

# NCAA Men's Basketball: SM Preseason

## Top 25

Compiling the nation's best teams for the upcoming 2025-2026 season

*Written by Sean Murawski // SM Sports*

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College athletics were forever changed in July of this past summer, with the results of the House settlement turning the NCAA's then-current regime upside down. Payment for play is not just a distant idea— it is a reality. College sports have become semi-professional. Players are changing teams as if they are NBA free agents, giving them more autonomy than ever before.

With just one week left before the season tips off, there is a lot of roster turnover and personnel change to take in when preparing for five months of college hoops action. The SEC looks to keep up with last season's improbable success, which resulted in 14 tournament bids, two Final Four teams, and a national champion. That champion, Florida, looks to be the second team in four seasons to go back-to-back, while UConn, the previous back-to-back winner, looks primed to be in the mix for their third title in four years. Transfers and freshman stars give schools like Duke, Michigan, and BYU some hope for glory in a stacked season.

All teams are in the hunt for Indianapolis in April 2026, but only four will actually make the trip. This new, uncharted era of college basketball is about to take flight, and these 25 teams are the ones to watch throughout the voyage.

### **1. Purdue Boilermakers (Big Ten)**

*2024-2025: 24-12 (13-7); lost in Sweet Sixteen vs. (1) Houston*

It was just two seasons ago that Purdue's best ever team reached the National Title game backed by the outstanding play of a potential National Player of the Year candidate. That was Zach Edey, who did indeed win the Wooden Award in 2024 (and 2023). His point guard on both of those teams, despite being nearly a foot shorter, is the perennial favorite to win the award this time around. Braden Smith's electric scoring

and passing ability (15.8 ppg, 8.7 apg) and calmness on the ball will help lead Purdue into this year as a very clear favorite to cut down the nets.

With Smith approaching Bobby Hurley's all time assist record, Purdue also returns sharp shooter Fletcher Loyer (44.4% 3PT) and big man Trey Kaufman-Renn (20.1 ppg, 6.5 rpg, 59.5% FG). Oscar Cluff (South Dakota State) and international prospect Omer Meyer (Israel) highlight the recruiting class for Matt Painter's team. They are one of the most prolific shooting teams in America, and boast the highest KenPom offensive rating in the country coming into the year.

While they may not admit it, perhaps it goes without saying: this season should be championship or bust. There are always teams that fall very short of preseason expectations, but Purdue seems the least likely of these candidates. The roster is built on experience, perimeter shooting, and paint presence. Though there's no Zach Edey, it wouldn't be a surprise to see the Boilermakers in Indianapolis for their second Final Four in three years. In fact, the real surprise would be if they *don't* make it there.

## **2. Houston Cougars (Big 12)**

*2024-2025: 35-5 (19-1); lost in National Championship vs. (1) Florida*

A refresher for the last time we saw the Houston Cougars on a basketball court: a distraught Emmanuel Sharp knelt down head in hands, while a stunned, silent Kelvin Sampson stared out at Florida celebrating a national championship. Sharp's intended buzzer beater turned near-travel turned lost dribble— and lost game— is the canopy that will hover over Houston's heads when the season tips off.

The only real way to avenge this disaster would be to get back to the promised land and finish the job. Sharp, who was the main slinger on the best three-point shooting team in America, also returns with defensive stalwart Jojo Tugler (1.9 blocks per game) and fierce guard Milos Uzan (11.4 ppg, 4.3 apg, 42.8 % 3PT). Kelvin Sampson, whose recent teams have been characterized by veteran leadership, also bring in three top level recruits: 5-star Chris Cenac Jr. and 4-stars Kingston Flemings and Isiah Harwell.

Houston's combo of returning mainstays and talented recruits, plus a potential future Hall of Fame coach, seems to equal guaranteed success. They have run through the Big 12 since joining the league prior to the 2022-2023 season. They are consistent national title contenders, but this season, they have extra motivation. They should fully

expect to be in the mix again with a re-dialed and refocused roster, and they would surely hope this campaign doesn't end in the Shakespearian tragic way last year did.

### **3. Florida Gators (SEC)**

*2024-2025: 36-4 (14-4); won National Championship vs. (1) Houston*

Back-to-back champions are not common in this sport at all, so for anyone who just began watching college basketball a few years ago, their view is likely skewed. Connecticut did it in 2023 and 2024, and remarkably, it is not outrageous to predict we see it again with Florida this upcoming season.

Last year's Florida team was led by an outrageous backcourt of Walter Clayton Jr. (Utah Jazz), Alijah Martin (Toronto Raptors) and Will Richard (Golden State Warriors). Clayton ended up being the third best player in the country, and replacing him will be immensely difficult. Transfers Boogie Fland (Arkansas) and Xaivian Lee (Princeton) will do their best, but it is the returning frontcourt that will make some waves. Alex Condon (10.6 ppg, 7.5 rpg, 1.3 bpg) is an AP preseason first team All-American, while Rueben Chinyelu (6 ppg, 6.6 rpg) and Thomas Haugh (9.8 ppg, 6.1 rpg) will aim to make big jumps and play more impactful roles. Coach Todd Golden has also not shied away from hinting that the three big men may all be on the court at the same time.

Golden has also been aggressive, scheduling tough games against Arizona, Duke, and Connecticut. In a historic SEC last season that sent 14 teams dancing, Florida is among the favorites to win the league again. Even further, we have a new back-to-back threat in college basketball— and it resides in the swamp.

### **4. Connecticut Huskies (Big East)**

*2024-2025: 24-11 (14-6); lost in Second Round vs. (1) Florida*

This time last season, plenty of outlets (this one included) had Connecticut ranked in the top 5-10 of their preseason polls, giving them a strong chance to be the first threepeat champions since John Wooden's UCLA. Then they took a flight to Maui, and the season never really took off in the way the Huskies might have hoped.

Despite giving eventual champions Florida a good run in the second round, Connecticut simply took a step back in 2025. Now, with a revamped roster, they hope to take two steps forward. Senior leader Alex Karaban (14.3 ppg, 5.3 rpg, 1.5 bpg) is back for one last go around, and he is a potential All-American in some capacity. The real

All-American threat will actually be Solo Ball (14.4 ppg, 41.4% 3PT), the junior guard who may end up being the nation's best three-point shooter by season's end.

Last year's freshman star Liam McNeeley, now a Charlotte Hornet, went above and beyond both expectation and responsibility in his lone season as a Husky. Braylon Mullins, this year's highly touted freshman, is another lanky shooter, but he will be sidelined with an ankle injury until at least December. In his place, returning forwards Jaylin Stewart (5.4 ppg, 2.4 rpg) and Jayden Ross (2.4 ppg) will look to take on the workload. Tarris Reed Jr. (9.6 ppg, 7.3 rpg, 1.6 bpg) will also take on a more regular role down low in his second season in Storrs.

The Huskies are once again in the conversation for a national title, just like last November. This year, they need it to still be true in March.

## 5. Duke Blue Devils (ACC)

*2024-2025: 35-4 (19-1); lost in Final Four vs. (1) Houston*

The 2024-2025 Duke team is one of the best college basketball teams in the modern era, despite losing to Houston in a ridiculously chaotic fashion in the Final Four. Cooper Flagg (Wooden Award winner), Kon Knueppel and Khaman Maluach (both lottery picks) were the young fresh faces last year that led the Blue Devils to San Antonio.

This year, it is the sons of former Duke star and NBA veteran Carlos Boozer that will look to take the reins. Cameron (#2 ranked recruit) and Cayden (#21 ranked recruit) will be joined by international recruit from Italy, Dame Sarr. Scarily enough, the Blue Devils were also in line to land Cedric Coward, who ended up declaring for the draft and being taken by the Grizzlies in the lottery— yes, this Duke team might have been *even better* on paper than it is right now.

Isiah Evans (6.8 ppg, 41.6% 3PT) will be one of the country's best three-point shooters, and Caleb Foster (4.9 ppg, 1.7 rpg, 1.4 apg) will take on a more prominent backcourt role. Maliq Brown (1.3 steals per game) will continue to provide a lengthy defensive presence as well. In an ACC that looks to be slightly better than last few seasons, Duke should still be the favorite in the conference.

How this season goes will be compared directly to last year, which was, in a word, heartbreaking. An all time team with all time talent that gave it up in crunch time on the biggest stage— it is either a recipe for revenge or a task too tall to live up to.

## 6. Michigan Wolverines (Big Ten)

*2024-2025: 27-10 (14-6); lost in Sweet Sixteen vs. (1) Auburn*

UAB product Yaxel Lendeborg (17.7 ppg, 11.4 rpg, 4.2 apg) was garnering plenty of NBA draft buzz before pivoting to Michigan for this season. Lendeborg's arrival in Ann Arbor cemented the Wolverines' status as a national threat this season. Michigan also brings in North Carolina's Elliot Cadeau (9.4 ppg, 2.9 rpg, 6.2 apg) and UCLA's Aday Mara (6.4 ppg, 4 rpg, 59% FG) from the transfer portal. Roddy Gayle Jr. (9.8 ppg, 3.4 rpg, 43.1 % FG) is the most notable returnee for Dusty May, who has transformed this squad into a national contender again.

On the subject of Dusty May, he went 27-10 in his first season at Michigan. Fresh off two straight NCAA tournament appearances, including a memorable run to the Final Four in 2023, May's coaching pedigree shot up the ranks very quickly. Many schools, including his alma mater Indiana, were reported to be interested. He eventually landed in Ann Arbor, where Michigan is looking for their best season since 2018, when they made it all the way to the National Championship game.

Yaxel Lendeborg is one of the most talented players May has had on any of his teams in his career, and with him as the centerpiece of the offense, Michigan should be primed to give Purdue a run for their money in the Big Ten. How far they go in March remains to be seen, but if Dusty May's trajectory holds true, the Wolverines will be a force come tournament time.

## 7. Kentucky Wildcats (SEC)

*2024-2025: 24-12 (10-8); lost in Sweet Sixteen vs. (2) Tennessee*

Slowly but surely, the momentum of Kentucky's basketball program began to halt in the final years of John Calipari's reign in Lexington. Jack Goehlke and Oakland put the final nail in the coffin, and suddenly, it was Mark Pope's turn at the helm. Year one was ceremonious and promising— year two looks to be even better.

If you're looking for a true dark horse for the National Player of the Year race, his name is Otega Oweh (16.2 ppg, 4.7 rpg, 49.2 % FG). Oweh was one of the leaders on last year's team, and he will take the lead again this year after transferring from Oklahoma. The health of Jayden Quaintance (9.4 ppg, 7.9 rpg, 2.6 bpg at Arizona State last season) will factor into Kentucky's success as well. Once Quaintance is healthy, he has a true shot at being the SEC's Transfer of the Year. Mouhamed Diabate (Alabama) and Jaland

Lowe (Pittsburgh) also will suit up for Big Blue Nation this season, giving the offense a new look. Denzel Aberdean, a national champion at Florida last year, will add more depth to the backcourt. Brandon Garrison (5.9 ppg, 3.9 rpg) will also be poised for a jump, giving the Cats some formidable starting five talent.

Florida is the favorite in the SEC after last year's triumph, but if this Kentucky team can click as expected, the nation's best conference can be more of a toss up than it seems right now. If Mark Pope's first season was a bit of a grace period, the team he brings in this year should give a little more juice to the national picture.

### **8. Texas Tech Red Raiders (Big 12)**

*2024-2025: 28-9 (15-5); lost in Elite Eight vs. (1) Florida*

Last year, Grant McCasland's Red Raiders were exactly one Walter Clayton Jr. away from reaching a Final Four in their home state of Texas, their first since 2019. It didn't quite pan out that way, but All-American JT Toppin (18.2 ppg, 9.4 rpg, 1.5 bpg) is back to earn their spot in Indianapolis this time around. He is also a preseason first team All-American for this year, fully expected to continue his dominance down low for the Red Raiders. Christian Anderson (10.6 ppg, 3 rpg, 2.2 apg) returns with Toppin and will look to continue his already major role.

Lejuan Watts (13.7 ppg, 6.7 rpg 4.4 apg at Washington State) should be an immediate impact player as soon as he arrives in the Red Raider front court. Donovan Atwell (UNC Greensboro) and Josiah Mosely (Villanova) will also be playing for McCasland this year, who has done a fine job in Lubbock since taking over. For the first time in what seemed like forever, last year's Big 12 was not the strongest league in the country. The SEC's dominance was the major story, but the Big 12 has gotten stronger this offseason. It seems that Texas Tech will be one of the teams at the forefront of that power surge.

### **9. St. John's Red Storm (Big East)**

*2024-2025: 31-5 (18-2); lost in Second Round vs. (10) Arkansas*

Year 1 for Rick Pitino at St. John's was good and positive— his second season was a renaissance. The Johnnies won the Big East outright and doubled it up with a tournament victory. 31 wins, just two conference losses, and #2 seed in the NCAA tournament. Unfortunately for St. John's, a great team will be overshadowed by a bad

loss to tenth-seeded Arkansas in the second round of the tournament. Their best year in decades was stopped short in its tracks.

This season, after losing Big East Player of the Year RJ Luis Jr., big man Zubey Ejiofor (14.7 ppg, 8.1 rpg, 1.4 bpg) is the preseason Big East Player of the Year, and will be under All-American consideration. Several transfers will complement Ejiofor, including Bryce Hopkins (Providence— injured for most of the last two seasons) and Ian Jackson (11.9 ppg, 45.6% FG at North Carolina). Oziyah Sellers (13.7 ppg, 2.8 rpg) will compete for a backcourt starting role after transferring in from Stanford. Joson Sanon (Arizona State) and Dylan Darling (Idaho State) will also have plenty of burn for this new-look St. John's team.

Hopkins is a wild card due to his injury history, but it is hard to overlook his immense talent. With him, Ejiofor and perhaps Jackson as the de facto "big three," this St. John's ceiling is high. It's a two horse race in the Big East, so calendars should be marked for February 6th and 26th of 2026: the dates for both rounds of UConn vs. St. John's.

#### **10. UCLA Bruins (Big Ten)**

*2024-2025: 23-11 (13-7); lost in Second Round vs. (2) Tennessee*

The Bruins are one of the more intriguing teams to assess coming into this season. They return Tyler Bilodeau (13.5 ppg, 4.6 rpg, 40% 3PT) and Eric Dailey Jr. (11.4 ppg, 4 rpg) to go with Xavier Booker, who transferred in from Michigan State. Booker (4.7 ppg, 2.2 rpg) will have to play a much bigger role this year for UCLA down low. Senior guard Skyy Clark (8.5 ppg, 2.7 apg, 39.7% 3PT) also comes back to Westwood as a backcourt presence.

Mick Cronin's big portal fish this year was Mountain West player of the year Donovan Dent (20.4 ppg, 6.4 apg, 40.9% 3PT). As one of the prolific scoring guards in the nation, Dent led New Mexico to a second round tournament appearance last season, and (spoiler alert) he will be an SM preseason All-American in some capacity.

UCLA's intrigue comes from the new look roster, especially with ball-dominant Dent, and the layout of the Big Ten. It is poised to be a deeper league than last year, with Michigan, Purdue, and Illinois making big jumps in particular. For UCLA, it is no longer about adjusting to life in Big Ten play. This team is talented enough— on paper, at least— to compete on a national stage regardless of conference affiliation. As long as

Mick Cronin stays away from the Statue of Liberty, expect the Bruins to be playing deep into March.

### **11. BYU Cougars (Big 12)**

*2024-2025: 26-10 (14-6); lost in Sweet Sixteen vs. (2) Alabama*

When a top three recruit in America chose BYU, it signified just how much of a player Kevin Young's Cougars will be in the Big 12. AJ Dybantsa is the athletic juggernaut who will undoubtedly be a top three pick in the 2026 NBA Draft (perhaps the #1 pick). Moreover, he is set to be the cornerstone of an offense that was top 10 in efficiency last season. If it weren't for a literal historic shooting night from Alabama, they very possibly could have been one win away from San Antonio.

Dybantsa will be joined by Richie Saunders (16.5 ppg, 4.5 rpg, 43.2% 3PT) and Baylor transfer Robert Wright III (11.5 ppg, 4.2 apg) to create what will be one of America's most exciting big three combinations to watch. BYU's offense has been a faster-paced set up under Kevin Young— and they have gotten a kick in the you know what with Dybantsa coming in. Keba Keita (7.4 ppg, 7.9 rpg) will complement that big three in the post, as he returns to Provo looking to make a jump in production.

The Cougars will be testing their young core right away with a date at TD Garden against Connecticut. They also play Wisconsin and Clemson before getting into Big 12 play, where contests against Texas Tech, Arizona, Kansas and Houston will tell us all we need to know about them. If this is the year for BYU, it may be up to their young phenom to lead the charge.

### **12. Illinois Fighting Illini (Big Ten)**

*2024-2025: 22-13 (12-8); lost in Second Round vs. (3) Kentucky*

Brad Underwood's new recruiting tactic: he has gone Balkan. David Morkovic (Montenegro), Mihailo Petrovic (Serbia), and Andrej Stojakovic (Serbia, by way of California) will suit up in Illini Orange this season. Underwood also brought in Zvonimir Ivisic (8.5 ppg, 4.3 rpg, 1.9 bpg) from Arkansas. Zvonimir's twin brother, Tomislav Ivisic (13 ppg, 7.7 rpg, 1.2 bpg), also returns with Kylan Boswell (12.3 ppg, 4.8 rpg, 3.4 apg) and Ben Humrichous (7.6 ppg, 3.8 rpg).

Despite running one of the more consistent programs in the country, Illinois has yet to find footing in a Final Four. They have made five straight tournaments with

Underwood on the sidelines, including an Elite 8 in 2024. That team, with talents like Terrence Shannon Jr. and Marcus Domask, was one of the deeper teams Underwood has had in Champaign. He reloaded this year after a second round exit in 2025 with an offense ranked 14th in the country. He may have the right guys to put it together on both sides of the ball in 2026, and if they do succeed, Underwood may schedule a yearly trip to Europe.

### **13. Louisville Cardinals (ACC)**

*2024-2025: 27-8 (18-2); Lost in First Round vs. (9) Creighton*

If reports of a possible dust-up at a recruit's house between Pat Kelsey and Mark Pope tell us anything, it's that Louisville basketball is *back*. It was probably hard to envision under Kenny Payne, but Louisville went from an eight win disaster to a 27 win breakthrough in one year under Pat Kelsey.

Looking at the roster on paper, 13th in the country may be short changing the Cardinals. Kasean Pryor (12 ppg, 6.1 rpg, 1.1 bpg) and J'Vonne Hadley (12.2 ppg, 7.3 rpg, 1.8 apg) are the notable returnees. However, it is Louisville's recruiting class that will put them over the top. They bring in two sharpshooters from the portal: Virginia's Isaac McKneeley (14.4 ppg, 42.1% 3PT) and Xavier's Ryan Conwell (16.5 ppg, 41.2% 3PT). Mikel Brown Jr. is a future lottery pick and a five-star recruit to give their backcourt some firepower.

The ACC is poised to be stronger than last year, both at the top and in the middle. Pat Kelsey and Louisville aim and expect to be towards the top.

### **14. Arkansas Razorbacks (SEC)**

*2024-2025: 22-14 (8-10); lost in Sweet Sixteen vs. (3) Texas Tech*

John Calipari's year one in Fayetteville was, in a word, eventful. After beginning 11-2 with a win over Michigan, they went on to lose six out of their next seven games in SEC play. When they went into Lexington and beat Calipari's former Kentucky team, things started to look up again. They knocked off seventh seeded Kansas and second seeded St. John's in the NCAA tournament before falling to third seeded Texas Tech in a Sweet 16 classic.

All told, it would be fair to say Coach Cal would hope this season is a little less "eventful" than last year.

Expectations are high this season, just as they were last year. Calipari returns four core members, including DJ Wagner (11.2 ppg, 2.7 rpg, 3.6 apg) and Karter Knox (8.3 ppg, 3.3 rpg). Trevon Brazile (6.8 ppg, 5.4 rpg) and Billy Richmond III (5.7 ppg) look to break into more expanded roles this year as well.

After losing star point guard Boogie Fland to Florida, they brought in Malique Ewin from Florida State (14.2 ppg, 7.6 rpg, 59.6 FG%) and Nick Pringle from South Carolina (9.5 ppg, 6.3 rpg). Five-star recruit Darius Acuff Jr. has a chance to be one of the major star guards in the SEC, as well.

With athletic and versatile scorers, Arkansas should compete nationally on paper, just like last year. This year, they need to match that expectation on the court.

### **15. Kansas Jayhawks (Big 12 )**

*2024-2025: 21-13 (11-9); lost in First Round vs. (10) Arkansas*

Standards are so high in Lawrence that the last two seasons have felt like utter disasters, despite making the NCAA tournament and winning 20+ games in both seasons. Of course, for Bill Self, that just isn't good enough.

As a result, Kansas went the extra mile to land potential first overall pick Darryn Peterson. As the #1 recruit in his class, Peterson is a lethal scorer whom Self believes is one of the best freshmen he has ever coached. He will also be joined by Elmarko Jackson, a former five-star recruit who was held out last season due to injury.

Flory Bidunga (5.9 ppg, 5.4 rpg, 1.6 bpg) played lighter minutes behind Hunter Dickinson last season, but should be in line for a bigger role down low. Tre White (10.5 ppg, 5.5 rpg) will enhance Kansas' backcourt this season after transferring in from Illinois. For a backcourt that lost the likes of Dajuan Harris and Zeke Mayo, replacing them with Peterson and White seems healthy enough.

With BYU, Houston and Texas Tech being so highly touted in the preseason, it feels like Kansas is somehow flying a bit under the radar. If Darryn Peterson reaches even a two-thirds of his ceiling by conference play, it is possible Kansas sits in the top 10 nationally. The Big 12 is completely open, but leave it to Kelvin Sampson to sum up Kansas' place in the league: "The bell cow in this conference is Kansas...don't get it twisted."

**16. Arizona Wildcats (Big 12)**

*2024-2025: 24-13 (14-6); lost in Sweet Sixteen vs. (1) Duke*

In a transfer-dominated landscape, Arizona returning four major players should translate to being a major win. Senior guards Jaden Bradley (12.1 ppg, 3.4 rpg, 3.7 apg) and Anthony Dell'orso (7.2 ppg) are the big backcourt returnees, while Tobe Awaka (8 ppg, 7.8 rpg) and Motiejus Krivas (7.9 ppg, 4.5 rpg) will anchor the backcourt.

Koa Peat and Brayden Burries are the two five-star freshmen for Tommy Lloyd, who also reeled in Harvard transfer Evan Nelson (9.1 ppg, 40.4 % 3PT). On paper, the Wildcats look like a deep team, which will help reframe the roster after losing Caleb Love and Carter Bryant to the NBA.

The top of the Big 12 is remarkably stacked, and Arizona is a sneaky player in that mix. They don't quite have the hype that Houston and BYU might have, but this team is deep. It is also impossible to undersell the positive effects of returning members of last year's team. Additionally, this team will be tested against Florida, UCLA, Connecticut, Auburn, Alabama, and San Diego State before Big 12 play. If they are going to make it deep in March, we will likely know it through those tough games.

**17. Iowa State Cyclones (Big 12)**

*2024-2025: 25-10 (13-7); lost in Second Round vs. (6) Ole Miss*

It is incredibly difficult to bet against Iowa State with TJ Otzelberger at the helm. The Cyclones have made four straight tournaments, including two Sweet 16s. Joshua Jefferson (13 ppg, 7.4 rpg, 2.1 steals per game) and Milan Mimcilovic (11.5 ppg, 3.3 rpg, 39.6% 3PT) both come back and will be continuous mainstays in the rotation. Tamin Lipsey, the fierce defender in the backcourt, also returns, but he is in the midst of recovering from a preseason MCL sprain. He is still on track to return in early to mid November, so it remains to be seen how his injury affects the Cyclones.

Blake Buchanan (5.4 ppg, 5.3 rpg, 1.1 bpg) transferred in from Virginia, looking to improve the Cyclones' frontcourt. They also bring in Eric Mulder from Purdue Fort Wayne and four-star freshman guard Jamarion Bateman, who seems slated to be starting alongside Lipsey in the backcourt.

In a similar vein to Tennessee, Iowa State will be hoping to match their offensive output with their already stellar defensive output. The Cyclones have ranked 13th, 1st, 8th, and 5th in the last four seasons in defensive efficiency. While their offense has

never been even close to subpar, they will need both sides of the ball on point to make their first Elite 8 (or beyond) with TJ Otzelberger.

## **18. Alabama Crimson Tide (SEC)**

*2024-2025: 28-9 (13-5); lost in Elite Eight vs. (1) Duke*

Alabama began last season as the second ranked team in the SM preseason poll. Despite a phenomenal season and a second straight Elite 8 appearance, the Tide were still only the second best team in the state of Alabama.

They lose Mark Sears to the NBA, but return star guard Labaron Philon Jr. (10.6 ppg, 3.8 apg, 1.4 steals per game). Philon Jr. will have surefire NBA prospects if this season goes to plan. He will be working in a backcourt with fellow returnee and three-point specialist Latrell Wrightsell (when he returns from injury). Wrightsell shot 42.2% from beyond the arc and was good for 11.5 points per game before tearing his ACL eight games into the season. Aden Holloway is also good for 11.4 points per game and hitting 41.2% of his three pointers.

Jalil Betha from Miami (FL) (7.1 ppg, 2.1 rpg) and Taylor Bol Bowen from Florida State (10.5 ppg, 5.5 rpg) highlight the transfer class, and it will be interesting to see how all of these pieces fit in Nate Oats' avalanche offensive system. With Sears and Grant Nelson now moved on, there will need to be some new leaders in Tuscaloosa.

Whatever the case, Oats' team identity should remain the same. Alabama finished last season as both the fourth most efficient offense and the fastest offense in America. Their high octane, high volume shooting style will be alive and well again.

## **19. Tennessee Volunteers (SEC)**

*2024-2025: 30-8 (12-6); lost in Elite Eight vs. (1) Houston*

232 wins, two SEC regular season titles, a Naismith Coach of the Year award, two Sweet 16s and two Elite 8s: all of these accolades highlight Rick Barnes' illustrious career as Tennessee head coach. The one thing that eludes him still is a Final Four banner to hang in Knoxville.

Last season, the Vols had a great shot. Chaz Lanier and Zakai Ziegler were a fierce and versatile backcourt, but they ran into a buzzsaw in Houston. This year, the Vols return Felix Okpara (7.1 ppg), J.P. Estrella (4.7 ppg), and Cade Phillips (4.6 ppg).

In keeping with last season, however, the real big contributor this season should be a transfer. Ja'kobi Gillespie (14.7 ppg, 4.8 apg, 40.7% 3PT) lit up the Maryland offense last year, and he will be the centerpiece of a Tennessee offense that finished 17th in efficiency last year. Barnes also recruited five-star freshman Nate Ament, an athletic frontcourt piece who also has a shooters' touch. Tennessee's third ranked defense from last year will hope to keep that identity this time around in search of another deep run in March.

## **20. Michigan State Spartans (Big Ten)**

*2024-2025: 30-7 (17-3); lost in Elite Eight vs. (1) Auburn*

Michigan State was unranked in the SM poll heading into last season. By week six, they had shot into the rankings. By March, they were outright Big Ten champions. It would be silly to leave them unranked this time around.

Jase Richardson was the surprise standout that ended up being drafted last year, so it will be tough to replace his production. However, they return four top scorers, including the athletic monster that is Coen Carr (8.1 ppg, 3.6 rpg). Elsewhere, Jaxon Kohler (7.8 ppg, 7.5 rpg) and Jeremy Fears Jr. (7.2 ppg, 2.1 rpg, 5.4 apg) will be expected to play much bigger roles. Jaden Akins (graduation) and Tre Holloman (transferred to NC State) will also no longer be in the rotation, so it will be a new look Spartan team for Tom Izzo's 31st season in East Lansing.

Trey Fort (14.6 ppg at Samford) and Kaleb Glenn (12.6 ppg at FAU) highlight Sparty's transfer class. Never shy from a challenge, Michigan State will play Arkansas, Kentucky, North Carolina and Duke in their non-conference slate. Izzo will be looking for a monstrous 28th (!) straight NCAA tournament appearance, and who are we to doubt he will get it done?

## **21. Gonzaga Bulldogs (West Coast)**

*2024-2025: 26-9 (14-4); lost in Second Round vs. (1) Houston*

Speaking of NCAA tournament streaks, there was about a three week period last season where it looked like the Zags might be in danger of missing out on March. Of course, they figured it out for a 25th straight season. Mark Few has built a behemoth in Spokane, and they will continue to be a national threat this season.

Graham Ike (17.3 ppg, 7.3 rpg) will be the X-factor for the Bulldogs down low. Braeden Huff (11 ppg, 3.4 apg) also returns with Ike, giving them a solidified frontcourt dynamic. Guard transfer Tyon Grant-Foster (14.8 ppg, 5.9 rpg, 2.1 apg, 1.7 steals per game at Grand Canyon) remains in limbo as his NCAA eligibility waiver is under appeal—it would be a *major* loss if he was not able to suit up for Gonzaga this season.

It will be the final season for Gonzaga in the WCC before moving to the revamped Pac-12 next season, and they want to retain the crown one last time after relinquishing it to Saint Mary's in the previous two seasons.

## **22. San Diego State Aztecs (Mountain West)**

*2024-2025: 21-10 (14-6); lost in First Four vs. (11) North Carolina*

The Aztecs will be joining Gonzaga in the new look Pac-12 next year, uniting as two of the most successful non-power conference programs of the last decade and beyond. Brian Dutcher's team returns star guard Miles Byrd (12.3 ppg, 4.4 rpg, 2.7 apg, 1.1 bpg), who is the preseason Mountain West Player of the Year. Magoon Gwath (8.5 ppg, 5.2 rpg, 2.6 bpg) is fresh off of a campaign where he won both conference Freshman of the Year and Defensive Player of the Year. That one-two punch alone should make the Aztecs a shoe-in for winning the Mountain West.

Elize Harrington, the four star recruit, will give their backcourt a boost as well. Defensively, the Aztecs start this year as the ninth ranked unit in efficiency, continuing their trend of finishing top 20 in that measure every season since 2022. Gwath's production in particular down low should help them achieve that feat for a fourth straight year.

Brian Dutcher's consistency in the program should be noted. Five straight tournaments (2020 tournament would have made it six), two Sweet 16s, and a National Title game appearance in 2023. It may go under the radar, but the Aztecs have run a tight ship as of late; it should be no different for their farewell season as a member of the Mountain West Conference.

## **23. Oregon Ducks (Big Ten)**

*2024-2025: 25-10 (12-8); lost in Second Round vs. (4) Arizona*

Continuity is key in this transfer portal era, and Oregon returns their two top scorers for the new season. Nate Bittle (14.2 ppg, 7.6 rpg, 2.1 bpg) and Jackson Shelstad

(13.7 ppg, 2.9 rpg, 2.7 apg) will lead the pack for the Ducks, who finished in the top 40 of both offensive and defensive efficiency last season. Shelstad's broken hand will likely keep him out for the first few games, which will be a blow to the Ducks offense. Sean Stewart, a junior forward from Ohio State, and TK Simpkins, a 16 point per game scorer at Elon, will join the program this year through the transfer portal, hoping to deputize in Shelstad's absence.

Dana Altman's time in Eugene has been quite prosperous for a program that doesn't often get the national headlines that it perhaps deserved. Since 2010, they have reached five Sweet 16s, including one Elite 8 and a Final Four. They have been remarkably consistent, and found their footing in the Big Ten relatively quickly as a fifth seed last year in March. With a strong returning core, Oregon will be a player in a deep Big Ten.

#### **24. North Carolina Tar Heels (ACC)**

*2024-2025: 23-14 (13-7); lost in First Round vs. (6) Ole Miss*

Year five is officially the hot seat season for Hubert Davis in Chapel Hill. It may seem silly on paper with the accomplishments: 101 total wins and a title game appearance in four seasons is usually enough to keep the train moving— but not for North Carolina.

It is, of course, the missed tournament after being ranked first in the preseason and early exit of last season that makes this year make or break for Davis. The good news is, the Tar Heels still have that recruiting prowess: Caleb Wilson (five star), Isaiah Denis (four star) and Derek Dixon (four star) will all make their college debuts for Carolina this year.

As far as returnees, Seth Trimble (11.6 ppg, 5 rpg, 1.4 steals per game) is the one to take the lead this year. Elsewhere, there are a whole lot of new faces to work around. Henri Veesaar (9.4 ppg, 5 rpg, 1.1 bpg at Arizona) and Kyan Evans (10.6 ppg, 2.9 rpg, 3.1 apg at Colorado State) are the standouts of the transfer class. Davis also nabbed Luka Bogavac, a 22-year-old Euro pro from Montenegro.

In a very important year for Hubert Davis, it will be a hodgepodge of pieces on the court for the Heels. Whether the expectations are unfair for Davis is out of the question; the reality is, it just hasn't been good enough for North Carolina's program pedigree. If it isn't good enough this year, there likely won't be another chance to right the ship.

**25. Texas Longhorns (SEC)**

*2024-2025: 19-16 (6-12); lost in First Four vs. (11) Xavier*

Texas squeaked into the tournament before falling to Sean Miller's Xavier team in Dayton last year. This year, Miller has switched sidelines and will be running the Longhorns from the sidelines this year.

Jordan Pope (11 ppg) was the third highest scorer on last year's team, so he will take the reins in the backcourt after the departures of Tre Johnson (NBA) and Arthur Kaluma (undrafted senior). Chendall Weaver (6.4 ppg) and Tramon Mark (10.6 ppg) also will make major jumps for this year's squad.

Miller brought Lassina Traore and Dailyn Swain with him from Xavier to fill out the frontcourt. Elsewhere, Camden Heide— whom you may remember for his thunderous putback dunk over Donovan Clingan in the 2024 National Title game— will suit up in Austin this year. Simeon Wilcher (8 ppg) will also get some run in the backcourt after transferring in from St. John's.

For Sean Miller's first season, a tournament appearance in the loaded SEC might be very high expectations. However, if anyone can do it, it might just be Sean.

***In the hunt: NC State, Creighton, Wisconsin, Auburn***

*Sean Murawski is a writer for his own personal sports website, smsports.net. He publishes weekly columns and rankings on men's college basketball, as well as coverage columns for the MLB.*