

2026 National Championship Preview

This year's most dominant team against this century's most prolific program—something's gotta give on Monday night in Indy

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The glorious, intriguing, and sensationally captivating push and pull of the men's college basketball season will finally come to an end tonight.

The tug-of-war on Monday night will not be the most expected matchup. It is not the matchup of the number one and number two overall seeds. It is not something that many would have predicted when the season tipped off in November, but somehow, it ends up being the perfect encapsulation of this wonderful college basketball season.

Michigan. 36-3. Big Ten regular season champions. They have demolished every team in their path. They have one of America's best players and a potent coaching staff led by Dusty May, who is in his second Final Four in the last four seasons. They have height, they have power, they have athleticism, and they have the attitude to back it up. They just took down fellow number one seed and other juggernaut Arizona with ease in the national semifinal. There is no debate—Michigan is the favorite. They are the monster.

Connecticut. 34-5. They did not win the Big East regular season or the Big East tournament. At times, they have looked unstoppable. Other times, they have looked incredibly beatable. They are not your classic title game underdog, nothing close to it. They are the most successful men's program of the new millennium, and this is their third National Championship game appearance in the last four seasons. They won back-to-back titles in 2023 and 2024, but this one would be the crown jewel. They are led by the best coach in the sport, and are on the verge of a historic dynasty. They are not the favorite, but they are a monster.

Monday night is a stage, and the teams are made up of merely players. The performers and portrayals of the night are a bit hobbled. Michigan's Yaxel Lendeborg (15.1 ppg, 6.9 rpg, 3.3 apg, 1.2 steals per game) played just 14 minutes in their Final Four drubbing of Arizona. Lendeborg sustained both a knee and an ankle injury in the game. He eventually returned from the locker room and logged in some injured minutes. It did

not end up mattering for the score, but he was limping severely. He has assured the media he will play, and was not listed on the injury report.

Solo Ball (12.9 ppg, 3.1 rpg, 1.6 apg) has turned in a down year for UConn this season. His three point shooting has declined severely, but he was ushered in a new and prominent mid range off the dribble arsenal that helps combat his long range woes. Ball sprained his foot in Saturday's win over Illinois, and was seen sporting a walking boot for Sunday's practice (in which he did not participate). He, too, was absent from the injury report, but it is something to monitor as tip off inches closer.

Michigan opens at a -6.5 favorite in the betting markets, and they are expected to win this game somewhat comfortably. The name of the game for Michigan is pace: the Wolverines have the 22nd ranked tempo in America, with just over 71 possessions per game. UConn logs in just under 65 possessions per game, which comes in at 319th in America. Michigan is quick in the backcourt and athletic in the frontcourt. If this game becomes a track meet, it would be to Michigan's advantage.

Michigan also has the height to back all of it up. The aforementioned Lendeborg measures at 6'9"/240 pounds, and he guards all five positions. Aday Mara (12.2 ppg, 6.8 rpg, 2.6 bpg) sits at 7'3" and Morez Johnson Jr. (13.1 ppg, 7.3 rpg, 1.1 bpg) comes in at 6'9". All three start in the same lineup, and all three command the game with their presence.

UConn's tallest starter is Tarris Reed Jr., who is 6'11"/265 pounds. Reed (14.8 ppg, 8.8 rpg, 2 bpg) has been the best player in the entire NCAA tournament. Reed's patient post moves and delicate touch at the rim have bolstered UConn's offense, which has been otherwise poor from long range. Braylon Mullins, Solo Ball, and Alex Karaban are all theoretical threats from beyond the arc, but their production has had to come from elsewhere en route to the title game.

UConn's defense, ranked 8th in all of America, is the key here. If they are able to slow this game down offensively and stifle Michigan on the defensive end, it is a close game. They have length and strength in the backcourt with Silas Demary Jr., but it may be Jayden Ross off the bench who is the defensive key. If Tarris Reed Jr. gets in foul trouble, which is a real threat against this Michigan frontcourt, we may even see some more serious Eric Reibe minutes down low. UConn will have their hands full, but they have the coaching and experience advantage. The gameplan does not have to be perfect and the performance doesn't have to be, either. Near perfect, though? That will probably have to happen for UConn to keep within range.

It all feels lined up for Michigan. They were not ranked the best team in America for the tournament, but they have been the most dominant. They can hit you from all angles and have a deep bench to back it up. Dusty May has transformed this squad into a modern monster, and they are one win away from immortality.

If there is a team in America who can put a stop to this, we thought it might be Arizona. We saw how that went in the national semifinal, but now, a more succulent and intriguing story has emerged: what if it's UConn?

In some ways, it also feels lined up for the Huskies. Whether it is Luke Murray or Bill Murray, it feels like someone has a rabbit's foot in their pocket for UConn. Down 19 points and looking bleak against Duke, the Huskies found a way. Braylon Mullins and Silas Demary forced the turnover, and Braylon Mullins cashed in the bucket. The shot itself is not lucky, but there had to be something at play there.

It could have been a Florida team riding high or a Houston team hellbent on redemption to meet UConn in the Final Four. Instead, it was Illinois, a team that UConn handled with relative ease back in November. They matched up well, and had a week-long turnaround to dissect how to beat them.

It could have been a fully healthy Michigan team awaiting in the title game, but it isn't. They are by no means a shell of themselves, but a full game with no safety net from an injured Yaxel Lendeborg could prove to be vital.

What about history? History says UConn has won six national title games; 6-0 in these very important 40 minute segments. Michigan has six losses in title games. Since 2010, only three national championship teams have not had a number one next to their name. Two of those were UConn.

Take some more insight from Chris Fallica, otherwise known as "The Bear." He noted on Twitter that the most recent team to win both the national semifinal and title game as a betting underdog was 2014 UConn. They also took down Michigan State en route to the Final Four. Since 1985, when the field expanded to 64 teams, title game underdogs of 6+ points are 4-9. The most recent title winner in that regard? 1999 UConn.

Michigan is more dominant, more athletic, and more versatile. UConn has the best coach in America, and the best player in this tournament. They both have deep benches, but Michigan has the better offense. Michigan plays fast, UConn plays slow. The numbers say Michigan, but there's a little voice in the back of everyone's head that is pleading for the Wolverines to not take the Huskies lightly.

Michigan for immortality. UConn for a dynasty. Monday night. All the marbles.