

2026 Sweet Sixteen Preview

Previewing and picking every game in the 2026 Sweet Sixteen

Written by Sean Murawski // SM Sports

Thursday, March 26th, 2026

As the second weekend of the 2026 NCAA tournament begins its second weekend, the field has been whittled down from 68 teams to just 16. Some of them have been dominant all season (Michigan, Arizona); some of them took a little longer to find their stride (St. John's); and others have gotten hot just when they needed to (Texas). The matchups are delectable, and the most fun part about the round will be watching all of the games.

The second most fun thing about it? Shamelessly predicting the results.

(11) Texas (21-14) vs. (2) Purdue (29-8)

West Regional Semifinal

The Boilermakers were a bit up and down all year after coming in as the SM Sports preseason #1 team in America. Texas sat just outside those rankings, and never really infiltrated them throughout the whole year. The key for this game will be down low. Oscar Cluff and Trey Kaufman-Renn have absolutely bossed the paint for Purdue. Texas' Matas Vokietaitas will be the main challenger for the two Purdue big men. If Vokietaitas can disrupt play down there, perhaps Texas can be a little more competitive.

The real key outside the paint will be Braden Smith. The NCAA's new all-time assist king shot 25% from the field in their second round win over Miami (FL), but now we are in nut cutting time. He is the leader of the team and will need to do it for them on the offensive end. Purdue has shown to be susceptible at times, but it appears they may have found their groove just at the right time. They beat Michigan in the Big Ten title game and haven't looked back since. I think it will be a close game, but the Boilermakers move on. **(2) Purdue wins.**

(9) Iowa (23-12) vs. (4) Nebraska***South Regional Semifinal***

I have recently discovered just how deep the hatred between these two teams truly runs. The "Battle of the Corn" will be based around Nebraska's willingness to shoot threes and Iowa's pesky, active hands defense. Conversely, Nebraska has a stingy defense as well (6th in efficiency), and Iowa's offense can tend to run through Bennett Stirtz exclusively.

Ben McCollum is in his first Sweet Sixteen ever, and so is Fred Hoiberg. Iowa hasn't been since 1987— Nebraska has never been. The Huskers and Hawkeyes will be trading blows all night. Nebraska may have more weapons in total, but in these later rounds, games can become a lot closer when the best players on the court play to their potential. Bennett Stirtz is the best player on the court tonight. **(9) Iowa wins.**

(4) Arkansas (28-8) vs. (1) Arizona (34-2)***West Regional Semifinal***

Arkansas may have the most talented player left in the field, but Arizona has the best team as a whole. It says something that Arizona is somehow still wonderful while not earning an All-American nod at all (SM Sports releases our teams next week, so that could change). Perhaps the whole is better than the sum of its parts.

Arizona got a bit of a push from Utah State in the second round, but Brayden Burries and Jaden Bradley composed themselves in the backcourt to push them to a win. Arkansas was able to take down. The Razorbacks offense runs solely through Acuff Jr., but I am particularly intrigued on how they will handle Motiejus Krivas and Koa Peat down low.

I think Arizona's team as a whole will overpower the star allure of Acuff Jr. and co. It should be competitive enough, but the Wildcats will pull away when the game gets late. **(1) Arizona wins.**

(3) Illinois (26-8) vs. (2) Houston (30-6)***South Regional Semifinal***

This is an absolutely fantastic matchup in the late slot. Illinois' magical offense against Houston's hard nosed defense. Keaton Wagler will be key for Illinois, and Kingston Flemings likewise for Houston. It will be a major battle of the freshmen.

Houston's frontcourt is not necessarily as dominant as years' past, but they still crash the glass and have the 4th ranked defense in America. Illinois has the second best offense in America, so something here has to give.

Houston was my champion pick before the tournament began, and I correctly anticipated this matchup. I think defense beats offense in this case. Perhaps it will be the most entertaining game of the entire second weekend, but the Cougars march on.

(2) Houston wins.

(5) St. John's (30-6) vs. (1) Duke (34-2)

East Regional Semifinal

St. John's has truly looked like one of the country's best teams over the last month. They come into this matchup with a chip on their shoulder, seeded fifth which is likely too low. Dylan Darling's buzzer beater took down Kansas, bringing them to a titanic matchup against the number one overall seed.

Duke has admittedly not looked their best this tournament. Cameron Boozer will have quite the matchup down low against Zuby Ejiofor. Both are ball dominant big men; Boozer is powerful while smooth, Ejiofor is powerful while explosive. Pitino vs. Scheyer. Devils vs. Johnnies. Darling vs. Cayden Boozer.

There are plenty of matchups to look out for, but this game will come down to defense. Duke ranks 1st defensively and St. John's ranks 8th defensively. Duke has the shooting edge, but there aren't many hotter teams in America than St. John's.

I took Duke over St. John's in the original bracket, and although it's scary, I am reluctantly sticking to my guns. **(1) Duke wins.**

(4) Alabama (25-9) vs. (1) Michigan (33-3)

Midwest Regional Semifinal

The Tide ran away from a battered Texas Tech team in the second round, giving them a date with one of America's all-around scariest teams. Michigan can beat you in almost any way, while Alabama generally has a single way to get down on you.

Bama plays fast (4th in adjusted tempo) and shoots plenty of threes. If they make 8-10 threes, things could get interesting. Michigan does not shoot the three ball particularly well, so if Bama gets hot, there might just be a math problem for the Wolverines.

On the flip side, can Alabama really defend the frontcourt of Aday Mara/Yaxel Lendeborg/Morez Johnson Jr.? They don't have many players that can even jump and touch the top of Aday Mara's head, so Michigan may dominate down low.

In my heart, I know that this upset would be the one to completely turn the bracket upside down. My head knows that it's Michigan's game. **(1) Michigan wins.**

(3) Michigan State (27-7) vs. (2) Connecticut (31-5)

East Regional Semifinal

The other half of the absolutely loaded East regional semifinals contains Dan Hurley vs. Tom Izzo. It will be a battle of grit. Both teams have a top 15 defense in America, and both teams are looking to cement their historical coaches' legacies. Jeremy Fears Jr. has been one of America's best point guards, and Alex Karaban has been on fire to start the tournament. Both teams' leaders have shown up.

The real question will be UConn's shooting. Solo Ball and Braylon Mullins have been slumping somewhat recently, especially from beyond the arc. Michigan State crashes the glass hard and works relentlessly on defense. If UConn goes cold, which they have been prone to do, they might have their water shut off completely by the Spartans.

I am just not as confident as I'd like to be in this UConn team getting hot when they really need it. It will be a great game, but Sparty takes it. **(3) Michigan State wins.**

(6) Tennessee (24-11) vs. (2) Iowa State (29-7)

Midwest Regional Semifinal

To be honest, I am shocked Tennessee has made it this far. I didn't really think they had it in them. Ja'Kobi Gillespie has been stellar, but Nate Ament has left a lot to be desired as one of the top freshman prospects in this year's draft class.

Iowa State's defense has been relentless, and if Tamin Lipsey keeps playing like this, I feel like this could be the biggest lopsided result of the Sweet Sixteen. The Cyclones have defense, poise, and the best three point shooter in the country. I don't see Tennessee keeping it close unless they go nuclear. **(2) Iowa State wins.**