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Grading November-December college hoops tournaments

By Matt Norlander | College Basketball Writer

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As usual, the Maui Invitational's field is rock-solid and a November highlight. (USATSI)

Nearly all of the major November and December multiteam college basketball events have revealed their brackets the past couple of days. In response to that, we're going to school, and grading each tourney according to who's playing where and how much you should get hyped for the event.

In the parlance of the sport, let's tip it off (in chronological order, using the first day of each tourney).

Champions Classic

Held at Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis on Nov. 18. It's the fourth installment of this four-team doubleheader that always includes the same clubs. This year's matchups are **Michigan State-Duke** and **Kentucky-Kansas**.

Grade: A. Four bluebloods. Always fun, a big TV event and with good reason. No more needs to be written. Always an A.

2K Classic



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Held at Madison Square Garden on Nov. 20 and 21, all four of its teams could well be in the 2015 [NCAA Tournament](#). You've got **Texas vs. Iowa** and **Syracuse vs. California**.

Grade: B-plus. Syracuse: who knows. Just haven't an idea as to how good/not good Boeheim's team will be, but it'll be fun to see them play a rare/random non-league foe like Cal. Cuonzo Martin is now on the sidelines for the Golden Bears. Will he have more success in the regular season next year than he did at Tennessee? Texas has high hopes. It has the talent to reach the second weekend of the NCAAs. Iowa's got Aaron White as the star this year, though Jarrod Uthoff should be a factor as well. Fun doubleheader here. I hope to be in attendance.

Puerto Rico Tip-Off

Held in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on Nov. 20, 21 and 23. The bracket will begin with **Texas A&M playing Dayton**, then **Charleston going up against UConn**. The bottom half pits **New Mexico against Boston College** as well as **George Mason against West Virginia**. Those games all played on Nov. 20.



With last year's Elite Eight darling Dayton, the Puerto Rico Tip-Off is bound to be in the top 5. (USATSI)

Grade: B. Puerto Rico has become reliable year in and year out. It's never going to be the best field, but it's almost always going to be among the five best tournaments, it seems. You've got the defending champs, last year's Elite Eight darlings, always-entertaining New Mexico and Bob Huggins! And with [Doug Wojcik just getting fired](#), who knows who will be coaching Charleston by then.

Gildan Charleston Classic

Held at TD Arena in Charleston, South Carolina. The eight-team tourney will go from Nov. 20, 21 and 23. The Nov. 21 quadruple header starts with **Akron-USC**, then **Drexel-Miami (FL)**, then **Penn State-Charlotte**, and finishes with **Cornell-South Carolina**.

Grade: C. Charleston's had better fields in the past five years, that's for sure. This is the "show me" bracket, of all the November tourneys we see. USC will try to become established in its second year under Andy Enfield. Will the Hurricanes be better? Penn State, Charlotte and South Carolina are all facing years where fans are expecting an uptick but nothing gargantuan.

Hall of Fame Tip-Off

Held at the Mohegan Sun Arena in Uncasville, Conn., on Nov. 22 and 23. The matchups are: **UMass-Notre Dame**, **Providence-Florida State**, **Manhattan-Binghamton**, **Navy-Northeastern**.

Grade: B. This event began a few years back. Notre Dame, UMass, Providence and Florida State will play in the semis against each other, regardless of outcomes in the quarterfinals.

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It's held in a casino, and there's almost always at least one upset. Which is good, since the bigger schools are guaranteed to play each other anyway.

Legends Classic

Held at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, N.Y. on Nov. 24 and 25. The semifinals for this exempt tournament pit **Villanova against VCU** and **Oregon against Michigan**. There is also a subregional held at Savage Arena in Toledo, Ohio, that will feature **Bucknell, Toledo, Detroit** and **Maryland-Eastern Shore**.

Grade: B. Downgraded just a tad since Oregon's most likely going to take a big dip this season following the sour offseason that's taken place in Eugene. (The Ducks may well end up having nine guys on scholarship.) Michigan will have Caris LeVert, who's draft stock has somewhat gotten out of hand, but he is a fun player to watch. Expect the Wolverines to be good again. VCU vs. Villanova could be loads of fun. Can we let that game get into the 80s? Don't let this one get lost in the mix. It will be worth the watch, I'd think.

Hall of Fame Classic

Held at the Sprint Center in Kansas City, Mo., on Nov. 24 and 25. We get **Arizona State-Maryland** and **Alabama-Iowa State**.

Grade: C-plus. Another HOF event? Yep! You get four major-conference teams here, but Arizona State lost its two best players (Jahii Carson and Jordan Bachynski); Maryland is still barely treading water under Mark Turgeon; Alabama is an afterthought; and Iowa State will be really solid. So it's not a miserable haul, but unfortunately it's a case of bad timing. Fortunately, Kansas City loves its college hoops and should support the event.

EA Sports Maui Invitational

Held at the Lahaina Civic Center in Maui, Hawaii., from Nov. 24-26. The quarterfinals begin at the top of the bracket with **Purdue vs. Kansas State** and **Missouri against Arizona**. The bottom half is **Pittsburgh-Chaminade** and **BYU-San Diego State**.

Grade: B-plus. I know the Battle 4 Atlantis has become the go-to event, but I still have a soft spot for Maui, which has been the best November event in the sport going on 20 years now. Purdue is do for a bounce-back year. K-State will have Marcus Foster, a dark horse to be a Second Team All-American by year's end. Missouri's going to be relatively bad, probably, but Arizona's a national title contender, and San Diego State might be even *better* this season. BYU will have Tyler Haws, who's always on will-he-score-30 watch. Pittsburgh is nothing if not reliable for November victories. And everyone loves those Chaminde Silverswords.

MGM Grand Main Event

Held at the MGM Grand Arena in Las Vegas on Nov. 24 and Nov. 26. **Oklahoma State-Oregon State, Auburn-Tulsa, Oral Roberts-Louisiana Lafayette** and **UW-Milwaukee vs. a TBD** opponent are the Nov. 24 games. Winners will move on and play each other on Nov. 26. There is also pre-Vegas, on-campus games for the big-conference teams involved.

Grade: C. We wrote on this a couple of weeks back, when the two Vegas MGM events were announced. The concept of the "middleweight" and "heavyweight" brackets for this "main event" are of course tied into Vegas' boxing appeal. It's not bad, but among the teams involved, how many are legitimate NCAA Tourney hopefuls? Oklahoma State could take a huge drop this year, remember. The best appeal here is Bruce Pearl and Auburn.

Battle 4 Atlantis

Held at Imperial Arena in Paradise Island, Bahamas. The top half of the bracket has **Wisconsin vs. UAB** and **Georgetown vs. Florida**. The bottom half starts with **UCLA-Oklahoma** and **UNC-Butler**. Those games will be played Wednesday, Nov. 26. The tournament runs through Nov. 28.

Grade: A. Would be an A-plus if not for the insistence on subbing "4" for "four." I could go on and on about this one, but Parrish wrote about it earlier on the site. [Go check it out.](#)



Wooden Legacy

Held at the Honda Center in Anaheim, Calif. It will be played on Nov. 27, 28 and 30.

Princeton vs. UTEP and **San Diego vs. Xavier** occupies the top half; **Long Beach State-Western Michigan** and **San Jose State-Washington** is at the bottom.

Grade: C-plus. Would love to see some nice play out of the mids involved here, but I'm hard pressed not to think Xavier can't strut to a title here. (I'm always wrong about these things, at least.) Overall, when you look at events like this, or Charleston's, you're seeing how so many of these are leading to the inevitable: just a little too watered down overall to make having more than a dozen exempt tourneys truly worth it.

Orlando Classic

Held in Disney, at the HP Field House in Orlando. This used to be called the "Old Spice Classic." The tournament will be played on Nov. 27, 28 and 30. The bracket breaks down like this: On Nov. 27, it's **Santa Clara-Tennessee, Kansas-Rhode Island, Michigan State-Rider** and **Marquette-Georgia Tech**.

Grade: B-plus. That grade based solely on the prospect of a Kansas-Michigan State final. Self-Izzo? Always will take that. Tennessee's going to be the worst team in the SEC most likely, and Marquette could be in for a rough first year under Steve Wojciechowski. Georgia Tech's been treading water under Brian Gregory -- could they make some waves here? Rhode Island will have a chance to show out, thanks in part to E.C. Matthews, who might be the best player in the A-10 next season.



The Jimmy V Classic will feature Indiana vs. L'ville and Illinois against Villanova. (USATSI)

Jimmy V Classic

Held at Madison Square Garden on Dec. 9. It's **Indiana vs. Louisville** and **Illinois vs. Villanova**.

Grade: B-plus. Indiana is going to be extremely interesting to follow. How much will the fan base tolerate this season -- and can Tom Crean get the group back to 20 or more wins? Louisville's going to have Montrzel Harrell, who's likely to be a preseason All-American pick. Villanova's the best team in the Big East for 2014-15, and Illinois has its starting lineup all coming back.

MGM Grand Showcase

Held at the MGM Grand Arena in Las Vegas on Dec. 20. Only a one-night event that pits **Oklahoma vs. Washington** (9 p.m. ET) and **Utah vs. UNLV** approximately two hours later.

Grade: B-plus. Not a bad doubleheader at all. Washington's in a make-or-break year, and they'll get an OU team that's going to be good again. Top 25-good? Possibly. Utah is probably going to be the most hyped "underrated" team heading into the season, and UNLV is always a wild card. This one gets played well after the November tourne hype dies down, so it's a nice double dip just before Christmas.

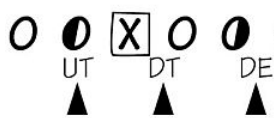
Hawaiian Airlines Diamond Head Classic

Held at the at the Stan Sheriff Center in Honolulu. The finals of this one are always held Christmas night. It starts on Dec. 22, and continues on Dec. 23. **Ohio-George Washington, DePaul-Colorado, Loyola Marymount-Wichita State** and **Nebraska-Hawaii** comprise the quarterfinals on Dec. 22.

Grade: B. George Washington, Colorado, Wichita State and Nebraska should all be [NCAA Tournament](#) teams. You get that into your field, you're a B tourney at the absolute worse. I'm surprise this event hasn't gotten totally huge, but I think it's placement just before Christmas has played a part in that.

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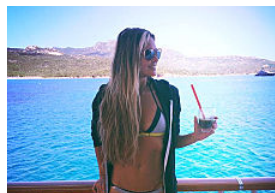
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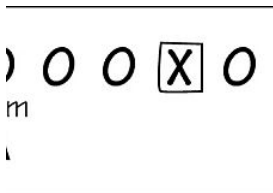
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