

Friday, March 16

2-Star Best Bet

*****Creighton (+2) over Alabama***

Creighton hasn't been covering the spread lately but the Bluejays have been winning games (7 in a row) and are 28-5 on the season, including a 3-1 record against top 50 rated teams (win at San Diego State, home win against Long Beach, and 1-1 against Wichita State). Alabama, meanwhile, hasn't beaten a top-50 rated team since mid-November and are 0-6 straight up in those games since December. The Tide are very good defensively, but they haven't been as good without suspended big man Tony Mitchell, who was averaging 13.1 points, 7.0 rebounds, 1.0 steals, and 1.4 blocks per game. Leading scorer JaMychal Green also missed 5 games due to suspension (and two others), but he was reinstated 5 games ago. Bama's level of play in 7 games without Green is about the same as their overall rating but the Crimson Tide are 2 points worse in 10 games without Mitchell and 1 ½ points worse than their overall rating in 5 games without Mitchell but with Green back. Alabama is overrated and they certainly shouldn't be favored in this game against a good Creighton team that has played pretty well against other good teams. Creighton's offense is about 1 point worse against good defensive teams, but I still favor the Bluejays by 1 ½ points (and 134 ½ total points) even after making that adjustment. In addition to the line value Creighton applies to a solid 62-29-2 ATS round 1 situation while Alabama applies to a negative 13-32 ATS situation. Those angles actually overlap pretty often and the record is 15-2 ATS when they do. I'll take Creighton in a 2-Star Best Bet at -1 or better

- **3-Star Best Bet**

******Georgetown (-3 ½) over Belmont***

No #3 seed has ever been favored by so few points as Georgetown is favored against Belmont (5 ½ points was the previous low line) and #3 seeds are 9-4-1 ATS in round 1 when favored by 8 points or fewer, including 7-0 ATS after losing as a favorite in their most recent game (which Georgetown did in losing to Cincinnati). Belmont is a popular pick for a first round upset in part because they lost by just 1 point at Duke early in the season, but the Bruins also lost by 16 at Memphis in their only other game against an NCAA tournament caliber team and the average of those two game ratings would result in a prediction of Georgetown by 4 ½ points. The average ratings differential between these two teams is actually 3 ½ points if you exclude the two games that Belmont was missing a key starter, which is why the line is 3 ½ points, but my ratings use a matrix of one team's game ratings against the others, which dampens the affect of outliers. Georgetown's median game rating was 7.4 points higher than Belmont's median game rating and the median cell in the matrix of the Hoyas' game ratings against the Bruins' game ratings would favor Georgetown by 5.1 points (with a total of 138 ½ points). This game boils down to Belmont's guard oriented, 3-point shooting offense (23 attempts per game at 37.8%) against Georgetown's elite perimeter defense (allowed just 27.0% 3-point shooting and an overall defensive efficiency that ranks 7th in the nation). Belmont played 8 games this season against teams that allowed less than 32% 3-point shooting and those were also the highest overall rated teams that the Bruins faced this season. In those 8 games against Duke, Memphis, Middle Tennessee State (twice), Marshall (twice), and Mercer (twice) Belmont made just 33.0% of their 3-point shots and the Bruins average game rating was 2.2 points worse than their season average game rating (and that includes their high game rating in the 1 point loss at Duke). Those opponents combined to allow 31.4% 3-point shooting for the season and Georgetown allows just 27.0%, so I don't expect Belmont to find many open looks from beyond the 3-point arc in this game. Not only do my ratings make the line on this game 5 points but Georgetown applies to a very good 34-5-1 ATS subset of an 82-29-4 ATS round 1 situation. If Belmont makes considerably more than the 31% on 3-pointers that I expect them to make then they do

have a shot at an upset, but all indications are that the Bruins will struggle offensively against the Hoyas' great defense. I'll take Georgetown in a 3-Star Best Bet at -4 points or less and for 2-Stars up to -5 points.

2-Star Best Bet

****San Diego State (+2 ½) over NC State**

NC State certainly looked good in the ACC Tournament, covering the spread in all 3 games and nearly knocking off North Carolina in the semifinals, but the Wolfpack also lost 4 straight right before winning 4 of 5 and late season spread winning streaks generally don't lead to point spread success in the first round of the NCAA tournament (teams that covered 4 or more in a row are just 17-31-2 ATS in round 1 if facing a team coming off a straight up and ATS loss, as San Diego State is). San Diego State is certainly not a dominating team and their average game rating with all key personnel is 0.5 points worse than NC State's average game rating with all their starters. However, San Diego State had a tendency to letdown against bad teams, which dragged down their average rating, and the Aztecs played well against other good teams. NC State was just the opposite. San Diego State played 15 games against good teams (12 against legit NCAA tournament teams plus a game at Arizona and two games against Wyoming) and the Aztecs were 9-6 straight up in those games with an average game rating that was 1.9 points higher than their overall average rating. NC State, meanwhile, was just 6-10 straight up against other good teams with a slightly lower average rating in those games. To make the comparison fair I will exclude games against elite teams Syracuse, Indiana, Duke and North Carolina and I'll exclude San Diego State's game against Baylor. In 14 games against good, but not elite teams the Aztecs were 9-5 straight up while NC State was a more modest 6-4 against such teams with 5 of the wins being very close games (by 5 points or less). San Diego State's average game rating against that level of opponent was 0.6 points higher than NC State's average game rating against good but not great teams and my overall ratings favor the Aztecs by 1 point (with a total of 138 points). San Diego State also applies to a 28-4-2 ATS subset of a 77-31-4 ATS round 1 situation while NC State applies to a negative 21-52-1 ATS situation. It's odd to have a #6 seed as an underdog against a #11 seed but the NCAA Tournament committee has been pretty good in these situations, as teams seeded #6 or better are 10-4 straight up and 10-4 ATS in round 1 as a dog, pick or 1 point favorite. That's because the Tournament committee concentrates on teams that win games rather than teams that lose competitively and the Aztecs are certainly better at winning games. I'll take San Diego State in a 2-Star Best Bet at -1 or better.

- **3-Star Best Bet**

*****Kansas (-14) over Detroit**

Detroit is a veteran team that put things together to win the Horizon League tournament and Ray McCallum Jr. and Eli Holman are good mid-major players but Holman will be outmatched by Jayhawks All-American big man Thomas Robinson and the Kansas guards don't let too many opponents dribble past them for layups. This is a bad match up for the Detroit, as Kansas ranks 2nd in the nation in 2-point percentage allowed (40.0%) and Detroit is among the worst 3-point shooting teams in the nation (29.6% in Division 1 games) and won't be able to take advantage of a Kansas defense that forces teams to shoot from the perimeter (the Jayhawks allow a mediocre 34.7% 3-point shooting). Meanwhile, the Kansas offense, which ranks 8th in compensated offensive efficiency, should have no trouble scoring points against a Detroit defense that is worse than an average Division 1 team, which is pretty bad for this level of play. Kansas will have trouble late in the tournament when they run into a team that can make 3-pointers but Detroit is certainly not that team and my ratings favor Kansas by 16 points in this game (with a total of 146 points) using Detroit's games with Holman (he missed the first 10 games of the season). The Jayhawks also apply to a 32-5 ATS subset of an 82-29-4 ATS first

round situation and I'll take Kansas in a 3-Star Best Bet at -15 points or less and for 2-Stars up to -16 points.