



Graphic by Zoe Rich and Pranay Dhooper — THE BATTALION

LET THE MADNESS BEGIN

The Aggies' road to San Antonio starts with a battle against Yale

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The most wonderful time of the year is here, and no, it's not Christmas. It's March Madness. 4-seed Texas A&M men's basketball is set to face the 13-seed Yale Bulldogs in the Round of 64 of the NCAA Tournament at 6:25 p.m. on Thursday. Yale enters the matchup on a high after defeating Cornell in a thriller to take home its seventh Ivy League Tournament title under coach James Jones. Senior guard John Poulakidas recorded 25 points in the game, 23 of which came in

the second half, where he did not miss a single shot. Poulakidas' perfect performance earned him Ivy League Tournament MVP honors. Poulakidas is a serious threat from beyond the arc. Over his four seasons with the Bulldogs, he has shot 40.2% from 3-point land and 40.9% from the floor this season. The Naperville, Illinois native is averaging 19.2 points per game this season. Dominant 3-point shooters have given the Aggies issues in the past. In 2023, the 12th Man watched in anguish as Penn State's fifth-year senior G Andrew Funk knocked down eight threes in the Nittany Lions' 76-59 trouncing of the Aggies in the first round of the tournament. In 2024, Houston sophomore G Emanuel Sharp sank seven from beyond the arc in the Cougar's 100-95 overtime win in the second round of the tournament.

Even in 2025, Tennessee senior G Chaz Lanier's eight-3-pointer game and Vanderbilt junior forward Tyler Nickel's seven-3-pointer game led their respective teams to victory over the Maroon and White. In Poulakidas' last tournament appearance, he knocked down six threes as Yale upset then-4-seed Auburn in the first round. He finished the game with 28 points, two rebounds and two assists. Stopping — or at least limiting — Poulakidas will be a deciding factor for the Aggies as they face the third-oldest college in the United States. Senior G Bez Mbeng rounds out the Bulldogs' backcourt and has quite the resume of his own. He has been named a finalist for the Lefty Drissell Defensive Player of the Year award, as well as being named the Ivy League's Player and Defensive Player of the Year. Against Cornell,

Mbeng recorded 15 points, four assists and seven rebounds. While he is not as much of a deep threat as Poulakidas, Mbeng has the ability to take over games. The Aggies are entering the tournament with a very different situation than the Bulldogs, with A&M coming off a double-overtime loss to the Texas Longhorns in an SEC tournament rendition of the Lone Star Showdown. Graduate G Wade Taylor IV, whose jersey is already hanging in the rafters of Reed Arena, embodied the spirit of A&M basketball in the loss. Taylor accounted for 29 of the Aggies' 89 points, seven rebounds and three assists, with 17 of his points coming from the charity stripe. Taylor, A&M's all-time leading scorer, will be a major factor in the team's offensive success. Yale's smaller size opens the

door for junior F Pharrel Payne to have a day down low. Payne found his scoring stride later in the season even with limited minutes. He is the Aggies' third-leading scorer for the season and stands second in blocks. When Payne gets hot, defenders should be worried. Payne contributes to A&M's strong, physical brand of basketball. Between him, graduate F Henry Coleman III, graduate F Andersson Garcia and junior F Solomon Washington, expect Yale to struggle in the paint on both ends of the court. Thursday's matchup will be the Aggies' third-straight March Madness appearance under coach Buzz Williams. It will be Yale's fourth appearance in five seasons. If A&M wins, it will go on to face the winner of Michigan vs. UC San Diego.