

Who came up with the March Madness names Sweet 16, Elite 8 and Final Four?

[Charles Curtis](#) March 21, 2019 3:47 pm



Welcome to FTW Explains, a guide to catching up on and better understanding stuff going on in the world.

You may be watching [the 2019 NCAA tournament](#) and suddenly sit up on your couch and say, "Wait, why DO they call it the Sweet 16? Or Elite Eight? And what about the Final Four, which totally makes sense but I probably wouldn't have thought of it unless it existed?"

We understand, we've been there. If that describe you, don't be alarmed. As always, we're here to help with a breakdown of the origin stories we found for those terms we throw around every year.

Why the Sweet 16? I assume it's because that's what birthdays for 16-year-olds are called.

Wait, did you watch *My Super Sweet 16* too?

Stay on topic, please.

Right, sorry. [This Slate article](#) from 2004 broke it down:

CBS commentators started using the phrase in the late 1980s, after the tournament field expanded from 53 to 64 teams. Unfortunately for the NCAA, the phrase (using both "16" and "Sixteen") was trademarked by the Kentucky High School Athletic Association in 1988, as a handle for its annual championship tournament. Perhaps mindful of the March Madness precedent, however, the KHSAA chose to bargain with the NCAA rather than litigate.

How about the Elite Eight?

It was another high school tournament that had the nickname first, [according to NCAA.com](#):

"Elite Eight" was originally coined by the Illinois High School Boys Basketball Championship, the single-elimination tournament run by the Illinois High School Association. In 1956, the field was reduced from 16 teams to eight, and the phrase "Elite Eight" was born.

The trademark rights are now held by the March Madness Athletic Association, a joint venture between the NCAA and IHSA formed in 1996.

March Madness Athletic Association? Does that mean March Madness came from Illinois too?

It did! This [IHSA](#) post breaks it down: A high school “Sweet Sixteen” tournament was held in Illinois in the 1930s, and thanks to poetry (!), we now have the term:

Henry V. Porter, assistant executive secretary of the Illinois High School Association, was so impressed by the phenomenon that he wrote an essay to commemorate it. Entitled “March Madness,” it first appeared in the *Illinois Interscholastic*, the IHSA’s magazine, in 1939. The term struck a chord with newspapermen, who used it throughout their pages. During the tournament’s “Golden Era” of the 1940’s and 1950’s, “March Madness” became the popular name of the event.

Did the “Final Four” come from there too?

Nope, not according to [Slate](#) again:

There are some high-school basketball purists who insist that the phrase “Final Four” was first used in connection with Indiana’s legendary annual tournament (which inspired the film *Hoosiers*). But the official NCAA story is that “Final Four” was coined by a *Cleveland Plain Dealer* sportswriter, Ed Chay. In a 1975 article for the *Official Collegiate Basketball Guide*, Chay wrote that Al McGuire’s Marquette squad “was one of the final four” in the previous year’s tournament. Something about the phrase struck a chord with the NCAA’s marketing folks, and they started capitalizing it as “Final Four” in 1978. It is, of course, now trademarked.

Okay, if you have all the answers, where does NCAA

tournament come from?

... Um, well, the National Collegiate Athletic Association formed in 1906 as the Intercollegiate Athletic Association and the first men's basketball tournament was played in 1939. The word "tournament," per etymonline.com, comes from "Old French torneament "contest between groups of knights on horseback" (12c.), from tornoier "to joust, tilt, take part in tournaments."

Gallery

March Madness 2019: Ranking the must-watch opening round games from 1 to 32

