

## A local March Madness preview

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### ***Three TN teams should make it***

This state has three basketball teams that should make the NCAA Tournament. All three – Belmont, Memphis and MTSU – are enjoying outstanding seasons.

Belmont is 24-6 and won the OVC regular season with a 14-2 record. It was the Bruins first season in the OVC.

Middle Tennessee is 27-4 overall and won the Sun Belt regular season with a 19-1 record. The Blue Raiders will move to Conference-USA next season. Memphis is 25-4 overall and finished 14-0 in C-USA play. The Tigers are bound for the Big East Conference.

So, how would you rank these teams in order? It's difficult, because they play in different conferences and don't have many head-to-head games.

There is no right answer, no wrong answer, but I would rank Memphis the best team of the three. The Tigers are No. 19 in the AP poll. Belmont and MTSU are among teams receiving votes for the Top 25.

Memphis has three players averaging double figures, led by guard Joe Jackson at 13.9. He also leads in assists with 4.8 per game and shoots 75 percent from the free throw stripe. Close behind Jackson is another West Tennessee product, Adonis Thomas. He averages 11.7 points, 4.4 rebounds and hits 76.5 percent of his free throws.

The Tigers lost to Virginia Commonwealth, Minnesota and Louisville in December and at Xavier by two points Feb. 26. That snapped an 18-game win streak. They also beat state rival Tennessee in Knoxville by five points.

The Tigers have an RPI of 19, followed by Belmont at 23 and MTSU at 24. Those are outstanding RPI's.

Memphis is 2-3 against teams in the top 50 RPI rankings. Belmont is 1-2 against top 50, but an impressive 1-1 against top 25. MTSU is 0-3 against the top 50.

In strength of schedule rankings, Belmont leads with a 73. Memphis has a 74 SOS while MTSU shows up at 131.

I would rank Belmont second behind Memphis. The Bruins run Coach Rick Byrd's system, which favors a fast pace and an offense that puts four players on the perimeter looking for open 3's.

Belmont beat Stanford on the road, 70-62, for its signature win. They also beat Ohio by 19 points in a recent bracket-buster game.

The Bruins have more trouble with larger, more athletic opponents. Their only two OVC losses came at Murray State and Tennessee State. Tournament play demands strong guard play and Belmont's Ian Clark and Kerron Johnson fill that order. Clark leads in scoring (18.1), while Johnson averages 13.5 points. Both can handle, shoot and play the point.

MTSU's success is team depth. They average 71 points a game and Marcos Knight is the only Blue Raider averaging double figures (12.6). Coach Kermit Davis suffered his only loss in Sun Belt play at Arkansas State in overtime.

MTSU knocked off Ole Miss by three in December, then lost its next game at Belmont, 64-49, in a game where the Blue Raiders' offense never found a rhythm.

All three teams should make the NCAA Tournament, even though historically, the OVC and Sun Belt have not gotten a second team in.

Frankly, I prefer the tournaments where only the champion gets a bid. Memphis can lose in the C-USA tournament and still get to the Big Dance.

I predict all three teams will make it, but in March there are no guarantees.

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