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All Eyes Were on the 2024 Final Four

Caleb Stipkovits, Managing Editor

The three most-watched games in women's college basketball history. An unstoppable, 7'4" center leading his team to the finals. A 38-win, undefeated season. These were some of the highlights of the highly entertaining 2024 NCAA March Madness Tournaments.

In the end, the South Carolina Gamecocks defeated the Iowa Hawkeyes 87-75 to take home the women's title April 7. The No. 1 overall seed Connecticut Huskies knocked off the Purdue Boilermakers 75-60 to repeat as men's champions April 8.

Led by All-American center Kamilla Cardoso, the Gamecocks cruised through the women's tournament, winning five of their six games by over 12 points. Facing off against Iowa and NCAA all-time leading scorer Caitlin Clark in the final, South Carolina rode to victory to complete the 10th perfect season in women's college basketball history. The championship averaged 18.7 million viewers, making it the most-watched women's college basketball game ever.

This is partially due to impressive performances from stars such as Clark, Cardoso, Louisiana State's Angel Reese, Southern California's Juju Watkins and UConn's Paige Bueckers. Ultimately, the excitement of the tournament led to the three most-watched games in women's college basketball history.

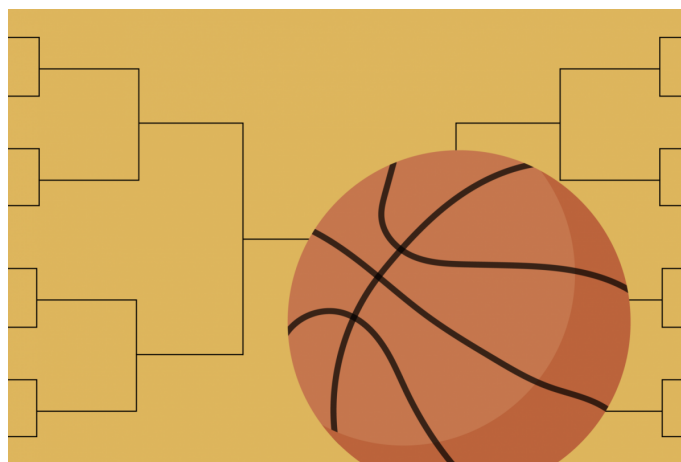
Second-year History and Political Science Major Owen Daryani watched one of those record-breaking games, Iowa's 94-87 Elite 8 win over LSU.

"Part of it is the storyline, being a rematch of the championship game from last year, the personalities of the players," Daryani said. "Caitlin Clark is obviously amazing, LSU has Angel Reese, Hailey Van Lith, [and] Flau'jae [Johnson]."

The Hawkeyes played in all three of the record-setting games, in part thanks to Clark's unique game. Besides the highly-viewed matches with LSU and South Carolina, Iowa's 71-69 comeback win over UConn in the Final Four also found the record books. The contest averaged 14.2 million viewers, good for the second most-viewed women's college basketball game of all time.

South Carolina made the women's finals by defeating the North Carolina State Wolfpack 78-59 in the Final Four. In what was a close game in the first half, the Gamecocks pulled away after halftime thanks to a 22-point performance from Cardoso. Their victory in the championship game over Iowa marked their third national championship in eight years.

Although viewership for women's basketball has improved, many fans feel that the quality of play has always been there.



Kim Nucum

"I see a lot of people talking about 'Finally, women's sports is being played at the level that [men's sports] are,' and I don't think that's true," Daryani said. "[They've] always been played at this level, it's just a case of it being marketed properly... I don't think it's been marketed properly [by sports media] until this point."

Second-year Business Economics Major Chloe Lee believes that the NCAA tournament marks a general rise in popularity for women's sports.

"I have been so proud to see women in sports get the recognition we deserve," Lee said. "I've been playing volleyball all my life and the Nebraska's women's volleyball team just broke a record for attendance because they hosted a game in a football field... I also saw [that] South Carolina and Iowa's game broke [the] record for viewership."

In the men's bracket, UConn's championship game victory marked their 12th consecutive tournament win by more than 13 points. The Huskies' dominance this tournament was historic, as their 23.3 average point-per-game margin of victory is the largest ever. Despite losing the game, Men's AP Player of the Year Zach Edey scored a whopping 37 points for Purdue, his highest total in the tournament.

UConn reached the finals by defeating the Alabama Crimson Tide 86-72. Riding a strong performance from guard Stephon Castle, UConn ended Alabama's remarkable March Madness run, in which they reached their first Final Four in school history.

Purdue rolled into the men's final by defeating NC State's men's team 63-50 in the Final Four. The Boilermakers' win ended the Cinderella run of the Wolfpack, who tied the men's record for the lowest seed to make the Final Four (11). Purdue's lengthy tournament run overcomes a tough loss in the first round last year.

Second-year Business Analytics Major Daniel Rios was sad to see NC State's magical run come to an end.

"My favorite storyline this year has been NC State's [tournament run]," Rios said. "Entering the ACC tournament, they... weren't even projected to make March Madness, then they went and won the ACC tournament against teams like Duke and UNC and carried that into March Madness... It was really a really cool storyline and a fun team to follow."

Other highlights of the tournament included Duke's men's team making the Elite 8, in part due to the performance of TikTok-famous guard Jared McCain. With 2.7 million followers and several viral videos, McCain became an internet sensation throughout the tournament. He wasn't half bad on the court too, dropping over 30 points in two of Duke's March Madness games.

As the NCAA's most popular offering, March Madness rarely disappoints. 2024 was no exception, as the gender gap in the sport's popularity seems to be disintegrating before our eyes.