

# UConn: 3 Storylines to Watch

*Written by Sean Murawski // SM Sports*

For the second year running, there will be a target on the backs of Connecticut. As reigning national champions, the Big East and the rest of the country will be aiming to take the Huskies' national crown. Coach Dan Hurley— not one to back down, let's say— firmly believes they are and should be the best team in the country. Whether or not you believe that is true, they have earned the benefit of the doubt and thensome.

For the upcoming 2024-2025 season, UConn has lost several pieces to the NBA. They have gained some talented freshmen, and have also dipped into the transfer portal. Considering all of this, there are definitely some major storylines to watch for the defending national champions as a new season approaches.

## **The Guard Play of Hassan Diarra**

Coming into last season, it was not necessarily a shoe-in that Tristen Newton would become the player he ended up becoming by March. During their 2023 title run, a lot of the discourse around UConn questioned their point guard; as in, do they even *have* a true point guard? Last season, Newton put that to rest.

In his final year campaign that ended in winning the Bob Cousy Award for the nation's best point guard, Newton nabbed 15.1 points per game (led team), as well as 6.2 points per game (led team). He played 33.2 minutes per game (led team), and was second in rebounds per game behind only Donovan Clingan. He also shot 31.1% from three-point land.

Replacing this production is tough, but UConn has options. Hassan Diarra feels to be the most likely fit. Diarra has mostly been an off-the-bench piece in his time at UConn. He featured prominently last year, when he won the Big East Sixth Man of the Year award. Diarra was one of the team's most touted on-ball defenders, and when he was on the floor, he shot 48.3% from the field and could hit the open three. He scored 6.1 ppg in 19.4 minutes on average.

Diarra's style is certainly different from Newton. Newton was the team's most lethal on-the-ball scorer. When the shot clock was under ten, Dan Hurley could get the ball in Newton's hands and trusted he would get his own basket. He did it time and time again in big moments. He did it against Kansas in December, when he scored a

career-high 31 points, and he also did it over Zach Edey in the title game. Diarra has not necessarily shown that this is his game, at least not yet. He can certainly dribble and drive, and UConn's off-the-ball movement allowed Diarra to find space last year from time to time. However, in a smaller sample size, it is difficult to predict if Diarra fits the Newton role entirely.

Expressing doubt in Diarra's abilities is *not* the message here; the kid can play, and his upper-classmen leadership will be a focal point of this year's squad. The question is really this: will he attempt to fill in for Tristen Newton, or will he create a new identity for himself altogether? The jump is possible, and there is no reason to believe he *can't* fill in productively. However, the reality is, Tristen Newton is a major missing piece, and the jury is still out on how UConn attacks that hole in the lineup.

### **The Man (or Men) in the Middle**

For the last two years, UConn has been relatively spoiled in the paint. Their 2023 title run ended in big man Adama Sanogo winning the Final Four's Most Outstanding Player honors. Last season, it was Donovan Clingan manning the 5. He split time with Sanogo his freshman season, but he took on the main role in 2024. Clingan (13.3 ppg, 7.4 rpg, 2.5 bpg) was a centerpiece of UConn's defense, and he will be missed for sure.

Clingan's backup last year was Samson Johnson (5.4 ppg, 2.8 rpg, 0.9 bpg). Johnson was less of an overbearing defensive stalwart, and he is not necessarily the NBA prospect that Clingan was from the moment he stepped on campus. Johnson, however, is lanky, athletic, and versatile. While his post move and paint play isn't necessarily as polished, he is still a shot-blocking six-foot-ten presence who can disrupt offenses. He also played 16 minutes per game, including seven spot starts.

Tarris Reed Jr. (9 ppg, 7.4 rpg, 1.4 bpg) also enters the fold after transferring from Michigan. While not necessarily a standout star, Reed Jr. looks for a fresh start under Hurley's offense. It is unclear how the big men will split their time, but the split formula has worked for UConn the past two seasons. Perhaps Reed can be to Johnson as Johnson was to Clingan: a different body, something fresh on the floor for half the game, and a big presence to give offenses something they have to maneuver around. Whatever the case, UConn will have to navigate their big man platoon carefully, as foul trouble came into play between Clingan and Johnson quite a lot last season. They look to solidify their paint presence and disrupt drivers and shooters as best they can this season.

### **The Sophomore Surge**

Two talented sophomores on UConn should make big jumps this year. Solo Ball, the athletic southpaw, is poised for a breakout. Ball's breakout performance last season was a 13 point mark against North Carolina at MSG in December. In the absence of Stephon Castle, Ball started 10 games. His 3.3 ppg/1 rpg/11.5 minutes per game line is sure to spike this season as he takes a more prominent role. The question will revolve around how Ball splits his role with fellow guards Diarra and Saint Mary's transfer Aidan Mahaney (13.9 ppg, 2.6 apg, 35.5% 3PT).

Jaylin Stewart, UConn's sophomore forward, should also be a more integral piece this season. Stewart appeared in 37 games last season, including standout performances off the bench against St. John's and Marquette in the Big East tournament. Stewart, at six-foot-seven, is a lengthy and athletic presence who can shoot the three. Stewart and Alex Karaban make up a good tandem of UConn forwards who can play a prominent frontcourt role during the team's "small ball" spells they became accustomed to last year. When their bigs got in foul trouble, Stewart and Karaban became versatile options for the UConn backcourt to work in tandem with.

This season, expect Ball and Stewart to increase their roles and be more of a presence over 40 minutes. With lots of roster turnover and high expectations, big sophomore surges can give UConn a boost to fill out their roster.

*Uconn's First Game: vs. Sacred Heart, November 9th at 7 p.m., Storrs, CT*

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