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As Trinity experienced, the Sweet 16's bracket is not fair. But it also shouldn't be changed | Estes

Gentry Estes, Louisville Courier Journal

Published 6:27 p.m. ET March 14, 2018 | Updated 6:31 p.m. ET March 14, 2018



(Photo: Gary Landers)

LEXINGTON, Ky. – Only a few hours after the first basketball was tipped in the 2018 KHSAA Boys Sweet 16, its top-ranked team was already out and the winningest high school coach in state history was already spent.

Scott County's Billy Hicks was happy, mind you, but he was a man who had just been through something.

"Y'all as tired as I am?" Hicks asked reporters with an exhale. "Shoot, guys. ... I don't know if we've ever had one we had to grind out like that. Every play was big."

This year's Sweet 16 at Rupp Arena has only just started, but it probably won't produce a game better than Scott County's thrilling 54-53 victory over Trinity, a Wednesday matinee that went to the wire.

More: [Cooper Robb's 3-pointer lifts Scott County over Trinity in Boys Sweet 16 \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/preps/kentucky/2018/03/14/cooper-robbs-3-pointer-lifts-scott-county-over-trinity-boys-sweet-16/415840002/\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/preps/kentucky/2018/03/14/cooper-robbs-3-pointer-lifts-scott-county-over-trinity-boys-sweet-16/415840002/)

No surprise, really. It was supposed to be this way, thanks to the blind draw that matched Trinity – No. 1 in the state's Litkenhous Ratings – against No. 3 Scott County, which also happens to be ranked No. 21 nationally by USA TODAY. Fern Creek and Covington Catholic are in the discussion, but one could make a strong case that the two best teams in Kentucky this season had to play each other in the round of 16.

They both played like it, trading baskets until Cooper Robb sank a 3-pointer for Hicks' squad for a one-point lead in the final seconds. When Trinity couldn't answer on the other end, the Cardinals (35-1) advanced. They are now a strong favorite to at least reach the championship game, while the Shamrocks (30-4) were eliminated before the sun went down on the tournament's first day.

"We did everything we could to win that game," Trinity coach Mike Szabo said.

Each time this happens, it seems an old argument is reheated. When one top team eliminates another in the early hours of the Sweet 16 and deprives everyone of seeing that team into the weekend, it naturally causes questions about the fairness of a bracket that doesn't use seeds and is filled by random draw.

Also: [Who has best chance to win Sweet 16? Ranking the field from No. 16 to No. 1 \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/preps/kentucky/2018/03/12/ranking-teams-kentucky-boys-sweet-16/414661002/\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/preps/kentucky/2018/03/12/ranking-teams-kentucky-boys-sweet-16/414661002/)

"I don't know if it's necessarily fair, but it is what it is," Szabo said. "It's the Sweet 16. Everybody knows it and accepts it, and I think you'd have a hard time seeding the teams. Putting the decision into human beings, I mean, that's going to create a lot of potential problems with that."

Prior to Wednesday's game, Szabo and Hicks [each told Courier Journal's Jason Frakes \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/preps/kentucky/2018/03/13/seed-boys-sweet-16-trinity-scott-county-votes/418997002/\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/preps/kentucky/2018/03/13/seed-boys-sweet-16-trinity-scott-county-votes/418997002/) that he would not change the way Kentucky chooses the Sweet 16 field.

And they're right.

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If I could change one thing about this year's Sweet 16, it would be the date. Why are you playing this during the opening weekend of the NCAA Tournament? (And actually, that won't be the case in 2019, when the KHSAA will flip the boys and girls tournaments, moving the boys to March 6-10).

Otherwise, Kentucky's high school tournament is the way it should be: No classifications. Part of the price of maintaining that format is the random draw. Seeding teams would hurt the underdogs, the smaller programs who would have to pay Trinity in Sweet 16

On the flip side, the current format is not fair for the best teams. It's also not advantageous for a tournament that obviously desires to sell tickets to its best teams in the biggest games. So the process might one day be changed, but the KHSAA should be cautious. Too often organizations can risk spoiling popular high school championships by tweaking too much – such as the use of more classifications. Scott Co. beats Trinity in Sweet 16

The fact that Kentucky has not done that is a large part of why the Sweet 16 continues to be unique. It is rare, and it is wonderful, and it should stay that way.

As tough as it was for a really good Trinity team to endure such a heartbreaking defeat Wednesday, the KHSAA should not change its draw procedure because of it.

"I think it was really good," Hicks said of drawing Trinity first, "because you got to see both teams well-prepared, ready to battle each other. When you meet later on down the line like that, you don't have time to do that. I think they got our best, and I know we got their best. I think the preparation really was good for both us.

"If Cooper hadn't hit that shot, they'd be in here saying how much that preparation helped. And we've all been on the end of those games before."

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