



MEET THE CENTER HUB CONTRIBUTORS









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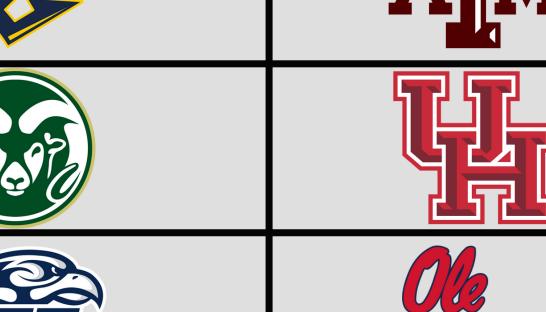












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AUBURN TIGERS



NO.1SEED
SOUTH
REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SEC	4th	Bruce Pearl	28-4 (15-3 in SEC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

This might be the most complete squad that Bruce Pearl has taken into March during his Auburn tenure. Yes, they do boast the likely Naismith Player of the Year in Johni Broome, but this team is so much more than that. Tahaad Pettiford has been a freshman revelation, and Chad Baker-Mazara, Denver Jones, and Miles Kelly are the supplemental scoring and two-way rockstars. Chaney Johnson and backup center Dylan Cardwell round out the crew and help the Tigers maintain a seven-man wrecking crew that has dominated the best conference in college basketball.

Offensively, they've been nearly unstoppable. Seven out of their eight rotation players can put the ball on the floor and score at multiple levels. Baker-Mazara, in particular, has been a spectacular Robin to Broome's Batman.

Defensively, the Tigers are extremely aggressive. Broome negates the paint, leaving the other four to fly around the perimeter and force difficult shots. Their one weak spot on that end is that they don't force a ton of turnovers, relying more on forcing tough shots and rebounding the ball well. This team is gritty; they fight hard, and the talent matches the effort. It's going to require a near-perfect performance on both ends to upstage them in March.

PLAYER TO WATCH: JOHNI BROOME

It has to be Johni Broome. Broome is capable of taking over the game on both ends of the court. His 2.6 blocks defensively, paired with his 3.7 offensive rebounds on the other end, demonstrate how dominant he's been as the best interior presence in the country. He finishes with either hand at the rim, making him a virtually unguardable post player in one-on-one situations. He's also expanded his game beyond the three-point line to the point that teams at least have to respect it when he catches the ball on the perimeter. Johni Broome is, at the very worst, the runner-up for Naismith Player of the Year. He'll be looking for more silverware as he takes the Tigers to battle this March.



PHOTO BY: AP PHOTO/JOHN BAZEMORE

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Chad Baker- Mazara, Miles Kelly	Quality Wins: Houston @ Alabama
Offense: A+	3 Pointers: B+
Defense: A	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: A-	Rebounding: B
Turnover: A+	Fouls: F
Pace: C	Ceiling: National Champs

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Whether it's Alabama State or Saint Francis that ends up getting the privilege of playing Auburn in the first round, the Tigers should be victorious. If I were Bruce Pearl, I'd prefer to see Saint Francis here. While the Red Flashes are certainly the team playing with house money, Alabama State is a bit less likely to play into Auburn's hands. The Hornets pride themselves on taking care of the ball and have a pair of guards in Amarr Knox and Micah Octave who love to hunt for steals, whereas the Red Flashes will struggle mightily if Riley Parker and Valentino Pinedo can't get going. The winner of the 16-seed play will be ready to go from the jump, so don't be nervous if Auburn gets off to a bit of a slower start than their opponent. That being said, it would be pretty miraculous for either of these teams to upset the Tigers in round 1.

Looking to the rest of the region, Auburn should like their chances. Louisville and Creighton will likely be tough outs, especially since Creighton has a center in Ryan Kalkbrenner who can match up with Broome. Once they get to the Sweet 16, things actually get a bit easier. They match up extremely well with the likes of Texas A&M or Michigan. They're just more physical than A&M, and the Wolverines could be pretty banged up if they get by UCSD and the Aggies. Iowa State just got a shock to the system after losing Keshon Gilbert, so they probably won't get that far. Michigan State is certainly capable of hanging with Auburn's backcourt, but it's going to be a tall order for anyone in that frontcourt to stop the likely Naismith Player of the Year.

ALABAMA STATE HORNETS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SWAC	273rd	Tony Madlock	19-15 (12-6 in SWAC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

The Hornets are coming out of one of the weakest conferences in all of college basketball. They managed to dodge the top seeded Southern as they Marched their way into the tournament. Despite being one of the most inefficient jumpshooting teams in the nation, Alabama State loves to shoot the 3 ball. 8 players in the Hornets' rotation have taken at least 50 3's on the season, but they shoot just 32.9% from beyond the arc as a team. Their one saving grace is that they don't turn the ball over too often, with a turnover percentage of just 13.5%, good for 5th in the nation. They go pretty deep into their bench on a regular basis, where they have 11 total players who average more than 10 minutes per game. While they may not shoot the ball particularly well, their willingness to fire at will could give a team trouble if they have a hot shooting night. Hornets' coach Tony Madlock is going to be hoping that's the case as they make their way into what will likely be a matchup vs a top seed.

PLAYER TO WATCH: AMARR KNOX

Despite being their second leading scorer, the All-SWAC First-Team guard has been the engine that ignites the Hornets' offense. He's their highest volume shooter, with over 400 attempts on the season, while also being their most efficient playmaker, averaging 2.5 assists to 1.4 turnovers. He's going to have to shoot well from the line, given that he shoots 87% from the charity stripe in their wins vs just making 67% of his attempts in their losses. If Knox is able to make his presence felt in the Hornets' first round matchup they could be in business.



PHOTO BY: COURTESY OF ALABAMA STATE ATHLETICS

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: CJ Hines, TJ Matlock	Quality Wins: Omaha Lamar
Offense: F	3 Pointers: D
Defense: F	Free Throw: F
Field Goal: F	Rebounding: C
Turnover: A	Fouls: F
Pace: C	Ceiling: Round of 64

BRACKET ANALYSIS

To nobody's surprise, the Hornets are playing in to face the #I overall seed. They've drawn the Saint Francis Red Flashes, who shocked Central Connecticut to get here. Saint Francis wasn't particularly good this season, finishing I3-17 before the conference tournament, but they were able to defend at a high level for 3 straight games to get themselves into March. The key to success for the Hornets will be if their guards can shut down Saint Francis' main weapon Riley Parker, and attack the paint. We know Alabama State loves to shoot the 3, but the Flashes are one of the worst interior defensive teams in the country, and they hold their opponents to 32% from beyond the arc. The Hornets' guard trio of Knox, TJ Madlock, and CJ Hines are going to need to push the pace and attack the paint relentlessly for the Hornets to take over the game. They have the depth to overwhelm Saint Francis, and center Jasteven Walker should be able to limit the Flashes' big man Valentino Pinedo. If the Hornets can impose their will inside, they'll be able to open things up, and maybe generate some efficient scoring from behind the arc. If they do manage to get by Saint Francis, Auburn will be the end of the road. They may be able to give the Tigers a scare early if they get hot from deep, as Auburn shakes off the rust, but the Tigers have way too much talent and Alabama state has nobody on the roster who will be able to contain Miles Kelly and Chad Baker Mazara. It's been a successful season for the Hornets, but one that likely ends with a lot of slumped shoulders as they watch Auburn triumph in the round of 64.

ST. FRANCIS RED FLASH



NO. 16 SEED SOUTH REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
NEC	311th	Rob Krimmel	16-17 (8-8 in NEC)

PLAYER TO WATCH: RILEY PARKER

Things seem to run for the Australian senior in Saint Francis. The 6'2" junior is the heart and soul that has brought the Red Flashes into the tournament. They love to get him into pick-and-roll actions, allowing him to see the floor and create. He's in the 85th percentile as a jump shooter per Synergy, and they use those screen actions when he's off the ball to give him a good look at the rim. Opponents are going to need to keep the ball out of his hands, especially in the halfcourt in order to slow down the Flashes' offense.



PHOTO BY: PATRICK WAKSUMSKI

TEAM OVERVIEW

For the first time in the 21st century, the Red Flashes are going dancing. Despite being under 500. and going just 8-8 in conference play, Saint Francis knocked off Central Connecticut to get the NEC autobid. The Red Flashes love to shoot the 3 ball, with 35% of their points coming from beyond the arc. They've got 5 players with over 100 attempts from behind the arc on the season, and despite being much more efficient inside, they take a lot of 3s. They're one of the worst in the country in both turnover percentage and offensive rebounding percentage, but they do hold their opponents to just 33% from beyond the arc defensively. Riley Parker is their main guy, as the first team all NEC point guard is on the cusp of a 50/40/80 season, where he has an assist percentage of 20.8. Valentino Pinedo has been their go-to guy in the post, and is their main source of rebounding on the interior. It's unlikely St. Francis is able to get anything done this March, but an unlikely conference champion is always a threat to provide a scare.

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Valentino Pinedo Ace Talbert	Quality Wins: @ Campbell @ C. Conn
Offense: F	3 Pointers: C
Defense: F	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: F
Turnover: F	Fouls: B
Pace: D	Ceiling: Round of 64

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Well, to just about nobody's surprise, the under 500. conference champion is playing in to face the #1 overall seed. The Red Flashes are set to face one of the worst scoring teams in the nation in Alabama State. Despite shooting a paltry 32.9% from beyond the arc, the Hornets get a whopping 37% of their points from the outside. That being said, it's going to be on Saint Francis to deny them open looks, especially in transition. Given the Flashes turnover issues, that could lend to a lot of opportunities, but it's going to be on Riley Parker to limit live ball turnovers, and lead clean possessions.

Down low it's going to be a battle between Valentino Pinedo, and Jasteven Walker. While Walker is a couple of inches taller, he gives up 40 pounds to Pinedo, which could be a boon to the Red Flashes if they operate through the post. Juan Cranford is another guy that needs to get going early, in order to give Pinedo room to operate down low. This one may be a tough watch, but these teams are going to be battling hard to keep their tournament hopes alive for just a couple more days. If Saint Francis gets through Alabama State, they'll meet their end against Auburn. The Tigers' guards will prove to be too much for Parker, 6'5 wing Dae'Mar Kelly is overmatched by Chad Baker-Mazara, and the Red Flashes have no way to contend with Johni Broome. They may make things a bit testy early if they get that far, while Auburn shakes off some of its' rust, but once the Tigers get rolling, the Red Flashes season will surely come to an end.

LOUISVILLE CARDINALS

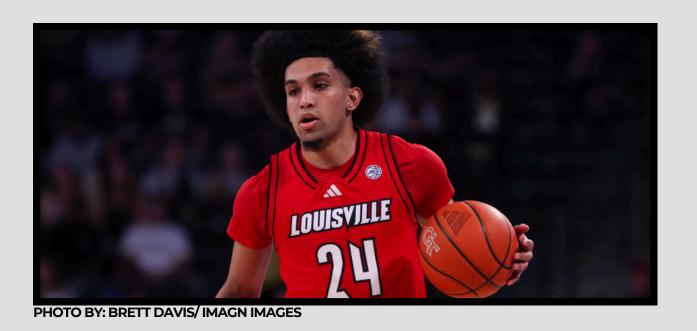


TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
ACC	23rd	Pat Kelsey	27-6 (18-2 in ACC)

PLAYER TO WATCH: CHUCKY HEPBURN

Chucky Hepburn has been a standout transfer, quickly becoming the leader of Louisville after his move from Wisconsin. He earned First-Team All-ACC honors and ACC Defensive Player of the Year. Hepburn averages 16.4 points per game, shooting 44.6% from the field, 34.5% from three, and 84.6% from the free-throw line. His impact extends beyond scoring, contributing 5.9 assists and 2.4 steals per game. Known for his defensive tenacity and clutch play, Hepburn is crucial for Louisville's success. As the team aims for a deep tournament run, his leadership and ability to perform under pressure will be key this March.



TEAM OVERVIEW

Louisville has experienced a remarkable turnaround under first-year head coach Pat Kelsey. After a rough 2023-24 season with an 8-24 record, the Cardinals rebuilt aggressively, using the transfer portal to bring in experienced players. Kelsey, who previously led College of Charleston to consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances, has guided Louisville to a 27-7 record and an 18-2 finish in ACC play, earning ACC Coach of the Year honors. They also finished as ACC Tournament runners-up.

The Cardinals are poised for a deep tournament run, ranking in the top 75 in both points scored and points allowed, showing strong two-way play. However, their outside shooting remains a concern, as they rank 223rd in three-point percentage. In March Madness, hot shooting often makes the difference, so Louisville will need more consistency from beyond the arc.

Still, with strong experience and defensive prowess, Louisville is a formidable opponent, and they should be considered alongside teams like Auburn, Tennessee, and Texas A&M as capable of making a serious tournament run.

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Terrence Edwards, J'Vonne Hadley	Quality Wins: West Virginia Clemson
Offense: A-	3 Pointers: D
Defense: A-	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: B	Rebounding: F
Turnover: C	Fouls: B+
Pace: B-	Ceiling: Round of 32

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Louisville enters the tournament as the 8th seed in the South region, facing a tough path with potential matchups against Auburn, Michigan State, and Iowa State. To make a deep run, the Cardinals will need to perform at their best, as this bracket presents numerous challenges. In the Round of 64, Creighton is a seasoned team that often makes noise in March. Their biggest strength is Ryan Kalkbrenner, who dominates in the paint. Louisville's defense will be key in stopping Kalkbrenner and controlling the pace of the game. This game promises to be a clash of styles, with Creighton's frontcourt against Louisville's backcourt. If Louisville gets past Creighton, they face Auburn, one of the top teams this season. Auburn's mix of young talent and veterans makes them a formidable opponent. Louisville will need to stay aggressive, but Auburn's depth and experience may prove too much to overcome. Louisville's floor is a first-round exit, as 8-9 matchups are often unpredictable. Creighton's frontcourt strength and Louisville's ability to defend it will determine the outcome. This is a 50/50 game, and whichever team executes better may prevail. Meanwhile, the ceiling for Louisville is reaching the second round. Beating Auburn would be a monumental challenge, but with the right momentum, the Cardinals could make some noise in the tournament. Regardless, Louisville's future under Pat Kelsey looks promising.

CREIGHTON BLUEJAYS



NO. 9 SEED
SOUTH
REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big East	37th	Greg McDermott	24-9 (15-5 in Big East)

PLAYER TO WATCH: STEVEN ASHWORTH

The easy answer here should be Ryan Kalkbrenner, given the big man was a finalist for National Defensive Player of the Year the last two years and an Honorable Mention All-American last year. However, in order to get the most consistent Creighton offense, Ashworth will need to be the one to have an impact. Ashworth was a starter on last year's Elite Eight team, but is now tasked with the main ball handling duties this year with Trey Alexander now off to the NBA. The good news is that he's been thriving in that role. His scoring went from 11.1 PPG to 17.1 this year. Additionally, his assists increased from 4.2 to 7 per game, which is 7th in the nation. This offense will go as far as Ashworth allows.



PHOTO BY: REBECCA 5. GRATZ/AP PHOTO

TEAM OVERVIEW

Offensively, Creighton is a pretty weird fit. Nearly half of their field goal attempts come from three point range, yet they shoot just 33.8% from deep. From two point range, the Blue Jays are second in the nation in 2P%. Yet, only 45% of their field goals are two pointers (307th in the nation). Defensively, Creighton doesn't force a lot of turnovers, instead opting to force tough shots. They force just 8 turnovers per game, with only two teams in the nation being worse. They also foul less than any team in the nation. Just 12.4% of their opponents' points come from the free throw line, which is the second lowest in the nation. Creighton averaged 79.3 points per game in wins and 65.8 points per game in losses. If Creighton wants to score consistently in the tournament, they'll likely need a third option to score consistently. Big man Ryan Kalkbrenner and point guard Steven Ashworth have scored a total of 46.4% of Creighton's points this season. That third option may be Jamiya Neal, who's averaged 11.7 points since top transfer, Pop Isaacs, suffered a season ending injury. Neal Kalkbrenner and Ashworth, form a three headed monster that few teams in the nation can match.

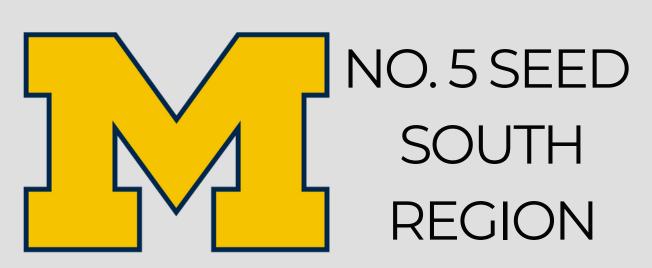
TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Jamiya Neal, Ryan Kalkbrenner	Quality Wins: Kansas St John's
Offense: B+	3 Pointers: C
Defense: B+	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: A-	Rebounding: B
Turnover: D	Fouls: A+
Pace: C	Ceiling: Round of 32

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Creighton has as tough of a road as any team in this tournament, starting with a first round matchup against Louisville and then a potential matchup with #I overall seed Auburn. For the Round of 64, Louisville will need to maintain Ryan Kalkbrenner, but they have enough big bodies to throw at Kalkbrenner to make it difficult on him for 48 minutes with James Scott and Noah Waterman. Additionally, Louisville's Chucky Hepburn will 'put the clamps' on Steven Ashworth. For as good as Creighton is, playing Louisville in Lexington is an uphill battle. Louisville's 21st ranked defense will make it difficult on Creighton, who will struggle to score consistently without Pop Isaacs. Additionally, Creighton lacks the depth to hang with Louisville. In the Big East Championship against St. John's, Creighton's bench scored just two points. Louisville's bench has had its struggles as well, given they scored just two points in the ACC Championship against Duke. However, the Cardinals have had a 'next man up' mentality all season after losing Kesean Pryor and Koren Johnson early in the season. Louisville also doesn't rely on the same 1-2 players to score, as Louisville has four different players who can lead the team in scoring on any given night. Even if Creighton gets by Louisville, which they could, they don't have any advantage over Auburn. Kalkbrenner is typically a mismatch nightmare on both ends of the floor, but Johni Broome is one of the few players in the country who can neutralize Kalkbrenner. While Creighton's advantage on a nightly basis is their experience and their size, both Louisville and Auburn can exploit those advantages and make life hell for the Bluejays. With this said, Creighton's ceiling this year is probably the Round of 32.

MICHIGAN WOLVERINES



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big 10	25th	Dusty May	23-9 (14-6 in Big 10)

TEAM OVERVIEW

After a torrid 2023-24 season in which Michigan won just 8 games, the Wolverines are well and truly back under first-year head coach Dusty May, who, just a couple of years ago, was one possession away from taking a lowly Florida Atlantic program all the way to the Championship game. May quickly revitalized the Michigan program, utilizing the portal to form one of the best frontcourts in college basketball. In the form of a Yale transfer, Danny Wolf and Vlad Goldin, who came alongside May from Florida Atlantic, these two complemented each other very well. Their size and skill were too much for most teams that Michigan faced. Wolf and Goldin pounded teams on the inside—per Synergy, they were in the 90th percentile in terms of rim frequency.

The Wolverines were transformed not only by adding more pure talent but also by injecting speed and ball movement into their play.

Throughout the season, Michigan has earned a reputation for its ability to grind out close wins. However, their luck mostly ran out towards the end of Big 10 play, as the Wolverines were dominated in games against the top opponents from their conference.

PLAYER TO WATCH: DANNY WOLF

Michigan has several good players, but the most exciting by far—and the one drawing most NBA interest—is Wolf, the unorthodox seven-footer (though he's likely a bit shorter than that) whose play style is much closer to a guard than a traditional big.

Wolf is one of those players who delivers remarkable plays on a nightly basis. He is an incredible passer for a player of his stature, but he's not your classic playmaking big - Wolf runs pick and roll, drives to the basket from the perimeter, pulls up for off-dribble threes, and makes outrageous livedribble passes.

Wolf is exciting because he's a risk taker, but that also has its downsides: He has a negative assist-to-turnover ratio.



PHOTO BY: JUNFU HAN/ DETROIT FREE PRESS

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Vlad Golden, Roddy Gayle	Quality Wins: Wisconsin Purdue 2x
Offense: B+	3 Pointers: C
Defense: A	Free Throw : C
Field Goal: B+	Rebounding: B
Turnover: F	Fouls: B-
Pace: B	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Michigan stumbled its way into the Big Ten tournament, but the Wolverines' mood is completely different now after they won the tournament in Indianapolis.

Their ability to win close games is either a good or a bad thing, depending on who you ask. Grinding out close games can get you far in the NCAA tournament, but it also shows that you're not winning a lot of games by comfortable margins. They're seeded 5th, but neither Kenpom nor Bart Torvik's analytical models are super high on Michigan, as they have the Wolverines ranked 25th and 26th, respectively. They have a potentially tricky first-round matchup against UC San Diego, a team that breezed past the Big West conference this year en route to a 30-4 record and a 12th seed in the NCAA tournament. The Wolverines should expect a barrage of threes in that game, as UC San Diego is the number 8 team in the country in terms of 3-point rate. Michigan is the favourite in this matchup, but if you're looking for potential Cindirellas or upsets among the 5-12 or 6-11 matchups, this could actually be a solid pick.

If the Wolverines get past this barrier, Texas A&M or Yale awaits. A&M has been a regular among the best SEC teams for the past three seasons but hasn't made a deep run yet, while Yale managed to dump out Auburn last season; this could actually be the year when the Aggies reach the Sweet Sixteen.

If Michigan were able to move on to the Sweet Sixteen, it's most likely that Auburn would prove too much for them. Though the Tigers don't seem to be at their best going into the tournament, most likely, they would still have too much for the Wolverines. On the other side of the bracket, there are teams like lowa State, which has been dealing with injury problems recently, and archrival Michigan State, which has already beaten the Wolverines twice this season.

BREAKDOWN: @SHEEDINATL

UC SAN DIEGO TRITONS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big West	36th	Eric Olen	30-4 (18-2 in Big West)

TEAM OVERVIEW

The UC San Diego Tritons make their March Madness debut after finishing the regular season with a 30-4 record and winning the Big West Conference Title. For a university most known for science and engineering, the UCSD Men's Basketball team has put the university's sports program on the national radar. UCSD has formed an identity based on Coach Eric Olen's two tenets: 1) take care of the ball and 2) take the ball away from the opponent. The Tritons are second in the country in taking care of the ball with only 8.8 turnovers a game. In contrast, UCSD forces 15.97 turnovers a game - top 10 in the nation. The turnover margin of +7.5 is first in all of Division I. These live turnovers fuel the Triton's pace-and-space offensive system in which 3-pointers and breakaway dunks come in bunches. Led by Senior guards Aniwaniwa Tait-Jones (19.7 ppg) and Tyler McGhie (16.5 ppg), the Tritons convert 10.9 3-pointers a game – fifth-best in the country – and score 79.9 points per game. Defensively, they allow 61.6 points per game, eighth in the nation. The +18.3 average scoring margin is second-best in the country behind Duke.

PLAYER TO WATCH: HAYDEN GRAY

Given that the Tritons' offense attempts and makes several 3-pointers per game, defenses are typically focused on slowing down marksman G Tyler McGhie. That works out perfectly for UCSD as it takes the attention away from their underrated, yet immensely impactful wing, Hayden Gray. At 6'4", 190 lb, Gray is one of the most versatile defenders in all of CBB. Gray is often tasked at picking up at the POA, regardless of any potential size or positional disparity. As one of the most defensively portable defenders, Gray leads all of Division I in total steals (106) as well as steals per game (3.21). In turn, Gray often jumpstarts the Tritons' fast break scoring opportunities by turning defense into offense. His ability to comfortably yet aggressively push the ball in transition is reflected in his 3.4 assists per game.



PHOTO BY: RONDA CHURCHILL/AP

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Aniwania Tait- Jones, Tyler McGhie	Quality Wins: @ Utah St @ UC Irvine
Offense: B	3 Pointers: B
Defense: A-	Free Throw: B-
Field Goal: B+	Rebounding: F
Turnover: A+	Fouls: B-
Pace: F	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Despite winning the Big West Tournament, the 30-4 UC San Diego Tritons enter the 2025 NCAA Tournament as the 12-seed of the South Region. While they have fully embraced the "lovable underdog" persona, the Tritons have every reason to believe they can make a relatively deep tournament run. In their Round of 64 matchup, the Tritons face the 5-seed Michigan Wolverines. The 25-9 Michigan Wolverines had an up-and-down season but capped it off with a strong finish and victory in the Big Ten Tournament. On paper, the Wolverines appear to be a significantly superior team due to their pair of starting 7-footers: Danny Wolf and Vladislav Goldin. Given that the Tritons starting lineup's tallest player is 6'8", it's understandable why many fans would assume this is an easy Michigan win. But a closer look at the matchup shows that the Tritons may have actually drawn a favorable opponent. The Wolverines are one of the worst teams at taking care of the ball; Michigan commits 14.4 turnovers per game. As fate would have it, the Tritons lead the tournament field in forcing turnovers (15.97 turnovers per game). In the absence of a true center, the Tritons essentially start five wings, all of whom are comfortable switching everything on defense. However, the trio of Hayden Gray, Chris Howell, and Aniwaniwa Tait-Jones are all capable of defending at the POA without fouling. Against a Michigan team that allows their two 7-footers to handle the ball, there will be plenty of opportunities for UCSD to eclipse their 9.9 steals per game. The Tritons consistently on their forced turnovers by pushing the pace in transition for pull-up 3-pointers and rim runs. If UCSD commits to pushing the pace off makes or misses, the Tritons may find themselves

facing off against the winner of Texas A&M-Yale in the Round of 32.

BREAKDOWN: @CP3_777

TEXAS A&M AGGIES



NO. 4 SEED SOUTH REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SEC	17th	Buzz Williams	22-10 (11-7 in SEC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Texas A&M is a veteran team. There are many upperclassmen and guys who have been with the program for a long time. Guys like Wade Taylor IV and Henry Coleman III seem to have been on the team for a decade. The Aggies' veteran status and SEC status tell us that they are very battle-tested, which should help them come tournament time.

When we consider that A&M finished 5th in the SEC (only behind powerhouses Auburn, Florida, Alabama, and Tennessee) and is the 14th-ranked team in college basketball, I'd say the Aggies' season so far has been a success.

The Aggies did stumble a little bit late in the season when they had a 4 game-losing streak. However, they recovered nicely after that skid - the very next game, they beat the no. I ranked team in the country, Auburn - by double digits. That was a big-time win for A&M and should give them the confidence that they can beat anybody.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WADE TAYLOR IV

Taylor IV is one of the best guards in college basketball. He's only 6'0" tall, but he's lightning quick, can handle the ball, shoot it, and pass (he had an awesome dime in the SEC tournament), and is lightning quick.

Taylor IV is the Aggies' leading scorer at 15.7 PPG. He shoots 38.9% from 3 and 88.3% from the free-throw line. And he's not just a shooter—Taylor IV also has a respectable FTr (Free Throw Rate) of 38.8, which is an indicator that he's good at driving to the basket and drawing fouls.



PHOTO BY: HANNAH HARRISON/THE BATTALION

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Zhuric Phelps	Quality Wins: Texas Tech, Auburn, Purdue
Offense: B+	3 Pointers: F
Defense: A+	Free Throw: F
Field Goal: F	Rebounding: A+
Turnover: F	Fouls: D
Pace: D	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

A&M is the 4 seed in the South region. In the opening round, they'll take on Yale. Yale just beat Cornell 90-84 in the lwy League championship game. Texas A&M should be able to take care of business vs Yale. One of the main objectives in the opening round game for A&M will be to contain Yale sniper John Poulakidas. Poulakidas is capable of catching fire and getting Yale a win or two in this tournament. But if I'm the Aggies, I'm putting Solomon Washington on Poulakidas. Washington has more size, length, and athleticism than Poulakidas, so Washington could give Poulakidas problems with his defense.

If A&M is able to get past Yale, they'll meet the winner of Michigan vs. UC San Diego. While UC San Diego has been fantastic this season, they won't be able to handle A&M's tenacity on the glass. The Aggies will need to be mindful of some of the Tritons' outside shooters, including Hayden Gray, if they get this matchup, which is a distinct possibility. We know that over the years, there have been many 12 seeds that have beaten 5 seeds.

If it's an A&M vs Michigan 2nd round matchup, that one should be a tightly contested battle that could go either way. I could see a game like that going down to the final buzzer. Coleman III would really have his hands full, having to go against the Wolverine's double big lineup of Danny Wolf and Vlad Goldin.

As for the South Region as a whole, Auburn should have a fairly easy path to the Final Four, with a small chance that Michigan State beats them in the Elite 8. I don't see Texas A&M coming out of this region—I'd be kind of surprised if they even make it to the Sweet 16.

BREAKDOWN: @ONBALLCREATOR

YALE BULLDOGS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
lvy	73rd	James Jones	21-7 (13-1 in Ivy)

PLAYER TO WATCH: BEZ MBENG

While John Poulakidis is not only Yale's leading scorer, he also led the entire Ivy League in scoring at 19.2 PPG. But Mbeng won both Ivy League Player of the Year and Ivy League Defensive Player of the Year. And given the emphasis that was reiterated in the team analysis, Yale will really need Mbeng, the team's starting point guard, to anchor the defense. Mbeng also averaged 2.9 turnovers per game this year, and even though Yale takes care of the ball collectively, Mbeng will be a driving force and focal point behind the offense as well.



PHOTO BY: ERICA DENHOFF/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES

TEAM OVERVIEW

Yale's offense is very Ivy League-ish. They shoot well, take high-percentage shots, and they take care of the ball. While Yale is 11th in the nation in assists to turnover ratio, they don't force enough turnovers themselves to consistently win the turnover battle. Additionally, despite shooting nearly 38% from three-point range, Yale outshoots its opponents very rarely. The Bulldogs allow the fourth most three-point attempts among every team in the country, but their opponents shoot just 33.4% against them. Additionally, 59.2% of their opponents' baskets are assisted, which is 330th in the nation. If Yale wants to make more lvy Magic (they beat Auburn in the first round of the tournament last season), the defense will need to tighten up. Everything Yale does well offensively, they lack defensively. However, the Ivy League's recent success in the NCAA tournament over the last 5 years isn't a coincidence, as the slow-tempo, methodical Ivy League approach that teams play year after year after winning Ivy Madness really makes their higherseeded opponents struggle to adjust.

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Nick Townsend, John Poulakidis	Quality Wins: Akron @ Cornell
Offense: B	3 Pointers: A+
Defense: C	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: B+	Rebounding: A-
Turnover: A	Fouls: B
Pace: C	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

I actually really like Yale's first round matchup against Texas A&M for Yale. After beating Auburn in the Round of 64 last year, Yale is aiming to defeat an SEC powerhouse two years in a row. In the team analysis, it was discussed how Yale shoots 38% from three yet rarely outshoots their opponents because of the amount of three point attempts they allow defensively. However, A&M is a team that likely won't exploit this, as just 28.3% of their points come from three point range. Additionally, A&M shoots just 31% from three. Defensively, 47% of Texas A&M's opponents shots come from three, which is music to Yale's ears. Additionally, A&M gives up a lot of assisted buckets. A&M also forces a good bit of turnovers, which is a trap that Yale is unlikely to fall into.

As previously stated, Yale will struggle defensively. If they win, it'll likely be in a shoot out. But Texas A&M is not an elite offense by any means. If Yale is shooting the way they can be expected to against A&M's defense, then it might not make a difference. According to KenPom, Texas A&M does have the 7th best defense in the nation, so maybe the concern about Yale's shooting is a bit too extreme. But either way, I don't know if Texas A&M's offense will be able to score consistently enough. Wade Taylor IV has been inconsistent this year, and outside of Zhuric Phelps, A&M really doesn't have another go-to scoring option. Given Mbeng, the Ivy League Defensive Player of the Year, could make life difficult for Taylor IV, Yale should be a sexy upset pick. Also, for what it's worth, UC San Diego is also an upset favorite against Michigan, and the winner of that game will play Yale in the Round of 32 if they get past Texas A&M.

OLE MISS REBELS



NO. 6 SEED
SOUTH
REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SEC	26th	Chris Beard	22-11 (10-8 in SEC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

The Ole Miss Rebels just finished a 22-11 season with a 10-8 record in the brutal SEC that just set a record for the most teams from a conference in the NCAA tournament. Miss ranks 28th in NET, 25th in Kenpom, and 35th in Bart Torvik. The Rebels are 8-10 in Quad 1 games, 5-1 in Quad 2 and 9-0 in Quad 3 and 4 games. Led by Coach Chris Beard, who has orchestrated a remarkable turnaround for a team that had previously been a perennial bottom dweller in the conference, the Rebs like to play tight, pressure defense and convert turnovers into points. Mississippi likes to spread the scoring around, with 6 players averaging over 10 points per game. They have an elite TO% on the season, coming in 3rd in the nation at 12.8. All that being said, the eye test tells the story for Ole Miss. At first glance one can see that this team is small. With no real height, or bangers around the basket, this team is constantly getting bullied in the paint and off rebounds. The offensive rebounding numbers are particularly worrisome, ranking 313th in the nation in offensive rebound%. In order for this team to be successful, they have to hit their shots. Period.

PLAYER TO WATCH: SEAN PEDULLA

Senior Sean Pedulla came to Mississippi this offseason through the portal from Virginia Tech and stepped in as the on-court leader and top scorer of this Rebels squad. Pedulla is a bit undersized, listed at 6'l, but there is no doubt that he's a bucket. He most recently hit a beautiful game winning 3 to shock Arkansas in the SEC tournament.

Pedulla averaged 14.9 ppg this season, shooting almost 39% from 3, while also chipping in 3.5 rebounds, 3.6 assists, and 1.8 steals. Pedulla's most impressive game this season came against SEC behemoth Auburn, where he put up 29 points with a 71.9% eFG%. He definitely doesn't shy away from the spotlight.

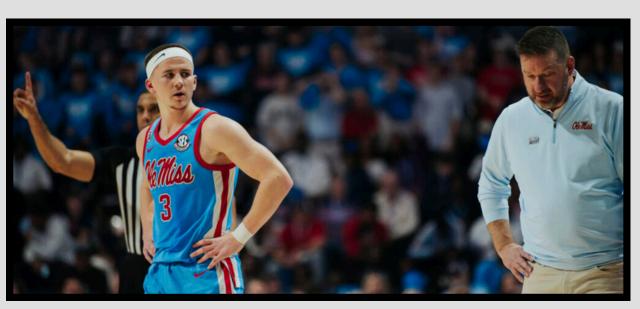


PHOTO BY: OLIVIA CANGELOSI

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Malik Dia, Dre Davis	Quality Wins: @ Alabama Kentucky
Offense: B+	3 Pointers: C
Defense: A-	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: D
Turnover: A+	Fouls: F
Pace: B-	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Hotty Toddy!! The Ole Miss Rebels are back in the tournament field for the tenth time in the school's history and the first time since 2019, under the guidance of Chris Beard, who has historically been a great tournament coach (and coach in general). Their 6 seed marks the highest the Rebs have been seeded since 2001, when then 3-seeded Ole Miss made it to the Sweet 16, falling to an Arizona Wildcats team that went on to the championship game. If Mississippi hopes to match or exceed that run this year, they are going to have to win what could be some tough battles. Their first round matchup will come against either a UNC team that many are saying shouldn't have made the field, but has been playing what is probably their best ball of the season as of late, or San Diego State, who has faltered as of late but has the size and defense to give this Rebs squad fits, especially with Magoon Gwath set to return to the lineup. It wouldn't be a surprise if Mississippi's lack of rebounding and poor defense of the 3 continue to haunt them in a matchup with either team, but I especially like San Diego State to pull off the upset. Should the Rebels move on to the second round, they likely have a date with the lowa State Cyclones, a team that again has been spotty late in the year, but is flat out the better team. What Ole Miss does have going for them is top tier coaching, grit, a pair of sharpshooting guards and

veteran leadership. Besides, its March and one thing that is for sure is anything can happen.

SAN DIEGO STATE AZTECS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Mountain West	46th	Brian Dutcher	21-8 (14-6in Mountain West)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Coach Brian Dutcher has had plenty of success at San Diego State, and his teams have become a mainstay atop the Mountain West Conference. All of San Diego State's losses have come from top 100 KenPom teams in what the Aztecs probably expected to be a transition year after losing Jaedon LeDee, Lamont Butler and Micah Parrish last summer.

The Aztecs have been led this season by Nick Boyd and Miles Byrd, like a law firm, Boyd, Byrd and associates have brought the defense, helping San Diego lead the country in block rate per KenPom while also maintaining a top-15 defense nationally. The Aztecs have always leaned on their defensive system, and even after losing Magoon Gwath a couple weeks ago, they're a problem defensively down low behind the likes of Jared Coleman-Jones and Miles Heide. Freshmen Pharaoh Compton and Taj DeGourville also provide a unique spark off the bench for the Aztecs. The wildcard for the Aztecs will be BJ Davis, who has traditionally been the third scorer for SDSU this year. If Davis can string consistent showings together in March, the Aztecs could be very dangerous in the dance.

PLAYER TO WATCH: MILES BYRD

Miles Byrd has elevated his game and his draft stock in his Sophomore season, all while battling injuries to himself and his teammates. Byrd's jump this year is eerily similar to Will Barton's jump from his Freshman to Sophomore campaign at Memphis, Barton is a really strong comparison. Byrd's defensive potential had been on NBA radars for some time, but now the player as a whole is considered a likely NBA draft selection in June. If Miles Byrd is scoring the basketball like he is capable, the Aztecs are in any game in March.



PHOTO BY: KIRBY LEE/OMAGN IMAGES

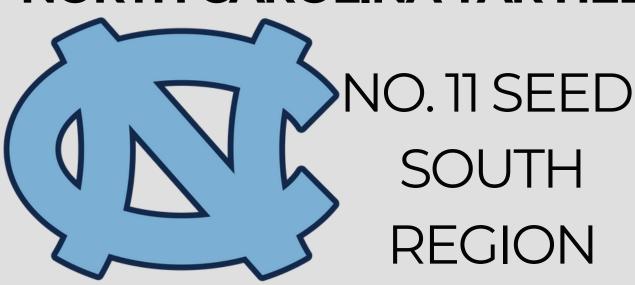
TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Nick Boyd, Magoon Gwath	Quality Wins: Houston Creighton
Offense: C	Shooting: D
Defense: A	Free Throw: F
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: C
Turnover: C	Fouls: F
Pace: D	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

The Aztecs (alongside many others) are likely surprised they're seeing the Tar Heels and not West Virginia in their play-in game. San Diego State rarely allows teams to reach 70 points, and UNC had a 6 game stretch where they consistently reached 80. This one's going to be a style battle where the unstoppable force (UNC offense) meets an immovable object (SDSU defense). If Magoon Gwath is able to play, that provides a massive boost to SDSU's chances, given he is their main source of rim protection. The Aztecs are going to want to keep the ball out of RJ Davis and Ian Jackson's hands, forcing Elliot Cadeau, Seth Trimble and Drake Powell to be the guys to beat them. If they can stifle the Tar Heels, they may like their chances against Ole Miss. While the Rebels have a scary backcourt, the style of San Diego State lends itself to a favorable matchup, given the Rebels propensity for attacking the paint, and hoping to play faster. Texas A&M had success against Ole Miss, and San Diego State plays a similar style to the Aggies. If they do squeeze by Ole Miss, they may have a lot of trouble against Iowa State. Even without Keshon Gilbert, the Cyclones can match the grit and grind of the Aztecs, and still have plenty of depth to spare. For any of this to be possible, it'll need to be all hands on deck offensively. They'll need Nick Boyd, Miles Byrd and even BJ Davis to be efficient from behind the arc in order to score enough to keep pace with these high-powered offenses. San Diego State games in March are rarely a work of art, but they may be able to carve out a nice little run in this region.

NORTH CAROLINA TAR HEELS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
ACC	33rd	Hubert Davis	22-13 (13-7 in ACC)

PLAYER TO WATCH: RJ DAVIS

It wouldn't be a Hubert Davis team without RJ Davis. He may be inefficient, undersized, etc, but when UNC needs a clutch moment, there's been nobody better than RJ Davis over the years at delivering. The Tar Heels will surely be hoping for one last glimpse of the version of Davis that we saw tear up the tournament on the way to a national championship appearance. If he can catch fire, there's no telling how far this Tar Heels team could go. However, given the inconsistency he's displayed this season, he's just as likely to send them home as he is to take them to new heights.



PHOTO BY: ROBERT WILLETT/NEWS OBSERVER

TEAM OVERVIEW

Hubert Davis may not have thought his Tar Heels were destined for March after their loss to Duke in the ACC tournament, but they've made their way in. UNC is a guardheavy team who is still relying on RJ Davis to get things done. A lot of issues have stemmed from weak rim protection in their first season without Armando Bacot, as well as some brutally slow starts to games. They need to get out and run to allow their guards to get into 1 on 1 situations as often as possible. Their smaller lineups have made it difficult to stem the bleeding at times, as they're allowing 75 points per game. Davis' willingness to rely on his pair of freshmen as the season has gone on is a major part of what's gotten them here. Drake Powell is probably their most impactful defender due to his ability to switch, while Ian Jackson has been a flamethrower, shooting 39% from beyond the arc. The Tar Heels are going to need their guards to heat up, just as they did in 2021 on their last title run, otherwise they may not be long for this tournament.

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Elliot Cadeau, Ian Jackson	Quality Wins: UCLA @ Florida State
Offense: A-	3 Pointers: B-
Defense: B	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: B	Rebounding: C
Turnover: B+	Fouls: C
Pace: B+	Ceiling: Round of 32

BRACKET ANALYSIS

The Tar Heels should consider themselves lucky to even be in the tournament. They're going to have to prove they deserve to be there by battling their way through a rough play-in matchup against a gritty San Diego State team. Drake Powell is going to be a key cog in the UNC wheel, as he's going to be the man to ground Miles Byrd. The Tar Heels need to rediscover the offensive form that saw them score over 80 points in 6 straight games. I wouldn't be surprised if the ball gets taken out of Elliot Cadeau's hands, and RJ Davis gets the brunt of the work. Given the lackluster interior provided by Ven Allen-Lubin and Jalen Washington, UNC could be in real trouble if Magoon Gwath is able to give it a go. Given the nature of San Diego State's defense, it's going to be unlikely that the Tar Heels will be able to really get a lot done in the halfcourt, so creating turnovers, and leaning on some of the individual brilliance of Davis, along with lan Jackson will be paramount to the Tar Heels success. Lastly, they cannot get off to a slow start. The stifling Aztec defense makes it nearly impossible to dig out of deficits of 10-15 points. If the Tar Heels do manage to force their way through San Diego State, they'll be greeted by a stout Ole Miss team. The Rebels don't turn the ball over very often, and have a frontcourt tandem of Malik Dia and Mikael Brown-Jones that could give the UNC bigs nightmares. Neither of these matchups are particularly appealing for UNC, so I won't really get into what happens if they get to the Sweet 16. It would be nice for RJ Davis to go on 1 last run, but the reality is that they are more likely to be an early exit.

IOWA STATE CYCLONES



NO.3 SEED
SOUTH
REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big 12	10	TJ Otzelberger	24-9 (13-7 in Big 12)

TEAM OVERVIEW

24-9 Iowa State was a popular early season pick for Big 12 champ and final four contender, going 15-1 in their first 16 games, with their lone loss being to an incredible Auburn team at the wire. The second half of the season, however, tells a different story with Iowa State going 8-7 in the next 15, and losing to BYU in the quarterfinals of the Big 12 tournament. Part of this could be attributed to injury, with core starters Momcilovic, Lipsey and Gilbert all missing time throughout that stretch. So who is the real Iowa State? Recency bias leans towards the latter, but we know that the tournament can bring the best out of teams, especially those as well-manned and well-coached as the Cyclones. NET (9), Bart Torvik (8), and KenPom (10) all have Iowa State as a top 10 program on the season, and even with the issues they saw in the second half of the season, they still put up elite defensive numbers and only dropped 9 spots in Bart Torvik.

PLAYER TO WATCH: CURTIS JONES

Buffalo transfer Curtis Jones, in his second season with the Cyclones, is simply a bucket. Leading lowa State in points per game while only making 9 starts on the season, Jones increased almost every stat category from last season to this one, becoming an impact player for a very good Cyclones lineup. Jones has shot 37% from 3 this season on a whopping 7 attempts per game, but when he is on, he's capable of taking over a game from behind the arc, as made evident in his valiant effort against BYU in the Big 12 tournament where he hit 7 threes on his way to a 31 point performance. If lowa State hopes to return to form in the NCAA tourney, Curtis Jones is probably going to have to be in his bag.



PHOTO BY: DARRYL WEBB/ AP PHOTO

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Tamin Lipsey, Keshon Gilbert	Quality Wins: Texas Tech Arizona
Offense: A	3 Point Shooting: B
Defense: A+	Free Throw: B
Field Goal: B+	Rebounding: C
Turnover: C	Fouls: B
Pace: C	Ceiling: Elite 8

BRACKET ANALYSIS

The committee fairly seeded lowa St #3 in the South bracket, and at first glance their path to the Sweet 16 looks favorable. The first round puts lowa St against 14-seed Lipscomb, winner of the Atlantic Sun conference. While it is no surprise to see a 14 upset a 3 in the NCAA tournament, I see this matchup as one that falls in Iowa State's favor.

The second round would see Iowa St against either Ole Miss or SDSU/UNC, neither of which pose a major threat to the Cyclones on paper. Both Marquette and Michigan State could make for interesting games should Iowa State meet them in the Elite Eight, and in the case of Michigan State, the Cyclones should be able to match them fairly well as far as physicality. So what does Iowa St need to do to reach the Final 4? Hit their shots. Plain and simple. Oh, and probably win a rematch with top dog Auburn.

LIPSCOMB BISON



NO. 14 SEED SOUTH REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
ASUN	83rd	Lennie Acuff	25-9 (14-4 in ASUN)

TEAM OVERVIEW

The Lipscomb Bisons have made their way into March Madness and are hoping to come out as the next Cinderella story. The Bisons went 25-9 this year and 14-4 in their conference. They don't have a particularly impressive nonconference resume, but a win against the A10's Duquesne is definitely impressive for any ASUN squad. Lipscomb just has to come ready for war. Their offense this year tells us that they should be ready. They ranked top 25 in taking care of the ball and are one of the better shooting teams in the country. Their experience with Joe Anderson, Will Pruitt, and Jacob Ognacevic will be relied on heavily to compete with the firepower that many high-major teams have in the backcourt. What could make you wary as a Lipscomb fan is how well the size and paint will hold up in March. Big men Dylan Faulkner, Charlie Williams, and Grant Asman have to be able to get stops and finish plays. Joe Anderson's highlevel passing, defense, and shooting will be a huge X-factor for the Bisons if they want to compete with high-level point guards. Opponents need to prevent Anderson and Ognacevic from getting hot, which could energize the Low-Major squad, turning it into anybody's game. If teams don't want to bow out early, they'd better make sure those two perimeter pieces don't kill them efficiently.

PLAYER TO WATCH: DYLAN FAULKNER

We can't call Dylan Faulkner an X-factor but more like a necessity for this Bisons team to succeed. Faulkner, the 6'9 forward who does a lot of positive things for Lipscomb, is an absolute must for a March Madness win. Faulkner checks a lot of requisite big man boxes like rebounding, finishing, and shot-blocking. He is shooting 70% at the rim and is averaging 2.3 steals + blocks. I don't see the Bisons having an easy time on the court without a signature Faulkner performance. If Faulkner can come ready to fight to the end and be his typical efficient self, then I wouldn't be too shocked if Lipscomb goes to the wire with one of these High-Major teams.



PHOTO BY: LIPSCOMB ATHLETICS

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Jacob Ognacevic, Will Pruitt,	Quality Wins: @ Duquesne Wofford
Offense: B	Shooting: B+
Defense: C	Free Throw: A+
Field Goal: A-	Rebounding: C
Turnover: A-	Fouls: A+
Pace: F	Ceiling: Round of 64

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Lipscomb received the 14th seed and, unfortunately, will have to play one of the strongest top seeds in lowa State. lowa State is littered with high-level pro talent and size. Their strong backcourt is banged up, though, and they aren't especially athletic on the wings. This could open up some opportunity for the Lipscomb backcourt to get going from deep. They will need that perimeter duo of Joe Anderson and Dylan Faulkner to be the leaders they've been this season and more. If Lipscomb wants to win this game, they will need to rely heavily on their shooting. They will need to make some of their opponent's less athletic players be the lead playmakers. Ognacevic, Anderson, and Faulkner don't have a choice but to be catalysts for this upset. Expect lowa State to focus on making things hard for both of the perimeter pieces. Faulkner's lack of great athleticism or shooting may be used against the Bisons too, as lowa State has legitimate size to throw out there. If Lipscomb can weather this Cyclone

MARQUETTE GOLDEN EAGLES



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big East	28th	Shaka Smart	23-10 (13-7 in Big East)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Shaka Smart's been trying to find a rhythm with the Golden Eagles for the last few weeks. After getting off to a scorching 18-3 start, they're now 5-7 over their last 12 games. They've really struggled to force turnovers through that stretch. While they were forcing their opponents to turn the ball over above 20% of the time through January, that number has dropped below 18% during this last stretch. The Golden Eagles themselves take incredible care of the ball, turning it over at just a 13% clip. Shaka Smart has tried tinkering with the rotations a bit more, with Zaide Lowery seeing a lot more run, but Marquette's bench depth is fairly weak. The strength of the Golden Eagles is in their versatility around their superstar Kam Jones. They've surrounded the star guard with a bevy of big guards/wings who defend the perimeter, and love to push the pace, generating transition opportunities. David Joplin, Chase Ross and Stevie Mitchell in particular are the core of this philosophy. The trio have shot a combined 467 shots from beyond the arc this season, and they'll need to continue to be effective if the Golden Eagles want to go anywhere in March.

PLAYER TO WATCH: KAM JONES

The big question going into the season was going to be how effective Kam Jones could be as a playmaker without his former back-court mate Tyler Kolek. Jones has more than lived up to the task. His assist rate has skyrocketed to 38.6%, good for 11th in the nation, as he is the hand that feeds all of the hungry mouths on the outside. While his shooting from beyond the arc hasn't been great, he's been able to attack the rim, and the midrange relentlessly. Marquette will go as far as Jones will take them. Enough said.



PHOTO BY: MORRY GASH/AP PHOTO

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: David Joplin, Chase Ross	Quality Wins : @ Maryland Wisconsin
Offense: B+	3 Pointers: D
Defense: A-	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: D
Turnover: B+	Fouls: C
Pace: C	Ceiling: Round of 32

BRACKET ANALYSIS

This is a must watch game if you like high-octane basketball with great guard play. Both New Mexico and Marquette average a shot in 16 seconds or less every possession, with New Mexico also being 4th in the nation in adjusted tempo per Kenpom. Donovan Dent and Kam Jones are 2 of the best playmakers in the nation, and it will be exhilarating to watch them go toe-to-toe as they look to impose their wills on this game. One thing to watch out for: if Marquette gets going from beyond the arc early, this game could get out of hand. The Lobos don't shoot many 3's to match the preposterous volume of Marquette, and they don't defend the perimeter particularly well. However, if Marquette isn't shooting well, they're going to struggle to generate extra possessions and New Mexico could run them over. Nelly Junior Joseph is a phenomenal defensive rebounder, and can dominate Ben Gold inside if given the opportunity. If Gold is able to draw Junior Joseph out of the paint with good perimeter shooting, he could open things up inside for the Golden Eagles. If they do manage to get by New Mexico, Marquette will be banking on one of my upset picks if they hope to get any further. Michigan State's pace and depth are going to likely prove to be too much for the Golden Eagles if they manage to get by Bryant. They are another team that lacks punch from beyond the arc, but Marquette will need to revive some of those early season memories if they want any chance of making the Sweet 16. There's a pretty good chance that Marquette is able to beat New Mexico, but unless you believe the Bryant Bulldogs await them in the round of 32, I wouldn't count on a Sweet 16 run.

NEW MEXICO LOBOS



NO. 10 SEED SOUTH REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Mountain West	41st	Richard Pitino	26-7 (17-3 in Mountain West)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Despite failing to repeat as Mountain West Conference champions, the 26-7 New Mexico Lobos enter the 2025 NCAA Tournament as one of those most stout defensive teams in Division I with signature wins over UCLA, USC, and VCU. As the 19th-ranked defense (95.2 DRTG) per KenPom, the Lobos use a full court pressure scheme that forces the 14th-most turnovers per game (15.33) with a majority of those turnovers coming in the form of steals (8.9 spg). With so many live ball turnovers, Coach Richard Pitino's Lobos are encouraged to play a high-tempo, transition-heavy offense with a focus on fast-break opportunities and deliberate halfcourt play. A high percentage of the Lobos' field goal attempts come in transition (18.8%) with a significant portion of their total points generated from fast-break opportunities (20%). With center Nelly Junior Joseph and forward Mustapha Amzil running up the court with ease, the Lobos shoot nearly 60% on their transition attempts. When all is said and done, the Lobos rely on the shot creation of the Mountain West Player of the Year, Point Guard Donovan Dent, to carry the Lobos through offensive Iulls and/or inconsistent outside shooting.

PLAYER TO WATCH: DONOVAN DENT

It comes as no surprise that New Mexico's success this season and moving forward hinges on the heliocentric play of Junior Point Guard, Donovan Dent. At 6'2", 185 lb, Dent has embraced shouldering the offensive load for the Lobos. At a career high usage rate of 27.8%, Dent has led the Lobos in both scoring (20.6 ppg) and assists (6.4 apg). Despite not being a prolific 3PT shooter, Dent relentlessly puts pressure on the rim and generates 6.6 FTA per game. Although the Lobos try to get out in transition as often as possible, part of their offense comes in half court sets that require Dent to create open perimeter shots as a result of the defense trying to contain his dribble penetration. New Mexico is at their best when Dent controls pace and space by shifting the defense off the dribble.



TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Nelly Jr Joseph, Mustapha Amzil	Quality Wins: UCLA @ Utah St
Offense: B-	3 Pointers: C
Defense: A	Free Throw: F
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: A-
Turnover: B	Fouls: D
Pace: A+	Ceiling: Round of 32

BRACKET ANALYSIS

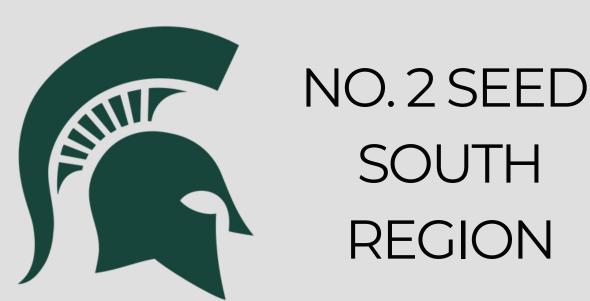
In some ways, the 7 vs 10 matchup in the South Region is reminiscent of the "Spider-Man Pointing" meme. The 7-seed Marquette Colden Eagles and the 10-seed New Mexico Lobos share a lot of similarities with regards to offensive identity as well as roster-building philosophies. Marquette Coach Shaka Smart and New Mexico Coach Richard Pitino both value fundamentals, IQ, chemistry, and continuity. As such, both teams are comprised of returning players that have eschewed the transfer portal. Likewise, both teams rely heavily on the offensive brilliance from their respective star guards. At his best, Marquette SG Kam Jones is an explosive scorer who can create his own shot at all three levels. And as we've seen all season, New Mexico PG Donovan Dent is one of the most dynamic PNR point guards in the nation. Assuming both guards play up to their potential, this matchup may be decided by each team's supporting cast. Given that neither team shoots the 3-pointer particularly well, scoring in the paint will be paramount for victory. And if this is the case, New Mexico's frontcourt duo of Nelly Junior Joseph and Mustapha Amzil may overwhelm Marquette with their combination of size, speed, and athleticism. Although Junior Joseph and Amzil aren't primary ball-handlers or playmakers, they are proficient passers out of the short roll. Against a Marquette team whose bigs lack lateral quickness, the inside passes that Junior Joseph and Amzil connect on may create the high-% looks needed to break the Golden Eagles' 28th-ranked defense. Looking ahead, the Lobos will be further challenged against their potential Round of 32 opponent, Michigan State. Much like Marquette, MSU features consistently dynamic guard play that will test the Lobos' 19th-ranked defense. Ultimately, New Mexico has to commit to getting in the paint in order to create quality looks at the rim or to draw shooting fouls.

The Lobos generate the 19th-most free throws of any team in the nation, but they're also one of the worst FT-shooting teams (68.7

FT%)!

BREAKDOWN: @CP3_777

MICHIGAN STATE SPARTANS PLAYER TO WATCH: JASE RICHARDSON



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big 10	8th	Tom Izzo	27-5 (17-3 in Big 10)

Jase Richardson might be a freshman, but he is a massive key to Michigan State's tournament success. Despite facing limited minutes in a crowded backcourt early in the season, Jase has clawed his way into a starting role as Michigan State's most efficient scorer.. Richardson leads the Spartans in both 3PT% (39%), and is second on the team in PPG (11). The more efficient he is, the better it is for Sparty, as he shoots 54% from the field in their wins vs 40% in losses. Not only that, but his box +/- of 11.2 is best in the Big 10 and 11th in the nation. When Jase is at his best, the Spartans look like title contenders, and Izzo may need 30+ minutes per game from the youngster if he's going to get back to another Final four..



PHOTO BY: JUNFU HAN/ DETROIT FREE PRESS

TEAM OVERVIEW

Sparty's back, baby! Tom Izzo is having his best season with Michigan State since 2018-19. It's all about their depth and speed. The Spartans are phenomenal inside the arc, with an array of slashing guards who love to break in transition and various interior rebounding forces, but they are one of the worst in the country beyond the 3-point line.

To their credit, they manage to be amongst the best in the country at defending the 3, and despite their outside woes, they've had a lot of success getting to the foul line all season. If Fears and Holloman continue to set the table at the same rate that they've had while Kohler and Cooper maintain their dominance on the boards, this team could make a deep run in March. However, if Akins and Richardson struggle to get going from beyond the arc, or their opponents shoot the lights out, it could spell doom for Sparty.

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Jaden Akins	Quality Wins: @ Maryland Wisconsin
Offense: A-	3 Pointers: F
Defense: A+	Free Throw: A
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: A
Turnover: C	Fouls: C
Pace: C	Ceiling: Final Four

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Don't blink for this one, ladies and gentlemen. Bryant and Michigan State both LOVE to get out and run as often as possible. These 2 teams average a combined 160 points per game. For Michigan State, the key is going to be hounding the glass and limiting Bryant's 3s in transition. The Bulldogs are one of the best rebounding teams in the country and will push the ball off of defensive boards as quickly as possible.

The Spartans could go about this a couple ways: they can either slow the game down and hope that Coen Carr and Jackson Kohler are able to take over the glass while their guards attack the basket, or they can try and match Bryant punch for punch, knowing that their depth can overwhelm just about any team in the country. The Spartans are the more talented team, but stylistically, this could make for a more interesting matchup than meets the eye. If the Spartans emerge here, they have to love their chances to make an Elite 8 run. The top end talent in the 7-10 game (Kam Jones of Marquette and Donovan Dent of New Mexico), but the Spartan guards should be able to handle either of the opposition threats. Iowa State could very well go down early, especially given that they'll face either San Diego State, UNC, or Ole Miss, leaving the Spartans with either a banged-up Cyclones team, or at worst, another grind-it-out team in Ole Miss. If they do make it to the Elite 8, Auburn is a terrifying matchup, as the Spartans have no real way to contain Johni Broome, but there's a lot of basketball between now and then. This side of the region is certainly tricky if the Spartans aren't careful; more often than not, it's a tough bet to go against Tom Izzo in March.

BRYANT BULLDOGS PLAYER TO WATCH: EARL TIMBERLAKE



NO. 15 SEED
SOUTH
REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
American East	149th	Phil Martelli Jr	23-11 (14-2 in American East)

Timberlake has done a lot of everything for the Bulldogs all season. The America East's player of the Year is also All-Defensive First Team, while being second in the league in rebounds, assists and blocks. He's the only player in the nation to average at least 15 points, 8 rebounds, 4.5 assists and 1.5 blocks. He's the one who will make plays on the defensive end and get Bryant up the court in a hurry. Look for him to be in constant attack mode, whether it be for his own layups, or kick-outs to one of the many Bryant shooters. He's had a phenomenal season, and the Bulldogs are hoping he's got some magic left in March.



PHOTO BY: KRIS CRAIG/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Rafael Pinzon, Barry Evans	Quality Wins: @ Drexel @ Maine
Offense: C	3 Pointers: C
Defense: C	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: A+
Turnover: C	Fouls: C
Pace: A+	Ceiling: Round of 32

TEAM OVERVIEW

The name "Phil Martelli" continues to thrive in college hoops as Phil Martelli Jr has propelled the Bulldogs to their second tournament appearance in school history in just his second season at the helm. Bryant dominated the America East this season, losing just two conference games by a combined 9 points. They could be a tough out in this year's tournament with their style of play. Bryant was one of the most prolific offenses in the country this season, finishing top 18 in scoring at 82 points per game, and leading the nation in field goal attempts.

The Bulldogs love to push Ithe pace (7th in the nation in adjusted pace) through their 3 leading scorers. Another thing to note with the Bulldogs is their size. 7 of the 8 players that Martelli tends to deploy are above 6'5, allowing the Bulldogs to really poach passing lanes, and be one of the top rebounding teams in the country, which helps create a lot of their transition opportunities. This is a team that can speed you up and get you into a shootout if you let them, which is a dangerous proposition in March.

BRACKET ANALYSIS

This one could get interesting. The Bulldogs are one of the more versatile teams in the nation, and are a rare mid-major that can keep pace with the Spartans offensively. Although Michigan State is an elite defensive team, they could be liable to turn the game into a track meet, given their guards' tendency to push the pace. If Bryant wants to pull off the upset, they're going to need to do a few things. First, they'll have to keep Jackson Kohler off the boards. He's been able to help the Spartans control games by earning extra possessions and wearing down opposing defenses. Second, they'll need to keep Jeremy Fears and Tre Holloman out of the paint. Although both guards shoot under 50% from 2, their ability to move the defense and create looks for cutters, and shooters comes from the advantage creation they generate downhill.

Lastly, they cannot let Jaden Akins or Jase Richardson get open looks from beyond the arc. Earl Timberlake, Barry Evans and Kvonn Kramer are going to be crashing the glass routinely on both ends to flood the paint in the event Kohler does pick up rebounds. Most teams have struggled to get these three things done, hence why Michigan State has just 6 losses on the season. However, Bryant has plenty of size and speed, and although the most likely result is that they get blown out of the water, there's a chance they could do the unthinkable. If they do manage to pull off the upset, Marquette and New Mexico could be beatable. Timberlake is going to need to be at his best on either Donovan Dent or Kam Jones, but this Bryant team could quite possibly be Cinderella. All they need is the glass slipper.

FLORIDA GATORS



NO.1SEED WEST REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SEC	2nd	Todd Golden	28-4 (14-4 in SEC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Florida has been one of the best teams in the country this season, looking like a bona fide Final Four contender. Equipped with one of the fastest, most efficient offenses in the country, the Gators walloped over their non-conference opponents before finishing 14-4 in the SEC regular season.

After suffering a heartbreaking first-round loss against Colorado a year ago, Florida largely kept the same core. The most notable additions were Washington State transfer big Rueben Chinyelu and guard Alijah Martin, who arrived from Florida Atlantic.

The Gators have the ability to outrun and outgun almost any team in the country - they're one of the leaders in three-point frequency and a top-10 team in adjusted offensive efficiency. They also have plenty of length and versatility in the frontcourt.

Throughout the season, Florida has put together an incredible tournament resume. The SEC scheduling didn't really favour them—for example, the Gators only got to play Auburn and Alabama away, but, incredibly, they won both of these games; the victory at Auburn at the beginning of February may be the single best win that any team has achieved this season.

PLAYER TO WATCH: WALTER CLAYTON JR.

Florida has at least a few candidates, but their ultimate fortunes will likely be determined by the play of senior guard Walter Clayton Jr. He's the offensive engine for this Gator team, leading the team both in scoring and assists.

Clayton Jr. is mainly a threat from the perimeter. He gets to the basket at a decent rate but really shines through as an off-the-dribble shooter and a pick-and-roll threat. He forms one of the best guard-big duos in the country with Alex Condon, who complements Clayton Jr. with his hand-off, pick-setting ability, and a high level of feel for the game.



PHOTO BY: NOAH LANTOR/THE INDEPENDENT FLORIDA ALLIGATOR

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Alijah Martin, Alex Condon, Will Richard	Quality Wins: Tennessee 2x Alabama 2x
Offense: A+	3 Pointers: B-
Defense: A+	Free Throw: D
Field Goal: B+	Rebounding: A+
Turnover: B+	Fouls: C
Pace: B	Ceiling: National Champions

BREAKDOWN: @SHEEDINATL

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Florida roared past the SEC tournament, which is quite an achievement, knowing that this year's SEC is widely considered to be the single strongest college basketball conference ever. So, naturally, the Gators have to be considered not only for a very deep NCAA tournament run but as one of the top 3 or even top 2 candidates to win it all.

It would take a monumental shock for 1-seed Florida to lose in their first-round matchup against 16-seeded Norfolk State. It's possible that in the 2nd round, Florida will have the opportunity to dethrone the 2-time champs in UConn Huskies. Either way, they'll be strong favourites in their 2nd round matchup, whether it's UConn or Oklahoma.

For their potential Sweet Sixteen matchup, there's a possibility for a rather tricky game - Maryland, Memphis, and Colorado State are all dangerous, in-form teams coming into the tournament. Maryland could be considered the 2nd best team out of the Big Ten in the tournament, and if they end up matching up with Florida in the Sweet Sixteen, they are a team that can at least hang

with the Gators in the paint, but at the end of the day, Florida should have too much depth for the Terrapins.

A potential Elite Eight matchup with St. John's would be a fascinating clash between styles - Florida has the best offensive rating in the country, while St. John's is the best defensive team, per Kenpom.

Though St. John's isn't an elite shooting team, they could cause problems for Florida with their defense and physicality. Florida's worst loss came at Tennessee this season, who do play a similar hard-nosed style of aggressive defense. Despite being the best defense in the country, St. John's is middle-of-the-road in terms of defending the three-point line (69th, per Bart Torvik) and is no an outstanding defensive rebounding team (131st), so, as close as this matchup is, Florida should still be considered the favorite.

NORFOLK STATE SPARTANS



Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
MEAC	180th	Robert Jones	24-10 (11-3 in MEAC)

PLAYER TO WATCH: BRIAN MOORE

The Murray State transfer has been sensational for the Spartans this season. Moore is Norfolk State's leading scorer, averaging 18 points per game. They love to get him in pick and roll options with Mading to allow him to read the coverage, where he either will opt for a midrange pull-up, or attack the rim for layups. He loves to run, with 25% of his possessions coming in transition, where he averages 1.341 points per possession (88th Percentile per synergy). For Norfolk State to have any chance of an upset, Moore will need to be at his best.



PHOTO BY: MIKE CAUDILL/FREELANCE

TEAM OVERVIEW

For the third time in five years, Robert Jones has the Spartans dancing. It's going to be tough for them to win a game in this year's field. They're led by their senior backcourt, which features their two leading scorers in Brian Moore and Christian Ings. Ings and Moore are prolific slashers who control the foul game and are a major reason why the Spartans are near the top 50 in every foul/free throw category. An interesting thing to note is the game plan changes when Chris Fields is on the floor. Despite only playing about 30% of the minutes, Field is their highest usage player. They have a trio of role players who can generate stocks in Jaylani Darden, Terrence Jones, and Kuluel Mading. Fun fact: Mading's 6.8 block percentage is 84th in the nation. While the Spartans are tenacious, they have two pretty major holes: turnovers and 3 point shooting. Norfolk State turns the ball over 12.2 times per game, and their turnover % of 18.3 is 258th in the country. Beyond the arc, the Spartans are 306th in shooting percentage, and 4th worst in the nation when it comes to how many of their points come from beyond the arc. They're likely just going to be outmatched by whichever #1 seed comes their way, but miracles can happen...it's March after all.

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Christian Ings, Jalen Meyers	Quality Wins: @ High Point James Madison
Offense: C	Shooting: F
Defense: D	Free Throw: B
Field Goal: B-	Rebounding: D
Turnover: F	Fouls: D
Pace: D	Ceiling: Round of 64

BRACKET ANALYSIS

It's probably going to be a short tournament for Norfolk State this year. While they did manage to pull off an upset as a 15 seed the year before Robert Jones became the Head Coach, this is a nearly impossible challenge. Norfolk State relies on their offensive rebounding, and ability to get to the rim, while being a woeful 3 point shooting team. On top of all of that, they don't take good enough care of the ball to be able to go toe-to-toe with the hyper-efficient Gator offense. Although that has been a recipe for success in the MEAC, it's just not going to be a sustainable model to beat a team like Florida.

The Gators have multiple centers who can protect the rim in Alex Condon and Ruben Chinyelu. Their backcourt pairing of Will Richard and Walter Clayton will completely overwhelm Christian Ings and Brian Moore. If Norfolk State even wants a chance her they're going to need to be able to outscore Florida. The Gators have been held under 70 points just once all season, and it was be a stifling Tennessee defense that is much better equipped to handle what Florida can throw at you. If I'm Robert Jones, I'm watching that Florida-Tennessee game on repeat in the hopes that maybe there's something to be uncovered. It's likely we see Norfolk State try to run zone, since they can't really go man for man with Florida. It's certainly a big deal for Norfolk State to add another NCAA tournament appearance to their belt regardless of how short lived it may be, but the harsh reality is that this game may be over by halftime.

UCONN HUSKIES



NO. 8 SEED WEST REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big East	35th	Dan Hurley	23-10 (14-6 in Big East)

TEAM OVERVIEW

It's been an up-and-down season for the two-time defending champion UConn Huskies. They won back-to-back titles in 2023 and 2024 in dominating fashion, winning all 12 NCAA tournament games by double digits.

Last season they went 37-3 overall, 18-2 in Big East play.

However, this season it's been rocky, as they've gone 19-9 (11-6 in conference play) so far.

In UConn's defense lost four starters from last year's team.
Two of those guys were top-ten draft picks (Stephon Castle and Donovan Clingan), and two of them were secondround picks (Cam Spencer and Tristen Newton).
The Huskies only returned one starter (Alex Karaban) and two key reserves (Hassan Diarra and Samson Johnson).
Those three guys have had to take on much larger roles this season, and they have often seemed to struggle a bit to handle the larger role.

UConn lost three in a row at the Maui Invitational, and it looked pretty bad. But Coach Hurley got the team back on track, as they won eight games in a row. Since then, it's been up and down—some good games and some not-so-good games.

It'll be interesting to see if they can get hot come tournament time like they have the previous 2 seasons.

PLAYER TO WATCH: LIAM MCNEELEY

It says a lot about how good McNeeley is that he's on a team coming off back-to-back championships but is their leading scorer (at 15.4 PPG). Everyone already knew that McNeeley could shoot, but the 2 areas where his play has been even better than anticipated are his ability to drive to the basket and draw fouls (very high FTr of 47.9) and his connective passing ability (assist % of 14.3).

Of course, McNeeley can also really shoot it from beyond the arc (35.2% on 10.13PA per 100 possessions) and from the free-throw line (86.7%). McNeeley also plays with a lot of passion and fire, often waving his arms around to get the crowd fired up - sort of like what we saw last season from Cam Spencer.



PHOTO BY: JESSICA HILL/AP PHOTO

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Alex Karaban, Hassan Diarra,	Quality Wins: Gonzaga Marquette x2
Offense: A	3 Pointers: B-
Defense: B-	Free Throw: A
Field Goal: A-	Rebounding: C
Turnover: C	Fouls: F
Pace: F	Ceiling: Round of 32

BRACKET ANALYSIS

UConn is the 8 seed in the West region. They will take on Oklahoma in the Round of 64. I think that should be a pretty competitive game. Oklahoma has pretty good depth. They have some shooters, they have some size. But ultimately, I see the Huskies winning that game. I don't see Dan Hurley losing in the first round, coming off back-to-back championships. I think Hurley and his staff will have a good game plan for containing Oklahoma point guard Jeremiah Fears. Fears has the ball in his hands a lot. The Sooners rely on him a ton. But I think Hurley will be prepared to handle Fears, as he'll likely have Hassan Diarra stick to Fears like glue all game. Diarra is an excellent point-of-attack defender, who also happens to be over 5 years older than Fears. If Diarra is able to really lock Fears up, it could be a long game for Oklahoma.

If UConn does get past the Sooners, it will likely meet top-seeded Florida in the second round. Anything is possible (especially during March Madness), but I do not see the Huskies getting past the Gators. This Florida team is just so good—they really seem like a team on a mission. I don't really see Florida getting beat—unless maybe to a team like Duke, Auburn, Alabama, or Houston. If UConn is able to defeat Florida somehow, Diarra will likely be a key reason. Just like the Huskies will use Diarra to try and shut down Fears, in a potential UConn/Florida matchup, it'll likely be Diarra getting the assignment of defending Walter Clayton Jr. Fears and Clayton Jr - that's two of the best point guards in college basketball. Diarra will have his hands full, but he's a good defender, and he's a 2-time national champion, so he should be up to the task.

BREAKDOWN: @ONBALLCREATOR

OKLAHOMA SOONERS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SEC	38th	Porter Moser	20-13 (6-12 in SEC)

PLAYER TO WATCH: JEREMIAH FEARS

As I mentioned before, Fears is the engine that drives this team. He plays at a frenetic pace, which can at times lead to some turnover issues, but his ability to get to the rim, almost at will, generate looks for his teammates, and get to the foul line make him dynamic. Teams are going to want Fears to shoot the 3, where he's making them at a 27% clip, rather than allowing him inside, where he draws all of his fouls and hits 85% of his FTs. On his best days, the Sooners can hang with anyone in the country, but a heavy turnover, low FTA game is one of Oklahoma's worst Fears.



PHOTO BY: JENNA BURRESS/OU DAILY

TEAM OVERVIEW

It's rare for 1 freshman to change the entire trajectory of a season, but when Jeremiah Fears comes calling, you pick up the phone. The Sooners were projected to be bottom feeders in a loaded SEC, and although they've struggled their way through conference play, an electrifying start to the season has propelled them to an at-large bid. Pace and space has been the name of the game for the Sooners. They're a top 50 3-point shooting team in the country through role players such as Bryson Goodine (43.9%) and Duke Miles (43.3%). Jalon Moore has taken major leaps to

become a fantastic scorer, while Kobe Elvas helps Fears run the show. The Sooners thrive in transition, where they get to the line consistently or look to these open shooters. They're a great bet in close games where FT shooting matters, as they shoot 80% as a team. However, there are some causes for concern. While both Sam Godwin and Luke Northweather have been feasible, the interior is definitely a weakness. They're going to have issues against teams that can play slow and grind out extra possessions. However, if Fears can continue to shine when the lights are the

brightest, they could certainly steal a game or two in March.

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Jalon Moore, Sam Godwin	Quality Wins: Arizona, Missouri
Offense: A-	3 Pointers: B+
Defense: B	Free Throw: A+
Field Goal: B+	Rebounding: F
Turnover: C	Fouls: F
Pace: C	Ceiling: Round of 32

BRACKET ANALYSIS

This could not have been a more brutal draw for Oklahoma for their first (and potentially even second) game. After scratching and clawing their way into the tournament, the Sooners find themselves matched up against the back-to-back defending champs, who will likely feel disrespected as a 9 seed. The Sooners are going to need to speed the game up as much as possible and wear out the UConn bigs. If it turns into a halfcourt battle, Tarris Reed and Samson Johnson are going to have a field day against Mohamed Wague and Luke Norweather. The Huskies are 36th in the country at limiting opposing shooters, but a quicker pace could net more open transition looks for Jalon Moore, Duke Miles and Bryson Goodine.

Fears is going to have to really take care of the ball and be precise with his reads. They'll need a performance resembling his 27 point 10 assist masterclass against Mississippi State if they want to escape with a win.

Even if they get past UConn, things still look bleak for the Sooners. They face a Florida team that annihilated them in Gainesville about a month ago. The Sooners couldn't get anything going beyond the arc, and they were down as much as 29 to a dominant Gator roster. It's going to be extremely difficult to obtain a different result. The Gators are just significantly more talented, and have a lot more depth. Fears is going to be overwhelmed by the combination of Walter Clayton, Will Richard and Alijah Martin, while the Sooners' soft interior will assuredly be punctured by the likes of Alex Condon (who actually missed that game) and Thomas Haugh. It's possible Oklahoma wins a game this week, but it's highly unlikely they'll win a second.

MEMPHIS TIGERS NO. 5 SEED WEST

TEAM INFO

REGION

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
AAC	51st	Penny Hardaway	27-5 (16-2 in AAC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Backcourt play typically wins games in March, and Memphis has a dynamic backcourt with All-AAC First teamers PJ Haggerty and Tyrese Hunter. While winning the AAC isn't anything to hang their hat on, the Tigers had the fourth hardest non-conference strength of schedule in the country, as they finished in second place in the Maui Invitational, had an overtime win over Clemson, and defeated Ole Miss in the mid-south rivalry.

While Memphis just ran the table in the AAC tournament, they beat Tulane by I and Wichita State by 3 before dismantling UAB in the second half of the championship game. Winning close games is a skill, but Memphis is finding ways to squeak by against inferior opponents this year.

Another concern about Memphis is that they aren't elite on either side of the ball. Offensively, Memphis is 6th in the nation in three-point percentage, as they shoot 38.8% from three. Despite the elite percentage, Memphis shoots just 20 threes per game, which is near the bottom of the nation. The Tigers also frequently turn the ball over, as they cough it up 14 times per game, also near the bottom of the nation. The blueprint for beating the Tigers is simple: make them take tough shots from deep and force them to turn it over.

PLAYER TO WATCH: PJ HAGGERTY

Haggerty, the nation's fifth-leading scorer, gets to the free throw line at will, shooting nearly 8 free throws per game. While Haggerty won National Freshman of the Year last year for Tulsa, he vastly improved his arsenal, as his three point percentage increased from 29% to nearly 42%. This unleashes Haggerty as a true three-level scorer, as he's comfortable getting downhill to attack the basket and draw the foul, but his shooting is now a threat as well. Haggerty's 51% from two-point range would be more concerning if he didn't draw 6 fouls per 40 minutes, as well as his free throw rate increasing against top 50 competition.



TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Dain Dainja, Tyrese Hunter	Quality Wins: @ Clemson Ole Miss
Offense: B	3 Pointers: A
Defense: B+	Free Throw : D
Field Goal: B	Rebounding: B-
Turnover: F	Fouls: C
Pace: A-	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

The committee didn't do Memphis any favors, as Colorado State has won 10 in a row and enters the tournament as the second-hottest team in America (behind Florida). Additionally, it's worth noting that Memphis' Tyrese Hunter missed the AAC Championship, and his status going forward is questionable. Meanwhile, Colorado State has convincingly been the best team in the Mountain West for about a month now. While PJ Haggerty is an X factor for Memphis, Nique Clifford is an even bigger force for the Rams. In fact, Clifford is 6th in KenPom's National Player of the Year rankings. Clifford averaged 25 points per game in the Mountain West tournament, while Haggerty scored 27.7 points per in the AAC tournament, which included a 42-point performance. This mid-major matchup has no shortage of star talent, and this game should come down to who can better contain the other team's star.

If the Tigers survive the Rams, then they'll have a Round of 32 matchup against Maryland or Grand Canyon. It'll likely be Maryland, which matches up well against Memphis. For their opponents, covering PJ Haggerty is always a collective effort, but Maryland's primary defender on Haggerty would likely be Ja'Kobi Gillespie. Gillespie doesn't foul often, and Haggerty relies on getting to the free-throw line. Gillespie commits just 2.4 fouls per 40 minutes. If Haggerty is neutralized, then Memphis will rely heavily on Dain Dainja, who would have his hands full while covering Maryland's Derik Queen along and Julian Reese. While Memphis had a successful season, especially in non-conference play, it appears their ceiling is the Round of 32, with a Round of 64 upset loss to Colorado State the most likely outcome.

BREAKDOWN: @THE_NBAGELL

COLORADO STATE RAMS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Mountain West	42nd	Niko Medved	25-9 (16-4 in Mountain West)

TEAM OVERVIEW

After winning the Mountain West Conference Tournament, the Colorado State Rams enter the 2025 NCAA Tournament as an automatic bid. But more notably, the Rams are riding a 10-game winning streak (7-0 to finish the regular season; 3-0 in MWC Tournament play) and are poised to be a difficult 1st round opponent. However, when compared to the field, Colorado State appears to be a relatively average team. They possess the 42nd-ranked Net Rating in Division I which accounts for their 44th-ranked offense (116.2 ORTG) and 49th-ranked defense (98.9 DRTG), per KenPom. Coach Niko Medved has his Rams executing a variation of the Princeton offense. With Nique Clifford serving as the offensive catalyst, the Rams set several off-ball screens to create space for unassisted cuts to the rim. Likewise, their cross-screens open up passing lanes for C&S 3-pointers. But given their lack of above average 3PT shooters, the Rams rely on using their speed and athleticism to muscle their way to points in the paint. On defense, CSU leans into a 3-2 zone scheme to make up for their lack of traditional rim protectors. By clogging up the paint, outside of the restricted circle, the Rams minimize the number of drives or lobs towards the rim.

PLAYER TO WATCH: NIQUE CLIFFORD

It is no secret that the Rams will go as far as Senior G/F Nique Clifford takes them. At 6'6", 200 lb, the Colorado Springs native leads the Rams in scoring (18.8 ppg), rebounding (9.8 rpg), assists (4.4 apg) and steals (1.2 spg); and for good measure, he's second in blocks! Despite having a career high 27.0% usage rate, Clifford has never been more efficient and productive, as evidenced by his career-best 61.3 TS% as well as his 7.0 OBPM. While it may seem like the Rams operate out of a heliocentric offense, Clifford is comfortable playing off of guards Jalen Lake and Kyan Evans. Because Clifford is both the team's alpha as well as their Swiss Army knife, he can function as the primary playmaker, secondary facilitator, or play-finisher in any given possession.



PHOTO BY: ISAIAH J. DOWNING/ USA TODAY SPORTS

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Jalen Lake, Kyan Evans	Quality Wins: @ Boise St @ Nevada
Offense: B+	3 Pointers: B
Defense: B+	Free Throw: A-
Field Goal: A-	Rebounding: D
Turnover: C	Fouls: C
Pace: F	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

No other team in the 2025 NCAA Tournament exemplifies the platitude "Start Slow, Finish Fast" better than the Colorado State Rams. Despite a pedestrian start to the regular season, the Rams enter the tournament as winners of 10 straight games, including a surprising upset victory in the Mountain West Finals. Like most mid-major conference champions, Colorado State is a somewhat underrated 12-seed. The Rams finished the regular season with the 56th best 3PT% in the nation and 31st best 2PT%. On defense, the Rams have held opponents to 67.1 points per game despite not forcing many turnovers. At their core, the Rams thrive by being solid but not spectacular. In contrast, the 5-seed Memphis Tigers' season has been marked by periods of brilliance interspersed with maddening volatility. Whereas Colorado State largely overachieved relative to expectations, the Memphis Tigers have played a full season of close games - playing up or down to the level of their competition. The Tigers' defense has held opponents to 32.4% from 3PT, but their paint protection has been inconsistent and passive from game to game. Ultimately, Colorado State's best chance at pulling off another upset win is to use Memphis' strengths against them. The Tigers will likely make it a point to hug up on the perimeter and aggressively run Kyan Evans and Jalen Lake off the 3PT line. If/when this happens, the two guards should be looking to attack the closeouts and pull-up for a midrange shot or find Nique Clifford on the elbow to allow him to attack downhill. The Rams will likely have to follow this formula if they advance to the Round of 32. Both Maryland and Grand Canyon University lack true rim protectors, so creating driving lanes for Clifford will be crucial to Rams' offensive

success.

BREAKDOWN: @CP3_777

MARYLAND TERRAPINS



NO. 4 SEED WEST REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big 10	12th	Kevin WIllard	24-7 (14-6 in Big 10)

TEAM OVERVIEW

The 2024-2025 Maryland Terrapins have posted their best season under head coach Kevin Willard, powered by their starting five, affectionately known by their fans as the "Crab Five". The starting lineup of Ja'Kobi Gillespie, Selton Miguel, Rodney Rice, JuJu Reese and Derik Queen has arguably been the best starting five lineup in College Park since 2020 or even 2002. The Maryland Terrapins' worst loss on the season is a six-point loss at Washington the day after New Years; every other loss on the season for the Terps has been either a two-possession loss or a last second game winner. The Terrapins play a hard-nosed defense-into-offense style and, per KenPom, have a top thirty offense and defense nationally. Where Maryland really takes advantage of their opponents is in their frontcourt, where starters Derik Queen and Julian Reese, along with key bench-cogs Tafara Gapare and Jordan Geronimo form a diverse frontcourt quartet that, behind Reese and Queen, is one of the best in the country. When Maryland's backcourt is hitting perimeter shots, this team can be extremely difficult to contain. Gillespie, Rice and Miguel combined are shooting above 40% from behind the arc this season.

The Maryland Terrapins will be a dangerous team in late

March, especially if they are hitting their perimeter shots.

PLAYER TO WATCH: DERIK QUEEN

Derik Queen is the best Maryland freshman basketball player this century and one of the best all time in College Park. Queen should be the frontrunner to take home Big Ten Freshman of the Year amongst other honors and will likely be a lottery pick in the upcoming NBA draft. Queen is gifted offensively. His passing ability as a big is well above average and his cerebral feel on offense is already at a professional level. When it comes to scoring, his touch around the basket is strong and his hands are some of the best in the country. Naturally, Queen's continued rise has ran parallel with Maryland's success this season. Can the talented freshman lead the Terps into late April basketball?



PHOTO BY: REGGIE HILDRED/IMAGN IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Ja'Kobi Gillespie, Julian Reese	Quality Wins: UCLA, Illinois 2x
Offense: A-	3 Pointers: A-
Defense: A+	Free Throw: B
Field Goal: B	Rebounding : C
Turnover: A-	Fouls: A-
Pace: B	Ceiling: Elite 8

BRACKET ANALYSIS

It's going to take a lot to beat this Maryland team in March. The 2 big lineup with Reese and Queen is going to give the Antelopes fits. While Duke Brennan and Jakobe Coles are both capable of matching up size-wise, the skill level of both Maryland forwards will likely prove to be overwhelming for Grand Canyon. Both of these teams love to push the pace, so while it will be a high scoring affair, as long as Maryland can keep some distance, they shouldn't be in too much trouble. Grand Canyon is always dangerous due to the constant threat of Tyon-Grant Foster, but one man can't beat an army, and the Terrapins have nine guys chomping at the bit.

The priority for the Terps is to defend without fouling. Grand Canyon is 7th in the country in fouls per field goal attempt, with multiple players achieving a free throw rate over 50. If they don't get tripped up, the next round matchups look a lot more enticing. Colorado State has a dangerous trio of Rashaan Mbemba, Nique Clifford and Jaylen Crocker Johnson, but if the Terps can continue to shoot the ball well, there's going to be plenty of space for Queen and Reese to operate 1 on 1. If Memphis gets through, PJ Haggerty could give Maryland trouble, but outside of him, the matchup leans heavily in Maryland's favor. Florida is likely to be Maryland's biggest challenge. They have the size to match up on the interior, and although Rice, Miguel, and Gillespie have been sensational, Walter Clayton, Will Richard, and Alijah Martin are even better. If Florida somehow goes down, we could see Maryland in their first Elite 8 since 2002.

GRAND CANYON LOPES



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
WAC	93rd	Bryce Drew	26-7 (13-3 in WAC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Bryce Drew has established Grand Canyon University as a consistent force in college basketball, guiding the team to over 20 wins in each of the past four seasons. Entering the WAC Tournament as the 2-seed, GCU faced a strong Utah Valley team but ultimately secured the WAC title, with their experience playing a pivotal role in the victory. With back-to-back March Madness appearances, the Lopes are poised for another deep run this year. Returning over 60% of last season's minutes and scoring, the team has a solid foundation of experienced players.

Grand Canyon finished the season with an impressive 26-7 record, including a 13-3 mark in conference play. The team ranked 55th in points scored and 90th in points allowed, showing their balanced offensive and defensive approach. GCU's experience and depth make them a formidable tournament contender. Key players like Tyon Grant-Foster and JaKobi Coles will lead the charge, using their leadership and skill to make a deep run. With their blend of talent and poise, this experienced team will be a tough matchup for any opponent.

PLAYER TO WATCH: TYON GRANT-FOSTER

Tyon Grant-Foster, the WAC Player of the Year last season, is a key leader for Grand Canyon University. Although his efficiency has dipped this season, he remains a strong offensive and defensive force, averaging 14.5 points per game with shooting splits of 39.9/21.7/68.4. For GCU to succeed, Grant-Foster must be the primary offensive contributor. The team is 9-1 when he shoots 50% or better from the floor, highlighting his importance. His ability to push the pace and lock down on defense will be crucial as he takes on any opponent in his path. Expect him to step up and lead GCU deep into March.



PHOTO BY: KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Jakobi Coles, Ray Harrison	Quality Wins: @ Seattle Stanford
Offense: C	3 Pointers: F
Defense: B	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: B
Turnover: F	Fouls: C
Pace: A	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Grand Canyon University (GCU) enters the 3-14 matchup with low expectations but plenty of potential. With an experienced team that reached the Round of 32 last season, the Lopes are determined to pull off an upset. GCU ranks in the top 100 in both offense and defense, making them a balanced squad, but they will need to contend with the size and physicality of Maryland. GCU's strategy will focus on limiting Maryland's interior game and pushing the tempo. However, Maryland's well-rounded team, ranking in the top 50 in both offense and defense, makes them the favorites. While GCU matches up decently, Maryland's advantages in nearly every category make them the stronger team. This 4-13 matchup is crucial, as the winner has a good chance to advance to the Sweet Sixteen. Despite GCU's solid play, Maryland's depth and experience should see them through. If GCU upsets Maryland, they'd face either Memphis or Colorado State. Memphis is a streaky, experienced team, while Colorado State, fresh off a MWC Championship, will also pose a challenge. If Tyon Grant-Foster plays at a high level, GCU could pull off another surprise. GCU's floor is a first-round exit. Maryland's physicality and experience make them the heavy favorite. If GCU can upset Maryland and carry momentum, they could make a deep run to the Sweet Sixteen, depending on their offensive performance.

MISSOURI TIGERS



NO. 6 SEED WEST REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SEC	15th	Dennis Gates	22-11 (10-8 in SEC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Everybody loves a comeback story, and the Missouri Tigers have bounced back in a major way after a dismal 2023-2024 season. At this time last year, Coach Dennis Gates saw his Tigers finish 0-18 in SEC play. But not all was lost last season, as Coach Gates was able to foster chemistry and connectivity among his squad while making some key additions like Duke transfer Mark Mitchell. Despite playing in one of the most competitive conferences, the Tigers finished the season at 22-11 and 10-8 in SEC play. And although that record was only good enough for a 6th place finish in the SEC, the Tigers are ranked 15th in the nation by KenPom Net Rating on the strength of their 5th-ranked offense (125.3 ORTG). The Tigers bring one of the most explosive and efficient offenses in Division I. With five players that shoot at least 40% from 3PT, the Tigers can play uptempo in 5-out formations or 4-out, 1-in sets that lead to pointblank layups or dunks. Likewise, Missouri use a highpressure defensive scheme that forces opponents to rush their sets. In the absence of traditional rim protection, the Tigers are proficient at stalking the passing lanes. By forcing 9.4 steals per game (11th most in the nation), the Tigers transition scoring opportunities often come in bunches.

PLAYER TO WATCH: CALEB GRILL

In his second year at Missouri after having transferred from lowa State, Senior G Caleb Grill has had the best season of his entire basketball career. Despite coming off the bench, Grill is the Tigers' 2nd-leading scorer and has achieved career highs in 2PT%, 3PT%, and FT%. Grill has worn many hats during his Missouri tenure. Last season, Grill assumed the energy and glue-guy role. When this season began, he was the spark off the bench. And as the Tigers enter the 2025 NCAA Tournament, Grill finds himself as the offensive catalyst for his squad. The numbers are very telling when it comes to Caleb Grill's scoring; the Tigers are 7-1 when Grill scores 20 or more points. The Tigers will need Grill to continue being aggressive so that his gravity will force defenders to overhelp, and thus create rim runs and open C&S shots.



PHOTO BY: WESLEY HALE/IMAGN IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Mark Mitchell, Tamar Bates,	Quality Wins: Kansas Alabama
Offense: A+	3 Pointers: B+
Defense: B	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: A	Rebounding: D
Turnover: B+	Fouls: D
Pace: C	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

The 6 vs 11 matchup in the West Region is shaping up to be a case of "The Unstoppable Force vs The Immovable Object". The 6-seed Missouri Tigers bring their high-octane offense that averages 84.5 points per game (9th best in Division I). In contrast, the Drake Bulldogs bring their stifling and physical brand of defense that limits opponents to 58.4 points per game - the least amount of points allowed by any team in the nation. To say the least, this clash of styles will test each team's ability to do what they do best. Between Caleb Grill, Tamar Bates, Anthony Robinson II, Marques Warrick, and Marcus Allen, the Tigers have five players that average at least 40% from 3PT. However, Drake not only holds their opponents to 31.0% from 3PT, they also limit opponents to a modest 18.2 3PA per game. By forcing their opponents to take shots within the arc, Drake consistently controls pace and keeps games to a manageable score. In order to counter Drake's ball-pressure and blitzing scheme, the Tigers have to commit to ball movement and player movement off the ball from the start of the game. Instead of spotting up for C&S 3PTs, Missouri's shooters must be deliberate in their cross-screens and/or flares. This will not only shift Drake's base defense, but also set up secondary action above the break or on the weakside. On defense, Missouri has to limit Drake to one-and-done possessions. The Bulldogs' offense is very efficient (48.1 FG%, 29th-best), but they also play at a slow pace. By minimizing Drake's second-chance opportunities, the Tigers decrease the likelihood that star G Bennett Stirtz gets hot. Stirtz is one of two Bulldogs that averages double-digit points (19.1 ppg). If Missouri can keep Stirtz in check, they will have a good shot at advancing to the Round of 32

where the winner of Texas A&M vs N.C. Wilmington awaits. **BREAKDOWN: @CP3_777**

DRAKE BULLDOGS



NO. 11 SEED WEST REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
MVC	58th	Ben McCollum	30-3 (17-3 in MVC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

The MVC Champion Drake Bulldogs just completed a remarkable season which saw them finish with a 30-3 overall record (30 wins is a program record), and a 17-3 record in the Missouri Valley Conference. Drake won its 3rd straight MVC conference championship, but its first under new coach Ben McCollum, who came to Drake this season after a dominant 15 year career at Division II Northwest Missouri State, where he won 4 national championships. The Bulldogs piled on the accolades this season, with Coach McCollum winning MVC coach of the year, and Bennett Stirtz, who followed his coach to Drake from Northwest Missouri State, won both the Newcomer of the Year award and the Larry Bird Player of the Year award. Stirtz brought along 3 other teammates from Division II, but it is very clear that they can hold their own, with wins over Miami, Vanderbilt and Kansas State this season. Stylistically, Drake plays slow, intentional half court basketball. In fact, Drake ranks dead last nationally in adjusted tempo at 58.6, while being highly ranked in defensive efficiency and rebounding. Simply, Drake makes every possession count. One could look at Houston or past Virginia teams for similarities.

PLAYER TO WATCH: BENNETT STIRTZ

DII Transfer Bennett Stirtz took the reins of this team in the first season of the post-Devries era and took the Missouri Valley by storm. How dominant was he? He led the conference in points, steals, and assists. Stirtz averaged 19.1 points per game on 49% shooting and almost 39% from 3. And he absolutely shows up for the big games, with point totals of 21 and 22 against Miami and Kansas State, respectfully. Stirtz was well rewarded for his efforts, too, winning the Larry Bird Player of the Year award for the best player in the MVC as well as Newcomer of the Year. And last year he was playing in Division II. He's the type of all-around guy you want going into March Madness as a mid-major looking to mix things up and make a run in the tournament.



PHOTO BY: DRAKE ATHLETICS

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Mitch Mascari, Daniel Abreu	Quality Wins: Vanderbilt Kansas State
Offense: B	3 Pointers: C
Defense: B+	Free Throw: D
Field Goal: B	Rebounding: F
Turnover: F	Fouls: F
Pace: F	Ceiling: Round of 32

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Drake's heroic season landed them an 11-seed in the West bracket of this year's tournament. Matched with 6-seeded Missouri in Wichita, Drake is a popular upset in many brackets. It will be interesting to see which team is able to dominate the style of play, as Missouri will look to push the play and increase scoring opportunities, while Drake will look to keep the game in the half court and exhaust the Tigers with their suffocating defense.

If Drake is to win this game and pull of the upset, it will be important for them to hit their shots early, as Missouri absolutely has the guns to get off to maximize off of missed shots and turnovers and get off to an early lead, and we know from experience that teams like Drake aren't necessarily built for comebacks. One thing that Drake has going for them is that even though they are relatively small, Missouri doesn't really have much of a size advantage, save for Mark Mitchell, and doesn't rebound well as a team. If Drake can force the tempo and guard the perimeter like they have all season, I like them to advance and potentially give another tough game to Texas Tech and Coach McCasland.

TEXAS TECH RED RAIDERS



NO. 3 SEED
WEST
REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big 12	7th	Grant McCasland	25-8 (14-5 in Big 12)

TEAM OVERVIEW

My favorite Final Four sleeper coming into this season is a sleeper no more. Texas Tech is a true final four contender, as there's nothing the Red Raiders can't do. They can defend their opponents in a variety of ways. They can shoot, they can pass, and they can rebound.

Tech averages 81.1 points per game, good for 29th in the nation, while also shooting 37.8% from three. The Red Raiders are 25th in the nation in assists per game and 20th in three point percentage. They also truly go eight deep in their rotation, as each rotation player logs at least 17 minutes per night. Over this season Tech has garnered some big wins, including victories over Arizona, Kansas, and a nice road win against Houston.

Texas Tech's most frequent lineup involves playing small ball with Big 12 Player of the Year, JT Toppin at center and 6'6" Darrion Williams at the four. What Texas Tech lacks in size, they make up in versatility. Also, shout out to freshman Christian Anderson, who has had a breakout February, averaging 14.1 points per game since February 8th.

PLAYER TO WATCH: JT TOPPIN

Toppin, the New Mexico transfer, was Mountain West Conference Freshman of the Year last season as well as a finalist for the Kyle Macy National Freshman of the Year. As a sophomore, Toppin won Big 12 Player of the Year in his new home. Over the past nine games, he has averaged 24.4 points and 11 rebounds, while being the focal point of Tech's 7th ranked offense, per KenPom.

While standing at 6'9", Toppin plays bigger than his size and plays roughly 60% of his minutes at the center spot for the Red Raiders. Toppin is also top 35 in the nation among all division one players in field goal percentage, and 22nd in the country in 2P FG% for all players who have shot at least 250 two point attempts.



PHOTO BY: WILLIAM PURNELL/IMAGN IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Darrion Williams, Chance McMillan	Quality Wins: @ Houston Arizona
Offense: A+	3 Pointers: A
Defense: B+	Free Throw: B
Field Goal: A-	Rebounding: C
Turnover: B+	Fouls: C
Pace: F	Ceiling: Final Four

BRACKET ANALYSIS

As stated above, Texas Tech is a true Final Four threat. In the first round, the Red Raiders shouldn't have much of an issue with UNCW, as the Seahawks rely heavily on getting to the free throw line and Tech is disciplined enough defensively to not allow UNCW to get comfortable. Additionally, UNCW doesn't have that 'star power' that a Cinderella team typically needs to upset a team of Tech's caliber.

While the Missouri/Drake matchup can go either way, both could pose a threat to Tech. However, Tech's best attribute is their versatility and their depth. Even when Tech plays small with Toppin at the five, neither of those teams would be able to match up with the combo of him and Darrion Williams.

In the Sweet 16, Tech will likely face off against St. John's, who I personally think Tech matches up VERY well with. St. John's entire identity is having their defense generate their offense by forcing turnovers and tough shots. Tech takes care of the ball, they are very well coached, and they would have a favorable matchup from three, as St. John's shoots less than 30% from three on the season. Additionally, St. John's plays at a much faster pace than Texas Tech, so the game could come down to who controls the tempo in their favor.

If they get past St. John's, then Tech could have a must-see-TV matchup against #1 seed Florida. Florida is the #1 ranked offense in college basketball and while Grant McCasland is a defensive-minded coach, his team may not be able to possess the tools to stop Florida's offense. However, despite not loving Tech in a matchup against Florida, I firmly believe they are the best 3 seed in the tournament and have the best chance of any team that isn't a 1 or 2 seed of cutting down the nets.

BREAKDOWN: @THE_NBAGELL

UNC WILMINGTON SEAHAWKS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
CAA	105th	Takayo Siddle	25-7 (14-4 in CAA)

TEAM OVERVIEW

The Seahawks have been one of the better mid-major teams over Takayo Siddle's tenure. Over the last four years, UNC Wilmington has gone 99-36, yet this is the first time they'll be dancing. And they're in the tournament to make noise. Leading scorer Donovan Newby averages 32 minutes per game. After him, there are nine players averaging 19 minutes or more, none playing more than 23.8 minutes per game. With that said, the Seahawks are deep, as they're 21st in bench points per game and 48th in bench minutes. Most of UNCW's offense comes from drawing fouls, as they average 22.1 free throw attempts per game, and they shoot 75.3% as a team at the line. The Seahawks also went 24-5 when scoring 69 points or more in a game. They also take care of the ball, as their A:TO ratio is 1.39, which is good for 57th in the nation. Taking care of the ball, getting good shots, and getting to the free throw line have seemed to be UNCW's ingredients for success this season, and it can be expected that this would be their recipe for a Cinderella run as well.

PLAYER TO WATCH: DONOVAN NEWBY

Newby will never be a rim finisher, and due to his 67, 185 lb size, he draws fouls to compensate. In order for the Seahawks to maximize their potential, Newby needs his efficiency numbers to improve. Newby shot just 33.8% from two-point range in conference play this year, and while he's done an excellent job taking care of the ball and drawing fouls to get to the line, he'll need to improve on that number. In order to improve, Newby will need his teammates to make plays for him, as less than 20% of his two-pointers were assisted, while the catch-and-shoot specialist had 80% of his three-pointers assisted.



PHOTO BY: JORDAN PRATHER/USA TODAY SPORTS

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Khamari McGriff, Harlan Obioha	Quality Win: @ Charleston
Offense: B-	3 Pointers: D
Defense: C	Free Throw: B-
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: A-
Turnover: B-	Fouls: C
Pace: F	Ceiling: Round of 64

BRACKET ANALYSIS

If UNC Wilmington's offense is Superman, then Grant McCasland will be kryptonite. While Takayo Siddle's squad finally is headed to the Big Dance, this is probably the worst team Siddle has had over the past three seasons. With that said, UNCW's matchup against Texas Tech is one of the more unlikely upsets. UNCW just doesn't have the star power. Despite being the CAA representatives in the tournament, the Seahawks didn't have a single member on any of the three all-league teams or any all-defensive team. As good as Donovan Newby is, he cannot lead the Seahawks to victory over a team like Texas Tech, which has true national title aspirations.

On offense, the Seahawks rely on plenty of second-chance points behind big man Harlan Obioha's offensive rebounding. His life will be a lot more difficult when he'll be fighting for boards with JT Toppin. But on the perimeter, UNCW is a little intriguing for a matchup against Tech. Out of the top seven in their rotation, five of those players are between 6'5"- 6"7". That's the sort of length that can disrupt Texas Tech on the perimeter. Tech shoots 38% from three and 54.3% from two-point range, so disrupting them on the perimeter may be a key to success. Obioha will have his hands full against Toppin, as will Khamari McGrith with Darrion Williams. As previously stated, Texas Tech is a true threat to cut down the nets in April, and what the Seahawks have in length and size, they lack in true star power. Regardless, it would need to be a collective effort to beat the Red Raiders, but this is one that you should feel confident about when selecting your brackets. Take Texas Tech.

KANSAS JAYHAWKS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big 12	21st	Bill Self	21-12 (11-9 in Big 12)

TEAM OVERVIEW

The Kansas Jayhawks haven't exactly had the dominant season they expected to have. Kansas, boasting one of the strongest (and most expensive) classes in the country, probably did not expect to finish barely above .500 in conference play. They dropped some games where they should've won, but if you look at their losses collectively, they are not as bad as they seem. Losses to Utah and Kansas State just should've never happened. Losing to teams like Houston, Iowa State, Baylor, and Texas Tech is not a bad thing, though. With wins over Duke, Michigan State, and recently Arizona, I wouldn't count the Jayhawks all the way out. They will have to find a rhythm on offense as it hasn't been quite the level they expected pre-season. What they can lean on, though, is their defense, which ranks in the top 10 in the country. The experienced backcourt and the very productive frontcourt should make everyone wary of this Kansas team in the postseason. I expect the likes of Zeke Mayo and Dajuan Harris to be pivotal in any success for this team. The frontcourt of Hunter Dickinson, KJ Adams, and Flory Bidunga should help Kansas feel confident when matching up with anybody. The X-factors are the two underperforming transfer wings, Rylen Griffen and AJ Storr. If those two can hit shots and defend while playing smart, I can see real success for the Jayhawks.

PLAYER TO WATCH: ZEKE MAYO

A player who will be everything for Kansas is 6'4 Combo Guard Zeke Mayo. One of the best transfers in the country will be in charge of putting reliable perimeter defenders in the fire in March. Mayo has been a lethal scorer and has made the most of his transfer up. Mayo is averaging 14 points, 5 rebounds, and 3 assists on 41% shooting from the 3-point line. Mayo solidified himself at the end of this year with an All-Big 12 third-team nod. If he can be relied upon to hit shots and make plays while the rest of the team does their job, then the Kansas offense should run as well as it has ever been this year.



PHOTO BY: EVERT NELSON/THE CAPITAL JOURNAL VIA IMAGN IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Hunter Dickinson, DJ Harris	Quality Wins: Duke Michigan State
Offense: B+	3 Pointers: C
Defense: A	Free Throw: D
Field Goal: B-	Rebounding: B+
Turnover: C	Fouls: B
Pace: C	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Coming in with the 7th seed, the Jayhawks find themselves in a less-than-ideal spot for a deep tourney run. The Jayhawks have dropped some easily winnable games this year. Their path this March as a 7th seed won't make the postseason any kinder (obviously). Kansas defense will have to carry them through every single game. The good thing is that defense can win you games in this tournament. Though the offense hasn't been amazing, the shooting from the perimeter is not bad whatsoever, and they have legitimate options to use in the paint. At least one of those highly-regarded wings will have to perform (Griffen or Storr). Dajuan Harris will be huge, too, as he will need to be on the floor, but if he's not hitting his spot-up 3s, it could stagnate their offense. The importance of Dickinson, Adams, and Bidunga goes without saying. If Hunter Dickinson gives up too much in the paint, Kansas could be going home early with all of the possible big man matchups they will have to face. Luckily, Hunter Dickinson is a monster down low on offense and they give him help with Flory Bidunga and Kj Adams' versatility. Their road to glory will be tough as they have to beat Arkansas in the first round, then teams like St. John's, Texas Tech, and Missouri. Those are some of the best and most stout teams in the country, so the Jayhawks cannot be lackluster on offense. Their path will be filled with great two-way squads who do not let up and won't have many flaws to exploit. I can see their defense and some signature performances by some of the transfers propelling Kansas. The only problem is doing it round after round, and that is looking like an extremely tall task for this 7th seed.

ARKANSAS RAZORBACKS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SEC	40th	John Calipari	20-13 (8-10 in SEC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

John Calipari's first Arkansas season has not quite lived up to the billing. Things have gotten better since their brutal month of January, where they only netted 1 win, but the Razorbacks haven't won 4 consecutive games since a non-conference stretch in late December. Shooting woes have been the main culprit. Only 2 Arkansas players have managed to shoot above 35% from beyond the arc all season, one of whom is guard Boogie Fland, who has missed substantial time, while the other is 7'2 center Zvonimir Ivisic. However, there have been some bright spots. Adou Thiero has been phenomenal all season as the main guy. He's their primary engine offensively, especially when he's getting downhill. DJ Wagner has done a really good job getting the team out in transition, and setting the table for some of the athletic wings, including freshmen in Billy Richmond and Karter Knox. All in all, it's a pretty typical John Calipari roster: a younger group of guys who love to play fast and get downhill, but struggle to create in the halfcourt. A lot of their offense comes from their defense. They don't force a ton of turnovers, but between Thiero, Ivisic, and Trevon Brazile, they have an absurd 15.4 block percentage. Calipari is looking for his first NCAA tournament win since 2019, the question is: is this the year he finally gets it?

PLAYER TO WATCH: ADOU THIERO

Throughout his college career, the story with Adou Thiero had always been about what he does on the defensive end. He was usually on the floor due to his ability to protect the rim from the weak side, defend passing lanes, and shut down opposing wings. He can still do all of that, but he's become a completely different player offensively. Although his outside shooting is still a work in progress, his ability to score in the midrange, and relentlessly attack the rim have kept Arkansas in games all season. He's managed to double his scoring output from his Kentucky years, and has become the go-to guy in his third season under John Calipari. When Arkansas needs something done right,



watch for Adou Thiero to be the man for the job.

PHOTO BY: CALEB GRIEGER/DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Zvonimir Ivisic, Boogie Fland	Quality Wins: @ Kentucky Michigan
Offense: B	3 Pointers: D
Defense: A	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: B-	Rebounding: C
Turnover: C	Fouls: B-
Pace: B	Ceiling: Round of 32

BRACKET ANALYSIS

This is the lowest any Calipari team has ever been seeded and Cal's first experience with a double-digit seed. This game is mostly going to be decided on the interior, where Hunter Dickinson can completely take over with his rebounding and post scoring. The Razorbacks are going to need Jonas Aidoo to be at his best defensively if they want to have a chance. If they're forced to double, Zeke Mayo and Dave Coit will be waiting on the perimeter to punish the defense. Arkansas will need to force Dickinson out of the paint, and in the open floor as often as possible. It would be as good a time as ever for the struggling Johnell Davis to finally find his stroke from beyond the arc, as this could open the paint for Arkansas' slashers, such as DJ Wagner and Adou Thiero. The return of Boogie Fland could also be instrumental in that regard. It's yet to be determined how much rust he'll have to shake off, given that he's returning from a broken finger, but he can be a gamechanger in this matchup. It might be beneficial for the Razorbacks to go bigger, playing Zvonimir Ivisic as a floor spacer and extra rim protector, while Aidoo attacks the glass and occupies Dickinson. Even with a win over Kansas, it's going to be a struggle for Arkansas to make the sweet 16. St. John's boasts the best defense in the country, and can make life hell for a Razorback roster that lacks offensive firepower. It's certainly possible for Calipari to get his first tournament win in 5 years, but a 1-2 punch of Bill Self and Rick Pitino will likely prove fatal for Arkansas.

ST. JOHN'S RED STORM



NO. 2 SEED WEST REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big East	11th	Rick Pitino	29-4 (18-2 in Big East)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Rick Pitino's squad has an identity. Offensively, they make quick decisions and shoot a ton of high percentage shots, and defensively, they force their opponents to do the opposite. St. John's opponents take 18.4 seconds per offensive possession, one of the slowest tempos in the nation. Meanwhile, St. John's has an average offensive possession of 15.8 seconds, 21st in the nation. While the Red Storm shoot just 29.9% from 3 (345th in the country), that's not their bread and butter, as only 30.8% of their field goal attempts are from deep, which is one of the lowest in the nation.

The Red Storm also rely on winning the turnover battle.

They force their opponents to cough up the ball almost 16 times per game, which is 11th best in the country but highest among all high major teams. St. John's relies heavily on their defense and scoring off turnovers, but at times their offense is stagnant and they'll need to find a way to score consistently. Despite this, St. John's is a staggering 19-1 in games they score at least 72 points..

PLAYER TO WATCH: KADARY RICHMOND

After transferring from Seton Hall to St. John's, Richmond is the only player from last year's All-Big East First Team to return to the conference, while the other four players were all NBA draft picks. While Richmond averages just 12.7 points per game, that number is a little misleading. In Big East play, Kadary averages 14 points per game, compared to just 9.5 points in non-conference games. Richmond is a player who plays to St. John's strengths. He forces turnovers, leads the fast break, and makes plays for others. He pushes the tempo, takes care of the ball, and puts his offensive player in jail on every defensive possession. He's as critical as a player comes, and if St. John's wants to make a serious run, it starts with Richmond being at his best.



PHOTO BY: MITCHELL LAYTON/GETTY IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Zuby Ejiofor, RJ Luis Jr.	Quality Wins: Marquette UConn 2x
Offense: B	3 Pointers: F
Defense: A+	Free Throw: F
Field Goal: D	Rebounding: A+
Turnover: B	Fouls: C
Pace: B+	Ceiling: Final Four

BRACKET ANALYSIS

St. John's, the winner of 20 of their last 21 games, just swept the Big East tournament on their home court at Madison Square Garden for the first time since 2000. The Red Storm should have no problem putting away #15 seed Omaha in round one, but in the Round of 32, Rick Pitino will have an appointment with either Bill Self or John Calipari. While Kansas and Arkansas are very well coached teams that make smart decisions, they may not be able to score consistently enough on the Red Storm. Kansas may match up better with St. John's due to the three point disparity between the teams, but Coach Pitino should prevail. While it would be a silly decision to write off preseason #1 ranked team Kansas, or even Calipari's Razorbacks, it's difficult to know which version of these two inconsistent teams will show up on game day. Pitino's team, meanwhile, is a model of consistency, as they were a well-oiled machine during Big East play.

The true test will be Texas Tech in the Sweet 16, where Tech matches up favorably with the Red Storm. It will be a tall task to ask the Red Storm to force Tech into enough turnovers to give them the advantage, and in a neutral game, St. John's just doesn't shoot the ball consistently enough. However, Zuby Ejiofor and JT Toppin would be a small ball five matchup for the ages.

Where it would get really fun is if St. John's #1 ranked defense went toe to toe with Florida's #1 ranked offense in the Elite Eight. Florida just won the SEC tournament to secure the fourth #1 seed and the Gators are coming into March Madness as the most dangerous team in the nation. If St. John's shot the ball even at an average clip, they'd be a legitimate Final Four contender. But on an average shooting night for them, the Red Storm just won't be able to get past Tech in addition to Florida.

BREAKDOWN: @THE_NBAGELL

OMAHA MAVERICKS



NO. 15 SEED WEST REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Summit	156th	Chris Crutchfield	22-12 (13-3 in Summit)

TEAM OVERVIEW

It's a truly historic moment for the Omaha basketball program as they prepare for their first NCAA D1 tournament appearance since moving up from D2 in the 2011/2012 season.

This year, the Mavericks won the Summit League regular season for the first time in their history, and their season was a truly wild ride. Having struggled badly in the nonconference schedule, Omaha suddenly turned it around towards the end of December and started conference player at 7-0, never looking back since. They punched their ticket even before the ball was tipped in their conference tournament final against St. Thomas, as they were ineligible for the NCAA tournament.

Omaha is a poor defensive team, ranking in the 200s in defensive efficiency. They clearly lack size on the interior, which will be tough to deal with come March Madness. Their banana-skin potential lies in three-point shooting. In guards Tony Osburn and JJ White, Omaha has two 40%+ three-point shooters who take those shots at very high frequencies, and their shooting ability is not just limited to Osburn and White.

PLAYER TO WATCH: JJ WHITE

The Omaha in-conference turnaround would not have been possible without the play of their senior guard JJ White. Though forward Marquel Sutton is their leading scorer and a guy who plays the most minutes, it's actually White who has been incredibly efficient scoring the ball ever since Omaha's turnaround in mid-December. He's been shooting threes at a high clip and with fantastic efficiency. He's also the primary perimeter offensive engine for the Mavericks, adept at scoring both off the catch and off the dribble. Effective both in pick-and-roll and isolation, White's scoring and passing will be crucial for Omaha to have any chance of making noise in March Madness.



PHOTO BY: SAMANTHA LAUREY/ USA TODAY NETWORK

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Marquel Sutton	Quality Wins: @ N Dakota St St. Thomas	
Offense: C	3 Pointers: B+	
Defense: F	Free Throw: C	
Field Goal: B	Rebounding: C	
Turnover: B-	Fouls: F	
Pace: C	Ceiling: Round of 64	

BRACKET ANALYSIS

For Omaha, simply the fact that they're here in the NCAA tournament, winners of both the Summit League regular season and tournament, is a monumental achievement, considering that they have never been to March Madness before and were picked to finish 2nd-to-last in the preseason poll.

The Mavericks from the state of Nebraska come into their first-round matchup against the Rick Pitino-led St. John's bearing almost no weight of expectation to win. The Red Storm have been absolutely flying this season, so anything less than their win in Providence would be an NCAA tournament upset for the ages.

In theory, the front-court matchup is somewhat favourable for the Mavericks; it's not like playing, say, Florida, who have an abundance of 6'10"+ guys. St. John's also plays an undersized frontcourt with 6'9" Zuby Ejiofor as their center, but Ejiofor plays so much bigger than he actually is, posting fantastic offensive rebounding numbers and a free-throw rate. Even playing with an undersized center, coach Pitino has the option to bring on Ruben Prey or Vincent Iwuchukwu off the bench.

Overall, St. John's should have too much in terms of positional size and skill for Omaha; the Red Storm is simply a team of a level that the Mavericks don't face on a weekly basis. They have played just 1 Quad 1 game this season at Iowa State and have zero Quad 1/Quad 2 wins. The disparity between teams is reflected in various metrics like Kenpom (11 vs. 156), Bart Torvik (15 vs. 126), and NET (13 vs. 160).

DUKE BLUE DEVILS



NO.1SEED

EAST

REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
ACC	lst	Jon Scheyer	30-3 (19-1 in ACC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

What can be said about this year's Duke basketball that hasn't been said already? Duke is sure to be a #1 seed in this year's tournament, with a legitimate argument for the top overall seed, for the first time in the post-Krzyzewski era. Armed with a combination of one of the all-time great Duke recruiting classes, combined with a core of returners and veteran transfers, Duke finished the season 31-3, going 8-3 in Quad 1 (including a win over fellow top seed Auburn) and an 22-0 record against opponents in Quads 2-4. Duke ranks 1st overall in Kenpom and NET, and 2nd in Bart Torvik. All that being said, when star freshman and national player of the year candidate Cooper Flagg suffered a lower leg injury in the quarterfinals of the ACC tournament, to say one could hear a pin drop across the collective Duke Nation might be an understatement. That withstanding, Duke showed their resilience and well-roundedness, defeating bitter rival UNC in their 3rd meeting of the year in a tighter than comfortable finish and winning this year's tournament championship over 2-seed Louisville. This team is eerily reminiscent of the last National Championship team from 2015, which was also led by a highly touted rookie class that saw it's star player earn both ACC ROY and POY honors. As of the time of this write-up, Duke has informed the tournament committee that Flagg would be available for March Madness.

PLAYER TO WATCH: COOPER FLAGG

ACC Freshman of the Year, ACC Men's Player of the Year, Top 10 in the ACC in points, rebounds, blocks, steals AND assists, Wooden Award finalist, Erving Award finalist, and barring something completely unexpected happening, future #1 overall pick in this year's NBA draft. He's really good. But there's another freshman on this squad, also a projected 2025 lottery pick, and he's certainly no slouch. Kon Knueppel, the 6'7 guard from Wisconsin has had quite the year himself, at 14.4 points, 4 rebounds, and 2.7 assists per game in his freshman season, while shooting 47% from the field and 39% from 3. As of the time of this write-up, Duke has informed the tournament committee that Flagg would be available for March Madness, but regardless of his status and how fit Flagg is, you can believe that Kneuppel will have a big role in how Duke fares in the next chapter of their fairytale run.



PHOTO BY: ROB KINNAN/IMAGN IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Kon Knueppel, Tyrese Proctor	Quality Wins: Auburn @ UNC	
Offense: A+	3 Pointers: A	
Defense: A+	Free Throw: A	
Fleld Goal: A+	Rebounding: A-	
Turnovers: A	Fouls: A-	
Pace: F	Ceiling: National Champs	

BREAKDOWN: @JOHNSIMPSON42

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Duke enters the 2025 NCAA tournament as the much deserved top seed in the East Bracket, playing opening round games just down the road from campus in Raleigh, NC. After what should be a cakewalk of a 1 versus 16 matchup for the Blue Devils, Duke likely won't have an "easy" matchup for the rest of the tournament, finding themselves in what could be a sneaky bracket. Round 2 sees the Devils facing Mississippi State or Baylor, a very interesting 8/9 matchup itself that pits together a pair of teams who have had struggles this season, but also have shown they can play with, and beat, some of the top teams in this year's field. Should Duke make it to the sweet 16, They could potentially see a rematch with 4-seed Arizona, who they beat early this season on the road, but who also improved as the season went on and recently made it to the finals of a very competitive Big 12 tournament, or Oregon who finished the season on a 7 game heater before falling to top seeded Michigan State in the Big 10 tourney. And let's not forget the 2-seed in this bracket, Alabama, who is looking to repeat their trip to the Final 4 last year and leads the nation in possessions per game with 78.8 compared to the Blue Devils 68.8 which is good for 277th. Much of how Duke's tournament plays out will depend on the health and durability of star freshman Cooper Flagg. After being ruled out for the tournament, Duke coach Jon Scheyer is optimistic that Flagg could be ready right away for the NCAA tournament to lead this special team to what would

be his first Final 4 as head coach of the Blue Devils.

AMERICAN EAGLES



NO. 16 SEED

EAST

REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Patriot	237th	Duane Simpkins	22-12 (13-5 in Patriot)

PLAYER TO WATCH: MATT ROGERS

It's been a banner year for the Eagles' talisman. He's been a ruthlessly efficient post player, shooting 58.9% from the field on post up opportunities per synergy. American's grindy, long winded possessions seem to always end with the 6 '9 big man. Not only is he able to post up, but he's also an effective roll man, who also shoots 43% from beyond the arc on his spot up opportunities. If American is going to win a game in March, it's going to be with Captain Rogers waving his American flag.



PHOTO BY: BOB DONNAN/IMAGN IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Slow and steady wins the race for the American Eagles. They are one of the slowest teams in the nation, averaging nearly 20 seconds per offensive possession. Despite averaging under 70 points per game all season, they managed to reach 70 in all 3 of their games in the Patriot League tourney. The key for the Eagles will be keeping their opponent off the glass, which has been a struggle all season, causing them to be 352nd in total rebounding. Part of that is due to their lack of size. Elijah Stevens is only 5'9, and they don't have a player over 6'9. Another part of that is their apprehension with attacking the paint. 6 out of their 9 rotation players shoot over 40% from beyond the arc, with 45% of their attempts coming from that range. If they can keep the game at their pace, and limit opponents to 1 possession, and their shooters are firing, they could frustrate a team in March.

TEAM OVERVIEW

Impact Players: Elijah Stephens, Greg Jones	Quality Wins: G Wash @ Colgate	
Offense: F	3 Pointers: C	
Defense: D	Free Throw: B-	
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: F	
Turnover: C	Fouls: D	
Pace: F	Ceiling: Round of 64	

BRACKET ANALYSIS

The Eagles find themselves in a 16th seed play-in game against Mount St Mary's. Despite their comfort in playing at an arduous pace, American may want to speed things up if they want to progress to the main part of the field. The Mountaineers have one of the highest turnover rates in the country, and given American's reliance on outside shots, they may create some of their best looks in transition, rather than in the halfcourt. They have a top 15 shooter in the nation in Greg Jones, and 6 players who shoot above 30% from beyond the arc. They'll be happy to hear that Carmelo Pacheco, a top 10 shooter in the nation will be missing for the Mountaineers with a broken finger. Forcing turnovers is going to be a great way to prevent the Mountaineer forwards Dola Adebayo and Jedy Cordilla from dominating the glass. If the Eagles try to play the game at their pace, it's likely that the extra possessions the Mountaineers will generate are going to be too much for one of the worst offenses in the country to handle. Even if they do somehow squeak past the Mountaineers, they have no chance against #1 seeded Duke. The Blue Devils size alone is going to cause the Eagles to be overmatched, not to mention the talent disparity. The only miniscule possibility that they have a chance of even keeping it close is if Duke gets off to a slower start, due to their youth and inexperience, and American hits a ton of perimeter shots early. Even if that's the case, Duke will eventually settle into the game, take over, and swiftly brush aside the Eagles.

MT. ST. MARYS MOUNTAINEERS



NO. 16 SEED

EAST

REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
MAAC	250th	Donny Lind	22-12 (12-8 in MAAC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

It may not always look pretty for one of the most turnover prone teams in the country, but the Mountaineers have managed to overcome their own pitfalls to grind their way into March. Despite finishing 6th in the conference in the regular season, they were able to take advantage of Quinnipiac's downfall in the MAAC semifinal, suffocating their dispatcher Iona in the finals to punch their ticket. They defended the 3 particularly well in wins over Marist, Merrimack and Iona, limiting their opponents to 25% or under from beyond the arc. They're going to need to be stingy defensively if they want to win a game in March. They were inconsistent at times on that end during the season, but in the MAAC tournament, they held all 3 teams below 60 points. Unfortunately, they suffered a massive loss towards the end of the season, with Carmelo Pacheco, a top 10 3 point shooter in the nation, going down with a broken hand. It'll be tough to expect much out of this Mount St Mary's team, but they earned this trip, and will hope to make the most of it.

PLAYER TO WATCH: DOLA ADEBAYO

The Mountaineers best player has been Dola Adebayo all season. The 2nd team All-MAAC selection is the interior force that has been the bane of the MAAC all season. The key for Adebayo is to stay out of foul trouble, and keep himself on the court. He averages 3 fouls per game in their wins, vs just 2.3 in their losses. On the other end of the floor, the Mountaineers need the MAAC's leader in FT attempts to get to the line consistently. He shoots 14% better from the line in their wins, and if the game is close, they'll need him to take advantage of those FT opportunities.



PHOTO BY: MOUNT ST. MARY'S ATHLETIC

TEAM REPORT CARD

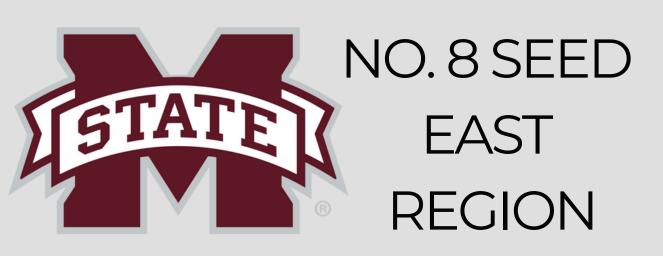
Impact Players: Dallas Hobbs, Jedy Cordilla	Quality Wins: @ Miami @ Merrimack	
Offense: F	3 Pointers: C	
Defense: C	Free Throw: C	
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: B	
Turnover: F	Fouls: B+	
Pace: C	Ceiling: Round of 64	

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Mount St Mary's is going to have to play their way onto the bracket this year against another underdog conference tournament winner in American. It's going to be a much more difficult proposition without Pacheco available, but the Mount has some ways to take advantage of the Eagles. If they can mitigate some of the turnovers, and prioritize getting shots on the rim, they should be able to take care of business against a slow-paced Eagles team. While the Eagles are certainly flawed, they do possess one of the best three point shooters in the country in Greg Jones. The Mountaineers will want to know where he is at all times, and keep focus all the way through the shot clock buzzer on these drawn out American possessions. American is one of the worst rebounding teams in the country, and Adebayo and fellow front-court mate Jedy Cordilla should have an abundance of second and third chances around the rim. While the Mountaineers have the personnel to dominate down low, their guards need to be able to take care of the ball in order for Adebayo and Cordilla to thrive. If they can, we should see Mount St Mary's make their way onto the bracket. Once they do, their celebrations will likely be short lived. Duke is a terror defensively, and should wreak havoc on the smaller Mountaineer backcourt. They have plenty of bodies to throw at Adebayo and Cordilla, even if Maliq Brown is unable to participate. While a round of 64 drubbing may not be fun in the moment, getting this far is certainly something to celebrate, and

take in to next season for the Mountaineers.

MISSISSIPPI STATE BULLDOGS PLAYER TO WATCH: KESHAWN MURPHY



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SEC	32nd	Chris Jans	20-11 (8-10 in SEC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Mississippi State is a product of an elite SEC conference and should not be taken lightly. The Bulldogs started their first 15 games of the season off with a stellar 14-1 record. They cooled down in conference play as the SEC is at historic heights of competition this year. They still came out with a bunch of quality wins and still tout a very deep and experienced squad. The Bulldogs still pulled off key games against Ole Miss, Georgia, and Texas A&M. They have a top-25 offense in the nation and are one of the better finishing teams in the country. Where they fall short is their 3-point shooting. They are one of the worst shooting teams in the Power Five. If they want to have a longer season, they are going to need some serious contributions from their perimeter options and reliable play from that frontcourt. Cameron Matthews, Keshawn Murphy, and Michael Nwoko will have to be able to go head-up with whatever big-man group they face. The perimeter also has to do its job. They have to hit jumpers, make plays, and defend. Mississippi State will expect a lot from Hubbard, Kugel, Harris, and Melendez.

In March, every team needs a consistent, physical presence in their frontcourt. That guy for Mississippi State is 670 Big KeShawn Murphy. Murphy's has all the requisite Big Man tools while also providing a nice drive game and really good connective playmaking. In order for this team to operate efficiently, he will have to be the first to finish his plays and be stingy in the paint on defense. Murphy is shooting 75% at the rim this year and averaging 2.0 steals + blocks with only 1.9 fouls. If he can use his nice rebounding ability on top of these skills, I don't see the Bulldogs being scared of any small ball lineups they might run into.



TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Josh Hubbard, Cameron Matthews	Quality Wins: @ Memphis Mississippi State	
Offense: A-	3 Pointers: F	
Defense: B+	Free Throw: F	
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: B+	
Turnover: B+	Fouls: D	
Pace: C	Ceiling: Round of 32	

BRACKET ANALYSIS

The Bulldogs were given the 8th seed, and that's right about where consensus had them, though they obviously wanted more. They surprised early and held out in conference play as much as they could. They should be a very respected squad, even though this first matchup is tough. They are the type of mid-seeded squad to advance regardless of first-round matchup. They are very balanced, but their streaky shooting could be their downfall. Expect Hubbard, Kugel, and Harris to be instrumental in keeping the defense honest and not loading up. However, Matthews and Murphy will be looked to hold down the fort, so their offense has to be well-oiled. They got their work cut out for them in the very first round against Baylor, and it's only harder from there. They have one of the hardest paths, having to play the best of the best in high-major D1. Teams like Duke, Oregon, and Arizona should all scare Mississippi State a little bit. If they can pass the tough Baylor test, then it should prepare them for this tough road.

BAYLOR BEARS



NO. 9 SEED

EAST

REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big 12	29th	Scott Drew	19-13 (10-10in Big 12)

TEAM OVERVIEW

It's been tough sledding for Scott Drew's men this season, especially in conference play. Baylor's 10-10 conference record is its worst since the 2018 season. Turnovers and defensive rebounding especially have plagued the Bears, and unfortunately the rebounding issues are scheme related. The Baylor 1-3-1 zone that Scott Drew loves to run to disrupt opposing teams' shooting leaves Norchad Omier on an island in the paint. While Omier himself is a great rebounder, other teams can crash the glass, forcing Baylor's wings to both contest perimeter shots and be aware of the crashers on the weak side. They've lost just one game when holding their opponents to offensive rebounds on less than 25% of their possessions, however they've only managed to do that 9 times all year. Jeremy Roach has been a solid addition to the team, with some clutch shots to keep them in games. Robert Wright and VJ Edgecombe have kept the season afloat as the stellar freshman duo account for 46% of Baylor's shots. Jaden Celestine, Josh Ojiunwa, Langston Love and Jayden Nunn have been decent role players, but the Bears are going to need to get more out of them in the tournament if they want to make any sort of run.

PLAYER TO WATCH: VJ EDGECOMBE

Edgecombe is, in a word, electric. The freshman guard earned freshman of the year, while also being on the Big 12 Second team all-league. He's currently averaging more steals per game (2.1) than turnovers (2.0), while being Baylor's second leading scorer behind Norchad Omier with 15 points per game. Edgecombe is an elite athlete on both ends of the floor, who can be dynamic as both a driver and at times a shooter. He's been constantly improving as the season progresses, and a herculean V.J effort could catapult the Bears beyond their underwhelming expectations in March.



PHOTO BY: JULIO CORTEZ/AP PHOTO

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Norchad Omier, Robert Wright	Quality Wins: St John's Kansas	
Offense: A	Shooting: C	
Defense: B	Free Throw: B-	
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: C	
Turnover: C	Fouls: C	
Pace: F	Ceiling: Round of 32	

BRACKET ANALYSIS

There's a chance this one could get ugly fast. Baylor is one of the worst defensive rebounding teams in the country, going up against a grindy Mississippi State team. If VJ Edgecombe and Jaden Celestine aren't crashing the glass aggressively, Norchad Omier could end up on an island, and the Bears will be in all sorts of trouble. However, Scott Drew may have a trick up his sleeve. The 1-3-1 junk zone that he's deployed at various times throughout the season, which encourages teams to take tough 3's, may be a way to frustrate a Bulldog squad that shoots just 31% from beyond the arc. The Bears are going to need to keep the ball out of Josh Hubbard's hands if they decide to use the zone, given that he's taken 300 threes on the year. Offensively, it's going to come down to efficiency. Even though Omier is an elite offensive rebounder, the size of Mississippi State is going to limit second chance opportunities. Baylor is going to need to turn them over and get VJ and Robert Wright in the open floor as often as possible. If Mississippi State somehow finds a shooting touch, this could be over by halftime. Even if the Bears manage to get through this matchup, they earn the privilege of facing Duke. There's no chance they'll be able to stop Cooper Flagg in any way shape or form. Even outside of Cooper Flagg, the Blue Devils have an average height of 6'6 and an array of shooters. The Mississippi State matchup may not be ideal, but a dance with the Devils is not where Baylor wants to be after what will likely be a grueling endeavor in round 1.

OREGON DUCKS



NO. 5 SEED

EAST

REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big 10	5th	Dana Altman	24-9 (12-8 in Big 10)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Given their torrid start, Dana Altman might feel a bit hard done by the Ducks 22-8 record, especially with all of the losses coming in conference play. Oregon had a brutal stretch where they lost 6 out of 7 games over a 20-day stretch in mid-January. However, Altman has righted the ship, and the Ducks haven't lost a game since February 8th. A big part of this revolution has been the reinstatement of Kwame Evans to the lineup. In games where Evans plays at least 16 minutes, the Ducks are 17-3, while being just 5-5 in games where he plays 15 or less. TJ Bamba has been sensational following a subpar stint at Villanova, and Nate Bittle has been a force after being N'Faly Dante's backup last season. Oregon boasts a pair of smaller guards in Keyshawn Bartholemy and Jackson Shelstad, who has been a clutch all season long. Jadrian Tracey has been a key role player as another Dana Altman JUCO snag, while Supreme Cook and Brandon Angel are post-up options, and paint cloggers, putting more rim pressure on opposing defenses. The Ducks are going to need to lean on recent performances to put together a run in March, but we've seen this from Altman in the past. Don't count them out just yet.

PLAYER TO WATCH: NATE BITTLE

It's been a long patient road for Nate Bittle to finally get his opportunity. After waiting in the wings behind N'Faly Dante for almost his entire career, Bittle has made it count. He's been Oregon's driving interior force, dominating the glass with a Defensive Rebounding percentage of 22%, and an 8% offensive rebounding percentage. He's been effective as both a rim running big, but he also has the ability to space the floor, shooting 33% from beyond the arc. Additionally, Dante has been on a tear defensively. He's had multiple blocks in every game since February 1st, and his ability to continually impact the game on the defensive end as Oregon's anchor is crucial to their success. If Bittle keeps balling, a Final 4 could come calling for the Ducks.



PHOTO BY: BRIAN ROTHMULLER/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Jackson Shelstad, TJ Bamba	Quality Wins: Alabama @ Wisconsin
Offense: B+	3 Pointers: C
Defense: A	Free Throw : C
Field Goal: B+	Rebounding: C
Turnover: F	Fouls: B
Pace: B	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

So much for lucky Ducks. Despite a strong end to the season, Oregon was rewarded with a battle against one of the most electric offenses in the country. The Flames are white hot perimeter demons. They're third in the nation in 3 point percentage, and 5th in the nation in opposing 3 point percentage. Ritchie McKay teams are going to shoot a ton of 3's, and they will do it well. However, the Ducks are going to have the advantage virtually everywhere else. Nate Bittle, Kwame Evans, Supreme Cook and Brandon Angel will be the 4 biggest players in the game, and they all will be playing for Oregon. If Liberty can't shoot the lights out, the Ducks can dominate the glass on both ends of the floor, and completely take over the game from the paint. The Oregon guards are going to need to be constantly fighting over screens, or if they decide to switch, making quick decisions. If these Liberty shooters see the basket, they will fire at will, and Oregon could be in trouble. If they can weather the Liberty storm, a potential former Pac-12 grudge match awaits, assuming Arizona takes care of business against a dangerous Akron. There would be a ton of exciting individual matchups in this event, with Carter Bryant against Kwame Evans, and the backcourt battle of KJ Lewis and Caleb Love vs TJ Bamba and Jackson Shelstad making for must see TV. Beyond that, the Duke Blue Devils await, which would likely end the Ducks' season. Kwame Evans could be a potential answer to Cooper Flagg, and Nate Bittle to Khaman Maluach, but it's tough to envision the rest of the roster stacking up with all of Duke's immense collection of talent and versatility. This is one of the tougher regions to navigate and Oregon may not have what it takes to get further than the Sweet 16, even if everything goes according to plan.

LIBERTY FLAMES



NO. 12 SEED

EAST

REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
CUSA	62nd	Ritchie McKay	28-6 (13-5 in CUSA)

TEAM OVERVIEW

When looking at KenPom team pages, nobody is more staggering than Liberty. The Flames are #1 in the country in effective field goal percentage, while their opponents have the 10th worst effective field goal percentage in the country. The three-point shooting is staggering too, as the Flames shoot 39.5% from three, fifth in the nation, while their opponents shoot just 28% from three, which is third-best nationally. The Flames also rattle off a lot o,f threes, as 41.3% of their points scored are from three three-point range, which is third in the nation. Meanwhile, their opponents score just 26% of their points from three, which is 343rd in the nation. Liberty should win the three-point battle in nearly any matchup they have.

The most staggering number of all is that Liberty assists on 61% of their baskets, while their opponents assist on just 39% of theirs. Liberty's offense is the model of efficiency, while their defense makes it difficult for opponents to get similar shots. Liberty did this against a very underrated Conference USA, but they also beat teams in the non-conference schedule, such as Big 12 member Kansas State and another Cinderella hopeful in Will Wade's McNeese team.

PLAYER TO WATCH: TAELON PETER

Peter has March Madness Darling written all over him.

Despite playing just 22.7 minutes per game, he is the
Flames leading scorer this season. In fact, since January 9th,
Peter is averaging 17.1 points per game in just 26.7 minutes
per game in that time frame. The efficiency is also
staggering, as Peter shoots 59/46/77 splits on the season. In
the CUSA conference tournament, Peter shot 76.2% from
the field and 81.8% from three in three games. If Liberty
makes a deep run, Peter will be a big part of it.



PHOTO BY: VASHA HUNT/AP PHOTO

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Zach Cleveland, Kaden Metheny	Quality Wins: McNeese Kansas St
Offense: B-	3 Pointers: A+
Defense: B+	Free Throw: F
Field Goal: A+	Rebounding: F
Turnover: B+	Fouls: A-
Pace: F	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Despite Liberty having a difficult path early on, they have a legitimate shot at a Sweet 16 run. Liberty is ELITE in a lot of categories (see team overview). Liberty's three-point shooting could lead them to a win over Oregon. Not only that, but Liberty's offense is a well-oiled machine. While Oregon has the 31st-best defense according to KenPom, they aren't elite at anything defensively, while Liberty's offense is prolific. It would be obscene to say that Liberty, the 12 seed, will definitely beat Oregon, but it's a real possibility. Additionally, Liberty could beat Arizona in the Round of 32 as well if they get past Oregon. Arizona is an offensive-minded team, and on a good day, Liberty can go toe-to-toe with nearly any offense in the nation. Additionally, Arizona isn't an elite shooting team, and they give up a LOT of threes defensively. That's a recipe for disaster for a Liberty opponent.

If this Liberty Cinderella run comes to fruition, then it would be a Sweet 16 matchup against the Duke Blue Devils, and that's where Liberty's flame would go out. Duke's defense is of the nation's elite, and they can schematically make things very difficult for Liberty. In my opinion, CUSA was one of the most competitive conferences as well as one of the most underrated this season, and Liberty won a hard fought conference tournament to earn this bid. The Round of 64 matchup is another upset I'll plant my flag on. Liberty will beat Oregon, and they have a realistic chance at being Arizona, too.

ARIZONA WILDCATS



NO. 4 SEED

EAST

REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big 12	14th	Tommy Lloyd	22-11 (14-6 in Big 12)

TEAM OVERVIEW

The Arizona Wildcats have battled some difficult hurdles in order to propel themselves into the NCAA tournament. If you told me before the season that Motiejus Krivas would start one game this season for the Wildcats, I would have seriously doubted their tournament chances, but the trio of Caleb Love, Jaden Bradley and KJ Lewis had other plans. The Wildcats possess one of the most dangerous

The Wildcats possess one of the most dangerous backcourts in the country with the aforementioned trio, along with a backcourt that could potentially carry the Wildcats to wins in the dance with their combination of experience and on-court ability. Per KenPom, the Wildcats boast a top thirty offense and defense in the country much of that success can be attributed to two-way players like Henri Veesaar, Tobe Awaka and Carter Bryant coming along during the season.

Tommy Lloyd has done a really good job at Arizona since taking over for Sean Miller, but is still seeking a signature tournament run. The Wildcats played a brutal nonconference schedule before playing their first season in the Big 12, they have been tested and they are led by experienced guards who have played in March. Make sure to watch out for the Arizona Wildcats in the dance.

PLAYER TO WATCH: CARTER BRYANT

Carter Bryant is the player to keep your eye on for Arizona, Since the last week of January, Bryant has stepped into an elevated role for Tommy Lloyd and the Wildcats. Bryant, who was a five-star recruit and McDonald's All American, was highly touted coming out of high school and is expected to hear his name called in the upcoming NBA draft. As the year has grown, so has Bryant's game, and as the Wildcats look to make a push behind an experienced backcourt, Carter Bryant is in a prime position to take a miniature leap in meaningful basketball games before the season concludes.



PHOTO BY: KATIE STRATMAN-IMAGN IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Caleb Love, Jaden Bradley	Quality Wins: @ BYU Texas Tech 2x
Offense: A	3 Pointers: D
Defense : B+	Free Throw: A
Field Goal: B-	Rebounding: A
Turnover: C	Fouls: B-
Pace: B	Ceiling: Elite 8

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Looking at the numbers for Akron might be scary for Arizona, but let's put things in perspective. Yes, Akron plays at a high pace, and they are efficient offensively, but they've played just two tournament teams all season, and were soundly beaten in both. The Wildcats frontcourt is just far too big and athletic for the Zips to deal with, and their backcourt trio is capable of completely taking over games. The one cause for concern lies with Caleb Love. Given his tendency to become overzealous in his ability to make contested shots, Arizona could run into trouble if Love tries to get into a shooting contest with the Zips. As long as Arizona controls the pace, generates extra possessions, and maintains a high shot quality, they should be able to power through to the second round.

Assuming they get through Akron, they'll have to deal with either Oregon or Liberty. I'm sure Tommy Lloyd would prefer a matchup with the perimeter-heavy Flames over a Pac-12 reunion with the Ducks. To get by Oregon, Henry Veesar and KJ Lewis are going to be the important defenders to focus on, as they'll need to take TJ Bamba and Nate Bittle out of the game in order for Arizona to progress. If the Wildcats can make their way to Duke, Carter Bryant and Caleb Love will be vital. Bryant has the size and speed to potentially guard Cooper Flagg, and Caleb would Love to knock out his old archrival in his final college basketball season. Arizona did lose to Duke already, but this version of the Wildcats is significantly different from the one Duke saw back in November. Duke is probably their biggest test in the region. If they get past the Blue Devils, the likes of Alabama and Wisconsin

could be in trouble if they hope to prevent an Arizona Final 4 run.

AKRON ZIPS



NO. 13 SEED

EAST

REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
MAC	99th	John Groce	28-6 (17-1 in MAC)

TEAM OVERVIEW:

Akron, Ohio, boasts one of Division I's most consistent, underrated teams. Under Coach John Groce's leadership, the Zips have secured back-to-back MAC tournament titles and another trip to March Madness. Despite significant roster changes, including the departure of star Enrique Freeman and starting guards Ali Ali and Greg Tribble, Akron didn't rebuild—they reloaded. Key additions Seth Wilson, Isaiah Gray, Sharron Young, and James Okwonko joined a seasoned core of Nate Johnson, Tavari Johnson, and Shammah Scott. The Zips run a nine-player rotation, all of whom average over six points per game, with six players having attempted over 100 three-pointers this season. They've dominated all year, losing just one conference game and remaining undefeated at home. This team faced a true test in the MAC championship. Down 12 at halftime, they displayed remarkable resilience, fighting back and punching their ticket to the dance with a last-second, goahead layup by none other than their heart and soul, Nate Johnson. Adding to their impressive resume, the Zips boast the MAC Coach, Player, Sixth Man, and Defensive Player of the Year, along with a First Team, Honorable Mention, and All-Freshman Team selection. This team is completely ready to wear a slipper and become a Cinderella story in March!

PLAYER TO WATCH: NATE JOHNSON

Nate Johnson, Akron's MAC Player, Defensive Player, and Tournament MVP, is the heart of the Zips. Stepping up after key departures, he averaged 14 points, 5 rebounds, 3.5 assists, and 2 steals, shooting 44.7%. Johnson plays with unmatched energy and grit, attacking the basket with powerful drives and a smooth mid-range game. A defensive force, he excels at turning steals into points. His leadership by example and ability to create his own shot make him a thrilling player to watch. Johnson embodies Akron's hard-nosed spirit, a true warrior on the court who means so much to this fan base.



PHOTO BY: JEFF LANGE/AKRON BEACON JOURNAL

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Tavari Johnson, James Okokwo	Quality Wins: @ Kent St S. Bama
Offense: B	3 Pointers: B+
Defense: C	Free Throw: B-
Field Goal: B-	Rebounding: A-
Turnover: C	Fouls: D
Pace: A	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

The 4-13 matchup between the Arizona Wildcats and the Akron Zips in Seattle presents a compelling bracket analysis, particularly within the unpredictable East Region. This isn't your typical Arizona team, and the Zips, under John Groce, are poised to exploit any vulnerabilities, making this a genuine upset alert.

Akron's recent tournament experience, their third appearance in four years, underscores a program on the rise. Groce has instilled a winning culture, and the Zips' fanbase is passionately invested. Their depth, ranked 4th nationally in bench points per game, is a critical asset, enabling them to maintain a high-intensity pace throughout the game, vital for their offensive strategy. They also rank 6th in points per game and 7th in 3-point attempts, highlighting their aggressive, perimeter-oriented attack.

Despite their lack of size, with no player over 6'8", which could be a perceived disadvantage against Arizona's potential size and talent, the Zips are an exceptionally effective rebounding team, ranking 34th in defensive rebounds per game. Akron compensates with relentless hustle, a rapid tempo, and sharpshooting. They aim to overwhelm opponents with their energy and

compensates with relentless hustle, a rapid tempo, and sharpshooting. They aim to overwhelm opponents with their energy and offensive firepower. "Heart over height" will be their mantra, and they'll need every ounce of that in a distant matchup. This well-coached team, led by a core group with tournament experience, is determined to advance past the first round.

The winner will face either No. 5 Oregon or No. 12 Liberty, further intensifying the intrigue in this region. While Arizona enters as the higher seed, they should not underestimate the Zips. Akron's blend of experience, depth, and offensive prowess makes them

a formidable opponent, capable of dramatically altering the East Region's bracket dynamics. I could easily envision the Zips

making a deep run to the Sweet 16, even with a potential showdown against the formidable #1 seed, Duke Blue Devils.

BREAKDOWN: @HOOPHOUND5

BYU COUGARS



NO. 6 SEED

EAST

REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big 12	24th	Kevin Young	24-9 (14-6 in Big 12)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Building off the success of Mark Pope, Kevin Young has had a strong start. Increasing the 2024 win total by one with a mix of some new faces Egor Demin, Kanon Catchings, and Fousseyni Traore, as well as returning developing cornerstones in Richie Saunders, Dawson Baker, and Trevin Knell. They had a slow start, beginning Big 12 play 6-6, but they went on a terror to end the year, winning eight games entering conference tournament play. Over that stretch, we saw the potential of this BYU squad. A versatile group that can spread you out with their shooting, while holding it down on defense. They had strong performances from Knell and Keba Keita, and that game gave a huge confidence boost, even stealing a game from Iowa State in the Big 12 tournament. If the supporting cast of Egor Demin and Saunders can continue to keep teams off the glass and shoot lights out, they may be able to overcome their lack of size and conventional defensive playmaking. It will be interesting to see how they adjust to a tough draw in VCU, but I am confident Egor and Co can at least sneak one win.

PLAYER TO WATCH: EGOR DEMIN

Kevin Young is cooking on the recruiting trail. The Cougars 24-9, with a six seed in the NCAA tournament, have one of the best recruits in the country on the way in AJ Dybantsa. Yet, he may not even be the highest draft pick in BYU history next year because Egor Demin has arguably put BYU in the tournament as Kevin Young's go-to guy. I was a big fan of Egor coming into the year because of his passing potential, and BYU's supporting cast has helped him grow into a potential top 5 pick in some people's eyes with his vision and upside at 6'9. Rocking an assist rate of 34.7, Egor is one of the most effective creators in the country. Much to my chagrin, he hasn't been able to dominate scoring the ball of late. BYU doesn't need it, but it would help his stock as it is probably a more pertinent talking point than a BYU final-four run. The two other trends to watch are Egor's shooting and defense. The tournament sets a great stage to see if young players can perform in high-leverage moments guarding the best players in the country.



PHOTO BY: ISAAC HALE/ DESERET NEWS

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Richie Saunders	Quality Wins: @Arizona, Iowa State 2x
Offense: A	Shooting: B+
Defense : B	Free Throw : D
Field Goal: A+	Rebounding : B-
Turnover: D	Fouls: B-
Pace: C	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

As I said, VCU is a strong opponent. They have a slew of 610 forwards that can challenge the more undersized frontcourt of BYU. They have a handful of shooters, including Max Shulga, who have created one of the most effective offenses not only in the A10 but across the country. The key to success for BYU will be how successful they are in getting to the basket inside. VCU held opponents to 43.6% on 2-point field goal opportunities, which BYU may be able to combat as they went 58.6% and shot 37.1% from deep. This balance could help get past VCU, who also defends the three quite well, they will also need to dominate the glass versus a team that has done very well. If they can top one of debatably the best double-digit seed in the tournament. Looking beyond a VCU win, which won't be easy, Wisconsin is waiting. An even better shooting, rebounding & defending team than VCU. would be surprised to see them win it all obviously, but it would be tough for them to get past this region overall.

VCU RAMS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
A10	30th	Ryan Odom	28-6 (15-3)

TEAM OVERVIEW

The VCU Rams are heading to the NCAA Tournament, capping off a remarkable season under head coach Ryan Odom. Sharing the Atlantic 10 regular-season title, the Rams left no room for doubt by decisively winning the A10 tournament, defeating George Mason, and securing the automatic bid. Odom, a proven winner at every stop, has quickly established himself at VCU as a force within the conference. This team's strength lies in its balanced roster, featuring seasoned seniors like Shulga, Bamisile, Clark, Russell, and Jackson, who provide invaluable leadership and experience. Their defensive prowess, particularly their elite turnover generation, makes them a formidable opponent. Coupled with a versatile offense that thrives when their three-point shots are falling, the Rams possess the tools for a deep tournament run. Their 28-6 record in the A10 speaks volumes of their consistent dominance. VCU's blend of interior length and skilled guards creates a dynamic team capable of adapting to various opponents. The Rams have built a winning culture, consistently dominating the A10. With Odom's strategic guidance and a roster rounded out with talent, VCU could be a team to make a run in the NCAA Tournament.

PLAYER TO WATCH: MAX SHULGA

Max Shulga, VCU's standout guard, is the Rams' driving force. Averaging 15 points, 6 rebounds, 4 assists, and 2 steals, his all-around game is undeniable. Shulga, the A-10 Player of the Year, has a 43.6% field goal percentage, which highlights his scoring efficiency. His clutch 18-point performance in the A-10 championship, with 12 coming in the second half, showcases his ability to deliver under pressure. A reliable three-point shooter, adept passer, and tenacious defender, Shulga minimizes turnovers and contributes significantly to the boards. As a top European talent from Ukraine, his presence brings a unique edge. His versatility makes him VCU's March Madness player to watch.



PHOTO BY: MIKE KROPF/AP PHOTO

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Joe Bamisile, Jack Clark	Quality Wins: Col St @ Dayton	
Offense: B+	3 Pointers: C	
Defense: A-	Free Throw: C	
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: B+	
Turnover: C	Fouls: F	
Pace: D	Ceiling: Round of 32	

BRACKET ANALYSIS

VCU's March Madness journey as an 11-seed in the East Region presents a formidable challenge. Their first-round clash against the 6th-seeded BYU Cougars in Denver is a steep uphill battle. BYU enters the tournament on a scorching streak, having won 9 of their last 10 games, with their sole recent loss coming against Houston in the Big 12 semifinals. This indicates a team peaking at the right time, armed with offensive firepower and confidence. Notably, BYU has achieved a No. 17 national ranking in Kevin Young's impressive first year as head coach, showcasing their rapid ascent and formidable strength.

For VCU to have any chance, their renowned defensive prowess must be the cornerstone of their strategy. Ranked No. 30 in KenPom for defensive efficiency, the Rams must stifle BYU's potent offense. They will hope to replicate the A10 upset from last year when Duquesne defeated BYU in the first round. The Rams will need to lean on their defense and generate offense from turnovers. This game presents a fun backcourt matchup of potential NBA draft picks with Max Shulga vs Egor Demin.

Should VCU manage to overcome BYU, they face a daunting second-round matchup against either No. 3 seed Wisconsin or No. 14 seed Montana. Most projections foresee the Rams' path ending against Wisconsin, led by John Tonje. Wisconsin's experience and overall strength pose a significant obstacle for VCU, even if they were to pull off the first-round upset. If the Rams make it past the Cougars in the first round, they will need to play near-perfect basketball to have any chance to move past the first weekend. The committee didn't do the Atlantic 10 any favors by the under-seeding for the Rams and includes a far journey for their first matchup on Thursday.

BREAKDOWN: @HOOPHOUND5

WISCONSIN BADGERS



Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big 10	13th	Greg Gard	25-8 (13-7 in Big 10)

TEAM OVERVIEW

As a lifelong Badger fan, I hesitate to get over-excited about March. Greg Gard has brought some pretty good teams to the big dance in years past, but few groups have had this many people excited about Wisconsin basketball in at least a decade. Much of this is due to an almost perfect adjustment to modern basketball from Gard offensively. In 2024, the Badgers ranked 226th in 3-point field goal rate per Kenpom; this season, they enter the tournament in the top 20. Getting up the shots has helped diversify their shot diet and open the paint further for their motion offense. Seeing them match their same percentage from deep last year on such a dramatic increase in team volume has also been remarkable. Yes, there has been some roster turnover, but hardly what you would expect. Steven Crowl, John Blackwell, Carter Gilmore, Kamari McGee, & Nolan Winter have all taken leaps in their efficiency, usage, and/or shooting volume. Seeing these gains from the supporting cast to support new star John Tonje was crucial. It is a true testament to the buy-in that Greg Gard has from this group

in the portal era.

PLAYER TO WATCH: STEVEN CROWL

Many expect that the star of the Badgers, John Tonje, would get the nod as the player to watch for the Badgers. As great of a scorer and willful driver as Tonje is, Steven Crowl is the X factor for the Badgers. Heading into the tournament, Crowl is rocking a mean efficiency line of 52.9/40.6/82.1 on college basketball's best free-throw shooting team. Furthermore, as a staple of their offense, he has demonstrated his ability to be a nifty facilitator at seven feet with a 1.70 a/to ratio. A true representation of a modern big. Unfortunately, it is rare to see Crowl's physical impact in his minutes, something I think will be key to determining the Badgers' tournament success. The guards have helped out on the glass but we need to see Crowl be assertive in the paint helping Wisco win the possession battle to make their lives easier on defense early into the tournament.



PHOTO BY: DAN SANGER/ BADGERBLITZ.COM

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: John Tonje, John Blackwell	Quality Wins: Arizona Michigan State
Offense: A+	3 Pointers: B-
Defense: B+	Free Throw: A+
Field Goal: B	Rebounding: C
Turnover: A	Fouls: B
Pace: C	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

If you told most people preseason the Badgers would rank in the top 10 in an overall efficiency on a side of the ball, everyone would have probably laughed at you & if anything, said defense. However, here we are, a prolific modern offense that cracked the top 10 in efficiency with their combination of downhill pressure & shooting volume. Who would have thought taking steps away from low post offense late in the clock would open the door for more cuts, spot ups & open drives. With all of these improvements on offense, the Badgers still get the job done on defense. With a gritty hardworking front court rotation, the backcourt has been able to put pressure on the ball creating a great possession margin. They keep teams off the offensive glass & that has helped them stay in games when they are maybe outmatched talent wise. It is going to be crucial that we see Crowl assert himself as a paint presence to open up more chances for Wisconsin to create turnovers. If he can't hang physically, it is going to be a tough ask of Nolan Winter to step in and create plays off the glass. Other key points of weakness may come externally. While they have had a top 30 SOS, I do fear how this group has responded to teams that can make shots with them. It is hard to see a way forward if they don't continue to shoot & make shots from deep at almost a record pace at times. Especially against teams like Alabama, Duke, BYU & Oregon that all will try to stretch out this defense in order to attack their lack of substantial size & rim protection. Carter Gilmore is going to have to show up big time with hustle plays other wise this unfortunately is a potential little one & done

team.

MONTANA GRIZZLIES



NO. 14 SEED EAST REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big Sky	157th	Travis DeCuire	25-9 (14-4 in Big Sky)

TEAM OVERVIEW

At 25-9 (15-3 in conference play), the University of Montana Grizzlies received an automatic bid for the 2025 NCAA Tournament after having won the Big Sky Conference title. With a 14-1 finish to the regular season, the Grizzlies are riding a palpable wave of momentum as they look to make the most of their first tournament appearance since 2019. Coach Travis DeCuire has preached patience and unselfishness; these core principles are reflected in how the team has been built as well as how they play. All of Montana's core players returned from last season, and as such, the Grizzlies' team chemistry was reflected in their highly-consistent and low-variance style of play. And even though the Grizzlies have four players that average doubledigit scoring, no single player attempts more than 10.5 FGA per game. The Montana Grizzlies utilize a ball-control, slowpaced offensive style that prioritizes efficient shot selection and high field goal percentage. Even though the Grizzlies are the 156th-ranked team in Division I per KenPom Net Rating, they actually have the 12th-best EFG% on the strength of their 8th-best 2P% (58.5%). Their even shot distribution further exemplifies how each Grizzlies player that steps on the court is a viable scoring option.

PLAYER TO WATCH: MONEY WILLIAMS

After a late season injury sustained during his freshman campaign, Montana G Money Williams started his sophomore year slow and out of sync but finished the season on a heater. The Oakland, CA native leads the Grizzlies in scoring (13.3 ppg) and free throw attempts. And much like his Bay Area idol, Damian Lillard, Williams brings a dynamic element of shot-creation off the dribble. Despite Montana's methodical and deliberate style of play, Williams has a good sense of when to surprise defenses with the occasional midrange jumper or 3-pointer off the bounce. As a lefty, Williams can throw his defender's timing off and create additional passing lanes for his teammates to cut directly to the rim. When driving the lane, Williams generates open looks for trail rim runners or shooters.



PHOTO BY: COURTESY OF MONTANA ATHLETICS

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Joe Pridgen, Malik Moore	Quality Wins: @ N. Colorado @ Montana State
Offense: B-	3 Pointers: B
Defense: D	Free Throw: B-
Field Goal: A	Rebounding: F
Turnover: C	Fouls: C
Pace: C	Ceiling: Round of 64

BRACKET ANALYSIS

The Montana Grizzlies enter the 2025 NCAA Tournament as the 14-seed in the East Region. To say the least, they are heavy underdogs against the 3-seed Wisconsin Badgers. Although the Grizzlies play as a singular unit that emphasizes communication and urgency, they are still physically limited when compared to their opponents. The Grizzlies main rotation features only one player taller than 6'5". Fittingly, Montana ranks 325th nationally in rebounds per game (31.7). At 6'5", graduate guard Joe Pridgen, leads the team in rebounds with 6.9 rpg. No other player averages more than 3.9 rpg. Against a Wisconsin team that features two 7-footers in forwards Steven Crowl (5.4 rpg) and Nolan Winter (5.9 rpg), the Grizzlies may find themselves strategically outmatched. Montana allows 72.9 points to their opponent which ranked third-worst in the Big Sky and 209th out of 355 Division I teams. In addition, the Grizzlies ranked 250th in adjusted defensive efficiency per KenPom. This does not bode well for Montana given that the Badgers enter tournament scoring 79.7 points per game on 45.2% shooting, including 34.9% from 3-point range. The Badgers are ranked 13th in adjusted offensive efficiency per KenPom, and that is largely bolstered by the fact that they lead the entire nation in FT% (82.8%). On the surface, this appears to be a one-sided matchup that will result in an early exit for the Montana Grizzlies. Perhaps Montana's one saving grace is that they do not commit many personal fouls (16.1 PF per game - 255th

in Division I). If they can defend Wisconsin without fouling, they will inevitably keep the Badgers off the free throw line. And for a

Wisconsin team in which 41.4% of their total scoring output comes from made free throws, limiting their trips to the line may be

the best (and only realistic) strategy for Montana to pull off a massive upset victory.

BREAKDOWN: @CP3_777

ST. MARY'S GAELS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
WCC	22nd	Randy Bennett	28-5 (17-1 in WCC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

At 28-5, the Saint Mary's Gaels finished one win shy of repeating as West Coast Conference Champions. Despite losing to Gonzaga for the WCC automatic bid, the Gaels enter the 2025 NCAA Tournament on the strength of their 17-1 conference record as well as signature regular season wins over USC and Gonzaga. Their 22nd-ranked Net Rating (+ 23.09) is bolstered by their 9th-ranked defense (92.2 DRtg) per KenPom. This iteration of the Gaels has leaned heavily into zone trapping schemes. By picking up ball-handlers full court, Saint Mary's have all of their guards and wings in position to blitz at half court. This has allowed the Gaels to control pace while limiting their opponents to 60.7 ppg. On the other side of the ball, Coach Randy Bennett's squad continues to operate at a slow pace in order to emphasize ball security (56th-ranked ORTG). Without a true low post scoring option, the Gaels have relied on the two-man game of Senior guard Augustas Marčiulionis and Arizona transfer Paulius Murauskas. And given the lack of above average 3PT shooters, Saint Mary's generates a lot of cuts to the rim via Murauskas pinch post action.

PLAYER TO WATCH: MIKEY LEWIS

Saint Mary's will go as far as Augustas Marčiulionis will take them. But when Marčiulionis is constantly shifting the defense via dribble penetration, it is up to the Gaels' perimeter shooters to capitalize on the open C&S shots that Marčiulionis creates. Enter Freshman Guard Mikey Lewis. At 6'3", 180 lb, Mikey Lewis is an agile and slippery player. However, he has been primarily used off-ball as a cutter and as a spot-up shooter who occasionally gets his shots via flare screens or pin-downs. In his streamlined role, Lewis is averaging 38.8% from 3PT on 4.5 attempts per game. Lewis is hardly a streaky shooter, but he is definitely the quintessential "heat check" shooter. When Lewis knocks down a few early 3PTs, his teammates have no problem feeding him outside shots which often result in the game being broken open in Saint Mary's favor.

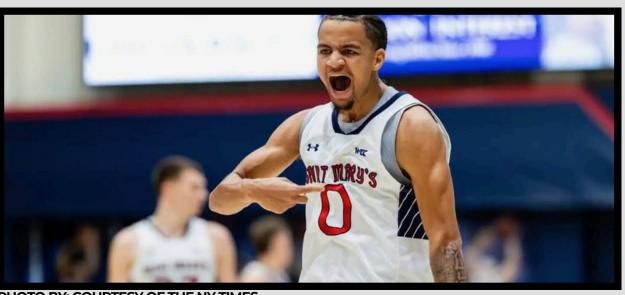


PHOTO BY: COURTESY OF THE NY TIMES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Mitchell Saxen, Augustus Marciulionis, Paulius Murauskas	Quality Wins: Gonzaga x2
Offense : B-	3 Pointers: D
Defense : A+	Free Throw: F
Field Goal: C	Rebounding : A
Turnover: B+	Fouls: A
Pace: F	Ceiling: Round of 32

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Despite finishing runner-up in the West Coast Conference Tournament, the Saint Mary's Gaels enter the 2025 NCAA Tournament as the 7-seed in the East region on the strength of their 17-1 record in conference play which consisted of two wins over rival Gonzaga. At this point, the Gaels fully embrace who they are: they are a slow and methodical team that grinds out possessions on both ends of the floor. The Gaels hold opponents to 60.7 points per game - the fifth best mark in all of Division I. In addition, Saint Mary's is one of the best rebounding teams - averaging 39.79 rpg (15th best in the nation). Although Saint Mary's understands their formula for success, will it be enough to take down their Round of 64 opponent, the 10-seed Vanderbilt Commodores? The Commodores bring an efficient perimeter-oriented offense anchored by sharpshooters Jason Edwards and Tyler Nickel, both of whom can get hot at a moment's notice. However, the Commodores have one of the most porous perimeter defenses in Division I, allowing opponents to make 36.9% of their 3-pointers against them. While this sounds like a key weakness that the Gaels can exploit, Saint Mary's happens to be one of the worst 3PT shooting teams in the field. On the season, the Gaels are averaging 32.3% from 3PT good for 6.5 made 3-pointers per game. Ultimately, the Gaels' best shot at winning this matchup is with suffocating perimeter defense. Augustas Marčiulionis, Luke Barrett, and Jordan Ross have combined to hold opposing shooters to 30.8% from 3PT. If Vanderbilt becomes a one-dimensional offense, Saint Mary's will have a significant advantage in the paint with Paulius Murauskas and Mitchell Saxen. Surviving and advancing is the name of the game. But with a potential Round of 32 matchup with Alabama looming, it's fair to question the sustainability of

Saint Mary's winning formula.

BREAKDOWN: @CP3_777

VANDERBILT COMMORDORES



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SEC	49th	Mark Byington	20-12 (8-10 in SEC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Predicted to finish dead last in a pre-season poll, a resurgent Vanderbilt stunned the SEC by finishing 10th in what was the best conference in college basketball, clinching its first NCAA tournament appearance since 2017.

The architect of the Commodores' success is first-year head coach Mark Byington, who arrived in Nashville after a fantastic season at James Madison. At Vanderbilt, Byington built an unusual roster, with no player taller than 6'8" but full of guys who can make plays and move with and without the basketball.

The result? Vandy boasts a top 20 offensive efficiency in the country, as they're one of the best teams in the country in scoring of pick and rolls and cuts. The downside? Vandy struggles to protect the paint on defense.

Vanderbilt sent out a clear signal that they were back during non-conference play, where they only suffered one defeat against Drake. In conference play, the Commodores made use of the plethora of quad-one-win opportunities in the SEC, taking down Kentucky and Tennessee at home and Texas A&M away.

PLAYER TO WATCH: DEVIN MCGLOCKTON

Vanderbilt has no player playing more than 62% of their total minutes, but the man who makes their unorthodox roster work is the undersized center Devin McGlockton. He's listed at just 6'7", but McGlockton's wide frame and upper body strength enable him to play bigger than that. He's excellent at carving out space both on offense and defense.

McGlockton doesn't rely on post-ups at all but is often the main beneficiary of his teammates' dribble penetration and pick-and-rolls. He is also super active on the offensive glass. On occasion, he can step out and knock down a three. However, as an undersized big, McGlockton has problems defending the post and staying out of foul trouble.



PHOTO BY: DANNY SIMMONS/USA TODAY

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Jason Edwards, AJ Hoggard, Tyler Nickel	Quality Wins: Tennessee @ Texas A&M
Offense: A-	3 Pointers: D
Defense: B-	Free Throw: B-
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: D
Turnover: A-	Fouls: F
Pace: B	Ceiling: Round of 32

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Vandy comes into the tournament on the heels of a loss against Texas in the first round of the SEC tournament, also having dropped their last two regular season games against Arkansas and Georgia.

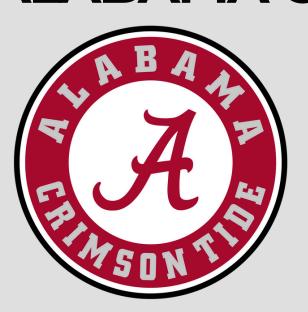
So, the Commodores are coming into the tournament in a bit of a slump. As a 10th seed in the West region, they get to face the St. Mary's Gaels, a very good regular-season team in the West Coast Conference that, unfortunately for them, has yet to make some truly serious tournament noise under their long-time coach, Randy Bennett.

Vanderbilt will most likely be a slight underdog for the game, but they definitely stand a chance of advancing. This will be a pretty classic offense vs. defense matchup—if the game is kept in the high 50s or low 60s, it's advantage St. Mary's, which for years has tried to slow the pace of the game down while playing high-level opponents.

Vandy's Achilles heel this season has been defending the three-point line. Per Bart Torvik, they're just 337th in the nation in opponent 3-point field goal percentage. Luckily for them, St. Mary's is not exactly the team that's going to crush you from three. Their star guard, Augustas Marčiulionis, can knock down a long ball, but overall, he prefers going to the basket or pulling up from the elbow area. If they managed to get past St. Mary's, it would most likely be a super tough second-round matchup against Alabama. They faced the Crimson Tide in SEC play this season, losing away by a score of 103-87. Vanderbilt's year has been extremely positive, and they could yet make some noise in the NCAA tournament, but at the end of the day, it does look pretty unlikely they make it out of the first weekend.

BREAKDOWN: @SHEEDINATL

ALABAMA CRIMSON TIDE



NO. 2 SEED

EAST

REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SEC	6th	Nate Oats	25-7 (13-5 in SEC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Everyone in the country should be wary of the Alabama Crimson Tide come tournament time. Alabama dominated their non-conference schedule, beating great high-major teams like Houston and Creighton. The Crimson Tide even beat a low-major power in McNeese State, which owns the Southland. This Alabama squad wins with overwhelming offense and great athleticism. Their two non-conference losses came to two Big Ten schools. In these losses, one could see that physicality and great offense to pressure their defense can allow you to best Bama. Alabama will have to lean into the elite offense that they possess. They are 3rd in the country in offensive efficiency while also being among the best in offensive rebounding and getting to the freethrow line. Mark Sears and Labaron Philon will have to be everything they are touted to be when it comes to creating offense for Alabama. The depth of Aden Holloway and Chris Youngblood gives a great offensive cushion to those previous two, though. The shooting and playmaking for this Alabama perimeter will be extremely dangerous. The frontcourt for Bama is just as impressive as it is athletic, long, and draws a lot of fouls. Grant Nelson, Mo Dioubate, Cliff Omoruyi, Jarin Stevenson, and even Aiden Sherrell. That is just too deep of a team that should not be doubted when it comes to making a deep run into March.

PLAYER TO WATCH: GRANT NELSON

671 Big man Grant Nelson will be relied upon like a star this March. Last year, he emerged as a breakout guy, and now he has the chance to cement himself in Alabama history books. Nelson is a versatile, modern big man who can impact the game in every single way. His great athleticism, plus ball skills and sound interior scoring. The shot hasn't been exactly consistent, so he will have to prove capable from deep and/or at the FT line. The good thing about Nelson is that he hits the glass and is a good weak-side rim protector. He is also solid on the perimeter on both ends and guarded on an island, and also shown connectivity on offense. Nelson is averaging 12 points and 8 rebounds on the season and is shooting 70% at the rim. With the depth that he has around him, one could expect some great performances in the tourney, barring any serious slumps.



PHOTO BY: STEVE ROBERTS/IMAGN IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Mark Sears	Quality Wins: Houston, Auburn, Kentucky 2x	
Offense: A+	3 Pointers: C	
Defense: B+	Free Throw: D	
Field Goal: A	Rebounding: A+	
Turnover: C	Fouls: D	
Pace: A+	Ceiling: Nationals Champs	

BRACKET ANALYSIS

It's worth noting that Grant Nelson is being re-evaluated for an injury before the Round of 64 before determining whether he can play for the Crimson Tide.

Alabama was blessed to receive the 2nd seed. They'll need all hands on deck as their potent offense has to come with their best defense of the season. The Tide cannot underestimate their opponent and get into a shootout. As solid and athletic as the frontcourt is, it's their perimeter that will need to strap their boots on the most. If Alabama can get Sears, Youngblood, Philon, and Holloway locked in on and off the ball defensively, it'll be a long postseason for Nate Oats' squad. The Crimson Tide will see a strong Horizon League squad in Robert Morris, and then it's high-major ball from then on. They shouldn't take anyone lightly on their path, but it's easy for them to see a path to the Final Four. They have the size, athleticism, and shooting to be the favorites in each round.

BREAKDOWN: @ONLYONEPODCASTT

ROBERT MORRIS COLONIALS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Horizon	139th	Rob Toole	26-8 (15-5 in Horizon)

TEAM OVERVIEW:

Owners of the nation's fourth longest winning streak, the Colonials have won ten in a row and 16 of their last 17 games heading into the tournament. "Bobby Mo", as some call them, dishes out 16 assists per game collectively, good for 41st in the nation.

Robert Morris also got to the free throw line A LOT, as they ranked 31st in the nation in free throw attempts at 22.6 attempts per game. They also find quality shots and are rarely in a rush, evidenced by their average possession length in addition to nearly 61% of their field goals being assisted. The Colonials also have size and length that most mid-major teams of their ilk don't possess. Both Alvaro Folgueiras and Amarion Dickerson play much bigger than their size and are both scrappy defenders. Folgueiras averaged 2.6 stocks per game, while Dickerson, the reigning Horizon Defensive Player of the Year, averaged 3.4 as the pair also greatly contributed to the Colonials averaging 12.4 offensive rebounds per game and 37.4 rebounds overall. In fact, Robert Morris has one of the best rebounding margins among all Division One teams, as they grab 4.9 rebounds more than their opponent on average.

PLAYER TO WATCH: ALVARO FOLGUEIRAS

Folgueiras is the reigning Horizon Player of the Year and for good reason. Folguieras is as complete a player as a coach can get at the mid-major level. He is a defensive focal point, shoots an excellent 55/42/78, and he can pass it and shoot it for a big man. From three, he's a pure catch-and-shoot and pick-and-pop guy, as nearly 98% of his made threes are assisted. He also averages 12.5 rebounds per 40 minutes. Folguieras is a mismatch nightmare for the #2 seed coach (Nate Oats), who needs to game plan against him.



PHOTO BY: COURTESY OF ROBERT MORRIS MEDIA RELATIONS

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Kam Woods, Amarion Dickerson	Quality Wins: Towson @ Cornell	
Offense: C	3 Pointers: C	
Defense: C	Free Throw: C	
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: B	
Turnover: F	Fouls: C	
Pace: C	Ceiling: Round of 64	

BRACKET ANALYSIS

It might actually be very entertaining to see Bobby Mo play at a much higher pace than they have all year. Alabama's games typically turn into track meets, and that's the Colonials' first opponent. While the Colonials come into this matchup as one of the hottest teams in college basketball, they will likely be overmatched by Alabama.

After last year's upset of Trey Townsend's Oakland squad upsetting Kentucky and essentially ending John Calipari's Big Blue era, the Horizon League would obviously love to repeat that success against Nate Oats' squad. The one intriguing part that makes me believe that Robert Morris has life is that Alabama commits 19 fouls per game, which is 332nd in the nation. As previously stated, Robert Morris relies on getting to the free-throw line and scoring. However, after that, almost nothing else could work to Robert Morris' advantage. While it's worth mentioning that Grant Nelson may miss substantial time for the Crimson Tide, Alabama still has too much talent for Robert Morris to keep up with. Alabama is also deep, as their rotation goes legitimately eight deep, even with Nelson on the mend. However, Nelson v. Folguieras would be must-see television.

Additionally, Robert Morris has a pretty good defense, especially for a Horizon League team. As previously stated, Robert Morris can take games over on the glass, and behind Folguieras and Dickerson, they'll crash the boards and play elite defense. In my opinion, Robert Morris may have the best chance of any other 15 seed to force an upset in the Round of 64. If you've already read Bryant's team page, Julian Mendelsohn will disagree, but this is the 15 seed I would plant my flag on.

BREAKDOWN: @THE_NBAGELL

HOUSTON COUGARS



NO.1SEED
MIDWEST
REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big 12	3rd	Kelvin Sampson	29-4 (19-1 in Big 12)

TEAM OVERVIEW

The nation's top-ranked defense, Houston Cougars, impose a suffocating style, forcing opponents into uncomfortable, low-percentage shots. Houston also allows a miserly pointsper-game average, consistently ranking among the nation's best. This year's Cougars team is a veteran-laden squad, led by seniors LJ Cryer and J'Wan Roberts and anchored by Big 12 Defensive Player of the Year, Joseph Tugler. The Cougars' offensive actions are orchestrated and controlled by their experienced leaders. Despite facing a challenging schedule in the rugged Big 12, the Cougars dominated, securing both the regular-season and tournament titles. They suffered only one conference loss, and that was in overtime. While they faced early-season tests against strong opponents, those experiences only made them stronger and more prepared. The Cougars possess a wealth of Quad 1 victories, demonstrating their ability to win against elite competition. The Cougars are currently fourth in 3-point percentage at 39.77%; talk about 3 and D. This year, the Cougars blend their signature defensive intensity with a high-skill and efficient offensive approach, executed at a deliberate pace that dismantles teams in the halfcourt. Ranking in the top 10 nationally in both offensive and defensive efficiency, this Houston team is a clear Final Four contender.

PLAYER TO WATCH: MILOS UZAN

Milos Uzan has become the pivotal player elevating Houston's championship potential. His emergence as a steady, reliable point guard throughout the season has been a crucial factor in their success. Uzan's development culminated in a spectacular Big 12 title game performance, where he scored a career-high 25 points with zero turnovers, showcasing his poise and control. He's a fluid guard with the ability to control the tempo, distribute the ball effectively, and score when needed, making him an essential component of Houston's offense. His performance in March Madness is poised to significantly bolster his draft stock as he demonstrates his well-rounded skill set on the national stage.



PHOTO BY: JOSHUA BRAGGS/THE COUGAR

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: LJ Cryer, J'Wan Roberts	Quality Wins: Arizona 2x, Iowa State, Texas Tech
Offense: A	3 Pointers: A+
Defense: A+	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: B-	Rebounding: C
Turnovers: A	Fouls: D
Pace: F	Ceiling: National Champions

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Under the masterful guidance of Kelvin Sampson, the 1 seed Houston Cougars are embarking on a redemption journey fueled by the bitter memory of last year's tournament. They entered the 2023 NCAA Tournament with genuine championship aspirations, boasting a team led by the exceptional Jamal Shead. However, their dreams were shattered when Shead suffered a devastating injury in the Sweet 16, derailing their momentum and ultimately ending their run. This year, they return stronger, more determined, and driven by the desire to finish what they started. Their dominance in the Big 12, securing both the regular-season and tournament titles, is a testament to their resilience and unwavering focus. Kelvin Sampson has instilled a culture of toughness and discipline, preparing them for the challenges that lie ahead.

Their tournament journey begins with SIU Edwardsville, where they have a chance to fine-tune their execution. The potential second-round clash with Gonzaga will be a significant test, demanding their signature defensive intensity. Beyond Gonzaga, the Midwest Region is a minefield, with potential matchups against Clemson, Tennessee, and Kentucky. When healthy and clicking on all cylinders, this Houston team is a formidable force. They are experienced, deep, and battle-tested. Cryer and Roberts' leadership, combined with the team's defensive prowess and offensive efficiency, makes them a championship contender. Kelvin Sampson has assembled a team that embodies his coaching philosophy: tough, disciplined, and extremely versatile. Their intelligence and defense have allowed them to withstand pressure and maintain their intensity, which they have used to win against elite competition. This year, the Cougars are driven by a singular goal: to overcome last year's heartbreak and achieve their championship aspirations. They have the talent, experience, and coaching to make it happen. This is Kelvin Sampson's team, and

they are ready to seize their moment.

BREAKDOWN: @HOOPHOUND5

SIUE COUGARS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Ohio Valley	217th	Brian Barone	22-11 (13-7 in Ohio Valley)

TEAM OVERVIEW

The season is already a huge success for SIUE, as they just won the Ohio Valley Conference championship for the first time ever, beating top-seeded Southwest Missouri 69-48 in the final. Southwest Missouri had the league's highest-scoring offense, and in the final, SIUE held them to their lowest point total of the season.

Under head coach Brian Barone, the Cougars went 22-11 (13-7 in conference), a solid improvement from the previous season, when they went 17-16 (9-9 in conference).

SIU has six players who have played in all 33 of their team's games this season. Four of those players have started in all 33 games - Ray'Sean Taylor, Brian Taylor, Ring Malith (one of the coolest names in the NCAA Tournament), and Desmond Polk.

The Cougars' two games this season vs. power conference teams were both blowout losses (to Indiana and Illinois), but the fact that they won their conference title game in a blowout over the top-seeded team indicates they may have improved a bit since those early-season games.

PLAYER TO WATCH: RAY'SEAN TAYLOR

Taylor is a senior guard. He's their leading scorer at 19.3 PPG and also sets up his teammates for scores well, registering a solid assist % of 25.1.

Taylor is not shy about shooting the ball from distance. He takes eight threes a game and makes them at a 34.6% clip, and makes 84.6% of his free throws. He's got the highest BPM on the team at 4.1.

Taylor also sports a strong FTr (Free Throw Rate) of 40.1, which indicates an ability to get downhill, drive the basketball, and handle physicality. So he can shoot, drive, and pass.



PHOTO BY: SCOTT KANE/SIUE ATHLETICS

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Brian Taylor, Ring Malith	Quality Wins: @ Indiana St @ W Michigan
Offense: F	3 Pointers: C
Defense: C	Free Throw: F
Field Goal: F	Rebounding: B+
Turnover: C	Fouls: C
Pace: F	Ceiling: Round of 64

BRACKET ANALYSIS

SIUE is the 16 seed in the Midwest region. They will take on Houston. It'll be the Cougars vs the Cougars. My money is on the Cougars!

In all seriousness, I would be shocked if SIUE is able to pull off the upset here. As I mentioned earlier, they were blown out (80-61 to Indiana and 90-58 vs. Illinois) in their two games against power conference schools this season. And it's safe to say that Houston is much better than both of those teams.

If SIUE were to win this game, it would certainly be one of the biggest upsets in March Madness history. If SIUE can just keep it close and have the final score be within 15 or so points, that would be a very good showing for them. I'm sure SIUE will give it their all and be well prepared. You never know - that's what makes March Madness so fun.

And speaking of fun, the point guard matchup of Ray'Sean Taylor vs Houston junior Milos Uzan should be a lot of fun. Uzan has a chance to hear his name called on the night of the NBA draft with a strong NCAA tournament. More importantly, the Cougars have a legit chance to be the last team standing, cutting down the nets when the Final Four is done. So you know Uzan and his Houston teammates will be locked in - even for a 16-seed matchup.

The first eight or so minutes of this game will be key. SIUE has to just try to keep it close—stay in the game and avoid going down by 15 or 20+ points early on. If so, it'll be a long game for them. Houston is going to try to stomp on them right from the beginning.

GONZAGA BULLDOGS PLAYER TO WATCH: RYAN NEMBHARD



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
WCC	9th	Mark Few	58-8 (14-4 in WCC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

While Gonzaga's defense has always been secondary to their elite high-low ball screen continuity offense, this year's Bulldogs team is one of the worst defenses in the Mark Few era. Per Bart Torvik, since the start of conference play, Gonzaga is ranked 52nd in adjusted defensive efficiency. While the predictive metrics such as KenPom are still very high on Gonzaga, the offense will need to be historic in order for the Bulldogs to make a deep run. In conference play, Gonzaga had a stretch where they gave up 82 points to Pepperdine, 82 to San Diego, 97 to Oregon State, and 103 to Santa Clara in a seven game span. However, this Gonzaga team is battle tested. They are the 11th most experienced team in the nation. Last year, they went to yet another Sweet 16 and they're coming back for vengeance, as they have the fourth best minutes continuity in the country from last year. In fact, Gonzaga is attempting to go to their 11th straight Sweet 16 appearance, which would be a record for any team since the NCAA tournament expanded to 64 teams. Additionally, this is Gonzaga's 26th consecutive NCAA tournament appearance. So what happens when college basketball's model of consistency is not consistent? A second round matchup against Houston, if they even beat Georgia. It's also worth noting that the Zags are 2-4 on neutral courts this year.

While Nembhard is just fifth on Gonzaga in scoring, he's leading the nation in assists with a healthy 9.7 per game. Nembhard is also an integral part of Gonzaga leading every team in the country in both assists per game and assist to turnover ratio, while Nembhard personally ranks second among all players in assist to turnover ratio. With this said, Nembhard is the catalyst to Gonzaga's elite offense. Roughly a whopping 62% of Gonzaga's made field goals have been assisted this year, which demonstrates the effectiveness of their shot selection.



PHOTO BY: JAMES SNOOK/USA TODAY

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Nolan Hickman, Graham Ike	Quality Wins: Baylor St Mary's
Offense: A+	3 Pointers: C
Defense: A-	Free Throw: A+
Field Goal: A-	Rebounding: A-
Turnover: A+	Fouls: B
Pace: A	Ceiling: Elite 8

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Gonzaga is a weird team to predict. They have the resume of an 8 or 9 seed (which is where they ended up) but they have the predictive metrics of a top 3 seed, as Gonzaga is ranked 9th in KenPom and 8th in the NET. Gonzaga, after winning the WCC tournament, will face Georgia in the Round of 64, with Houston the next opponent. In order to beat Georgia, Gonzaga should be able to play their typical style, as they'll take care of the ball, create easy baskets, and play pesky defense. This isn't your father's Gonzaga team, though, as the Bulldogs don't rely heavily on their three point shooting this year. Georgia doesn't have the offensive firepower to keep up with Gonzaga and their defense isn't elite enough to prevent Gonzaga from scoring at the rate they score at, so this one should be Gonzaga all the way. In terms of Houston, I'm not saying Gonzaga can't beat the Cougars, but it is unlikely. Houston is one of a handful of teams that can really make things difficult on Gonzaga's offense, and that's exactly what Kelvin Sampson's squad would need to do. Additionally, Houston plays with one of the slowest paces in the nation, which Gonzaga would actually be okay with. Gonzaga's opponents were 337th in the nation in terms of average possession length, so Houston's slow style wouldn't be anything Gonzaga isn't accustomed to. While it's likely that Houston wins the matchup and Gonzaga's Sweet 16 streak could end, Gonzaga is probably the last eight seed that Houston wanted to face before the bracket was revealed.

GEORGIA BULLDOGS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SEC	34th	Mike White	20-12 (8-10 SEC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

It's been a good but hectic season for the Georgia Bulldogs this year. They started off scorching hot, as they went 14-2 in their first 16 games. They took down some solid nonconference opponents, but their best wins in that span were against St. John's and Kentucky. After that, it got rough for the Dawgs as they would lose 9 of their next 11 games. At least they ended their conference play with 4 straight wins, including one on Florida. I believe Georgia's top-25 defense, great offensive rebounding, and ability to get to the line will have to shine in order for them to be a threat in March. Luckily, Georgia is very well-rounded this year and has a lot of depth inside and out. Silas Demary, Dakota Leffew, and Blue Cain all shot solid from 3, and even their bigs like Newell and Dylan James provide floor spacing. Somto Cyril and Asa Newell will have to play beyond their young freshman ages and really hold down Georgia's paint. Tyrin Lawrence and RJ Godfrey are going to have to stay as solid as they've been and provide that reliable depth the Bulldogs need.

PLAYER TO WATCH: ASA NEWELL

One of the Dawgs' most key players will have to be 6'll freshman sensation Asa Newell. Newell is a former 5-star and HS National Champion at Montverde. His play this year has been nothing short of amazing, and he's one of the best young Georgia bigs to have come through the program. Newell's ability to finish, proven versatile defense, and space the floor have made him the go-to frontcourt option for Georgia. He's shooting 72% at the rim and has been a terror on the offensive boards. His shot has proven capable enough to hurt a defense, and I think his spacing in March will be key to the Dawgs' offense. If Newell can continue his great play, then there's no reason for UGA to not head into March with some confidence.

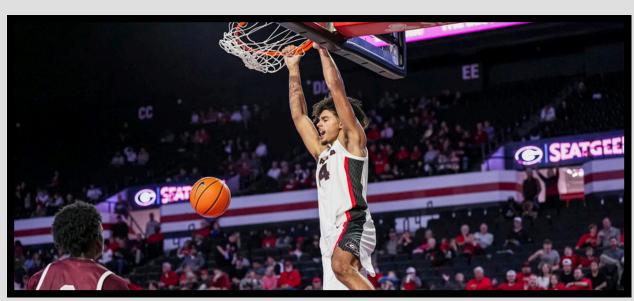


PHOTO BY: DALE ZANINE/IMAGN IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Silas Demary, Blue Cain	Quality Wins: St John's Florida
Offense: A-	3 Pointers: C
Defense: B	Free Throw: D
Field Goal: B-	Rebounding : C
Turnover: F	Fouls: C
Pace: D	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

The Bulldogs grabbed a 9th seed for their SEC efforts. The Dawgs will have to lock in early as they got the Dawgs from across the country. Gonzaga is not to be played with at all, but they are definitely not their usual powerhouse selves. This should be an even-matched fight between the South and West. The Bulldogs have to feast on Gonzaga's less-than-ideal athleticism. The frontcourt athletic difference is stark. Newell and Cyril should be more than ready to make Gregg, Ike, and Huff work vertically. Georgia has to hit from deep, though, and win the fight down low if they want to advance. Their journey could be short, though, as they get a Championship favorite, Houston. Luckily, Houston lost a key big man, so hopefully, Georgia can use that to its advantage. The path isn't filled with top-tier squads although they could eventually run into Tennessee. A positive is that beating Houston will prepare them for the rest of the region. Possible matchups between Kentucky, Texas, Xavier, or UCLA should not scare the Dawgs too much. If they can handle business in the first two rounds, I don't see why they can't make a surprising run.

CLEMSON TIGERS



NO. 5 SEED
MIDWEST
REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
ACC	18th	Brad Brownell	27-6 (18-2 in ACC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

It's pretty tough to improve after losing your best player, but Brad Brownell has been able to propel his Tigers to their best regular season since 1987, despite PJ Hall's departure to the NBA. How? With the power of one of the most ruthlessly efficient offenses in the country. Clemson brought back the Hunter brothers (Dillon and Chase), while returning Chauncey Wiggins and Ian Scheffelin. Throw Boston College transfer Jaeden Zachary and Cincinnati transfer Viktor Lakhin in the mix, and the Tigers have a 7 man death squad. Chase Hunter has been the ultimate three level scorer, while Lakhin and Scheffelin have provided a major boost to the interior scoring. Clemson is one of the best in the country at limiting turnovers, while creating extra possessions on the offensive glass. One thing to be wary of...Brownell has been mostly running 7-8 guys all season, and Clemson ranks 360th in the nation when it comes to playing guys with 2 fouls. If an opposing team can attack the rim successfully and get either Scheffelin or Lakhin in foul trouble early, it could be something to watch out for in March. Brownell is looking to further his legacy at Clemson, and another deep tourney run would entrench him for years to come

PLAYER TO WATCH: VIKTOR LAKHIN

It's easy to make the case for Scheffelin or Hunter here, but I think Lakhin is the one to watch, coming in as a transfer and revolutionizing the Tigers' ability to dominate inside. His ability to defend pick and roll, especially in drop coverage, while being an elite screener on the other end of the floor has completely opened things up for Ian Scheffelin.

Clemson is + 9.4 when Lakhin is on the floor, and a lot of that has to do with the way he dominates the paint on both ends. He's not the most prolific post player, but with his touch around the rim on hooks, along with his putback ability on offensive rebounds, he simply doesn't need to be.



PHOTO BY: SCOTT KINSER/AP PHOTO

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Chase Hunter, Ian Schieffelin	Quality Wins: Kentucky. Duke
Offense: A-	3 Pointers: B+
Defense: A	Free Throw : B+
Field Goal: B	Rebounding: C
Turnover: B-	Fouls: B+
Pace: F	Ceiling: Final Four

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Boy, did Clemson draw the short straw on this one. They've pulled the ever-treacherous 5-12 matchup and are faced with one of the best mid-major teams in the country in McNeese State. That being said, on paper, the matchup looks great for Clemson. McNeese gives up a lot of points from beyond the arc, and Clemson is 31st in the country when it comes to 3-point percentage. It's going to be crucial for them to take care of the ball. McNeese is one of the best in the nation at forcing mistakes, and Quadir Copeland will punish you in transition with his ability to find open guys. The Tigers are going to need to be mindful of where Javohn Garcia and DJ Richards are at all times, as those are the guys that can really burn teams if they're given open looks.

The onus is going to be on Scheffelin and Lakhin to be mindful on the perimeter on defense, and to punish McNeese on offense when they switch into mismatches. If the Tigers can avoid the mistakes, and continue to shoot the lights out, they can make it out of this round. Things get a bit easier in the round of 32. Their size and guard play should be more than enough to overwhelm High Point or Purdue, with either Scheffelin or Lakhin being nightmarish for Tre Kaufman Renn or Justin Bodo Bodo. If they do make it to the Sweet 16, they'll be hoping to see a Georgia, or more likely Gonzaga upset, rather than having to face the Houston Cougars. It's unlikely they get back to another Elite 8, but they've been there before, so they are certainly capable of willing themselves back there again.

MCNEESE COWBOYS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Southland	59th	WIII Wade	27-6 (19-1 in Southland)

PLAYER TO WATCH: JAHVON GARCIA

In a squad loaded with talent, it's hard to look past the Southland Player of the Year. Garcia has been the Cowboys' best creator, especially when it comes to scoring the ball. They like to get him moving towards the ball, usually off of feeds from Quadir Copeland, but once he gets it, he can score at all 3 levels. He's at his best off the dribble in the midrange, where he hits at a 49.5% clip. If the game slows down, Garcia is far and away Mcneese's premier option in the halfcourt. Look for him to be the go-to guy when they need a bucket.



PHOTO BY: KIRK MECHE/SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN PRESS

TEAM OVERVIEW

It might be Will Wade's last hurrah before he jets off to the Power 5, but he's got his Cowboys on Cinderella watch headed into March. The Cowboys were a whopping 19-1 in conference play this season before brushing off Lamar and Northwestern State for their autobid. They've got a roster loaded with talent, including: Southland Player of the Year:

Javon Garcia, Second Team All Conference Quadir

Copeland, and DPOY Christian Shumate. Sincere Parker leads the nation in scoring for players with 0 starts, carrying the bench unit. They also happen to have a top 30 three point shooter in the nation in DJ Richards (44%).

The Cowboys love to run. Their opponents possessions last around 18.6 seconds, which is 346th in possession length in the country. They create havoc with constant switching and active hands, and they have a swagger and tenacity about them on both ends of the floor. If they are going to beat a higher seed in March, they'll need to rebound the ball a lot better. They're 260th in the nation in offensive rebounding %, allowing around 10 per game. They're a lower seed for a reason, but they could make things very dicey for their first round matchup.

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Quadir Copeland, Christian Shumate	Quality Wins: North Texas Lamar x3
Offense : B	Shooting: B-
Defense : B	Free Throw : D
Field Goal: B	Rebounding : C
Turnover : C	Fouls: C
Pace: F	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

It would be real rough for McNeese if this were Will Wade's last game before he departs for greener pastures. However, Clemson is a tough matchup for the Cowboys. They need to force turnovers against the Tigers and create transition opportunities before Scheffelin or Lakhin get the chance to set up inside. Copeland specifically needs to be aggressive in attacking the paint and draw fouls to force Brad Brownell to go to his bench.

Given Clemson's shooting ability, the Cowboys are going to need to be hyper-focused and overly communicative in this "switch-everything" defense, or Clemson will shoot them out of the gym. If the pace starts to slow, expect Garcia to try and take advantage of mismatches on either Scheffelin or Lakhin. Garcia probably will see either Jaeden Zachery or Dillon Hunter guarding him, and the Cowboys should try to get him out of those matchups.

DJ Richards could also have a big game, but Wade is going to have to force his involvement through screening actions. This could be one of the more intriguing first round matchups, and despite being a 12th seed, McNeese genuinely has a shot here. If they do manage to pull off the upset, a Sweet 16 run could be on the table.

Purdue is one of the colder teams coming into March, and the pesky defense of the Cowboys could frustrate Braden Smith and Tre Kaufman-Renn, assuming the Boilermakers get past High Point in round one. They may actually prefer a duel with Purdue over High Point oddly enough. High Point is on a hot streak, and could really bother McNeese with the size of Kimani Hamilton and Justin Bodo-Bodo. Upsets are always tough to predict, but McNeese is a savvy upset pick for those looking to inject a bit of chaos into their brackets.

PURDUE BOILERMAKERS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big Ten	19th	Matt Painter	22-11 (13-7 in Big 10)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Purdue entered the season fresh off a National Championship appearance, but found replacing two-time Naismith Award winner Zach Edey a significant challenge. The team returned 54.2% of last season's minutes and 46.3% of its scoring, providing a solid foundation. Matt Painter's squad finished with a 22-10 record and 13-7 in Big Ten play, securing fourth place in the conference. Known for its efficient offense, Purdue excels in guard play, perimeter shooting, and a stationary post presence. However, without Edey, Purdue's defensive concerns are apparent, particularly with a 5.3% block rate and opponent effective field goal percentage (eFG%) of 51.9. Despite these struggles, Purdue remains talented, led by Big Ten Player of the Year Braden Smith and All-Big Ten First Team selection Trey Kaufman-Renn. Depth will be crucial for a deep March run, with many freshmen and sophomores needing to step up. While Purdue has the tools to contend, defensive weaknesses and a lack of experience has posed obstacles. Contributions from the supporting cast will be key to their success as they aim for another deep tournament push.

PLAYER TO WATCH: BRADEN SMITH

Braden Smith has become one of the nation's top guards and is crucial to Purdue's success. As the leader of their offense, he controls the pace and creates scoring opportunities for himself and his teammates. Smith averages 16.2 points per game with shooting splits of 44.2% from the field, 39.4% from three, and 83.3% from the free-throw line. He excels as a playmaker, averaging 8.8 assists per game and maintaining a 3:1 assist-to-turnover ratio. His ability to break down defenses and make smart decisions is key to Purdue's offensive efficiency. As Purdue looks to make a deep NCAA Tournament run, Smith's leadership and poise will be vital.



PHOTO BY: BRYNN ANDERSON/AP PHOTO

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Trey Kaufman- Renn, Fletcher Loyer	Quality Wins: Alabama Michigan	
Offense: A+	3 Pointers: A+	
Defense: B	Free Throw: C	
Field Goal: A	Rebounding: F	
Turnover: B	Fouls: C	
Pace: F	Ceiling: Sweet 16	

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Purdue enters the tournament after a National Championship appearance, with high expectations to replicate last season's success. However, to make a deep run, they must avoid potential mid-major upsets and face a tough Houston team in the Sweet 16—all before reaching the Elite Eight. Against High Point: High Point comes in with a 29-5 record and ranks second in Offensive Rating (121.7). With strong veteran leadership, they could pose a challenge. However, Purdue's guard play, especially Braden Smith, will control the tempo and smoothen the offense. Purdue's experience and talent should see them through this first-round matchup.

In the second round, Purdue will face either Clemson or McNeese State. Clemson is known for its balanced offense and defense, while McNeese State brings physicality and guard play after last season's Cinderella run. Both teams will test Purdue's depth, but their skill and experience should help them advance.

Purdue's floor is a Round of 32 exit. High Point could make the game closer than expected, and Clemson or McNeese State's defense could exploit Purdue's weaknesses. Staying sharp will be essential to avoid an upset. Meanwhile, Purdue's ceiling is the Sweet 16. After navigating the first two rounds, a potential matchup against Houston could prove challenging with their suffocating defense. If Purdue rises to the challenge, they may make it to the Elite Eight, but the Sweet 16 could be their final stop.

BREAKDOWN: @GAMEBREAKNOW

HIGH POINT PANTHERS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big South	84th	Alan Huss	29-5 (14-2 in Big South)

TEAM OVERVIEW

The High Point Panthers have only lost five games this season and are coming fresh off a Big South regular season and postseason championship. After just missing out on the tournament last year, coach Alan Huss now has the Panthers dancing for the first time ever, in his second year at the helm, with a top 25 offense in the country!

The Panthers haven't lost a game since January 16th and it will be over two months since their last loss when they open play in the NCAA tournament. High Point plays a great brand of basketball, they love to play in the halfcourt, they don't turn the ball over, they play 10-11 deep in their rotation, they get to the free throw line and convert and they don't lack experience.

Kezza Giffa is a senior guard from Paris, France who has led the Panthers backcourt this season, but he is not alone. D'Maurian Williams, Trae Benham, Chase Johnston and Bobby Pettiford are all senior guards that play alongside Giffa on the perimeter. Kimani Hamilton provides the punch in the frontcourt and Juslin Bodo Bodo, a 7 foot sophomore, is also a very interesting two-way player for the Panthers. The way this roster is constructed and coached by Alan Huss makes the High Point Panthers a legitimate Cinderella team in the NCAA tournament.

PLAYER TO WATCH: BOBBY PETTIFORD

If you watched the Panthers in the Big South Conference championship game, the wildcard on this team, and the player that can catapult the Panthers to success in the tournament is "Big Shot" Bobby Pettiford. With the Panthers down 15 in that game, it was Pettiford who ignited the comeback. Pettiford began his career playing for Bill Self at Kansas before transferring to East Carolina last year before finally ending up at High Point. Experienced and seasoned, Bobby Pettiford might have to go on a heater in order for the Panthers to win their opening-round game.



РНОТО ВҮ:

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Kezza Giffa, Kimani Hamilton	Quality Wins: UAB North Texas	
Offense: A-	3 Pointers: B	
Defense: D	Free Throw: F	
Field Goal: A	Rebounding: C	
Turnover: B	Fouls: F	
Pace: D	Ceiling: Sweet 16	

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Despite the vast seeding difference, the Panthers could genuinely give Purdue a run for their money. High Point's talented backcourt could frustrate Braden Smith and Fletcher Loyer, and Justin Bodo-Bodo has a distinct size advantage over Tre Kaufman-Renn. The Panthers' offense, which has scored over 75 points in every game throughout their 14 game winning streak, could go toe-to-toe with the Boilermakers. The key for High Point will be getting inside. In Purdue's last 10 games, 6 of which have been losses, they've only managed to hold 3 opponents under 55% from inside the arc. If Pettiford and Hamilton manage to get downhill early and often, it could spell trouble for Purdue. In last season's championship run, it was the guard play of Loyer and Smith that propelled the Boilermakers to new heights. If the Panthers can slow that backcourt, they could be in business. If they manage to pull off the upset, an intriguing matchup awaits them with either Clemson, or McNeese. The blueprint looks pretty similar if they manage to draw the Tigers. Bodo-Bodo and Hamilton will hope to marshal the Tigers' frontcourt, while Kezza Giffa, D'Maurian Williams, Pettiford and co will hope to contain Chase Hunter and Jaeden Zachary. If they draw McNeese, they need to limit turnovers. They won't be able to hang with the Cowboys if the game becomes a track meet with a lot of fastbreaks. If they do make the Sweet 16, it'll be momentum that would carry them any further. Houston and Gonzaga (the most likely) have a lot of tournament experience and a style that is proven to get results in March. It's unlikely they'll be able to get past either of those teams, but if they generate belief with a pair of tourney wins, anything is possible.

ILLINOIS FIGHTING ILLINI



NO. 6 SEED
MIDWEST
REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big 10	20th	Brad Underwood	21-12 (12-8 in Big 10)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Illinois made a deep tournament run in 2024, but Coach Underwood had to build the team back up from scratch since they lost pretty much all of their rotation guys from that squad - to either the NBA draft, graduation, or the transfer portal.

Still, expectations were pretty high coming into the season since they were able to bring in a lot of talented players via the portal and incoming freshmen. On paper, it looked like a top-15 team in the country. But they were relying a lot on guys with no college experience yet, such as Kasparas Jakucionis, Morez Johnson, Tomislav Ivisic, and Will Riley, as well as transfers coming up from a smaller conference—namely Ben Humrichous.

Given the lack of chemistry due to all of the changes, paired with lots of inexperience, the Illini have had their ups and downs this season. That being said, they do have a lot of talent and some impressive wins. One of them was a 32-point blowout win at Oregon. Another was a double-digit win over Ohio State. They also notched quality wins over Missouri and Wisconsin, as well as a 25-point win over Indiana.

PLAYER TO WATCH: KASPARAS JAKUCIONIS

One of the best freshmen in college basketball, Jakucionis is a pure point guard who can run the offense, play pick-and-roll, and make nifty passes all over the court—and he can shoot it, too.

Jakucionis leads the Illini in PPG (15.3) and APG (4.4) while maintaining a healthy BPM of 7.9. His shooting efficiency numbers have dipped a little bit later in the season, and he's struggled a bit with turnovers - partly due to the schedule getting harder and partly due to a forearm injury. Opposing teams may also be starting to "figure him out" as the scouting report gets around.

Still, he's only 18 years old and is an exceptional talent with a lethal step-back jumper.



PHOTO BY: ROBERT GOODIN/IMAGN IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Will Riley, Kylan Boswell	Quality Wins: Missouri @ Michigan	
Offense: A	3 Pointers: F	
Defense: B+	Free Throw: B	
Field Goal: C	Rebounding: A+	
Turnover: B-	Fouls: B+	
Pace: A	Ceiling: Sweet 16	

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Overall, the season has gone about as well as you could expect it to so far, especially since Ivisic (mono) and Jakucionis (forearm), arguably the team's two best players, both missed a few games due to injury/illness. Illinois is a six-seed in the Midwest region. They will play against the winner of Texas vs. Xavier in the Round of 64. I think Texas has more talent than Xavier, but Xavier (under Sean Miller) is very well-coached. Unlike Texas, Xavier does not rely heavily on a freshman to carry a large portion of its offense. So, I could see the Texas/Xavier game going either way.

Illinois better bring their A game, too. I would not be surprised if they got upset by the Texas/Xavier winner, especially since Illinois relies heavily on a bunch of guys who are in their first year of Division I basketball—Jakucionis, Riley, Ivisic, Morez Johnson, etc.

However, if Illinois is able to advance to the second round, they could end up going pretty far. The Midwest is probably the most wide-open region in the bracket. I say that partly because I believe Houston is the worst of the no. I seeds in this year's tournament but also because I think the 2-seed Tennessee is pretty beatable, as are the respective 3rd, 4th, and 5th seeds, which are Kentucky, Purdue, and Clemson. This looks like a region that could have lots of upsets. It wouldn't shock me if a team seeded in the 6-10 range ends up winning the region.

Ivisic and Morez Johnson are healthy, and the Illini as a team have avoided injuries, which helps their chances. However, how far they go will be largely dependent on how well Jakucionis and Riley (both freshmen) play.

BREAKDOWN: @ONBALLCREATOR

TEXAS LONGHORNS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SEC	44th	Rodney Terry	19-15 (6-12 in SEC)

PLAYER TO WATCH: TRE JOHNSON

Where would Texas be without this freshman standout? Johnson has averaged nearly 20 points per game with splits nearing 40/40/90. He's a dynamic shot-maker off the dribble, who loves shooting through contests. While his shot selection can be erratic, his ability to create off both the dribble and the catch make him a terrifying proposition to guard for any defense. He's an underrated playmaker, who doesn't turn the ball over a ton, so teams are going to need to force him into taking bad shots (which he can still make on occasion). When he gets going, this Texas team can be incredibly dangerous, especially if he gets into an early rhythm.



PHOTO BY: STEPHEN R. SYLVANIE/IMAGN IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Arthur Kaluma, Jordan Pope	Quality Wins: Kentucky Texas A&M x2
Offense: B+	Shooting: B
Defense: B	Free Throw: B-
Field Goal: B-	Rebounding: C
Turnover: A	Fouls: F
Pace: C	Ceiling: Sweet 16

TEAM OVERVIEW

It's likely that the double OT win over Texas A&M in the SEC tournament was just enough to get the Longhorns into March. Rodney Terry's men struggled mightily through conference play, especially since they were missing key guard Chendall Weaver for a big chunk of the season. While they did get off to a hot 11-3 start, a lot of that is due to one of the easiest non-conference schedules in the country (352nd hardest). On paper, they have some good metrics. They're 18th in the nation in turnover percentage and they shoot just under 36% from beyond the arc, while being 38th in adjusted efficiency. The main issue has been fouling. They commit on average 18.9 fouls per game, which is 353rd in the nation, and their main 8 players average over 2 fouls per game. Despite their record in conference play, the Longhorns have plenty of talent. They'll need that talent to step up in order to make a run.

BRACKET ANALYSIS

The Longhorns have been assigned one of the dreaded 11th seed play-in games against a Xavier team who were not expected to hear their name called. The Longhorns are going to need some elite defensive performances from Chendall Weaver (on Ryan Conwell) and Arthur Kaluma (on Dailyn Swain) to really give the Musketeers trouble. Kaden Shedrick against Zach Freemantle is going to be an absolute war down low, but the former Virginia big man has plenty of tournament experience, and should be capable of winning his matchup. The Longhorns need to avoid live ball turnovers against a Xavier team that can get after it in transition, and shoot the cover off the ball from beyond the arc. Both of these teams have plenty of firepower, and Texas is going to need Tre Johnson to score both effectively, and efficiently.

The magic number for the Longhorns is 75 points, as they are just 3-13 in games where they've allowed more than 75 points. Given that Xavier averages 78 points per game, that may be difficult. If they do manage to get by Xavier, they'll create one of the most exciting matchups between elite guard prospects, as they'll face Kasparas Jakucionis and Illinois. This is a matchup where they really should win the turnover battle. Illinois is one of the worst at forcing turnovers, with a turnover rate of just 12%, while Texas is 18th in turnover rate at just 14%. If they can contain Jakucionis and fellow freshman Will Riley, we could see them in the Sweet 16, where they'll likely be forced into a rematch with either Kentucky or Tennessee. That's probably the end of the line for the Longhorns, but Rodney Terry should be thrilled with that outcome.

XAVIER MUSKETEERS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big East	43rd	Sean Miller	21-11 (13-7)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Sean Miller would have likely been disappointed with how this season went had the Musketeers not heard their name called on Sunday night. Despite a sub-500 2023-24 season, alongside the loss of Quincy Olivari (NBA) and Desmond Claude (transfer portal), the quality of returners gave Xavier some optimism going into this season. The return of Zach Freemantle from a year long absence due to a foot injury, along with the addition of Ryan Conwell from Indiana State have galvanized the Xavier offense. The Musketeers are one of the best shooting teams in the country, where they make 38.8% of their 3's. They play at an electric pace, and have a lot of size, especially on the wings. The issue all season has been their depth. While their top end has been able to get them through some of the weaker Big East teams, their bench minutes have been few and far between (24%, 322nd in the nation), making it tough for them to get through the class of the Big East, especially on the road. Their top guys will need to carry them through games, and HAVE to avoid early foul trouble if the Musketeers want any chance of taking a game in March.

PLAYER TO WATCH: RYAN CONWELL

Conwell may have an argument for being the best Indiana State transfer with his play this season (over Robbie Avila). The junior guard has had a 40/40/80 season, while shooting over seven 3 pointers per game. The key to Xavier's success depends on Conwell's ability to take care of the ball. He averages nearly one less turnover per game in wins compared to their losses. He's the kind of player teams are going to dread matching up with in March, and Conwell will be instrumental to any Xavier success.



PHOTO BY: AARON DOSTER/IMAGN IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Zach Freemantle, Dailyn Swain	Quality Wins: @ Marquette Creighton	
Offense: B	3 Pointers: A+	
Defense: B+	Free Throw: A+	
Field Goal: B	Rebounding: F	
Turnover: C	Fouls: B	
Pace: B	Ceiling: Sweet 16	

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Xavier was one of the last teams in, giving them the opportunity for a fun play-in game against the Texas Longhorns. Ryan Conwell vs Tre Johnson is going to be a really fun battle between a pair of guards who can score at will. For Xavier to have any sort of success, Conwell is going to likely have to get the job done on Texas' best perimeter defender in Chendall Weaver. Weaver returned recently to the lineup, and his defense has been the key to the Longhorns late-season push to March. The key here is going to be the pace. Texas doesn't turn the ball over at a high clip, so a lot of Xavier's transition is going to need to come from the boards, meaning Freemantle and Dailyn Swain are going to be vital for controlling the glass, and getting the ball out to Conwell or Dayvion McKnight to allow the Musketeers to break quickly. If they do manage to beat Texas, the Musketeers run may get easier. Although Xavier is the more experienced team, the Illini have a terrifying trio that includes sophomore Tomislav Ivisic, Kasparas Jakucionis, and Will Riley (freshmen). However, the Illini will match the Musketeers' pace, and shoot a paltry 31% from 3. Also notable, is that the Illini are 5th worst in the nation in opponent turnover %, so it should be easier for Xavier to play a cleaner game. If they do manage to see Kentucky in the Sweet 16, that's the likely curtain call. While the Wildcats are beatable, they have way too much depth for Xavier to deal with, and That's the furthest the Musketeers could go before they meet their end.

KENTUCKY WILDCATS



NO.3 SEED
MIDWEST
REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SEC	16th	Mark Pope	22-11 (10-8 in SEC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Anytime you start a new job, you are always reluctant to hear about your predecessor. I doubt Mark Pope has had a choice in the matter, and he hasn't seemed to care. His team, almost entirely constructed through the portal, looks like it has played together for several seasons. With strong talent deep onto the bench, the fit of the pieces seemed promising, and yet this group has overachieved to this point. Not many expected this type of explosion from Otega Oweh into a premier role, *cough cough*. Lamont Butler is everything you want in a strong, battle-tested leader. Amari Williams has simply been a monster. I could go down this whole roster and find positive things to discuss regarding their play compared to preseason expectations. The key for this team will be how well they can defend late into games.

The offense has almost been too good at times and allowing this team to coast a bit in games. I expect Mark Pope to have them focused and locked in on defending down the stretch.

PLAYER TO WATCH: OTEGA OWEH

Otega Oweh has been easily one of my favorite players to watch grow over the last few seasons. In high school, he consistently demonstrated his potential as a dominant combo guard on both ends. It took some time and a change in scenery to see this play out for him, and I couldn't be more excited. Though, don't get it twisted; the flashes were there even in Oklahoma. In his role there, he thrived as a pesky defender and off-ball weapon, knocking down threes, something you couldn't see him doing much on the EYBL circuit. These days, he's back to bulldozing down the lan,e but he hasn't lost sight of his newfound balance. It is super enticing to me as a draft guy to see a player take on so many different roles and continually rise to the occasion.



PHOTO BY: JORDAN PRATHER/IMAGN IMAGES

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Amari Williams, Koby Brea	Quality Wins: Duke, Florida, Tennessee 2x
Offense: A+	3 Pointers: A-
Defense: B	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: A-	Rebounding: B+
Turnover: B+	Fouls: B-
Pace: A-	Ceiling: National Champs

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Kentucky has arguably the toughest path to through the tournament but may be the best equipped team outside of Duke for this challenge. If they can take care of business on night one, to win it all they would have to be prepared to play in order: Illinois, Tennessee, Houston, Alabama or Duke & then whatever great team is hot on the other side of the bracket. In my opinion, I identify two key points that I think make them a factor to beat any team in the tournament (& Tennessee for the third time!). They have ample depth at every position with size & shooting. They also have guys outside of their main engines who can provide a moment or tournament breaking run. Koby Brea has been one of the most efficient players in the country & can be relied upon to make any shot at any big moment. Jaxson Robinson can do the same, but also creates an interesting mismatch off the dribble for most strong tourney built. They may have some flaws, but I think they got back to basics with rebounding and defensive improvements down the stretch of the season. Especially, if Butler & specifically Oweh, can provide pace setting defensive pressure while maintaining their outputs offensively, it could be time for Kentucky to write the new definition of a Cinderella story in the tournament. A full team of transfers with a first year head coach. It could be something, if not with this group, that isn't very rare soon. In the era of NIL, super conferences & the portal, Mark Pope has a chance to etch himself into the history books.

TROY TROJANS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Sun Belt	98th	Scott Cross	23-10 (13-5 in Sun Belt)

TEAM OVERVIEW

Troy has been one of the most consistent teams in the Sun Belt, surpassing 20 wins in each of the last four seasons. After several near-misses in the conference tournament, they are back in the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2016-17. Head coach Scott Cross led the Trojans through a highly competitive Sun Belt tournament, with standout performances from conference Player of the Year Tayton Conerway. Troy defeated defending champion James Madison and a tough Arkansas State team to secure their bid.

With a 23-10 record and a 13-5 conference mark, Troy is primed for a tournament run. Their defense is a key strength, ranking highly in rebounding, steals, and blocks. However, their biggest concern is shooting efficiency, as they rank 350th in three-point percentage. While their defensive prowess makes them a potential upset team, inconsistent perimeter shooting could hurt them against higher-seeded opponents. If they can improve their offense while maintaining strong defense, Troy could pull off a surprise win.

PLAYER TO WATCH: TAYTON CONERWAY

Tayton Conerway has been the driving force behind Troy's success, leading the team with 14.3 points per game while shooting 47.2% from the field. Though his three-point (27.7%) and free-throw (66.7%) shooting could improve, he contributes in all areas, averaging 4.6 rebounds and 4.8 assists. Defensively, Conerway is a standout, posting 2.9 steals per game, ranking among the top defensive playmakers in the tournament. His ability to disrupt passing lanes and generate turnovers will be key for Troy's success. As the Trojans' leader, Conerway's all-around play could elevate their chances of pulling off an upset in the NCAA Tournament.



PHOTO BY: TROY ATHLETICS

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Myles Rigsby, Marcus Rigsby	Quality Wins: @ App St, @ Ark St
Offense: C	3 Pointers: F
Defense: B	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: D	Rebounding: A-
Turnover: F	Fouls: B-
Pace: D	Ceiling: Round of 64

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Troy enters the tournament with low expectations in a 3/14 matchup, but their strong defense gives them a fighting chance. The focus will be on disrupting top offenses and hoping their offense can keep up in high-pressure situations. In the Round of 64, Troy faces Kentucky, a perennial powerhouse. While Kentucky has had struggles this season, their experience and depth under Mark Pope make them formidable. Troy's best shot lies in their defense, as they are top 30 in limiting opposing offenses. To pull an upset, Troy must maintain defensive intensity, limit turnovers, and disrupt Kentucky's rhythm. If Troy beats Kentucky, they'll face either Illinois, Texas, or Xavier—offensive juggernauts. Troy's defense will be tested as they go up against two of the nation's best offenses, making it a tough challenge to advance. Given the typical disparity in 3/14 matchups, Troy's floor is a first-round exit. However, with a strong defense, they could surprise if they execute well. Troy's ceiling is reaching the second round, but their offensive struggles could hurt them. If their defense holds strong, they may keep it close, but the high-scoring teams in the second round could prove too much.

UCLA BRUINS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Big 10	27th	Mick Cronin	22-10 (13-7 in Big 10)

PLAYER TO WATCH: ERIC DAILEY JR.

While Tyler Bilodeau may steal the headlines, Dailey is UCLA's secret weapon. The 6'8 sophomore has been ruthlessly efficient as a scorer, where he shoots 57% from inside the arc, and 40% from beyond it. He's thrived in an off-ball role all season, and the attention he garners will open things up inside for the likes of Bilodeau, and Mara in the paint. His ability to take care of the ball and be a matchup nightmare for many teams due to his size and skill could be a major boon to UCLA's chances.



PHOTO BY: WALLY SKALIJ, LOS ANGELES TIMES

TEAM OVERVIEW

It's been a resurgent season for Mick Cronin's Bruins. After what can only be described as a disastrous 2023-24 season without even an NCAA tournament appearance, Cronin raided the portal to get the Bruins back to the promised land. The key for the Bruins has been their ability to stay dialed in on the defensive end. They're a top 10 team in the nation when it comes to forcing mistakes and turnovers. They like to slow the game down, forcing teams to run through a wealth of depth and size. They have 3 players 6'9 and over, including the towering 7'3 Aday Mara. Their tournament will depend on the quality of guard play. Sebastian Mack and Dylan Andrews have been substantially better this season, but they'll need to keep the turnovers to a minimum in order to progress through to the round of 32. One of their bigger issues is they tend to struggle with the FT battle, given that they are outside the top 200 in FT% and outside the top 300 in opposing FT%. UCLA has a chance to make things happen in this year's tournament, but they'll need to be at their best.

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Tyler Bilodeau, Sebastian Mack	Quality Wins: Gonzaga, Arizona	
Offense: A-	3 Pointers: C	
Defense: B+	Free Throw: D	
Field Goal: B-	Rebounding: F	
Turnover: B-	Fouls: D	
Pace: F	Ceiling: Elite 8	

BRACKET ANALYSIS

UCLA draws a mid-major staple in the Utah State Aggies. The Aggies are one of the more ruthless high-pace teams in the country. Out of Utah State's 7 losses, 6 of them have resulted in the Aggies scoring less than 75 points. The size and strength advantage of UCLA is going to have to play a role in order for the Bruins to slow the game down, and limit the number of possessions. Sebastian Mack and Dylan Andrews are going to have to be on their A game defensively in order to slow down the slashing lan Martinez. If they manage to stall out the Aggies, a matchup with Tennessee likely awaits. This one will surely be a low-scoring affair, given that Volunteers slow the game down even more than the Bruins themselves. This could be the matchup where Dailey Jr is able to assert himself as the go-to guy for UCLA. Igor Milicic is going to struggle to contain Dailey Jr defensively, and the Volunteers don't have many wings that can match up with him on the interior. Another option could be Bilodeau getting hot from beyond the arc, and drawing the Tennessee bigs to the perimeter. If they can pull off the upset, Kentucky and Illinois might be a bit easier for the Bruins. Although they did lose to Illinois in Champagne last time out, the Bruins can take this one over if they get some help from Bilodeau and Dailey on the glass. It's much less likely that they'll be able to hang with Kentucky, but if Kentucky goes down, their ceiling could be the Elite 8.

UTAH STATE AGGIES



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Mountain West	52nd	Jerrod Calhoun	26-7 (15-5 in Mountain West)

PLAYER TO WATCH: IAN MARTINEZ

Martinez is the catalyst to Utah State's elite offense. He's efficient, as evidenced by his 45/38/88 splits, as well as his 17 points per game. In wins, Martinez averages 17.6 points, while he averages just 14.1 in losses. Additionally, he shoots nearly 42% from 3 in wins and just 24.3% from 3 in losses. That might correlate with the 3-4 record the Aggies possess when scoring under 70 points, but it also demonstrates that the Aggies are at their best when Martinez is at his best. It's worth noting that against top 50 opponents, Martinez's 3P% is just 27.6%, but his two-point percentage jumps up to 55.6% from his 53.9% on the season.



PHOTO BY: JEFF HUNTER

TEAM OVERVIEW

The Aggies will go as far as the offense takes them. In their 25 wins, Utah State averaged nearly 86 points per game.

Meanwhile, in their six losses, they averaged 68.

Additionally, when the Aggies scored at least 70 points in any game, they were 22-2, while they were 3-4 overall when scoring under that threshold. Offensively, Utah State's identity is centered around shooting efficiency and getting easy shots. Nearly 62% of their baskets are assisted, while their effective field goal percentage is 56.6%, 11th in the country. Defensively, Utah State gives up 3-point attempts at a high rate but their opponents shoot just 33.7% against them from deep. In order to beat Utah State, their opponents must win the three-point battle and force them into a more difficult shot selection.

This team is also deep. Eight players have played at least 17 minutes per game, yet just three players averaged over 22 minutes per game. The Aggies have two stars in Mason Falslev and Ian Martinez, and they have a collective effort across the board behind them.

TEAM REPORT CARD

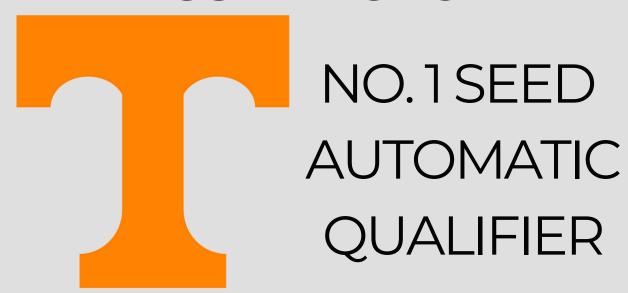
Impact Players: Mason Falslev, Dexter Akanno	Quality Wins: @ St Mary's Colorado St
Offense: A	3 Pointers: B
Defense: C	Free Throw: F
Field Goal: A-	Rebounding: D
Turnover: B-	Fouls: F
Pace: C	Ceiling: Sweet 16

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Given UCLA's brand recognition, it would be surprising to learn that the Aggies are the team with the star power in their Round of 64 matchup, as Ian Martinez and Mason Falslev are the two names to know in the Aggies' opening round game vs UCLA. While UCLA doesn't shoot it at high enough of a three-point volume to make Utah State pay, both of these teams have a similar style of play offensively. However, per KenPom, Utah State is 149th defensively, while UCLA is 17th. Given Utah State's struggles to win low-scoring affairs, the defensive advantage should work in UCLA's favor. UCLA prioritizes ball movement to seek out efficient shots, similar to the Aggies, as 60.5% of the Bruins' baskets are assisted.

If the Aggies' offense finds a way to score consistently enough against UCLA's defense, they most likely won't be able to repeat a similar performance against Tennessee. It would take an outlier shooting performance for the Aggies to upset the Volunteers, which is bad news for Utah State, as Tennessee has the #1 three-point defense in the nation. While Utah State is an offensive-centric team, they just don't have the defense to hold off potential All-Americans in Zakai Ziegler and Chaz Lanier. The Aggies, despite having three coaches in the last three seasons, haven't missed a beat and continue to be an NCAA tournament mainstay, but it's more likely than not that the Round of 32 is their ceiling this year, just like it was last season when they fell to eventual national champion runner-ups in Purdue.

TENNESSEE VOLUNTEERS



TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
SEC	5th	Rick Barnes	26-6 (11-6 in SEC)

TEAM OVERVIEW

With the nation's #1 defense per KenPom's defensive efficiency, the Volunteers force their opponents to play at one of the slowest paces in the nation. Tennessee also allows just 61.9 points per game, which is 7th lowest in the country. Last year's Volunteers team went to the Elite Eight, but this year's team may be even better. Although this Tennessee team does not have a First Team All-American like Dalton Knecht on offense, they have Chaz Lanier and Zakai Ziegler. Ziegler is 4th in the nation in assists. Despite having the 4th most difficult strength of schedule in the country, the Volunteers went 13-0 in their non-conference schedule which included wins over Baylor on a neutral court and a true road game against Illinois, before going 12-6 in what's been potentially the best conference in the history of the sport. While Tennessee has lost 6 games this year, two have come against #1 seeds Florida and Auburn, while another two came to a sweep at the hands of Kentucky. The Volunteers are also tied for the fourth most quad-one wins in the country. While a whopping 46% of Tennessee's opponents' field goal attempts are from three, their opponents shoot just 28.2% from long range, which is second in the nation.

PLAYER TO WATCH: CHAZ LANIER

Similar to Knecht before him, Lanier is a mid-major darling who transferred to Tennessee to become a borderline All-American after transferring from North Florida. During the Volunteers non-conference schedule, Lanier averaged 19.6 PPG and shot 46% from three. Lanier averaged 16.7 points per game in conference play while shooting 36.4% from three. Meanwhile, Lanier averages 12.8 points per game in Tennessee's losses, but he averages 19.1 points in their wins. Tennessee's offense isn't championship-level, so the Volunteers will need Lanier to be a consistent offensive focal point to win six games in the tournament.



PHOTO BY: ANDREW FERGUSON/TENNESSEE ATHLETICS

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Zakai Ziegler, Igor Milicic Jr.	Quality Wins: Florida, Alabama, Auburn
Offense: A	3 Pointers: B-
Defense: A+	Free Throw: C
Field Goal: B-	Rebounding: B-
Turnovers: C	Fouls: B
Pace: F	Ceiling: Final Four

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Tennessee and Wofford will be a very low-scoring game, as they each play with a very slow tempo. And while Tennessee is among the best teams in the best conference we've ever seen in college basketball, Wofford is a dangerous 15 seed. Wofford relies heavily on their three-point shooting, and the Volunteers allow their opponents to shoot behind the three-point arc. While I'm not predicting an upset, a hot-shooting Wofford team could make it close. While these Volunteers should have national title aspirations, they will likely need to get through Kentucky, which has already beaten them twice this year. That would be their sweet 16 matchup if Tennessee gets by Wofford and UCLA/Utah State winner. Tennessee should be able to get to the Kentucky trilogy matchup with relative ease. Neither Utah State nor UCLA have the offensive firepower to pace themselves with Tennessee's offense while also being able to score consistently enough on the Volunteers' elite defense. For a Sweet 16 rematch with Kentucky, I would take Tennessee this time around, especially with Kentucky having two starters out for the season. In both of their head-to-head matchups this year, Kentucky shot 50% from the field and 50% from three in each matchup. While Kentucky is one of the more efficient teams in the country, they relied heavily on outlier

shooting performances in order to secure victories over college basketball's #3 defense, per KenPom.

Tennessee's tournament run will likely end if they face Houston. The Cougars have won 26 of their last 27 games and have one of two defenses better than Tennessee's. While either of these teams can represent the Midwest region in cutting down the nets, Tennessee's best hope is for Houston to be upset earlier and avoid them entirely.

WOFFORD TERRIERS



NO. 15 SEED
MIDWEST
REGION

TEAM INFO

Conference	Kenpom Ranking	Coach	2024-25 Season Record
Southern	120th	Dwight Perry	19-15 (10-8 in Southern)

PLAYER TO WATCH: KYLER FILEWICH

While Corey Tripp deserves to be listed as a 'player to know', Filewich has 'March Madness darling' written all over him. Filewich, a career 37% free throw shooter, has been working with Rick Barry on the underhanded, granny-style free throw. Additionally, because of the 6'9", 250 lb Filewich, Wofford is one of the best teams in the country in terms of offensive rebounding percentage while also keeping their opponents off the offensive boards. Filewich also keeps the defense afloat, and if Wofford wins a game in the round of 64, which is a realistic possibility, Filewich would be a large (literally and figuratively) reason why.



PHOTO BY: CARL CARLSON/AP PHOTO

TEAM OVERVIEW

Dwight Perry accomplished an impressive feat in the era of the transfer portal: retention. Wofford retained 84.3% of their minutes from last season. That being said, there were plenty of expectations for Wofford to finish near the top of the SoCon standings this season. However, Wofford ended up 6th in the SoCon regular season standings before running the table in the conference tournament. There's also a certainty when playing Wofford: both teams will hoist a lot of three-point attempts. Wofford shoots 34.5% from deep, while their opponents shoot the same percentage. The Terriers steamrolled through the SoCon tournament while shooting 44% from 3 in three games on 84 attempts. As previously mentioned, the Terriers also hoist a ton of threes, as 47.7% of their field goal attempts were three-point attempts. In order for Wofford to make some noise in March, they'll need to keep up the hot shooting streak. Shooting aside, Wofford takes care of the ball and gets easy shots, as evidenced by a 1.37 A:TO ratio and a team average of 15 assists per game, which is good for 86th in the nation.

TEAM REPORT CARD

Impact Players: Corey Tripp, Dillon Bailey	Quality Wins: St Louis, North Alabama
Offense: B	Shooting: C
Defense: D	Free Throw: F
Field Goal: B	Rebounding: B
Turnover: C	Fouls: F
Pace: F	Ceiling: Round of 64

BRACKET ANALYSIS

Expect a very low-scoring game between Wofford and Tennessee in the Round of 64, as each team plays with a bottom-30 pace in the country. As stated in the Tennessee preview, Wofford is a dangerous 15 seed. Coming into this season, it was anticipated that Wofford would be one of the better mid-majors in the country. However, the Tennessee matchup doesn't bode well for the Terriers. Expect Wofford's high-volume 3-point shooting to be a staple of their game plan in March. However, that may not bode well against Tennessee, given that the Volunteers' opponents shoot 27.8% from three, which is the best in the nation. While most upsets in the tournament typically involve the underdog getting an outlier shooting game or two during a Cinderella run, Wofford would likely need a similar trajectory. While Wofford is capable of one of those Cinderella runs, Tennessee is just too good to let it happen.

Additionally, Wofford doesn't have the defensive infrastructure to make that aforementioned Cinderella run happen. While Wofford has Filewich to protect the rim, they just do not play strong enough defense. Their games are low-scoring because of the slow tempo they play with and lack of possessions, more so than the Terriers actually getting defensive stops. While Tennessee's identity is always defensive-minded, and their offense will end up being too high-powered for the Terriers. Wofford also does not have an adequate solution to defend Zakai Ziegler or Chaz Lanier. Despite Wofford being the most talented team on the 15 line this March, this upset just doesn't seem likely, even coming from someone who was as high on them as I was on them going into the preseason.

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