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It's March: Madness time in Las Vegas

Alan Zaremba recently wrote a book about March Madness. *Photo by Lauren McFalls*

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March Madness? Casino gambling? Each has a passionate following but when they are combined, the experience is an incredible whirlwind of emotion. Alan Zaremba, associate professor in **communication studies**, has captured this energy in his latest book, "The Madness of March: Bonding and Betting with the Boys in Las Vegas." The story takes readers through the memorable sights and sounds of the first weekend of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball tournament in 2007, chronicling why there's no greater time for sports hysteria in Vegas.

What prompted you to write your book?

In 2001, my brother contacted me about an article he'd read that listed 100 things to do before you die. One of those things was to go to Las Vegas during the first week of the NCAA tournament. Shortly thereafter, I read a short piece in Sports Illustrated with the same message. We went, and it was as advertised. It was good fun, and we met some very quirky folks. We went again in 2003 and had a similar experience, and I began to think that there was a book in there. I thought that the people I met represented a distinctive subculture that would be fun to describe, enjoyable to read about, and I thought the book might be valuable for those who examine culture and subcultures.

Who are the people who flock to Las Vegas for the tournament?

For the most part they are just fans, certainly not inveterate gamblers. I have a cousin who heard about what I was doing and said, "So, you're studying degenerates." That's not my feeling at all. The people I met—while quirky—were on a vacation doing something they love doing. … They are college basketball fans out for a good time, which to them is watching 48 basketball games in four days.

What moment or character exemplifies the experience of being in Vegas for the tournament? Does one in particular come to mind?

Several come to mind. There was one fellow who was waiting in line to bet who kept muttering, "The only luck I have is bad luck," as if it was a mantra. Yet despite that, he was still in a queue that continually contributes to the collective wealth of the state of Nevada. Another man told me that if I wanted a winner I should just listen to what he is going to do, and bet the other way. Probably the classic image I have, though, is of a guy in a restroom who apparently didn't want to waste a minute because he was multitasking, staring at a betting sheet the whole time.

Is there more camaraderie or rivalry between bettors?

Much more camaraderie. You're betting against the house. And even they are happy when you win. This way you will come back.

Did you get swept up in the excitement yourself?

Yes. It's tough not to be. If you don't bet foolishly — and I wouldn't and didn't — it's a fun ride.

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