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GET IN THE GAME!

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How to make March Madness fun for the whole family

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THE UNUSUAL fever known as “March Madness” that grips the nation every spring is approaching, and savvy military families can take advantage of this basketball mania to sneak in a smidgen of educational activities under the guise of fun.

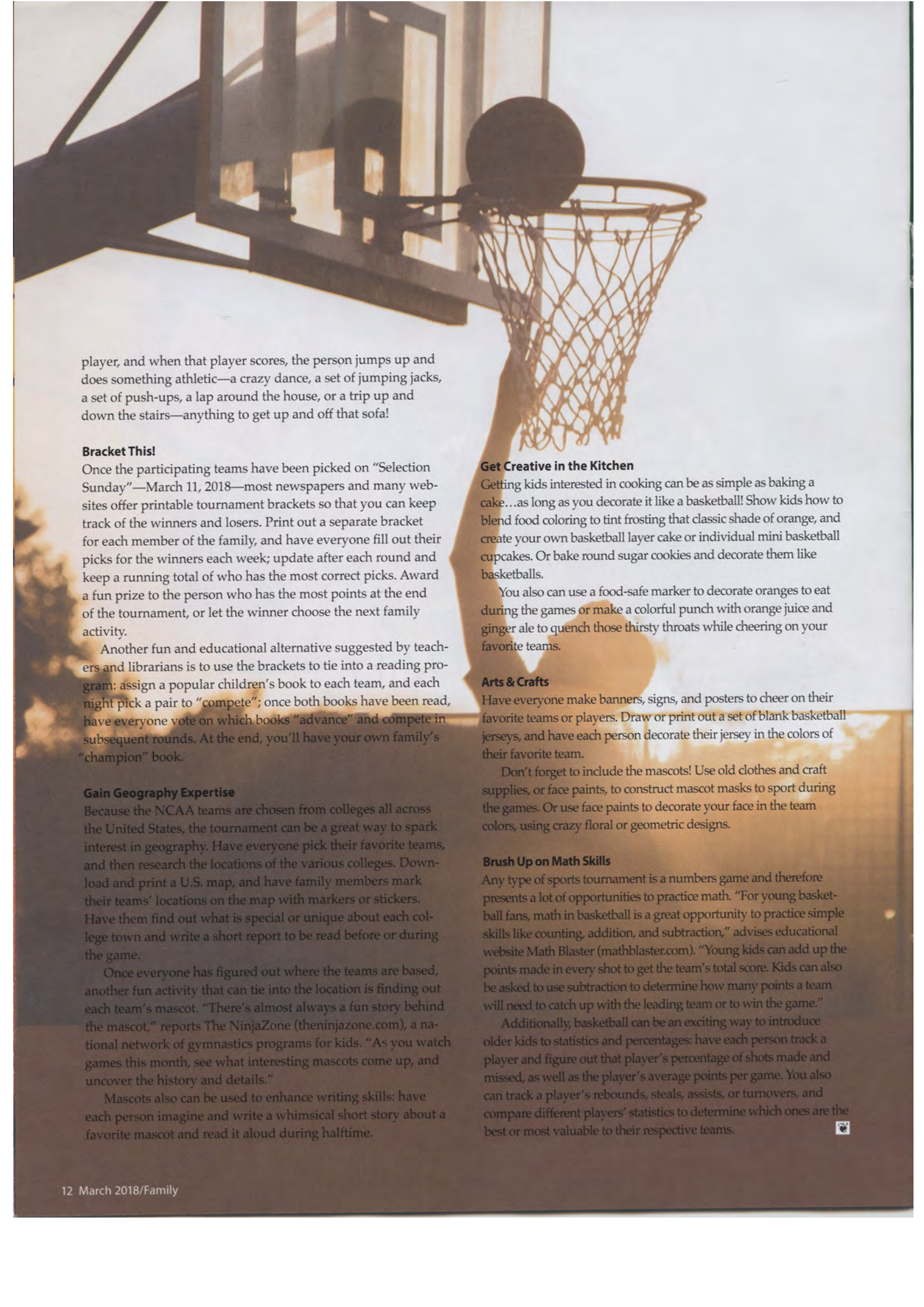
March Madness is the term coined to describe the country-wide fascination with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) men’s and women’s basketball tournaments, held from the second week of March through the first week of April. The tournament features the top 68 men’s college teams and the top 64 women’s college teams playing in a single-elimination tournament to determine the national champions of college basketball.

Once the bailiwick of only the most diehard sports fans, March Madness has morphed into a veritable obsession among enthusiasts and casual observers alike. But before you resign your entire family to spending weeks as couch potatoes glued to the television screen, check out some of these entertaining and energetic activities to get the whole family into the game.

Basketball Basics

Channel the interest in March Madness into actually teaching kids the basics of the game. Start with dribbling and passing exercises, and move on to shooting free throws, layups, and court shots. Check out informational websites for downloadable drills and games designed to promote age-appropriate learning activities: for example, educational website PE Central (pecentral.org) offers a broad array of free lesson ideas, videos, instructional cues, and games focused on basketball, all designed to make it easy to get up and get moving.

During the actual games, have each person pick their favorite



player, and when that player scores, the person jumps up and does something athletic—a crazy dance, a set of jumping jacks, a set of push-ups, a lap around the house, or a trip up and down the stairs—anything to get up and off that sofa!

Bracket This!

Once the participating teams have been picked on “Selection Sunday”—March 11, 2018—most newspapers and many websites offer printable tournament brackets so that you can keep track of the winners and losers. Print out a separate bracket for each member of the family, and have everyone fill out their picks for the winners each week; update after each round and keep a running total of who has the most correct picks. Award a fun prize to the person who has the most points at the end of the tournament, or let the winner choose the next family activity.

Another fun and educational alternative suggested by teachers and librarians is to use the brackets to tie into a reading program: assign a popular children’s book to each team, and each night pick a pair to “compete”; once both books have been read, have everyone vote on which books “advance” and compete in subsequent rounds. At the end, you’ll have your own family’s “champion” book.

Gain Geography Expertise

Because the NCAA teams are chosen from colleges all across the United States, the tournament can be a great way to spark interest in geography. Have everyone pick their favorite teams, and then research the locations of the various colleges. Download and print a U.S. map, and have family members mark their teams’ locations on the map with markers or stickers. Have them find out what is special or unique about each college town and write a short report to be read before or during the game.

Once everyone has figured out where the teams are based, another fun activity that can tie into the location is finding out each team’s mascot. “There’s almost always a fun story behind the mascot,” reports The NinjaZone (theninjazone.com), a national network of gymnastics programs for kids. “As you watch games this month, see what interesting mascots come up, and uncover the history and details.”

Mascots also can be used to enhance writing skills: have each person imagine and write a whimsical short story about a favorite mascot and read it aloud during halftime.

Get Creative in the Kitchen

Getting kids interested in cooking can be as simple as baking a cake...as long as you decorate it like a basketball! Show kids how to blend food coloring to tint frosting that classic shade of orange, and create your own basketball layer cake or individual mini basketball cupcakes. Or bake round sugar cookies and decorate them like basketballs.

You also can use a food-safe marker to decorate oranges to eat during the games or make a colorful punch with orange juice and ginger ale to quench those thirsty throats while cheering on your favorite teams.

Arts & Crafts

Have everyone make banners, signs, and posters to cheer on their favorite teams or players. Draw or print out a set of blank basketball jerseys, and have each person decorate their jersey in the colors of their favorite team.

Don’t forget to include the mascots! Use old clothes and craft supplies, or face paints, to construct mascot masks to sport during the games. Or use face paints to decorate your face in the team colors, using crazy floral or geometric designs.

Brush Up on Math Skills

Any type of sports tournament is a numbers game and therefore presents a lot of opportunities to practice math. “For young basketball fans, math in basketball is a great opportunity to practice simple skills like counting, addition, and subtraction,” advises educational website Math Blaster (mathblaster.com). “Young kids can add up the points made in every shot to get the team’s total score. Kids can also be asked to use subtraction to determine how many points a team will need to catch up with the leading team or to win the game.”

Additionally, basketball can be an exciting way to introduce older kids to statistics and percentages: have each person track a player and figure out that player’s percentage of shots made and missed, as well as the player’s average points per game. You also can track a player’s rebounds, steals, assists, or turnovers, and compare different players’ statistics to determine which ones are the best or most valuable to their respective teams.