

Biases and Brackets

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Americans typically prepare for the month-long basketball frenzy known as March Madness by filling out a bracket and placing a bet on the accuracy of their predictions. But deciding which of the 68 teams in the single-elimination tournament will reach the “Sweet Sixteen” and eventually the “Final Four” is no easy task. Many people will look at the team’s statistics, while others might make decisions based on the team’s new players. Yet, psychological science research suggests there may be other biases people aren’t thinking about when they’re putting together their brackets.

Peter Ayton, a researcher from City University London, UK, investigates how people make judgments and decisions under conditions of risk, uncertainty, and ambiguity. One way he studies decision making is through sports. “Thanks to the Internet,” says Ayton, “people have coded in all sorts of interesting and elaborate ways, the outcomes of games and events in games, and that provides a very rich sort of data for not studying sport *per se*, but decision making generally...sporting statistics provide a kind of test bed for things we can look at.”

One bias discovered through sports statistics, says Ayton, is the “hot-hand fallacy,” which was first coined by APS Fellow **Tom D. Gilovich**. The fallacy arose from the belief that a basketball player is more likely to score if he or she just scored, making that player “hot.” By analyzing data from professional basketball games, **Gilovich showed that the idea of players being “hot” was false.**

But Ayton says this finding doesn’t stop people from believing in the fallacy and making bets based on it. So if you’re filling out a bracket, don’t forget to let psychological science be your guide as you make your picks.

Introduction:

Question 1: How did you become interested in psychological science?

Question 2: What will you be speaking on at the 24th APS Annual Convention?

Question 3: Peter Ayton on the psychological science of decision-making in sports.