It was quite a four day weekend the NCAA tournament gave us starting last Thursday. You had buzzer beaters and upsets, blowouts and bracket-busting wins from mid-majors and it all sets up an intriguing four day set of games starting this coming Thursday.

But what did we really learn over the weekend?

The Midwest Bracket Truly Was Hell-

Expectations are a bitch. Just ask Kansas.

The Midwest's #1 seed was unceremoniously dumped in the second round by Northern Iowa. Northern Iowa is a good basketball team and there were some who thought they could give Kansas a run in that bracket if they could get by UNLV in their opener. But what was shocking in the UNI/Kansas game wasn't that Northern Iowa took down the overall #1 seed, it was that they

basically controlled the tempo and beat Kansas wire to wire. That was no fluke and it took no miraculous last second shot to do in the Jayhawks (although Ali Farokhmanesh's three pointer with 35 seconds left in the game and UNI up one is the shot of the tournament thus far).

UNI played like a team that belonged in that game. They were free and easy and they weren't intimidated by either Kansas or their moment in the sun on Saturday. And now they get a game with banged up Michigan State on Friday night for the right to move on to the Elite Eight. Michigan State will almost surely be without 2009 Big Ten Player of the Year Kalin Lucas who appears to have torn his left Achilles heal in the win over Maryland.

MSU coach Tom Izzo is a wizard in March and has his 5th seeded Spartans in yet another Sweet 16 but without Lucas and with Delvin Roe and Chris Allen slowed by injury his team has their back against the wall once more.

But you know who doesn't care about MSU's health? The remaining 15 teams. Ohio State took care of business and advanced with a couple solid victories in their half of the bracket and if they can get by Tennessee on Friday night they'll watch the UNI-Michigan State game knowing that they get the winner for a trip to the Final Four.

It doesn't matter to the Buckeyes or anyone else left standing in that bracket that the 1st, 3rd and 4th seeded teams went down. Survive and advance or watch from home.

MSU is actually a 1-point favorite over UNI while Ohio State is a 4 ½ point favorite over Tennessee. I like the Buckeyes and the Panthers to move on and meet for that coveted trip to Indianapolis. It'll be then that David Lighty locks down Farokhmanesh and helps the Buckeyes move on.

The Kids Are Alright

Kentucky sure isn't playing like the youngest and most inexperienced #1 seed in the field. The Wildcats gashed E Tennessee State and Wake Forest in reaching the round of 16. They have

an extremely interesting game with Cornell coming up on Thursday in Syracuse. Big Red beat a Temple team and a Wisconsin team that each play a similar style to Cornell. Cornell has size, skill and athleticism not typically seen in an Ivy League school and if they can force Kentucky into a slowed down, half court game the Wildcats could get their first big test of the tournament.

Kentucky doesn't shoot the ball well from behind the arc but they will run Cornell to death if given the opportunity. If Cornell can dictate tempo you will know the names of Jeff Foote, Ryan Wittman, Louis Dale and Chris Wroblewski after Thursday night.

What do Cornell and the University of Washington have in common? Well, aside from being double digit seeds that are moving on to the Sweet 16 they're both experienced, upper classmen dominated teams that have been together through thick and thin. Yes, Washington has sophomore guard Isaiah Thomas whose second in scoring for the Huskies. But with Quincy Pondexter, Venoy Overton and Matt Bryan-Amaning the Huskies have guys who have been through the grind and are focused on the task at hand.

They get Bob Huggins WVU squad Thursday night in the game preceding UK-Cornell. If Huggins's teams have shown anything over the years it's that they're talent is often outdone by their penchant to implode. Now add in the fact that WVU starting PG Truck Bryant is down for the count after suffering a fractured foot at practice Tuesday and you've got not just a straw on the camel's back but potentially an anvil. I liked Washington before I heard about Bryant.

Kentucky is a 9-point favorite over Cornell while WVU is a 5-point favorite over Washington. Only one of the top two seeds is escaping this round in my mind. I like Kentucky to get past Cornell and Washington to get past the Mountaineers with UK getting past the Huskies to reach Indianapolis.

Orange is Crushing

So much for the effect of losing Arinze Onuaku thus far for Syracuse. The Orange look really strong heading to Salt Lake City. Whether or not Onuaku returns for this weekend's set of games you have to like Syracuse's chances against Butler simply because of the talent discrepancy and the intensity of their defensive effort. The match up zone can wreak havoc on many teams but when you're employing it with the athletes at the disposal of Jim Boeheim it's

even more deadly.

Butler is a good basketball team. In fact, they're a perennially strong program regardless of their conference. I just like Wes Johnson, Andy Rautins and Scoop Jardine over Gordon Hayward and Shelvin Mack. Maybe I don't like them by the seven points that Syracuse is favored, but they get out of that game with a win.

When Syracuse does advance they'll likely meet Kansas State in the Elite 8. I love Xavier and they, like Butler, make me laugh at the 'Mid Major' tag they get stuck with at this time every year. But Jacob Pullen is apparently this season's shining tourney star and he and Denis Clemente give KSU what might be the best guard play we've seen in March thus far. Kelly Curtis and Jamar Samuels provide the low post scoring and size to combine with that guard play and in the end I think it's too much for Jordan Crawford, Jason Love and Terrell Holloway to overcome.

Kansas State gets past Xavier but that joy ends when Syracuse takes them out in the round of eight.

Duke & Gaels on Collision Course?

You either love them or hate them. They are a perennial national title contender, run a clean program and graduate a large portion of their players to either the NBA or the corporate world. But the problem many people have with Duke is their fans will wear you out telling you about all of the above.

Personally I'm not a fan of their floor-slapping heritage and their holier-than-thou attitude but I will give Duke this; they've showed up this tournament season in a big way.

Coming off a couple impressive and lopsided wins Duke heads to Houston with Kyle Singler, Nolan Smith and Jon Scheyer leading the way. Add in senior, 7'1" center Brian Zoubek, who was perfect from the floor this past Sunday for 13 points, and you have all the necessary guard play and inside-out production you need to advance in the tournament.

Duke will be near double-digit favorites against Purdue in the round of 16 and it's easy to see why. Purdue is playing mostly on guts and guile and piece-mealing their attack in the absence of Robby Hummel.

Purdue used eight guards in their wins against Siena and Texas A&M with senior guard Chris Kramer hitting the game winning lay up in OT against A&M on Sunday. Center JaJuan Johnson gave the Boilermakers 11 points against the Aggies but he's going to giving away about four inches and 65 pounds to Zubek.

Purdue has overcome a lot to get this far but what E'Twuan Moore and Kramer have left to give is debatable. If Duke gets out to an early lead it's going to be difficult for Purdue to scrap back into the game. If that spread stays below double digits I'm afraid I'd have to put a few dollars on the Blue Devils. In any event, I expect them to advance to the Elite Eight where the winner of Baylor and St. Mary's await.

Baylor's LaceDarius Dunn, Josh Lomers and Ekpe Udoh have spearheaded a couple of closer than expected Baylor wins against Sam Houston State and Old Dominion. Saint Mary's has parlayed senior center Omar Samhan and junior guard Mickey McConnell into wins over Richmond and Big East fraud Villanova. Samhan is averaging over 30 points per game in the tourney thus far and he could conceivable go off again and take St. Mary's another round.

Samhan is a legit 6'11" post presence and he's going to give Baylor all they can handle. For my money (and Baylor is giving St. Mary's four points according to the odds makers) I'll stick with the tournament-tested 'inside/outside' theory and give St. Mary's a close win. If Baylor can frustrate the mercurial Samhan or get him in early foul trouble though, well, that swings the pendulum in a big way.

Again, when it's all said and done in the south, and regardless of who faces off against the Blue Devils, I expect Duke to rise again and reach the Final Four.

Minutiae

- Samhan is the tournament MVP at this point. 29 points against Richmond and 32 against Villanova make it so. Pullen might be next in line followed by Farokhmanesh whose hit two memorable three pointers to end the seasons of UNLV and Kansas.
- All hail the Big least. Top four seeds Villanova, Pitt and Georgetown couldn't get out of the second round and the Hoyas actually were routed by the MAC's Ohio University in the first round. I'm sure we'll hear more about how the difficult conference schedule wears down the Big East entrants but the excuses are wearing thin.
- I'd like to appeal to the committee to ban Wake Forest from the tournament for life. Maybe I'm being too hard on the Demon Deacons given they did win an opening round game (against Texas in OT) for the first time since…well…a long time last Friday, but their display against Kentucky Saturday night was disgraceful and their recent tournament history is deplorable.

- While I'm appealing to the NCAA I'd like to take the time to ask if Gus Johnson can do the play-by-play of every game. I understand the logistics might be difficult with such a request but I get goose bumps when Johnson announces the Tuesday night CBS programming lineup.

- Dear Kansas Fans, please recycle the paper those brackets were printed on. You can also feel free to shred them, box them up and have them ready to ship to Lexington, Durham or Syracuse for the ticker portion of the parade. Waste not, want not.

There are plenty of intriguing match ups starting Thursday night. Enjoy.