

My 2009 Bracket, Part One

by Joe Mulder

The ritual has been the same for almost 20 years; the only variations have been my living quarters, the mechanism by which I recorded CBS's NCAA Tournament selection show and, for the first 12 to 15 of those 20 years, the kind of pen I used (for those who simply must know, I've settled on a Pilot Precise Rolling Ball V5).

What I do is I get my pen and a clean, blank sheet of standard white 8.5x11" paper and, a couple of hours or so before the selection show, I draw out the brackets. 64 lines, as straight as of equal length as I can make them just by eyeballing it (my brother one year refused to believe I hadn't used a ruler, if I may be permitted to brag). Then I fire up the selection show, and I fill them out. I write the participating teams in ink, then I fill in my predictions, swiftly and without stopping to look anything up, in pencil. I do this without any predetermined Final Four picks or prospective champions in mind, which forces me to consider each individual game itself, even if only for a split-second (likely), and even if I know next to nothing about either of the teams involved (extremely likely).

Over the course of the tournament I fill in my correct picks with ink, carefully tracing over the pencil so it looks nice, clean and pristine, and I fill in my incorrect picks with ink as well, marking my mistake with an asterisk as well as leaving the pre-existing penciled-in pick lurking behind the actual winner like some sort of shameful shadow of failure. Also over the course of the tournament I try not to be condescending to people who might see my bracket and not "get" how I keep track of who's won and who's lost (it's quite obvious at first glance; you essentially have to be determined not to understand it. Consequently, my efforts to avoid condescension usually fail; such is life).

Bored yet? If not, don't worry: I'll get you there. Let's walk through my bracket, shall we (keep in mind that I usually finish near the top of the office pool, and that I won it back in 2002. I was awfully close last year, but I lost out to a woman who picked all four No. 1 seeds to make the Final Four, which had never before happened in history. Until, of course, it happened last year. I even picked the right champion – Kansas – and she didn't, but under our office pool's point system she still did enough to beat me)? It should be noted that I probably watched less college basketball this season than I have in any season prior, including seasons that took place before I was born. So rather than provide analysis I'll just give you my real, actual thought processes for each pick, most of which are sure to disappoint our loyal reader(s?) if (t?)he(y?) was harboring some notion that I knew anything about sports.

Here goes:

PLAY-IN GAME

Alabama State over Morehead State

This one takes place today. I'd bet heavily on Morehead State, since I'm something like 1-8 in picking the play-in game since it was instituted. Couple that with the fact that I absolutely hate the very idea of the play-in game, and I've just stopped caring.

Really, two teams win their conference tournaments, get all excited about a trip to the "Big Dance," and then one of them is out before the deadline for turning in picks for the office pool has even passed? It's B.S. Nobody watches it, nobody cares about it, it makes people say that the tournament has a 65-team field which sounds dumb and false and is barely even true; if you're going to do it, have a play-in game between two bubble teams from big conferences, or from mid-majors. Heck, take eight bubble teams and have four play-in games, with the winners all becoming 12 seeds. Now that's a Tuesday of basketball for you.

Anyway. I picked Alabama State because they were listed first, and I can only assume they were listed first because they come before Morehead State in the alphabet.

ROUND 1

(1) Louisville over (16) Alabama State

A No. 16 seed has never beaten a No. 1 seed; until one does, it would be silly to pick a No. 16. Even in the event that it ever happens, it would still be silly to pick a No. 16.

(9) Siena over (8) Ohio State

I've said I don't ever have any predetermined champions or Final Four picks in mind when I start filling out my bracket, but I generally have one or two guiding principles that I go by, principles I picked up either from watching a bunch of games or simply made up out of whole cloth. This year, one of those guiding principles was that the Big Ten is going to disappoint. Whether or not the Big Ten is good this year, I have no idea. For some reason, though, a little while ago I got it in my head that they'd have a bad tournament.

Plus, I have an unspoken agreement with myself to pick three No. 9 seeds and one No. 8 seed every year. So, Siena over Ohio State kills two birds (bad Big Ten year; 9 over 8) with one stone.

(4) Wake Forest over (13) Cleveland State

A 13 can beat a 4, and does almost every year. Still, I figure the ACC is always tough. And I'm pretty sure Wake Forest plays in the ACC.

(5) Utah over (12) Arizona

I never have much confidence in bubble teams from major

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conferences.

(3) Kansas over (14) North Dakota State

Who knew North Dakota State was a Division I basketball program, and was tournament eligible? That must be a relatively new development, right?

(6) West Virginia over (11) Dayton

I couldn't possibly know less about either team; just going with the higher seed.

(to save time, let's just abbreviate that "ICPKLAET;JGWTHS")

(10) USC over (7) Boston College

I went to USC. You've got to pick your own school, right? Especially if they're only a slight underdog, which a 10 should be to a 7, right?

(2) Michigan State over (15) Robert Morris

I don't care how good Robert Morris is, I doubt he'll be able to beat a talented Michigan State team all by himself.

(1) UConn over (16) Chattanooga

A No. 16 seed has never beaten a No. 1 seed; until one does, it would be silly to pick a No. 16. Even in the event that it ever happens, it would still be silly to pick a No. 16.

(8) BYU over (9) Texas A&M

There's my one 8 seed.

(4) Washington over (13) Mississippi State

I have it in my head that Washington's good, for some reason. Also, it's weird to see a major conference team (and, if I'm not mistaken, a relatively recent Final Four participant) like Mississippi State seeded so low, but apparently they were pretty bad until they went on a run and on their conference tournament, so they're down there with the likes of Akron and Portland State.

(5) Purdue over (12) Northern Iowa

I have some cousins who went to Northern Iowa. Really good ones, in fact. But that's not enough to get me to pick them over Purdue.

(3) Missouri over (14) Cornell

Usually a safe bet to pick against the Ivy League in Round 1.

(6) Marquette over (11) Utah State

ICPKLAET;JGWTHS

(10) Maryland over (7) California

I'm wearing a Cal t-shirt right now, despite the facts that a) I didn't go to Cal, b) I don't like Cal, and c) Cal sucks. I have no idea where the shirt even came from; I think my wife might have said it was her dad's, despite the facts that a) he didn't go to Cal, and b) Cal sucks.

Cal is a Pac-10 rival of USC, so I'll use any excuse I have to pick against them. Plus, I think I read the blurb of an article about Maryland a week or so ago. I didn't read the article, and I don't honestly remember whether the blurb said Maryland was good or bad, but somebody was writing about them; that's good enough for me.

(2) Memphis over (15) Cal State Northridge

Cal State Northridge is like ten minutes from my house. Seriously; if I'd left for campus when you started reading this, I'd be there by the time you finished.

Memphis reached the finals last year, and although I don't know at all whether the following things are true, I'm assuming that a) they still have some of those same players, and b) they've improved their subpar free throw shooting, which essentially cost them the 2008 title.

(1) Pittsburgh over (16) East Tennessee State

A No. 16 seed has never beaten a No. 1 seed; until one does, it would be silly to pick a No. 16. Even in the event that it ever happens, it would still be silly to pick a No. 16.

(9) Tennessee over (8) Oklahoma State

9 over 8; it's as simple as that.

(4) Xavier over (13) Portland State

ICPKLAET;JGWTHS

(5) Florida State over (12) Wisconsin

I thought I remembered Florida State reaching the finals of their conference tournament and, if you'll remember, I'm down on the Big Ten for no particular reason.

(3) Villanova over (14) American

I realize that, by making this pick, I run the risk of being labeled "anti-American." So be it.

(6) UCLA over (11) Virginia Commonwealth

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Whenever I see UCLA or ACLU anywhere, I just think to myself, "I'm a Republican USC grad; there's nothing you can do with those four letters that I'm going to like."

I wanted to pick VCU over hated UCLA, but I picked VCU to upset Duke a few years ago in the first round and they did. I don't want to go back to that well too often.

(10) Minnesota over (7) Texas

I grew up in Minnesota and have family that went to school there. Other than USC, Minnesota is really the only team I care about.

(2) Duke over (15) Binghamton

I've haven't been following things all that closely, like I said, but did it seem like Duke was good enough to be a 2 seed? I guess enough people thought so. They shouldn't have trouble with Binghamton.

(1) North Carolina over (16) Radford

A No. 16 seed has never beaten a No. 1 seed; until one does, it would be silly to pick a No. 16. Even in the event that it ever happens, it would still be silly to pick a No. 16.

(9) Butler over (8) LSU

9 over 8, plus residual bad blood over LSU's two fake "national championships" in football. Play USC sometime, maybe I'll take away the quotation marks.*

*It doesn't matter what happens; I'm never taking away the quotation marks.

(13) Akron over (4) Gonzaga

Gonzaga broke my heart, and my bracket, too many times. Yes, I'll admit it: I root for them because they have white guys. I friend of mine once told me that he talked to a black guy at the Metrodome who was a hardcore Bears fan but was torn when they played the Vikings, because the Vikings had a black head coach (this was years ago, obviously. Right now, as a hardcore Vikings fan, I'm torn when they play the Bears, because the Bears have a good black head coach and the Vikings have an incompetent white one). I know my people have had it easier in the last, say, several hundred years, but if that guy gets to contemplate rooting for the Vikings, I get to root for Gonzaga.

In any case, picking Gonzaga to go deep into the tournament at this point is like picking Ken Griffey, Jr. for your fantasy baseball team; you just have to resist the urge, no matter how good it makes you feel.

So, since there's always an upset this big, I'm picking this one to be it.

(5) Illinois over (12) Western Kentucky

I correctly picked Western Kentucky to score an upset win as a No. 12 last year; I don't want to take any more chances.

(3) Syracuse over (14) Stephen F. Austin

Sports Illustrated had an article about the Big East a few weeks ago, told from the point of view of Syracuse. It didn't make me think Syracuse was destined for great things this year, but neither did it make me think they'd lose to Stephen F. Austin.

(6) Arizona State over (11) Temple

I remember hearing early in the year that Arizona State was decent for the first time in a long time. Plus, I have some friends that became Temple basketball fans back in junior high for absolutely no discernible reason; it's a long shot any of them will see this, but if they do, they can consider their balls affectionately and mildly busted.

(7) Clemson over (10) Michigan

I suppose I've got to pick one 7 seed, don't I? And I either actively dislike – or actively support the opponents of – all the other ones.

(2) Oklahoma over (15) Morgan State

In Blake Griffin, Oklahoma has at least one player I've heard of. That makes them way ahead of the vast majority of teams, in that respect.

ROUND 2

(1) Louisville over (9) Siena

Sports Illustrated just had a thing about how Louisville was good. I didn't read it, but I imagine that if I had, I would have gleaned that Louisville is the type of team that probably won't lose in Round 2 to Siena.

(4) Wake Forest over (5) Utah

ICPKLAET;JGWTHS

(3) Kansas over (6) West Virginia

Kansas used to choke all the time, but last year they won it all. So that means they're not chokers anymore, right? For the sake of this pick I hope it does, anyway.

(10) USC over (2) Michigan State

My wife went to Michigan State. I can't pick her school over mine, can I? What husband could bring himself to do that?

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(1) UConn over (8) BYU

UConn is another one of those teams that has the distinct advantage of having a player – Hasheem Thabeet – of whom I've actually heard (and whose name I very nearly spelled correctly the first time before looking it up and fixing it). That could be huge for them, obviously.

(4) Washington over (5) Purdue

I'm just banking on the Pac-10 over the Big Ten here, honestly.

And if you're wondering why I write "Pac-10" but "Big Ten," it's because that's how those two conferences spell their names out on their respective logos.

(3) Missouri over (6) Marquette

ICPKLAET;JGWTHS

(2) Memphis over (10) Maryland

Memphis is going to be a tough out, wanting to avenge last year's title-game loss. At least, that's what I assumed while I was picking their games.

(1) Pittsburgh over (9) Tennessee

Pitt has choked pretty spectacularly a few times in recent years; could this be the season they finally put it all together? Well, if it is, they sure as heck have to get past Tennessee first (or Oklahoma State, if that's who wins in the first round).

(4) Xavier over (5) Florida State

ICPKLAET;JGWTHS

(3) Villanova over (6) UCLA

Because UCLA sucks. FUCLA. My Maid Went to UCLA. U\$C, U[cent symbol]LA... You Get What You Pay For. Practice Safe Sex... Make Love With a Trojan.

Clearly, I'm just repeating slogans from knockoff t-shirts they used to sell on the USC campus back in the late-'90s, so let's move on.

(2) Duke over (10) Minnesota

I'm embarrassed as a sports fan to say this, since Duke is such a prominent program and Minnesota is basically my Vice-Favorite Team, but: ICPKLAET;JGWTHS

(1) North Carolina over (9) Butler

I do remember when Butler made a great run deep into the

tournament five or six years ago... good times. Not in '09, though.

(5) Illinois over (13) Akron

If Gonzaga *does* end up getting past the winner of Illinois-Western Kentucky, it could screw things up for me. In fact, watch that happen; now that I've picked Gonzaga to lose early, the only way they can screw me is to win a few in a row. I bet that's what they do, the bastards. Nonetheless, my actual, official pick remains Illinois over Akron.

(6) Arizona State over (3) Syracuse

As I said before, I'm pretty sure I read something about Arizona State being decent, and I'm completely sure I read something that didn't instill much confidence in me as far as Syracuse is concerned. Trenchant analysis, I know.

(2) Oklahoma over (7) Clemson

Don't underestimate the Oklahoma-having-a-guy-I've-heard-of factor; I'm telling you.

So that gets us to the Sweet Sixteen, and you know what? I think that's a good place to stop. We'll finish up with Part 2 and the rest of my tournament picks tomorrow. I know; I'm super-excited about that too. Still, try to get at least *some* sleep tonight, okay?
