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.
that success is impossible, or you can trust that most private moments: “Stay positive. You can
rubbery, the bathroom becomes a refuge, sheltered from the hum of phones and the clutter of keyboards and the glow of computer screens. Some words of wisdom are posted on the
bathroom wall, taped opposite the concourse so employees cannot escape them, even in their most private moments: “Stay positive. You can

Outside this bathroom, even faith and optimism are feeble tools. The University of Louisville men’s basketball team and its coaches, cheerleaders and travel
members sit at a Kentucky tarmac inside a plane that can carry either its two tuba 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 reported requested – but the coach now wants to by two hours earlier, when no plane is avail-
able. 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 are the cynics and doubters, their watch piercing and always present. They are the sports columnists and critics who lie in wait for a mistake, 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 1 p.m.”). Even the victories (“One charter company bid on eight legs for the second round, five met with the winning bid”), “We have to give more love to this

road. Others, such as buses, planes, travel bags and trombones, are mobile but inane – items in motion that must be accounted for and tracked. Still others – the most complex pieces of all – are living, breathing beings, with needs and, often, demands. They are pilots and flight attendants, their movements regulated by the Federal Aviation Administration. They are luggage handlers and security screeners, who can be in short supply – particularly on the short notice MULTIDIMENSIONAL PUZZLE

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 Hamp-

ton game. Crisis resolved. On to the next crisis.

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 spots that could turn the madness into moments of magic.

But when Juanta 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 Hol-

verica box. But as Sheely scans it, the potential quandaries pop off the page. How will those road trips, those cross-country flights, those unexpected

tournaments to compete on this

national stage.

This staff, too, waits all year

for the championship season, although for them, the madness of March requires

their travel left them scrambling to staff flights. The rapid-fire rate of NCAA championships

crews to rest took effect just two months before the tournament stretch into evenings and

at Short’s. Even more convenient as the days

of the tournament stretch into evenings and

morning-hours morning.

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. Airlines

mergers had led to diminished fleets and

unprecedented fees for allowing flight
to go to any game on any day –

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 Sherr’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

plane.

Each March, she leaves her cubicle on the third floor of the NCAA’s national office in Indianapo-
lis and heads to Waterloo, Iowa, home of Sherr’s Travel Management, the NCAA’s travel

consultant since 2001. Sherr’s books a room at Candlewood Suites, located a convenient seven minutes from the travel agency, even

though she’s spent just a few hours earlier. She

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Fratzke, the NCAA account executive for NCAA’s, are prohibited from taking part in with slogans like “I love championships: Sleep basketball teams and the other II and III men’s and women’s basketball officials, Divisions schedule travel for Division I who usher schools through Waterloo from as far away as Short’s staffers who travel to airport codes and charter bids. names and departure times and a color-coded mosaic of team Sheely shares the war room with Kris Sheely knows, will be among her simplest of the week.

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. (Color photo)

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Not every request has been fulfilled with quite as much beauty

One team traveling 1,000 miles to its first competition also 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 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,” Fratzke 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 tournament has yielded some outcomes helping travel organizers bubble in answers to their puzzle. The charter companies, meanwhile, have come to be known by the gender of their contracted carrier—“if she doesn’t carry Maryland men but carries Albany, can she do both Xavier and N.C. State at her preferred time?” Sheely asks Weber Friday afternoon. “We’re also looking at her for Arizona.”

“Airlines only work 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 that game is over.”

Charles and his wife, Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, will tune in for the Division I Men’s Basketball Championship. By Monday, two men’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 library of season episodes of “The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills.” Sheely has some catching up to do.

Taylor Weber, NCAA charter coordinator for Short’s Travel, coordinates travel options for Division I women’s basketball, then reports it in a solution—travel.airlines.com/travel.

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.

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 traveled all the problems to one charter company—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 staff, we need to deal with that.

“There’s nothing we can do for today’s flights,” she tells Sheely, “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 by 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 picks 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.

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