

# Mapping the Madness

By Amy Wimmer Schwarb

When teams and their travel parties trek hundreds of thousands of miles on their Road to the Final Four,\* their every move is charted by travel experts in Waterloo, Iowa, who get the job done using customized software, a color-coded dry-erase board and, always, a large dose of patience\*\*

\* The same staff also organizes travel for 26 other championships that fall in March.

\*\* And caffeine. Caffeine\*\*\* is very helpful.

\*\*\* A sense of humor is also necessary.



A t a travel agency housed in a low-slung brown brick building in a suburban neighborhood in the middle of America, the travel consultants share one bathroom, a unisex one-seater stocked with Febreze and Aqua Net. Sometimes, especially on late nights in mid-March, when the caffeine buzz has receded and the pepperoni pizza delivered hours earlier has grown cold and rubbery, the bathroom becomes a refuge, sheltered from the buzz of phones and the clatter of keyboards and the glow of computer screens. Some words of wisdom are posted on the bathroom wall, taped opposite the commode so employees cannot escape them, even in their most private moments: “Stay positive. You can listen to the cynics and doubters and believe that success is impossible, or you can trust that with faith and an optimistic attitude all things are possible.”



JUSTIN TAFOYA / NCAA PHOTOS

Outside this bathroom, even faith and optimism are feeble tools. The University of Louisville men’s basketball team and its coaches, cheerleaders and [band members](#) sit on a Kentucky tarmac inside a plane that can carry either its two tubas and two drum sets or enough fuel to get to Seattle without a fuel stop, but not both. Another Division I men’s basketball team is scheduled to depart at the time its athletics department requested – but the coach now wants to fly two hours earlier, when no plane is available. At an airport in Dayton, Ohio, Hampton University has arrived for the first round and, after unloading its gear, discovered its uniforms are missing.

Also out there are the cynics and doubters, their watch piercing and always present. They are the sports columnists and critics who lie in wait for a misstep, and here in the travel office, uneasiness is felt with each jolt of bad news (“Mechanical problem in Oklahoma”), each suggestion that this travel riddle might not get solved (“Green Bay women want to leave at 1 p.m., but the airline’s bid is for 11 p.m.”). Even the victories (“One charter company bid on eight legs for the second round”) are met with caution (“We have to give more love to this other company because we have 300 hours contracted with them over the next 10 days”).

The second half of March is a logistical riddle for the NCAA travel staff, a multidimensional puzzle made up of pieces that can change shape, break or dissolve. Some, like clocks, calendars, airports and game times, are



PROPRIETARY INFORMATION HAS BEEN OBLISCURED

From left, Kim Claussen, Kris Fratzke and Bryce Fratzke of Short’s Travel and NCAA Director of Travel and Insurance Juanita Sheely keep an eye on first-round Division I men’s basketball tournament games while team travel plans loom behind them. CONRAD SCHMIDT / NCAA PHOTOS

fixed. Others, such as buses, planes, travel bags and trombones, are mobile but inanimate – items in motion that must be accounted for and tracked. Still others – the most complex pieces of all – are living, breathing beings, with needs, wants and, often, demands. They are pilots and flight attendants, their movements regulated by the Federal Aviation Administration. They are baggage handlers and security screeners, who can be in short supply – particularly on the short notice the madness of March requires. They are airline and charter company representatives, vying for a slice of the \$15 million the NCAA spends annually on transportation for the Division I men’s and women’s basketball tournaments alone. And they are the travelers themselves – the coaches, administrators, cheerleaders, band members and, of course, the players, who have worked all year for the chance to compete on this national stage.

This staff, too, waits all year for the championship season, although for them, the Road to the Final Four is more about the road than the finals. Their attention is captured by one emergency after another, as they coach the ground crew to pull some band equipment off Louisville’s plane and ship it separately so the team can avoid a fuel stop. Play defense on the 10 a.m. departure against the coach’s objections because another team 2,200 miles away needs the same plane a few hours later. Run

a fast break on Hampton uniforms – found in the baggage compartment of the team bus – to [overnight them to Dayton](#).

The travel staff checks the shipping receipt the next morning. Someone signed on the team’s behalf at 7:47 a.m. the day of the Hampton game.

Crisis resolved. On to the next crisis.



JOSHUA DUPELECHIAN / NCAA PHOTOS

it, the potential quandaries pop off the page as if highlighted in yellow: Brigham Young and Boise State universities to Dayton, Ohio, by Monday for games on Tuesday and Wednesday. Georgetown University to Portland, Oregon, by Tuesday. North Carolina’s Davidson College to Seattle by Wednesday. San Diego State University to Charlotte, North Carolina, by Wednesday.

When most people see the new bracket for the Division I Men’s Basketball Championship, they scan it for opportunities – matchups where the unexpected might break their brackets, or upsets that could turn the madness into moments of magic.

But when Juanita Sheely, NCAA director of travel and insurance, sets her eyes on a bracket for the first time – this year, at 5:48 p.m. on Selection Sunday, 12 minutes before CBS broadcasted it to the world – she probes it for potential pitfalls. All the schools are listed in the same seven-point Helvetica font. But as Sheely scans



THE MAP IS A PRODUCT OF NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



SHUTTERSTOCK

FIRST FOUR,  
ROUNDS 2 AND 3  
REGIONAL ROUNDS  
FINAL FOUR  
MEN’S TOURNAMENT TRAVEL

ROUNDS 1 AND 2  
REGIONAL ROUNDS  
FINAL FOUR  
WOMEN’S TOURNAMENT TRAVEL

A representation of the travel legs, both by bus and by plane, embarked upon for the 2015 NCAA Division I Men’s and Women’s Basketball Championships, executed using embroidery floss, map pins, school logos and hot glue. ARNEL REYNON / SPORT GRAPHICS

each day there because, really, she is booked at Short’s. Even more convenient as the days of the tournament stretch into evenings and nights and early-morning hours: [Starbucks is just five minutes away](#).

But this year, on the night before Selection Sunday, Sheely struggled to find sleep. Last year, changes in the airline industry caused more problems than the staff had anticipated: Charter operators had gone out of business. Airline mergers had led to diminished fleets and availability. New rules for allowing flight crews to rest took effect just two months before March Madness in 2014, and while the airlines thought they had a handle on the adjustment, the rapid-fire rate of NCAA championships travel left them scrambling to staff flights.

Those behind-the-curtain complications

played out nationally. Coaches’ frustrations aired during a news conference led to a round of pundits’ criticisms. The judgments are made without a name or face in mind, but Sheely is the name and face who feels the sting. She’s ready this time, but in March, the unexpected must be anticipated.

Morning arrives. Selection Sunday – which, in 2015, just happens to fall on the ides of March.

At Short’s, Sheely sets up her tablet on the edge of a shared desk in a 180-square-foot room known during March as “the war room.” Its walls are lined floor to ceiling with dry-erase whiteboard, soon to be populated with

Continued on page 40



a color-coded mosaic of team names and departure times and airport codes and charter bids.

Outside the war room, Short's staffers who travel to Waterloo from as far away as Seattle are assigned as liaisons who usher schools through their travel. A dozen other Short's employees work to schedule travel for Division I basketball officials, Divisions II and III men's and women's basketball teams and the other NCAA championships that fall in March – from fencing and wrestling to men's and women's swimming and diving.

Their uniforms during these weeks consist of jeans, yoga pants and Short's Travel T-shirts with slogans like "I love championships: Sleep is overrated." Short's employees, like the NCAA's, are prohibited from taking part in office bracket pools. But this is March in Iowa, so occasionally a University of Northern Iowa, University of Iowa or Iowa State University hoodie walks through the door.

Sheely shares the war room with Kris Fratzke, the NCAA account executive for Short's, and Short's charter coordinators Taylor Weber and Kim Claussen. Fratzke is the calm in this storm, maintaining order with two computer screens blinking before her and an ever-present earpiece that positions her for instant access to charter carriers. She



SAM WASSON / UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA ANCHORAGE

also gives the place a familial vibe: For four consecutive years her son, Bryce, has given up his college spring breaks to help Short's in its greatest hours of need, and each year Fratzke's husband, Dick, prepares meatloaf and cheesy hash browns for the staff on one of their late nights. As staffers from points around the country arrive at the main office on Selection Sunday, hers is the voice that greets them with: "Welcome to Waterloo!"

Claussen, wearing a shirt that reads "March Mania: If you're awake, you're working," has worked at Short's for 12 years but is spending the tournament in the war room for the first time.

And Weber, six months pregnant with her third child, is eager to get the March party started. Once again this year, she got a special pedicure for the season – Final Four toes, with orange polish and black lines representing the channels of a basketball. She, too, is staying in

a hotel up the street, an hour away from her family, so her late-night and early-morning comings and goings won't wake 4-year-old John and 2-year-old Millie. She relishes guiding the pieces into their places each year – even though explaining to her family her unique role in the travel industry is always a challenge. "You want to get your team and all your equipment across the country in three days? I'm your girl," she says.

"You want a family package to Disneyland? No. I can't help you."

Sheely glances at the clock. It's 5:54 p.m. Soon, the rest of the country will know what has already been revealed to the four women in the war room. Weber is anxious. She snaps her fingers twice, claps her hands three times. Time to get to work.

Sheely looks over the bracket again, then scans the U.S. map on the wall.

"What time zone is Utah?" she asks. "Is that Mountain?"

"I believe so," Fratzke replies.

"Dayton is Eastern. They'll lose two hours

automatically, and it's a four-hour flight," Sheely says. "BYU is going to have to leave as early as possible."

Let the madness begin.

But wait. Even before the brackets are announced, a crisis is brewing.

Division II women's basketball teams have already been on the move, headed toward the homes of the top seeds in their championship, which earn hosting rights for the first three rounds.

And so, just as the NCAA was trying to lock up charter planes in advance of the Division I men's and women's championships, seven Division II women's basketball teams needed transportation to the home court of a No. 1 seed: the University of Alaska Anchorage. To pull off the logistics of this location, all seven teams caught rides to Anchorage, like kids catching a carpool to school, on one plane that made several stops. And on the eve of Selection Sunday, [those women's teams were still in Anchorage](#), their plane disabled by a part that froze overnight in temperatures of 2 below zero – and then fell off.

The teams got one more night's rest in Alaska. The plane got its needed repairs. And, at last, just hours before the Division I men's Selection Show, the last of the teams arrived home.

One more plane back in the continental United States, just in time.

The men's bracket is out, and the teams – most likely, their directors of operations – are calling Short's. They could choose to communicate their information – how many people they will take in their travel party, their desired airport and preferred time of departure – through an electronic portal created for this purpose. But the operations directors won't rely solely on technology.

"They always want to hear a voice," Sheely says. "We're all Type-A personalities in sports, and the directors of operations are no different. Yes, they know it's all in the portal, but they want to make sure you've seen it, you get it – that you truly understand what they want to do."

Not long after the Short's liaisons begin contacting schools, a team director of operations demands to talk to Sheely. According to NCAA rules set by committees made up of representatives from member schools, Division I men's and women's basketball teams must travel by bus if they are located within 350 miles of their competition sites.

Some schools don't know the rule – or, perhaps, don't like it when it affects their team.

This conversation, Sheely knows, will be among her simplest of the week.

"I got the note you wanted to talk to me about the exception to the fly rule," she says. "Unfortunately, that's one rule we have that is not flexible. If you are within 350 miles, you have to drive. Seventeen other teams have to drive this year, and I have one team that is at 347 miles."

Responsibility for teams traveling by bus shifts to Chicago-based GO Ground Options, which handles ground travel operations for the NCAA. Short's, meanwhile, works with charter companies to move planes into position for first-round travel to Dayton. The first plane of the tournament is scheduled to depart Provo Municipal Airport at 8 a.m. the morning after Selection Sunday and will carry the 81-person travel party of Brigham Young, scheduled to play at 9:10 p.m. the following day.

"What time zone is Utah, again?" Sheely asks, before her memory answers the question for her. "OK. That will be fine."

As millions of people around the country are filling in their brackets, the tournament is also taking shape on the whiteboard walls of the war room. Weber prints in purple marker the second-round host cities, where four teams emerging from the first round in Dayton will meet 60 others to form the second round of the bracket. The schools traveling by air are added in blue, with the preferred departure airport, travel party size, and desired time and date in orange. The team's scheduled tipoff is noted in aqua.

"4:20p PT Davidson JQF/CLT 3/18 8p 80," reads the notation for Davidson College, which is traveling 2,843 miles to compete in Seattle and wants to fly out of Concord Regional or Charlotte Douglas International airports, both in North Carolina.

Sheely scans the wall, 12 feet wide and 10 feet high, which has evolved into a colorful travel wish list for bracket teams. She is prowling for errors, such as teams that miscalculated their needs, or preferred airports so small that charter companies won't be able to round up security screeners and baggage handlers in time.

"Can someone confirm that Davidson doesn't want to leave until 8 p.m. Wednesday? That's a long flight," Sheely says.

"Yep, that's right," replies Robin Stodghill, the travel liaison for teams like Davidson that are heading to Seattle for the second round. "Their professors don't want them to miss class."

Four hours after the bracket is announced, the teams' wish lists are in the hands of the charter carriers and airlines. They can see that the University of North Carolina and its party of 110 want to fly out of Raleigh-Durham International Airport at 8 p.m. Tuesday, or that the University of Oklahoma wants to fly out of the



Kevin Brown of Short's Travel helps line up plans for the other NCAA championships in March besides basketball: in both genders across three divisions, swimming and diving, indoor track and field, skiing, fencing, rifle, wrestling and ice hockey. CONRAD SCHMIDT / NCAA PHOTOS

Will Rogers World Airport at 2 p.m. Wednesday with its party of 143. The companies scan the lists in search of business opportunities.

"This is the fun part," Weber says Monday afternoon, as the wall begins to come into focus. "This is where the puzzle comes together."

As expected, the shortage in aircraft means fewer options for teams with cross-country flights. Across the country, the desire to keep planes in service conflicts with the need to give the crews enough rest. Many teams have requested flight plans similar to their regular-season routines, in which they depart from a small regional airport, its patterns and people familiar

to them, and avoid commercial airport terminals and security lines. But tournament travel can force flexibility. Even the few commercial airlines that commit to a charter leg sometimes can't pick up from anywhere but a main gate.

Still, for the most part, this first round of bids has yielded more options than Sheely had feared – and more options than were offered for the men's second round in 2014.

"Texas wants afternoon," Fratzke says, eyeing the board and noting that the University of Texas at Austin not only got an afternoon flight but also the carrier it likes.

"We gave them that," Sheely replies.

*Continued on page 42*

*The tools of the trade that make March Madness travel possible include chocolate-covered espresso beans and brackets filled out with mileage figures, not favorited teams.*



AMY WIMMER SCHWARB / NCAA



CONRAD SCHMIDT / NCAA PHOTOS



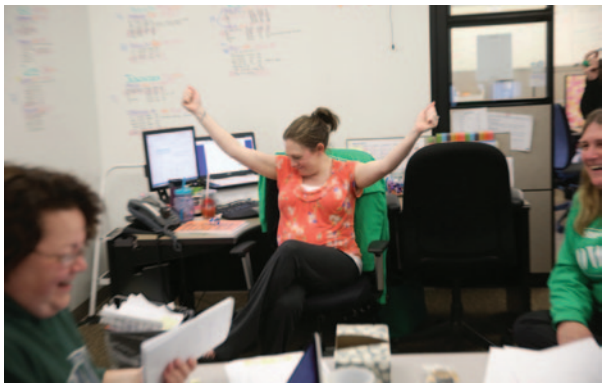


PROPRIETARY INFORMATION HAS BEEN OBLISCURED.

“I know,” Fratzke says. “I was just pointing out the beautifulness of it.”

Not every request has been fulfilled with quite as much beauty. One team traveling 1,000 miles to its first competition site wants to know why it can’t fly out of its first-choice airport, a small regional just off campus that takes care of the team during the regular season. Fratzke checks the bids again. The travel staff had plenty of bids to choose from – seven carriers bid on it – but none would agree to fly out of the small airport. “Screeners aren’t available there,” Fratzke told Brenda Hager, Short’s operations manager and the school’s liaison. “We always have trouble with screeners there.” Hager turns her attention to answering the school’s questions, and Sheely turns to Fratzke: “Can I ask you – did we definitely bid it for the smaller airport?” “Oh, no, we did,” Fratzke responds. “We’ve always had problems with that airport.” Hager is back. “They’re very disappointed.

They want a list of all the charter companies that bid on their flight,” she tells Sheely and Fratzke. “Can we give it to them?” “Yes,” Sheely responds, “absolutely.”



Taylor Weber, NCAA charter coordinator for Short’s Travel, agonizes over travel options for Division I women’s basketball, then rejoices in a solution. CONRAD SCHMIDT / NCAA PHOTOS

Two days later, the team and its travel party board a plane at the international airport 45 minutes from campus. But Sheely offered the school’s athletics director something else: Over

the next year, the staff will work with charter carriers to understand why that airport presents such a challenge. If the logistics can be worked out and the school makes the tournament again next year, it might be able to use its local airport.

The ebb and flow of the days at Short’s begins to fall into an uneasy rhythm: Team requests in, bid requests out, charter bids in, charter bids awarded, teams informed, games played, teams win, teams lose, teams go home or teams stay another night. The Division I women’s bracket is announced 24 hours after the men’s, and those teams’ plans begin filling up another two walls in the war room. On Wednesday – the day before the remaining 64 men’s teams begin play – the NCAA is responsible for 45 flights in airspace. The travel staff’s success seems to hinge on this day. The war room, still collegial and, like the days before, fueled on jelly beans and coffee, is hopeful but tense, like a hospital waiting room.

Already, the tournament has yielded some problems. One team experienced terrible in-flight service and a two-hour delay that led two other teams to have five-hour delays the following day due to crew rest issues. One of those schools was given conflicting information about when to report to the airport. The travel staff had traced all the problems to one charter carrier – and Fratzke called the company. “I need answers. And I’m not getting them,” she says, her voice even and her tone direct. “This is their first step into this tournament. We don’t want it to start this way. We can’t have it start this way. Communication, communication, communication. We need to know what’s going on. If it’s an issue with the school being late, we need to know that. If it’s an issue with them having too much stuff, we need to deal with that. “There’s nothing we can do for today’s flights,” she continues, “but we are going to research our options for tomorrow’s flights.” Sheely scans the women’s whiteboards. It’s 1:14 p.m. Wednesday, and this same carrier is scheduled to fly Florida Gulf Coast University and The Ohio State University on Thursday. Leaving those two schools in the hands of a company that is 0 for 3 on performance makes Sheely nervous. Weber and Fratzke reach out to two new carriers. One can take Ohio State, but only if it pulls its bid to take home whichever team loses the University of Notre Dame-Northeastern University game in Pittsburgh. The other has an aircraft available for the short flight from Fort Myers to Tallahassee, Florida. The travel liaisons must reach out to the two schools and alert them to the last-minute swap. “Tell them the carrier we had for them has not done well today,” Sheely says, “and we don’t want to take the chance that they are going to continue to not do well tomorrow.” Sheely turns her attention back to her tablet screen, and her face softens. The University of Maryland, College Park, men’s basketball team has tweeted a photo from its charter plane. The men are crowded together with broad smiles for a selfie. “[#Terps are ready for TakeOff!](#)” Heading to Columbus, OH for the @NCAA @marchmadness Round of 64!” the tweet reads. “Aww,” Sheely says. “That’s sweet,” Weber says, looking over Sheely’s shoulder. It’s 2:15 p.m. “Now can we talk about lunch?”

On the Friday of selection week, with both

the men’s and women’s tournaments underway, the basketball games on the war room’s 20-inch television mark the passage of time, their



EVAN VUCCI / AP IMAGES

outcomes helping travel organizers bubble in answers to their puzzle. The charter companies, meanwhile, have come to be known by the gender of their contact person: “If she doesn’t carry Maryland men but carries Albany, can she do both Xavier and N.C. State at their preferred time?” Sheely asks Weber Friday afternoon. “We’re also looking at her for Arizona.” “Arizona only works if Washington women lose today,” Weber replies, “then she can go up to Portland.” “If Washington women lose today?” Sheely repeats. “We won’t know that until ... Oh, that game is going on right now. That game should be almost over.” “Washington down 44-52,” Weber says, “with 15 minutes left.” The puzzle, it



UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND PHOTO

seems, is suspended in time. “I need some of these games to end,” Sheely says, “so I can figure out where these planes are going to be.” During a 2 p.m. lull, the war room breaks for lunch. Carryout, again. And a couple of hours later, Fratzke calls one of her trusted charter

contacts. It’s 4:14 p.m. on the first Friday of the tournament – which also happens to be the first day of spring. “What makes you think you get a week-end?” Fratzke asks the charter representative. “You wanna play in the Madness, man, you get no weekend ... OK ... Uh-huh, I got it. Right ... 1:30 a.m. if Oklahoma State loses. But if Florida Gulf Coast loses, you can do it on time. But if they win, you’re taking Oklahoma State home. ... It sure is. ... Yes, we’re all in the same state of fog.” Sheely checks her email and spots a subject line on a message from a charter carrier: “Prince of Wales could delay flight a bit (NOT KIDDING).” The Road to the Final Four has been disrupted by weather, airline regulations, overtimes, shortages of bus drivers, screeners, flight crews and aircraft. But a visit to the U.S. from Prince Charles and his wife, Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall? [That’s a new one.](#) More than 20 million television viewers will tune in for the Division I Men’s Basketball Championship. One night later, about 4 million are expected to watch the women’s finals. By then, 68 men’s teams and 64 women’s teams will have logged hundreds of thousands of miles, stepped onto 214 chartered flights and taken 467 bus trips. The Division I men’s and women’s basketball travel parties alone will have accounted for 20,923 air passengers. Sheely is a graduate of DePauw University, a Division III school. That fact leaves Sheely, who touches thousands of lives in the Division I basketball championships, without a rooting interest in the tournaments. Instead, she cheers for seamless travel arrangements. She tunes in to the final seconds of games not to enjoy the nail-biters, but to alert waiting planes where they’re headed. By Monday, two men’s teams will remain in Indianapolis and two women’s teams will remain in Tampa. All four teams will be heading home, win or lose. Travel arrangements will be locked in place. Five days into April, March will at last be over. And Sheely will be home in Indiana. At that point, she will climb into bed. She might check in briefly on the championship game. And if the team has its uniforms and the band has its tubas, she will click over to her digital video recorder. Throughout March, it has been recording episodes of “The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills.” Sheely has some catching up to do. **A**