BRAYDEN'S BREAKDOWN:

ONE BUBBLE TEAM TO WATCH FROM THE POWER 5 CONFERENCES

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As the calendar turns to March, all eyes are on college basketball. Whether you have been watching since November or just watched your first game this weekend, it is a time when the sports world comes together for the month-long spectacle.

Unfortunately for some teams however, they are fighting for their tournament lives on the infamous bubble. The bubble, used by all bracketologists, but in this case, it will be ESPNs. The worldwide leader in sports has eight teams on the right side of the bubble, along with eight teams on the wrong side of the bubble.

Here are teams on both sides of this bubble as conference championship week looms.

Big East: Seton Hall

The lone bubble team in the Big East has fallen outside of the "Next Four Out" category after Saturday's loss to UConn. Not all hope is lost for the Pirates as Friday night's matchup against 18 ranked St. John's gives them a chance to boost their resume before the Big East Tournament next week.

Shaheen Holloway's team will most likely be a 4 seed in the Big East Tournament. If they can get past their first opponent, they will have 1 seed St. John's or UConn to deal with in the semifinals. A win over one of these teams will not only help their resume but send them to the Big East Championship finals where anything can happen.

Seton Hall will rely on the veteran leadership of AJ Staton-McCray, who made the NCAA tournament a few years ago with Samford and Adam "Budd" Clark who led Merrimack to an NEC regular season championship last season.

Big Ten: Ohio State

In a tremendous year for the Big Ten, Ohio State's tournament hopes are hanging on for dear life. A massive win over eighth ranked Purdue on Sunday, OSU has moved into the "Last Four In" according to ESPN.

All the Buckeyes losses are to NCAA tournament teams, besides an early season loss to Pittsburgh and a midseason loss to Washington. Wins over Wisconsin, USC and West Virginia should go a long way going into Selection Sunday.

Bruce Thornton is trying to will his team to March Madness. The senior who has played all four years at Ohio State is averaging 20 points per game, including scoring 27 in a February win against Wisconsin. Will he go his whole collegiate career without making the tournament, or will the Buckeyes hold on to their spot?

SEC: Texas

Year one under Sean Miller has the Texas Longhorns on the doorstep of an NCAA tournament appearance. Sitting at 18-11 with a bunch of quality wins and losses to tournament teams, the Longhorns could make noise in March. In an SEC that is almost as good as last year when they got 14 teams into the tournament, Texas has a 9-7 record in SEC play. With wins over Missouri, Texas A&M, Alabama and then undefeated Vanderbilt, Texas can clinch their spot with a win over number 20 ranked Arkansas on March 4, or a few wins in the SEC tournament.

Dailyn Swain followed Miller from Xavier to Texas and the move paid off for the junior. The 6-foot-8 guard leads the team in scoring (17.7 PPG), assists (3.1 APG) and field goal percentage (55.4%).

ACC: California

Saturday's loss to Pittsburgh sent the Golden Bears to the "Next Four Out". Sitting in eighth place in an above-average ACC, Cal must beat Georgia Tech and Wake Forest to even have a chance for an at-large bid. The Golden Bears will most likely face an NCAA tournament team in round two of the ACC tournament, an opportunity that they must take advantage of.

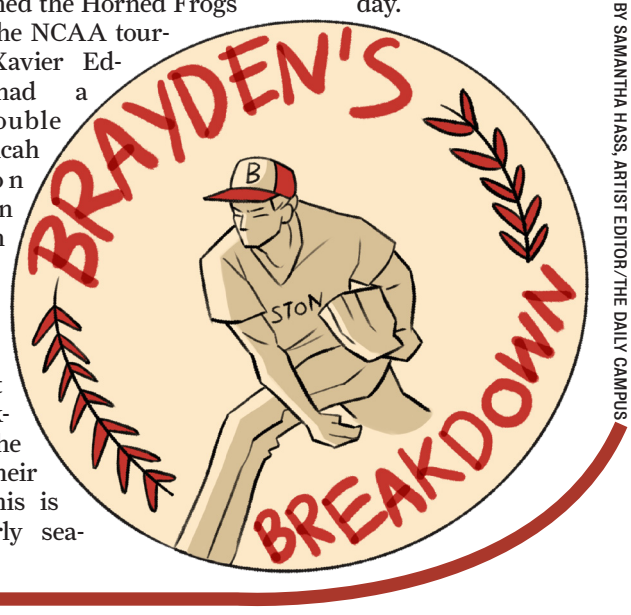
Dai Dai Ames is California's leading scorer with 16.4 points per game. The junior had 19 at home against UNC in Cal's biggest win of the season. If Ames can provide the offense while Lee Dort (7.7 rebounds and 0.9 blocks per game) and Justin Pippen (1.8 steals per game) can anchor the defense, the Golden Bears have a chance against the cream of the crop in the ACC.

Big 12: TCU

Tuesday night's win on the road against Texas Tech may have clinched the Horned Frogs a spot in the NCAA tournament. Xavier Edmonds had a double-double while Micah Robinson and Jayden Pierre both pitched in with double figures.

But when looking at the rest of their resume, this is where early season victories come into play. Along with a 10-7 conference record, TCU beat defending National Champion Florida and tournament lock Wisconsin before Big 12 play began. They have also picked up some great Big 12 wins, including against then fifth ranked Iowa State and twice beating a strong Oklahoma State squad.

The Big 12 is a top conference in college basketball, and a 10-7 record is nothing to scoff at. The Horned Frogs were sitting in "Last Four Byes" before taking care of Texas Tech. They should hear their name called as a ninth or 10th seed on Selection Sunday.



LOGO BY SAMANTHA HASS, ARTIST EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

SPORTS SPECTRUM:

NBA'S MOST VALUABLE IS THE LEAST INJURY PRONE

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It is a general consensus among both casual and diehard NBA fans that there are two players above the rest when it comes to the most valuable player award: Thunder guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and Denver Nuggets center Nikola Jokić.

Both players, considered a tier above the rest of the NBA, are no longer competing against each other. They're competing against a stipulation: a game requirement.

Established in the 2023-24 season's Collective Bargaining Agreement, in order to qualify for accolades, including MVP, Defensive Player of the Year and All-NBA teams, players must have played at least 65, or about 80%, of the 82 games in an NBA season, logging at least 20 minutes in all of those games.

This has opened a conversation regarding the rule and the implications of it.

Should the rule be done away with?

The rule can be seen as punishing the unlucky MVP-caliber players who have injuries that keep them out longer than expected. In addition, certain players' contracts include bonuses if they make an All-NBA team or win DPOY or MVP, meaning a player could be missing out on extra money.

There is also this point that the athletes who would be getting the awards in place of those disqualified would be changing the course of NBA history, as concurred by Eric Koreen of The Athletic and Golden State Warriors center Draymond Green.

To Green's point, he lost the 2015-16 DPOY to current Clippers forward Kawhi Leonard, who only played 64 games. Under today's rules, Leonard is ineligible for the award, and that season is effectively erased from the history books.

While it is not intended to be a knock on players like Detroit Pistons guard Cade Cunningham, many are not comfortable with the idea of players in that tier (alongside Boston Celtics forward Jaylen Brown) winning that award because of injuries that Gilgeous-Alexander, Jokic and San Antonio Spurs center Victor Wembanyama had no control over.

Changing the course of NBA games over a missed game over the threshold seems counterproductive, as it sends the message to stars that their injuries can cut them loose at any moment.

With the league investigating the Utah Jazz in seeing if injuries are legitimate, it creates an air of hostility.

However, it comes at the cost of ignoring the physical strain the game brings, and the league's best players, like Warriors guard Stephen Curry and Bucks forward Giannis Antetokounmpo, who have already been disqualified.

Green also noted in January of last year that Philadelphia 76ers center Joel Embiid, who has a litany of injury concerns, had felt "forced" to play the game against the Warriors due to not wanting to be disqualified for the awards.

If the sentiment is to be believed, it wouldn't be too hard to insinuate that many players who have a chance to win that award also feel the same and, as is common in sports, will play despite the injuries that may exacerbate into something even worse. It is an act of putting the league's best talent at risk even if that was not the intention.

Load management, spurred by Leonard in late 2019 when he signed with the Clippers, is often believed to be the primary reason as to why the rule was instituted.

Teams were resting healthy stars during high-profile national TV games to save them for the playoffs, further contributing to what can be considered a lack of regard for regular season matchups.

They seemed to operate on the principle that if something can go wrong, it will go wrong. With that notion, stars were being sat out every other game, creating both a frustration for fans at home and fans that spent money to come and see their favorite players play.

The rule essentially acts as a product guarantee; if the players want to gain these bonuses and for the sake of the fans, they must show up at least about 80 percent of the time.

When it comes to what is valuable, for many, it is time. The league seems to apply this to the MVP voting process, in which those who can show up consistently can provide more value to their team than those who don't.

This also preempts the small sample size arguments; stats can be inflated, after all, and they need time to be flattened out.

A lot of NBA fans often extrapolate corporate America practices to a professional sports league such as the NBA, often stating that if one were to show up to work less than 80% of the time, they would be fired.

Athletes are dealing with larger expectations, as comes with the larger sums of money they are paid. A physically intensive 'job' is the one they work where, despite their often-superhuman abilities, they are still putting their bodies and careers on the line every time they lace up.

However, the fired for 80% attendance argument ignores the physical reality of the sport. In a corporate setting, an employee can 'work through' a minor ailment. In the NBA, playing through a 'minor' injury can lead to a career-ending catastrophe.

It's important to note that in most cases, players who win MVP play around 70 games.

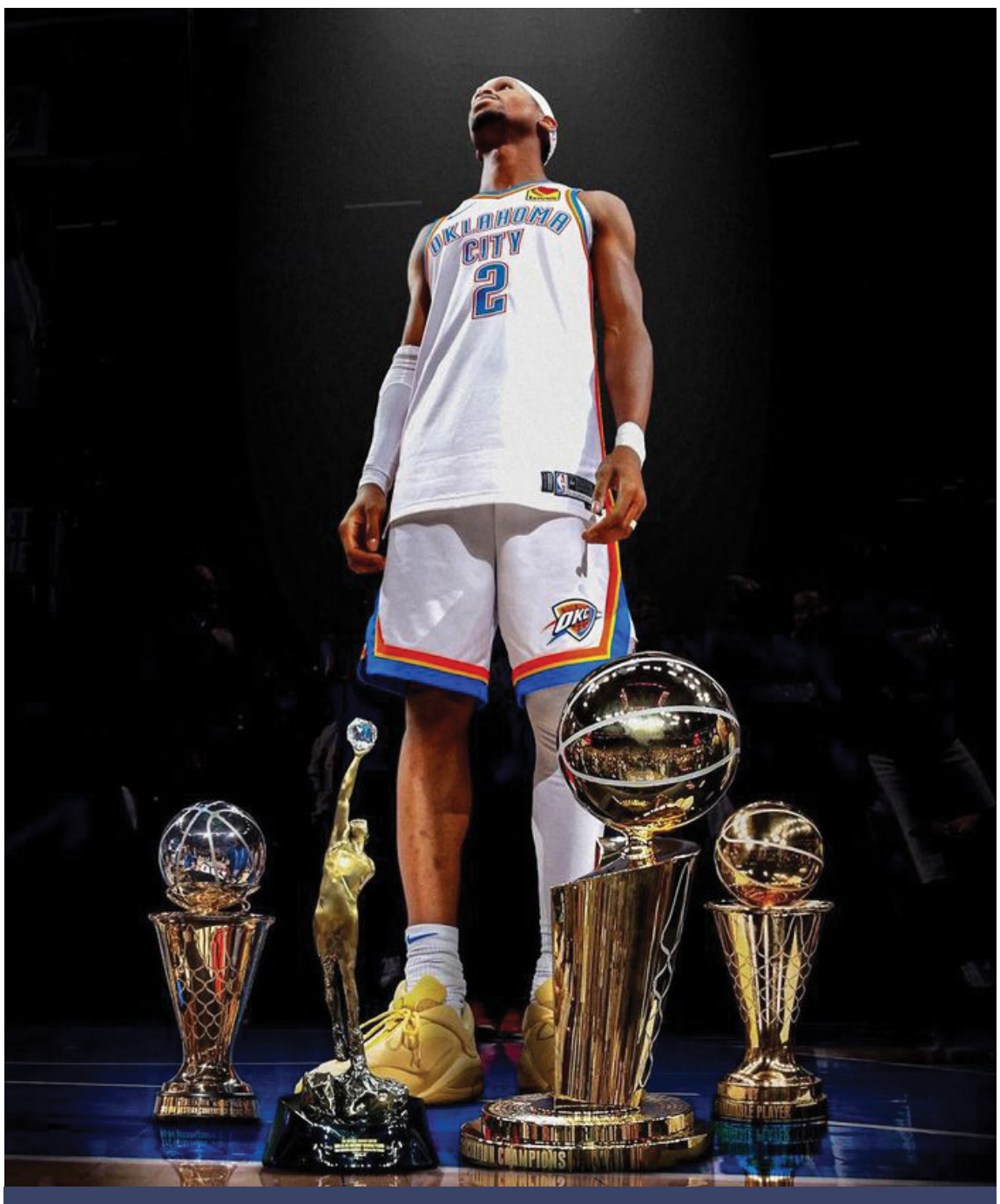
Bill Walton (1977-78) was the only MVP in an 82-game season to win while playing fewer than 65 games, with just 58. He is an anomaly, however, because the Portland Trail Blazers went 50-10 with him and 8-14 without him. To voters, those 58 games were so impactful that it won him the award outright.

Other low game counts, like Karl Malone (40; 1999) and LeBron James (62; 2012) are all the result of lockouts and shortened seasons. The standard has been 70 games.

The conversation has picked up recently specifically because of Jokic's abnormal extended absence. He missed a stretch from late December to the end of January, which makes it the longest extended absence of his career. Many doubt if the conversation would be occurring if he were still eligible.

In conclusion, the NBA's rule is an attempt at a compromise. It's gatekeeping based on a lottery of health. When a rule dictates accolades that can make or break a player's Hall of fame case, the history of the game starts to change.

With that, though, comes the inherent risk of players being more susceptible to career-altering injuries. The rule treats a torn ligament and a 'scheduled rest day' the same, and that's where the comparison falls apart.



Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, guard for the Oklahoma City Thunder, stands among coveted trophies to be won in the NBA. He is considered a top-tier player that is deserving of the Most Valuable Player award.
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