

BASKETBALL PREVIEW 2024-25

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JEFFERY A. SALTER

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The



SEEKER

As a Rookie,
VICTOR WEMBANYAMA
Took Over the NBA

His Learning Curve
—On the Court and in Life—
Has Barely Begun

by
CHRIS MANNIX



Why UConn Is the Center of the
College Hoops Universe

by
MICHAEL ROSENBERG



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GREEN LIGHT

Boston made it look easy last year, as Finals MVP Jaylen Brown led the C's past Dallas in five games. But there are new threats emerging out West.



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LINEUP

BASKETBALL PREVIEW



NBA



CBK

18 / VICTOR WEMBANYAMA At 20, the phenom is always looking to learn **BY CHRIS MANNIX**

28 / ADAM SILVER The commissioner is focusing on the fan experience **BY CHRIS MANNIX**

34 / TIP-INS Did the Lakers make the right call by hiring a coach with zero experience?

40 / SCOUTING REPORTS Opposing scouts size up the chances for all 30 teams

BUCKET LIST

Wembanyama has become a must-see talent, while senior Paige Bueckers is back for a final season to try to end UConn's title drought.

54 / UCONN A sleepy town is home to two hoops powerhouses **BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG**

64 / RUTGERS How the Scarlet Knights landed a pair of lottery talents **BY KEVIN SWEENEY**

70 / MEN'S SWEET 16 Alabama could have the bluebloods seeing Crimson **BY KEVIN SWEENEY**

72 / SOUTH CAROLINA A rowdy bunch forced Dawn Staley to adapt **BY EMMA BAGCELLIERI**

82 / WOMEN'S SWEET 16 The reigning champs are loaded **BY CLARE BRENNAN AND KRISTEN NELSON**

84 / TIP-INS The college game is taking on an increased international flavor

▶ DEPARTMENTS

SCORECARD P.4

FACES IN THE CROWD P.16

POINT AFTER P.88

FROM LEFT: STEPHEN MATUREN/GETTY IMAGES; TROY WAYRYNEN/IMAGN IMAGES



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ESSAY

Believe The Hype

CAITLIN CLARK ENTERED THE WNBA UNDER MASSIVE EXPECTATIONS. SOMEHOW, SHE EXCEEDED THEM

▶ BY EMMA BACCELLIERI
▶ PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERICK W. RASCO

START WITH a full-court pass. Start with something almost no one else could see. Start with her feet just past the logo, finding her way out of a trap, sinking a signature bucket. Start with her scrambling past a defender, catching and shooting from the corner, her body falling away in a shot that is miraculously good enough to make up for all of the mechanical rules it breaks.

Or realize that it does not particularly matter where you start. Therein lies the beauty of Caitlin Clark: All roads lead to potential highlights. (Each of the above examples, plus a few more, came from one late-season game, when Clark's Fever beat Atlanta in overtime, 104–100.)

A few weeks later Clark wrapped up a rookie campaign not quite like any that have come before. After a singular college career, she entered the league under the weight of tremendous expectations, frequently

positioned not so much as a basketball player but as a cultural phenomenon unto herself.

That dynamic came with intense scrutiny and coverage to match, including plenty from people and places who had rarely shown previous interest in women's basketball—or women, or basketball, for that matter. The cumulative effect could have been staggering. Yet she ultimately did something that previously seemed all but impossible given the context.

Clark played to match the hype. The national discourse around the 22-year-old sometimes drifted so far afield of basketball that it could feel totally divorced from what she was actually doing on the court. First there was discussion of her primarily as marketing engine or economic force. (Both of which she has been: WNBA attendance, viewership and merchandise sales have spiked, with a consistent focal point being Clark.

Indiana saw explosive growth in everything from tickets and jerseys to mascot bookings and beer sales.) And then there was the discussion of her as a symbol in a dizzying array of culture wars, often only tangentially related to her, if at all. What she herself actually said or did seemed to matter little here: Fires raged around projections and loose abstractions. At least one book is being written about the impact of her summer.

It's hardly surprising that when Clark played her final contest of the regular season on the road in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 19, lawmakers from both parties announced plans to use the game with the Mystics as a fundraiser. Not as if there was a need for anything extra to produce an attendance boost: Clark and the Fever drew 20,711 fans that night

CROWD PLEASER

After drawing barely 4,000 per home game last year, Clark's Fever set a WNBA record with an average of 17,036 this season.



FEVERPITCH

After a slow start, Clark delighted fans down the stretch, finishing with 120 treys, the third-best season total in WNBA history.



to Capital One Arena, the largest crowd in the history of the WNBA, filled with little girls and grown men alike sporting her jersey.

But underneath all of that conversation, of course, Clark was hooping. And on the other side of some early growing pains—especially during a brutal opening stretch for Indiana—she became simply too good to ignore. Put aside everything off the court for a moment. Clark started to grow into the player that was promised, and then some.

The core of that is still what made her so effective in college at Iowa. It's her shooting range, yes, but it's more so her vision and her ability to facilitate. By the end of the season she was no longer as vexed by pro defenses as she was in her first weeks in the league. The same traps and blitzes that stymied her in the early going no longer proved quite so effective. Clark returned after the league's



break for the Paris Olympics—her first extended period of time off since the summer of 2023—notably stronger and smarter on the floor. The result was a historically potent offensive campaign: No one had ever scored this much while assisting this much. No player in WNBA history had ever averaged 15 points and eight assists per game for a season. Yet Clark cleared that comfortably, at 19.2 and 8.4, breaking not just rookie records (769 points), but league ones as well (337 assists).

It helped the Fever break a WNBA-record seven-year playoff drought. That, of course, required

more from Indiana than just Clark.

A Fever squad that had looked stiff and disjointed found its identity down the stretch. The team picked up the pace and ditched much of its reliance on forced set plays. Aliyah Boston, the 2023 Rookie of the Year, grew more assertive in the paint and found her chemistry with Clark. Coach Christie Sides found rotations that worked—more of Lexie Hull, who established herself on the wing—and showed a greater willingness to make adjustments. And a key part of that growth for the group across the board was Clark, at



point guard, setting up everyone to play their best.

The backcourt pairing of Clark and Kelsey Mitchell looked among the best in the WNBA. “Having a high-value point guard obviously opens things up in a positive way,” says Mitchell. “I always thought we could play up-tempo, at a fast pace, and now you guys get to see it.” Mitchell has spent her entire career (seven seasons) in Indiana. The attention this year has been like nothing she could have previously imagined. “Shout out to Caitlin,” she says. “She’s done an unbelievable job of bringing her



BUT UNDERNEATH ALL THE CONVERSATION, OF COURSE, CLARK WAS HOOPING.

fans and people that support her.”

That put the Fever in the playoffs, an especially striking development considering how the group looked during a 3–10 start.

“I feel like any team that goes through adversity grows together, and definitely with our schedule at the start, we were forced to kind of build that quickly,” Hull said in June. “Hopefully, by the end of the season, we’ll be able to look at that start and be like, *That helped prepare us for the end.* ... You’re forced to kind of block out the noise. Everyone has an opinion. And so it’s trying just to not let that creep

in and stay strong together and have our circle be really tight.”

The noise only increased. But so did the level of performance at its center. The question of whether Clark’s rookie season is the best ever is tricky—Candace Parker was league MVP in her first year. There have been rookies who scored more (Seimone Augustus) and certainly those who were far stronger defenders (Tamika Catchings). But Clark established a rookie season that felt singular in its gravitational pull.

Clark made the adjustment. It’s now up to everyone else to adjust to Clark. □

SCORECARD: NEWSMAKERS

OHTANI'S ODYSSEY

THE DOUBLE THREAT HAS HAD AN AMAZING RUN—AND IT'S ONLY GOING TO GET BETTER

▶ BY TOM VERDUCCI

WHAT IF the unprecedented, unfathomable, unimaginable achievement of 50/50 is just the beginning? What if this colossal wonder Shohei Ohtani has put before us is only the appetizer? What if this is only the first line of Book 1 of a baseball epic?

Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many ways...

True it may be. We should not be surprised that Ohtani is headed for bigger and better, such as next year when he returns to the mound and resumes contending for the Cy Young Award and the home run

title. (Please read that sentence again. Slowly. Never get used to the enormity of that duality.)

Those who know Ohtani will tell you that 50/50 is not a culmination but a beginning.

Hideki Kuriyama knows Ohtani better than most. He is the man who made possible the unique greatness of Ohtani. As Ohtani was graduating from high school, he seemed so likely to sign with a major league organization that some thought a Nippon Pro Baseball team would be wasting a top draft pick on him. Kuriyama was the manager of the Nippon Ham Fighters. He knew a major league organization was likely to develop Ohtani as either a pitcher or a hitter.

Kuriyama challenged him to take a path where no one tread: sign with the Fighters to pitch and hit—to be a master of *nitoryu*, the two-sword fighting style. Once he had established himself as a two-way player, Kuriyama told the player he could jump to MLB with both disciplines as a condition of his signing.

Ohtani signed on to the dream. Kuriyama managed him for five years before Ohtani signed with the Los Angeles Angels. (Kuriyama was also Ohtani's manager during the 2022 World Baseball Classic.) Kuriyama believes Ohtani is only just getting started.

"The numbers are incredible, but the ceiling I see for him is much higher," Kuriyama told *The Japan Times*. "He makes a lot of mistakes at the plate. Honestly, I think he has the ability to hit around 80 home runs."

Eighty? *Whoa.*

But then, Ohtani is incomparable. His horizons extend beyond all others. And when you think about his path to 50/50, why wouldn't this be only the start of

more unique greatness? Here are some of the key parts of his journey—and some that lie ahead:

• **Increased strength.** Ohtani has the long, limber levers of a Michael Phelps. Indeed, he was a competitive swimmer from kindergarten through fifth grade. He is hyperflexible at the elbow and shoulder joints. Signed by the Angels at around 210 pounds, Ohtani has added more than 20 pounds without losing athleticism or flexibility.

• **Dodgers resources on offense.**

This is no knock on the Angels, but no team has greater depth of staff, technology, analytics and systems than the Dodgers. As one veteran pitcher put it just days after having joined the franchise, “Now I feel like I’m in the major leagues.”

This year Ohtani’s baserunning has benefited from the wisdom of veteran base coaches Dino Ebel and Clayton McCullough and the video scouting of the analytics

• **Dodgers resources on the mound.**

Among active pitchers who have started 86 games, Ohtani ranks second in strikeout rate (11.4, just behind teammate Tyler Glasnow), third in winning percentage (.667, even more remarkable because he has never pitched for a winning team) and third in ERA (3.01).

With his foundation of pitches, Dodger know-how, the team’s defensive efficiency (routinely



GRAND THEFT

With more time to study pitchers, Ohtani blew past his previous high of 26 steals, becoming the first Dodger to top 50 in 10 years.

among baseball’s best) and the way the club emphasizes recovery, it’s not a stretch to say that Ohtani may be even more dominant on the mound next year.

• **Closing holes.** Ohtani had so much raw power on elevated pitches and so much less on pitches low in the zone that for the first half of the season L.A. manager Dave Roberts encouraged him not to swing at low strikes. Through his first 72 games, Ohtani hit only one home run on any pitch in the bottom rail of the strike zone.

But then Ohtani, who hits from an upright posture with his hands high, which can make covering low pitches difficult, simply closed that hole in his game. In his next 83 games, Ohtani hit nine homers in the bottom rail.

AS A CHILD, Ohtani so loved baseball that people called him a *yakyu shonen*, a boy who holds the game deep in his heart. The uniqueness of 50/50 prompted not just awe at the feat but an appreciation of the person who did it. Casual

“It’s the one comment I get the most,” his agent, Nez Balelo, says. “If I heard it once I heard it a thousand times: ‘He’s much bigger in person.’ He’s a beast.”

In 2021 Ohtani set a personal record in average exit velocity (93.6 mph), broke it in 2023 (94.4) and broke it again this year (95.6). There is a pattern here.

And how’s this for an outlier of Ruthian proportions? Ohtani leads the majors with nine home runs of at least 450 feet. That’s more than every team except the Rockies, who benefit from added distance from playing home games a mile high.

department. With a week to go in the regular season, Ohtani had the second-highest stolen base percentage among players with 50 stolen bases (93.2%, trailing only Max Carey’s 96.2% from 102 years ago). He was 55 for 59, including 32 in a row.

“He’s clearly done a lot of research,” Kuriyama said. “I think he watches the pitchers closely, noticing even the slightest shift in weight that indicates a throw to home. This year, even though he hasn’t been able to pitch, it seems like he’s enjoying that aspect of the game.”



“THE NUMBERS ARE INCREDIBLE, BUT THE CEILING ... IS MUCH HIGHER,” KURIYAMA SAID.

fans checked in to see what the fuss was about and came away seeing the *yakyu shonen* in him. The way Ohtani exulted and threw his cap after striking out then teammate Mike Trout to end the 2023 World Baseball Classic, the way he pumped his fist upon the 50th home run, the way he shouted, “Let’s go!” while rounding the bases upon his game-tying homer—his 53rd long ball of the year—in late September ... these were expressions of pure joy in meaningful moments we had never seen before from him.

There is an organic quality to his greatness. He is setting records without chasing them.

“I’m not in awe. It’s like I’m

numb,” Balelo says. On the night Ohtani reached 50/50, with a mad burst of six hits (including three home runs) and 10 RBIs—after going 2-for-10 with five strikeouts the previous two nights in Miami—Balelo had one question for him.

“Where,” he asked Ohtani, “did that come from?”

“I have no idea,” Ohtani replied.

Homer wrote in *The Odyssey*, “There is no greater fame for a man than that which he wins with his footwork or the skill of his hands.” Ohtani is the rarity who has achieved his fame by way of both means. The epic has begun.

Tell us more, O Muse, about this man of many ways. □

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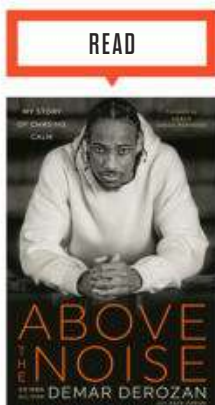
ROYAL TREATMENT
Now with the Kings, DeRozan spent his first nine seasons in Toronto, where he became the Raptors' all-time leading scorer.

SCORECARD: GAMEPLAN

A HARD ROAD OUT

AN ALL-STAR'S MEMOIR DETAILS HIS BUMPY JOURNEY FROM COMPTON TO THE NBA

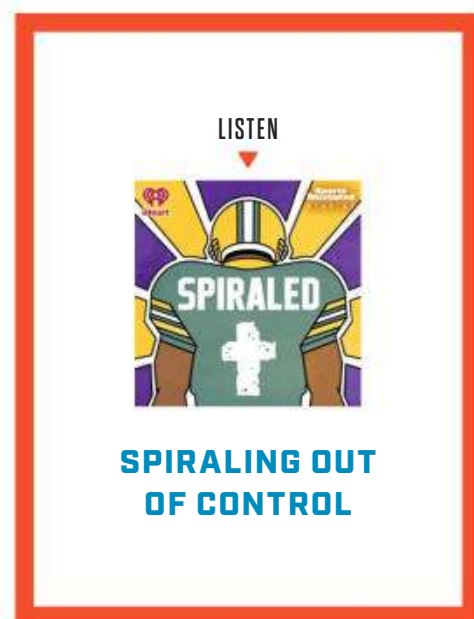
▶ BY MARK BECHTEL



DEMAR DEROZAN is something of an outlier in today's three-point-mad NBA: a scorer who does his damage from the midrange rather than behind the arc. He's also long been an anomaly off the court. DeRozan was one of the first players to speak openly and honestly about his mental health struggles, a topic that has been largely destigmatized in recent years.

The forward grew up in Compton, Calif., where one uncle was a Blood and another was a Crip. Other than their nephew, the two had little in common, except that they were both lost to violence. At first

blush, this is a popular narrative: the kid from the mean streets who uses sports to escape a cycle of despair. As well as that tale plays out on the big screen, DeRozan's brutally honest book, *Above the Noise*, is a reminder that the journey out often leaves scars, and they don't simply vanish when the protagonist escapes—even if, perhaps especially if, he goes on to become one of the top athletes of his generation. □



SPIRALING OUT OF CONTROL

THE TALE of Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila is one of the stranger ones in recent NFL history. Once the Packers' all-time leader in sacks, he became obsessed in retirement with a controversial, insular religious community. Based on a

series she wrote while at SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, ESPN's Kalyn Kahler has produced *Spiraled*, a must-listen podcast that delves into how a popular NFL star upended his life for what is widely considered a cult.



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SCORECARD: FULL FRAME

WHOLE CARD

▶ PHOTOGRAPH BY WALTER IOOSS JR.

B **OB GIBSON** made his postseason debut for the Cardinals 60 years ago, in 1964. It didn't go well. He walked three batters, hit another and uncorked a wild pitch in eight innings as St. Louis lost Game 2 of the World Series (*pictured*) to the Yankees by the score of 8-3.

But after that? Gibson won his

next seven Fall Classic starts, striking out 75 and walking just 13 hitters in 64 innings. That stretch included two wins in the 1964 Series, culminating with a W in the decisive seventh game against New York on two days' rest. Three years later he won all three of his starts as St. Louis beat the Red Sox in seven games.

Gibby's string of wins came to an end in the seventh game of the 1968 World Series, when he was beaten by Mickey Lolich and the Tigers, 4-1. It was Gibson's ninth and final postseason start. Like the previous seven, he threw a complete game.

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FACES IN THE CROWD

▶ BY DAN FALKENHEIM

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ALVIN HENDERSON ▶ Sport: Football ▶ Hometown: Elba, Ala.

Henderson, a senior running back at Elba High, rushed for 441 yards, scored nine touchdowns and had three two-point conversions in an 80–78 overtime loss to McKenzie High, breaking the state record for most points scored in a game (60) and tying the single-game rushing TD mark. As a junior, he rushed for 3,523 yards and 61 touchdowns on 225 carries and had at least 165 rushing yards in all 14 games. He is committed to Auburn.



LUKE ELLIS ▶ Sport: Swimming ▶ Hometown: Las Vegas

Ellis, a high school senior who competes for the Sandpipers of Nevada swimming club, took gold in the 800-meter freestyle (7:52.40) at the Junior Pan Pacific Championships in Canberra, Australia, breaking the meet record previously set by now Olympic gold medalist Bobby Finke in 2016. An Indiana commit, Ellis also won silver in the 400-meter individual medley, the 1,500 free and the mixed 4 × 1,500-meter relay.



AKAOMA ODELUGA ▶ Sport: Track and Field ▶ Hometown: Munster, Ind.

Odeluga, a sophomore at Ole Miss, won the shot put at the 2024 World Athletics U-20 Championships in Lima, Peru, landing a 17.34-meter throw to become the first American to win the world age-group event since 2004. In May, she won bronze in the shot put at the SEC Championships with a throw of 18.11 meters, the longest by an American U-20 athlete in nearly three decades, then took silver at the U.S. U-20 Championships in June.

HOOPS

Top Tier

▶ **WHEN SHE** was in fourth grade, Aaliyah Chavez was told that she wasn't good enough to make her local AAU basketball team. Now 17, she has used that slight to fuel her, and then some. The top-ranked recruit in the class of 2025 ended her summer by taking MVP honors at the Mamba League Invitational and winning her second Nike U-17 EYBL National Championship with CyFair Elite.

"All the people that are saying I'm not gonna make it or I'm too small—I'm still like, *Oh, yeah. I'm gonna prove y'all wrong.*" says the 5'11" point guard who, as of mid-September, had narrowed

her college options to LSU, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Texas Tech and UCLA.

As a junior, the Lubbock, Texas, native averaged 37.8 points, 10.1 rebounds and 4.4 assists a game for Monterey High. When she last suited up for the Plainsmen, she scored 50 points in a Region I-5A quarterfinal loss to Amarillo High. She hasn't forgotten that defeat, and she's now eyeing a state title.

Challengers, be warned. At the Mamba League Invitational in August, Aaliyah threw down the gauntlet: "I'm in your town, and you're not lacing up. You don't want that smoke." □



ANNIE RICE/AVANCE-JOURNAL/USA TODAY NETWORK/IMAGN IMAGES (CHAVEZ); COURTESY OF MARC STEVING (HENDERSON); COURTESY OF HEATHER ELLIS (ELLIS); JOSHUA MCCOY/OLE MISS ATHLETICS (ODELUGA)

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AS THE NBA SEASON STARTS, ALL EYES ARE ON REIGNING ROOKIE OF THE YEAR **VICTOR WEMBANYAMA**, WHO'S ON A QUEST TO HONE HIS MIND TO MATCH HIS (REMARKABLY IMPRESSIVE) PHYSICAL GIFTS

STUDD





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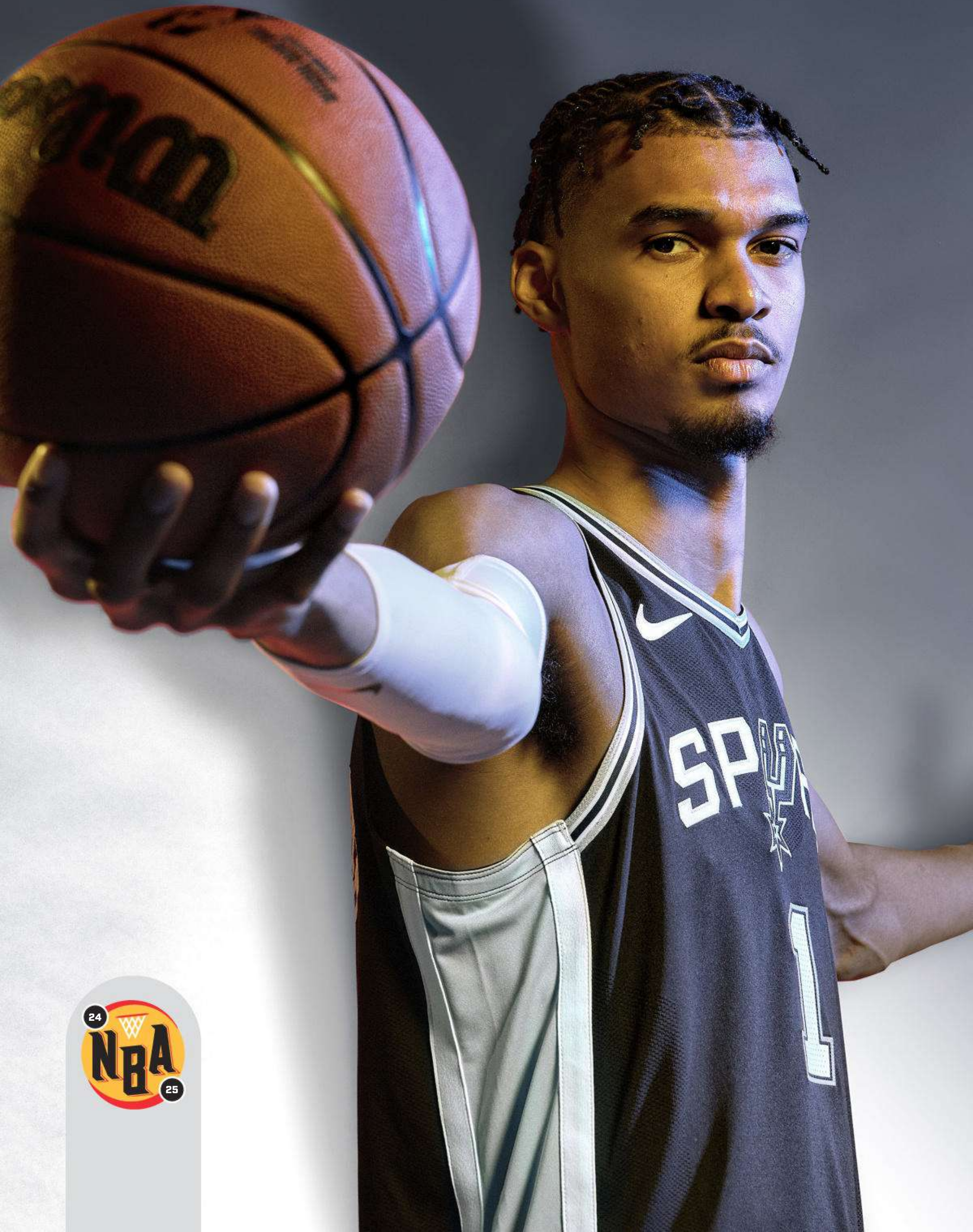
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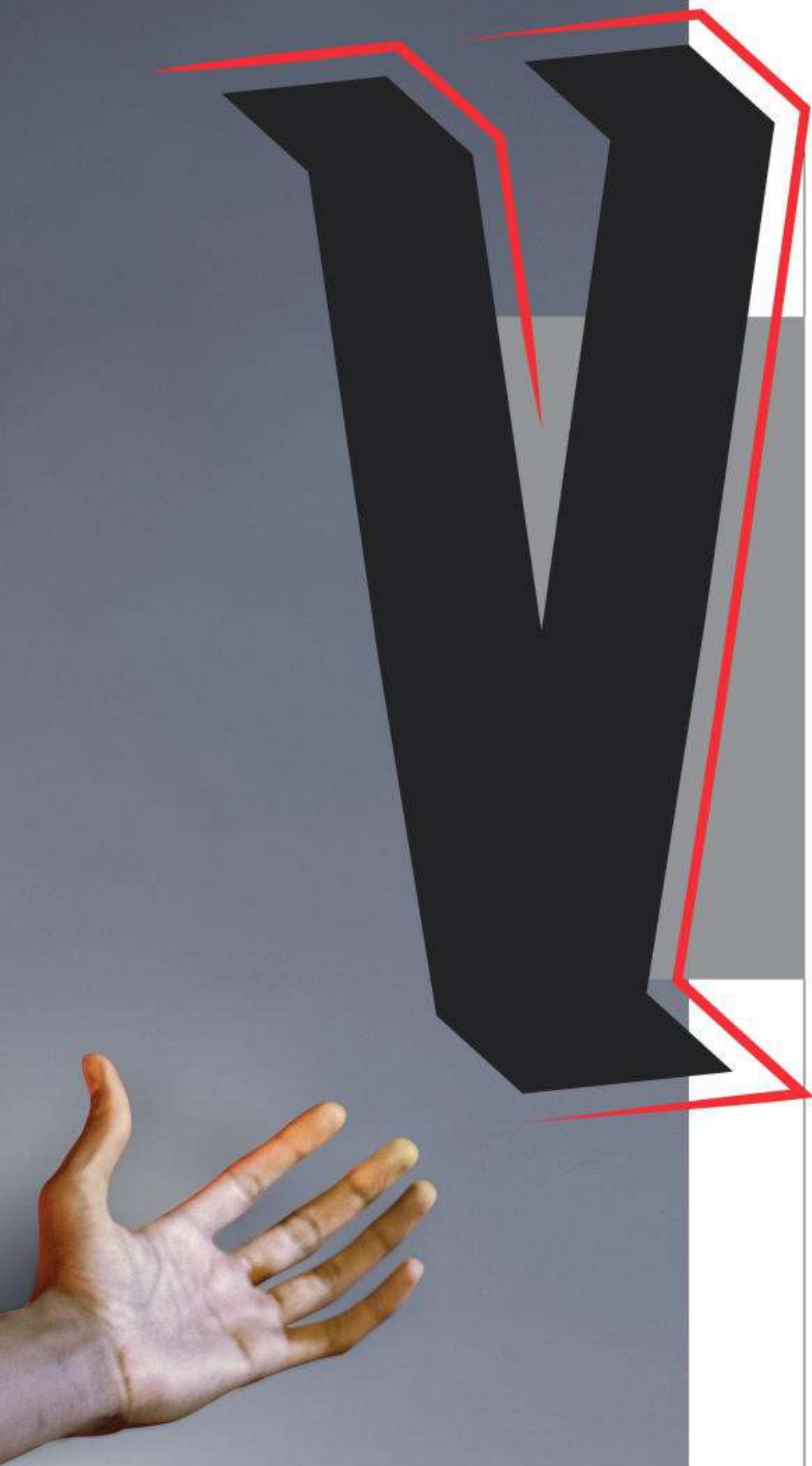
of the

GAME

by
CHRIS MANNIX

RONALD CORTES/
GETTY IMAGES





VICTOR WEMBANYAMA wants to talk about something important. Kind of life-changing, he says. It's a book. Well, books. *The Witcher*, a six-part series of fantasy novels that follow a monster hunter with supernatural abilities. Took him three years, Wembanyama says, but he finally finished them. "It's incredible," Wembanyama says. "Following the same characters for years like this, it feels like you know them." It's not just *The Witcher* universe that draws him in. It's *The Hobbit*. *Game of Thrones*. *Berserk*, a Japanese manga series. "Any good art piece," the 20-year-old says. If coaches from Paris to San Antonio have sharpened Wembanyama's basketball skills, characters in Middle-earth and Westeros have molded his mind. "The experiences are so detailed that you learn the lessons that the author tries to teach as well," Wembanyama says. "It's not just a story, it's a fantastic story about somebody that's also full of lessons."

It's mid-September and Wembanyama has folded his 7' 4" frame onto a couch inside the Spurs' practice facility, escaping, briefly, the still scorching San Antonio heat. These are the conversations Wembanyama enjoys. About arts and literature, science and science fiction. "He is naturally curious," says Spurs coach Gregg Popovich. Last season, Wembanyama's agent, Bouna Ndiaye, arranged a meeting between Wembanyama and Thomas Pesquet, a French astronaut. "If you heard them talking," Ndiaye says, "you wouldn't know which one was the astronaut." During a late-season trip to Utah, Wembanyama met with Brandon Sanderson, a fantasy novelist. In August, Popovich arranged for Peniel Joseph, an associate dean at the University of Texas and a leading expert on the history of the Black Power movement, to speak to a group of players about voting. Wembanyama—who, as a French citizen, can't vote in U.S. elections—stuck around after to ask a few follow-ups.

Wembanyama doesn't find his inquisitiveness particularly unusual. "I just like to understand things," he says. Others see it differently. "You tell him something, and it could be about anything, and he picks it up," says Spurs general manager Brian Wright. "And the next time you talk to him, he will know more about that subject." His representatives describe a client

JEFFERY A. SALTER



determined to grasp the nuances of every deal he is involved in. Jordan Howenstine, the designated Wemby guy on the Spurs' PR staff, thinks Wembanyama could have had a career in aerospace engineering. Popovich imagines a writer. Wembanyama thinks he could have been a physiotherapist. It's as if his impossibly rare blend of size and skill have denied his true calling. "I have plenty of ideas," Wembanyama says. "Life is going to be about more than just basketball."

But he is *really* good at basketball. Last fall, Wembanyama entered the NBA with lofty expectations. By any metric, he exceeded them. He averaged 21.4 points and 10.6 rebounds per game, while leading the NBA in blocked shots. He ran away with the Rookie of the Year award

POP CULTURE

Wembanyama improved in the Spurs' system as last season wore on, averaging 23.5 points, 12.0 rebounds and 5.3 assists per game after the All-Star break.

and finished second in the race for the league's top defender. The notes the Spurs provide the media detailing Wembanyama's accomplishments are 11 pages long. He played in 71 games, silencing skeptics who wondered if his lanky frame would hold up to the rigors of an NBA season. "I learned so much," Wembanyama says. "Playing 70 games, I'd never done that in my life before. But it went by super quick."

When his first season ended, Wembanyama

MERCEDES OLIVER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

returned to France. He saw family, friends. Played a little paintball. It was relaxing. Sort of. Wembanyama likes structure. A schedule. He refers to himself at times as a “machine.” The NBA, with its limitless resources, is perfect for him. “We have the best *everything*,” he marvels. Most of his time is spent at the Spurs’ facility, where everything he needs—chefs, coaches—is under one roof. “He wants his life to be in order,” Popovich says. At 9:00 each night, Wembanyama puts his phone into airplane mode and disap-



pears into a novel. “It’s kind of a paradox,” he says. “I’m more tired when I’m on vacation.”

The Spurs’ season ended in early April and by May, Wembanyama was back in San Antonio. Popovich gave him a list—three pages long—of things to drill down on. Half offense, half defense. For six weeks, Wembanyama worked. After a monthlong Olympic tour with the French national team—Wembanyama averaged 15.8 points per game in a silver-medal-winning effort—he was back. Individual work in the morning. Scrimmaging in the afternoon. At night, Wembanyama was back in the gym getting up a thousand shots—mostly threes. Around the Spurs these days, there is a palpable energy. Like, what you saw from Wembanyama last season was special—but you ain’t seen nothing yet.

THE MESSAGE was surprising. Since retiring from the NBA in 2020, Jamal Crawford, a slick-handling scorer, has dabbled in individual coaching. Guards, mostly, a position Crawford adeptly played for 20 seasons. In March, Crawford’s phone buzzed. *Victor would like to work out with you*, Ndiaye texted. *Do you have time to come to Texas after the season?* Wembanyama, in tinkering with ways to improve his pull-up three, admired how Crawford was able to shake defenders and was hoping to collect a few pointers. In June, Crawford

“I want to be yelled at,” says Wemby. “I’m not here to **WASTE TIME**. Neither is [Popovich].”

flew to San Antonio. For several days, the two ran drills. “It’s actually scary how fast he learns,” Crawford says. “He was picking up footwork and rhythms that took me years in a matter of minutes.” At night, the two went to dinner, where Wembanyama would mine Crawford’s mind. “I’ve never met a 20-year-old like him,” Crawford says. “When it comes to basketball, working with him is one of the greatest things I’ve ever been a part of.”

This is the truly terrifying part of Wembanyama. He isn’t trying to be great at one thing. He wants to be great at *everything*. Last season was a lot of trial and error for the Spurs and their young center. Popovich started Jeremy Sochan, a power forward, at point guard for most of the season. Zach Collins started alongside Wembanyama before the Spurs opted for more floor spacing.



San Antonio's 22 different starting lineups were tied for the 11th most in the league.

Offensively, Wembanyama's role changed nightly. Popovich worked him on the wings and high post. "The Nowitzki spots," Popovich says. He encouraged him to bring the ball up after a rebound. Pick-and-rolls as both a ballhandler and a screener. "We wanted to see what all is there and where is he most comfortable in his own skin, where does he gravitate to," Popovich says. Wembanyama provided plenty of data. A 38-point game against the Suns in November. A 20-rebound effort against the Bulls a month later. In February, Wembanyama swatted away 10 shots against the Raptors. The skills—the frightening, never-before-seen skills—were there. He just needed to put them together.

Popovich, 75, embraced the challenge. He has polished Tim Duncan, developed Tony Parker and harnessed the skills of Manu Ginóbili. In Wembanyama, Popovich was gifted a player with more raw talent than any of them. The task was refining it. Initially, they focused on footwork. Popovich showed Wembanyama film of Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant. Rucker steps, pivots, pump fakes. "We talked to him about how important it was to get that base really solid and disciplined," Popovich says. He encouraged Wembanyama to watch how Stephen Curry moved after the pass. "Chasing space," Popovich says. "We weren't teaching him Kareem's sky-hook. Simple concepts."

Wembanyama absorbed it all. Again, the curiosity. Wembanyama loves information. Craves it. He asks questions. He devours scouting reports. "To see how thorough, detailed and disciplined he was at that age," Wright says, "it was kind of mind-blowing." For Wembanyama, it was about making things instinctive. All the eye-catching things he can do—the crossover dribbles, the one-legged jump shots, the pull-up threes—is the result of years spent screwing them up.

FRENCH CONNECTION

Wembanyama was the leading scorer in the gold medal game—outpacing Kevin Durant and James—but France came up short in a 98–87 loss.

ERICK W. RASCO





“For me, it’s the only solution,” Wembanyama says. “Expanding my game is not thinking twice when you want to do something crazy. I don’t think I’ve had one game where I really applied everything. Not one. I want eventually to have a wide variety of tools that I’ve really mastered. I don’t want to have a role on the court. I don’t want to be the shot blocker. I don’t want to be the scorer. I don’t want to be the playmaker. I want to be all of this at once.”

“I want to work so hard that I have the chance to one day **INVENT NEW THINGS,**” he says.

Indeed, Wembanyama expects his game to grow as he does. Not up, but out. Officially, Wembanyama weighed 210 pounds last season. He will weigh more in this one. Spurs coaches pushed him to be more aggressive last season. Opponents, looking for advantages, would often use sturdier wing players to try to push him off his spots. Among the things he worked on with Crawford was how to deal with physical defenders. “I think my physical potential,” Wembanyama pauses. “I don’t know where it can lead me. I’m sure it’s not complete at all. I want to work so that I have the chance one day to invent new things.”

Pop’s offseason program focused on defensive fundamentals. How to close out better. How to use his hands, his length. How to get between two spots on the floor and remain balanced.



Offensively, it was decision-making. “He intuitively understands space and where people are, but he tends to dribble in crowds,” Popovich says. Shooting drills to become more efficient from beyond the three-point line. Popovich estimates Wembanyama worked with eight to 10 different Spurs coaches this summer.

Wembanyama loves it. He’s fully bought in. To the Spurs way. The Pop Way. The ex-Air Force officer is the ideal coach for the star who longs for structure. “The most important thing to remember to know about him as a player is how he thinks about the human first,” Wembanyama says. “He knows sometimes I need to get yelled at, sometimes, when I make the mistakes, the same mistake multiple times in a row. First of all, I need it and I want to be yelled at. I’m not here to waste time. Neither is he.”

GARRETT ELLWOOD/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES



SPURRED ON

After never missing the playoffs in back-to-back seasons, San Antonio is in the midst of a five-year drought, which Wembanyama aims to end.

SAN ANTONIO lost 60 games last season. Wembanyama was on the floor for 52 of them. They got drilled by 36 points by New Orleans. They lost by 33 to Boston. The Spurs' point differential (minus-6.5) was sixth worst in the NBA. At times, Wembanyama says, "It was hard to get your head out of the water." Meaning? "At some point, you're going to be tired, you're going to have injuries. It's inevitable," he says. "But for how long are you going to be on a losing streak? You can lose two games in a row, and even the best, the 2016 Warriors or the [1996] Bulls, they lost only nine or 10 games, but they could have easily lost 11 or 12 if they didn't react the right way when they lost one or when they lost two in a row. It's about minimizing where difficulty leads you. Where losses and difficulties lead you."

The losing, of course, was expected. The Spurs' dynasty had crumbled years earlier. Parker, the last vestige of San Antonio's championship teams, retired in 2019—in a Hornets uniform. In recent years the Spurs' win totals have looked like locker combinations. Last season wasn't about the record, Popovich says. It was about development. Not just for Wembanyama. For Devin Vassell, a fourth-year swingman. For Malaki Branham, a second-year point guard. Now they'll try to incorporate UConn point guard Stephon Castle, the No. 4 pick in the 2024 draft. "As a team, they're learning how to play," Popovich says. "How to chase space, how to spread the floor, decision-making. You don't want to skip steps."

This season should be different. "Development has helped significantly when you start winning," Popovich says. "They start to see the light at the end of the tunnel." During San Antonio's title-winning heyday, the Spurs were steeped in veteran leadership. David Robinson and Avery Johnson gave way to Duncan and Ginóbili. These Spurs needed that. So San Antonio signed Chris Paul to a one-year, \$11 million contract while Castle gets acclimated to the pro game. They facilitated

a deal between the Bulls and Kings by absorbing Harrison Barnes. "You could coach your ass off and say the same thing 60 times," Popovich says. "But sometimes it's [better] coming from somebody else."

So Popovich wants Paul teaching the intricacies of the pick-and-roll. He wants Barnes's practice habits to rub off. More tangibly, he wants both to help the team win. The Spurs had 35 games last season where they led by double digits. They lost 20 of them—most in the NBA. San Antonio had the third-worst record in games that were within five points in the last five minutes. "All plights of a young team," Wright says. "We feel like they check a lot of boxes."

Wembanyama welcomes the help. He was never fazed by the expectations on him. Still, Popovich checked in regularly. "I'd get a look," he says, "like in his mind he's looking at me saying, 'Why is this man telling me these things? I don't need to hear this s---.'" But Wembanyama wants to win. After France's loss to the U.S. in the Olympic men's basketball final, cameras caught Wembanyama in tears. "Because I didn't for one second imagine losing," he says.

Popovich has tried to manage expectations. He has pointed to Nikola Jokić, the three-time MVP. Jokić didn't win a championship until his eighth season. Popovich asked Wembanyama how many of Jokić's teammates in Denver's 2023 title season were there at the beginning. "The answer is zero," Popovich says. "It was the same thing with LeBron, same thing with Michael. It takes time. It takes patience. Or you can make a huge mistake."

Wembanyama gets it. He enjoys San Antonio—the Spurs and the city. He's a conspicuous figure, but in a town familiar with seven-foot stars, he can blend in. "They have been seeing the same guys for 25 years," Wembanyama says. He visits museums and shopping centers. He's a regular at Shiro, a Japanese bistro. Says Wembanyama, "They make me feel like a regular person."

With the same goals. Last year, Wembanyama says, "felt like a dream, like walking in the shadows." This year? "Much different," he says. "I still don't know what I'm doing, but at least I got my habits." Indeed, whether it's from a coach, a fellow player, an astronaut or a professor, Wembanyama is always learning. □



The

SILVER

Touch

*WITH BIG TV AND LABOR DEALS TAKEN CARE OF,
THE **NBA COMMISSIONER** TURNS HIS FOCUS TO
EXPANSION, THE FAN EXPERIENCE AND TAMING
THE DARK SIDE OF SPORTS GAMBLING*

by
CHRIS MANNIX

illustration by
**HARRISON
FREEMAN**





ADAM SILVER, who last January agreed to a contract extension that will keep him in the NBA commissioner's office through the end of the decade, begins his next term with ... nothing to do. "There's a *lot* to do," insists Silver, chuckling. True, running a multibillion-dollar sports league with its tentacles everywhere around the globe is a full-time job. But Silver begins his 11th year as commissioner with the biggest agenda items already taken care of. Last year the league and the players union ratified a new seven-year collective bargaining agreement. In July, the NBA finalized a new broadcast rights deal, an 11-year, \$77 billion windfall that will kick in next season. For the time being, it looks like clear sailing ahead.

Silver will happily acknowledge that, structurally, the NBA is in as good a place as it has been in ages. "Not just in my time as commissioner," Silver says. "But in my [32] years at the league." Parity, a decades-long dream of the NBA, has been achieved. Over the last six seasons, the league has crowned six different champions, with

THINKING BIG

The WNBA, sizzling in the age of Reese (opposite), is adding three teams, and the NBA is also looking at expansion, with a return to Seattle, where Kevin Durant (below) spent a year with the Sonics, considered a strong possibility.



not so much as a back-to-back finalist. The CBA has choked off the ability of large-market teams to spend their way to success. “It goes more to how the team is built rather than to the outcome,” Silver says. “We want teams to be rewarded for drafting well and developing players well.”

So what are Silver’s priorities now? In a wide-ranging interview, he addresses the key items that remain on his agenda.

ITEM 1

NBA EXPANSION

With the CBA and the broadcast deals wrapped up, the possibility of the league adding teams for the first time in 20 years moves to the front burner. While it’s believed that the NBA will add two cities—with Seattle and Las Vegas as the front-runners—Silver cautions that any expansion talks are preliminary. While admitting two new teams could generate up to \$10 billion in franchise fees, there are also concerns.

Silver’s take: “It’s one of the reasons why expansion isn’t as obvious as some people might think. There is a point of view that I often encounter that expansion is printing money. It’s not. First of all, you’re in essence selling equity in the league. To the extent you have new national television deals, you now have two new partners, so you’re dividing up the money by two additional ways. There’s also a dilution of talent. It’s one of the reasons we haven’t expanded anytime recently, because we’ve been working towards creating a more competitive league.”

ITEM 2

WNBA EXPANSION

The women’s game, Silver says, could expand more quickly. The league recently added a franchise in San Francisco to begin play next season, with Portland and Toronto joining in 2026, bringing the total to 15 teams. Interest in the WNBA, fueled in large part by the arrival of Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese, has exploded.

Silver’s take: “I know both [WNBA] commissioner [Cathy] Engelbert’s and my phones have been ringing off the hook over the last several months from parties interested in owning or investing in WNBA teams. When we launched the league 28 years ago, our goal was to have a WNBA team affiliated with every NBA

franchise. We’ve clearly had some fits and starts along the way, and it may be that there are markets that the NBA is not in which make a lot of sense for the WNBA. At the same time, our goal would be to have a robust league roughly equivalent to the NBA. The fact that there’s all this interest doesn’t mean we should expand that quickly. We should be careful and deliberate in the way we do it.”



ITEM 3

ENHANCING THE FAN EXPERIENCE

This, Silver says, “is at the top of my agenda.” The NBA is satisfied with its in-game experience. Arenas were at 98% capacity last season, and teams continue to innovate in areas such as food, accessibility and entertainment. “There’s not a lot of room to grow there,” Silver says. Where there is room is in the home viewing experience.

Silver’s take: “There’s enormous opportunity to grow, especially on a global basis. What that will require is using new technology that’s largely coming through streaming services to find better ways to engage fans. That comes through the personalization of those telecasts—things you can’t do certainly on broadcast television or on linear cable, but you can through streaming, where if people want to chat as part



of a larger community during the game because they're hard-core fans, they can. Or if they want to have discussions about individual players because they went to the same college, or they are interested in that player's fashion choices. You name it, you can create communities around it.

ARE YOU NOT ENTERTAINED?

With the fan experience in Philadelphia and at arenas around the league going well, with capacity at 98%, the commissioner's focus will be on creating the same kind of audience engagement for viewers at home.

"If fans want to buy products around the game, that's available to them. If they want to play fantasy around what's happening on the court, depending on the jurisdiction. If they want to bet, and now I'm talking about in-play betting. We're just barely scratching the surface in terms of that interest."

ITEM 4

HARNESSING TECHNOLOGY

For years, the NBA has utilized artificial intelligence for everything from generating highlights to translating play-by-play into multiple languages.

ERICK W. RASCO



Silver's take: "Using technology, we can get sophisticated fan data to better understand where we gain viewers and where we lose them. For example, we've made some changes in the last few years because of concerns around [having] so many stoppages in the last few minutes for replay. One way around that is, and we're investing a lot here, using technology that can make objective calls.

"There are a hundred fingers on the floor at all times, and creating technology that can instantaneously tell the officials whose finger the ball went off of or who stepped out of bounds will help with the pace of the game. [Look at]

"There's enormous opportunity to **GROW** through the personalization of telecasts," Silver says.

Hawk-Eye at the U.S. Open in tennis, It's just, *Ball's out, hit the line, move on.* We can do better in getting the call right, but also in creating a better pace to the game."

ITEM 5

PROTECTING THE INTEGRITY OF THE SPORT

Last April, the NBA faced an existential crisis. Jontay Porter, a backup forward with the Raptors, was caught, as the league later revealed, "disclosing confidential information to sports bettors, limiting his own participation in one or

more games for betting purposes, and betting on NBA games." Silver quickly banned Porter for life, and it likely won't be the last time the commissioner has to hand out a severe punishment to send a message about what will happen to players who manipulate results. The proliferation of legal sports gambling—which Silver, as far back as 2014, strongly advocated for—has created more opportunities for exploitation.

Silver's take: "We spend a lot of time thinking about that. There's no question, there are ways that we can improve monitoring, and we've talked directly to the betting companies about that. I'd say one of the issues we deal with now is in [the Porter] case, you have Canadian regulations, and then in the U.S. you now have roughly 35 states with legalized sports betting, with, in many cases, very different regulatory framework.

"Even before sports betting became legalized in all these states, I was in favor of federal jurisdiction. I still think that we would be better off with a consistent national framework. I'm realistic. That's not at the top of anybody's list in Congress right now, so I'm not holding my breath waiting for that to happen.

"At the same time, I think that as we and the other leagues work together on some of these monitoring issues, AI is going to play a big part in this. I think that these monitoring systems are becoming increasingly sophisticated to [detect] aberrant behavior. In some cases, that isn't necessarily tied directly to betting activity, but it sets off flags that suggest you may want to look at what's happening in an individual situation because things are happening either statistically or from an operational standpoint that are not consistent with a data set that you're seeing for other players.

"And we're learning about the best ways to protect our players. It hasn't been a secret. We've heard directly from coaches and players who felt harassed, whether it's over point spreads or over/unders or prop bets. Just like we've dealt with other areas in problematic speech not relating to sports betting, it's on us working with our teams to draw the appropriate lines. We want to do everything we can to make sure there's a safe environment for them and our officials. We're learning as we go, and no question there's room for improvement." □

▶ **SI ANSWERS THE BIG QUESTIONS:** Who is this year's MVP? What are the games of the year?
Did the Lakers blow it by hiring JJ Redick? Are there any franchise saviors in the draft?

TIP-OFFS





ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

RUNNER-UP › Zaccharie Risacher, ATL
DARK HORSE › Donovan Clingan, POR

ZACH EDEY



THE FORMER Purdue center likely won't have the most impressive stats playing with the loaded Grizzlies, but his impact on winning—through rebounding, setting screens and providing an outlet for Ja Morant around the rim—could be a difference maker on a team with title hopes.

COACH OF THE YEAR

RUNNER-UP › Taylor Jenkins, MEM
DARK HORSE › Gregg Popovich, SAS

TOM THIBODEAU



THESE KNICKS are his kind of team: versatile, defensive-minded and led by a durable point guard. If Thibs can seamlessly reintegrate Julius Randle—who missed the second half of last season and will now be asked to play some center—New York could approach 60 wins.

MVP SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER

THE RUNNER-UP in 2024, Gilgeous-Alexander is the top two-way candidate in a crowded field. Working in SGA's favor: Oklahoma City figures to be in the running for the No. 1 seed, and he is the hub of an offense largely built around him. More exposure will help, too: The Thunder are scheduled for 15 national TV games this season, up from eight last year.

RUNNER-UP › Luka Dončić, DAL
DARK HORSE › Ja Morant, MEM

SIXTH MAN OF THE YEAR

RUNNER-UP › Donte DiVincenzo, NYK
LONG SHOT › Buddy Hield, GSW

NAZ REID



THE T-WOLVES center is an efficient shooter (41.4% from three), reliable rebounder (7.8 per 36 minutes) and tough defender who can slide between frontcourt spots. Not since Detlef Schrempf in 1992 has a big man won this award in back-to-back years.

DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR

RUNNER-UP › Rudy Gobert, MIN
LONG SHOT › Herbert Jones, NOP

VICTOR WEMBANYAMA



AFTER LEADING the league in blocks as a rookie, the 7' 4" Wembanyama, who averaged 1.2 steals per game for the Spurs, second among all centers, should be even more menacing. As one assistant coach says: "We don't show our team Wembanyama offensive film. We show defense."

MOST IMPROVED PLAYER

RUNNER-UP › Josh Giddey, CHI
LONG SHOT › Nikola Jović, MIA

DERECK LIVELY II



THE LIVELY, er, Lively was a revelation in Dallas, coanchoring, with Daniel Gafford, a top-five playoff defense. Now the Mavs are counting on him to expand his offensive game—perhaps even beyond the three-point line—to give an already dynamic attack a little more punch.

GREG NELSON (ALEXANDER); JOE MURPHY/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (EDEY); JOHN W. MCCOY/GETTY IMAGES (THIBODEAU); GARRETT ELLWOOD/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (REID); JUSTIN TAFUYA/GETTY IMAGES (WEMBANYAMA); GLENN JAMES/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (LIVELY)



No Experience Needed?

JJ Redick will be learning as he goes while he **TAKES CHARGE** of one of the league's marquee franchises

IN JUNE, addressing reporters for the first time as Lakers head coach, JJ Redick looked the part. He had the dark suit, the neatly coiffed hair and, most of all, the unabashed confidence. “I really don’t give a f--,” Redick said in response to a question that referenced skeptical comments about his ability to jump from the broadcast booth to the bench. Indeed, Redick (*left*) had a vibe that was Pat Riley-esque, a comparison the Lakers’ brass has made internally. Riley led L.A. to four titles—a high standard for a novice to live up to.

Other teams have hired former players with no coaching experience before, with mixed results. The most encouraging example is Steve Kerr, who has led the Warriors to four titles, including in his rookie season of 2014–15 after inheriting a team that had won one playoff series in three years under his predecessor, Mark Jackson (himself a coaching newbie). Then there’s Steve Nash, who despite being handed an abundance of talent in Brooklyn with Kevin Durant, James Harden and Kyrie Irving, was dismissed after two early playoff departures followed by a nail-in-the-coffin 2–5 start in 2022–23.

“It’s a different challenge,” says former Bulls coach Vinny Del Negro, who had been a player, broadcaster and assistant GM before taking over on Chicago’s bench in 2008 at the age of 42. “You can watch all the film you want, you can think you have all the best plays and things of that nature. No matter how smart you think you are and how much other experience you have, there are going to be things that are going to happen.”

In Chicago, Del Negro says, he leaned on a staff of veteran assistants led by former head coaches Del Harris and Bernie Bickerstaff. Each morning, Del Negro would meet with Harris to go over offensive game-planning. Then he would confer with another assistant, Bob Ociepka, who handled the defense. Bickerstaff critiqued practices and how Del Negro ran in-game huddles.

“The thing I realized quickly is there is never enough time,” says Del Negro, who went 41–41 in each of his two seasons in Chicago and is now an analyst with NBA TV. “When you’re a young coach you think, *O.K., I’m going to get three or four things done today*. And you realize, depending on who your audience is, you’re better off making sure you perfect one, maybe two things instead of being mediocre at three and four.”

by
**CHRIS
MANNIX**

Like Del Negro, Redick has assembled a seasoned staff, headlined by Nate McMillan and Scott Brooks, both former head coaches. Early on, Redick's message has been simple: Get organized. Privately, players grumbled about uncertainty with the game plans last season under Darvin Ham, and about how roles routinely changed.

Improving shot selection has been another point of emphasis. Last season L.A. launched 10.4 midrange jumpers per game (12th in the NBA), but ranked 23rd in making them (38.6%). Redick wants his team, which attempted the third-fewest threes in the league (31.4 per game), to shoot more from beyond the arc. As the NBA has zigged toward emphasizing defensive versatility and a three-point-centric attack, the Lakers have zagged toward size and a more paint-oriented offense. Redick aims to change that.

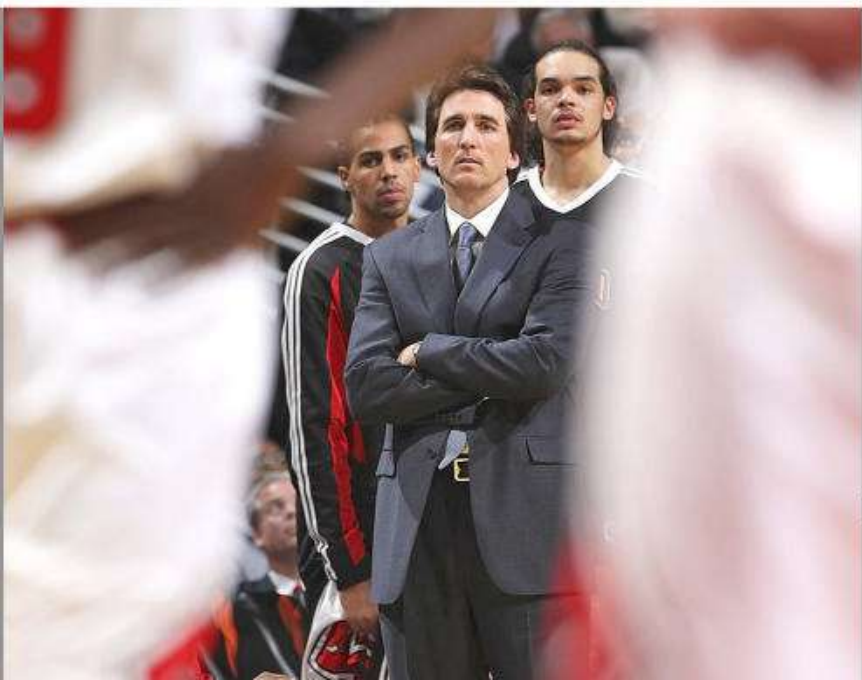
But even if he does, will it matter for a team that had LeBron James and a healthy Anthony Davis last year but still didn't make the playoffs? Even if Redick is a coaching wunderkind, given the limitations of the roster beyond its two stars, marching up the standings in a competitive Western Conference will be challenging.

All Redick can do, says Del Negro, is create a standard—and stick to it.

“Coaching is gut-wrenching,” says Del Negro. “It’s 24/7. Let your players know how you expect them to perform and work on that every day until you are successful.” □

STUDY, QUICK!

Del Negro (below) who had no coaching experience when he took over the Bulls, learned that an awful lot goes into running a team.



GAMES TO WATCH

The matchups to circle include budding rivalries, an emotional reunion and a piece of history

OCT. 22 TIMBERWOLVES AT LAKERS

Los Angeles's prime-time season opener against Minnesota will be the first opportunity to witness history, when LeBron and Bronny James could become the first father-son duo to share an NBA floor.

OCT. 30 SPURS AT THUNDER

Victor Wembanyama vs. Chet Holmgren could be a rivalry in the mold of Magic Johnson vs. Larry Bird, if Johnson and Bird played in the same conference and each possessed freaky physical tools.

NOV. 12: MAVERICKS AT WARRIORS

After 13 seasons with Golden State, four of which ended with championships, Klay Thompson will walk—or maybe boat—into the Chase Center as a visiting player. Expect an ovation for the ages.

JAN. 5 CELTICS AT THUNDER

An NBA Finals preview? If there's a natural rival for Boston, it's Oklahoma City, which has built its team following the Celtics' blueprint (long, athletic, versatile). This game will provide a midseason measure of just how far the Thunder can go this year.



JAN. 21 76ERS AT NUGGETS

For various reasons, mostly injury-related, Joel Embiid hasn't played in Denver since 2019. Let's hope the friendly rivalry between Nikola Jokić and Embiid (above) will resume with both in uniform. —C.M.



All Eyes on 2025

by
KEVIN SWEENEY

With some teams—*hi, Trail Blazers!*—clearly headed for the lottery next summer, it's not too early for their fans to take a look at the **PRIZE PROSPECTS** who will be available next June. It's an impressive draft class heavy on collegiate talent—unlike recent years

1 | COOPER FLAGG (RIGHT)

SF, DUKE

Scouts have long been excited about Flagg (*right*), but his performance against the NBA's elite during USA Basketball's Olympic training camp this summer, where he was the only non-pro invited to participate, has only added to the anticipation.

2 | ACE BAILEY

G-F, RUTGERS

Bailey, at 6'10" with a seven-foot wingspan, is an athletic shotmaker. While he may not be as polished as Flagg is right now, his upside could be even higher. A big year at Rutgers could make him a surprise contender to go No. 1 next summer.

3 | VJ EDGECOMBE

SG, BAYLOR

The 6'5" shooting guard turned heads over the summer while playing with the Bahamas national team during Olympic qualifying. Though still developing as a shot creator, he's an explosive slasher who should be elite in transition.

4 | DYLAN HARPER

G, RUTGERS

Harper (*page 64*) is the son of five-time NBA champion Ron and the younger brother of Ron Jr., now with the Celtics. A jumbo point guard at 6'6", 215 pounds, he's capable of bullying his way to the rim against almost any competition.

5 | KHAMAN MALUACH

C, DUKE

Maluach will be only 18 years old on draft day and likely in need of polish. But as a mobile 7'2" shot blocker who has flashed shooting touch and had nice moments in the Olympics playing for South Sudan, he's an attractive gamble.

6 | HUGO GONZÁLEZ

G, REAL MADRID (SPAIN)

Among this draft's crop of international prospects, the versatile 6'6" wing, who plays with energy and toughness, looks like the headliner. A strong shooting season in 2024–25 would clearly vault him even higher up the draft board.

7 | NOLAN TRAORÉ

PG, SAINT-QUENTIN (FRANCE)

When he's rolling, the 6'5" playmaking guard looks like the type of prospect who could push for the top spot in the draft. The 18-year-old's decision-making could use some work, though, and occasionally his motor runs hot and cold.

8 | TRE JOHNSON

SG, TEXAS

The 6'6" Johnson is unquestionably talented as a bigger combo guard who is wired to get buckets, though he is at times shaky when running an offense. He should be one of the top freshman scorers in college basketball this season.

9 | EGOR DEMIN

G/F, BYU

The 18-year-old Russian's decision to leave Real Madrid for the Cougars sent shockwaves through international basketball (*page 86*). An effective shooter and playmaker at 6'9", he will immediately become the centerpiece of the BYU offense.

10 | LIAM MCNEELEY

SF, UCONN

An elite 3-and-D prospect and a prep teammate of Flagg's, McNeeley should be among the best shooters in NCAA hoops this year. That touch and his competitiveness set him up to be the Huskies' fourth lottery pick in the last three years. □

CAMERON BROWNE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES



PICK OF THE PACK

With an exciting young core (hoarding draft capital will do that for you) led by Chet Holmgren, OKC has a real chance to win the franchise's first championship since 1979, when it was in Seattle.

by
CHRIS MANNIX
ODDS PROVIDED BY FANDUEL
NOAH GRAHAM/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

The NBA has given us **SIX CHAMPIONS IN SIX YEARS**. Do we hear seven? With the Thunder rolling in the West and the Knicks on the rise in the East, don't bet against it

SCOUTING



EASTERN CONFERENCE

1	Knicks	6	Pacers	11	Hawks
2	Celtics	7	Magic	12	Pistons
3	76ers	8	Heat	13	Bulls
4	Bucks	9	Hornets	14	Wizards
5	Cavaliers	10	Raptors	15	Nets

Conference Finals

CELTICS over 76ERS

WESTERN CONFERENCE

1	Thunder	6	Pelicans	11	Clippers
2	Timberwolves	7	Suns	12	Rockets
3	Mavericks	8	Warriors	13	Spurs
4	Grizzlies	9	Kings	14	Jazz
5	Nuggets	10	Lakers	15	Trail Blazers

Conference Finals

THUNDER over TIMBERWOLVES

► **NBA FINALS** ◀
THUNDER over **CELTICS**

REPORTS



EASTERN CONFERENCE

ATLANTIC

An opposing team's scout breaks down the division

► **EVERYTHING THE Knicks** are doing is about Boston. You can't beat the Celtics without wing defenders, and now New York has a bunch of them. Last January, after the Knicks traded for OG Anunoby, they went on a 12–2 tear and were terrifying. Now they've added Mikal Bridges from Brooklyn. He's versatile, can defend three positions and shoot the three. He'll thrive playing off of Jalen Brunson. The Knicks can send out a death lineup like Golden State's. They can go super small with Bridges, Anunoby and Josh Hart in the frontcourt. This is a Tom Thibodeau type of team, with a bunch of big-time defenders who don't mind playing heavy minutes. ... Julius Randle has to play center. Mitchell Robinson is a good rim protector, but their best lineup is going to be Randle, the three wings and Brunson.

The **Celtics** are as well-equipped to repeat as any team since the Warriors at their peak. They have no weaknesses. They can put huge runs on you offensively and lock you down defensively. Their chemistry is excellent. You just have to pray they fall off. You have to hope Kristaps Porziņģis isn't healthy and that Father Time catches up with Al Horford. That would leave them weak in the middle. Maybe hope that Jrue Holiday's shooting falls off. They didn't play many close games last year, so maybe if you play them close, you have a shot. If you are physical with them, you have a shot. But they are ridiculously good. ... I wasn't surprised Porziņģis fit as well as he did. There are only a handful of bigs who can shoot threes and defend the rim like he does. His shooting opened up the floor for Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown to drive.

BROCK WILLIAMS-SMITH/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

HOW THEY'LL FINISH



NEW YORK KNICKS
OVER / UNDER /// 53.5 WINS

The 'Nova Knicks added a fourth former Wildcat this season in Mikal Bridges. With Bridges, OG Anunoby and Josh Hart, New York now has a perimeter defense that matches up with the Celtics' offense.



BOSTON CELTICS
OVER / UNDER /// 58.5 WINS

While Kristaps Porziņģis's foot injury may slow down the defending champs over the first half of the schedule, these Celts should be as formidable as the team that went 16–3 in last season's playoffs.



PHILADELPHIA 76ERS
OVER / UNDER /// 52.5 WINS

Paul George brings scoring, playmaking and defense on the wing. But will the former Clipper be enough to get the Sixers past the second round of the postseason for the first time in the Joel Embiid era?



Jalen
Brunson

Paul George is a good fit with the **76ers**. He can play on the ball or off the ball, and that's what they need. The last couple of years of that contract [four years, \$212 million] could be a little messy, but they don't care. They are trying to win now.... The Sixers will go as far as Joel Embiid takes them. He hasn't elevated his play enough in the playoffs. All the limping he does, I think it's just an excuse to blame injuries.... I love Tyrese Maxey. He's a better shooter than I thought he would be. He plays hard, and he has a great spirit about him.... Caleb Martin was a nice pickup. He'll get you some offensive rebounds, guard a few positions. I liked Kelly Oubre Jr. last year, but I think Martin gets a lot of his minutes. He's better.

The **Raptors** have some good pieces. They're just not good enough. Scottie Barnes is a hell of a defender, but it's hard to see him as a franchise guy when he can't really score. I see him as a Mikal Bridges type. There's nothing wrong with that. But Bridges couldn't be the guy in Brooklyn. I don't think Barnes is the guy in Toronto.... RJ Barrett is good starter. He gets to the rim, he shoots free throws, he works hard. He just hasn't been a consistent shooter, and I don't know if he will ever be.... Immanuel Quickley is solid, too. But he's not a switch guy. He can guard ones and twos, but that's it.... They just don't have anyone you'd consider special.

The **Nets** are tanking. It's obvious they don't want to win. Look at their roster. I like Nic Claxton. He can switch, he can rebound offensively. He has a little bit of an offensive game. But is he a top-10 big? I don't think so. He doesn't pass, and he can't really shoot.... When Cam Thomas gets rolling, he can be tough to stop, but he has not had an impact on winning.... This is a team that needs a guy setting up shots for them. In theory Ben Simmons could be that guy, but who is counting on Ben Simmons? If he gives them 60 to 70 games, Brooklyn might surprise people. But if he's the same injured Simmons, this is one of the worst teams in the league. □



TORONTO RAPTORS

OVER / UNDER /// 30.5 WINS

The Raptors are rebuilding—or are they? Toronto's collection of 20-somethings appears to be not good enough to make the playoffs but not bad enough to put Toronto in the mix for the draft's top pick.



BROOKLYN NETS

OVER / UNDER /// 18.5 WINS

Will Ben Simmons bounce back? Doesn't matter. Even a revived Simmons, who has played only 57 games the last three seasons, won't be enough to lift the Nets from the bottom of the standings.



EASTERN CONFERENCE

CENTRAL

An opposing team's scout breaks down the division

▶ **JUST BEFORE** last season started, the **Bucks** acquired Damian Lillard, and everything felt rushed. Then they fired Adrian Griffin in January and the whole thing was a mess. A healthy Dame is still pretty elite, but he has aged a little. Young Dame had this quickness that was next level. I'm not saying it's all gone, but we haven't seen that since his groin injury in 2021–22. ... Giannis Antetokounmpo is still a beast, but he's got to return to championship form and be more dominant. ... They've added decent role players in Taurean Prince and Gary Trent Jr. ... Khris Middleton has definitely dropped down a bit, but some of that is injuries. ... Brook Lopez adds a uniqueness to their offense with his floor spacing, and defensively he's still a great rim protector. Bobby Portis is really good, but when he's in, you don't have any rim protection.

There's a lot of overlap in that Donovan Mitchell-Darius Garland backcourt for the **Cavaliers**. Neither is a true point guard, and they don't have size defensively. Mitchell is a volume-scoring wing. And volume scorers never do well with scoring point guards. Also, they essentially start two fives, so it's not just the backcourt, it's also the way the rest of the team is designed. ... I don't love the Evan Mobley-Jarrett Allen pairing, mostly because Mobley didn't make threes last year. Defensively it's good, but the NBA is about scoring and spacing now. You're in these track meets with teams that are trying to outscore you. And if you've got a guy that's shooting twos, death by post-up doesn't win you many games.

The **Pacers** were super impressive last year. They've committed to a way of playing that's elite

DYLAN BUELL/GETTY IMAGES

HOW THEY'LL FINISH



MILWAUKEE BUCKS
OVER / UNDER /// 50.5 WINS

A roster overhaul, a midseason coaching switch to Doc Rivers and playoff injuries spelled doom in 2023–24. Better health and continuity will show what Giannis and Dame are capable of together.



CLEVELAND CAVALIERS
OVER / UNDER /// 48.5 WINS

New coach Kenny Atkinson is charged with reviving an offense that finished 18th in efficiency last season. A key to that is Evan Mobley, who shot 37.3% from three but averaged only 1.2 attempts.



INDIANA PACERS
OVER / UNDER /// 47.5 WINS

A run-and-gun offense that was second in efficiency propelled the Pacers to the conference finals last season. Improving a defense that ranked 24th could help them take that tough next step.





Tyrese
Haliburton

offensively, and they have the shooting and a motor in Tyrese Haliburton to do it. They're willing to go toe-to-toe and try to outscore you. To me, that's a style that can win.... Pascal Siakam, who was acquired in a January trade, had a good little roll in the playoffs. I thought he found a niche that really helped them, mixing in some early post-ups.... Their defense needs to come way up. They do have some good pieces, and Andrew Nembhard has proven to be super elite on-ball. Aaron Nesmith is not a true shutdown defender, but he can do enough. I like him.... Bennedict Mathurin is a pretty good weapon off the bench. We'll see if he has the work ethic to make a jump this year.

Where should I start with the **Pistons**? Lack of shooting, lack of experience, inconsistent health. Cade Cunningham is closer to a combo guard than a true point guard, but he's not quick or athletic enough, especially on defense. The biggest question is, can he stay healthy? ...Jalen Duren has a high ceiling, but he has a lot of work to do. Right now he does a little bit of everything not very well.... Ausar Thompson can be good if he can figure out a jump shot. He is an elite defender.... Jaden Ivey is a great kid and an athletic beast. If he can develop a shot, the game will open up for him.... They added a good locker room leader in Tobias Harris. His veteran presence should really help those young guys.

The **Bulls** traded for Josh Giddey, who still has a big upside. He's a great passer, he's physical, aggressive on defense. His shot hasn't improved very much, but I do think he'll benefit from being a primary ball-handler.... Coby White has the potential to be an elite combo guard, and it seemed like it was clicking last year. He was shooting it well.... I don't know how Zach LaVine fits with this group. He's a volume scorer who doesn't move the win column.... They have a bunch of guys that I'm just not sure about. Patrick Williams is intriguing. Ayo Dosunmu is pretty good. But those are more glue guys than anything, and they're not really gluing anything together in Chicago. □



DETROIT PISTONS
OVER / UNDER /// 24.5 WINS

J.B. Bickerstaff will be the Pistons' third coach in three years. He and a revamped front office led by Trajan Langdon must somehow unlock the potential of the young talent Detroit has been collecting.



CHICAGO BULLS
OVER / UNDER /// 27.5 WINS

Will Lonzo Ball finally get back on the court after missing two-plus seasons with a knee injury? The return of a healthy and effective Ball would be a refreshing dose of good news for this franchise.



EASTERN CONFERENCE

SOUTHEAST

An opposing team's scout breaks down the division

► **PAOLO BANCHERO** is a true No. 1 option for the **Magic**. He's good enough and moves well enough at his size [6'10", 250 pounds] that you have to base your defense around him. The only thing that can stand in his way is his shot, but it was a little better last season and should continue to improve... Franz Wagner is pretty legit as a top option, too. He can be soft and a bit of baby, but offensively he's really skilled... Kentavious Caldwell-Pope is a great addition. KCP fits almost anywhere, but Orlando already has two ball-dominant scorers in Banchero and Wagner, so he can just space the floor... Overall the backcourt is pretty solid. Jalen Suggs is a really good defender, tough on the ball, like a lot of guys on that team. Their length is huge. They give up a limited number of threes and play decent paint defense.

Caleb Martin is a big loss for the **Heat** because we're in a league now where it's all about positionless basketball... The player I think will step up is Haywood Highsmith. He's been solid in that classic Miami mold... Nikola Jović is another guy who could make a little bit of a jump this year... I love Jaime Jaquez Jr. He has a great feel offensively, and he's a pit bull defensively... The Terry Rozier-Tyler Herro backcourt is scary and not in a good way. They are both defensive liabilities. Both are best suited to be volume scorers, and that's not necessarily what's needed there... The Heat have Jimmy Butler, Herro and Rozier, and then they're going to surround them with Miami guys. Is that enough to carry them? And the lack of size scares me a little, too. Bam Adebayo is awesome, but after that, who do they have?

MEGAN BRIGGS/GETTY IMAGES

HOW THEY'LL FINISH



ORLANDO MAGIC
OVER / UNDER /// 48.5 WINS

Kentavious Caldwell-Pope adds needed shooting and a veteran presence to the locker room. After getting back to the playoffs last season, this could be the year the Paolo Banchero-led Magic bust out.



MIAMI HEAT
OVER / UNDER /// 44.5 WINS

Jimmy Butler is in a contract year, Caleb Martin is gone. The Heat have overcome a lot in the Erik Spoelstra era, but Miami will need big step-ups from Jaime Jaquez Jr. and Nikola Jović to avoid the play-in.



CHARLOTTE HORNETS
OVER / UNDER /// 29.5 WINS

The Hornets haven't made the postseason since 2016, but with a healthy LaMelo Ball and growth from second-year swingman Brandon Miller, they could at least make a run at a play-in spot.



Bam Adebayo

Brandon Miller looks like he's going to be really good for the **Hornets**. He has the potential to be a star, and everything you hear is that his work ethic is phenomenal. ...I don't think LaMelo Ball can be a franchise point guard. Defensively he's a complete liability, and offensively there's no consistency to his game. He seems kind of lost between being a true point guard or a volume scorer. It just seems like he's constantly trying to make razzle-dazzle plays. ...Miles Bridges, before his suspension, developed a nice niche as a ball-handling wing. And even though he doesn't shoot it amazingly well, he's lefty, unorthodox and can create his own shot. If he can get back to what he was when James Borrego was coaching him, he's a real pain in the ass—in a good way.

Blowing up the Dejounte Murray-Trae Young backcourt was the right call for the **Hawks**. Murray is very comfortable running a team, and that was kind of an impossible task with Trae. That's no knock against [Murray], but Trae's got to run your team. ...Trae has proven he is not the franchise guy. He's a volume scorer who can be really potent. But can he do enough alone to beat you? Not consistently. ...Jalen Johnson is very good. Obviously, he's super young still, but he's a versatile wing who can shoot, drive and play positionless basketball, going from small-ball five to even playing the three.

The **Wizards** are a weird mix. They have a bunch of players on two different timelines. Kyle Kuzma ideally is a second or third scorer on a really good team. I don't think he's suited to be the No. 1 scoring option. ...Jordan Poole's best role is as a sixth man. Being the go-to guy is not for him. He got his opportunity to do that last year and failed. He's got to evolve into something else. ...Bilal Coulibaly showed some promise as a rookie. There's real potential there. ...Corey Kispert can shoot it. I'd like to see them give him a lot of minutes, see what he can do. But how many minutes are these young guys going to get when there are veterans ahead of them? □



ATLANTA HAWKS
OVER / UNDER /// 35.5 WINS

Trading away Dejounte Murray ended a two-year backcourt experiment—and signaled the start of a rebuild. Is Trae Young the next to go? Jalen Johnson and No. 1 pick Zaccharie Risacher are the future in Atlanta.



WASHINGTON WIZARDS
OVER / UNDER /// 20.5 WINS

Is Jordan Poole a starter? A sixth man? An overpaid gunner? After having endured a disastrous first season of his four-year, \$128 million contract extension, the rebuilding Wizards need to find out.



WESTERN CONFERENCE

NORTHWEST

An opposing team's scout breaks down the division

► **THE SUPER-TALENTED** and super-deep **Thunder** are led by the NBA's most consistent scorer, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander. Shai doesn't have to handle it to score, he can also play off the ball. He's had another ballhandler out there in Jalen Williams and now you give him one more in Alex Caruso—that's going to make him more dangerous. When they are bad, it is just Shai initiating everything. ... I love the totality of Williams's game—his size, his scoring ability, his vision. Shai is their best scorer, but their best all-around player? It's this kid. ... The new guys, Caruso and Isaiah Hartenstein, they're going to fit anywhere they go. Caruso is a better fit in OKC than Josh Giddey was. ... Chet Holmgren shoots the s--- out of it. If that's his role, then he's really good at it. ... Mark Daigneault has done a great job hiding everybody's weaknesses

and showing all their strengths, putting them in the positions they need to be successful.

The **Timberwolves** are basically running it back, and that's the right move. They have a great starting five, but I just don't know about their depth. ... Anthony Edwards is one of my favorite players. He's physical. He's got that mentality of *I'm good, and I'm coming out to kill you. I'm going to get mine, and me and you one-on-one, I'm going to beat you every time.* He's goofy and stuff, but man, he has that competitive edge. ... Rudy Gobert is fine. The criticism he gets is dumb. Just rebound, block shots and guard—he's definitely earning his contract with that, especially while having a guy like Karl-Anthony Towns next to him. I mean, Towns could be the worst defensive player in the league.

TIM HELTMAN/GETTY IMAGES

HOW THEY'LL FINISH



OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER
OVER / UNDER /// 56.5 WINS

Already a 57-win team loaded with young talent, OKC added a three-and-D wing defender (Alex Caruso) as well as a relentless center (Isaiah Hartenstein) to shore up its rebounding woes.



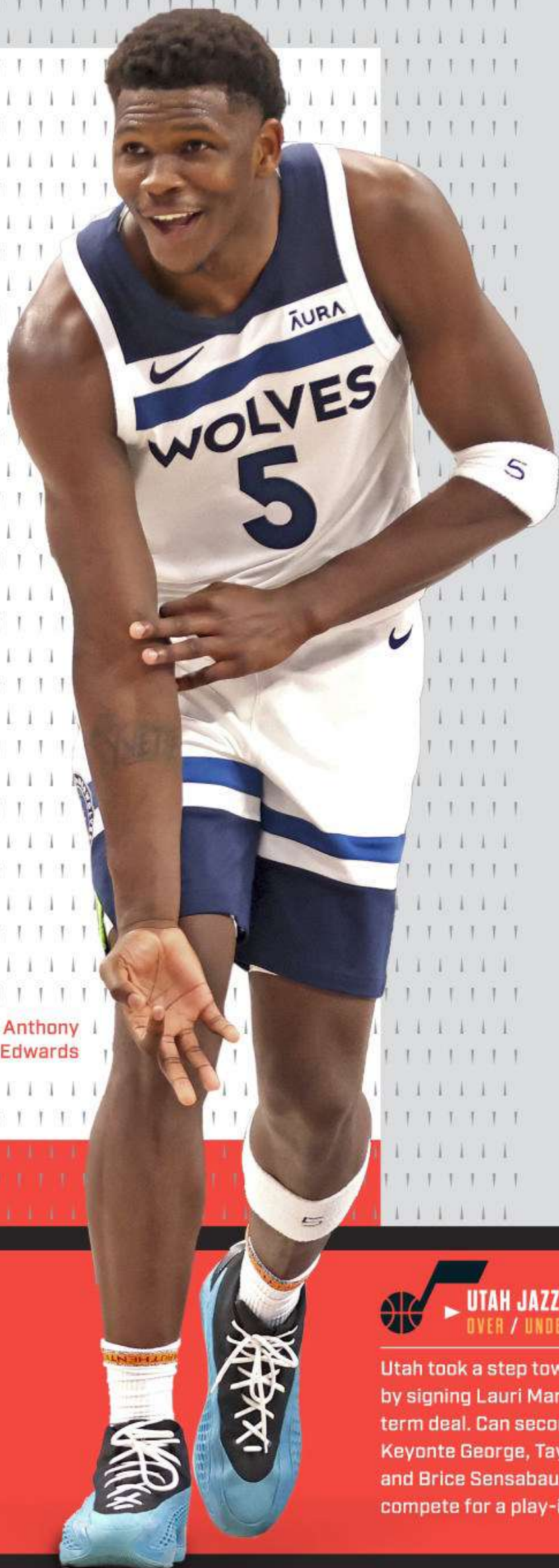
MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES
OVER / UNDER /// 52.5 WINS

Anthony Edwards is a superstar. But is Karl-Anthony Towns? He struggled against Dallas in the conference finals. The T-Wolves need consistent two-way play from the 10-year vet to advance in a crowded West.



DENVER NUGGETS
OVER / UNDER /// 51.5 WINS

The exodus from the 2022-23 championship team continues, with Kentavious Caldwell-Pope following Bruce Brown and Jeff Green out the door. Denver's young players need to respond to increased responsibility.



Anthony Edwards

I can see the **Nuggets** collapsing. They just keep losing guys. They will miss Kentavious Caldwell-Pope. He was a great glue guy. I like Christian Braun, but KCP was a perfect fit alongside Nikola Jokić and Jamal Murray. ... Julian Strawther can score. He moves well without the ball. That's the kind of player you like with Jokić. The issue is, Strawther doesn't have much of a focus on the defensive side of the ball. ... Michael Porter Jr. just isn't a starter. He's got to be an off-the-bench guy—go get your buckets—because he's never passed and he's just literally looking for himself. ... Their second unit is shaky.

I liked what the **Jazz** had going a couple seasons ago. Then they brought in John Collins last year and slid Lauri Markkanen over to the three. Markkanen was at his best when he was playing the four. Everybody kept trying to make him a three before, in Cleveland and in Chicago. They finally made him a four in Utah, and I was like, *Wow, this is what he is.* ... I'm not sure why they haven't traded Jordan Clarkson. Just move him to a playoff team for a first-round pick. It's confusing as hell with what they're trying to do. Either rebuild or not. It's almost like Danny Ainge is just collecting pieces and waiting to make some move.

I love the **Trail Blazers'** Shaedon Sharpe. I think he has the most upside to grow for them, along with Toumani Camara. ... The major question mark is Scoot Henderson. Not playing in Summer League was notable. It made me think they were hiding him because they know the second he gets on that floor and isn't producing the way he should, the asset value nose-dives. ... Deandre Ayton is a good scoring center. I look at where they're at and don't see why they wouldn't go with the kid [Donovan Clingan] they just drafted. ... The situation with Chauncey Billups is a mess. He's in the last year of his contract. The front office doesn't want to win. They want to develop the young guys and be in a position for the No. 1 pick. They let go of two of his assistants, including his brother, and didn't give him an extension. It could get ugly there. □



UTAH JAZZ
OVER / UNDER /// 29.5 WINS

Utah took a step towards credibility by signing Lauri Markkanen to a long-term deal. Can second-year players Keyonte George, Taylor Hendricks and Brice Sensabaugh help the team compete for a play-in berth?



PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS
OVER / UNDER /// 22.5 WINS

The Blazers have an awkward mix of veterans [Deandre Ayton, Jerami Grant] and developing players [Scoot Henderson, Shaedon Sharpe]. That makes them the early leaders in the Cooper Flagg sweepstakes.



WESTERN CONFERENCE

PACIFIC

An opposing team's scout breaks down the division

► **INJURIES SCREWED** up the **Suns** last season. It felt like Bradley Beal never really got his feet under him, but he's a very good player. ... Kevin Durant and Devin Booker are competitors. They'll be motivated to bounce back from last year. ... Booker did the best he could as a point guard. The hardest thing in basketball is creating for others while still looking for your shot. Signing Tyus Jones was smart. I'm guessing they did that to have a facilitator and let the others get back to their roles. ... They missed Deandre Ayton. And I don't think new coach Mike Budenholzer will like Jusuf Nurkić. Bud had skilled big guys with Al Horford in Atlanta and Brook Lopez in Milwaukee. Nurkić doesn't fit that mold. ... Grayson Allen shot the heck out of the ball last year. And he has a comfort level with Bud from their Milwaukee days. That matters.

There's so much pressure on Stephen Curry and Draymond Green to carry a heavy load for the **Warriors**. Steph was something last year. He's going to have to play out of his mind again for this team to be competitive, but I think he still has it in him. ... The young guys have to step up. Brandin Podziemski is a tough sucker. He's not scared, he's physical. He just has a really good competitive character. As a rookie, Trayce Jackson-Davis was a legit rim threat by the end of last season. I'm sure they are hoping to expand that role for him. And Jonathan Kuminga and Moses Moody just need to show a little more consistency. We'll be able to tell a lot this year because I do think that Klay Thompson cast a big shadow on all those other guys. And with Klay gone, they're going to be given more opportunity.

BARRY GOSSAGE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

HOW THEY'LL FINISH



PHOENIX SUNS
OVER / UNDER /// 47.5 WINS

Mike Budenholzer, who won a title with the Bucks, has been tapped to squeeze more out of an awkward-fitting Big Three. Tyus Jones arrives as the true point guard the Suns were lacking last season.



GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS
OVER / UNDER /// 43.5 WINS

Are three better than one? That's what the Warriors are hoping, after acquiring Buddy Hield, Kyle Anderson and De'Anthony Melton to help fill the void left by the free agent departure of Klay Thompson.



SACRAMENTO KINGS
OVER / UNDER /// 46.5 WINS

After a disappointing play-in loss last year, the Kings turn to DeMar DeRozan—a curious fit in Sacramento's high-octane offense—to attempt to get past the first round for the first time since 2004.

Devin
Booker



The DeMar DeRozan signing by Sacramento was interesting. The **Kings** are challenging to prepare for because of the pace that they play at, the speed of De'Aaron Fox, the quick decision-making of Domantas Sabonis and their ball movement. And DeRozan is difficult to prepare for because his style is the exact opposite of those things. He is not ever in a hurry. It's not a combination that is naturally complementary. But great players figure things out, and he does give them someone to get a bucket at the end of the shot clock.... Sabonis's defensive issues are real. He's competitive, he's physical. He's just not big enough to have the impact at the rim.

Watching LeBron James and Anthony Davis this summer, two of the best players on the Olympic team, you just wonder how the **Lakers** are not better. The goal is to surround great players with the right fits, and L.A. hasn't done that.... I like Jarred Vanderbilt. He will improve the defense. When LeBron was younger it was like, *Put shooters around him*. But now that the three-pointer is more a part of his game, that gives the Lakers the flexibility to add guys who aren't three-point threats but are really high-level defenders.... D'Angelo Russell is not a defender and he can be streaky. He's way more suited for a sixth man role.... I thought it was a little arrogant of JJ Redick not to coach at Summer League. He needed the reps, and he didn't do it.

Losing Paul George is huge for the **Clippers**. This increases the pressure on Kawhi Leonard, who health-wise is the most unreliable star in the league. When Kawhi plays, he still has it. If he played 70, 75 games, he could be the MVP.... James Harden doesn't finish the way he used to. There's no lift. If the Clippers are trying to win something, more Harden isn't the answer.... Derrick Jones Jr. had a good playoff run in Dallas, but he's not a PG-level defender.... I love Norman Powell. He's an athlete that guards. This could be a good opportunity for him to take on more, like he did in Toronto. □



LOS ANGELES LAKERS
OVER / UNDER /// 43.5 WINS

All-NBA seasons from LeBron James and Anthony Davis weren't enough to get the Lakers into the playoffs last season. Will a healthier bench and a first-time coach hired out of the broadcast booth make a difference?



LOS ANGELES CLIPPERS
OVER / UNDER /// 40.5 WINS

If Kawhi Leonard can stay healthy, if James Harden can handle a larger role, if the Clippers' offseason signings (Derrick Jones Jr., Kevin Porter Jr., Kris Dunn, Mo Bamba) pan out, L.A. should... make the playoffs.



WESTERN CONFERENCE

SOUTHWEST

An opposing team's scout breaks down the division

► **KLAY THOMPSON** is a massive addition for the **Mavericks**. They need somebody who can play without the basketball because Luka Dončić wants the ball the whole time—or else Kyrie Irving has it. And you can't help off of Klay. They could put up a lot of points. But they're going to be overmatched on the perimeter on defense. Klay just doesn't move laterally at all anymore. ... I really liked Dereck Lively II last year. He and Daniel Gafford inside will clean up a lot of stuff defensively. ... I love Naji Marshall, who they signed from New Orleans. He is a hard-nosed, do-everything kind of guy, and he shoots the ball really well. He can guard one through four. ... Kyrie just looked happy last year. You saw less of the drama. He looked much more team-focused. And you didn't just hear all the bulls---

The **Grizzlies** are interesting to me. They have a swagger, but they haven't really earned it. They remind me a little bit of how the Celtics were before they won the title, where it was like, *You act like you've won three championships, but you haven't won one.* ... There's a lot of pressure in Memphis. I think Taylor Jenkins has done a good job, but they made him fire most of his assistants. That's usually not a good sign. ... **Ja Morant** is still really dynamic. His teammates all seem like they f---ing love him. ... **I like Marcus Smart**, but I think he's overrated. He's never been a really good shooter, and he makes dumb decisions a lot of times. ... **They can be a tough regular-season team**, but their lack of shooting is really going to hurt them. Luke Kennard is so important for them, even though he can't guard, because he can actually make a shot.

JONATHAN BACHMAN/GETTY IMAGES

HOW THEY'LL FINISH



DALLAS MAVERICKS
OVER / UNDER /// 49.5 WINS

Klay Thompson, a career 41.3% three-point shooter, will be a welcome addition for the defending conference champs, who are also looking for a breakout second season from Dereck Lively II.



MEMPHIS GRIZZLIES
OVER / UNDER /// 47.5 WINS

Rookie Zach Edey will take pressure off Jaren Jackson Jr. in the frontcourt, while Ja Morant and costars Desmond Bane and Brandon Clarke will look to bounce back from an injury-riddled 2023-24.



NEW ORLEANS PELICANS
OVER / UNDER /// 48.5 WINS

Dejounte Murray, acquired from Atlanta, beefs up an already sturdy defense while Brandon Ingram, entering a contract year, must convince the New Orleans brass that he fits alongside Zion Williamson.

Zion
Williamson



The **Pelicans** are so incomplete with their lack of a center. They're going to have to put Herb Jones on centers defensively, and look to switch a bunch, and try to hide Zion Williamson elsewhere. ... Zion and Brandon Ingram do work together, to an extent, but the issue is that they told Ingram, 'We're going to get you out of here [in a trade],' and then they didn't. They have to try to move him or CJ McCollum, but I don't see either of those things happening. ... And I'm not in love with Dejounte Murray either. He's an upgrade over CJ, but he's not the answer to all their problems.

Ime Udoka got through to the **Rockets** last year. He brought consistency and accountability. Fred VanVleet really helped them, too. You can quibble over whether he is worth [his three-year, \$128 million salary] or not, but he makes good decisions, and he gets guys on the same page. ... The question is, how do they improve? Is Jalen Green going to take another step? Jabari Smith Jr. has talent, but he's not really a priority there. If you've got to play [No. 3 pick] Reed Sheppard, you're probably going to get your teeth kicked in a little bit in his minutes. ... I'm not in love with Alperen Şengün the way others are. He's a bad defender, he's going to score points, but is he making the team better?

Last year with the **Spurs**, we saw the worst Victor Wembanyama is ever going to be, and he looked like a top-25 player. He got better as the season went on. To me, it seems like he's about the right things and committed to playing the right way. He has not looked like the shooter that people have acted like he is, but he's going to be really good. ... Chris Paul is near the end of his career, but anyone is better than Jeremy Sochan at point guard. You can still play Sochan, but I'm not sure how well he fits with Wembanyama. I would rather not have Wembanyama be a fake point guard, but [they should] have the ball with him more. If he fails, he fails, but that's going to be the future of the team. It's not to let Sochan back down a defender or let Keldon Johnson isolate. That's not what this team needs to be. □



HOUSTON ROCKETS
OVER / UNDER /// 43.5 WINS

Alperen Şengün averaged 21.1 points, 9.3 boards and 5.0 assists last year, but when he was hurt the Rockets went on a run—with Jalen Green taking the lead. Can the two young talents successfully coexist?



SAN ANTONIO SPURS
OVER / UNDER /// 36.5 WINS

The Spurs added a point guard [Chris Paul] and a veteran scorer [Harrison Barnes]. That sets the stage for a big sophomore season for Victor Wembanyama—and perhaps a surprising one in San Antonio.



UConn
NCAA NATIONAL CHAMPIONS
11 WOMEN'S BASKETBALL
6 MEN'S BASKETBALL
5 FIELD HOCKEY
3 MEN'S SOCCER

Welcome to
CONNECTICUT
Home of the
Basketball Capital
of the World
Governor Ned Lamont

photo illustration by
THE SPORTING PRESS



by
**MICHAEL
ROSENBERG**



What's In Storrs

A small town in the Nutmeg State seems an unlikely home for not one but two college basketball powerhouses. But **UCONN IS THRIVING** because of, not in spite of, its sleepy setting



HELLO, AND thank you for your interest in Connecticut basketball! We hope you enjoy your trip to Storrs, a town that proves that even in a tiny, densely populated state, you can be in the middle of nowhere. Before your official visit, please note:

On your way into the town of Storrs, you will pass through an intersection known as the Four Corners, which was named because—here is a bit of campus lore—it has four corners. Yes, so do most intersections. But ours also has a combination Dunkin’/pizza joint/gas station. Yes, so do most intersections in New England. But ours also has a Dick’s (Auto Care, not Sporting Goods) as well as... um...

Anyway: All the greenery serves as camouflage, but we trust you’ll find our campus eventually. It is truly quite lovely. Please allow yourself a moment to picture a young Geno Auriemma arriving here 40 years ago for his first head coaching job, ready to build one of the great dynasties in sports history. You can almost hear his pitch to prospects...

“We’re not in a recruiting area where a lot of players are growing up,” Auriemma said recently. “We are not in a major city or major community, so to speak. We didn’t have a great arena on campus. The university itself was a commuter school, pretty much. I can’t think of any positives that there would have been, 40 years ago, to come to school here.”

Ah, well, that was then. This is now, according to our men’s coach, Dan Hurley:

“You’re not going to get seduced by the weather or major city or the geography.”

Moving right along: While you are here, you might want to attend a tailgate at our beautiful on-campus football stadium. Great idea! But we don’t have an on-campus football stadium.

To understand how unusual that is: In the last 34 years, 23 schools have won at least one men’s or women’s basketball championship. Twenty-one of them have on-campus football stadiums. The exceptions are UCLA, which plays in the Rose Bowl, and UConn, which does not play in

DOUBLE FEATURE

Twenty-one years after the Huskies’ first men’s and women’s titles, Karaban and Bueckers (right) will each have their teams contending.



THIS SPREAD: JEFFERY A. SALTER (2); PREVIOUS SPREAD: MANNY MILLAN (OKAFOR, TAURAS); DAVID E. KLUTHO (HAMILTON, STEWART); JOHN BIEVER (CALHOUN, MOORE); BOB ROSATO (WALKER); ROBERT BECK (BIRD); AL TIELEMANS (TEAM CELEBRATION); JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES (HURLEY, CHERLEADERS); ELSA/GETTY IMAGES (AURIEMMA, CHERLEADERS); JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES (LOBO); BRIAN MURPHY/ICDN SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (BUECKERS); ROY ROCHLIN/GETTY IMAGES FOR EMPIRE STATE REALTY TRUST (HUSKY); ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY IMAGES (TROPHY); CHRIS CUDUTO/GETTY IMAGES (FANS); ROB CARR/GETTY IMAGES (CHERLEADERS WITH SIGNS); DAVID BUTLER II/IMAGN IMAGES (KARABAN)



UCONN
11

UCONN
5

BE THE CHANGE

BIG EAST

BE THE CHANGE

BIG EAST

UCONN

the Rose Bowl. Even Villanova's football team, which competes in the FCS, has a campus stadium. Ours plays in East Hartford, 25 miles west of campus, which saves us the trouble of asking 25,000 people to turn right at the Four Corners stoplight to get to a game.

What we have in abundance here at UConn is banners. Since 1995, our women have won 11 national championships, while our men have won six—as many as Duke and North Carolina combined.

You might wonder: How did this tiny, unglamorous outpost become the self-proclaimed Basketball Capital of the World?

It seems like a mystery, but it's more of a riddle: The answer lies in the question.

"No one," Hurley says, "picks UConn for the wrong reasons."

H EY, YOU made it! Good. Now pull up a chair. We're going to tell you a story about the old days. But only one, we promise. This isn't Kentucky.

When Auriemma took the UConn job in 1985 and saw that he had so little to sell, he had a realization: UConn's apparent shortcomings served as a recruiting filter. Players who wanted glitz or sunshine or a storied basketball arena chose other schools, while, as he recalls, "we got kids that didn't care about any of that." The same thing was happening with the men's program under Jim Calhoun. Whether you were a man or a woman, the main reason to choose UConn back then was because you wanted to play basketball for the Huskies' coach.

It is still the main reason. Since 1995, when the UConn women went unbeaten and won their first national title, Auriemma has had access to as much talent as any program in the country. But that can be a trap. Plenty of coaches have stockpiled elite recruits with the belief they could shoehorn anybody into their culture, only to find, as Auriemma says, that "you take all the best, then you realize all the best, they're not all the best pieces." He started out recruiting scrappers other schools didn't want. Since '95, he has recruited scrappers everybody else did want.

"Breanna Stewart is exactly like Rebecca Lobo," Auriemma says. "Not as a player. But cut her open, and you've got the exact same thing inside both of those people. Paige Bueckers is exactly like



Diana Taurasi: Cut them open, they're exactly the same person. Tina Charles was exactly like Stefanie Dolson. Different style of play, different backgrounds, whatever you want to call it... [but] here?"

He taps his hand on his chest.

"*Exactly the same.* So when people say, 'How do you go and maintain it?' You're getting the same kid over and over and over again."

It is a formula Hurley is applying now, after having won the last two national titles.

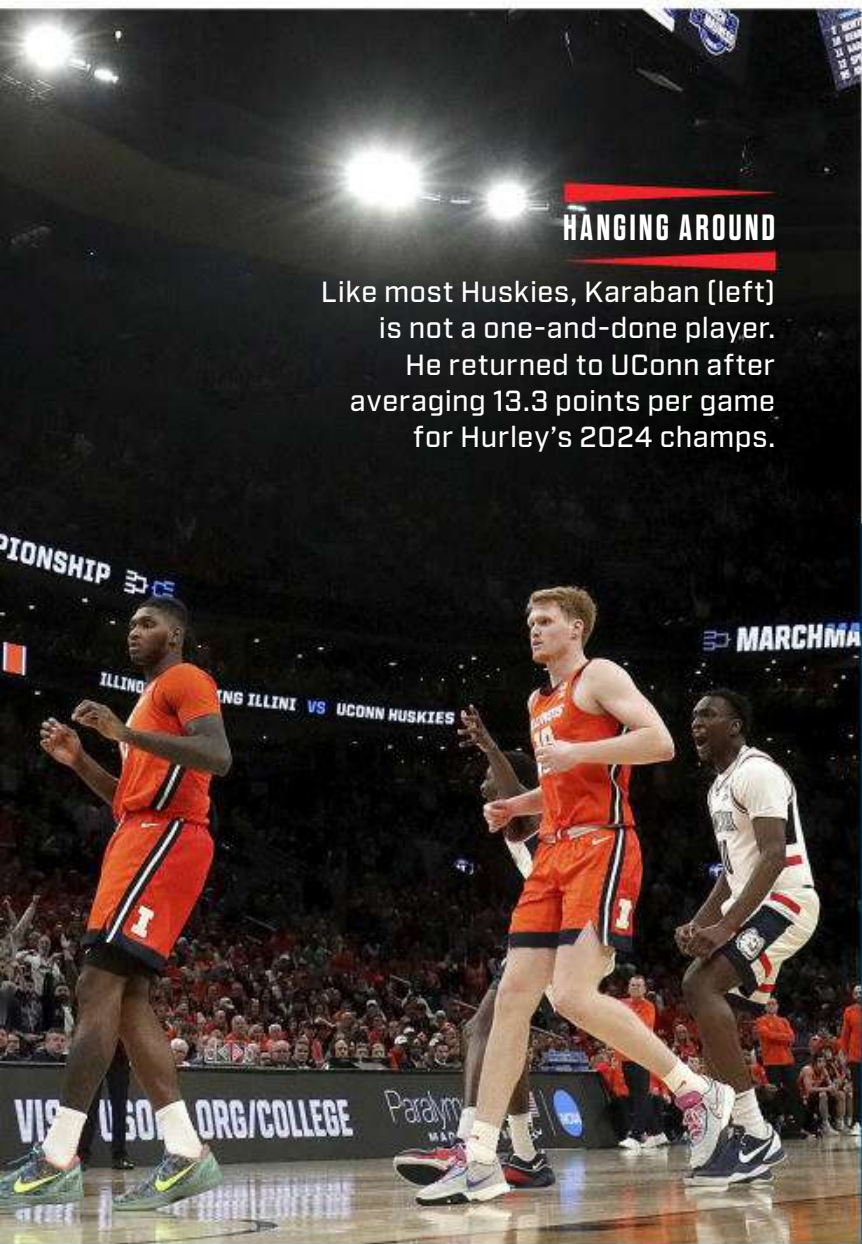
"Every player in the country wants us to recruit them now," he says. "That doesn't mean that every one of them wants to come here or believes in the way that we do it."

The way that they do it is many things: creative, intelligent, educational. But mostly it is hard.

BARRY CHIN/THE BOSTON GLOBE/GETTY IMAGES (KARABANI); JAMIE SCHWABERDOW/NCAA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (HURLEY)

HANGING AROUND

Like most Huskies, Karaban (left) is not a one-and-done player. He returned to UConn after averaging 13.3 points per game for Hurley's 2024 champs.



“We purposely don’t try to **FOOL ANYONE** into coming here,” says Hurley. “It attracts serious people.”

Come watch for yourself.
 We insist.
 No, really: *We insist.*

SOME PROGRAMS recruit with sugar and coach with salt. Here at UConn, we prefer to sell you the salt up front. It’s more efficient.

“We purposely don’t try to fool anyone into coming here,” Hurley says. “I don’t have a great comfort level with a kid unless they’ve seen us practice a couple of times. You come and you watch us practice on an official visit, you see how hard we go. You’ve got to make a decision on whether you want to be in an environment like this. It attracts serious people—people that are serious about basketball.”

The NCAA regulates how much teams can

practice, but not how hard. Hurley gets four hours a week in the summer, and every minute is as intense as any in-season session.

You might notice that he does not give his team water breaks. Water, sure. But not breaks. Managers run bottles out to players during drills. He also does not pause so players can practice free throws, or to blowtorch their effort. He says, “I think the longest I’ve stopped the practice since I’ve been in Connecticut is maybe 20 seconds—maybe 25.” He might gather them for a collective scolding when they’re done, but during practice, it’s *go, go, go*.

It’s also *teach, teach, teach*. Auriemma, who spends the first 45 minutes of his practices on fundamentals, says—with admiration—that Hurley “coaches them like they’re in junior high.

He teaches them, like, ‘This is how you dribble a basketball.’ That’s why they’re so f---ing good. He takes high-level talent and coaches the absolute s--- out of them.”

You might think you’re the greatest player in the country, on your way to a long pro career, and you don’t need some coach showing you how to dribble. You might even be right. Good for you! Go somewhere else. “I’m a high school coach by trade,” Hurley says. “I think that players have become more versatile, but in the end, it comes down to catching with two hands and finishing strong and being smart and a good passer.”

Hurley looks like an uncaged beast during games: berating refs, even getting into it with opposing fans. But for the most part, he is screaming on behalf of his players, not at them. “I’m [like] the boxing trainer—I’m the hype man for my players,” he says. “If I’m yelling at my team on game night and yelling at players for shot selection and turning the ball over and different things, then I’m a s---y coach. I had ample time for that.”

Most women who choose UConn are making the most obvious choice, because no school has won more. But it’s also the most challenging: They are, essentially, asking the famously demanding Auriemma to push them with no guarantee



BASKETBALL LIFERS

Auriemma [above, right] has been in Storrs for nearly four decades, while Hurley grew up the son of a New Jersey high school coaching legend.

they will ever crack the lineup. Auriemma compares them to grads pursuing an acting career. One might say, “I’m going to Omaha, Nebraska. I want to be a stage actress.” His response: “Really? O.K. The other kid says, ‘I’m moving to New York, and I’m gonna try to make it on Broadway.’ ‘Holy s---. Are you kidding me? You know how hard that’s gonna be? You know what you’re gonna have to go through? You know how much easier [it] would be someplace else?’ ‘Yeah, but it wouldn’t be Broadway.’”

South Carolina has won three titles since UConn last won one. But one could still argue that, in the women’s game, the way you get to Broadway is by turning right at the Four Corners.

“We have to fit them, and they have to fit us, and they have to want what we already have,” Auriemma says. “That’s what I realized: I can’t make you what you are not capable of being, regardless of how good you are. And those kids went to other schools and they beat our ass. So that’s fine, because they fit that school that they went to perfectly.”

This season, Auriemma plans to co-opt a slogan from the NBA champion Celtics: *Different here.*

“It doesn’t connote *It’s better here. It’s special here. We’re better than you are. We’re preordained to be better than you are,*” Auriemma says. “None of that s---. We haven’t won a national championship since 2016. That means [seven] other teams have. So there’s lots of ways that you can win, and there’s lots of great places out there to win [at]. It’s just different here.”

WHAT ABOUT NIL? you say. We’re so glad you asked!

You’ll have plenty of opportunities here. Bueckers was the first college athlete to sign a Gatorade deal. She and Alex Karaban both signed with Dunkin’.

So yes: You can make a lot of money playing for UConn. But if that’s why you want to come here, we have two words for you:

See ya.

“We don’t want NIL to be the driver,” Hurley says.

Hurley adds that he does not want to *lose* a recruit over NIL, either. But he has seen what has happened when players only care about grabbing the biggest bag: “You’re a mercenary. Maybe it’s

not the place you really, in your heart, wanted to go. That's a tough way to build a champion."

Geographically or athletically, Storrs is not a place you pass through. You come here to win. We even have a special committee of people to remind you of this, a group that we refer to as "everybody."

Huskies fans are intense. The local media can be relentless. The one constant since the 1980s is that people don't really aspire to have the flashiest team in the country. It's fine if they do. But they had better win while they're doing it.

"They demand that we not just put players in the NBA, but are playing championship-level basketball *and* put players in the NBA," Hurley says. "It really forces us as a coaching staff to recruit winners and pass on recruiting some talented players [who] may just use the program for 10 months, become a draft pick and not fight too hard to win for UConn."

The standard for Auriemma's team is unlike anything else in American sports.

"There's a shock when we lose," he says. "Last year, we were 4-3 before Christmas. All the stats start coming out, all the obscure stuff. You know, *The last time UConn women's basketball lost more than one game before Christmas was 37 years—whatever the hell the case may be.*"

There is a purity of basketball purpose in Storrs that you will not find anywhere else. Sure, people *say* basketball is the dominant sport on Tobacco Road, and it often feels that way. But North Carolina pays football coach Mack Brown almost twice as much as it pays men's basketball coach Hubert Davis, and for good reason: In college sports, football causes earthquakes, and every other sport must survive them. Duke-Stanford is now an ACC matchup because football blew up the Pac-12. Arizona has put forth four decades of men's basketball excellence, but when the Big Ten expanded to the West, it chose football schools.

Auriemma and Hurley both make more money than UConn football coach Jim Mora Jr. Hurley says, "We don't want our conference to be the driver," and it isn't. Huskies basketball is essentially realignment-proof: UConn bounced from the Big East to the American Athletic Conference, won national titles in men's and women's hoops, and then bounced back to the Big East and kept making Final Fours.

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WELL, YOUR visit is almost over. You're probably tired. Hey, UConn hoops has that effect on people. After a few hours at the Werth Family UConn Basketball Champions Center, you might want a little rest and relaxation. No problem! Just leave.

The key to the Werth Center, like the magic of Storrs, is what it *doesn't* have.

"There's no sauna," Auriemma says. "I mean, there's no beach volleyball s--- over here. There's no, you know, 15 pool tables and Ping-Pong machines, or whatever they're called—pinball

"I would hope that, after four years, you will have experienced the University of Connecticut," Auriemma says. "How do you do that if you spend 12 hours a day in here? I think you can have more influence on your players when you give them more freedom."

The men's and women's teams each have their own courts at the Werth Center. That way, they can practice whenever they like. But they share a dining room, an academic center and a weight room. This makes sense economically—15-person

"There's no PING-PONG MACHINES," Auriemma says. "This is a place where you come to work."



machines. No. This is a place where you come to work."

The Werth Center opened in 2014. Hurley arrived four years later. ("When I got here, it actually looked like a brand-new home with no furniture in it.") He revamped the weight room and improved players' nutrition. But he didn't install any beach volleyball s--- or, um, Ping-Pong machines. In a recruiting world that is full of gold bells and platinum whistles, Auriemma says: "You want to get your hair done? Go to a hair salon."

There are two reasons to turn a practice facility into an upscale resort. One is to impress recruits. But neither Hurley nor Auriemma want recruits who would be impressed by pool tables. The other reason is to keep players under the coach's thumb. They don't want that, either.

GUARDED OPTIMISM

With Bueckers and Azzi Fudd [35], Auriemma has an elite backcourt talented enough to end his seven-season national title drought.

teams do not need their own dining rooms—but also athletically.

The women feel as important as the men. The men understand they are not more important than the women. They are all forced to socialize with the students who are most likely to understand that, as Hurley says, "playing basketball here is an intense experience." When fall basketball practice begins, the UConn men and women hold a Midnight Madness event together, and



when the season starts, they attend each other's games. Auriemma says of the men: "They're basketball junkies." So are his players. The culture of each program reinforces the other's.

AS YOUR visit comes to an end, we have two tests for you.

The first is a simple pop quiz. Ready?

Name the only two schools to win national titles in men's and women's basketball in the same year.

That's right: UConn and UConn.

Now, a tougher one: In the past quarter century, what percentage of NCAA basketball championships has UConn won?

The answer: 32%.

O.K., that's the end of one test.

The other test started when you got here.

Every player and coach in the program was evaluating you. A lot of players are good enough to play for UConn, but not as many belong here. Hurley estimates that between 10% and 15% of the time, after a player visits, he stops recruiting him.

If you are in that 10% to 15%, don't take offense. Most people aren't made for this place. Fifth-year senior Bueckers is. Redshirt junior Karaban is. Auriemma and Hurley are.

Auriemma is the 70-year-old son of Italian immigrants, and Hurley is the 51-year-old son of a legendary American high school basketball coach.

But cut them open, and they're exactly the same inside.

That is probably why they get along so well. They have the same passion for the game and the same ability to slice through the nonsense.

Here is one more story for you before you go.

Early in the 2022–23 season, with three minutes left and his team up by 40 points against Delaware State, Hurley started getting on one of the refs. He knew he'd see the ref again during the Big East season, and he wanted to plant a seed. The ref T'd him up. After the game, the two teams flew out to Portland for the Phil Knight Invitational. Hurley sat next to Auriemma on the plane and asked what he thought.

"He was like, 'That was low level. Why would you act like that? It was a total a--hole thing,'" Hurley says.

Auriemma had already told Hurley he thought he had a special squad. But unnecessary histrionics were not going to help. Hurley says, "I agreed with Geno... until about January. Then I started melting down again." This time, Hurley's wife and agent both talked some sense into him. The UConn men went on to win the national title, and then another last season.

Hurley says, "I was way more insecure then than I am now. I have a different level of confidence as a coach." It is unlikely that any men's or women's coach will ever approach Auriemma's 11 titles. But Hurley's two champions played a lot like Auriemma's best teams: overprepared and unshakeable.

It's different here. Not better. Not magical. Just different. As you drive away, look around. Storrs does not seem like the kind of place that produces champion after champion. And that is why it does. □

JERSE

▶ RUTGERS IS AN UNEXPECTED LANDING SPOT FOR ONE OF THE NATION'S TOP RECRUITS—LET ALONE TWO OF THEM. BUT FIVE-STAR FRESHMEN **DYLAN HARPER** AND **ACE BAILEY** WILL MAKE THE SCARLET KNIGHTS A MUST-SEE THIS SEASON FOR FANS AND NBA SCOUTS



65
SPORTS
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SI.COM



Y?

SURFER!



by
KEVIN SWEENEY
photograph by
**JUSTIN JAMES
MUIR**



FORTY MILES from Manhattan, Jersey Mike's Arena in Piscataway, N.J., has long been a convenient destination for NBA scouts. Rather than trek to one of the Big Ten's more remote campuses, why not catch a potential prospect in a road game at Rutgers instead?

But this season, Rutgers isn't just a convenient place to scout the Scarlet Knights' opponents. It's the center of attention for NBA talent evaluators planning for the 2025 draft. While Duke's Cooper Flagg is the early favorite to go No. 1, Rutgers is the home of two potential top-five picks in Ace Bailey and Dylan Harper for what is likely to be a one-and-done year for both. Some believe Bailey may be the only player capable of unseating Flagg for the top spot in the class.

To call Piscataway a surprising locale for future elite NBA talent would be an understatement. Since moving to a major conference in 1995 (the Big East, and then to the Big Ten in 2014), Rutgers has finished above .500 in league play twice in 29 tries. The last NBA draft pick directly from the school was in 2010, and

the school's last first-rounder was picked a few weeks before Bailey was born in '06. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for Rutgers to change the perception of its program forever, and maybe even reshape how top recruits think about what they should value in a college home.

RUTGERS COACH Steve Pikiell has been in college coaching 32 years, but the scene when Bailey committed to the Scarlet Knights after their January 2023 win over Ohio State was unlike any he'd experienced before.

It was an emotional game: A gritty overtime victory in front of a sold-out home crowd against a team that had beaten Rutgers earlier in the season. Pikiell and top assistant Brandin Knight had been recruiting Bailey, a hyperathletic wing from McEachern High in Powder Springs, Ga., longer than any other power conference program. Bailey's high school teammate Jamichael Davis, then a senior, had already committed to RU, so hope was building they could land the program-changing talent. But recruitments these days are

FIRST-YEAR FIREPOWER

Bailey (left) averaged 33.4 points as a senior, while Harper (below) scored 22.4 per game—welcome news for a program that was the lowest scoring in the Big Ten last season.



often long, drawn-out affairs, and Bailey was just midway through his junior year of high school and very much in the process of blowing up.

“Kids of [his] caliber, they can wait until the last day and they’ll have choices,” Pikiell says. “We had a good vibe with him and a good relationship. But you never know if they’re in that type of place [to commit].”

Bailey didn’t intend to commit during his on-campus visit to Piscataway. But as the day went on and he soaked in the atmosphere, he became more and more sold. Pikiell even kept pitching Bailey throughout the game with some quips from the sideline. “Coach Pike was talking to me and [Davis] during the game, he was like, ‘Y’all ready to put y’all stuff on?’” Bailey says. “I was like, *Dang!* That let us know that Coach Pike really wanted us.”

As the party started in the Rutgers’ locker room postgame, Bailey walked over to Pikiell and told him the good news. He wanted to be a Scarlet Knight.

“He’s coming!” Pikiell yelled out before the

coach and future player were mobbed in a locker room scene that looked like a championship celebration. Pikiell says he’s never received a commitment after a game like that. In this day and age, there’s often negotiating between a prospect’s representatives and the school’s NIL collective to be done before a commitment can be made public. But Bailey was sold, and after quickly consulting with his mother to make sure he wasn’t getting caught up in the moment, he was ready to pick RU then and there. “It was really the perfect place for real,” Bailey says. “The best place out of all the options I had.”

Getting Bailey on board early was huge because Rutgers had long been in pursuit of another elite prospect in the 2024 class: Harper. The versatile combo guard with exceptional feel for the game had been around the program since middle school watching his brother, Ron Harper Jr., develop from a three-star recruit into a two-time All-Big Ten performer and NBA player with the Raptors. Plus, he was a hometown kid playing at Don Bosco Prep in nearby Ramsey. The challenge: The hometown school isn’t the sexy choice when that hometown school is Rutgers, especially when Duke, Kansas and Indiana are pushing hard for a commitment.

“I’d never watched [Rutgers] a day in my life, except for [2015–18 star guard] Corey Sanders,” Harper says of his ties to the school prior to his brother’s matriculation in 2018. “I just wanted to change the narrative that every kid that is from Jersey leaves Jersey. Every year, we have two or three five- and four-stars, but they never come here.”

Pikiell could already show Harper he knew his game better than anyone else. Now, he could show that Rutgers had the talent to win big with him. Bailey took recruiting matters into his own hands, regularly calling Harper to check up on him and try to nudge him toward the school. The two even teamed up on the AAU circuit for a weekend in April 2023, with Harper joining Bailey’s Georgia-based Athletes of Tomorrow team to get a taste of what playing together might look like. With an elite running mate next to him, a coaching staff that had treated him like family since before he was a top prospect and a chance for his actual family to come to every home game, Harper committed to Rutgers in December ’23.



“Go where you’re wanted, not where you want to go. That’s what my mom always told me,” Harper says.

HARPER AND BAILEY have only been together in New Jersey for a few months, but it doesn’t take much time with them to see that their bond is already strong. They finish each other’s sentences, bicker about when they first officially met and even lend each other sneakers for a photo shoot at Rutgers’s College Avenue Gym.

“We’re basically like family,” Harper says.

A preseason trip to that old-school barn a few miles from the team’s current arena might be poetic, given expectations are higher now than at any point since the Scarlet Knights men’s team last played there, in the mid-1970s. Rutgers went to the Final Four in 1976 with a roster that included five current or future All-Americans, going 31–0 before losing to Michigan in the Final Four and John Wooden’s UCLA team in the third-place game. Since winning three games in that Big Dance, Rutgers has won three NCAA tournament games in the nearly 50 years since.

Getting to the tournament in 2021 and ’22 was a monumental accomplishment considering how moribund the program was when Pikiell took over in ’16, but talents like Bailey and Harper give fans who once hoped for respectability a chance to dream bigger. Pikiell’s office features a corner with cases labeled for three commemorative basketballs: The first is full, marked for reaching the NCAA tournament. The second and third remain empty, with placards earmarking them for balls from a Final Four and a national championship. “We trying to get BOTH of them!” Bailey says with a smile, referring to those two empty slots in Pikiell’s office.

Lofty goals? Sure—but the talent Pikiell suddenly has lends itself to big ambitions. The 6’10” Bailey oozes potential, having just turned 18 in mid-August and possessing the type of lanky frame and explosive game that resembles a young Kevin Durant or, more recently, former Alabama and current Hornets wing Brandon Miller. He explodes effortlessly off the floor for dunks, has the length to shoot over defenses and is a gifted passer. Stop by a Scarlet Knights practice and Bailey is guaranteed to do at least a few things that make you stop whatever you’re doing and watch.

Harper is also 18, but physically blends in more with a roster that’s otherwise littered with 22- and 23-year-olds. He looks like a modern NBA lead guard built in a lab, a chiseled 215 pounds at 6’6”, with elite court vision and the ability to get to the rim. He took Don Bosco (a football school, Pikiell adds) to a state title in basketball his senior year, winning the title game in the same arena he’ll call his home court in college.

Winning with freshmen has never been harder with the explosion of the transfer portal, but Pikiell believes the two are uniquely wired to play beyond their years. “They’re not the typical five-star kids,” Pikiell says. “Dylan wasn’t ranked the

Rutgers has a **ONCE-IN-A-GENERATION** chance to change the perception of its program.

No. 1 freshman in New Jersey. He wasn’t ranked the No. 1 sophomore. He wasn’t even ranked the No. 1 junior. And neither was Ace [ranked No. 1] on any of those boards. They earned everything they got. Last year, all the sudden, everyone was talking about them. But there were a lot of other players rated [higher] forever and ever and ever. These kids weren’t. They’re true workers.”

The two freshmen live in apartments no more than a stone’s throw from the team’s state-of-the-art practice facility, next to Jersey Mike’s Arena. They have 24/7 access to a gym at the practice facility and take full advantage, getting



RISING IN THE DRAFT

It's been nearly two decades since Rutgers produced a first-round pick, but Bailey (4) and Harper both project as potential top-five talents.

up extra shots any time from the crack of dawn to midnight. It's a basketball lover's paradise, and make no mistake: Bailey and Harper are basketball lovers.

"If we can't sleep, we're in the gym," Bailey says.

"You get bored, go to the gym," Harper says.

"You get mad, [go] in the gym!" Bailey says.

They may have grown up more than 800 miles from one another, but their makeup is eerily similar. Each grew up in deep basketball families. Harper's father, Ron, won NBA championships with the Bulls next to Michael Jordan and the Lakers next to Kobe Bryant. His mother, Maria, played at the Division I level and coached him from second grade on, and his brother is already a legend at Rutgers. Bailey's mother, Ramika McGee; father, Richard Bailey; and aunt, Venus Lacy, each played D-I basketball, with Lacy winning gold for Team USA at the 1996 Olympics. Both possess what Pikiell calls "old-school values," the work ethic and loyalty that kept them on the path to Rutgers even when the bluest of blueblood programs started calling.

Both are embracing the challenge of lifting a college hoops also-ran into the sport's top tier. "If you get all this hype and pressure, you're doing something right," Harper says. "You'd rather have it than not have it, because if you don't have it, you're chasing it. I think for us, even though we've got it, we're still chasing it and trying to do even more."

That these two have teamed up in Piscataway of all places still seems surreal, especially when you remember that before Pikiell, Rutgers was three coaches removed from its last winning season. Now, for at least one year, it's home to as much NBA talent as any team in college basketball in 2024–25.

"I like guys that are willing to do something a little bit different and have the confidence in themselves," Pikiell says. "All your dreams can come true here at Rutgers." □



Men's

SWEET 16

When it comes time to cut down the nets, the sport's bluebloods will be seeing a lot of **CRIMSON**

1 | ALABAMA

Best case: Rutgers transfer center Clifford Omoruyi elevates the Tide's interior defense, and Nate Oats's team jumps from Final Four squad to title winner.

Worst case: Alabama's offense is overly reliant on the three-point shot, and 2023–24 stand-outs Mark Sears (43.6% last year) and Latrell Wrightsell Jr. (44.7%) show some regression, leading to a slide in a loaded SEC.

2 | HOUSTON

Best case: With four starters back, including standout guards L.J. Cryer and Emanuel Sharp (*right*), long-time coach Kelvin Sampson breaks through for his first national title.

Worst case: Oklahoma transfer Milos Uzan can't continue UH's run of exceptional point guard play, lowering the Cougars' ceiling.



3 | KANSAS

Best case: The wing scorers brought in through the transfer portal help the Jayhawks bounce back from last year's fifth-place conference finish as KU rejoins the title conversation.

Worst case: Center Hunter Dickinson has been the centerpiece of teams that have underachieved three years in a row (first at Michigan, now in Lawrence); he sees that trend continue as a team that looks good on paper doesn't jell.

4 | UCONN

Best case: Once again Dan Hurley presses the right buttons in the spring, and the Huskies complete a historic three-peat despite having lost NBA lottery picks Stephon Castle and Donovan Clingan.

Worst case: A roster featuring four new starters is a challenge, even for Hurley. UConn still contends for a Big East crown, but is reminded why no men's team has won three national titles in a row in half a century.

5 | DUKE

Best case: Cooper Flagg lives up to the hype. With the 6'9" wing as the anchor and talented role players around him, the Blue Devils make a championship push.

Worst case: Flagg won't even turn 18 until midway through the season, and Duke places too much responsibility on a freshman who'll be among the youngest players in the NCAA.

6 | IOWA STATE

Best case: The Cyclones remain dominant on defense and take a jump offensively, thanks to an experienced backcourt led by junior point guard Tamin Lipsey.

Worst case: Even with Lipsey's growth, the offense continues to have its flaws, and Iowa State just doesn't have the firepower to contend.

7 | GONZAGA

Best case: The Zags retained their core and made key portal adds, led by wing Michael Ajayi from Pepperdine, and that stellar offseason propels the team straight into the title picture.

Worst case: Redshirt senior center Graham Ike, who has been a force when healthy, misses time once again.

8 | AUBURN

Best case: Johni Broome (*right*), one of the nation's top returning frontcourt players, gets backcourt help from the portal, and Auburn makes its second Final Four in six years.

Worst case: The Tigers can't shake the inconsistency that plagued them a year ago, when they were stunned by 13th-seeded Yale in the first round of the NCAA tournament.

9 | BAYLOR

Best case: Coach Scott Drew meshes young talent (led by five-star freshman forward VJ Edgecombe) with experienced players (forward Norchad Omier and guard Jeremy Roach, both transfers) masterfully.

Worst case: Defense proves to be the Bears' Achilles' heel, just as it has been the last two seasons.

10 | NORTH CAROLINA

Best case: National player of the year candidate RJ Davis gets the support he needs from UNC's role players.

Worst case: The Tar Heels' failure to replace center Armando Bacot in the portal comes back to haunt them.

11 | ARIZONA

Best case: A tougher, more physical roster, built in preparation for the Wildcats' move to the Big 12, translates into March success.

Worst case: Guard Caleb Love, the team's leading scorer who shot 34.0% in the tournament last year, again comes up short in the Big Dance.

**12 | TENNESSEE**

Best case: North Florida transfer Chaz Lanier replaces Dalton Knecht (now with the Lakers) about as well as anyone could reasonably hope.

Worst case: The transition from last year's veteran group to one filled with fresh faces proves to be too bumpy.

13 | CREIGHTON

Best case: Center Ryan Kalkbrenner provides elite D at the rim while being surrounded by quality shooting.

Worst case: The Bluejays see their offensive efficiency take a big dip with guards Baylor Scheierman and Trey Alexander off to the NBA.

14 | PURDUE

Best case: Junior Braden Smith blossoms into an elite point guard, overcoming the departure of two-time national player of the year Zach Edey.

Worst case: Without Edey drawing the attention of the defense, Purdue's role players from a year ago suddenly look a lot more ordinary.

15 | TEXAS TECH

Best case: Forward JT Toppin and point guard Elijah Hawkins, both portal additions, make a major impact from the opening tip.

Worst case: The grind of the Big 12 slate sees the Red Raiders struggle to go .500 in the loaded conference.

16 | XAVIER

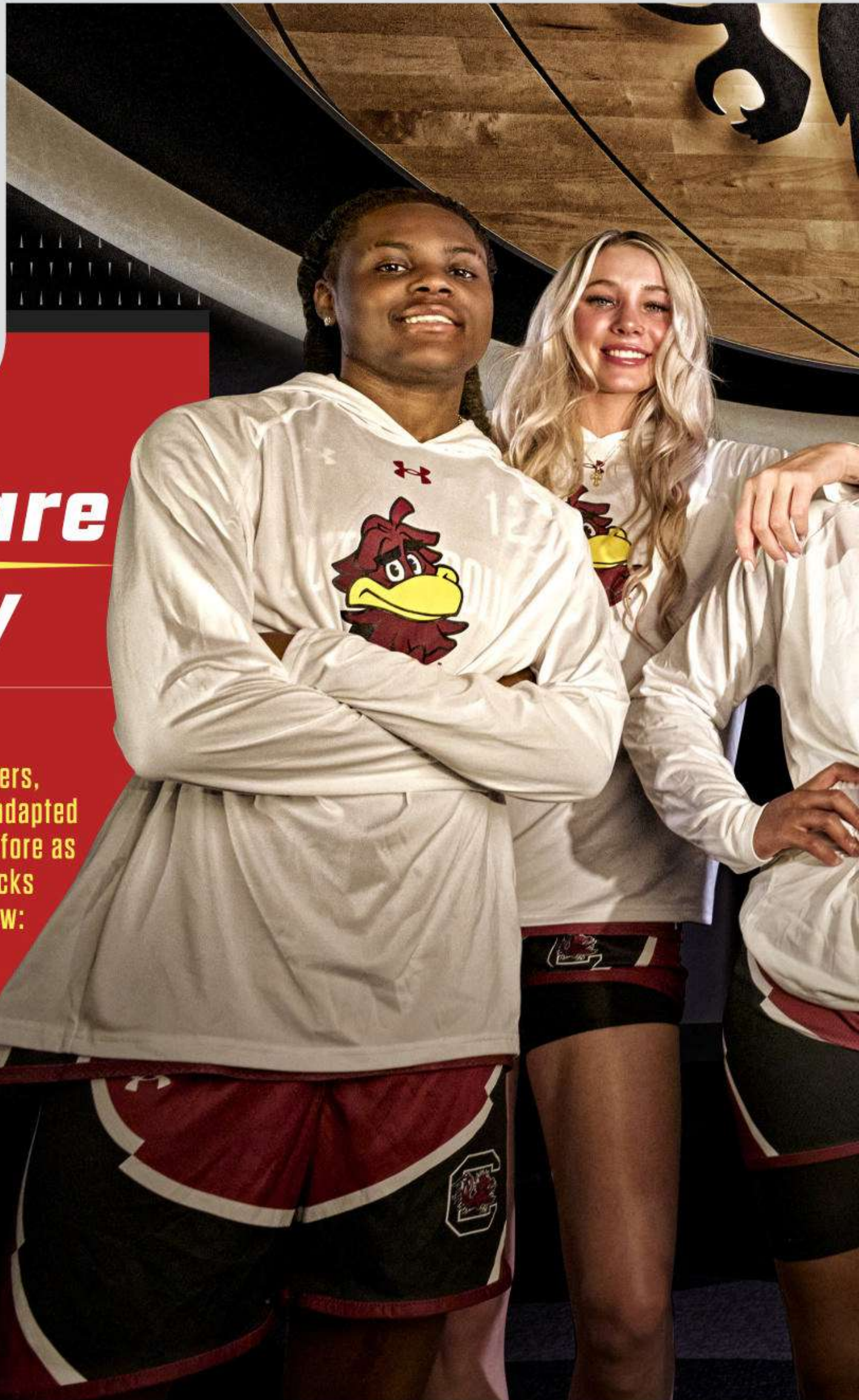
Best case: Guard Dayvion McKnight is joined by a slew of talented transfers, and the Musketeers give UConn a run for its money in the Big East.

Worst case: Grad student forward Zach Freemantle struggles in his return from a foot injury, leaving a major hole in the frontcourt. □



Day Care Duty

Challenged by a group of rambunctious, young players, last season Dawn Staley adapted in a way she never had before as a coach. Now the Gamecocks will try something else new: win **BACK-TO-BACK** titles



by
EMMA BACCELLIERI ◀



MiLaysia Fulwiley, Chloe Kitts, Te-Hina Paopao,
Tessa Johnson, Raven Johnson and Bree Hall

photograph by
TAYLOR BALLANTYNE



WITH THE benefit of a few months away, some perspective and a bit of rest, Dawn Staley can now say that last season was quite sweet for her Gamecocks.

“Now that I’ve been through it? Now that we’re on the other side?” Staley asks, grinning. “I thought it was great.”

This was the most successful South Carolina team she had ever coached. She’d led other championship squads, of course, but never one like this: It cruised to an undefeated record en route to the title. Only two games all year were decided by fewer than five points. But this group had been a profound test for the 54-year-old. None of its achievements felt guaranteed. This was a young, fun-loving bunch that entered the year with little starting experience, earning the nickname “Dawn’s Day Care.” The team was constantly talking, always messing around, totally different from the serious group that had just graduated. Most had previously been

role players. They required Staley to adjust her style in ways she hadn’t since her earliest days as a coach. When they opened the season with a win over ranked Notre Dame—“I thought it was an anomaly,” Staley says—it was in fact the first step in a historic run.

Now the Gamecocks must figure out how to follow that up. They return every roster member from last year save one. (Though it’s worth noting that one departure was big in every sense of the word: 6’7” center Kamilla Cardoso was the No. 3 pick in the WNBA draft.) They will be bolstered by a strong recruiting class, headlined by local product Joyce Edwards, one of the most highly rated prospects in the country.

GREGORY SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES



It's no surprise that they're naturally heavy favorites to win another title.

The list of women's programs that have pulled off the art of the repeat is tiny—USC, Tennessee and UConn—and it's been nearly a decade since the last instance. The Gamecocks will try to crack that set with players who changed Staley as much as she changed them.

The day care is now a bit more grown up, accustomed to big stages and bright lights, a more cohesive unit. What's next? Kindergarten? Elementary school? Not quite, the players say.

"Oh, it's definitely a day care still," laughs senior guard Te-Hina Paopao. "But I think we have a better grip on it now."

THE VETERAN coach has a list of areas she wants to see this group improve upon. The offense looks a bit inefficient. There are questions about who can dominate in the paint. Yet Staley feels significantly better than she did last fall. "We're *much* further along than we were last year this time," she says.

Staley expected last season to be challenging:

UNLIKELY AND UNDEFEATED

Despite fielding a whole new starting lineup, the 2023–24 Gamecocks were Staley's most successful team yet.



South Carolina had just graduated the most successful class in program history, headlined by WNBA picks Aliyah Boston, Zia Cooke and Brea Beal. That group went 129–9 in its four years and won a championship as juniors. Staley anticipated struggles in replacing that talent. What she had not anticipated was the need for a total cultural overhaul.

The differences were obvious from the first preseason workouts in June 2023. Though she had a handful of freshmen and transfers, most

much weightier than a potential losing record.

“I felt like they were destroying our legacy,” Staley says.

That Gamecocks legacy is physically manifested around her as she speaks in the team offices. There are trophies everywhere. A signed photograph of Staley with former President Barack Obama leans against a window. Her dog, Champ, sits at her feet, the school’s winning tradition evident both in his name and in the fact that he’s nearly as recognizable around town as

“I think that’s a reason why we won. We had a coach who **UNDERSTOOD US**,” Kitts says.



in the group had already been with the program, and while none of them had starting experience, they had been around enough to know how things worked. But without the veteran influence of the recently graduated class, the remaining players were ... noisy. They wouldn’t stop talking. (“Like, useless, senseless talking,” Staley offers.) It felt like they weren’t taking basketball seriously, perpetually five minutes late, neglecting to respond to text messages.

“I don’t think they were hard workers at first,” she says. The coaching staff responded by pushing the players harder. But that seemed to get them nowhere. And for all the uncertainty about how this group would look on the court, Staley was soon nervous about something that felt

PIVOTAL PIVOT

Staley made some key adjustments last year, such as having her squad to take more three-pointers than any team she had coached before.

is his owner. When Staley was hired away from Temple in 2008, she inherited a flagging program, one that hadn’t made the NCAA tournament in five years. She took a long view and built from scratch: Staley began meeting with fans and people on campus, treating growth as a collaborative effort. The Gamecocks posted a losing record in her first two seasons but still boosted attendance by more than 50%. The rest of her

plan soon fell into place. A decade and a half into her tenure, Staley had made South Carolina into one of the most successful programs in the country by every metric.

She worried last summer that her rambunctious group of youngsters might jeopardize that.

So the beginning of last season brought a reckoning of sorts. Staley decided to change her approach. “This was a challenge for her,” says associate coach Lisa Boyer, who has been with Staley since her Temple days. “She embraced it.” The game was changing, and the players were, too. “It’s a new generation of kids,” Boyer says. What if Staley adopted a younger, more fun environment? Maybe the best way to push the program forward was to meet the players where they were. She wouldn’t compromise on core pillars of team culture. She wouldn’t let up on the floor. But she decided she could be more flexible in certain areas. Maybe they could use their phones the night before a game. Maybe they could keep chattering away during workouts, with their coach learning to let it wash over her, like white noise. Staley had always considered herself a master of the pivot. This would be one of her biggest in years.

“She realized that maybe not going super hard on us was probably what was best,” says junior forward Chloe Kitts. “A lot of coaches don’t do that. She hadn’t really done that in the past. But she adapted to who we are.”

The players took note. If some of their early silliness had come across as childishness, they were all mature enough to know that it meant something for a coach of this caliber to compromise, and they bought in. Staley was essentially offering to meet them halfway—and they were ready to do their part. The pivot built trust.

“She took kind of a cultural risk, a good risk,” says sophomore guard Tessa Johnson. “It was just like a relationship piece in the fact that she was letting us be ourselves.”

The group’s makeup prompted Staley to make other adjustments. Her most successful teams traditionally had centered on defense and featured a heavy presence in the paint. That was still key here. But the offense was unlike anything seen in recent years in Columbia. It shot more from outside and used more ball movement. It took more three-pointers than any Gamecocks

DOUBLE DIPPING

Look no further than LSU’s Flau’jae Johnson to see how much college athletes can accomplish while using their platforms to grow the game

BEFORE SHE was SEC Freshman of the Year and a 2023 national champion, Flau’jae Johnson made a name for herself as a rapper. At 14, she was a quarterfinalist on *America’s Got Talent*. She now has a record deal with Jay-Z’s Roc Nation and recently dropped her debut studio album, which is aptly titled *Best of Both Worlds*.

Johnson’s talents are symbiotic. As she excels in one, so follows the other. “What I learn in basketball about

pushing through challenges and staying dedicated translates into my music career and vice versa,” she says.

NCAA champion and rapper. Performer and podcast host. Leader and student of the game. Johnson wants it all, and with the freedom NIL has given athletes, she is not alone among those who identify as being more than just a basketball player. She encourages others to showcase their personalities as part of playing the game. “We don’t have to be one-dimensional,” the 5’10” junior guard says. “I’m blessed to have these opportunities, so why not take advantage of them?”

And there will be plenty this season, as Johnson leads LSU on another title quest, the opportunity to write her next verse clearly in her hands.

—Elizabeth Swinton





squad Staley had coached. It recorded more points per play, and it logged more assists. South Carolina had frequently beat opponents by slowing them down. This team pushed the pace. It was an entirely new look.

Staley had long shown a knack for adapting on the fly. “She’s always evolving,” Boyer says. This was still a strikingly big set of changes. “I think that’s a reason why we won,” Kitts says. “We had a coach who understood us.”

When they first took the floor last year, they had no firm expectations. “We had no idea what type of team we were going to be. We didn’t know what kind of run we were going to have,” says Paopao. “But our theme last year was *love*. That’s all you felt throughout this program. Everyone



SOPHOMORE STANDOUTS



JUJU WATKINS
USC / GUARD

Arriving at USC with a daunting amount of hype, Watkins still exceeded expectations last year. The nation’s No. 2 scorer (27.1 points per game) set the national freshman scoring record (920 points) and took the Trojans to the Elite Eight for the first time in 30 years. “Her skill set, size and strength make her uniquely tough to guard,” says USC coach Lindsay Gottlieb. The 6’2” playmaker will now look to refine her already well-rounded game.



HANNAH HIDALGO
NOTRE DAME / GUARD

At 5’6”, she may look unassuming, but Hidalgo’s game is expansive. The point guard put up a staggering 31 points in her Fighting Irish debut—against would-be champions South Carolina, no less—and averaged 22.6 points, 6.2 rebounds, 5.5 assists and 4.6 steals as a freshman. This season she will play alongside Olivia Miles, who returns from a season-ending knee injury, giving Notre Dame one of the most potent backcourt duos in the country.

MILAYSIA FULWILEY
SOUTH CAROLINA / GUARD

She may have started just three times as a freshman, but Fulwiley, who averaged 18.4 minutes per game, made the most of her time on the court. Her game is packed with no-look passes, behind-the-back moves and flashy charges to the rim. She will look to incorporate refinement and discernment into her skill set, while taking on a greater role in Dawn Staley’s returning core as the Gamecocks attempt to claim back-to-back titles.

FROM LEFT: USC ATHLETICS; FIGHTING IRISH MEDIA; JACOB KUPFERMAN/GETTY IMAGES

genuinely loved each other.” The group seemed closer, top to bottom, than any she’d ever coached, Staley says.

The Gamecocks started winning as soon as they started playing. They never stopped.

“We don’t know what it’s like to lose,” Johnson says. “So we’re not going to plan on it.”

YET IT’S hard to go back-to-back. Even when returning a supermajority of an undefeated championship team. Even when bringing in top recruits. Even when big cultural questions were answered the year before. The last women’s program to repeat was UConn with its string of four in a row from 2013 to ’16. If that doesn’t seem like very long ago, it’s been long enough

to usher in a new era of recruiting and program building, with increased parity in women’s basketball alongside structural changes around transfers and NIL. It’s harder than ever in some respects to sustain a high level of success.

Amid that changing landscape, Staley has cemented herself as an icon of the sport. Her decorated playing career—a six-time WNBA All-Star and three-time Olympic champion—has given way to an even more impressive run as a coach. Part of that is her knowledge of the game, and part is a knack for building community that proved vital early at South Carolina, a quality that makes her “a mom away from mom,” says junior guard Raven Johnson. Part is the ability to pivot that she displayed last season. And part is

After impressive freshman seasons, these seven players are expected to steal the spotlight in Year 2. by CLARE BRENNAN



MIKAYLAH WILLIAMS
LSU / GUARD

A 42-point explosion against Kent State is among the highlights from Williams’s freshman campaign, and perhaps a taste of what’s to come. Without Angel Reese and Hailey Van Lith, Williams has a chance to step into the spotlight for the Tigers. “I’m expecting big things from her this upcoming season,” LSU guard Aneesah Morrow says. “I know y’all got to get a glimpse of her last year, but I feel like the potential for her is going to be outstanding.”



AUDI CROOKS
IOWA STATE / CENTER

Last March, Crooks established herself as one of the most dangerous centers in the country, dropping 40 points against Maryland, the most ever by a freshman in the NCAA tournament. “Audi plays with an infectious joy that is so fun to watch,” says Iowa State coach Bill Fennelly, who added some offensive firepower from the portal to fill out around her. “She has an outstanding skill set that starts with excellent hands and footwork.”



MADISON BOOKER
TEXAS / FORWARD

The versatile 6’1” star averaged 16.5 points, 5.0 rebounds and 5.0 assists per game last year, helping to lead the Longhorns to a 33-win season, their best showing since 1985–86. “Madison is special because nobody can guard her and she can play at almost every position,” says Texas guard Rori Harmon. With the roster back in full force and Booker having gained vital experience, Texas should improve upon last year’s Elite Eight run.



KK ARNOLD
UCONN / GUARD

As a freshman, Arnold was expected to be Paige Bueckers’s backup, but a series of injuries expedited Arnold’s rise. She started in 33 of the team’s 39 games, averaging 8.9 points, 3.1 rebounds and 3.2 assists. Should the Huskies stay healthy, the roster will boast a backcourt with impressive depth. Arnold may be waiting in the wings until Bueckers departs for the WNBA, but last season proved she’ll be ready when called upon.



her resistance to taking shortcuts. Staley builds players up over years, not months, a style that feels somewhat anachronistic in a time when athletes can leap from one program to another for more playing time or bigger platforms. But for Staley? The players buy in long-term.

“There’s a process of letting them know they’re not there yet,” Staley says. “They build up the endurance to handle that.”

That’s evident in a player like sophomore MiLaysia Fulwiley. She was a top recruit in her class. Staley first offered her a scholarship in seventh grade. Her first college game garnered this effusive reaction from Magic Johnson on social media: “I just saw the best move in all of basketball including the pros like LeBron, Steph, KD, Victor and Jokić. Everyone must see the coast-to-coast, behind-the-back move by freshman guard MiLaysia Fulwiley from South Carolina. WOW!!” But none of that guaranteed a starting position. She instead spent the year coming off the bench.

Which was just fine, Fulwiley says.

“I know that Coach trusts me,” she says. “I just follow her lead and believe in her. She met me where I was last year, and that makes me feel way more confident this year.”

This season will present some new challenges. Roughly a third of the roster will be eligible to turn pro in the spring. “How do we prevent this team from getting big heads?” Staley says. “How do we keep them focused on the team while also increasing their stock in the WNBA draft?” And while the only player the Gamecocks lost is Cardoso, her absence will be keenly felt, and they’ll have to reinvent portions of their offense without such a singular presence in the post.

But this group is confident in its ability to make adjustments. And even after a career of pivoting, growing step by step, Staley is struck by how much she has learned from that process.

“We probably needed—I probably needed—some spicing up,” Staley says. “Because it was so regimented, right? It was so routine. I think it was helpful to me to have a different type of challenge that distracted me from the actual game.”

So she enters one more year with this group of players, who pushed her in a way she had never been pushed and rewarded her by winning in a way she had never won. □

TIDE OF TRANSFERS

Nearly every major roster saw turnover this summer, a sign of the times in women’s hoops

▶ **OREGON STATE** coach Scott Rueck sat at the podium last March in what should have been an enviable spot. For just the second time in program history, the Beavers were in the Elite Eight, and their group was not just talented, but also quite young. Here was a situation that would traditionally have a coach preparing to run it back the next season. It instead had Rueck fielding questions like this:

How concerned are you that your core players will all transfer out now?

“Well, that would be logical,” said Rueck, a bit ruefully. “That’s reality.”

It would have been hard to argue. No program is immune in modern college sports, whatever its current success or previous track record. In the weeks that followed, eight players transferred out of Rueck’s program, including most of its big names. Some important context here: The Beavers had been left out in the cold with the dissolution of the Pac-12, sending them from one of the game’s strongest conferences to a veritable no-woman’s-land. The example is one of the more extreme from this summer. But it’s illustrative nonetheless.

To get a full sense of the impact of the transfer portal—of its many rebuilds and revolving doors—trace a path outward from Oregon State.

Start with third-team All-American forward Raegan Beers, a 6’ 4” junior who chose Oklahoma. Meanwhile, Pac-12 Sixth Player of the Year



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRYCE WOOD; JUAN OCAMPO/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (VAN LITH BODY); ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES (LOUISVILLE JERSEY); BRIAN ROTHMULLER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (LSU JERSEY); JOHN E. MOORE III/GETTY IMAGES (TCU JERSEY); CHRIS JONES/IMAGN IMAGES (TCU SHORTS)

PERIPATETIC POINT GUARD

After three seasons at Louisville, Van Lith had a brief stop at LSU before moving to TCU, where she'll try to take the Horned Frogs to their first NCAA tournament in 15 years.

Timea Gardiner went to UCLA, where another top player to leave the conference, Washington State's Charlisse Leger-Walker, joined her. Across town, USC welcomed Beavers guard Talia von Delhoffen, who is now teammates with another

star transfer, forward Kiki Iriafen out of Stanford. Guard Donovan Hunter landed at TCU, where the roster now includes one of the biggest names from the portal this summer, Hailey Van Lith. And former Oregon State guard Dominika Paurová chose Kentucky, a program that almost completely remade itself, with new coach Kenny Brooks bringing along some of the top players from his previous job at Virginia Tech, including guard Georgia Amoore and 6'5" center Clara Strack.

That level of player movement can feel dizzying, but it's all part of the massive change college basketball has undergone in recent years. Conferences have broken apart and been smashed back together in geographically questionable new shapes. NIL collectives keep paying up and paying out. The coaching carousel spins as fast as ever. It's only natural that players are on the move, too.

The reasons for the movement can include the chance to play for a beloved coach. ["This is my second dad," Amoore said of Brooks when they played their last game at Virginia Tech.] It can be a chance to make a Final Four. [That's a strong possibility for transfers like Iriafen and von Delhoffen, joining a strong core at USC.] It can be an opportunity to boost draft stock or refine skills. [This was seemingly part of the equation for Van Lith, who switched from point guard to shooting guard last season when she transferred from Louisville to LSU and will now likely return to her natural position at TCU.]

The degree of change is hard to process for coaches old enough to remember the comparatively placid era of, say, five years ago.

"I was scared of [this entire transfer world] at the beginning," Rueck said at the Elite Eight. But he learned to adapt to it. "You'd better be on your 'A' game all the time, you'd better take care of people, and you'd better provide a great experience."

So after last year's tournament run, Rueck will start fresh, or something like it. Oregon State will be in an old conference that will feel very new. There will be freshmen to coach up. And, of course, there will be some other new faces: Rueck brought in four transfers through the portal. —E.B.



Women's

SWEET 16

The defending champions will be tough to beat, but some **STACKED CONTENDERS** are dreaming big

1 | SOUTH CAROLINA

Best case: With most of last year's roster intact, Dawn Staley's team, led by Raven Johnson and Te-Hina Paopao, charge to a second straight NCAA title.

Worst case: After an undefeated 2023–24 campaign, the Gamecocks are knocked from their footing when the stumbles come and miss out on a top seed.

2 | USC

Best case: Sophomore superstar guard JuJu Watkins and new sidekick Kiki Iriafen, a Stanford transfer forward, lead a dynamic Trojans lineup to the national championship.

Worst case: The roster—which also includes Oregon State grad transfer Talia von Oelhoffen—is loaded with talent, but cultivating chemistry proves a challenge.

3 | UCONN

Best case: The Huskies avoid the injuries that sabotaged the last two seasons, and guards Paige Bueckers and Azzi Fudd finally get a chance to show what they're capable of.

Worst case: The Huskies struggle with Nika Mühl and Aaliyah Edwards gone to the pros, and Bueckers leaves Storrs without a national title.

4 | TEXAS

Best case: Rori Harmon (*right*) returns from an ACL injury and pairs with Madison Booker to form a dominant backcourt and propel the Longhorns into title contention.

Worst case: The exodus of frontcourt players through the transfer portal comes back to bite Texas, and a second straight season ends with a loss in the Elite Eight.

5 | NOTRE DAME

Best case: Point guard Olivia Miles, back after missing last season with a knee injury, leads a stacked roster to title contention.

Worst case: Miles isn't the same, and big-name transfers Liatu King and Liza Karlen don't mesh with the returning talent.

6 | UCLA

Best case: Junior transfer Timea Gardiner outdoes her stellar 39.5% three-point shooting at Oregon State, and Charli Leger-Walker ably replaces Charisma Osborne at point guard.

Worst case: Despite doing everything right, Cori Close's program is still just the second-best women's basketball team in L.A.



7 | LSU

Best case: Flashy junior guard Flau'jae Johnson thrives in a starring role and heads back to the Final Four.

Worst case: The shoes of Angel Reese are tough to fill, while Hailey Van Lith excels at TCU after what was a middling year in Baton Rouge.

8 | NC STATE

Best case: Aziaha James, Saniya Rivers and Zoe Brooks recreate the magic of last year's Final Four run, boosted by transfer Caitlin Weimar.

Worst case: The Wolfpack miss the leadership of departed grads River Baldwin and Mimi Collins, key figures in the team's recent success.

9 | IOWA STATE

Best case: Perimeter threats Kenzie Hare and Sydney Harris, added as transfers, prosper around sophomore center Audi Crooks, who averaged 19.2 points and 7.8 boards per game last season.

Worst case: A tough nonconference schedule, with games against UConn, South Carolina and Iowa, keeps the Cyclones from getting on track.

10 | DUKE

Best case: An experienced core that's tough defensively meshes with a strong recruiting class to make noise in the competitive ACC.

Worst case: An inconsistent offense drags down Kara Lawson's squad, which lost five-star recruit Arianna Roberson to a knee injury during international play this summer.

11 | KANSAS STATE

Best case: Center Ayoka Lee, in her seventh year with the program, leads an attack rife with capable scorers. With a more versatile offense, buoyed by the addition of Tulsa transfer forward Temira Poindexter, the Wildcats make a push for the Elite Eight.

Worst case: Opponents know how to game-plan against Lee and disrupt the K-State offense, making the squad vulnerable come tournament time.

12 | BAYLOR

Best case: Center Aaronette Vonleh, a 6'3" transfer from Colorado, lifts an already solid team with a deep backcourt led by Sarah Andrews.

Worst case: Vonleh isn't enough to compensate for the loss of last season's top scorer, Dre'Una Edwards, and top rebounder, Aijha Blackwell.



13 | LOUISVILLE

Best case: The elite rebounding of Olivia Cochran (*above*) keeps a team with a reliable core in the ACC fight.

Worst case: With the departure of top scorer Kiki Jefferson, Louisville's guard depth proves too thin.

14 | OKLAHOMA

Best case: The Sooners make a splashy entrance into the SEC after nabbing a top transfer in 6'4" forward Raegan Beers of Oregon State.

Worst case: Oklahoma struggles to assimilate Beers into its up-tempo style of play.

15 | NORTH CAROLINA

Best case: Five-star recruits Ciera Toomey, who redshirted last season, and Blanca Thomas shine together.

Worst case: After losing six players in the transfer portal, the Heels fail in acclimating so many newcomers.

16 | OHIO STATE

Best case: Forward Cotie McMahon takes the spotlight in her junior year, and the Big Ten regular-season champs repeat.

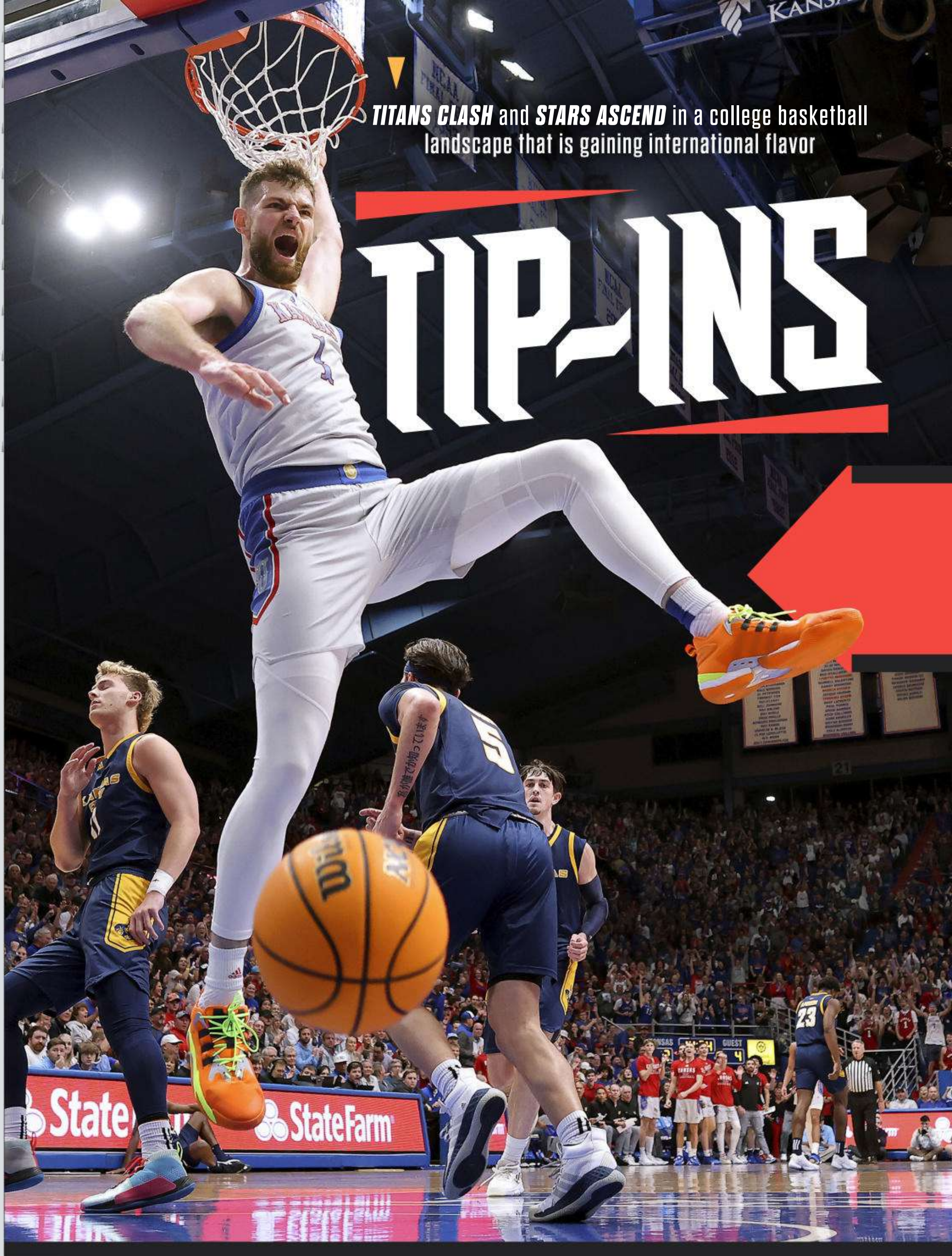
Worst case: While OSU no longer has to contend with Caitlin Clark, the addition of USC and UCLA to the Big Ten causes new headaches. □



FROM LEFT: SARA DIGGINS/AMERICAN-STATESMAN/USA TODAY NETWORK/
IMAGI IMAGES; ANDY HANCOCK/NCAA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

TITANS CLASH and **STARS ASCEND** in a college basketball landscape that is gaining international flavor

TIP-INS





GAMES TO WATCH

MEN'S

ALABAMA vs. HOUSTON NOV. 26

The No. 1 and No. 2 teams in SI's preseason rankings clash in the Players Era Festival, a new early-season event in Las Vegas promising big NIL player payouts. Nate Dats's elite Tide offense will fight for buckets against Kelvin Sampson's stingy Cougars defense.

DUKE vs. KANSAS NOV. 26

The jewel of what is always a loaded slate of games during Thanksgiving week, this glitzy tilt has frosh phenom Cooper Flagg's Blue Devils taking on senior center Hunter Dickinson (*left*) and the Jayhawks in the even glitzier T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas.

KANSAS AT CREIGHTON DEC. 4

Omaha should be rocking when the Jayhawks come to town, as a Bluejays team with Final Four aspirations seeks an early marquee win. Every blocked shot by Creighton center Ryan Kalkbrenner, back for a fifth season, will only add to the frenzy.

UCONN vs. GONZAGA DEC. 14

Gonzaga believes it has a roster capable of finally winning it all. Taking on the defending champs at Madison Square Garden will be a good litmus test, especially with both coach Dan Hurley and forward Alex Karaban back at UConn despite NBA overtures.

ARKANSAS AT KENTUCKY FEB. 1

John Calipari's return to Rupp Arena should be one of the most compelling moments of the season after his shocking decision to leave Lexington for Fayetteville. Will fans celebrate Cal's 2012 national title or boo his recent stumbles and flight to a rival SEC school?

WOMEN'S

NC STATE vs. SOUTH CAROLINA NOV. 10

This neutral-site game in Charlotte is a Final Four rematch, thanks to the Wolfpack's surprising run last season. NC State's incoming recruiting class is a good one, while South Carolina returns nearly everyone from its 2023-24 title team.

TEXAS AT NOTRE DAME DEC. 5

At least four WNBA draft prospects—Notre Dame's Olivia Miles, Sonia Citron and Maddy Westbeld, and Texas's Rori Harmon—will take the floor in a big early-season test as the Longhorns, in a new conference, join in the SEC/ACC Challenge.

TENNESSEE vs. IOWA DEC. 7

New coach Kim Caldwell will lead the Lady Vols into Brooklyn's Barclays Center for the new Women's Champions Classic. There she'll face new Iowa head coach Jan Jensen, whose biggest challenge will be finding a way to replace Caitlin Clark.

USC AT UCONN DEC. 21

Two of the sport's brightest stars—the Huskies' Paige Bueckers and the Trojans' JuJu Watkins—go head-to-head. UConn has won its previous three matchups against USC, including an 80-73 victory in the Elite Eight last season.

UCONN AT SOUTH CAROLINA FEB. 16

A Final Four preview? These teams have matched up at least once a year since 2014-15, with the Huskies holding a 7-4 advantage during that stretch. But the Gamecocks have won the last four meetings, including the 2022 national championship game. □

JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES

by KEVIN SWEENEY

by JOHANNA HUYBERS

Foreign Takeover

Thanks to NIL, elite draft prospects are leaving their European pro teams and **COMING TO AMERICA** to play college ball

BASKETBALL IS an increasingly globalized game, and college teams are taking note.

The last three players to win the NBA MVP over the past six seasons were born outside of the United States. So were each of the last two No. 1 picks in the NBA draft. In fact, the top two picks this year were from France. While the U.S. is still producing plenty of stars, the rest of the world is rapidly catching up. That has led many college programs to ramp up their international recruiting, and that shift in priorities is bringing some of the most highly touted young players in the world stateside. Among them: potential 2025 first-round draft picks Egor Demin, who left Real Madrid for BYU, and Kasparas Jakucionis, who departed Barcelona to enroll at Illinois.

Players such as Demin and Jakucionis taking the college route is a marked change from just a few years ago, when a draft prospect would have almost never considered leaving an elite pro European club to spend a year or two in college. The trend coincides with the explosion of NIL money, which has made playing in college more lucrative than in some overseas leagues. NIL collectives have even funded buyouts of pro contracts.

Jon Chepkevich, the director of scouting for DraftExpress, which works with NBA, foreign and college teams, says that some top overseas player agencies are now hiring staff to manage

the U.S. college recruitments of their clients. “It’s hard for 18, 19, 20-year-old kids to play at that [high] level in Europe,” Chepkevich says. “The rotation players for these teams are typically 27 to 35 years old. Despite how talented and how much potential these guys have, they’re just not ready to contribute at that level at this age, whereas college is sort of the perfect incubator for them to come over and get real on-court reps against high-level competition, and have a ton of resources at their disposal to develop.”

Jakucionis appeared in just two games in Spain’s top-flight league with Barcelona last season, trapped on a roster that featured eight former NBA draft picks, including Jabari Parker, who went second overall in 2014. Despite that, Jakucionis popped onto NBA radars after a monster spring at the U-18 level, tearing it up for Barcelona at the Adidas Next Generation tournament and putting together a strong showing with the Lithuanian national team at the U-18 European Championships. Rather than sit behind older pros for another year in Spain, Jakucionis will now be a centerpiece for Illinois.

The Illini had recruited internationally before

by
KEVIN SWEENEY

WHAT A RUSSIAN

Demin’s choice to come to BYU could be a watershed moment.



under coach Brad Underwood, who feels that overseas players often grow up learning to play in an environment that is more professional than the American high school and AAU landscape, giving them better basketball IQs and work ethics. Illinois became even more aggressive in the foreign market this spring, signing Croatian big Tomislav Ivišić and Canadian wing Will Riley in addition to Jakucionis. All three could end up being starters this year. That monster haul is the culmination of years of work from assistant Geoff Alexander, who Underwood said “has been at every event” in Europe over the last two to three years to lay the groundwork for what turned into a loaded class.

Demin comes even more highly regarded than Jakucionis. His choice to play college basketball could be a watershed moment if his time at BYU ends up boosting his draft stock. Two other potential top-10 picks next June, Spanish wing Hugo González and French point guard Nolan Traoré, also drew significant NCAA interest this spring and summer but elected to stay in Europe. But if Demin gets a draft-day bump from his year with the Cougars, the next wave of European prospects will be that much easier to entice.

Of the 78 programs in high-major conferences, 73 have at least one scholarship player who was born outside of the U.S. Recruiting overseas was once seen as a creative niche for some schools to carve out, one that helped programs such as Gonzaga and St. Mary’s punch above their weight over the last two decades. Now, it’s becoming as essential as spending time in cramped high school gyms or working the transfer portal. One college coach says this summer he saw three to four times as many coaches scouting at the U-18 European Championships in Finland as he had in previous years. And at least to Underwood’s eyes, the future of recruiting may well involve spending as much time in Paris or Helsinki as in New York or Dallas.

“Being a familiar face over there and letting the people see us is vital,” Underwood says. “We have to keep sticking our nose over there and make it just like an event in Atlanta or Augusta [home of Nike’s biggest U.S. recruiting event] or whatever it might be...It’s going to be an important piece of our future growth here.” □

DAVID GRAU/EUROLEAGUE BASKETBALL/GETTY IMAGES (DEMIN); ERICA DENHOFF/ICDN SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (MILES)

THE NEXT WAVE

These draft prospects will give the WNBA a fresh shot of energy next summer



1 | PAIGE BUECKERS

UCONN

The top guard in this class returned to Storrs for her senior season in search of a happy ending to an injury-marred tenure.

2 | KIKI IRIAFEN

USC

Before transferring, the junior forward averaged 19.4 points and 11.0 rebounds per game last season at Stanford.

3 | ANEESAH MORROW

LSU

The senior guard was second on the Tigers last season in both scoring (16.4 ppg) and rebounding (10 rpg).

4 | OLIVIA MILES

NOTRE DAME

Miles (*above*), who missed last season with a knee injury, is a do-it-all point guard who can fill up a box score.

5 | RORI HARMON

TEXAS

The senior guard, an assist maestro, had a program-record 7.4 per game in her sophomore season.

6 | SONIA CITRON

NOTRE DAME

The junior guard is a skilled three-point shooter (35.9% last season) and averaged 17.3 ppg filling in for Miles last year.

7 | AZZI FUDD

UCONN

Over 40 games in an injury-riddled career, Fudd has averaged 13.0 points per game and shot 38.2% from behind the arc.

8 | GEORGIA AMOORE

KENTUCKY

The Virginia Tech transfer from Down Under averaged 18.8 points and 6.8 assists last season.

9 | TE-HINA PAOPAO

SOUTH CAROLINA

Paopao’s 46.8% three-point shooting and 11.0 ppg helped propel the Gamecocks to an undefeated national championship season.

10 | HAILEY VAN LITH

TCU

After three dominant years at Louisville, the guard slipped last season at LSU. Can she bounce back? —J.H.



POINT AFTER

TWO GOOD

S **HOHEI OHTANI** is great (*page 8*), but since he didn't pitch this season we must look elsewhere for mind-boggling two-way excellence in 2024. Enter Travis Hunter, who this fall is reshaping our conception of what a college football—and someday NFL—player can be.

Over Colorado's first four games, the wide receiver/cornerback was on the field an average of 131 snaps. He made them count: four 100-yard receiving games and five TDs on

offense; an interception, a fumble recovery and a rep as one of the country's best coverage guys on D. We haven't seen that kind of explosiveness on both sides of the football since his coach, Deion Sanders, was lighting up the NFL.

What felt like a novelty earlier in Hunter's career has now cemented him as perhaps the best player in college football. Like Ohtani, he's a historic figure in our midst—and this time next year, he'll be reshaping norms in the pros. □



BALL HAWK

The question for NFL scouts: Is Hunter the best wideout in the 2025 draft or the best corner?

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: CHRISTOPHER HANEWINCKEL/IMAGN IMAGES; RIC TAPIA/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/AP

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