

SM Sports Preseason Top 25 Rankings

Compiling the nation's best college basketball teams for the 2026-2027 season

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October 24th, 2026*

A lot has already happened in college athletics over the past few years, with money, the transfer portal, NIL, and courthouses all playing a major role in the NCAA's big time makeover. However, there is a legitimate case for this past offseason to be unquestionably the craziest offseason in the history of college basketball.

If you have not learned the word "injunction" or understand what a "TRO" is, you are likely in the dark (and perhaps not alone in that camp). There are rosters with less than five players on them (at the time of this writing, LSU) and rosters with several players who may or may not be deemed eligible by the time the season tips off (too many schools to name). There are schools who have brought back fifth years and schools who have attempted to bring back G-League players. Money is being thrown at recruits more extravagantly than ever. The reigning national champion coach now coaches the Dallas Mavericks.

Somehow, in between all of this nonsense, there will be basketball. The season tips off on November 1st with Villanova and Notre Dame squaring off in Rome, followed by the usual five months of chaos on the court. There will still be upsets, there will still be great home crowd environments, and there will still be great basketball played. The courts, lawsuits, and lawyers will (hopefully) subside by the time November hits. After all, the talent pool in college hoops is deeper and more experienced than ever.

Even during the most chaotic era in the history of the NCAA, there will still be basketball. In an effort to get us back on track, it is time to look at the 25 teams in America who will bring us back to basics.

1. Florida Gators SEC/Coach: Todd Golden

Last season: 27-8 (16-2); lost in Second Round to (9) Iowa

Not many teams were in the running for this coveted top spot, but Florida's frontcourt retention has ensured that the Gators soared into the pole position. Thomas Haugh (17.1 ppg), Reuben Chinyelu (10.9 ppg), and Alex Condon (15.1 ppg) all return for

a third straight season, with more experience, championship pedigree, and intensity than any other frontcourt in America. Haugh himself shied away from NBA Draft lottery promises to unofficially become college basketball's most expensive player for another year at Florida. His perimeter prowess and high wire intensity make him the on court leader for this team, as well as a perennial favorite for the Preseason National Player of the Year Award.

If there was a question about last year's Florida team, which earned a one seed before bowing out to Iowa in the Second Round, it was their backcourt. With 2025's trio of guards all now in the NBA, Florida reloaded with Princeton transfer Xaivian Lee and Arkansas transfer Boogie Fland. The backcourt lacked the skill of the year prior, and it was a weak point in their late game execution during that tournament loss. With Lee now at Gonzaga, Fland will partner with Urban Klavzar (9.6 ppg, 40.6% 3PT) and Denzel Aberdeen, who returns to Florida after a one year stint at Kentucky.

It's all on the table for Florida. They have the dudes, they have the coach, and they have the momentum. It's all about finishing the job, and luckily for them, they seem best positioned to do just that.

2. Duke Blue Devils ACC/Coach: Jon Scheyer

Last season: 35-3 (17-1); lost in Elite Eight vs. (2) Connecticut

Encapsulating Duke's last three years is quite the ride: 97 wins, 16 losses, two ACC regular season titles, two number one seeds, and two National Players of the Year who also were picks one and three in their respective NBA Drafts. Counter all of that with three devastating tournament losses: one Elite Eight loss against an inferior in-state rival on a Cinderella run, one Final Four collapse against a tough and gritty one seed, and another Elite Eight collapse capped by a miracle shot against the team that always seems to have their number when it counts.

The last three seasons of Duke basketball have been a couple wins shy of being some of their most successful seasons. With Jon Scheyer rumored to have been in the mix for the Dallas Mavericks job that went to Dusty May, perhaps his dedication to his alma mater reaches a new height this time around.

They certainly have the players, with returning guards Caleb Foster (8.3 ppg, 2.8 apg) and Cayden Boozer (7.7 ppg, 3 apg) leading the backcourt. Four (!) five-star prospects decorate Duke's recruiting class, with Cameron Williams and Joaquim Boumtje Boumtje expected to make the most impact. Patrick Ngongba III (10.1 ppg, 5.8

rpg, 1.1 bpg) is also on many draft boards in the lottery zip code for 2027, and his poise down low will help Duke retain their strong defensive identity from last year.

They may not be as experienced as Florida, but this Duke team pressed all of the right buttons in the offseason. It is hard to erase the endings of the last three seasons, but all it takes is one good ending for Jon Scheyer to bring the Blue Devils back to the top of the mountain again.

3. Illinois Fighting Illini *Big Ten/Coach: Brad Underwood*

Last season: 28-9 (15-5); lost in Final Four vs. (2) Connecticut

It is difficult to understand just how much Illinois struck gold last year with Keaton Wagler, the non-top 100 freshman recruit who turned into the focal point of their offense and is now a focal point of the Los Angeles Clippers rebuild. Their offensive efficiency was staggering, finishing second in America behind Purdue, and they were a few bounces away from making their Final Four loss a lot closer of a contest late.

This season, Illinois retained the Ivisic brothers down low, as well as surefire sophomore jump candidate David Mirkovic. Mirkovic (13.3 ppg, 8 rpg) will be recovering in the early season from surgery on a fractured left foot, and although no firm timeline has been set, it seems he will be as big of a landmark of this rotation as expected. Andrej Stojakovic (13.5 ppg, 4.5 rpg) was the Illini's second leading scorer, and he comes back as well.

Stefan Vaaks (15.8 ppg, 3.2 apg, 35% 3PT) leads the transfer class as the big get from Providence, while four-star recruit Quentin Coleman headlines the freshman class. Last season's Illinois squad was talented enough to win it all, and they had the chance to. This season's team has another year under their belt, along with some talented newcomers to keep things fresh.

The Big Ten will be just as loaded as it was last year, but with this kind of roster loaded up, expect Illinois to be sitting atop the league when March rolls around.

4. Connecticut Huskies *Big East/Coach: Dan Hurley*

Last season: 34-6 (17-3); lost in National Championship vs. (1) Michigan

For the first time since 2022, the Connecticut Huskies will suit up without Alex Karaban on the roster. The four-year captain and two time national champion departed

Storrs for the NBA, along with their big time big man Tarris Reed Jr. Only two players remain from either of UConn's back-to-back title teams, signaling a changing of the guard for Hurley's squad this season.

Silas Demary Jr. (10.1 ppg, 5.9 apg, 1.6 steals per game) is expected to be an All-American caliber point guard this season, and he returns with Braylon Mullins (12 ppg, 1.4 apg, 33.5% 3PT) to form one of America's most promising backcourts. Jayden Ross (4.6 ppg, 2.5 rpg) should be in the starting five as well, as he expects to make the jump from off the bench sparkplug to senior on-court leader.

In the portal, Dan Hurley did not have to go far to try and replace Tarris Reed Jr. Najai Hines (6.5 ppg, 5.5 rpg, 2.2 bpg) comes in from Seton Hall to bolster the Husky frontcourt. Among some other additions are former Duke forward Nik Khamenia and Oskar Giltay, previously at Stanford. Junior County and Colben Landrew, two four-star recruits, will be the freshmen most likely to make an impact.

All of this comes without Solo Ball, who is expected to redshirt following wrist surgery this past spring. UConn came up six points short of their third national title in four years last April, and the expectations are high for them to reach a fourth Final Four in five years. Husky fans are spoiled in the trophy room, but they are coming off the program's first ever national title game loss (they were previously 6-0 in such games). There is no doubt that Dan Hurley is looking to make amends.

5. Michigan State Spartans *Big Ten/Coach: Tom Izzo*

Last season: 27-8 (15-5); lost in Sweet Sixteen vs. (2) Connecticut

The key word in East Lansing: retention. The Spartans return five main pieces from last season's team that reached the second weekend of the NCAA tournament. The main piece is perhaps America's best point guard, Jeremy Fears Jr.. Fears (15.2 ppg, 9.4 apg, 1.3 steals per game) enters this year as a shoe-in All-American. Fears' relentless assist numbers and playmaking will help Sparty's backcourt develop into one of the country's best.

Coen Carr (12 ppg, 5.4 rpg) is the best dunker in all of college basketball, and Kur Teng (7.3 ppg, 38.1% 3PT) will be one of the most prolific three point artists in the Big Ten. With Jaxon Kohler now at BYU and Carson Cooper graduated, the frontcourt will be the most vulnerable to Tom Izzo's team. Four-star center Ethan Taylor hopes to be among the team's most valuable additions, with Anton Bonke (previously at Charlotte) headlining the transfer class.

The Spartans will continue to operate under Tom Izzo's identity for a whopping 32nd season straight: defense, tenacity, and hard work. Michigan State finished two out of the last three seasons in top ten of defensive efficiency, and with the core from last year coming back, they should expect the same success defending their own basket. In a transfer-portal driven world, Michigan State's retention rate bodes well for their success towards the upper echelon of the sport in 2027.

6. Arizona Wildcats *Big 12/Coach: Tommy Lloyd*

Last season: 36-3 (16-2); lost in Final Four vs. (1) Michigan

The greatest season of Arizona basketball since their 1997 title winning campaign ended somewhat unceremoniously: an 18-point thrashing at the hands of Michigan in the Final Four. With star freshmen Brayden Burries and Koa Peat now in the NBA, Tommy Lloyd was able to do a great job in the offseason by reloading a very strong team.

Motiejus Krivas (10.4 ppg, 8.2 rpg, 1.9 bpg) is an SM Sports Preseason First Team All-American, and will be a frontrunner for America's best defensive player. His defensive presence down low will be matched on the perimeter by Ivan Kharchenkov (10.4 ppg, 4.3 rpg, 1.4 steals per game).

Arizona's recruiting class is one of the nation's strongest, with five-star Caleb Holt the most notable freshman addition. Derek Dixon (6.5 ppg at North Carolina) and JJ Mandaquit (5.2 ppg at Washington) make up the top end of the transfer class.

Last year's Arizona squad was an anomaly: a national powerhouse that outright avoided the three-point game. They enter the season ranked tenth in offensive efficiency, after finishing last season ranked fifth. Regardless of Tommy Lloyd's play style it will be hard to argue its effectiveness. Arizona will be among the Big 12's strongest teams again, which means they will also be among the strongest teams in America.

7. Louisville Cardinals *ACC/Coach: Pat Kelsey*

Last season: 24-11 (11-7); lost in Second Round vs. (3) Michigan State

The money has been flowing in the bluegrass state, and Pat Kelsey has been doing a lot of the bidding. After two seasons of bringing life back to one of America's most beloved basketball programs, Louisville is going all in for the 2026-2027 season.

Flory Bidunga (13.3 ppg, 9 rpg, 2.6 bpg) is the Cardinals' biggest acquisition. The big man spent his previous two seasons at Kansas, but he will take his strong defensive presence to Louisville to anchor their frontcourt. After losing Ryan Conwell and lottery pick Mikel Brown Jr., their backcourt also received some renovation. Oregon's Jackson Shelstad (15.6 ppg, 4.9 apg) and North Carolina's Seth Trimble (14 ppg, 3.8 rpg) will lead Louisville's charge with the ball in their hands. Five-star prospect Obinna Ekezie Jr. also enters the fold as a leading freshman.

Alvaro Fulgeiras, formerly at Iowa, will lengthen Louisville's perimeter and give them more depth, as well. Adrian Wooley (8.7 ppg, 3.9 rpg) looks to play a more dynamic role as the most prominent returning player.

The Cards have stacked up in anticipation of a more competitive ACC. In year three of the Pat Kelsey experience, Louisville should be making the jump back into the national picture at the highest level.

8. Texas Longhorns *SEC/Coach: Sean Miller*

Last season: 21-15 (9-9); lost in Sweet Sixteen vs. (2) Purdue

In year two in charge of the Longhorns program, Sean Miller had quite a sparkling offseason. After bowing out in the Sweet Sixteen against Purdue, Miller went to work on the recruiting front. The most intriguing player is former TCU forward David Punch, a double digit scorer with athleticism. Amari Evans also comes in from Tennessee, with five-star prospect Marcus Spears Jr. reclassifying and joining Texas a year ahead of schedule.

Matas Vokietaitis (15.6 ppg, 7.1 rpg) returns as the centerpiece of the Longhorn frontcourt. The seven foot Lithuanian center will maintain a strong defensive presence and a foothold for a defense that ranked outside of the top 80 in efficiency last season.

On the offensive end, however, last year's Texas team finished 13th in efficiency, led by 15th overall draft pick Dailyn Swain. Vokietaitis was the team's second leading scorer, and with the addition of Colorado's Isaiah Johnson (16.9 ppg, 3 apg, 37.8% 3PT), there are plenty of scoring options for this year's squad. If Sean Miller's recruiting success tells us anything this year, it should tell us that Texas will be one of America's most dynamic teams to watch.

9. Virginia Cavaliers ACC/Coach: Ryan Odom*Last season: 30-6 (15-3); lost in Second Round vs. (6) Tennessee*

Ryan Odom's first season at the helm in Charlottesville was a massive success: 30 wins, a second-place ACC finish, and a top three seed in the NCAA tournament. Despite the lack of hardware, Odom was among America's best hires in the prior coaching cycle.

For year two, the expectations will match the output of last season. Virginia returns a ton of talent, the most notable being Thijs de Ridder (15.6 ppg, 6.2 rpg, 50.8% FG). De Ridder, voted as the conference's preseason Player of the Year, is expected to make a huge jump in his sophomore year. Chance Mallory (9.3 ppg, 3.4 apg, 1.6 steals per game) and Sam Lewis (10.6 ppg, 3.6 rpg, 40.3% 3PT) will complement De Ridder, with Lewis being one of the team's most capable three-point shooters.

Jurian Dixon (15.9 ppg at UC Irvine) and Kalu Anya (15.9 ppg at Saint Louis) decorate Odom's transfer class as two high level scorers from two of the most prominent mid-majors of recent years in America. The Cavaliers were staunch defensively last season (9th in efficiency), but they look to make more of a leap offensively with some new weapons. There is a firm top tier in the ACC, and Virginia has a case to be just as close to the peak as any Duke or Louisville team this season.

10. Arkansas Razorbacks SEC/Coach: John Calipari*Last season: 28-9 (13-5); lost in Sweet Sixteen vs. (1) Arizona*

John Calipari didn't necessarily need any more pedigree when it comes to one-and-done freshmen, but Darius Acuff Jr.'s rise to one of America's top prospects helped continue that trend last season. All Calipari has done this season is recruit a few more high level freshmen to keep the train moving.

Five-star freshman Jordan Smith Jr. is the pick of the litter. Smith Jr., the point guard from Virginia, is a scoring threat with his speed and physicality, as well as a strong defensive prospect with a long wingspan. Smith Jr. is a surefire lottery pick in the 2027 NBA Draft, but he isn't alone in the Arkansas class.

JJ Andrews and Miikka Muurinen (five-star), as well as Davion Thompson and Abdou Toure (four-star) fill out the rest of the class. Billy Richmond III (11.2 ppg, 4.3 rpg) is the most notable returnee for Calipari, while Cooper Bowser (13.8 ppg at Furman) will make a difference in the transfer class.

Ever since John Calipari came into the fold, Arkansas has been all about athleticism. Big, long wings and huge, powerful athletes have come and gone in the past two years, but this may be one of the most talented groups. It is another Calipari team that is loaded with talented freshmen and a lot of preseason hype. Nobody is surprised

11. Gonzaga Bulldogs *Pac-12/Coach: Mark Few*

Last season: 31-4 (16-2); lost in Second Round vs. (11) Texas

It must be getting old for Mark Few: last year marked 27 straight NCAA tournament appearances. A lot of trophies and accolades have come in during that span, including conference titles, All-Americans, and Final Four appearances. Twice, they have even made the national title game.

It is that elusive sixth win in March that Gonzaga has yet to attain. This season, the Bulldogs are back again, eternally in the national picture. Braden Huff (17.8 ppg, 5.6 rpg) is the team's highest scoring returnee, with Davis Fogle (8.6 ppg) also expected to play a role. The Zags' offseason initially took a hit when point guard Mario Saint-Supery left school to play professionally in Spain, but they wasted no time in replacing him. Xaivian Lee (11.6 ppg at Florida) earned eligibility for another year after and finds himself leading Gonzaga's offense. Isaiah Harwell (3.6 ppg at Houston) and Massamba Diop (13.6 ppg, 2.1 bpg at Arizona State) fill out what is a solid transfer class.

Of course, this all happens in the new Pac-12 Conference. It isn't quite the old one, but Boise State, San Diego State, and Utah State will all pose threats to the Zags in conference play. Make no mistake, though: Gonzaga will still be the conference favorite for yet another college hoops season.

12. Tennessee Volunteers *SEC/Coach: Rick Barnes*

Last season: 25-12 (11-7); lost in Elite Eight vs. (1) Michigan

Two seasons ago, Tennessee was one of the powerhouses of the most historically loaded conference in modern college basketball history. Last season, in somewhat of a regression year, the Vols still reached the Elite Eight. It looks like Rick Barnes, for the third straight year, will have things humming in Knoxville.

Dewayne Brown II (4.8 ppg, 3.6 rpg) is the most notable returning player for Tennessee, after Jakobi Gillespie, Nate Ament, and JP Estrella left the program. However, Rick Barnes was able to land former Wake Forest standout Juke Harris. Harris

(21.4 ppg, 6.5 rpg, 1.9 apg) spent two seasons in Winston-Salem and was one of America's premier scoring guards. He will give Tennessee a huge backcourt threat, while Jalen Haralson (16.2 ppg, 2.6 apg at Notre Dame) will complement him in the backcourt. Jalen Washington (8.9 apg, 5.6 rpg, 1.2 bpg at Washington) will help improve the frontcourt after losing JP Estrella to the transfer portal.

Rick Barnes has built a consistent program for himself, but that coveted Final Four still eludes the Volunteers. This season should give Barnes as good a chance as any to get Tennessee over the hump.

13. St. John's Red Storm *Big East/Coach: Rick Pitino*

Last season: 30-7 (18-2); lost in Sweet Sixteen vs. (1) Duke

In three seasons at St. John's, Rick Pitino has transformed the program from the doldrums of mediocrity to a national contender. In year one, they were one of the first teams to miss the cut line of the NCAA tournament. In year two, they earned a two seed and won the Big East for the first time since 2000. They repeated that feat in year three, making it to the second weekend of the Big Dance.

In year four, Pitino has built another strong roster to take the next step. Tounde Yessoufou (17.8 ppg, 5.9 rpg, 2 steals per game at Baylor), the powerful guard, turned down NBA prospects to join the Red Storm. He will be the centerpiece of the offense, who lost vital pieces (Zuby Ejiofor, Dillon Mitchell) to the NBA. Keyshawn Hall (19.3 ppg, 7.1 rpg at Auburn) and international prospect Quinn Ellis help fill out a strong transfer class.

Ian Jackson (9.4 rpg, 1.3 apg) and Ruben Prey (4.3 ppg, 2.1 rpg) look to make jumps as the most prominent returning players in the locker room. The Johnnies have been built on hard-nosed defense under Pitino, and in a year of substantial roster turnover, St. John's will look to mold its identity by conference play. In a Big East conference expected to be deeper than the last few years, they will look to defend their crown and win a third consecutive conference title. Their stature in their own league has been solidified, at least for now. For St. John's, the Final Four is the real prize.

14. Houston Cougars *Big 12/Coach: Kelvin Sampson**Last season: 30-7 (14-4); lost in Sweet Sixteen vs. (3) Illinois*

Of all the teams in the last decade plus to never win the national title, Houston is likely the most prolific. They are consistently in the national picture, with a ruthless defensive identity and a high-level coach who demands work ethic. Kelvin Sampson is back for another year, which means Houston is back in the 25 Hard.

Joseph Tugler (8.4 ppg, 5.3 rpg, 1.5 bpg), for his defensive presence alone, should be one of the most impactful returning players in America. Mercy Miller and Chase McCarty also return for the Cougars, giving them a good retention core. Chendall Weaver (5.8 ppg at Texas) looks to make an impact as a senior transfer. Dedan Thomas Jr. (15.3 ppg) comes over from LSU as a high impact guard.

Last year, it was Kingston Flemings who led the Cougars' freshmen class. This season, it will be a trio of four-star prospects: Arafan Diane, Ikenna Alozie, and Tyus Thomas. It will be hard to replicate the effect of Flemings on Houston's gameplay, but Kelvin Sampson has a more than capable recruiting class to develop as the season rolls on. In another Big 12 campaign with more than five teams in line to compete for the crown, Houston has once again proven they are up to the task.

15. Michigan Wolverines *Big Ten/Coach: Mike Boynton**Last season: 37-3 (19-1); won National Championship vs. (2) Connecticut*

The last time Michigan won was a big win indeed: a national title victory for the program's second ever championship. However, they lost soon after: Dusty May fled Ann Arbor after just two seasons for the Dallas Mavericks. May's former assistant, Mike Boynton, now takes the reins for a title defense campaign.

With a trio of lottery picks now gone (Aday Mara, Morez Johnson Jr., Yaxel Lendeborg), two major returnees will lead Michigan. Last year's Final Four MOP Elliot Cadeau (10.5 ppg, 5.9 apg) will lead the backcourt again. Perhaps Michigan's most important player is the young man who hit the shot to seal last year's title, Trey McKenney. McKenney (9.9 ppg, 2.8 rpg) had a big role off the bench as a freshman, and his silky smooth jumper and fluid movement should take a huge leap for his sophomore campaign (in the eyes of SM Sports, a leap into the Second Team All-America).

Despite an injury hit to five-star freshman Brandon McCoy Jr. (ACL- out for season), the Wolverines still have plenty of ammo to reload this year. JP Estrella (10 ppg,

5.4 rpg at Tennessee) will partner in the frontcourt with Moustapha Thiam (12.8 ppg, 1.6 bpg at Cincinnati). The courts also earned Michigan a late victory, with Roddy Gayle Jr. (7.3 ppg, 3.3 rpg) being granted another year in the maize and blue.

When Dusty May abandoned ship, a lot of people may have sold their stock. One look at this roster should tell you that they aren't relinquishing their crown quietly.

16. USC Trojans *Big Ten/Coach: Eric Musselman*

Last season: 18-14 (7-13); missed NCAA tournament

It has been quite the offseason for Eric Musselman. A few spats, including one with his former player Chad Baker-Mazara and another with an unlucky California beachgoer, have decorated USC's narrative with some drama. However, when you break it down to just basketball, the Trojans look like a top tier contender in the Big Ten.

Alijah Arenas (14.1 ppg, 2.1 apg) and Jacob Cofie (9.9 ppg, 6.8 rpg) both return as complementary pieces, but Rodney Rice is the most prominent returning player for USC. Rice was the Trojans' leading scorer last year before a season-ending injury in Maui, and he has a chance to be one of the Big Ten's premier scoring guards. He should compete for all-Big Ten honors, in a very crowded backcourt field.

Transfer wise, Musselman brought in two substantial pieces. KJ Lewis (14.9 ppg, 5.1 rpg at Georgetown) comes in to bolster USC's backcourt even more. Former UConn center Eric Reibe (5.9 ppg, 3.3 rpg) will enter the season on the injury report after undergoing foot surgery this past summer. Whenever he does return, Reibe can provide some depth for that Trojan frontcourt.

With five-star freshman Christian Collins coming into the program as well, USC looks primed to be a national story on the hardwood. If players like Rice and Lewis can continue their strides, USC will add another layer to a deep Big Ten race.

17. Alabama Crimson Tide *SEC/Coach: Nate Oats*

Last season: 25-10 (13-5); lost in Sweet Sixteen vs. (1) Michigan

Approaching his seventh season, Nate Oats has done a phenomenal job building a football-dominant school into one of the SEC's most formidable programs. He has done it the same way: efficient, high powered offense with high-volume shooting.

This year, the formula is no different. Two primary scorers return to lead Bama's offense, with Aden Holloway (16.8 ppg, 3.8 apg, 43.8% 3PT) and Amari Allen (11.4 ppg,

6.9 rpg) back in the fold. Drew Fielder transfers in from Boise State to help solidify the frontcourt, while Brandon Garrison looks to improve on last year's production at Kentucky. Freshman Cole Cloer is the pick of Oats' young recruiting class.

Alabama has finished the last three seasons in the top five of offensive efficiency, as well as finishing towards the top of the nation in adjusted tempo. Alabama loves to run, they love to shoot, and they aren't shy in doing either of those things. Even with the defensive prowess of Tennessee, the anticipated jump of Texas, and Florida's emergence as runaway national favorites, Alabama should be very much in the running for an SEC title.

18. Kansas Jayhawks *Big 12/Coach: Bill Self*

Last season: 24-11 (12-6); lost in Second Round vs. (5) St. John's

The Jayhawks were a late addition to the preseason rankings, and it all comes down to some veteran presence returning (somewhat controversially) to college basketball.

Up until about two weeks ago, the outlook for Kansas was based around two star freshmen. Projected number one overall pick Tyran Stokes and five-star recruit Taylen Kinney were believed to be the centerpieces of the 2026-2027 roster for Bill Self.

However, those two youngsters will be getting some help from a few experienced returns. Tre White (13.5 ppg, 6.7 rpg) was the team's second leading scorer last year behind Darryn Peterson, and he is back in Lawrence for another go around. Melvin Council Jr. (12.7 ppg, 5 rpg, 5.1 apg), a beloved fan favorite, also earned more eligibility to return to Kansas.

The big story is Trey Kaufman-Renn. Kaufman-Renn (14.2 ppg, 8.3 rpg) spent the last five years at Purdue. After seemingly running out of eligibility, he inexplicably earned another year, and found himself in Lawrence. Regardless of how ridiculous it may seem, his presence propels the Jayhawks from unranked into the top 25.

Kohl Rosario is the other notable returnee, but it will be the combination of star freshmen and calm veteran presence that can help Kansas compete in the Big 12. A few weeks ago, it was unclear where they might fall in the ladder. A week out from tip off, Kansas looks to be in a familiar spot: near the top.

19. BYU Cougars *Big 12/Coach: Kevin Young**Last season: 23-12 (9-9); lost in First Round vs. (11) Texas*

The last two seasons in Provo have been some of the most exciting basketball BYU has played in more than a decade. Kevin Young's third season will follow up his second season led by number one pick AJ Dybantsa. With Dybantsa a fixture of the past, the Cougars will turn to one of America's best guards to make a jump and lead the team.

Robert Wright III (18.1 ppg, 4.6 apg, 41% 3PT) spent one year at Baylor before coming over to the Cougars' high-octane, NBA-adjacent offense. Khadim Mboup (2.2 ppg, 5.1 rpg) will get more burn in the frontcourt with Keba Keita no longer in the program.

Bruce Branch III is another five-star recruit coming to make a name in Provo. For transfers, Kevin Young was able to bring in Collin Chandler (9.7 ppg, 41% 3PT at Kentucky) and Jaxon Kohler (12.5 ppg, 8.9 rpg at Michigan State). It will be hard to replace Dybantsa, who led the nation in scoring last year. However, with the solid progression of Robert Wright and the coaching philosophy of Kevin Young, BYU looks to be a mainstay in the Big 12 for the foreseeable future.

20. Kentucky Wildcats *SEC/Coach: Mark Pope**Last season: 22-14 (10-8); lost in Second Round vs. (2) Iowa State*

There is nothing quite like being under the microscope of the Big Blue nation. Ask Mark Pope, who has endured plenty of ups and downs in his first two seasons at the reins of his alma mater.

Pope's record (46-26) is a fine mark, but when Kentucky fans get restless, they get loud. Year three for Mark Pope should not be a hot seat year, but it just might be the most important year yet.

Kentucky lost a big piece of their offseason puzzle when Mark Mitchell's eligibility was denied, and he was forced to return to Missouri. With Mitchell out of the picture, they could still lean on Milan Momcilovic, the sharp shooting Iowa State transfer who commanded plenty of offseason buzz. Momcilovic (16.9 ppg, 3.1 rpg, 48.7% 3PT) will join Zoom Diallo (15.7 ppg, 4.5 ppg at Washington) and Alex Wilkins (17.8 ppg, 4.7 apg at Furman) in a very formidable transfer class. Four-star prospect Mason Williams is the prize of Pope's freshman recruiting class.

Kentucky is one of a kind program with one of a kind expectations. Mark Pope has built plenty of goodwill, from being a national champion player to taking over coaching duties. Nothing will make him a more beloved figure than bringing Kentucky back the promised land.

21. Iowa State Cyclones *Big 12/Coach: TJ Otzelberger*

Last season: 29-8 (12-6); lost in Sweet Sixteen vs. (6) Tennessee

Iowa State built up lots of momentum heading into last season's NCAA tournament. They earned a two seed in a tough Big 12, but an injury to standout forward Joshua Jefferson really hampered their chances of moving forward.

With Jefferson gone and Milan Momcilovic off to Kentucky, the returns looked a little light for Iowa State. Tamin Lipsey (13.5 ppg, 5.1 apg) became another late benefactor of the NCAA court system carousel, earning another year of eligibility and returning to Ames for another season.

Lipsey's return will help counteract the shoulder injury to Kilyan Toure (8.6 ppg, 3.5 rpg), which will leave the backcourt a little light until conference play. Jamarion Batemon (6.6 ppg, 1.2 rpg) and Blake Buchanan (8.5 ppg, 5.7 rpg, 63.6% FG) also help fill out what ends up being a strong returning class.

The cyclones bring in a hodgepodge of transfers, leaving it up to the ever-reliable TJ Otzelberger to reel things in. He is one of the most trustworthy coaches in America, as the architect of one of America's most consistent programs. With a few returning key factors and other puzzle pieces to put together, Iowa State will have a high ceiling again in 2027.

22. Missouri Tigers *SEC/Coach: Dennis Gates*

Last season: 20-13 (10-8); lost in First Round vs. (7) Miami (FL)

Out of the many decisions made in courts this summer, one of the most important ones was the one that kept Mark Mitchell away from Kentucky. Mitchell (13.2 ppg, 5.1 rpg, 38.8% 3PT) returns to Missouri as one of America's most talented players. He is not alone in Columbia, either. Trent Pierce (10.4 ppg, 3.8 rpg) returns for Dennis Gates' Tigers.

Missouri has quietly had one of the best recruiting summers in America, as well. Bryson Tiller (7.9 ppg, 6.1 rpg at Kansas) and Jamier Jones (11.9 ppg, 4.5 rpg, 38.7% 3PT)

headline the transfer class. As far as freshmen go, Dennis Gates was able to bring in three studs: Jason Crowe Jr. (five-star), Toni Bryant (five-star) and Aidan Chronister (four-star).

Mizzou has made the Big Dance three out of the four seasons Gates has been at the helm, but he has never reached the second weekend. With a few high profile recruits, a strong transfer class, and a marquee player leading the charge, this season will be the best chance Missouri has had in a long time to break through to the Sweet Sixteen.

23. Miami (FL) Hurricanes ACC/Coach: Jai Lucas

Last season: 26-9 (13-5); lost in Second Round vs. (2) Purdue

In the name of retention, Miami has plenty at stake. Jai Lucas had a tremendous first season in Coral Gables: 26 wins, a third place finish in the ACC, and an NCAA tournament win. For his second year, he brings back a solid core.

Malik Reneau (18.9 ppg, 6.5 rpg, 2.1 apg) returns as the team's leading scorer, and he projects to again be one of the better players in the ACC. He is joined by Shelton Henderson (13.8 ppg, 4.9 rpg), as well as Dante Allen and Marcus Allen, who look to make production jumps this season.

Acaden Lewis (12.2 ppg, 5.3 apg at Villanova) joins Somto Cyril (9.3 ppg, 5.4 rpg at Georgia) highlight a very strong transfer class for the Hurricanes. Lewis had a tremendous freshman season at Villanova, and Cyril blocked over two shots a game in the SEC. Their talent, combined with the strong returning core, should keep Miami in the mix for an ACC title.

Even with Duke, Louisville, and Virginia taking the headlines in conference, Miami is on a very promising trajectory in year two of Jai Lucas.

24. Texas Tech Red Raiders Big 12/Coach: Grant McCasland

Last season: 23-11 (12-6); lost in Second Round vs. (4) Alabama

It is incredibly difficult to evaluate how Texas Tech's season may pan out due to one detail: the health of JT Toppin.

Toppin (21.8 ppg, 10.8 rpg) has spent the last two seasons as the most consistently great player in the Big 12. His season last year was cut short with an ACL injury, and the plan is for him to return in the zip code of Big 12 conference play this year. While that

timeline does leave him off of the SM Sports Preseason All-American teams, it does not mean that Texas Tech cannot be a nationally ranked team. However, it does throw in some uncertainty.

Aside from Toppin, Grant McCasland does have other players who can deputize in his absence and alongside him when he returns. Donovan Atwell (13.5 ppg, 3.2 rpg, 1.2 steals per game) and Josiah Moseley (5.5 ppg, 3.6 rpg) will provide some valuable retention to this year's roster. Darrion Williams, after last season at NC State, returns to Lubbock for a fifth year of eligibility.

Cruz Davis (20.1 ppg, 4.7 apg at Hofstra) and Dra Gibbs-Lawhorn (20.7 ppg, 2.5 apg at UNLV) both bring in some portal depth for the Red Raider backcourt. Despite the injury recovery for Toppin, Texas Tech should be able to hold their own until Big 12 play begins. When Toppin finally does return, there is no reason that Texas Tech can't continue their top 25 form of the last few seasons.

25. Vanderbilt Commodores *SEC/Coach: Mark Byington*

Last season: 27-9 (11-7); lost in Second Round vs. (4) Nebraska

As the buzzer sounded at double zeroes in the NCAA tournament, Tyler Tanner's halfcourt heave was in the hoop. Vanderbilt was moving on to the Sweet Sixteen.

And then, the ball came out. The most remarkable halfcourt miss since Gordon Hayward ensured Vanderbilt's season ended at the hands of Nebraska in the Second Round of last season's NCAA tournament.

The good news is, Tyler Tanner has returned to Nashville. Tanner (19.5 ppg, 5.1 apg) turned down heavy NBA interest to return to college. He will be among the country's best players and is an SM Sports Preseason First Team All-American.

Chandler Bing (3.6 ppg) is one of the only other notable returnees for Vandy in The One With All of the Transfers. Berke Buyuktuncel (6.5 ppg, 5.6 rpg) switched sides from that Second Round game, transferring in from Nebraska. Barrett (8.6 ppg, 3 apg, 2.7 rpg) enters the program after spending the past two seasons at Missouri.

Out of all Mark Byington's freshman recruits, five-star guard Gabe Nesmith looks to make the most impact. Ethan Mgbako and Anthony Brown Jr., both four-stars, also look to make an early impact for the Commodores.

Led by one of America's best guards and best up-and-coming coaches, it may take a while for this roster to gel. They will have their work cut out for them in the SEC, but look for Vanderbilt to be a contender when March rolls around.