that with enough heart, hustle and HEY, DID YOU SEE THAT?!! we can often rise to the occasion. The surprises of March Madness should prove to us that amazing things can happen with the right mix of belief, determination, and a little bit of Michael O'Connell putting up a three against Virginia, right in front of the NC State bench, just before the clock goes off!

2. **Comeback Wins Are Crucial:** Teams in the tournament face adversity, setbacks, and close calls; resilience and the will to win are the signs of champions. Iowa's women's team was down at their semi-final halftime, 32-26, to UConn, winner of 11 national championships. UConn's brick-wall defense on National Player of the Year, Iowa's Caitlin Clark, was working. But, the greatest teams showcase resilience, a relentless spirit—who wants it more—and a refusal to give up. Iowa clawed their way back, took the lead and held on. We all face challenges and disappointments. True strength is shown by our efforts to get back up and keep fighting for our goals.

3. **You Can't Do It Alone:** The title of John C. Maxwell's book, **Teamwork Makes the Dream Work**, says it all. While NC State's DJ Burns, Jr., has become the media's darling he isn't doing it on his own. Teammates DJ Horne, Ben Middlebrooks, Mohamed Diarra, Michael O'Connell and others are stepping up to score points, take charges, shut down shooters, and solidify wins. The most successful teams—the most successful individuals—play as a unit. However, learning to trust and rely on others, let them offer their strengths, and congratulate them when they succeed can be a challenge for some of us. The best, most successful lives show a collaborative approach. A *team first* mentality can propel us to achievements we might never have reached on our own. Ask yourself, "Who can I help? And, who can help me?"

4. **Practice Ain't Always Fun:** There is a long-known story about Roy Williams, Carolina's Hall of Fame men's basketball coach, putting trashcans on the court baselines during sprints at the ends in his intense practices. While practicing, whether in basketball or life, isn't always fun it is a fact that success in March Madness isn't accidental. Talent can get you through the door, but practice gets you to the trophy

stand. The best coaches set goals, make plans, and teach their teams to put in the effort upfront to lay the groundwork for victories. Similarly, more often than not, life rewards us when we anticipate, prepare, and practice important skills. One of the biggest concerns voiced by today's coaches is that younger stars spend so much time playing in tournaments they don't have time to improve their fundamentals. We should do the groundwork to create a solid base for success.

5. Joy and Heartbreak: In 1992, with 2.1 seconds remaining in the eastern regional championship overtime, defending national champion Duke trailed Kentucky 103–102. Grant Hill threw a pass three-quarters of the length of the court to Christian Laettner, who faked right, dribbled once, turned, and hit a jumper as time expired for the 104–103 win. Ten years earlier, Michael Jordan had hit the game-winning shot to carry Carolina over Georgetown for the national championship. However, years later, after his pro career was over, Jordan said, “Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed.”

Only one team takes home the National Championship trophy; for the other 63 teams it's a long ride home. The heartbreak of March Madness is as prevalent as its joy. Talented teams lose games due to bad bounces, missed shots, untimely injuries, uncalled fouls, or unpredictable events; this echoes the reality of life. The key is to control what we can and have the grace to deal with what we can't. However, learning from our defeats is a life skill as important—maybe more important—than any other. March Madness can teach us to learn from defeats, adjust goals and strategies, and never lose sight of the long game—because next season is right around the corner.

*About the Author: Mike Collins is president of [The Perfect Workday Company](#), an information company based in the Research Triangle region of North Carolina. He is a speaker, writer and AENC member who focuses on helping organizations move through times of change.*

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