They start out as longshots, dark horses, sleepers, and underdogs. But since the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Tournament introduced its seeding system in 1979, the biggest overachievers in the Big Dance have all come to be better known as "Cinderellas." Now-- with the parity of the 2013 season turning upsets into inevitabilites -- it's time to put the tournament's most surprising performances in their proper historical context. These are college basketball's 40 Greatest Cinderella Runs of the modern era.

Of course, like the committee on Selection Sunday, there are certain key attributes we looked for when putting this list together. First and foremost, our definition of a Cinderella team **includes ONLY teams that won at least two games during their tournament run;** overcoming a relatively low seed and tough draw in the process. This means that we're drawing a distinct line between schools that pulled off one shocking upset (like Coppin State in 1997 or Norfolk State last year) and those that actually put together a prolonged run into the Sweet Sixteen or beyond. If the shoe fits, you've got to wear it more than once. A Cinderella ain't no one one-trick pony!

Also, a Cinderella needn't be an obscure mid-major school previously unheard of to the general public. Representatives of the Big 6 conferences are welcome here, too, so long as they entered the tournament with low seeds and lower expectations. The thinking here is, if you can't include the 1983 N.C. State team on a Cinderella list, what good is it?

So... if the ground rules are understood-- and with all apologies to the fine programs of the pre-seeding era-- let us begin the countdown. Here are your 40 most memorable March Madness Cinderella Teams, ranked on a scale from "terrific" to "totally effing legendary."

40 Greatest Cinderellas of the NCAA Tournament 1979-Present (The Seeding Era)

40. Rhode Island (1988)
Seed: #11 / Finish: Sweet Sixteen
The 1988 NCAA Tournament is best remembered for the surprising title run of the "Danny and the Miracles" Kansas squad, but while the Jayhawks were simply reaching their clear potential, the Rhode Island Rams were fighting well out of their weight class and winning. Led by senior Tom Garrick, the #11-seed sent shockwaves through the East Region, dropping 6-seed Missouri and 3-seed Syracuse before losing a heartbreaker to the Final Four bound Duke Blue Devils, 73-72.

39. UTEP (1992)
Seed: #9 / Finish: Sweet Sixteen
Nearly 30 years after an historic National Championship victory over Kentucky (back when the school was called Texas Western), the University of Texas-El Paso had faded into basketball obscurity. But that all quickly changed at the '92 NCAA Tourney, when the Miners blew up everyone's brackets by taking down the #1 seed Kansas in the second round, 66-60. They kept the momentum going in a third round war with Bob Huggins' Cincinnati Bearcats, but fell a hair short, 69-67.

38. Southern Illinois (2002)
Seed: #11 / Finish: Sweet Sixteen
Like UTEP, the Southern Illinois basketball program enjoyed some glory back in the '60s (including a 1967 NIT Championship), but nobody gave the Salukis much notice coming out of the Missouri Valley Conference in 2002. That would prove to be an egregious oversight, as junior guard Kent Williams helped lift SIU to upsets of 6-seed Texas Tech and the heavily favored #3 seed, Georgia.

GOLDEN FLASHES

[illegible]

[illegible]

KU

[illegible]

LIONS
LOYOLA MARYMOUNT

[illegible]

MASON
PATRIOTS

[illegible]

VCU RAMS

[illegible]

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BUTLER

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