

COVID-19 Halts March Madness

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COVID-19-related cancellations and postponements have been pouring in for the last seven days. One of the first shook the sports world, and left many wondering how to share the news. On Wednesday, the NCAA basketball tournaments were going to be played in empty arenas. That decision barely made it a day. By Thursday, the NCAA announced the decision that all Division I men's and women's basketball tournaments would be canceled entirely. No games, no brackets, no more of one of the biggest U.S. sporting events of the year. No March Madness as a precaution to stop the spread of coronavirus.

In their statement, the NCAA officials said: "The decision is based on the evolving COVID-19 public health threat, our ability to ensure the events do not contribute to spread of the pandemic, and the impracticality of hosting such events at any time during this academic year given ongoing decisions by other entities..."

Some of those other entities could have included the many colleges nationwide that have decided to close down their campuses, telling students to transition to online classes and, in some cases, telling them to leave campus altogether.

From a [public relations](#) standpoint, this decision has a lot of different facets. First, many fans are split about the necessity of canceling games. Meanwhile, the NCAA gains a

significant amount of revenue through television contracts with networks who buy the rights to broadcast the game. That money is gone, and everyone who will lose out wants a very good reason why they are losing three full weeks of almost constant airtime.

Right now, the byword appears to be in the ballpark of “abundance of caution” or “to protect the public health,” both powerful and laudable phrasing. But the NCAA added a bit more to the standard boilerplate we’ve been seeing other places. The mysterious “ongoing decisions by other entities...”

That could mean anything or anyone related to either the colleges or the sport, but the one thing that is clear, is that the NCAA is not wanting to shoulder all the responsibility – some would say blame – for this decision. Officials are hedging, giving angry fans and frustrated stakeholders something – or someone – else to vent those negative emotions toward. That’s a deft bit of PR messaging. They didn’t point fingers, but they did offer a glance in a general direction that’s away from them.

And they benefit from the fact that there’s definitely some truth to the claim. A lot of connected agencies are making a lot of conflicting – or ongoing – decisions, and it can’t be easy to keep up with that.



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