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Review of *Making March Madness: The Early Years of the NCAA, NIT, and College Basketball Championships, 1922–1951*, by Chad Carlson

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Carlson, Chad. *Making March Madness: The Early Years of the NCAA, NIT, and College Basketball Championships, 1922–1951*. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2017. Pp. xvi + 429. Appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$44.95, hb.

The early beginnings of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) postseason basketball craze suffered through precarious financial instability, lack of notoriety, and competition for teams, not assuring the successful behemoth it is today. The NCAA tournament was the third collegiate postseason entry into a competitive marketplace at the time. Chad Carlson offers a well-written and entertaining addition to the tomes on the rise of college basketball to become today's "March Madness." He chronicles from the beginnings of the game to the 1951 point-shaving scandals that rocked the nation's embrace of college basketball.

Carlson is an accomplished sports historian, associate professor of kinesiology, and assistant basketball coach at Hope College. His three-pronged professional background helps shape the book. The bibliography is well over thirty pages—he utilizes primary-resource material to detail critical strategic decisions guiding postseason development and place it within societal context. Secondary material—mostly newspaper accounts—captures the excitement of the games played along with how basketball developed into today's version.

The tournaments' administrative advancements are depicted alongside the game's refinement. The business side of postseason play develops along with the emergence of dominant personalities—coaches, players, and tournament administrators—as well as basketball epicenters throughout the country. In addition, the seeds of today's tournament are shown being planted: the importance of media coverage, location, rivalries, team selection controversy and conference biases, attention-grabbing personalities of both coaches and players, and, of course, the attractiveness of upsets.

Among Carlson's contribution to the list of works on NCAA basketball is his placing the development of postseason competition within context—appropriately so since the book is a title in the publisher's Sport, Culture and Society series. Tension between small colleges and larger universities favored by the media play throughout his work. The author's

affiliation with a Division III college did not color his portrayal of the small–large school tension. The economic realities of the marketplace gradually tip the balance in favor of the universities. Another strength of the work shows the confrontation of racism by college basketball. From teams initially being asked not to bring minority players to some tournaments—which many colleges complied with—to the National Invitational Tournament (NIT) featuring integrated teams without fanfare or incident, the emerging social issue is chronicled as an important driver within college athletics.

The book flows chronologically starting with the development of basketball by James Naismith, who envisioned it as a college game. Three tournaments dominated the early collegiate postseason. The National Invitational Basketball College Tournament (NIBCT) in Kansas City—the first tournament started in 1937—the NIT headquartered at Madison Square Garden, and the NCAA were the leading tournaments. While the NIT and NCAA slowly were emerging as the dominant tournaments, the NIBCT continued as a small college and midwestern favorite, while other postseason competitions emerged. (The NIBCT evolved into today's National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, the NAIA). These three tournaments led development of collegiate postseason play and benefitted from an early formula for success: dynamic leadership and location.

As Carlson notes,

[S]ustainability was not a given for the NCAA tournament. After an inaugural event that lost money and a 1942 event that barely made any, the NCAA's future was not certain. Moving to Madison Square Garden in New York City for the 1943 Eastern Regional and Championship Final was the single most important move that put the event on its path to the success that it has today. (xii)

Through tough national times such as the Depression and World War II, college basketball provided emotional relief, as it continued growing in appeal despite the adverse conditions. By 1951, when the book ends, five national championship tournaments existed, although not all were of equal caliber. The lesser tournaments in college basketball's history demonstrated the growing demand for more transparent consideration of who deserved to be in postseason competition as well as the fans' growing appetite for tournament play. In basketball postseason's infant stages, though, not all universities and conferences believed in postseason competition, such as powerhouse Purdue, which routinely stayed home after regular season play concluded.

The point-shaving scandals in the early 1950s damaged college basketball's reputation at a critical postwar time. Rightfully or not, Madison Square Garden and New York City gamblers were blamed for turning the athletes. While the author does not fully explain why he stops with the 1951 point-shaving scandals, which put college basketball in a precarious situation, Carlson's epilogue details college basketball's survival of the gambling scandal and the familiar rise of the NCAA, which eventually led to purchasing the NIT along its path to become the money-making behemoth it is today. Scholars of the timespan covered, sports historians, basketball coaches, and those interest in the development of sports management as a profession—as well as fans—will benefit from Carlson's enlightening work.

—Paul M. McNerny  
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