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Article Launched: 3/19/2006 01:00 AM

## Everyone into the pool

### Millions have bounce in their steps and eyes off their work when it's time to fill out basketball brackets

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Fretting that the 10 bucks you dropped on your NCAA basketball bracket may run afoul of the law? Well, you can relax.

Colorado Attorney General John Suthers has the University of Connecticut Huskies going all the way in his office pool.

Yup, it's tournament time, and, it seems, almost everyone has a bracket or two filled out. It's the ultimate office-betting event, fueled by the Internet.

"Traditionally, participating in office pools makes the NCAA Tournament more interesting, especially when you attended a college that's in the tourney," Suthers says. "I went to Notre Dame. They have not been too good lately."

Office pools are legal in Colorado, as long as the organizer doesn't take a cut, Suthers says. Just keep the stakes modest and ensure it's a social event, he advises.

That should be a relief to several skittish Colorado lawmakers, who declined to discuss whether they were participating in office pools. Some denied knowing about any sort of friendly bracket betting.

For the rest of America, it's open season when the NCAA Tournament comes around, the phenomenon called March Madness.

The slew of games produces billions of dollars in gambling and, some experts say, billions of dollars of losses in workplace productivity.

And while the law views most pools as harmless, some researches say they can lead to gambling addiction.

Throwing money into a bracket can lead to bigger betting and darker behavior, especially among children, said John Welte, senior research scientist at the University of Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions.

"No gambling, whether it be office pools or a government-sponsored lottery, is completely innocuous," Welte said.

Last year, more than 1.4 million people played brackets on the CBS SportsLine website. The number has grown by about 30 percent every year since the late 1990s, CBS spokesman Alex Riethmiller said.

"Fantasy football is still king of the hill, but right now, March Madness bracketing is bigger than fantasy baseball, fantasy hockey, fantasy basketball," Riethmiller said.

One NCAA survey estimates that more than 30 million Americans participate in pools. That adds up to a lot of college basketball junkies.

"I'm a sports-o-holic," said Myrnan Fronczak of Littleton, who joined 50 colleagues in a \$10 entry pool. She also played five other brackets, just for fun.

"You have to have your heart and soul in it if you are going to play," she said.

And just like the attorney general, Fronczak likes Connecticut to win it all.

### **It's work to pick a winner**

Business analysts say March Madness is the time of year when employees spend more time tracking the games than doing their work.

Challenger, Gray and Christmas Inc., a human-resources consulting company based in Chicago, estimates that \$3.8 billion will be lost in productivity because of the tournament.

But the firm says companies should embrace the tournament and the office pool because it creates better morale and sense of community in the workplace.

"These days, companies ask their people to do their work on cellphones, Blackberrys, after hours and on weekends, and work has invaded their personal space," the firm's chief executive, John Challenger, said. "There's no reason personal business like this shouldn't invade the workplace."

Kansas State University business management professor Diane Swanson isn't so sure that the office pools and tournament excitement dampen employee output and wonders whether the productivity losses are exaggerated.

"Those figures don't reflect the whole truth, and I'm a little concerned that we would make a big deal out of this type of betting when it's causing excitement among employees and boosting morale," she said.

No doubt, Steve Ewalt, a sales representative who lives in Denver, is having a good time with the tournament. He laid out a copy of his bracket on the bar at ESPN Zone downtown as he watched first-round action Thursday afternoon.

"I'm a big basketball fan," said Ewalt, who paid \$10 for his bracket. "I've been doing it a long time."

A University of Iowa alum, he'd like to see his alma mater go all the way, but he never picks the team to win the grand prize.

"I don't want to jinx them. If I win, I win. It's just fun."

Despite Ewalt's best efforts, his beloved Hawkeyes lost in the first round Friday.

### **Online, all bets may be off**

In 2005, Christiansen Capital Advisors estimated that \$2 billion was bet on the NCAA Tournament online and at legal Nevada sports books.

Often, online betting companies set up their operations in foreign countries to skirt U.S. gambling laws.

Suthers spent the better part of this week speaking with attorneys general from other states to rally support for a congressional initiative that would direct credit card companies to decline off-shore betting transactions.

The measure, now on the House floor, has garnered support from professional sports leagues as well as the NCAA.

"Online gambling is illegal in all forms and violates state and federal law," Suthers said.

Meanwhile, the basketball frenzy continues.

Sitting in a leather recliner lined up to the center of a 25-foot television screen at ESPN Zone, William Swigert was in hoops heaven.

Swigert arrived at 8:45 a.m. Thursday, 15 minutes before the start of the tournament, to grab the "best seat in the house."

Armed with a laptop loaded with spreadsheets, Swigert, a biochemist, is running a \$10 pool at his office. He has been entering NCAA office pools for 10 years, starting in college, when the winner would get paid the un princely sum of \$45.

Like everyone else, he has a strategy and a champion already picked out.

"I don't like Duke," he said. "But I have them going all the way this year."

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