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Women's Final Four packs favorite with three surprises

A No. 7-seeded team found itself in the Final Four.
No. 1 seed Duke lost in the Elite Eight.

Stanford lost by two to Tennessee, earning the Lady Vols their NCAA-record 15th Final Four.

Connecticut advanced to the Final Four for an NCAA-record fifth consecutive year.

Welcome to March Madness. Same crazy fans, same crazy tournament bracket, but this is a different game.

While sports junkies across the nation are glued to couches watching the likes of Connecticut's Emeka Okafor and Oklahoma State's John Lucas on CBS, there's a second world of madness occurring on courts next door.

Nicole Powell's buzzer-beater hit the rim, bounced up with a ray of hope and then fell to the side, closing the door on her collegiate career.

The Cardinal lost its eighth consecutive game to Tennessee and the Pacific-10 Conference women officially

have no teams left in the postseason. Meanwhile, the final Pac-10 men's basketball squad in a tournament — any tournament — is on its way out in New York.



Mindi Rice
The girl and the game

But back to the women's NCAA Final Four.

Three-time All-American Alana Beard closed her Blue Devil career one game shy of the Final Four and empty-handed as Duke missed another NCAA Championship. Beard cried on her coach's shoulder as the

final seconds wound down and the Golden Gophers of Minnesota upset the Blue Devils.

"You can't really put it into words," Beard told reporters after the loss. Teammate and fellow senior Iciss Tillis found words for it in the same post-game press conference.

"You guys don't understand how it feels to go out there every single year thinking you're going to win the national championship and it doesn't go your way," Tillis said. "It hurts. It's really painful."

Every team understands that pain. A tough loss late in the season — or early in the season depending on which team — can be crushing to the spirit and a blow to the high hopes of a season.

If a fan can get excited for a Duke — Alabama State or Stanford — Texas — San Antonio matchup, then it is not difficult to find the fight and passion in games like Tennessee — Stanford and Minnesota — Duke just as addicting.

Not that other flavors of March Madness aren't at the top of the priority list for other fans. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but sports junkies should open their eyes and change the channel every so often.

There's something mesmerizing about watching Geno Auriemma's Huskies — led by Diana Taurasi — make an attempt at a three-peat of the NCAA Championship much in the same way that you can't turn your eyes from Mike Krzyzewski's Blue Devils — with Luol Deng and Chris Duhon running the show — taking yet another trip to the Final Four.

There is just one thing missing from the women's NCAA Tournament: The pure madness that envelops a majority of the nation each March. It's almost too late now, as today is the final day of the month, but perhaps there is hope for next year.

The 2004 Women's NCAA Tournament — even though there are three games remaining — was already a success because it made the most of the madness. Minnesota because it's the first No. 7 seed to be in the Final Four. Two of the WNBA's top prospects for this spring's draft lost in the Elite Eight. And, for a sprinkle of consistency, Connecticut is making another run at a title.

Oh, the madness.

Contact the senior sports reporter at mindirice@dailyemerald.com. Her opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.

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