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Where Was the Bracket Born?

It's a Cultural Icon, but Nobody Knows Who Invented It; E.R. Seymour Gets a Bye in Round Two.

By RACHEL BACHMAN

Show an empty tournament bracket to a random sample of Americans and they're likely to make the same instant association: NCAA basketball.

This simple design, which is used whenever a competition needs to winnow a large group of contestants to a single winner, has become a much-admired cultural meme. If there were a hall of fame for sports graphics, the bracket would be the first inductee.

But as ubiquitous as brackets have become, they're also the center of a surprising mystery: Nobody knows for sure where the idea came from.

College basketball's National Invitation and NCAA basketball tournaments began in 1938 and 1939, respectively, and soon after, brackets began to appear in some newspapers. The NCAA says the first complete bracket in its basketball archives is from 1943.

But the approach wasn't uniform back then: In a March 1943 edition of the New York Post, the first-round pairings for the two tournaments did get a graphic treatment—they were listed together with seeds and ellipses and punctuated by curly brackets. But they were crammed into a regular news column.

By the 1970s, brackets had spawned office pools and the competition was heating up. News reports suggested that FBI agents wiretapping an organized gambling ring in 1977 had found a side benefit to the job: They were able to glean some excellent tips for their brackets.

When CBS bought the rights to the tournament in 1982, it staged and televised the first selection show, which featured the now-traditional unveiling of the bracket. Neal Pilson, the former president of CBS Sports, said he doesn't remember whose idea it was to use the bracket format visually on the show, but said the broadcast and the display have been a huge success. "We never imagined that the brackets themselves would take on their own mystique," he said.

When the NCAA expanded the tournament to 64 teams from 53 in 1985, the bracket gained its modern symmetry and started to grow as a cultural phenomenon. Former NCAA executive director Dick Schultz said that with more teams in the field, nearly every area of the country had a reason to obsess over who would advance.

Today, the bracket has become so popular that the NCAA often fights attempts by outside groups to invoke it for commercial purposes. Warning letters have gone to, among others, an adult website, NASA

and even an insurance company that once used a bracket made of vegetables to promote itself in a magazine ad (don't ask).

"What it really does is it does a very good job of triggering an addictive psychological behavior," said Maurice Woods, a former basketball player at Washington who works in graphic design. "What it does is it builds anticipation."

As the tournament starts in earnest, and as millions of brackets are being taped to cubicle walls, the Journal set out to figure out who deserves the credit (or the blame) for this innovation.

Steven Murray, a Colorado Mesa University professor who has studied the history of sports, said the concept that inspired the bracket—a single-elimination sporting competition with many rounds— isn't a modern invention. He said the ancient Greeks held wrestling and boxing competitions starting around 700 B.C. where the combatants would draw lots to set pairings.

If the tournament pairings were posted in a bracket form, Murray said, they probably would have been painted with pigment on scrolls, placards or walls and wouldn't have survived.

Several historians, when confronted with the question, speculated that the basketball bracket could have its roots in another organizational art form: the family tree. Brenton Simons, president and chief executive of the New England Historic Genealogical Society, said renderings of family trees date at least to the 18th century in the U.S. and stretch back centuries before in other countries.

"It's not hard to imagine that those charts and lineage tables were the inspiration for the sports brackets," Simons said, "because they really mirror the shapes being used in family history where you have to convey succession. In sports it's succession of winners; in family history it's succession of generations."

The question, then, is when this graphic made the leap to sports. Historians agree that the most likely source for the bracket is the birthplace of modern athletics: England.

One of Britain's oldest competitions, the Henley Royal Regatta, started in 1839. Because the Thames was only wide enough for three boats, the competition used a single-elimination tournament format—the sort of thing that would have lent itself nicely to a bracket.

The historians the Journal spoke to weren't sure when Regatta organizers began using a bracket, but their best guess is that the form was adopted as early as 1919. The noted rowing historian and collector Thomas E. Weil of Woodbridge, Conn., owns a Regatta bracket from 1926.

By some accounts, the oldest existing sports bracket lies in the archives of the Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum, which houses memorabilia from the famous tennis tournament. According to the curator, Honor Godfrey, the Lawn Tennis Championship printed a bracket in the program to display the pairings in its inaugural year, 1877. Godfrey said she couldn't find a copy of that program, but she did unearth a Xeroxed copy of the program from the following year, 1878.

That program, issued by the "All England Croquet and Lawn-Tennis Club" announced the "Lawn Tennis Championship Meeting," which would be contested for a prize of 19 Guineas.

Inside, on a full page, is a one-sided bracket with 34 names. To make the pairings add up correctly, a certain E.R. Seymour and a certain H.F. Lawford were awarded byes. To this day, Wimbledon's program includes a bracket of the tournament field.

Godfrey couldn't find any mentions of brackets being used in any of lawn tennis's precursors, she said, "but that doesn't mean that they didn't exist."

—Joshua Robinson contributed to this article

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