Bold predictions: This is bad news for the ACC and SEC
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Fraud.

Goofball.

Joke.

"Expert."

I've heard it all in the years I've written my annual bold predictions. These critiques often follow calls for my resignation and subsequent retirement from sports journalism.

North Carolina fans still point to the infamous "UNC won't last the first weekend" prediction in 2016. Well, the Tar Heels reached the national title game that year.

But ... I'm still here!

I'm not deterred. And I won't waste time explaining the intent of a piece called bold predictions. Let's just get to it.

Adjust your brackets accordingly. Here are this season's bold predictions for the NCAA tournament:

Duke's Grayson Allen (3) reacts during the second half of an NCAA college basketball game against St. John's at Madison Square Garden in New York, Saturday, Feb. 3, 2018. St. John's defeated No. 4 Duke 81-77. Andres Kudacki/AP Photo

The entire ACC will watch the Final Four from home

No league in America matched the ACC's nine-bid haul on Selection Sunday. But the paths for the league's top contenders -- North Carolina, Virginia and Duke -- to reach the Final Four come with complications. Virginia's path
to San Antonio will probably demand a win over Arizona or Kentucky -- a pair of squads with unique frontcourts and big wings capable of playing the inside-outside attack needed to beat Tony Bennett's team -- in the Sweet 16. Tennessee or Cincinnati would probably await the Cavaliers in the Elite Eight if they pass those tests. This is a loaded region for the No. 1 overall seed. Michigan State, Rhode Island, Oklahoma, Kansas and Auburn could all block Duke, a team that lost two games to a North Carolina squad that shot below 34 percent from the 3-point line, from reaching the last stage of the NCAA tournament.

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North Carolina entered the ACC tournament title game against Virginia with a chance to contend for a top seed. But one of the Tar Heels' most blatant weaknesses in league play was their porous perimeter defense and mediocre shooting from the 3-point line. The West Region features potent shooters from Xavier, Missouri, Gonzaga, Houston and Michigan. No other squads in the league boast the tools necessary to reach the Final Four. So grab a couch, ACC. After winning two of the past three national titles, you'll watch the action in San Antonio from home this year.

Yes, Arizona to the Final Four

Significant elements of this Arizona team's production point to a first-round loss to Buffalo (58.8 percent mark inside the arc in conference play) more than a deep run. Teams in the 70s on KenPom.com's adjusted defensive efficiency rankings don't reach the Final Four. Defensive problems are the greatest indicators of a team's ability, or lack thereof, to win a title.

But no opponent has registered more than 1.00 point per possession against the Wildcats during their current five-game win streak. They're capable of swarming teams.

If they can play solid defense in the NCAA tournament, Deandre Ayton will handle the rest. The 7-foot-1, 260-pound prospect is averaging 20.3 PPG, 11.5 RPG and 1.9 BPG. He has made 82 percent of his shots at the rim this season, per hoop-math.com. Against man-to-man defenses, he has made 58.9 percent of his shots, placing him in the 97th percentile, per Synergy Sports.

I think Virginia is playing the best defense we've seen in years. I think Kentucky is hot and dangerous right now. I think Tennessee and Cincinnati are both impressive contenders Arizona might have to face to escape the South Region.
But nothing -- absolutely nothing -- seems too difficult for Ayton to overcome with the support of an Arizona team that's arguably the most perplexing matchup in the field.

That's why I believe Sean Miller's run won't end until he captures his first trip to the Final Four.

Davidson KO's Kentucky in the first round

If Kentucky were playing any other 12-seed in the opening round, I would pick the Wildcats to win by 20. Right now, Kentucky is capable of dominating any team that allows John Calipari's squad to dictate the flow of the game.

They're not a great 3-point-shooting team, but they ruin you with their size, explosiveness and skill. They're relentless now.

But Florida disrupted everything Kentucky attempted to do when the Gators limited their turnovers and made 41 percent of their 3-point attempts in a win on March 3, the Wildcats' second loss of the year to the Gators.

Davidson has averaged 10 made 3-pointers in its past four games, a 4-0 stretch that includes two wins over Rhode Island and another over St. Bonaventure, a pair of NCAA tournament teams. Peyton Aldridge leads a group of seven players -- from 6-foot-2 to 6-foot-11 -- who've made at least 39 percent of their 3-pointers this season.

Yeah, Davidson's best chance to beat Kentucky involves turning the game into a shootout and shredding this talented group from beyond the arc.

They're capable of doing just that.

Gonzaga loses in the national title game ... again

Gonzaga lost Zach Collins, a first-round pick in last summer's NBA draft, and veteran big man Przemek Karnowski. But the Bulldogs are more versatile now with the development of Rui Hachimura, Johnathan Williams, Josh Perkins and Zach Norvell. They're ranked within the top 20 in both offensive and defensive efficiency. This balanced roster can handle anything in the West Region, including Xavier, Ohio State, North Carolina and Michigan.

They're equipped to reach the national championship game for the second consecutive season. Sorry, Bulldogs. That's where you'll lose to ...

Michigan State will end the Big Ten's drought and win its first national title since 2000

The field is stacked in every region, but the Midwest seems surmountable for a team like Michigan State. Kansas, the top seed in the region, might not have a healthy Udoka Azubuike. Even if the Jayhawks do have their big man available and ready, Michigan State has the highest ceiling in the region for any team not named Duke. But the Blue Devils didn't play this version of the Spartans at the Champions Classic in November.

Jaren Jackson Jr., a 6-foot-11 forward who has made 40 percent of his 3-pointers this season and who recently won Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year honors, will become a household name this week. Miles Bridges has strengthened his already lofty draft stock in his sophomore season.

The Spartans have depth. They have a savvy guard named Cassius Winston. They have Tom Izzo. And they've lost one game since Jan. 13.
The Big Ten's 18-year national title drought -- Michigan State last won it in 2000 -- will come to an end this season in San Antonio, as Michigan State stands atop the dais in San Antonio.

Virginia will hold its first two opponents to under 80 points combined

North Carolina's top-five offense failed to reach 50 points in a Jan. 6 loss to Virginia. It's not crazy to predict UMBC and the Creighton-Kansas State winner won't collect 80 points combined against the Cavaliers, the greatest defensive collective of the advanced stats era, in the opening weekend.

New Mexico State will reach the Sweet 16

The Aggies boast wins over Davidson and Miami. They're ranked among the top 20 teams in adjusted defensive efficiency and top 10 in 3-point defense. With Zach Lofton (19.8 PPG), they'll attack Clemson and Auburn at the rim. Clemson (Donte Grantham), NMSU's opening-round opponent, and Auburn (Anfernee McLemore), a probable second-round opponent, are each missing one of their biggest pieces in the paint. They haven't been the same teams without those contributors. New Mexico State will expose those vulnerabilities and advance to the second weekend.

The SEC won't send a team to the second weekend of the tournament

Let's walk through this: Davidson over Kentucky (see above). New Mexico State over Auburn in the second round (see above). The Loyola-Chicago team (40 percent from the 3-point line) that Tennessee will see in the second round has played above the expectations attached to its seed and will shock the world with a win over the Vols. Ed Cooley's Providence team just defeated Villanova, Xavier, Creighton and Marquette within the past month and can handle an oft-undisciplined Texas A&M squad in the first round. Alabama got hot in the SEC tournament, but Justin Robinson and Virginia Tech will hound Collin Sexton and win. Florida can hit the 3-ball, but scoring inside has been the challenge with this undersized squad. The Gators could go cold against the St. Bonaventure-UCLA winner in the First Four. In the second round, Michael Porter Jr. and Missouri will fall to a Xavier team that's one of the nation's most talented and scrappiest squads. And Purdue will dominate Arkansas, a team that has lost multiple games by double digits this season, in the second round with its size in the post and its ability to hit 3-pointers.

The double-digit seed will win every 6-11 matchup in the first round

Mark it down. Loyola-Chicago will contest shots around the rim and play an efficient game to beat Miami in the opening round. Remember, this is a Loyola-Chicago team that went to Florida and won, a squad with a defense ranked within the top 30 on KenPom.com. San Diego State just held a top-10 offense at Nevada under 75 points twice in a six-day stretch. Brian Dutcher's squad ain't afraid of Houston. TCU hasn't won a game since Feb. 27. And its staying power will demand a win over Syracuse's maddening defense or an Arizona State squad that put up 102 points in a win over Xavier. I'll pick the double-digit seed here. Same with an unreliable Florida team against St. Bonaventure or UCLA. The inconsistency of Florida, a team with losses to Vanderbilt and South Carolina and its struggles to diversify its offense in tough times, spells trouble.

Trae Young will drop 40 points and 10 assists on Duke in a second-round loss

Oklahoma's collapse down the stretch nearly cost the Sooners a trip to the NCAA tournament. Many national pundits have criticized the selection committee for assigning this reeling Oklahoma squad a 10-seed.

But the Sooners have dismissed more imposing teams (Kansas, Wichita State, Texas Tech) than the Rhode Island squad they'll face on a neutral court this week. They'll push the pace and expose Rhode Island's limited playmaking
ability. And that win will propel Oklahoma into a second-round matchup against Duke -- just a coincidence, since the committee ignores TV-friendly pairings and only focuses on performance.

Young is a competitor. He knows he's lost the mojo he enjoyed earlier this season. But this is Young's last collegiate stretch and another chance to finish his brief career with a redemptive finale. Young will author a memorable 40-point, 10-assist effort in a loss to Duke that will eliminate Oklahoma but confirm Young's gifts and talents, a rare skill set that carried an 11-win team a season ago to the NCAA tournament.