

# 2025 Big East Tournament Preview

*Storylines, Narratives, and Teams to Watch at the World's Most Famous Arena*

*Written by Sean Murawski // SM Sports*

On Wednesday, there will still be four days before the NCAA tournament bracket is unveiled. Although the big prize is a spot in the field of 68, there is also plenty on the line at Madison Square Garden in the field of 11. The best tournament in basketball not named March Madness will begin in earnest, with narratives and storylines galore to get us all the way through to Selection Sunday.

## The Outline

If you are talking Big East this year, you are talking St. John's. Rick Pitino has revitalized and invigorated New York with his Red Storm's blistering campaign: 27 total wins, 18 conference wins, just 4 losses total, undefeated at home, and a regular season Big East crown for the first time since 1992. The conference literally and figuratively runs through St. John's— if you want the automatic bid, someone will have to beat St. John's on the floor at MSG, something no team has managed to do this year.

Along with the Johnnies, four more teams earned byes to the quarterfinals. Creighton finished 2nd despite an injury to star transfer Pop Isaacs; UConn looks to defend their crown in 3rd place; Marquette will play Xavier in the 4 vs. 5 game to round out the quarterfinal slate.

The first round will consist of Butler vs. Providence (winner to play St. John's), DePaul vs. Georgetown (winner to play Creighton), and Seton Hall vs. Villanova (winner to play UConn). Single elimination. 4 games, 4 days, one champion. The stage is set.

## The Stars

The aforementioned Pitino is undoubtedly one of the biggest names in the sport right now, but his team is all for it as well. RJ Luis Jr. (18.1 ppg, 7.1 rpg, 2.2 apg, 1.4 steals per game) *should* very well be on his way to a Big East Player of the Year award. Seton Hall transfer Kadary Richmond (12.7 ppg, 6.1 rpg) has also shown out. Zubey Ejiofor (14.1 ppg, 1.5 bpg) earned all conference first team honors with his ferocious play down low. They can't really shoot the three, but they hound on defense and have a mid range game

stronger than almost anyone in America. If it isn't obvious, St. John's is the team to beat and thensome.

UConn's Dan Hurley lost 4 starters to the NBA from last season's title winning team, but they return some fresh pieces who have earned their accolades this time around. Solo Ball (14.8 ppg, 1.6 apg, 42.8% 3pt) is one of the nation's best three-point shooters, and Liam McNeeley (14.7 ppg, 6.2 rpg, 2.5 apg) is on track to be a lottery pick in this summer's NBA draft. Returning captain Alex Karaban (14.5 ppg, 5.2 rpg, 1.6 bpg) also has found his form following a mid-seasonl.

Elsewhere, Kam Jones for Marquette is having an all-American type season, and will likely find himself on one of the three lists by season's end. Jones' line of 18.9 ppg, 4.5 rpg, and 6.1 apg has led Marquette through an up and down season. Despite their stock dropping somewhat after an early-season surge, Marquette is a fantastic defensive team and will cause fits in the right matchup. If Jones is firing, the Golden Eagles have as good of a shot as anyone to lift the trophy.

For Creighton, Pop Isaacs' season-ending injury put a damper on some promise. However, Ryan Kalkbrenner has just picked up his 4th straight Big East Defensive Player of the Year award— the first player to do that since some guy named Ewing. Steven Ashworth (16.8 ppg, 7 apg, 38% 3pt) and Jamiya Neal (11.3 ppg, 6 rpg, 4.4 apg) help front the backcourt for Greg McDermott's Bluejays, who bounced back superbly from injury and found a hot stretch at the right time to get themselves firmly in the tournament picture. As the second place team in the Big East, they could very well see UConn for a third time in the semifinal, a rematch everyone will be on board for.

### **Who will wear the slipper?**

In a somewhat "down year" for any conference not named the SEC or the Big Ten, the Big East is already sending 1 more team to the NCAA tournament than last season. St. John's joins UConn, Creighton, and Marquette for this year's total of 4, but a fifth waits in the wings— Xavier.

The bubble this season across the country is particularly atrocious. Although Xavier is by no means safe in the field, they currently sit as SM Sports' "Last Team In" at the time of this writing. While it might not be a true, definitive "win and in" game, Xavier defeating Marquette on Thursday in the Big East quarterfinals would go a very long way in securing the Musketeers a spot. As is the nature of the bubble, life for Xavier is not all up to them. Teams like Boise State, North Carolina, San Diego State,

Indiana, and Ohio State all sit on the bubble too. Results elsewhere will have major effects for the fate of Sean Miller's team.

One way for Xavier to be sure? Win the damn thing. The Musketeers have the talent to do it. Zach Freemantle (17.4 ppg, 7.1 rpg, 52.5% FG) has had a fantastic turnaround since returning from injury, leading the team in scoring. Ryan Conwell shoots the three at 40% while scoring 16 a game, while Dailyn Swain scores 10 and dishes out 5 assists on a nightly basis. If there's any team below the surface that could take the crown, it's Xavier. They not only have the talent, but the motivation: winning a few at MSG can all but solidify a spot in the NCAA tournament. Winning it all over the defending champs or the favorite St. John's? That would be gravy.

In the era of conference realignment, super 18-team leagues, and staggered tournament formats, the Big East tournament remains classic and valuable. Every team gets a shot, and they get to take that shot at Madison Square Garden. There's no better way for basketball to kick off the greatest month in sports. In a year where the SEC and Big Ten have dominated headlines, the Big East still remains the most intriguing conference tournament in the country. It just feels like something is coming, and that there will be surprises, twists, and turns over the next four days. It's a precursor to the Big Dance, as it always is.

It's New York, it's Pitino, it's Hurley. It's Bill Raftery. It's big time basketball in a big time arena on a big time stage. It's the Big East and it's March. You know the story.

It's time to write it.

*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.*