

March Madness: 10 ways to bond

By Margot Carmichael Lester



You know the saying, "Beware the Ides of March?" Forget the Ides of March. Beware the Madness of March. For many men and women alike, March (and very early April) means an endless string of NCAA basketball games about which you care nothing—but your sweetie considers life-or-death. So, how can you keep your dating life alive from the opening tip-off to the closing "one shining moment" montage?

Just follow these easy tips:

1. Place your bets. You probably don't care about who wins or loses, but you will if you follow this advice from Debbie Mandel, author of *Turn On Your Inner Light: Fitness for Body, Mind and Soul*. Wager about which team will triumph. "If your team wins, he has to fulfill your fantasy, and if his team wins, you have to fulfill his. This way there is a post-game celebration, and you're both excited about the outcome."

2. Make time for each other. Lauren Wilson of Washington, D.C. doesn't let college hoops interfere with together time. "If a big game is on Saturday night and I know I have no other choice but to watch it, I make sure the guy I'm dating lets me pick what we do on Friday or Sunday night, no matter how girly or artsy it may be."

3. Let him pout. If his favorite team is knocked out, giving him the room he needs is the best way to get him closer to you in the long run, says Julie Bain, health director for *Reader's Digest*. "Men often retreat from their pain. They withdraw or seem angry. [Don't] force it by saying the dreaded words, 'Honey, we have to talk.'" Instead, she suggests, "Do something physical together. It can be as simple as going for a walk or cleaning out the garage. Men express their emotions physically, so if you're biking or even shopping at Home Depot, those bottled-up feelings may just come out naturally."

4. Give in. "Some people just didn't grow up around sports and don't understand basketball the way other people don't understand classical music or other classical arts, like ballet and opera," says relationship expert April Masini. "Ask your Madness pro to help you understand and enjoy the game. The lucky thing is that basketball moves a lot more quickly than most other games, so this is one sport where boredom strikes less easily."

5. Show your spirit. Cheerleaders are an integral part of any basketball game, so why not dress the part? "My boyfriend is a huge hockey fan, but college hoops leave him cold," says Marnie Nathan of Santa Barbara. "Last year, he ran in during a key time-out in a super-sized cheerleader outfit to do a cheer for my team. It was hilarious and kind of sweet. He was rewarded during the break between games."

6. Wear the team colors. To connect with a partner after a game, get a jersey with your partner's favorite player's number on it and wear just that at the end of the game.

7. Feed the beast. The breaks between day and night sessions present the perfect time to ply your date's palate. "I love to cook, so I make something really delicious to serve between the sessions when I'm watching the games with a woman I'm dating," says Donald Bash of Washington, D.C. "I set the table, light the candles and create a romantic atmosphere. During dinner, there's no TV, just the two of us talking and having some 'quality time.' It's a nice break for both of us."

8. Get physical. A pre-game rub-down is important for any elite athlete—and rabid fan. Arrange a massage session for two before the big game. "I think of it as the calm before the storm," says Betsy Jameson of Bloomington, IN. "We dim the lights, put on some jazz and give each other massages. It's a nice bit of together time before our friends come over to watch the game."

9. Host a team meeting. Ask your date about the game if you didn't watch it together (or ask about some particular plays if you did). The idea here is to use conversation about the game as a springboard to more conversation — deeper conversation — so you communicate more. Follow up with questions like, "What do you think of the coach's decision? What would you have done?"

10. Create game central. Planning a party is a great way to bond, Masini says. "Don't go mad—have a ball." Work together to plan the menu and decorations, choose prizes and set up the living room for good viewing. When it comes to making two people feel like a close-knit couple, few things can rival playing host to a bunch of pals.

Running the plays in this game plan will help you advance your relationship to the next round.

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