

# Mapping the Madness

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September 13,  
2017

Every March in the United States, fans of college basketball get a mega dose of the game as hundreds of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) teams make their way to the Final Four tournament in hopes of becoming national champions. The NCAA spends USD15 million annually on transportation for the Division I men's and women's basketball tournament alone, and airline and charter company representatives are vying for a slice of that pie.

Coaches, administrators, cheerleaders, band members and, most importantly, the players who have worked all year for the chance to compete on this national stage trek hundreds of thousands of miles on their road to the Final Four, or more fondly known by sports enthusiasts as "March Madness."

The man at the center of this logistical madness is YPO member **David LeCompte**, CEO of Shorts Travel Management and STM Charters and, who, by his own admittance, stumbled into the NCAA tournament.

"Dumb luck. That's how it all began," says LeCompte. "In 2003, I wasn't really familiar with March Madness and we literally stumbled into this bid through a sales person on our team. I didn't realize at the time how complicated it was."

So what to do? LeCompte and his team rolled up their sleeves, visited and talked to a lot of collegiate athletic directors to get the lay of the land and got to work.

## Let the games begin

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From the moment the 68 men's teams are selected, on a Sunday in early March, LeCompte's staff hunkers down in a room of a small travel agency in Waterloo, Iowa, USA, to begin scheduling flights for teams who begin leaving the next day for their first game. Using customized software, color-coded dry-erase boards and a large dose of patience, the travel professionals chart each team's every move. The biggest nightmare? "Weather, weather, weather," says LeCompte. "Strong storms shut down the northeast sector of the U.S. for a couple of days this year and that presented huge complications."

Short's logistics team maximizes use of the aircraft available, which is quite limited during the busiest travel season of the year. Also, any flight delays affect all the flights following them. To complicate matters, teams often show up late for scheduled departures or show up with more equipment than they stated on their manifests. And then there are aircraft

mechanical issues. "They travel with a lot of equipment and oversized bags," says LeCompte. "The Division I men's and women's team also has a full band which means drum sets, tubas, you name it."

During tournament travel, added logistical nightmares come from not being able to schedule teams until a few days before their game. If a team wins, they need to stay and play additional games and if they lose, it's back home. "Multiple return scenarios need to be worked out for each situation," says LeCompte.

Then there's the airlines, whose goal is to fly as many hours in one day as possible; however, that doesn't happen with collegiate charters. "Most teams want to leave mid- to late-afternoon (after practice and/or classes) and want to return post game," LeCompte explains. "Most of those returns are late-night returns and don't allow for a lot of flexibility as students need to be home for class the next morning. Additionally, most teams have a very strict routine they follow, and any deviation from that routine causes a lot of stress on everyone."

But somehow, LeCompte's team creates magic from the madness. In 2017, the men's teams participating in the tournament collectively traveled 270,572 kilometers (168,126 miles) roundtrip from their respective college campus to the site of the game. For the women's teams, the total kilometers roundtrip was 213,415 (132,610 miles). A total of 330 charter flights were booked during March Madness. Sixty-seven men's teams and 42 women's teams flew.

## **The biz of transporting athletes**

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While the contract with the NCAA undoubtedly assisted LeCompte's entry into the market, he points to his company's honesty, integrity, and communication for propelling his business to the top of the athletic charter business in the U.S. today. The travel company is fully integrated with the NCAA. Nearly 500,000 college athletes make up the 19,500 teams that send more than 54,000 participants to compete each year in the NCAA's 90 championships in 24 sports across three divisions. "The NCAA is more than just basketball," he explains. "Some of the lesser-known sports that the NCAA holds championships for include women's bowling, skiing, fencing, rifle, water polo, beach volleyball, golf, tennis, indoor and outdoor track, cross country, women's rowing, and field hockey."

LeCompte is very active in product innovation with a goal to develop simple products with clever design that can provide control for Short's customers. With this philosophy as well as the desire for innovation, Short's has become one of the most innovative travel management companies in North America with such products as [FindIt](#), [CouldYou](#), [STO](#) (Short's Travel Online) and many other products whose simplicity provides an enhanced travel experience.

After 2017 March Madness wrapped up, LeCompte and his team had a brief rest before they moved on to planning the 2018 tournament. “As soon as one championship season is over, we’re already beginning planning logistics for the next year. We are constantly updating our online systems and processes for better efficiency and cost savings. We also begin working with charter carriers to reserve our dedicated fleet of aircraft for the next year.” And the madness continues.

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