News
Ministry



Loyola-Chicago basketball chaplain Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt, poses with fans for a photo before the first half of a regional final NCAA college basketball tournament game on March 24, 2018, in Atlanta. (AP/David Goldman)



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Editor's note: *This story was updated at 1:15 p.m. Central time March 16 to note that Sr. Jean Dolores Schmidt received approval to go to the NCAA Tournament.*

A year after it was canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the NCAA basketball tournament is back. And one of the sport's most beloved fans will have a shot at witnessing any buzz-beaters by her favorite team in person, too.

Sr. Jean Dolores Schmidt became the focus of a media frenzy three years ago when she accompanied the Ramblers of Loyola University Chicago on their underdog run to the Final Four at the 2018 men's tournament. Schmidt, a member of the Sisters of the Charity of Blessed Virgin Mary of Dubuque, Iowa, has served as team chaplain since 1994, and her pious courtside presence quickly became one of the feel-good stories of March Madness that year.

In a March 13 interview with the Chicago Tribune, Schmidt, now 101, said she had asked Loyola Chicago administrators for their blessing to attend the tournament, which instead of bouncing around the country will be confined to the Indianapolis area to minimize potential spread of the coronavirus.

Approval came March 16, as the Tribune reported Schmidt, who has been fully vaccinated, will travel to Indianapolis in time to watch the eighth-seeded Ramblers take on No. 9 seed Georgia Tech on March 19.

COVID-19 precautions are limiting the number of fans into the Indianapolis basketball bubble, and teams are restricted to 34 people in their travel parties. All members of a party must have seven consecutive days of negative COVID-19 tests before traveling to the tournament and once there are required to take daily rapid tests.



Sr. Jean Dolores Schmidt greets Loyola University Chicago men's basketball players after a Feb. 12, 2018, game. (CNS/Chicago Catholic/Karen Callaway)

"I have not lost hope in going," she previously told the Chicago newspaper. "I want to go so badly."

Schmidt, in making her pitch to join the team, said she turned to Luke's Gospel and the parable of the persistent widow, who did not grow weary in asking a judge for a just decision. Like many women religious during the pandemic, she has been in lockdown for much of the past year and has kept up with her campus ministry work virtually. Only recently was she able to meet with two other sisters in person. Like many sports fans, she's been unable to attend Ramblers games in person.

Still, Schmidt has stayed in contact with the players and Coach Porter Moser, sending them emails after games and even offering the team her signature pregame prayers and pep talks, including during the Ramblers' run earlier in March to the Missouri Valley Conference championship.

In a column for Yahoo Sports, Dan Wetzel made the case that the NCAA should do everything in its power to make sure Schmidt is safely in attendance at Loyola's first

game in the tournament, even if NCAA President Mark Emmert has to drive her there himself.

"Simply put: Free Sister Jean," he wrote.

"As long as a woman who has devoted her lengthy life to the service of others — and cheering on a low-major college basketball team — wants to be there to watch them in person, she should be allowed to be there to watch them in person," Wetzel said.

Related: Q & A with Sr. Jean Dolores Schmidt on life returning to normal after the Final Four

Other Catholic angles abound at the 2021 men's tournament when it tips off March 18.

That begins with Gonzaga University, making its 21st consecutive tournament appearance with perhaps its best chance yet to cut down the championship net.

The Bulldogs are the No. 1 overall seed, and many basketball insiders see 2021 as their year. Should Coach Mark Few and his team capture that elusive first title, Gonzaga would be the first men's champion with a perfect record since the Indiana Hoosiers won it all in 1976.

Seven Catholic schools made the men's tournament, and three punched their March Madness tickets to the women's tournament. Two universities will compete in both tournaments.

The Catholic schools in the women's bracket, announced March 15, are Gonzaga (No. 5 seed), Marquette University (10) and Mount St. Mary's University (15). Marist College (15), which was founded by the Marist brothers but is now nonsectarian, also made the bracket. The tournament will be held in San Antonio, Texas.

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On the men's side, joining Gonzaga and Loyola Chicago in Indianapolis are Creighton University (No. 5 seed), St. Bonaventure University (9), Georgetown University (12), Villanova University (5), Iona College* (15) and Mount St. Mary's, which will try to become the No. 16 seed in the East region on March 18 against Texas Southern University.

An eighth Catholic team could yet enter the men's tournament: The Billikens of St. Louis University, who had a 33-day COVID-19 layoff in their season, are the third alternate team, meaning they're on standby through March 16 should any schools have to drop out because of a coronavirus outbreak.

The men's tournament tips off at 4 p.m. Eastern time March 18. The women's tournament will take to the court at noon Eastern on March 21.

* *An earlier version of this story omitted Iona College from the list of Catholic schools making the men's tournament. GSR extends its apologies to the Gaels and their fans.*

Related: Flurry over Sr. Jean Dolores Schmidt can open clearer, more complete look at women religious