

2026 Sweet Sixteen Power Rankings

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The NCAA tournament very rarely reaches the Sweet Sixteen with the country's "best" sixteen remaining teams. Florida ended the regular season on a tear— they are gone. Texas Tech was dangerous all year, and then they lost JT Toppin. Kansas was one of the more talented rosters, but they never got their chemistry right.

There are sixteen teams left. Some of them were dominant all year. Some of them pulled it together slowly as the season dragged along. Some of them have gotten just hot enough at just about the right time. No matter where they began in November, they now begin again in three days. One-third of the tournament path is complete, and the remaining two-thirds will play out with the field of sixty eight dwindling down to just sixteen. The sixteen were not necessarily the best teams all year, but they are here now— and that is all that matters, until the trophy is lifted in Indianapolis two weeks from today.

1. Michigan Wolverines (33-3)

Dusty May's squad began the season by demolishing teams. They stumbled just three times all year, but despite not being the number one overall seed, it is incredibly difficult to not build them up as the team to beat. The Wolverines are lanky, athletic, and play a versatile three big lineup. Their margin of victory through the first two games has been true to form: 21 points over Howard, followed by 23 points over Saint Louis. Yaxel Lendeborg (14.7 ppg, 6.9 rpg, 1.3 bpg) has been a do-it-all guy and is by far Michigan's most important player. He has also upped his three point game (36.1%), which gives him yet another dimension to threaten teams with.

When Michigan lost to Wisconsin in Big Ten play. Alabama will look for the same formula in their Sweet Sixteen matchup on Thursday. You have to play near perfect when you play Michigan. Even then, however, it might still not be enough.

2. Arizona Wildcats (34-2)

Despite Michigan being a somewhat healthy favorite, it is hard to put Arizona even this low on the list at number two. The Wildcats are a picture of consistency and composure. If you were to compile a list of the most dominant players left in the field, an Arizona player might not necessarily stick out for inclusion on that list. And yet, they are perhaps the best bet to make it to Indianapolis. Jaden Bradley leads the backcourt with his pose, while Brayden Burries complements him with his playmaking. Motiejus Krivas anchors down low with the dominant freshman Koa Peat, while Ivan Kharchenkov defends and fills in the gaps at a high level on the perimeter. They also have a strong bench and an even stronger feel for the games. They know when to put on the gas and make sure they hand out killshots.

Arizona and Michigan may just meet in the national semifinal. It may be more star-studded and a bigger draw than the national championship game.

3. Duke Blue Devils (34-2)

Duke's dominance all year made sense, as they were anchored by the sport's best player and a cast of characters around him fit for a Final Four. Imagine everyone's surprise, then, when Siena took them down to the wire in the first round. Duke went from nearly being the third number one seed ever to lose to a sixteen seed to being a perennial favorite again after a bounceback performance against TCU.

Cameron Boozer will only be getting stronger, and his twin brother Cayden has been sensational when filling in for the injured Caleb Foster at point guard. Patrick Ngnoba is somewhat back, on a minutes restriction, and he immediately made a difference in the second round win over TCU. How far Duke goes may rely on their health, but even in their current state, they are a horribly unfavorable matchup for just about anybody. In such a loaded East region, it's hard to peg a true favorite. When you look at Duke as a whole, it feels just a bit clearer.

4. Houston Cougars (30-6)

It is so difficult to doubt Kelvin Sampson. If there was any team to potentially lose in the early rounds, Houston would be the one team that I just could not wrap my head around.

Kingston Flemings (16.2 ppg, 4 rpg, 5.2 apg, 41.7% 3PT) will continue to be the X-factor for the Cougars. His athleticism and finishing skill is astonishing for such a young player, and I truly look forward to the battle between him and Illinois' Keaton

Wagler in their Sweet Sixteen matchup. Houston is a physical team that can rebound and defend at a high level. It is hard for any team to match up with their statures and builds, but then you add the skill and talent, and it just feels unfair. In a star-studded field, Houston somehow only ranks fourth. Remember, we at SM Sports picked them to cut down the nets, and they have done nothing to waver that view. Power rankings and picking a champion are vastly different ventures. They might not look the best on paper, but when the game is played on the court, I trust Houston.

5. Iowa State Cyclones (29-7)

Ask North Carolina and Texas Tech how much losing your best player completely changes the on court dynamic of your team. They will tell you that it is astronomical. However, despite losing Joshua Jefferson to injury in the early stages of the first round, Iowa State has found a way to steamroll into the second weekend.

Tamin Lipsey was sensational in the second round win vs. Kentucky, scoring 26 points and dishing out 10 assists. Milan Momcilovic continues to be the country's best three point shooter, and the Iowa State defense is back to its old ways. They suffocate opponents and work just about as hard as anyone in America to make the game Hell for any offense in front of them. A lot of people seem to stop short of Iowa State's title ceiling, but I can't see how they are not in the running. They are senior led and have defensive pedigree. If Tamin Lipsey keeps playing like this, then the Jefferson injury becomes less of an obstacle. If they somehow get Jefferson back for the later rounds? Oh boy.

6. St. John's Red Storm (30-6)

The Red Storm have been absolutely surging since their massive 72-40 loss to UConn in February. They won the double Big East title, destroyed Northern Iowa in the first round, and outlasted a Kansas team with a Dylan Darling buzzer beater in the second round. Rick Pitino and the Red Storm have solidified their identity. They can't necessarily shoot the ball, but they are defensively tough and can rebound the ball like nobody's business.

Zuby Ejiofor (16.3 ppg, 7.3 rpg, 3.5 apg) is the obvious perennial threat for St. John's, but their "others" on the squad are just as valuable. Josen Sanon, Dillon Mitchell, and Bryce Hopkins all show signs of being the capable game changers for St. John's. At points this season, it seemed hard to imagine being a national threat. They ended up winning the Big East outright, but their out of conference prowess left a lot to be

desired. Through two games in March, they seem to more than belong in the last sixteen. With Pitino at the helm, even in this East region, it would not be outrageous to see the fifth seeded Johnnies making a run to Indianapolis.

7. Michigan State Spartans (27-7)

They just always seem to pop up late in March. Tom Izzo and the Spartans are back with a real shot at getting to the Final Four. Jeremy Fears Jr. has 27 assists through his first two games of the tournament, which leads any player in the field. State has been defensively strong and active on the boards, as always.

The one thing that may hold them back is the fact that they do not necessarily have a true NBA draft prospect. You can pretty much point to any national champion of recent memory and pick out at least one NBA draft prospect. Does Michigan State's lack of NBA talent hold them back? Perhaps it can, but getting to Indianapolis is more than possible for any team who is riding high. Once you get there, it's a different story, but there is no reason why this edition of Michigan State can't get through this regional to the Final Four.

8. Connecticut Huskies (31-5)

In this season of all seasons for UConn, there has actually been plenty of frustration for fans. Despite the 31-5 record, UConn's offense has been hot and cold. Even through shooting struggles and some confusing losses, the Huskies are back in the Sweet Sixteen. A stat to behold: when making the second weekend in the tournament, the Huskies have not lost since the 2009 Final Four. That run includes four national titles.

Hurley and co. will have their work cut out for them against Michigan State, and the X-factor is Solo Ball. UConn was able to get by Furman and UCLA with Ball not playing very well and shooting poorly. It will be difficult to imagine surviving another Ball no-show. Tarris Reed Jr., Alex Karaban, and Jayden Ross have carried the load. A healthy Silas Demary Jr. would also go a long way, but the shooting for UConn is their biggest concern. If they do get that component going? We may be sending a third banner in four years back to Storrs. *If.*

9. Purdue Boilermakers (29-8)

I have wavered on Purdue perhaps more than any other team in America this season. They came in hot as the preseason #1. They ended up falling and stumbling quite a bit. I did not perceive their Big Ten title win over Michigan to be anything too significant— I even had them losing in the second round against seventh seeded Miami (FL).

They are back in the Sweet Sixteen for the third straight year. Braden Smith, the new NCAA all-time assist king, did not have a great game in the second round. It has largely been Trey Kaufman-Renn and Oscar Cluff who have made the biggest impacts for Purdue through their first two games. They now face eleventh-seeded Texas, and will have their hands full if they get to the Elite Eight against either Arizona or Arkansas. They are still the best offense in America, and that's without their best player living up to his ceiling so far.

I can't quite quit this Purdue team anymore. I thought they were done. I am not guaranteeing a title win or even a Final Four berth— but this team is not to be taken lightly.

10. Illinois Fighting Illini (26-8)

The Illini have had perhaps the most electric offense all season, led by sensational freshman Keaton Wagler (17.8 ppg, 4.9 rpg, 4.4 apg). However, I rank them this low for their defense. It is ranked 24th, and they will play a feisty Houston team in the Sweet Sixteen. Illinois has an incredibly high offensive ceiling, but it is on the other side of the ball that worries me just a little.

The Illini have played very well through their first two games, but they now have some big dogs to face. Even if they get past Houston, it would be Iowa State waiting on the other end. I love watching this Illinois team and am truly confident that they can score with the best of America. If they can get both sides of the ball working, with the right matchup, it is hard to count this team out of any game.

11. Arkansas Razorbacks (28-8)

Nobody's draft stock has skyrocketed higher in the last month of the season than that of Darius Acuff Jr. (23.3 ppg, 3.1 rpg, 6.5 apg). His wiry athleticism and scoring ability has garnered so much attention, but we forget that the team as a whole actually had an extremely impressive season in the SEC. The Razorbacks have played well in

March so far through two games, setting up a titanic matchup against top-seeded Arizona in the Sweet Sixteen.

Arkansas' weakness, like Illinois, may be on the defensive end. Arizona is one of the most well-rounded teams in America on both sides of the ball, and it remains to be seen how Arkansas can handle that kind of consistency. The question may come down to Darius Acuff Jr. himself. As Carmelo Anthony and Anthony Davis before him, can Acuff Jr. be the best player (and freshman) on his team, carrying them to the promised land in the process? His first huge test comes Friday against the Wildcats.

12. Alabama Crimson Tide (25-9)

The Tide have had a bit of a wild season. Between the Charles Bediako situation and the recent Aden Holloway arrest, some (including SM Sports) sold their stock coming into the tournament. Here they are, back in the Sweet Sixteen for the third straight season.

Labaron Philon Jr. (21.6 ppg, 3.4 rpg, 5 pg) has used his lethal scoring ability to propel the Tide's offense into the regional semifinals. They will need every bit of their third ranked offense against Michigan, who ranks sixth. Bama continues to play fast (4th in America in tempo), and their three point game will need to be on point. Michigan doesn't seem to be a team that goes through too many cold streaks, but if any team has the ability to score 10+ in a flash to open up a game, it might just be this Alabama team.

13. Nebraska Cornhuskers (28-6)

Fresh off of their first tournament win in program history, Nebraska was able to get one more in stunning fashion over Vanderbilt in the second round. After Braden Fraeger's go ahead layup, Tyler Tanner's halfcourt heave fell achingly, Gordon Haywardly out of the hoop. The Huskers moved onto the Sweet Sixteen for the first time ever.

They plan an Iowa team who also won in stunning fashion over top-seeded Florida, and it is a delightful matchup. Nebraska shoots plenty of threes, and also ranks sixth in defensive efficiency. They rank so low because of their perceived lack of NBA talent— it might just be hard to play this style against such dominant teams with pro-level players. Then again, it's March, and there might be magic in these cornstalks.

14. Tennessee Volunteers (24-11)

I must admit: this Tennessee team had exactly ZERO buzz or zip about them in my head coming into March. One key win over Houston at the Players Era, but besides that, they just felt like a very average team. While Nate Ament has proved some ability while holding himself back in other areas as an NBA prospect, it's really been Ja'Kobi Gillespie (18.4 ppg, 2.8 rpg, 5.6 apg) who has carried the weight for Tennessee.

As usual, Rick Barnes coaches a defensively strong team. Their offense could hang with anyone in the SEC, and they were able to squeak out a win over third seeded Virginia in the second round. What lies ahead is the defensive stalwart Iowa State, and potentially Michigan in the Elite Eight. Gillespie and Ament will need to be at the top of their game if this sixth seed is to make their first Final Four in program history.

15. Iowa Hawkeyes (23-12)

Led by coaching prodigy Ben McCollum, the Hawkeyes took down top-seeded Florida in near-buzzer beating fashion. They aim to take down Big Ten rival Nebraska and make their first Elite Eight since 1987.

Bennett Stirtz (19.7 ppg, 2.7 rpg, 4.5 apg) is the lynch pin for the Hawkeye offense— they likely won't get very far without him having a big game. Stirtz's ability to score at will from all points of the floor will give him a big advantage over Nebraska's stingy defense. Iowa took down the Huskers this season and lost the other game, so this will be an extra-juiced up rubber match. The Battle of the Corn will hold some extra weight, and perhaps provide some of the best theatre throughout the Sweet Sixteen.

16. Texas Longhorns (21-14)

There is a sizable gap in KenPom metrics between Texas (31st) and their next closest challenger (Iowa at 22nd). The Longhorns pushed their way through the First Four against NC State, the first round against BYU, and the second round over a Gonzaga team seeded third. Texas finds themselves against a Purdue team who they may find vulnerable.

Dailyn Swain (17.4 ppg, 7.5 rpg, 3.5 apg) will be the focal point of Sean Miller's offense, but may be down to how they utilize Matas Vokietaitis down low. Vokietaitas will have to deal with Trey Kaufman-Renn and Oscar Cluff in the paint, and they will be key for Purdue. They aren't quite a Cinderella, but Texas is the only double digit seed left. They aren't supposed to be here, but here they are. They are surely dangerous enough to challenge any team left in the field.

