SM Holiday Hierarchy 2025

The tiered, ranked guide to the teams that have the best shot to win a national championship

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During the college hoops lull that is Christmas week of every season, it is always a great time to reassess how the landscape of college basketball looks. As the New Year approaches, several teams have separated themselves from the field, for better or worse. Teams have reached expectations, exceeded them in spades, or fallen short of them in disappointment.

As of New Years' Eve 2025, there are plenty of teams who can realistically see themselves winning it all at Lucas Oil Stadium in April. The definitive guide to the country's best teams, from most likely to least likely, is presented as a last minute present to the college hoops heads that can't wait for March.

TIER I: Cutting Nets
These teams have staked their claim as the country's best, and they should be bringing scissors to Indianapolis

Michigan Wolverines (12-0)
Big Ten // Coach: Dusty May // X-Factor: Yaxel Lendeborg (15.7 ppg, 7.2 rpg, 3.6 apg)

The Wolverines have run through their schedule like a knife through butter. They sit at #1 in KenPom and the NET rankings. They also boast the country's most efficient defense and fifth most efficient offense. 13 of the previous 22 national champions since KenPom began compiling data in 2002 have ranked in the top 10 of both offensive and defensive efficiency, so Michigan is firmly on pace.

If there is one thing to question about Michigan, it's their resume. Only two of their wins came against teams who seem to be firmly in the NCAA tournament picture (Auburn and Gonzaga). The majority of their games have been against non-tournament competition. That being said, if they are going to keep beating teams by their current average margin of 20+ points, it might not matter who is on the other side of the ball.

Arizona Wildcats (13-0)

Big 12 // Coach: Tommy Lloyd // X-Factor: Jaden Bradley (13.4 ppg, 3.8 apg, 1.9 steals per game)

Arizona kicked off the season by taking out the defending national champions Florida, helped on by a masterful 30 point performance by star freshman Koa Peat. Ever since then, the Wildcats have defeated a slew of tough competition: UCLA and Alabama on neutral courts, Auburn at home, and UConn on the road. Arizona ranks top ten in both offensive and defensive efficiency, all while peculiarly only making about six three pointers a game— a markedly unique style of play in the modern era.

Arizona has answered the call and has a top two resume in the sport. They are currently #1 in the SM 25 Hard and have not faltered yet. If they can get through the Big 12 gauntlet with even three or four losses, they will be on their way to being the top overall seed in the NCAA tournament.

Iowa State Cyclones (13-0)

Big 12 // Coach: TJ Otzelberger // X-Factor: Milan Momcilovic (17.9 ppg, 3.2 rpg, 54.5% 3PT)

The Cyclones boast, far and away, the most impressive win of the entire season by any team. They marched into Mackey Arena and destroyed Purdue by 23 points at their own house. That also adds to three impressive wins at the Players Era Festival in Vegas.

Iowa State has always been menacing when defending their own basket under TJ Otzelberger. However, this year, they are pumping up the offense. They rank 11th nationally in scoring—- higher than Duke, UConn, and Houston. Milan Momcilovic isn't the only key factor, either. Joshua Jefferson (18.1 ppg, 7.1 rpg) has been a beast in the frontcourt. The Cyclones have been humming stronger than ever before, and are well on their way to a top seed in March. This year's edition may be Otzelberger's best chance yet to make it to the promised land.

Duke Blue Devils (11-1)

ACC // Coach: Jon Scheyer // X-Factor: Cameron Boozer (23.3 ppg, 10 rpg, 56.7% FG)

Duke sustained their first loss last weekend, when they relinquished their 17 point lead and fell to Texas Tech at MSG. Besides that game, the Blue Devils have been near perfect. Cameron Boozer, the star freshman and future top draft pick, is the leader in the clubhouse for the National Player of the Year race.

Amazingly, this roster turned over five starters from last year, who all went on to be drafted. This year's edition is just as fast, just as athletic, and just as scary. If Boozer isn't killing you, then Maliq Brown is. If not Brown, then watch out for Caleb Foster. Duke's one weakness is, once again, experience. When your star players are all freshmen, it can be tough sledding in March. Last year's Final Four demons can be exorcised by this year's squad, and they look likely to get another shot at a title in 2026.

Connecticut Huskies (12-1)
Big East // Coach: Dan Hurley // X-Factor: Alex Karaban (13.6 ppg, 5.3 rpg, 43.9% 3PT)

Firmly placed in the top five all season, the Huskies have flown a little under the national radar. They aren't blowing teams out like Michigan, but they are taking care of business. Their only loss came against Arizona, and that was without Tarris Reed Jr. due to injury.

On that note, the Huskies have only played a few games at full strength. Even without some key players, they rolled through a schedule of BYU, Illinois, Florida, and Kansas without trouble. Braylon Mullins' arrival in Storrs is proving to be vital, and Alex Karaban's last go around in a Husky uniform is primed to be his best yet. Nationally, they aren't getting grouped in with the top four as likely as you'd think. However, come March, there isn't anybody in the country who wants this matchup.

TIER II: Real Contenders
This tier belongs to the second rung on the championship ladder— teams with enough firepower and talent to compete for a spot in Indianapolis

Gonzaga Bulldogs (13-1)
West Coast // Coach: Mark Few // X-Factor: Graham Ike (16.7 ppg, 8.5 rpg, 2.8 apg)

There isn't anything much more definite than Gonzaga being a national contender at any point in the college basketball season. Mark Few has built a titanic program in the pacific northwest, and this year's edition is led by the frontcourt prowess of Graham Ike and Braden Huff (18.4 ppg, 5.1 rpg). The Bulldogs bulldozed through wins over Alabama, Kentucky, UCLA, and Oklahoma.

Their only blemish comes against Michigan (ever heard that one before?), and through the weaker WCC, Gonzaga shouldn't face many issues in conference play. Gonzaga has long been a national powerhouse, but that national title still eludes them. In what feels like the twilight of Mark Few's career, one of his best teams sits firmly in

the mix of one of the strongest championship contending fields we have seen in years. This team has the ability to get over the hump, but this season's hump is more treacherous than usual.

Purdue Boilermakers (11-1)
Big Ten // Coach: Matt Painter // X-Factor: Braden Smith (12.5 ppg, 4.1 rpg, 9.5 apg)

How could the preseason number one team not make this list? Led by the Preseason National Player of the Year running point, this Purdue team is on par with the one that made the national title game two seasons ago, led by Zach Edey. They have an experienced backcourt and a fierce frontcourt, led by Trey Kaufman-Ren (14 ppg, 10.2 rpg).

This Purdue team has all the ingredients of your classic Matt Painter crew: excellent offense led by shooting, big man power down low, and a composed guard running the show. Purdue has the best offense in the country by efficiency, and their only slip up was a home thrashing against Iowa State. Perhaps that holds them back from Tier I, but make no mistake: this team was expected to get to Indianapolis from day one.

Houston Cougars (12-1)
Big 12 // Coach: Kelvin Sampson // X-Factor: Kingston Flemings (15.3 ppg, 3.4 rpg, 4.9 apg)

Houston returned plenty of star power from last year's national runner-up team, and they have picked up right where they left off. Besides one loss against Tennessee at the Players Era Festival, the Cougars have assumed their normal position. They have a top ten defense and a top 25 offense, led by freshman sensation Kingston Flemings.

Emanuel Sharp (17 ppg, 3 rpg, 1.9 apg) and Milos Uzan (11.1 ppg, 2.9 rpg, 4.6 apg) continue to run the show in the backcourt this season. Houston's Big 12 competition will be stiff, per usual. However, since joining this conference a few seasons ago, all they have done is win it. It might be a closer race this year, but Houston should be in every conversation. Nationally, the same is true.

BYU Cougars (12-1)
Big 12 // Coach: Kevin Young // X-Factor: AJ Dybantsa (23.1 ppg, 7.2 rpg, 3.8 apg)

Led by the nation's second best scorer, BYU possesses the most potent three man attack in the country. AJ Dybantsa, a future #1 draft pick, is partnered with Richie

Saunders (18.6 ppg) and Robert Wright III (16.2 ppg, 3.7 rpg, 5.5 apg) all share the wealth for this Cougar team who torpedoed into the national picture the past two seasons.

BYU, besides their one loss to UConn in November, have been as solid as anyone in the country. A top 25 defense and a top ten defense will compete at the top of a fiercely competitive Big 12. An offense of this makeup can certainly win at least four games in March and get to the Final Four. There is no question that BYU is a contender, and if Dybantsa can improve even more as the season goes along, he may help BYU shatter their ceiling.

TIER III: In the Mix
This tier is full of teams who will have something to say in March, but it will take some tough matchups going their way to make them title favorites.

Michigan State Spartans (12-1)
Big Ten // Coach: Tom Izzo // X-Factor: Jeremy Fears Jr. (11.5 ppg, 3 rpg, 9.3 apg)

Jeremy Fears Jr. has been a revelation this year for the Spartans. He is firmly competing with Braden Smith for the title of best point guard in America, and he has led this team all year to their 12-1 record. With just one loss at home against a talented Duke squad, this team has all of the weapons to compete with the top of the heap.

Per usual with Tom Izzo, they are a feisty, hardworking bunch on the defensive end, where they rank sixth nationally in efficiency. The athletic Coen Carr is good for one block per game, as is Jaxon Kohler. Last season's team was not expected to be near the top, and they ended up there anyway. This team had expectations from the first tipoff, and they haven't looked back all year.

North Carolina Tar Heels (12-1)
ACC // Coach: Hubert Davis // X-Factor: Caleb Wilson (19.6 ppg, 10.8 rpg, 2.3 apg)

When you factor in the stature of the program and how high expectations are in Chapel Hill, Hubert Davis' seat was among the hottest in the country coming into this season. Instead of crumbling to pressure, his team has rattled off a great start to the year.

That charge is led by Caleb Wilson, the stud freshman who is determined to convince everyone he belongs in the same conversation— and even in the same sentence— as AJ Dybantsa, Darryn Peterson, and Cam Boozer. The Heels have won against Kansas, Kentucky, and Ohio State, with their only loss coming to Michigan State

at the Champions Classic. This team has answered the call on behalf of their coach, and are well on their way to being a top five seed in the tournament.

Illinois Fighting Illini (10-3)
Big Ten // Coach: Brad Underwood // X-Factor: Keaton Wagler (15.3 ppg, 5.2 rpg, 3.8 apg)

      Illinois has maintained their place as one of America's most prolific offenses, currently sitting at 2nd in efficiency. Keaton Wagler, yet another standout freshman, leads the Illini in scoring and will surge into Big Ten play as a contender to top the league.

      Their three losses are not bad by any stretch: UConn, Alabama, and Nebraska. The Illini have enough offensive firepower to compete with pretty much anyone in the country at any given point, and their 25th ranked defense can keep them in any game just as well. This year's Illinois team is one of those three-loss teams that simply cannot be taken lightly.

TIER IV: Outside Chance
These teams are talented and can give any top tier team in America a run for their money. We aren't going to guarantee a Final Four or even a regional final, but then again, March is March....

Texas Tech Red Raiders (10-3)
Big 12 // Coach: Grant McCasland // X-Factor: JT Toppin (21 ppg, 10.6 rpg, 1.7 bpg)

      The Red Raiders were ranked 8th in the SM Preseason poll, but a few early losses dropped them down a peg. Then they stormed back against Duke at the Garden to stun the Blue Devils, and the nation was reminded of how high of a ceiling this team has.

      JT Toppin is a First Team All-American as the calendar turns, and Christian Anderson (20.6 ppg, 7.1 apg) is one of the best "Robins" in the country. There are also times when Toppin is Robin to Anderson's Batman. I am genuinely dumbfounded at how I have the Red Raiders this low. This team is wonderful to watch, and the stride they hit when they are on point is among the scariest strides for opponents to handle in America.

Louisville Cardinals (10-2)
ACC // Coach: Pat Kelsey // X-Factor: Mikel Brown Jr. (16.6 ppg, 3 rpg, 5.1 apg)

Louisville came into this season projected to have one of the country's most explosive offenses, and they have hit that in spades. With the 6th most efficient unit in America, the Cards tear through defenses with some prolific three point shooting. Ryan Conwell and Isaac McKneeley both sling about 40% from beyond the arc, forming a three-headed monster comparable to that of BYU.

The one knock on Louisville is their size down low. It is tough for them to compete with bigger frontcourts. Bigger teams may be able to expose them, but if this team is firing like they do from the field, then it may not matter.

Vanderbilt Commodores (13-0)
SEC // Coach: Mark Byington // X-Factor: Duke Miles (17.1 ppg, 2.8 rpg, 4.7 apg)

Judging by the Commodores undefeated start and this past season's success on the gridiron, there might not be many schools better suited to compete in the NIL era than Vanderbilt. Duke Miles leads this year's basketball team as the star guard, transforming Mark Byington's team into a national contender out of nowhere.

They earned a 10 seed in last year's Big Dance, but this year's team took a massive jump. Mark Byington is almost a sure thing for the National Coach of the Year award, as they are the frontrunners in the SEC over the likes of Alabama, Florida, and Kentucky. Don't let the name on the jersey fool you: this team can punch with the big dogs.

Florida Gators (9-4)
SEC // Coach: Todd Golden // X-Factor: Thomas Haugh (16.7 ppg, 6.4 rpg, 2.2 apg)

Thomas Haugh has made the biggest jump for the reigning champion Gators. After an opening night loss, Florida has battled up and down this year, including a loss to TCU. Their backcourt has absolutely taken a nosedive with Xaivian Lee and Boogie Fland being the most notable transfer pickups after the NBA raided last year's team.

The Gators will compete in an SEC that is weaker than last season, but it will still produce some quality opportunities. They are still 12th at KenPom with a top 15 defense. Bolstered by one of the country's most prolific frontcourts, I don't think many people would be surprised if Florida gave themselves a shot to protect their title.