

CBS Sports Classic Post-Mortem

The four corners of college basketball were showcased on Saturday in Atlanta— how do these teams feel going into 2026?

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ATLANTA, GA— One team rolling in a year where they needed to roll. One team looking to get a season-changing win en route to their first NCAA tournament since 2022. Two teams with high expectations trying not to drown before Christmas.

Four corners of college basketball were in play at this year's CBS Sports Classic, and all four teams now have new areas of focus heading into the holiday season.

First there is North Carolina, led by Hubert Davis. Leading up to his fifth season at the helm in Chapel Hill, there was plenty of preseason buzz about it potentially being his last. Expectations are high at North Carolina, and leashes are short. Davis reached the NCAA Championship Game in his first year as an eighth seed. The Heels promptly missed the Big Dance the following year, a year in which they were ranked preseason #1. A Sweet 16 exit, followed by last season's First Round loss, has led to this year being an ultimate hot seat year for Davis.

So far, North Carolina has answered the call for their coach. The Tar Heels sat at 10-1 coming into Saturday's game against Ohio State. Seth Trimble (17 pts, 3-5 3pt) returned from injury and slotted himself firmly back into their offensive setup that ranks 23rd in efficiency. Caleb Wilson (20 pts, 15 rebs) has been Carolina's best player. The outstanding, outspoken freshman has forced himself into the national conversation that has been centered on the nation's "Big Three" freshman stars (AJ Dybantsa, Darryn Peterson, and Cameron Boozer). Wilson's athleticism and high energy play style has transformed North Carolina's offense, which barely squeaked into the NCAA tournament last year. They will make it with plenty of pedigree this year, and Wilson may play himself into a top five pick of the NBA draft (if he isn't already there).

North Carolina was able to beat Ohio State Saturday by one point, courtesy of a Henri Veesaar game-winning bucket with under ten seconds remaining. The Buckeyes

represent something different than North Carolina. Ohio State has not been to the tournament since 2022. They were yet to make a big splash in their non-conference slate so far, with their most prominent wins being a one point victory over Notre Dame and a double overtime win over West Virginia.

Saturday gave the Buckeyes a shot to shock their system with some momentum heading into Big Ten play, which will pose plenty of challenges through a gauntlet that includes Nebraska, Michigan twice, Michigan State, and Purdue. They are led by perhaps the country's most underrated upperclassman. Bruce Thornton, a senior guard averaging over 21 points per game, came into yesterday's game with a chance to make headlines. In a season dominated by freshmen, Thornton had a standalone chance to be the best player on the floor and take down a nationally ranked UNC team.

Thornton scored 16 points on 7-16 shooting during his 37 minutes of gameplay. It was a good matchup for him to show he is still a player to watch out for on the national stage. Despite garnering zero bench points, the Buckeyes managed to keep it close until the end. They missed their shot at a huge resume boosting win, and now enter Big Ten play at 8-3. The Buckeyes have a rich basketball history, and have had successful seasons under Jake Diebler. However, this school that has always belonged in March has hit a lull. They will have plenty of chances in conference to make up some ground, but for now, the Buckeyes are in search of their first spark of the season.

The early slate of the CBS Sports Classic possessed the most intrigue. St. John's, who replaced UCLA in the lineup after the Bruins pulled out of the event, began the season with high hopes. They were coming off of a 31-5 season in 2024-2025 and a Big East regular season/tournament double. They earned a two seed in the NCAA tournament, before torpedoing out at the hands of Arkansas in the second round. It was a disappointing end to an otherwise fabulous season.

Fueled by numerous transfer portal additions and the momentum from last year's renaissance, the Johnnies ranked top ten in most preseason rankings (SM Sports had them at #9 to begin the year). However, they have done nothing to back up that ranking so far. Their one solid win was over Baylor at the Players Era Festival. Coming into Saturday, they had beaten the teams they were better than and lost to the teams they were worse than.

Their opponent was not in much better shape. Kentucky, who SM Sports pegged as a Final Four participant in our preseason predictions (yikes!), had lost to Gonzaga, UNC, Michigan State, and Louisville. Mark Pope had publicly questioned his team's commitment and effort in the weeks leading up to the CBS Sports Classic. Jaland Lowe

and Jayden Quaintance, two major components of the offense, had been injured to begin the year. They both were deemed healthy enough to play on Saturday, giving the Wildcats a look at a completely healthy roster for the first time all year.

It was a battle of teams who have been underperforming to begin the season. Kentucky got the better of St. John's, with the help of their returning difference makers. Quaintance (10 pts, 5-7 FG) played 17 minutes and was an immediate impact player. It was clear that whenever he was on the floor, the Cats just looked more dangerous. He is physically imposing and imposed that will down low when he could. Lowe, who briefly reinjured his shoulder before returning later in the game, scored 13 points off the bench. Otega Oweh (20 pts, 5 rebs) led Kentucky in scoring, looking to get back to last year's form and be the focal point of Kentucky's offense.

St. John's competed early and had a double digit lead for a healthy portion of the first half. Zubey Ejiofor (12 pts, 3-11 FG) was limited, and Bryce Hopkins led the Johnnies with 13 points. Much of the discussion around St. John's has been about their lack of a true point guard, and it showed on Saturday. With nobody to command the offense and lead the charge, Kentucky took control late. They won 78-66, pushing St. John's to 7-4.

There is also the fact that Rick Pitino won a national title as Kentucky head coach in 1996. Mark Pope played on that Kentucky team, and he is now Kentucky's coach, in his second year. This added wrinkle gave this already intriguing game a little more juice. Score one to Pope.

North Carolina will look to challenge Duke and Louisville in the newly revamped ACC. Ohio State will have a fighter's chance in pretty much any Big Ten game. Kentucky is on the way up, fully healthy and looking a little more confident. St. John's is on the way down, and will be hard-pressed to find quality opponents in a weaker Big East.

Four teams with four different trajectories and four different paths to follow. The CBS Sports Classic is nothing if not a barometer for where these four teams lie heading into the New Year. For Carolina and Kentucky, they may look back at a weekend that sparked a fire. For Ohio State and St. John's, they may look back at the weekend as an opportunity that slipped away.