VSiN

COLLEGE BASKETBALL BETTING GUIDE

MICHIGAN STATE
15-1 TO WIN NCAA TOURNAMENT

CONTENDERS

SPARTANS #1 IN MATT YOUMANS' PRESEASON TOP 25

PLUS...
- THIS SEASON'S CINDERELLA TEAMS
- 32 CONFERENCE PREVIEWS
- SEASON-LONG BEST BETS

VSiN PRO

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ABBREVIATIONS USED WITHIN THE GUIDE
AST/TO Ration - Assist to Turnover Ratio • ATS • Against the Spread • AVG FL - Average Final Line • CAP - Capacity
EFF FG % - Effective Field Goal Percentage • Makinen's PR - Steve Makinen's Power Rating • Nat/Conf Rank - National/Conference Rank
O/U - Over/Under • PA - Points Allowed • PF - Points For • PPG - Points Per Game • PP Possession - Points Per Possession • SU - Straight Up

All National Rankings based on 362 teams.

ODDS WITHIN GUIDE ARE TAKEN FROM DRAFTKINGS. ALL ODDS ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE.

Loyal VSiN Subscribers,

It sure seems like betting guides have been coming out at a fast and furious pace of late, but this is the busiest time of the year and we love it. We hope that you've been happy with what you've gotten so far and now we're pleased to present our 2023-24 College Basketball Betting Guide.

We've been rewriting the record books on subscribers this fall and that motivates each and every one of us to churn out the best content possible and this year's CBB Guide is another example of that commitment. All 32 conferences are previewed and it takes a village to put together something like that. We've also got multiple feature articles, systems and Power Ratings, and futures/season-long props from our VSiN experts.

To make the Guide more consumable for readers, we did overviews and individual team previews for each of the 10 "major" conferences (A-10, American, ACC, Big 12, Big East, Big Ten, Mountain West, Pac-12, SEC, West Coast) and extended overviews for the other 22 conferences.

In this Guide, you will read:

• Matt Youmans with his Preseason Top 25 and previews of the Big 12 and Pac-12
• Aaron Moore with a feature on this year's potential Cinderellas and the Wooden Award, as well as previews of the Atlantic-10 Conference, MAAC, and Ivy League
• Wes Reynolds on the ACC and Big Ten
• Jonathan Von Tobel on the Mountain West and West Coast Conferences
• Zachary Cohen on the SEC and Summit League
• Tim Murray on the CAA and MAC
• Mike Somich on the Big West and WAC
• Tyler Shoemaker on the Horizon, Missouri Valley, and SoCon
• Adam Burke on the AAC, Atlantic Sun, Big Sky, Big South, and Ohio Valley Conferences
• Steve Makinen's Power Ratings and features on returning minutes and predictive indicators
• And the man, the myth, the legend, the ultimate college basketball workhorse, Greg "HOOPS" Peterson on the Big East, America East, Conference USA, MEAC, NEC, Patriot, Southland, Sun Belt, SWAC, and with "Betting Nuggets" on every major conference team

We hope you enjoy these 104 pages to get you ready and we'll have plenty more coverage throughout the season at VSiN.com. Thanks for all of your support in helping us reach new heights and good luck this college basketball season.

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VSIN EXPERT FUTURE AND PROP

BEST BETS

Kansas To Win NCAA Championship (12-1)

Hunter Dickinson, the top player in the transfer portal, was the biggest piece to the Jayhawks' puzzling offseason. Seven players transferred out and two were NBA draft picks, leaving Kansas coach Bill Self in need of a quick rebuild. The 7-foot Dickinson, who averaged 18.5 points and made 42.1% of his 3-pointers last season at Michigan, makes everyone around him better. Point guard Dajuan Harris, who has 77 career starts, is an elite defender and passer. The other returning starters are forwards KJ Adams and Kevin McCullar. It was a minor setback when guard Arterio Morris was dismissed from the team in September, but backcourt depth is a strength with highly-touted newcomers Elmarko Jackson, Johnny Furphy, Jamari McDowell and Towson transfer Nicolas Timberlake, a 3-point specialist. Self won his first national championship in 2008 and waited 14 years to add another after the 2021-22 season. I bet Kansas at 15-1 after the Dickinson addition and like this team at any double-digit odds.

Michigan State To Win NCAA Championship (18-1)

It's accurate to bash most Big Ten teams for flopping in March, but leave Tom Izzo out of that discussion. Izzo has coached the Spartans to every NCAA Tournament since 1998, to eight Final Fours and to the 2000 national title. He's got a great shot to win it all again. Five of the top six scorers return from a 21-win team that reached the Sweet 16. Fifth-year senior Tyson Walker and fourth-year junior A.J. Hoggard lead the backcourt. Other returning veterans are forward Malik Hall, center Mady Sissoko and swingman Jaden Akins. The freshman class is highlighted by a pair of McDonald's All-Americans, forward Xavier Booker and guard Jeremy Fears. Izzo's roster is 10 to 12 deep with high-quality players, so he's planning for this team to play pressure defense and run more often. I rate Michigan State No. 1 in the preseason and bet the Spartans at 20-1 to win the national title in the summer — the best current odds (18-1) are available at the Westgate SuperBook. Also consider the DraftKings price of +550 to reach the Final Four.

Duke's Kyle Filipowski To Win Wooden Award (+800)

Purdue center Zach Edey, the favorite to win the award at +175 at DraftKings, was last year's unanimous national Player of the Year. Edey could become the first repeat winner since Virginia center Ralph Sampson in 1983. Edey's numbers (22.3 PPG, 12.9 RPG) might dip if the Boilermakers, who have a deeper and more talented rotation, don't run their offense through the big man in the low post so frequently. If Edey is not quite as dominant, the voters will look for an alternative, and most voters like change. Filipowski, a 7-foot sophomore who turned down the NBA, is ready to dominate after averaging 15.1 points and 8.9 rebounds. The Blue Devils will be among the nation's top 10 teams, so Filipowski figures to be the player most likely to challenge Edey for the prestigious award.

AARON MOORE

Michigan State To Win NCAA Championship (18-1)

Tom Izzo didn't forget how to coach since 2019 when the Spartans last had a high seed in the tournament. The elite-level rosters just weren't there. This season Izzo not only has a talented roster, he has an experienced one as well. From a value standpoint. Michigan State is priced behind Purdue (a team and a coach with poor tournament history) and Kentucky (the John Calipari chemistry class that just keeps failing its final exam). The Spartans compare favorably with Duke and Kansas but come with a better price.

Rayshon Harrison

Grand Canyon To Win NCAA Championship (800-1 and even higher)
No, I am not trying to get attention with some crazy play. Instead I am looking for ways to carve out a profit come March. Nabbing some astronomically high odds for Grand Canyon can have some value come March, and it only needs a micro investment that won't tie up units. Getting that ticket will take work. The Antelopes are not on a lot of boards, but you can get them at Circa for 800-1 and some other national books for as high as 2,000-1.

Here is the rationale: GCU is an experienced team that can challenge for a win(s) in the NCAA tournament. However, in a one-bid league, there is always the chance it doesn't make it out of the WAC tournament. So, instead of betting on GCU to win that tournament when the odds become available in February at about 2-1, get a national championship ticket instead with an exponentially higher number. If GCU wins the conference tournament, this ticket is alive. If it fails to win the WAC, then oh well, this inexpensive experiment fails without costing too much.

Last year, GCU was a 14th seed in the tournament and lost in the first round to Gonzaga. This year's team has a chance to do better, perhaps a 12th or 13th seed. After the tournament upsets last year, dogs on these lines are going to be popular and could bring down the favorites' ML price, in turn making it easier to wager against GCU. Last year, the 5th seed on average was a -212 favorite over the 12th seed and the 4th seed was -300 against the 13th seed. Yes, those are high odds but with a ticket in the range of 1,000-1, it doesn't take much to hedge and create a profit. If GCU wins the first round game, the Martingale System kicks in and bets don't need to be outrageous to eventually create a profit since the original ticket can be bought for very little.

Or if you like the way GCU looks, let it ride…

Marquette (+600) and Gonzaga (+650) To Make The Final Four
DraftKings offering a Final Four futures board before the season starts is a great option to use on teams that project far but are a tier below the Duke and Kansas crowd. After what we saw last year, look for a number of teams in play for a Final Four run. Marquette has both the scoring and defense to do it while Gonzaga, behind a strong transfer group, can make it back to the Final Four for the first time since 2021.

Kyle Filipowski (+800) and Tyler Kolek (30-1) To Win Wooden Award
Kolek to win the award is my favorite futures bet based on these healthy preseason odds. And there are so many factors working in Filipowski's favor that he must be in the portfolio.

Texas A&M To Win SEC Regular Season Title (+450)
There is uncertainty surrounding the return of Zakai Zeigler for Tennessee. The Vols aren't the same team without him being at full speed. That creates a good opportunity for Wade Taylor IV to lead the

Aggies to their first SEC title since 2016 when they were conference co-champs.

Colorado To Win Pac-12 Regular Season Title (+700)
There's a lot of value on Tad Boyle's team to win a conference title before his more famous co-worker does on the football side. The Buffaloes are a good team to back before they break into the national conversation.

Brown To Win Ivy League Regular Season Title (+800)
Yale is clearly the favorite in Ivy with its returning talent. However, the Bears are a legit contender for their first Ivy League regular season title. They should be priced in line with Princeton (+260) or no more than Pennsylvania (+350). This is a value play and the set up of the Brown schedule can help any hedging that these odds allow. Brown's first and last conference game of the season is against Yale. Prior to the final game on March 9 against the Bulldogs, Brown is at home against Harvard and Dartmouth — those two games should help the Bears move up the standings and possibly create a winner take all scenario.

Canisius To Win MAAC Regular Season Title (12-1)
Another value play since I think Caesars has this priced incorrectly. Their board is off because they have Iona (+220) priced as a clear favorite over Rider (+400) and Quinnipiac (+450). That is too much respect for the Gaels based off of what happened the last few seasons. Rick Pitinio and most of those MAAC title winning players are gone. The Golden Griffins were picked third in the preseason MAAC coach's poll and are a real contender for this conference. This is too good of a price to pass up.

ZACHARY COHEN

Battle 4 Atlantis Winner - Villanova (+400)
Villanova was better than its record last season. The Wildcats might have finished the year at 17-17, but they were 51st in KenPom's adjusted efficiency rankings. And while the team did lose Cam Whitmore to the NBA, Villanova hit the portal hard. The Wildcats brought in former Richmond star Tyler Burton, who averaged 19.0 points, 7.4 rebounds and 1.5 steals per game last year. And they also added TJ Bamba, who averaged 15.8 points per game at Washington State last season. When you add those two proven contributors to a very experienced team, you're looking at a Villanova squad that should be good right off the bat. So, I like the Wildcats' chances of winning an early-season tournament. There might be more talented teams than Villanova in the Battle 4 Atlantis field, but Arkansas, the betting favorite, is piecing together a lot of moving parts. And North Carolina has a lot to prove after last year's nightmare of a season, especially with some big-time talent going out the door. That said, I think it's worth taking a shot on Nova to start the season with a bang in the Bahamas.

Wisconsin Big Ten Regular Season Champion (15-1)
If you go to my X (Twitter) profile, you'll see that I am a Wisconsin fan. I just wanted to get that out there, as you deserve the right to know before tailing this. However, I am a realistic fan and I rarely expect good things from the Badgers. But this year's Wisconsin team has the potential to be very good. The Badgers brought back every key contributor from last year's team, including tremendous players like Tyler Wahl (11.3 PPG, 6.3 RPG, 1.2 SPG) and Chucky Hepburn (12.2 PPG, 2.8 APG, 1.5 SPG). Connor Essegian should also be even better after averaging 11.7 points per game as a freshman. He's one of the best shot makers Wisconsin has had in the last decade. The Badgers also have good role players scattered throughout the rotation, with Max Klesmit (8.4 PPG, 38.3% 3PT) and Steven Crowl (12.1 PPG, 6.9 RPG) both knowing how to impact games. And St. John's transfer AJ Storr gives the team an explosive athlete on the wing, and he's another guy that can hit the 3-ball. Overall, this team has a little bit of everything, and freshman Nolan Winter could provide a nice spark off the bench. Considering the talent and experience here, plus the steady hand of head coach Greg Gard, I don't think it's crazy to believe that Wisconsin can keep up with the big boys in the Big Ten this season. The Badgers also lost a lot of close games last year, so they should have some luck on their side. And for what it's worth, Bo Ryan attended a summer practice and said that this group has the potential to be special.

Ole Miss To Win NCAA Championship (150-1)
When scanning through the championship odds, it was hard for me to find any value that I liked. But taking a flier on Ole Miss makes a lot of sense to me. Chris Beard made it to the Final Four of the NCAA Tournament with Texas Tech back in 2019, and he was also the architect of a Texas Longhorns team that was fifth in the nation in KenPom's adjusted efficiency rankings last year. Beard ended up getting himself fired from that job because of off-court drama, but the Rebels were willing to overlook that and bring him in. And while I don't support his antics, I do think Beard is a top-five coach in college basketball. He also happens to be inheriting a team that returns its two leading scorers from last season, and he did a great job of bringing in proven talent in the transfer portal to complement those guys. With that in mind, I think that Ole Miss is a little more talented than it is given credit for. And we know that Beard's style of coaching is conducive to winning in March. Beard's teams can generally be trusted to defend the 3-point line defensively, and the teams play unselfish basketball offensively. So, I don't think it's outrageous to think that this team will really hit its stride towards the end of the season. And I think the Rebels will be a tough out if they make the tournament.

WES REYNOLDS

Purdue To Win NCAA Championship (12-1)
In 2018, Virginia became the first 1 seed to lose in the NCAA Tournament First Round to a 16 seed as they were blown out by UMBC, 74-54. Flash forward five years to March 17, 2023 when

Purdue became the second 1 seed to fall to a 16 losing 63-58 to Fairleigh Dickinson largely due to a 5-for-26 shooting night from outside the arc. The following year, Virginia got its revenge winning the NCAA Championship in 2019 with an experienced group and a coach in Tony Bennett that everyone said was good, but could never win the big one.

Purdue can do the same with a coach in Matt Painter who "can't win in March" and all five returning starters, including National Player of the Year Zach Edey. Speaking of Edey, Purdue played without him in its trip to Europe as the 7-foot-4 big man was playing with Team Canada in the FIBA World Cup. This could be a good thing for the Boilermakers as there may be a night or two, perhaps in March, where Edey could be in foul trouble and they will have to play without him in stretches.

The Boilermakers have the recipe to make a deep run. They run good motion offensively. They rebound well (and not just Edey). They play good defense. They don't foul. They share the ball well. They are unselfish. They can potentially go 10 deep.

The 3-point shooting (32.2% - 276th nationally) needs to improve, but their freshman backcourt of Fletcher Loyer and Braden Smith are now sophomores and they went through the baptism by fire last season.

Purdue started 22-1 last season with victories over Marquette, Duke, Gonzaga, and Michigan State. This group proved they can beat anyone in the country and they are out for redemption to right the wrong of how last season ended.

The highest price on the Boilermakers on their redemption tour is 16-1 at Caesars Sportsbook.

Arkansas To Win the SEC (+800)
Eric Musselman was the transfer portal king before the transfer portal was cool. He took Nevada to the Sweet 16 in 2018 largely on the backs of transfers. He also has reached the Elite Eight twice and the Sweet 16 last year all in the span of four seasons in Fayetteville largely with the help of transfers.

This year, Muss went into the portal to nab three double-digit scorers including Travon Mark (Houston), El Ellis (Louisville), and Khalif Battle (Temple), plus Jeremiah Davenport, a career 1,000-point scorer at Cincinnati. Trevon Brazile returns from an ACL injury as does point guard Devo Davis.

Despite losing three NBA Draft picks, Arkansas is just as talented, if not more so, than last season.

Trevon Brazile

MATT YOUMANS' TOP 25 PRESEASON POLL

In the wild world of college basketball, the team that starts in the No. 1 spot rarely finishes on top, and last year's preseason rankings might have been the worst airball of them all.

Imagine a season when the preseason No. 1 team (North Carolina) missed the NCAA Tournament and an unranked team (Connecticut) won the national championship. The 2022-23 season was incredibly unpredictable for several reasons beyond the Tar Heels' bizarre demise and the Huskies' surprising rise.

The Associated Press Top 25 poll is a compilation of 62 voters from the media, and many of those voters have a regional bias, so the poll is inherently less accurate than Ken Pomeroy's analytics-based ratings or any given sharp handicapper's unbiased numbers.

Last year, almost every source had it wrong in early November, starting with North Carolina. The AP Top 25 failed to rank UConn and two of the other three Final Four teams, Florida Atlantic and Miami. San Diego State, which reached the title game, was ranked 19th in the AP poll. Pomeroy's preseason ratings showed Kentucky at No. 1 and UConn 27th.

My preseason ratings were not much better. I had Miami at No. 19, followed by San Diego State (23) and UConn (28). Purdue, unranked by the AP in the preseason and No. 22 in my ratings, started 21-1 and was the unanimous No. 1 in the AP poll in late January.

But preseason ratings are not always so off the mark. Kansas topped my power ratings for VSiN prior to the 2021-22 season — Gonzaga was the favorite by media and oddsmakers — and the Jayhawks cashed at 15-1 odds by beating the Tar Heels for the NCAA championship.

"This feels like a crazy year when we don't know who's going to be really good," Westgate SuperBook oddsmaker Ed Salmons said.

While it's possible, I highly doubt this season will be as crazy as the last. I believe this season will be far more predictable, based on stronger ratings on a majority of my top 10 teams. Kansas is the most popular pick for preseason No. 1 in 2023-24, but the Jayhawks are my No. 2.

My top team in the preseason is Michigan State, which was picked second behind Purdue in the Big Ten media poll. Spartans coach Tom Izzo has an experienced team that rates highly in all areas, and Izzo has a magic touch in March.

In his 28 years in East Lansing, Izzo has reached eight Final Fours. He has guided the Spartans to every NCAA Tournament since 1998, and Izzo will have a good shot to win it all for the first time since 2000.

"Izzo is due for a good year where things go his way," said Circa Sports oddsmaker Nick Bogdanovich, who added the Spartans have been drawing sharp money on the futures board.

I bet Michigan State at 20-1 to win the national title in the summer — the best current odds (18-1) are available at the Westgate SuperBook. The Spartans are posted at 16-1 at Circa and 15-1 at DraftKings, which also offers +550 on Izzo's team to reach the Final Four.

Preseason power ratings are obviously an inexact science and a team rating in November is based mostly on opinion. I rate teams in seven categories — coaching, backcourt, big men, experience, 3-point shooting, defense/rebounding, and depth — and the first three categories listed are weighted for more emphasis.

Michigan State, which returns five of the top six scorers from a 21-win team that reached the Sweet 16, earned the top score of 94 on my ratings (100 is the top of the scale).

Fifth-year senior Tyson Walker, fourth-year junior AJ Hoggard and junior Jaden Akins lead the backcourt. Freshman point guard Jeremy Fears was a McDonald's All-American and headlines Izzo's impressive recruiting class.

The front line will be strong, as usual, with 6-foot-8 power forward Malik Hall, 6-foot-9 center Mady Sissoko, 6-foot-11 backup center Carson Cooper, 6-foot-9 sophomore Jaxon Kohler and freshmen Coen Carr, a 6-foot-6 athletic freak, and 6-foot-11 Xavier Booker, another McDonald's All-American.

It's a good sign that Izzo did not downplay the Spartans' potential when speaking at a recent media day.

"I'm going to go a little unconventional and tell you I love my team," Izzo said. "I have seen our team in the top five and top 10. People have asked me if I like that and I always say no — I love it."

Instead of playing at a typically slow pace, Izzo said he plans for this team to apply pressure defense and run more often because his roster is 10 to 12 deep with high-quality players. Izzo always tests his team with a tough nonconference schedule, and this one features Duke and Arizona in November and Baylor in December.

The Spartans are ranked No. 4 by Lindy's, No. 5 by Blue Ribbon and No. 12 by KenPom. It's a long journey from early November to early April, when the Final Four will be staged in Glendale, Arizona, and Michigan State will start No. 1 in my power rankings.

THE REST OF MY PRESEASON TOP 25...

2 KANSAS

The Big Ten lost one of its brightest stars when 7-foot-2 Hunter Dickinson transferred from Michigan and joined the Jayhawks as the top player in the portal. Dickinson is an excellent passer and perimeter shooter who makes everyone around him better. Point guard Dajuan Harris (77 career starts) and forwards KJ Adams and Kevin McCullar have plenty of experience, but young players must develop. Depth is a concern, and that's the primary reason this team is not rated No. 1. The guard rotation is promising with newcomers Elmarko Jackson, Johnny Furphy, Jamari McDowell and Towson transfer Nicolas Timberlake. Bill Self, who has coached Kansas to two national titles, is looking sharp with Dickinson plus three starters returning from a 28-win team.

3 PURDUE

Zach Edey should remain the nation's most dominant player. The 7-foot-4, 300-pound center is the reigning national Player of the Year, but his numbers (22.3 PPG, 12.9 RPG) might dip because the Boilermakers have a deeper and more talented rotation. Young guards Fletcher Loyer and Braden Smith fizzled late last season, but they will be better as sophomores. Purdue returns five starters from a team that swept the Big Ten regular-season and tournament titles, and coach Matt Painter adds 6-foot-7 Camden Heide, 7-foot-2 Will Berg, 6-foot-6 Myles Colvin and Southern Illinois transfer guard Lance Jones. This team is ranked No. 1 by KenPom. VSiN's Brent Musburger recently said, "I can't bet Purdue to win the national title." And I agree. But this rating is predictive for November and not about the Boilermakers' flops in March.

4 DUKE

In his first season as coach, Jon Scheyer guided the Blue Devils to 27 wins. He was a winner in the offseason, too. Kyle Filipowski, a 7-foot sophomore, turned down the NBA and will do bigger things after averaging 15.1 points and 8.9 rebounds. Filipowski is flanked by 6-foot-9 sophomore Mark Mitchell and 6-foot-10 center Ryan Young. An impressive recruiting class is highlighted by guards Caleb Foster and Jared McCain and forwards TJ Power and Sean Stewart. The backcourt has experienced leaders in senior guard Jeremy Roach and sophomore point guard Tyrese Proctor, so Scheyer has veterans to lean on while the prospects develop. Scheyer replaced Mike Krzyzewski and proved he could handle the job.

5 MARQUETTE

It all starts with senior Tyler Kolek, who's arguably the nation's top point guard. Kolek and junior shooting guard Kam Jones led the Golden Eagles to the Big East regular-season and tournament titles, beating Connecticut in the process. Marquette returns 88% of its scoring from a 29-win team, so the table is set for coach Shaka Smart.

6 CONNECTICUT

The Huskies won the NCAA championship and then lost a lot — center Adama Sanogo, guard Jordan Hawkins and forward Andre Jackson Jr. — but don't cry for coach Dan Hurley. UConn brings back 7-foot-2 center Donovan Clingan, senior guard Tristen Newton and forward Alex Karaban. Rutgers transfer Cam Spencer adds needed 3-point shooting in Hawkins' absence, and freshman point guard Stephon Castle is a five-star recruit and future star. Don't dwell on the departed stars because Hurley has another team with a high ceiling.

7 ARKANSAS

Eric Musselman's recruiting prowess is undeniable. Despite losing two NBA first-round picks, the Razorbacks will be better. Point guard Devo Davis returns to a backcourt that adds transfers Khalif Battle (Temple), Tramon Mark (Houston) and El Ellis (Louisville). Baye Fall, a 6-foot-10 center, arrives as a McDonald's All-American and will fit well with 6-foot-10 sophomore Trevon Brazile. Musselman, who has seven seniors on the roster, has coached Arkansas to three consecutive Sweet 16 appearances.

8 HOUSTON

Cougars coach Kelvin Sampson lost NBA first-round picks Jarace Walker and Marcus Sasser, but he's reloading much like Musselman at Arkansas. Senior point guard Jamal Shead will be joined by senior guards LJ Cryer, a transfer from Baylor, and Temple transfer Damian Dunn. Houston, which allowed 57.5 PPG to rank No. 2 in the nation in scoring defense, has enough talent and interior toughness to challenge Kansas atop the Big 12.

9 CREIGHTON

The Bluejays have an impressive big three — 7-foot-1 Ryan Kalkbrenner, junior guard Trey Alexander and senior guard Baylor Scheierman — coming back from a 24-win team that reached the Elite Eight. Expectations should remain high in Omaha. Greg McDermott is a great coach, and he added an elite 3-point shooter in Utah State transfer Steven Ashworth.

10 GONZAGA

For the first time in what seems like 10 years, Drew Timme will not be starring for the Zags and the preseason hype surrounding this team is not over the top. Bulldogs coach Mark Few is counting on a few transfers — point guard Ryan Nembhard (Creighton), shooting guard Steele Venters (Eastern Washington) and power forward Graham Ike (Wyoming) — to provide big boosts. Senior forward Anton Watson will be one of the few familiar faces. Few needs freshman Dusty Stromer to develop quickly. It's fair to question Gonzaga's defense, and the roster is short on size, which will be a problem when the Zags face Purdue in the Maui Invitational before Thanksgiving.

11. ARIZONA
Caleb Love (North Carolina), Jaden Bradley (Alabama) and Keshad Johnson (San Diego State) arrive in Tucson as high-profile transfers, and senior Oumar Ballo is one of four 7-footers on the Wildcats' roster. Tommy Lloyd is an outstanding offensive coach and recruiter, but one fair criticism has been his previous teams' lack of defensive toughness. Arizona's talent and size make it the Pac-12 favorite.

12. BAYLOR
Bears coach Scott Drew lost three of his top scorers but brought in freshman guard Ja'Kobe Walter, a McDonald's All-American, and senior guard RayJ Dennis, a former Toledo star who was the Mid-American Conference's top player. Senior forward Jalen Bridges, who averaged 10.3 points and started all 34 games, is the only returning starter, but Drew still will have Baylor near the top of the Big 12.

13. TENNESSEE
The Volunteers displayed their toughness by muscling Duke out of the NCAA Tournament, and they did it without point guard Zakai Zeigler, who went down with a season-ending knee injury in late February. Zeigler's return date this season is a mystery, but senior guard Santiago Vescovi returns along with senior forward Josiah-Jordan James. Tennessee was the No. 1-rated defensive team by KenPom, yet its offense was painful to watch, and the 3-point shooting must improve.

14. KENTUCKY
After getting overrated last year (No. 2 preseason), the Wildcats might be underrated here. It's difficult to evaluate what Kentucky will be early in the season as coach John Calipari replaces double-double machine Oscar Tshiebwe and works in one of the nation's top recruiting classes headlined by guards DJ Wagner and Justin Edwards. Senior guard Antonio Reeves can be a big-time scorer. Seven-foot freshman Aaron Bradshaw and senior forward Tre Mitchell add interior toughness.

15. FLORIDA ATLANTIC
After narrowly escaping the first round of the NCAA Tournament, the Owls were one defensive stop away from playing in the title game. Five starters return from coach Dusty May's 35-4 team. Junior guards Johnell Davis and Alijah Martin have NBA potential, and 7-foot-1 Vladislav Goldin gives FAU the ability to match up against bigger teams.

16. NORTH CAROLINA
It's not as if the Tar Heels were terrible last season (20-13, 11-9 ACC), but it was terribly disappointing for the preseason No. 1 team to finish seventh in its conference and miss the NCAA Tournament. It has been a rollercoaster ride for third-year coach Hubert Davis. Carolina should rebound with 6-foot-11 senior Armando Bacot (15.9 PPG, 10.4 RPG) and junior guard RJ Davis leading the way. The Heels added transfers Harrison Ingram (Stanford), Cormac Ryan (Notre Dame) and Paxson Wojcik (Brown).

17. TEXAS
Max Abmas, who transferred from Oral Roberts, is a dynamic playmaker and shooting star with 123 career starts. Rodney Terry was able to drop "interim" from his job title after coaching the Longhorns to the NCAA Elite Eight. Terry welcomes back junior guard Tyrese Hunter, senior forward Dylan Disu and sophomore forward Dillon Mitchell. Abmas is an exciting player who significantly raises the ceiling for this team.

18. MIAMI
The Hurricanes had seven NCAA Tournament wins in the past two seasons. While it's tough to say Jim Larranaga is an underrated coach, he deserves more credit. Point guard Nijel Pack and forward Norchad Omier played major roles during the Final Four run. Wooga Poplar will step up to help replace leading scorer Isaiah Wong, and forward Matthew Cleveland is a big addition as a transfer from Florida State.

19. TEXAS A&M
Veteran guards Wade Taylor IV and Tyrece Radford return to steer the Aggies, who finished 25-10 and won 15 games in the SEC. Texas A&M coach Buzz Williams has put together a strong roster with few weaknesses.

20. VILLANOVA
Kyle Neptune's break-even first season (17-17) as coach did not make anyone forget Jay Wright. The Wildcats will be much better this time around with senior guard Justin Moore and senior forward Eric Dixon leading a new-look team. Washington State transfer guard TJ Bamba is one of many promising additions.

21. COLORADO
Tad Boyle is coaching a sleeper team in the Pac-12. The Buffaloes bring back 84.0% of their scoring and two of the league's top five returning scorers in senior forward Tristan da Silva and junior guard KJ Simpson, who each averaged 15.9 points. Cody Williams, a 6-foot-8 forward, arrives as a five-star recruit, and 6-foot-10 Assane Diop is another big part of Colorado's hyped recruiting class. The Buffaloes are ready for prime time.

22. ST. JOHN'S
Rick Pitino remains one of the top coaches in the game, and he will have the Red Storm rising fast. Pitino has rebuilt the roster around 6-foot-11 senior Joel Soriano, who recorded 25 double-doubles last season. There are several immediate impact transfers on a talented team that will be underrated by most pundits. Pitino will win more than 20 games and get to the NCAA Tournament.

23. USC
Isaiah Collier is considered by some to be the nation's No. 1 freshman, and senior guard Boogie Ellis is the Pac-12's preseason Player of the Year after averaging 17.7 points. The Trojans will defend the rim with muscle and size as 7-foot-1 Vincent Iwuchukwu returns from a health scare and 6-foot-6 senior DJ Rodman, son of Dennis, transfers from Washington State.

24. MARYLAND
The gap between the Big Ten's top two teams (Michigan State, Purdue) and the next tier of contenders is not huge. Senior guard Jahmir Young and senior forward Donta Scott will make the Terrapins tough to beat.

25. UCLA
Always give coach Mick Cronin the benefit of the doubt. The Bruins lost Jaime Jaquez Jr., Tyger Campbell and others, but Cronin reloaded and stacked his roster with big men. UCLA could be a matchup nightmare in the post with 6-foot-10 sophomore Adem Bona, 7-foot-3 Aday Mara from Spain, 6-foot-10 Kenneth Nwuba, 6-foot-10 Devin Williams and 6-foot-9 Berke Buyuktuncel.
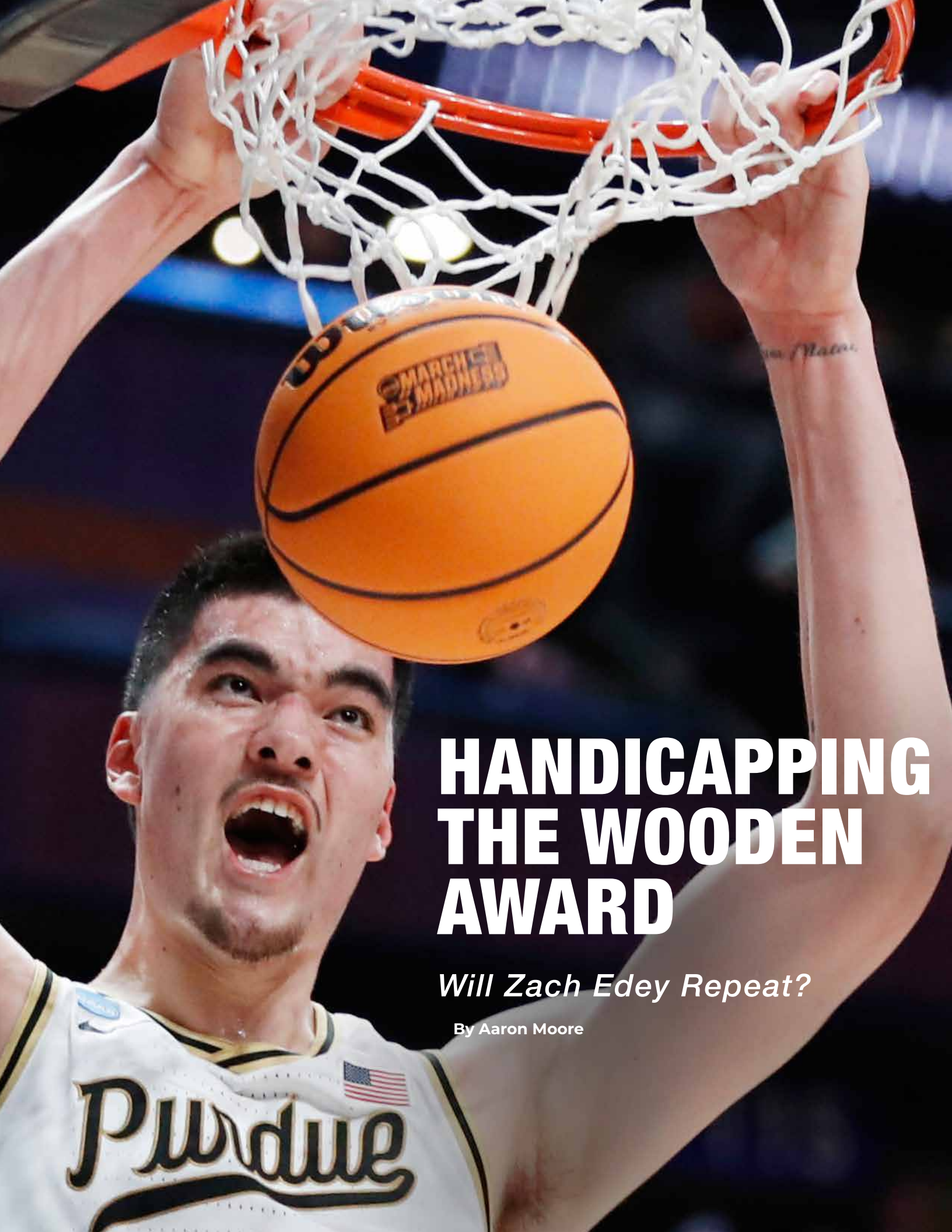
HANDICAPPING THE WOODEN AWARD

Will Zach Edey Repeat?

By Aaron Moore

The process of handicapping the Player of the Year award for college basketball begins just like it did prior to the college football season. Bettors have to determine first if there will be a repeat winner.

Caleb Williams was heavily favored to be the first back-to-back Heisman winner since Archie Griffin in 1974 and 1975 before this college football season. However, despite putting up strong numbers thus far, Williams is no longer looking like a real threat to win it. On the basketball side, Zach Edey will start the season with the goal of winning two straight John R. Wooden Awards like another big man, Ralph Sampson, did in 1982 and 1983.

The top of the odds boards kind of look like the days of Sampson in the early 1980s when big men ruled the game. Besides Edey +175 (DraftKings), the other betting favorites, Kyle Filipowski (+800), Hunter Dickinson (+900), Armando Bacot (16-1) and Donovan Clingan (20-1) all play the center position, at least the current version of it.

The books see a trend forming. The last three Wooden winners, Edey, Oscar Tshiebwe and Luka Garza had a C next to their name.

Here is an analysis of the Wooden Award and some options to add to a futures portfolio.

AVERAGE RETURNS

With voters heavily favoring a returning player, let's look at the statistical improvements made by the past three winners since 2019 when Zion Williamson was the last freshman to take home the award.

In the season they won the award, the trio of Tshiebwe, Garza and Obi Toppin averaged an increase of 5.5 minutes, 3.0 rebounds and 4.9 points per game from the prior campaign.

So, keep in mind how much room a returning player has in this year's stat line to accommodate necessary improvements.

TOO SHORT FOR THESE BIGS

There should be a number of concerns betting on Edey to repeat.

One is that media members already did their stories on Edey's ascension up the basketball ranks. They are searching for new material this year. There is also the issue of the odds being below 2-1 for something that hasn't happened in four decades.

Look at how Tshiebwe fared in his 2023 attempt to go back-to-back. The numbers (16.5 PPG, 13.7 RPG) were strong and comparable to what the Kentucky center did in 2022 (17.4 PPG, 15.1 RPG). However, he was not one of the five finalists for last season's award. A bet this year on Edey at +175 is a belief that his numbers from last year (22.3 PPG, 12.9 RPG, 2.1 BPG) won't take any type of dip.

Sampson's statistics for his return year after first winning the award were essentially the same. His rebound average moved up only .3, but he did add three more points per game to his scoring. As a frame of reference, Edey would then need to score 25+ points a game this year, and only one player eclipsed that total last season.

Another strike against the Edey campaign is how Purdue painfully bowed out of the NCAA tournament. The last voters saw of Edey, he was gassed, trudging up the court against a No. 16 seed. Basically, the best player in the country struggled and couldn't lift his team past Fairleigh Dickinson.

That historic loss will likely be Edey's main storyline all season, regardless of the numbers he puts up this year.

If a bettor is willing to play odds this low for a repeat Wooden winner, look at the women's board for Caitlin Clark of Iowa who is +100. She is a better bet than Edey because Clark has only two realistic contenders to fend off — Paige Bueckers of UConn +300 and LSU's Angel Reese +350.

Bacot and Clingan are other top candidates that bettors should be leery of backing this early.

Bacot, the veteran North Carolina big man, can score and rebound like the best player in the country when he is healthy. Last year, he suffered an ankle injury that lingered through the second half of the season. While that may have healed, his physical style and willingness to pound in the post opens him up to even more wear and tear. He never appears fresh enough to make the move from an All-American team to a Wooden Award winner. So, there's no reason to hurry to the window for Bacot.

A bet on Connecticut's Clingan should come at a much higher price than 20-1. Even odds like that can still be too low. Clingan's presence this high on the odds board is based on his new expanded role for the defending national champions. However, be advised a successful backup getting more time doesn't mean his stats will rise in a proportional manner.

Last year, in 13.1 minutes per game, Clingan averaged just 6.9 points and 5.6 boards. So, if those totals are doubled to be in line with the 26.6 minutes Adama Sanogo played per game last year for the Huskies, Clingan could possibly put up 14 points and 12 rebounds per game. Those would be excellent numbers but not Wooden numbers. At 7-foot-2, 265 pounds, Clingan drags around a ton of weight and doesn't have the same range as Sanogo did as UConn's primary center.

In Bart Torvik's Top 10 projected contributors for the Huskies in 2024, he has Clingan ranked sixth.

Donovan Clingan

Kyle Filipowski

BIG ENOUGH

There is a lot to like in the upcoming Filipowski-for-the-Wooden campaign. Based on how well he projects this season, a +800 ticket is worth an early investment. The 7-foot big man who can score from anywhere on the court is coming back after an impressive freshman season (15.1 PPG, 8.9 RPG) in Durham. Those numbers should only improve as Duke challenges for a national championship in Year 2 of the Jon Scheyer regime. Filipowski should also play an even greater role in the Blue Devils offense with the departure of Dereck Lively II, who left for the NBA.

After his horrendous game against Virginia last February when he was held scoreless, Filipowski went on to score double digits in 10 of Duke's last 11 games.

If a bettor likes Duke to get a top tournament seed, then consider Filipowski for the Wooden because those two wagers are correlated.

The same connection can be made with Hunter Dickinson and his new Kansas team. The former Michigan big man is looking to follow the same path Tshiebwe took from transfer to Wooden Award winner. A scoring big man with brand equity playing for top-ranked Kansas makes for a good investment.

Dickinson's 3-point shooting percentage improved each season for the Wolverines, and he should get some more chances behind the arc this year for Bill Self, who no longer has Gradey Dick.

While Dickinson is a solid bet for the award, Filipowski might be better since Kansas, in a deep Big 12, will face more physical defensive styles than Duke will in the ACC.

THE VALUE OF SCORING

While the award has gone to a big man five straight times, the most value might be on a point guard. Marquette's Tyler Kolek (30-1) fits the profile of lead guards Frank Mason III and Jalen Brunson who won the award in 2017 and 2018 respectively. Kolek could very well carry Marquette to near the top of the national rankings. From a narrative standpoint, he looks and plays differently than the aforementioned big men, which might help generate stories about his frenetic full-court style.

The Golden Eagles may have one of the most explosive offenses in the country running the Shaka Smart system, and Kolek is the floor general scoring and dishing it out. Last year, in his second year under Smart, Kolek averaged 12.9 points and was third in the nation with 7.5 assists per game. He was also named the Big East tournament MVP.

Averaging the preseason odds of the last three Wooden Award winners, it was 26.5-1, a similar number to what bettors can now get for Kolek.

Max Abmas (30-1) is another guard with the potential to showcase his abilities at Texas and differentiate himself from the big men candidates. He provides more scoring punch than Kolek, averaging over 21.9 points per game in the last three seasons for Oral Roberts. There is more concern for Abmas winning the award than Kolek since he must step into

a new offense and share the ball with another Wooden contender Tyrese Hunter (60-1).

When Tshiebwe won the award as a transfer, he made a lateral move from the Big 12 to the SEC. Abmas is trying to do it while moving from the Summit League to the Big 12.

WAY OUT WEST

For those bettors contemplating a Wooden futures ticket on a player who attends a school located in the Mountain or Western time zone, be aware of what looks like an East Coast (and Midwest) bias. The last player in those western areas to win the award was Jimmer Fredette in 2011. Before that, it was Andrew Bogut in 2005.

That raises questions about how much media support a talented Pac-12 group consisting of Oumar Ballo (30-1) and Caleb Love (35-1) of Arizona and USC's Isaiah Collier (35-1) and Boogie Ellis (80-1) can count on throughout the season.

Aidan Mahaney (65-1) has the talent to win the award but not the platform at Saint Mary's.

The top Gonzaga player on the board is transfer Graham Ike (80-1).

BUY LOW

This could be a prolific year for the Big East so Wooden bettors should look all around the conference for options.

Expectations are that Villanova will bounce back in Kyle Neptune's second season running the program. If that happens, it will likely be from the healthy return of senior guard Justin Moore (50-1) who played just 13 games last year due to an Achilles injury. When he did take the court, he was limited but still showed an ability to score. The 50-1 is a buy-low option for a player who should ride the wave of stories focused on the "return" of Villanova after missing last year's tournament.

GO LONG

Creighton big man Ryan Kalkbrenner (75-1) can turn a small preseason wager into something worth following during the year. Last year, Wooden voters showed they are willing to back a 7-footer for the honor of being the best player in the country. This season, the 7-foot-1 Kalkbrenner could play both the role of Edey and Doug McDermott, the 2014 Wooden winner.

The Bluejays are in line to be a Top 5 team and earn a No. 1 seed in the tournament. Somebody is going to get credit for it.

Another option that should lead his team to a high ranking while having very long odds is Kansas' Dajuan Harris Jr. (100-1). There is another comparison here as well. Harris, who is more of a distributor than a scorer and one of the best on-ball defenders in the country, could be the one who gets the headlines for the Jayhawks as Mason III did in 2017.

BETTING ON 'CINDERELLA' BEFORE THE BALL BEGINS

By Aaron Moore

What both Florida Atlantic and San Diego State did last season to make the Final Four seems different than what other non-power conference teams like George Mason, VCU and Loyola Chicago did over the past few decades.

It wasn't just some good breaks and luck that helped them make it all the way through their brackets. Last year the Owls and the Aztecs were two of the best teams in the country regardless of conference affiliation.

FAU, which won 28 regular-season games, started the season inside KenPom's Top 100 and progressively moved into the 20s before the start of the NCAA Tournament.

SDSU, with 24 regular-season wins, was in the teens for the KenPom rankings for most of the season.

These teams shouldn't have surprised fans or bettors going as far as they did. But it did for many because of how much we still value conference affiliation in the handicapping process.

Well, let last season be a learning experience for futures bettors.The time has come to adjust early-season handicapping and include some work in trying to identify who could be the next FAU. The setting is ripe for another one to emerge.

The transfer portal and NIL deals have helped spread the talent pool across many more conferences thus altering the landscape of college basketball. Mid-major conferences like Conference USA and the Mountain West are benefiting from being in the middle because they are getting untapped talent moving down and hungry players moving up.

When most players at this level don't see college basketball as a brief off ramp on the way to the NBA like they often do in the Power Five neighborhoods, there is more of an opportunity for coaches to create continuity.

Don't be confused, though. The elite conferences are still sitting in an advantageous position, comfortably in first class. Everyone else just has a little more legroom in coach.

The big guys retain a massive advantage in terms of recruiting and scheduling, which then affects conference seeding and venue destinations. Teams like Duke, Kansas, Michigan State and Connecticut should still have a strong presence in a futures portfolio. A squad of that rank is likely going to win the national championship. However, the conditions have changed and bettors should be more receptive to backing some longer-odds teams outside the Power Five and Big East.

From a betting standpoint, long shots appear to be in a better position to make deep runs, allowing tickets on them for the national championship

or Final Four the opportunity to be monetized (credit to Mike Palm for coining the term) along the way.

Here are some options to keep in mind as to who might be the next FAU when diversifying this year's futures portfolio.

All odds are courtesy of DraftKings

FLORIDA ATLANTIC (40-1 NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP; 10-1 TO MAKE FINAL FOUR)

Surprise, they're back. … but it shouldn't be a surprise. Basically that same team that went to the Final Four returns with the exception of a backup point guard.

Last season, the books certainly got caught off guard by FAU as it wasn't readily available on the futures board until midway through the year at a robust 250-1.

Other than the possibility of a hangover effect, this team should do exactly what it did in 2023. The Owls can slow opponents down with KenPom's 34th-ranked defense and get scoring from Johnell Davis (13.8 PPG) and Alijah Martin (13.4 PPG). The 7-foot-1 Vladislav Goldin will patrol the middle.

Instead of doing it in Conference USA, the Owls must navigate the higher-level American Athletic Conference. Stepping up is a reason some will remain skeptical about FAU.

DraftKings has this squad priced similarly to Maryland (40-1) and Auburn (45-1).

It's the AAC the Owls are moving to, not the ACC. Sure, Memphis, Tulane and SMU will pose a challenge, but FAU is in a strong position to win another conference title with the return of all five starters who have more tournament experience than those aforementioned clubs.

FAU is definitely in line to be the next FAU, and at 40-1 there is some preseason value.

Being part of the AAC should help in terms of seeding. Last year Memphis got an at-large bid and was seeded eighth, one spot higher than FAU was as an automatic qualifier. Joe Lunardi's first Bracketology report has FAU slated to be on the 4-line (where Connecticut was placed last year).

The Owls will get plenty of opportunity to boost their seeding potential by playing an upgraded schedule that includes Loyola Chicago, Illinois, Butler and Arizona. A couple of wins there puts them in a realistic position to secure a top-3 seed. If that happens, the ability to monetize a 40-1 ticket becomes much easier.

Think about this when pondering long shots: if the team can get a higher-than-expected tournament seed, it should start the opening rounds as a favorite, making it easier to wager against the existing ticket.

This might be one to add early since the public hasn't turned its attention to CBB futures yet, and once that happens, the Dusty May 2.0 show is going to be a popular play.

SAINT MARY'S
(50-1 NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP; 15-1 TO MAKE FINAL FOUR)

Like FAU, this is another overachiever from last season that has the chance to parlay experience and continuity into a deep tournament run. The Gaels bring back the bulk of last year's team with the exception of leading scorer Logan Johnson (14.5 PPG). Obviously that's a big loss for a group that averaged 70.7 points a game. SMC will offset that departure by moving Augustas Marciulionis into the starting PG spot and relying even more on Aidan Mahaney (13.9 PPG, 2.0 APG) to advance his already strong offensive game into his sophomore year. He makes a great combination with 6-foot-7 guard senior guard Alex Ducas (12.5 PPG). There is a little star power in Moraga, Calif.

The Gaels might not be an unknown like FAU was last year, nonetheless the program is still in the shadow of Gonzaga and back-to-back years as a No. 5 seed shows they are still considered an outsider. The 50-1 odds only reinforces that assessment.

Lunardi predicts the Gaels on the 6 seed line.

By playing a schedule that includes Utah and multiple Mountain West teams, including San Diego State, the Gaels also have a chance to get a top-3 seed, but their current odds don't necessarily reflect that.

SMC has experience, defense and physicality, good characteristics to back with a ticket for a tournament where top seeds are vulnerable.

DRAKE
(300-1 NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP; 60-1 TO MAKE FINAL FOUR)

Bart Torvik has this Missouri Valley Conference team already ranked 78th in the nation. Coach Darian DeVries has earned that type of preseason respect after leading the program to 27 wins last year and an NCAA Tournament berth in two of the last three seasons. The 2023 squad was a defensive-minded team (40th in KenPom's Adjusted Efficiency) while two seasons ago it was offense (33rd Adjusted Efficiency) that propelled the Bulldogs.

DeVries can coach. This year, he has son Tucker DeVries (18.6 PPG) back along with leading rebounder Darnell Brodie (7.3 RPG). To supplement this experienced nucleus, Drake added a mix of power conference and mid-major transfers. What creates the possibility of Drake moving from a one-win tournament team to something more is all of them will fit into DeVries' defensive strategy. Atin Wright (Cal State Northridge), Kyron Gibson (Texas-Arlington), Ethan Roberts (Army) and Carlos Rosario (Washington State) can help Drake develop into a difficult squad to prepare for as it is filled with 6-foot-7 type players who defend and don't turn the ball over.

Even if Drake keeps the 12th seed Lunardi is predicting, it is a 300-1 team that could knock off 5 and 4 seeds.

Drake could be like the 2010 Butler Final Four squad with Tucker DeVries playing the Gordon Hayward role.

NEW MEXICO
(150-1 NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP; 35-1 TO MAKE FINAL FOUR)

The Lobos are a senior-oriented team that can score. Jamal Mashburn Jr. and Jaelen House combined for more than 36 points a game last season. This year, the backcourt could go for more points than that if coach Richard Pitino has his way. Center Nelly Junior Joseph, who played for Pitino's dad at Iona, comes to Albuquerque along with veterans Jemarl Baker (Fresno State), Mustapha Amzil (Dayton), and Isaac Mushila (Texas A&M Corpus Christi). Add highly touted high school recruit JT Toppin and the Lobos have a team that will contend for a Mountain West title and, then in the NCAA Tournament, has the ability to outlast any school offensively.

Perhaps UNM is the next SDSU.

GRAND CANYON
(NOT ON THE DRAFTKINGS BOARD BUT AVAILABLE AT SOME BOOKS AT 2000-1)

Now here is a long shot with a chance to monetize a ticket if the Antelopes can make the NCAA Tournament. Don't overlook this team because it lacks a hoops pedigree. Yes, a WAC school can follow a similar path to what FAU did last season. Grand Canyon has a talented roster — inside Bart Torvik's Top 100 (81) — regardless of its conference profile.

Leading scorer Ray Harrison (17.8 PPG) returns after leading GCU's March run through the WAC and a competitive game against Gonzaga in the opening round of the NCAA Tournament. Not only is the 6-7 Gabe McGlothan (7.6 RPG) back, but so is Jovan Blacksher Jr., who appeared in just 12 games last season after being tabbed the conference's preseason Player of the Year. Add them to a group of power conference transfers including Tyon Grant-Foster (DePaul and Kansas), Lok Wur (Oregon), Sydney Curry (Louisville) and Duke Brennan (Arizona State) all looking to jump-start their careers under coach Bryce Drew.

Under Drew, GCU has quietly risen near the top of the mid-major ranks and can knock off the big guys using a deliberate offense (18.3 average possession length) that shifts position players all around the court.

Lunardi sees upward movement here. He had the team seeded 14th last season and on the 12 line in 2024.

Any futures bet is contingent on GCU not slipping up during the WAC tournament. If they get through that, this is a long-shot team with a chance of marrying old and new into a tournament run.

TRAITS THAT PREDICT IMPROVEMENT, DECLINE

By Steve Makinen

For those of you familiar with my preseason college football work, the articles I put together for readers each summer have become increasingly popular, as several VSIN hosts and personalities champion the concepts on my behalf each year. The data I cover in these pieces includes key statistics, the number of returning starters, coaching changes, and several other factors. I even have a popular system I employ every year to quantify my theories called Stability Scores.

I do this exercise every summer as a prep for a new season. One of the most difficult things about handicapping college sports is the process of evaluating teams from one season to the next. So many things can affect a team's strength and how different they might be. Adding to the difficulty is the thought that many programs are taking players out of their most recent recruiting class and/or the transfer portal and plugging them in early starting spots.

I have a similar set of ideas I use in predicting potential teams that might improve or decline in the coming season for college basketball, based upon some shared characteristics of past teams fitting that bill. Identifying those teams accurately can clearly help build bankrolls. Last year's list of teams to watch for performed amazingly, as all 21 of the teams I projected to decline last year did so, and 20 of the 23 teams I projected to get better last season saw their records improve year-over-year. I share the details of those projections from last year below. It was the second straight season in which I saw noteworthy returns on this strategy, so of course, I have decided to employ it again.

Any of you who have become regular readers of my work know that I rely heavily on systematic approaches that exhibit a solid foundation for year-after-year repeated success. I strongly believe that returning experience or lack thereof, and the relationship of that with how a team fared in the prior season in a variety of analytics, is a huge foundational cornerstone on which bettors should analyze teams entering a college basketball season. What I have put together below is based on that logic.

Shared Characteristics of Teams that Decline Year-to-Year
There have been 104 teams over the last eight seasons that have declined by 30.0% or more (approximately 15 wins) from one year to the next in terms of outright won-lost percentage. Do these teams share any personnel or statistical characteristics that might help us project the potential depreciating teams for this season? Let's take a look, using a similar process I employ in projecting the title favorites and potential Cinderella teams for the NCAA Tournament each March.

Of the 104 teams I described above, to narrow down the list of this year's qualifying teams:

- About 2/3 of them won 60.0% or more of their games in prior season (120 teams did this in 2022-23)

- 72, or about 69.0%, had two or fewer returning starters (71 of the 120 teams for this season have this)
- About 2/3 of them had 30.0% RPM or less (26 of the 71 teams for this season share this trait)

With a list of 26 potential teams destined to fall off in 2023-24, I then analyzed seven different statistical angles from the prior season matching the 104 teams from past years that experienced 30.0%-plus declines in win percentage:

- About 2/3 of them had a point differential of less than +6.5 PPG
- About 2/3 of them won 50.0% or more of their games ATS
- About 2/3 of them had at least five close wins (<=5 PTS)
- About 2/3 of them had, at most, four close losses (<=5 PTS)
- About 2/3 of them had five or fewer blowout wins (>=20 PTS)
- About 2/3 of them had at least one blowout loss (>=20 PTS)
- About 2/3 of them won seven or fewer of their last 10 games

Here is the list of the 26 teams with the number of traits that they match from above (out of 7). It could be assumed that the more shared traits, the greater the chance that the team declines significantly in 2023-24, although, as you'll see just below this year's list, there was a consistent decline from all the teams last year. Note that the teams marked with a "*" have new head coaches this season:

NORTHWESTERN STATE (7)*
SANTA CLARA (7)
GEORGE MASON (6)*
INDIANA (6)
KANSAS STATE (6)
PENN STATE (6)*
ARIZONA STATE (5)
BALL STATE (5)
MONTANA STATE (5)
SOUTHERN UTAH (5)*
TOWSON STATE (5)
ALABAMA (4)
CINCINNATI (4)
VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH (4)*
VIRGINIA (4)
GONZAGA (3)
IONA (3)*
KENTUCKY (3)
MEMPHIS (3)
TEXAS A&M CC (3)*
UTAH STATE (3)*
UTAH VALLEY STATE (3)*
XAVIER (3)
YOUNGSTOWN STATE (3)
NC CENTRAL (2)
UCLA (2)

Here is a look back at the 2021-22 to 2022-23 results. Overall, all 21 teams declined by an average of 7.4 wins on the season or a little over 20.0% on winning percentage. Those with new head coaches dropped by an average of 9.3 wins:

PROVIDENCE (7) – went from 27-6 to 21-12
ARKANSAS (6) – went from 28-9 to 22-14
MONMOUTH (6) – went from 21-13 to 7-26
NEW MEXICO STATE* (6) – went from 27-7 to 9-15
OHIO STATE (6) – went from 20-12 to 16-19
ST BONAVENTURE (6) – went from 23-10 to 14-18
GEORGIA STATE* (5) – went from 18-11 to 10-21
JACKSONVILLE STATE (5) – went from 21-11 to 13-18
MISSOURI-KC* (5) – went from 19-12 to 11-21
ST PETER'S* (5) – went from 22-12 to 14-18
WAKE FOREST (5) – went from 25-10 to 19-14
ILLINOIS (4) – went from 23-10 to 20-13
MOREHEAD STATE (4) – went from 23-11 to 22-12
SMU* (4) – went from 24-9 to 19-14
BELMONT (3) – went from 25-8 to 21-11
DUKE* (3) – went from 32-7 to 27-9
MURRAY STATE* (3) – went from 31-3 to 17-15
BUFFALO (2) – went from 19-11 to 15-17
LSU* (2) – went from 22-12 to 14-19
MISSOURI STATE (2) – went from 23-11 to 17-15
TEXAS TECH (2) – went from 27-10 to 16-16

In addition, a noteworthy 25 of the 104 (24.0%) teams had a new head coach, a lofty number considering the normal percentage of new coaches is 13.0%. The average SU win percentage drop for this group has been 36.7%! For 2023-24, as noted above, there are nine teams that find themselves in that dangerous predicament: George Mason, Iona, Northwestern State, Penn State, Southern Utah, Texas A&M Corpus Christi, Utah State, Utah Valley State, and Virginia Commonwealth.

Shared Characteristics of Teams that Improve Year-to-Year
There have been 109 teams over the last eight seasons that have improved by 28.0% or more (approximately 10 wins) from one year to the next in terms of outright won-lost percentage. Do these teams share any personnel or statistical characteristics that might help us project the potentially upgraded teams for this season? Let's take a look.

Of the 109 teams I described above, to narrow down the list of this year's qualifying teams:

- About 2/3 of them won less than 40.0% of their games in prior season (93 teams did this in 2022-23)
- 80 had three or more returning starters (41 of the 93 teams for 2023-24 have this)
- About 2/3 of them had 60.0% RPM or more (16 of the 41 teams have this)
- Automatically eliminate any teams with new head coaches (this eliminates two teams for 2023-24)

With a trimmed-down list of 14 potential teams destined to improve in 2023-24, I again analyzed seven more statistical angles from the prior season matching the 109 teams from past years that experienced 28.0%-plus gains in win percentage:

- About 2/3 of them had a point differential of better than -6.0 PPG
- About 2/3 of them won 50.0% or less of their games ATS
- About 2/3 of them had four or fewer close wins (<=5 PTS)
- About 2/3 of them had at least five close losses (<=5 PTS)
- About 2/3 of them had at least two blowout wins (>=20 PTS)
- About 2/3 of them had four or fewer blowout losses (>=20 PTS)
- About 2/3 of them won three or more of their last 10 games

Here is a look back at the 2021-22 to 2022-23 results from this same study. Overall, 20 of the 23 teams improved by an average of 6.0 wins on the season or a little over 17.2% on winning percentage. The outliers are in italics:

MARSHALL (7) – went from 12-21 to 24-8
SIU EDWARDSVILLE (7) – went from 11-21 to 17-15
STETSON (7) – went from 11-19 to 17-14
UTAH (7) – went from 11-20 to 17-15
BOSTON COLLEGE (6) – went from 13-20 to 16-17
ST FRANCIS (PA) (6) – went from 9-21 to 13-18
NORTHERN FLORIDA (5) – went from 11-20 to 14-17
PRESBYTERIAN (5) – went from 12-20 to 5-27
TENNESSEE-MARTIN (5) – went from 8-22 to 19-14
AMERICAN (4) – went from 10-22 to 17-15
BUCKNELL (4) – went from 9-23 to 12-20
CAL POLY-SLO (4) – went from 7-21 to 8-25
CHARLESTON SOUTHERN (4) – went from 6-25 to 10-21
INDIANA STATE (4) - went from 11-20 to 23-13
LOYOLA-MARYMOUNT (4) – went from 11-18 to 19-12
NORTHERN ARIZONA (4) – went from 9-23 to 12-23
NORTH DAKOTA (4) – went from 6-25 to 13-20
SOUTH FLORIDA (4) – went from 8-23 to 14-18
ARKANSAS-LITTLE ROCK (3) – went from 9-19 to 10-21
CENTRAL ARKANSAS (2) – went from 11-20 to 9-22
COLUMBIA (2) – went from 4-22 to 7-22
PEPPERDINE (2) – went from 7-25 to 9-22
SAN JOSE STATE (2) – went from 8-23 to 20-14

Here is the list of the 14 teams with the number of traits that they match from above (out of seven). Again, it could be projected that the more shared traits, the greater chance that team improves significantly in 2023-24:

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT STATE (5)
ILLINOIS STATE (5)
LAMAR (5)
LOYOLA (IL) (5)
LOYOLA (MD) (5)
NEW ORLEANS (5)
COLUMBIA (4)
DARTMOUTH (4)
CHICAGO ST (3)
MARIST (3)
NORTH DAKOTA (3)
DELAWARE STATE (2)
NEBRASKA-OMAHA (2)
OREGON STATE (2)

STEVE MAKINEN'S
POWER RATINGS

TEAM	RATING	TEAM	RATING	TEAM	RATING
KANSAS	92.0	VIRGINIA	83.5	DUQUESNE	78.5
PURDUE	91.5	FLORIDA	83.0	GEORGIA	78.5
HOUSTON	91.0	IOWA	83.0	UNLV	78.5
CONNECTICUT	90.5	IOWA STATE	83.0	VCU	78.5
GONZAGA	90.5	MIAMI	83.0	VANDERBILT	78.5
TENNESSEE	89.5	STANFORD	83.0	LIBERTY	78.0
DUKE	89.0	TEXAS TECH	83.0	LOYOLA (IL)	78.0
MICHIGAN STATE	88.5	BYU	82.5	WASHINGTON STATE	78.0
ALABAMA	88.0	MISSOURI	82.5	FLORIDA STATE	77.5
ARIZONA	88.0	XAVIER	82.5	SETON HALL	77.5
BAYLOR	88.0	CINCINNATI	82.0	YALE	77.5
CREIGHTON	88.0	ST. JOHNS	82.0	TULANE	77.0
MARQUETTE	88.0	LSU	81.5	UCF	77.0
TEXAS	88.0	MICHIGAN	81.5	GEORGIA TECH	76.5
ARKANSAS	87.5	NEW MEXICO	81.5	GRAND CANYON	76.5
NORTH CAROLINA	87.5	OKLAHOMA	81.5	PENN STATE	76.5
TEXAS A&M	87.0	UTAH	81.5	SAN DIEGO STATE	76.5
ILLINOIS	86.5	NC STATEATE	81.0	UAB	76.5
KENTUCKY	86.5	NEBRASKA	81.0	AKRON	75.5
USC	86.5	PROVIDENCE	81.0	BOSTON COLLEGE	75.5
AUBURN	86.0	RUTGERS	81.0	BRADLEY	75.5
TCU	86.0	ST MARYS (CA)	81.0	BUTLER	75.5
WISCONSIN	86.0	VIRGINIA TECH	81.0	CALIFORNIA	75.5
MARYLAND	85.5	BOISE STATE	80.5	KENT STATE	75.5
UCLA	85.0	DAYTON	80.5	LOYOLA-MARYMOUNT	75.5
VILLANOVA	85.0	OKLAHOMA STATE	80.5	NORTHERN IOWA	75.5
COLORADO	84.5	OLE MISS	80.5	SYRACUSE	75.5
FLORIDA ATLANTIC	84.5	PITTSBURGH	80.5	WICHITA STATE	75.5
MEMPHIS	84.5	WEST VIRGINIA	80.0	COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON	75.0
MISSISSIPPI STATE	84.5	WAKE FOREST	80.0	FURMAN	75.0
KANSAS STATE	84.0	ARIZONA STATE	79.5	NORTH TEXAS	75.0
CLEMSON	83.5	WASHINGTON	79.5	SAINT LOUIS	75.0
INDIANA	83.5	DRAKE	79.0	UC-IRVINE	75.0
NORTHWESTERN	83.5	NEVADA	79.0	UTAH STATE	75.0
OHIO STATE	83.5	SAN FRANCISCO	79.0	VERMONT	75.0
OREGON	83.5	COLORADO STATE	78.5	COLGATE	74.5

STEVE MAKINEN'S
POWER RATINGS

TEAM	RATING	TEAM	RATING	TEAM	RATING
EASTERN KENTUCKY	74.5	SOUTH ALABAMA	72.5	SIENA	70.0
INDIANA STATE	74.5	SANTA CLARA	72.5	WESTERN KENTUCKY	70.0
LONG BEACH STATE	74.5	TEMPLE	72.5	FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL	69.5
OHIO	74.5	TOLEDO	72.5	ILLINOIS STATE	69.5
SF AUSTIN STATE	74.5	UC-SANTA BARBARA	72.5	LIPSCOMB	69.5
DEPAUL	74.0	CHARLOTTE	72.0	MOREHEAD STATE	69.5
GEORGE MASON	74.0	CORNELL	72.0	PENNSYLVANIA	69.5
HOFSTRA	74.0	NOTRE DAME	72.0	PEPPERDINE	69.5
JAMES MADISON	74.0	SMU	72.0	SOUTH DAKOTA STATE	69.5
SOUTH CAROLINA	74.0	UNC-ASHEVILLE	72.0	SAM HOUSTON STATE	69.5
UNC-GREENSBORO	74.0	WEBER STATE	72.0	TEXAS STATE	69.5
WRIGHT STATE	74.0	IONA	71.5	WESTERN CAROLINA	69.5
DREXEL	73.5	PORTLAND	71.5	CAL BAPTIST	69.0
EAST CAROLINA	73.5	RICE	71.5	GARDNER WEBB	69.0
GEORGETOWN	73.5	WINTHROP	71.5	GEORGIA STATE	69.0
LOUISVILLE	73.5	ABILENE CHRISTIAN	71.0	MASSACHUSETTS	69.0
MIDDLE TENN STATE	73.5	ARKANSAS STATE	71.0	NEW MEXICO STATE	69.0
MINNESOTA	73.5	CAL DAVIS	71.0	RHODE ISLAND	69.0
MISSOURI STATE	73.5	CS-FULLERTON	71.0	UT-CHATTANOOGA	69.0
PRINCETON	73.5	DAVIDSON	71.0	UTAH VALLEY STATE	69.0
USF	73.5	OREGON STATE	71.0	WI-MILWAUKEE	69.0
SAN JOSE STATE	73.5	ST. PETERS	71.0	YOUNGSTOWN STATE	69.0
ST BONAVENTURE	73.5	UMASS-LOWELL	71.0	BRYANT	68.5
APPALACHIAN STATE	73.0	UTEP	71.0	KENNESAW STATE	68.5
FRESNO STATE	73.0	CLEVELAND STATE	70.5	LASALLE	68.5
LOUISIANA TECH	73.0	N KENTUCKY	70.5	STETSON	68.5
SAMFORD	73.0	ORAL ROBERTS	70.5	BELLARMINE	68.0
SEATTLE	73.0	RADFORD	70.5	DELAWARE	68.0
UNC-WILMINGTON	73.0	TOWSON STATE	70.5	NORTH ALABAMA	68.0
BELMONT	72.5	AIR FORCE	70.0	NORTH DAKOTA STATE	68.0
FLA GULF COAST	72.5	BROWN	70.0	PORTLAND STATE	68.0
FORDHAM	72.5	E WASHINGTON	70.0	SOUTHERN MISS	68.0
HAWAII	72.5	LA-LAFAYETTE	70.0	ST. JOSEPHS	68.0
MARSHALL	72.5	MONTANA	70.0	TEXAS SOUTHERN	68.0
MURRAY STATE	72.5	OLD DOMINION	70.0	TX-ARLINGTON	68.0
RICHMOND	72.5	PACIFIC	70.0	UC-RIVERSIDE	68.0

STEVE MAKINEN'S
POWER RATINGS

TEAM	RATING	TEAM	RATING	TEAM	RATING
GEORGE WASHINGTON	67.5	OAKLAND	65.5	LA-MONROE	63.0
LONGWOOD	67.5	SOUTH CAROLINA STATE	65.5	MD-BALT COUNTY	63.0
N ILLINOIS	67.5	SE MISSOURI STATE	65.5	NAVY	63.0
QUEENS COLL	67.5	SIU EDWARDSVL	65.5	NEW HAMPSHIRE	63.0
RIDER	67.5	TULSA	65.5	ROBERT MORRIS	63.0
SOUTHERN ILLINOIS	67.5	BALL STATE	65.0	SE LOUISIANA	63.0
SAN DIEGO	67.5	CS-BAKERSFIELD	65.0	ST FRANCIS-PA	63.0
SOUTHERN UTAH	67.5	FAIRFIELD	65.0	TEXAS A&M-COMM	63.0
AUSTIN PEAY	67.0	GRAMBLING	65.0	TX-RIO GRANDE	63.0
BUFFALO	67.0	JACKSONVILLE	65.0	CAMPBELL	62.5
CAL SAN DIEGO	67.0	MARIST	65.0	DENVER	62.5
GEORGIA SOUTHERN	67.0	NIAGARA	65.0	IDAHO STATE	62.5
IL-CHICAGO	67.0	NORFOLK STATE	65.0	MISSOURI-KC	62.5
JACKSON STATE	67.0	SACRAMENTO STATE	65.0	SOUTHERN U	62.5
MOUNT STATE MARYS	67.0	USC UPSTATE	65.0	TENNESSEE TECH	62.5
TROY	67.0	WOFFORD	65.0	ALBANY	62.0
AMERICAN	66.5	ALCORN STATE	64.5	ARMY	62.0
BOWLING GREEN	66.5	CANISIUS	64.5	CENTRAL CONNECTICUT	62.0
EAST TENN STATE	66.5	COASTAL CAROLINA	64.5	DETROIT	62.0
JACKSONVILLE STATE	66.5	MONTANA STATE	64.5	HAMPTON	62.0
MAINE	66.5	SACRED HEART	64.5	HOLY CROSS	62.0
MCNEESE STATE	66.5	STONY BROOK	64.5	MERRIMACK	62.0
MERCER	66.5	TENN-MARTIN	64.5	PRESBYTERIAN	62.0
NORTHEASTERN	66.5	TX-SAN ANTONIO	64.5	THE CITADEL	62.0
QUINNIPIAC	66.5	UTAH TECH	64.5	WM & MARY	62.0
TARLETON STATE	66.5	WAGNER	64.5	EASTERN MICHIGAN	61.5
WYOMING	66.5	ARK-LITTLE ROCK	64.0	ELON	61.5
DARTMOUTH	66.0	BINGHAMTON	64.0	MONMOUTH	61.5
HARVARD	66.0	LOYOLA-MD	64.0	NORTH FLORIDA	61.5
HOWARD	66.0	COLUMBIA	63.5	NICHOLLS STATE	61.5
MIAMI OHIO	66.0	HIGH POINT	63.5	TEXAS A&M CC	61.5
NORTHERN ARIZONA	66.0	LAFAYETTE	63.5	WESTERN MICHIGAN	61.5
NORTH DAKOTA	66.0	NORTHERN COLORADO	63.5	CS-NORTHRIDGE	61.0
ST THOMAS-MN	66.0	NEBRASKA-OMAHA	63.5	IUPUI	61.0
TENNESSEE STATE	66.0	NEW ORLEANS	63.5	NC CENTRAL	61.0
LEHIGH	65.5	FARLEIGH DICKINSON	63.0	SOUTHERN INDIANA	61.0

STEVE MAKINEN'S
POWER RATINGS

TEAM	RATING	TEAM	RATING	TEAM	RATING
CENTRAL MICHIGAN	60.5	NEW JERSEY TECH	59.0	NORTHWESTERN STATE	57.0
EVANSVILLE	60.5	PRAIRIE VIEW A&M	59.0	ALABAMA STATE	56.0
MANHATTAN	60.5	ALABAMA A&M	58.5	LINDENWOOD	56.0
PURDUE FT WAYNE	60.5	CAL POLY-SLO	58.5	MD-EAST SHORE	55.5
VALPARAISO	60.5	DELAWARE STATE	58.5	VMI	55.0
BOSTON U	60.0	STONEHILL	58.5	LONG ISLAND	54.5
CHARLESTON SO	60.0	EASTERN ILLINOIS	58.0	HOUSTON CHRISTIAN	54.0
WESTERN ILLINOIS	60.0	MORGAN STATE	58.0	NORTH CAROLINA A&T	54.0
BUCKNELL	59.5	SOUTH DAKOTA	58.0	COPPIN STATE	53.5
CENTRAL ARKANSAS	59.5	WI-GREEN BAY	58.0	LEMOYNE	53.5
CHICAGO STATE	59.5	FLORIDA A&M	57.5	IDAHO	53.0
ARK-PINE BLUFF	59.0	INCARNATE WORD	57.5	MISS VALLEY STATE	51.5
LAMAR	59.0	BETHUNE-COOKMAN	57.0		

RETURNING PLAYING
MINUTES % (RETURNING STARTERS)

TEAM	MINUTES	TEAM	MINUTES	TEAM	MINUTES
COLUMBIA	99% (5)	WRIGHT STATE	72% (3)	MONTANA	62% (3)
WISCONSIN	93% (5)	WEBER STATE	71% (5)	UMASS-LOWELL	62% (3)
NORTHERN IOWA	91% (4)	MAINE	71% (4)	TULANE	61% (3)
EASTERN KENTUCKY	91% (4)	UNC-WILMINGTON	71% (4)	FARLEIGH DICKINSON	61% (3)
FLORIDA ATLANTIC	90% (5)	ST MARYS (CA)	70% (3)	CREIGHTON	61% (3)
ST. JOSEPHS	89% (5)	LEMOYNE	70% (4)	NORTH DAKOTA	61% (3)
ST BONAVENTURE	87% (5)	BYU	69% (4)	LASALLE	61% (2)
DREXEL	87% (4)	SIU EDWARDSVL	69% (3)	MURRAY STATE	61% (3)
PURDUE	86% (5)	RICE	69% (4)	COLGATE	61% (3)
MARQUETTE	85% (4)	COLORADO	69% (3)	NORTHWESTERN	61% (3)
BELLARMINE	83% (4)	NEW ORLEANS	69% (3)	MIDDLE TENN STATE	60% (3)
NEBRASKA-OMAHA	83% (4)	SOUTH DAKOTA STATE	68% (3)	FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL	60% (3)
SACRED HEART	82% (4)	NEVADA	67% (3)	ILLINOIS	60% (3)
TEXAS A&M	81% (4)	CENTRAL CONNECTICUT	67% (3)	LAMAR	60% (3)
CORNELL	81% (4)	CHICAGO STATE	67% (3)	N ILLINOIS	60% (3)
EAST CAROLINA	79% (3)	LEHIGH	67% (4)	FURMAN	60% (3)
JACKSON STATE	79% (5)	LOYOLA-MD	67% (3)	DUQUESNE	59% (3)
DUKE	79% (4)	WINTHROP	66% (4)	CAL SAN DIEGO	59% (3)
MISSISSIPPI STATE	79% (5)	ARKANSAS STATE	66% (3)	BOISE STATE	59% (3)
FLA GULF COAST	78% (3)	PORTLAND STATE	66% (2)	SF AUSTIN STATE	58% (4)
MICHIGAN STATE	78% (4)	WI-MILWAUKEE	65% (4)	BOSTON COLLEGE	58% (3)
IUPUI	78% (0)	OHIO	65% (3)	CLEVELAND STATE	58% (3)
CAL DAVIS	77% (3)	BRYANT	65% (3)	SMU	58% (3)
BROWN	77% (4)	STANFORD	65% (3)	AKRON	58% (3)
LONG BEACH STATE	77% (4)	OREGON STATE	65% (3)	N KENTUCKY	58% (3)
AMERICAN	76% (4)	HOLY CROSS	64% (3)	AUBURN	58% (2)
UNC-ASHEVILLE	75% (4)	COLORADO STATE	64% (3)	FLORIDA STATE	57% (3)
APPALACHIAN STATE	75% (5)	UTAH	63% (4)	LIBERTY	57% (4)
DARTMOUTH	75% (3)	MISSOURI STATE	63% (3)	CANISIUS	57% (3)
NORTH DAKOTA STATE	74% (4)	STETSON	63% (3)	TENNESSEE	57% (3)
LOYOLA (IL)	74% (5)	ILLINOIS STATE	63% (3)	GRAND CANYON	57% (2)
YALE	73% (4)	GARDNER WEBB	62% (2)	LIPSCOMB	57% (4)
NORTH ALABAMA	73% (4)	CLEMSON	62% (3)	UC-IRVINE	57% (3)
WESTERN CAROLINA	73% (3)	MARIST	62% (3)	PRESBYTERIAN	57% (2)
DELAWARE STATE	73% (5)	PACIFIC	62% (3)	CENTRAL ARKANSAS	56% (3)
SEATTLE	72% (3)	MARYLAND	62% (3)	GEORGIA STATE	56% (4)

RETURNING PLAYING
MINUTES % (RETURNING STARTERS)

TEAM	MINUTES	TEAM	MINUTES	TEAM	MINUTES
GEORGIA TECH	56% (4)	SAMFORD	50% (2)	GEORGE WASHINGTON	45% (2)
ABILENE CHRISTIAN	56% (2)	IL-CHICAGO	50% (3)	IOWA	45% (2)
RADFORD	55% (3)	FORDHAM	49% (3)	ST THOMAS-MN	45% (2)
HAWAII	55% (3)	MOREHEAD STATE	49% (3)	PEPPERDINE	45% (2)
SYRACUSE	55% (3)	MISSOURI-KC	49% (3)	BUCKNELL	45% (2)
OAKLAND	55% (3)	FRESNO STATE	49% (3)	LONGWOOD	45% (2)
AIR FORCE	55% (4)	RIDER	49% (3)	WM & MARY	44% (2)
RUTGERS	55% (2)	TCU	49% (2)	BELMONT	44% (2)
PENNSYLVANIA	54% (2)	EASTERN MICHIGAN	49% (3)	CHARLESTON SO	44% (3)
QUEENS COLL	54% (3)	DRAKE	48% (2)	NORTH CAROLINA	44% (2)
VIRGINIA TECH	54% (3)	ALCORN STATE	48% (3)	DELAWARE	44% (2)
BRADLEY	54% (3)	MISS VALLEY STATE	48% (3)	TEXAS A&M-COMM	44% (2)
NEW MEXICO	53% (2)	CS-FULLERTON	48% (3)	OREGON	44% (3)
USC UPSTATE	53% (3)	PRINCETON	48% (2)	WESTERN MICHIGAN	44% (2)
LAFAYETTE	53% (2)	LA-MONROE	48% (1)	BETHUNE-COOKMAN	44% (2)
UTEP	53% (3)	HOUSTON	48% (2)	NEW HAMPSHIRE	43% (2)
MIAMI	52% (3)	MCNEESE STATE	48% (2)	KANSAS	43% (3)
MOUNT STATE MARYS	52% (2)	SE LOUISIANA	48% (4)	DAVIDSON	43% (2)
VILLANOVA	52% (2)	UNC-GREENSBORO	48% (1)	GRAMBLING	42% (2)
NORTHEASTERN	52% (3)	MINNESOTA	47% (2)	OLD DOMINION	42% (3)
WAGNER	52% (3)	TENNESSEE TECH	47% (2)	MIAMI OHIO	42% (4)
SAN DIEGO STATE	52% (2)	ARK-PINE BLUFF	47% (2)	LOUISIANA TECH	42% (2)
TENN-MARTIN	52% (2)	PROVIDENCE	47% (2)	LA-LAFAYETTE	41% (2)
DENVER	52% (2)	SOUTHERN MISS	47% (2)	THE CITADEL	41% (3)
HOFSTRA	51% (3)	ALABAMA STATE	47% (3)	SETON HALL	41% (2)
USC	51% (3)	IDAHO STATE	47% (2)	VANDERBILT	41% (3)
UC-SANTA BARBARA	51% (2)	SOUTH CAROLINA	46% (3)	SAN FRANCISCO	41% (2)
CHARLOTTE	51% (3)	NORTHERN ARIZONA	46% (2)	CONNECTICUT	41% (5)
PORTLAND	51% (2)	MONMOUTH	46% (4)	KENT STATE	41% (2)
WAKE FOREST	51% (2)	TEXAS STATE	46% (3)	CS-NORTHRIDGE	40% (3)
ELON	51% (3)	KENNESAW STATE	46% (2)	VERMONT	40% (1)
SAN JOSE STATE	51% (2)	NORFOLK STATE	46% (1)	ROBERT MORRIS	40% (3)
STONY BROOK	51% (2)	WASHINGTON	46% (2)	E WASHINGTON	40% (3)
DAYTON	51% (2)	JAMES MADISON	46% (2)	SAM HOUSTON STATE	40% (1)
EVANSVILLE	50% (4)	TEXAS SOUTHERN	45% (2)	OLE MISS	40% (2)
HAMPTON	50% (2)	NEBRASKA	45% (3)	LOYOLA-MARYMOUNT	39% (2)

RETURNING PLAYING
MINUTES % (RETURNING STARTERS)

TEAM	MINUTES	TEAM	MINUTES	TEAM	MINUTES
SE MISSOURI STATE	39% (2)	TX-RIO GRANDE	35% (3)	SOUTH ALABAMA	27% (2)
SAN DIEGO	39% (1)	ARKANSAS	35% (2)	TOWSON STATE	27% (2)
NC STATEATE	39% (2)	SOUTH CAROLINA STATE	34% (3)	ARK-LITTLE ROCK	27% (1)
OKLAHOMA STATE	39% (2)	UC-RIVERSIDE	34% (2)	NAVY	27% (1)
CS-BAKERSFIELD	38% (2)	TOLEDO	34% (2)	LINDENWOOD	26% (3)
MERCER	38% (2)	EAST TENN STATE	34% (2)	GEORGE MASON	26% (1)
ARIZONA	38% (1)	GEORGIA	34% (1)	INDIANA	26% (1)
MARSHALL	38% (2)	LSU	33% (2)	FLORIDA	26% (2)
CENTRAL MICHIGAN	38% (2)	ORAL ROBERTS	33% (2)	INCARNATE WORD	26% (1)
OHIO STATE	38% (2)	ARMY	33% (1)	NORTHERN COLORADO	26% (2)
RICHMOND	38% (1)	FLORIDA A&M	33% (2)	OKLAHOMA	26% (2)
BINGHAMTON	38% (2)	FAIRFIELD	33% (3)	BOSTON U	26% (0)
TENNESSEE STATE	37% (1)	STONEHILL	32% (2)	SOUTH DAKOTA	26% (0)
LONG ISLAND	37% (2)	SAINT LOUIS	32% (1)	TEMPLE	25% (2)
CAMPBELL	37% (3)	SOUTHERN ILLINOIS	32% (3)	ALABAMA	25% (2)
WOFFORD	37% (2)	UAB	32% (0)	HIGH POINT	25% (1)
MISSOURI	37% (2)	MASSACHUSETTS	31% (1)	UTAH TECH	24% (4)
ALBANY	37% (2)	MORGAN STATE	31% (1)	BUFFALO	24% (1)
ALABAMA A&M	36% (2)	TARLETON STATE	31% (3)	WICHITA STATE	23% (1)
CALIFORNIA	36% (2)	NORTH TEXAS	31% (1)	NORTH FLORIDA	23% (1)
TEXAS	36% (2)	BAYLOR	31% (1)	UT-CHATTANOOGA	23% (1)
LOUISVILLE	36% (3)	CAL BAPTIST	31% (1)	MONTANA STATE	22% (1)
EASTERN ILLINOIS	36% (3)	USF	30% (1)	GEORGIA SOUTHERN	22% (1)
INDIANA STATE	36% (2)	GONZAGA	30% (2)	WI-GREEN BAY	22% (1)
HOUSTON CHRISTIAN	36% (1)	SACRAMENTO STATE	30% (2)	JACKSONVILLE	21% (1)
ST. PETERS	36% (3)	CINCINNATI	30% (2)	COASTAL CAROLINA	21% (1)
PITTSBURGH	36% (2)	TEXAS TECH	30% (1)	WESTERN KENTUCKY	21% (0)
HOWARD	35% (2)	VIRGINIA	30% (1)	BOWLING GREEN	21% (1)
TROY	35% (2)	HARVARD	29% (2)	KENTUCKY	21% (0)
NEW JERSEY TECH	35% (2)	KANSAS STATE	29% (2)	YOUNGSTOWN STATE	20% (1)
IOWA STATE	35% (1)	WASHINGTON STATE	28% (1)	UNLV	20% (2)
WESTERN ILLINOIS	35% (2)	JACKSONVILLE STATE	28% (2)	BALL STATE	20% (1)
MICHIGAN	35% (2)	NIAGARA	28% (2)	MD-EAST SHORE	20% (0)
QUINNIPIAC	35% (3)	ARIZONA STATE	28% (1)	CAL POLY-SLO	20% (1)
COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON	35% (2)	TX-ARLINGTON	28% (2)	SOUTHERN U	19% (1)
MERRIMACK	35% (2)	DEPAUL	27% (1)	SANTA CLARA	19% (0)

RETURNING PLAYING
MINUTES % (RETURNING STARTERS)

TEAM	MINUTES	TEAM	MINUTES	TEAM	MINUTES
XAVIER	19% (2)	PURDUE FT WAYNE	12% (0)	PENN STATE	6% (0)
SIENA	18% (3)	MANHATTAN	12% (1)	TEXAS A&M CC	6% (0)
UCLA	18% (1)	VALPARAISO	12% (0)	TULSA	6% (0)
ST. JOHNS	18% (1)	DETROIT	12% (0)	NORTHWESTERN STATE	5% (1)
VMI	17% (0)	VCU	11% (0)	NORTH CAROLINA A&T	5% (0)
NC CENTRAL	16% (0)	MD-BALT COUNTY	10% (0)	PRAIRIE VIEW A&M	5% (0)
SOUTHERN INDIANA	16% (3)	TX-SAN ANTONIO	10% (1)	UTAH VALLEY STATE	3% (0)
GEORGETOWN	16% (1)	WEST VIRGINIA	10% (0)	SOUTHERN UTAH	3% (0)
UCF	16% (1)	IONA	9% (1)	IDAHO	3% (0)
ST FRANCIS-PA	16% (0)	MEMPHIS	9% (1)	NOTRE DAME	2% (0)
WYOMING	16% (1)	BUTLER	9% (1)	UTAH STATE	0% (0)
RHODE ISLAND	13% (0)	COPPIN STATE	9% (0)	NEW MEXICO STATE	0% (0)
NICHOLLS STATE	13% (1)	AUSTIN PEAY	7% (0)		

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ACC *PREVIEW*

By Wes Reynolds

The ACC sent a team to the Final Four for the sixth time in eight years and it was not one of the usual suspects like Duke, North Carolina, or Virginia. Instead, it was the Miami Hurricanes making their first ever Final Four appearance. However, despite having another Final Four participant, it was another down year for the ACC as the conference sent just five teams to the NCAA Tournament and the conference ranked seventh in Ken Pomeroy's conference efficiency power rankings, which was its lowest-ever ranking.

Miami (+400) was the only ACC team last season to make it to the second weekend of the NCAA Tournament. The Hurricanes will have to replace ACC Player of the Year Isaiah Wong, but Jim Larranaga brings back point guard Nijel Pack, forward Norchad Omier, and adds Florida State transfer Matthew Cleveland.

While Miami is the second choice, the favorite is Duke (+140). Jon Scheyer's club loses two first-round NBA Draft picks, but returns ACC Freshman of the Year Kyle Filipowski, along with Tyrese Proctor and two other starters. The Blue Devils also had the nation's No. 2 recruiting class per 247 Sports. North Carolina (+450) missed the NCAA Tournament last year but brings back its all-time leading rebounder Armando Bacot for his fifth year along with his running mate RJ Davis from Hubert Davis's 2022 national runner-up team.

Virginia (+750) returned to the NCAA Tournament after a year's absence, but Tony Bennett will have to replace four starters to surround ACC Defensive Player of the Year Reece Beekman.

Clemson (12-1) finished T-3rd in the ACC last year but missed the NCAA Tournament and could be the league's surprise. Pittsburgh (35-1) is the other team that finished T-3 along with Clemson and Duke, and its 14 conference wins were part of a 13-win program improvement from the previous campaign.

Wake Forest (40-1), NC State (50-1), and Boston College (60-1) are atop the second tier of the league, while Florida State (60-1), at 9-23, and Louisville (80-1), at 4-28, were dismal.

While there is a great deal of player familiarity with 10 players transferring from one ACC school to another, there are three new head coaches in the conference with Adrian Autry taking over for Jim Boeheim after nearly 50 years at Syracuse (30-1), Damon Stoudamire taking over for the fired Josh Pastner at Georgia Tech (60-1), plus Micah Shrewsberry replacing Mike Brey, who mutually separated with Notre Dame (100-1).

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
89.0	DUKE
87.5	NORTH CAROLINA
83.5	CLEMSON
83.5	VIRGINIA
83.0	MIAMI
81.0	NC STATE
81.0	VIRGINIA TECH
80.5	PITTSBURGH
80.0	WAKE FOREST
77.5	FLORIDA STATE
76.5	GEORGIA TECH
75.5	BOSTON COLLEGE
75.5	SYRACUSE
73.5	LOUISVILLE
72.0	NOTRE DAME

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	DUKE
4	GEORGIA TECH
3	BOSTON COLLEGE
3	CLEMSON
3	FLORIDA STATE
3	LOUISVILLE
3	MIAMI
3	SYRACUSE
3	VIRGINIA TECH
2	NORTH CAROLINA
2	NC STATE
2	PITTSBURGH
2	WAKE FOREST
1	VIRGINIA
0	NOTRE DAME

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
79%	DUKE
62%	CLEMSON
58%	BOSTON COLLEGE
57%	FLORIDA STATE
56%	GEORGIA TECH
55%	SYRACUSE
54%	VIRGINIA TECH
52%	MIAMI
51%	WAKE FOREST
44%	NORTH CAROLINA
39%	NC STATE
36%	LOUISVILLE
36%	PITTSBURGH
30%	VIRGINIA
2%	NOTRE DAME

BOSTON COLLEGE

2022 RECORD: 16-17 SU, 15-18 ATS, 20-13 O/U

The Eagles improved to respectability in Earl Grant's second season. However, they also lost three of their top five scorers from last season from a team that finished 14th in the conference for scoring offense (66.6 PPG). The good news is that 7-foot big man Quinton Post (15.1 PPG, 5.6 RPG), the ACC's Most Improved Player of the Year, elected to return. He, along with point guard Jayden Zachary (10.7 PPG, 2.7 APG), will have to shoulder the main load. In the backcourt, Prince Aligbe (6.1 PPG, 4.4 RPG) returns but must improve his shot (37.1% FG, 27.1% 3PT). Charleston Southern transfer Claudell Harris averaged 17.4 PPG there last season and Mason Madsen (5.8 PPG, 2.6 RPG) also will see minutes at guard. Devin McGlockton (6.1 PPG, 3.9 RPG) will help Post out in the post. Grant's club always plays hard and is a tough out on a nightly basis due to its defense, which ranked sixth in the league last season. However, this team must make more shots to move into the top half of the conference. BC ranked 14th in the ACC for 3-point percentage (31.9%) and dead last for 3-pointers made per game (5.7). They also ranked 12th in free throw percentage (72.5%) and 11th in field goal percentage (43.7%).

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	75.5 (#91/#12)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	58%

CLEMSON

2022 RECORD: 23-11 SU, 17-17 ATS, 21-13 O/U

The Tigers won 23 games including 14 in the ACC with the expanded schedule but settled for a spot in the NIT due to bad losses at South Carolina, at Louisville, and versus Loyola Chicago. Two of the top four scorers, including All-ACC forward Hunter Tyson, are gone, but Brad Brownell's roster is deeper this season. Point guard Chase Hunter (13.8 PPG, 4.5 APG) leads the backcourt with a new running mate, Syracuse transfer Joseph Girard III, who was the leading scorer for the Orange last year at 16.4 a game and shot 38.1% from the 3. Air Force transfer and leading scorer Jake Heidbreder (15.1 PPG, 75 made 3s) battled a hip injury over the summer. He and Alex Hemenway (6.9 PPG, 47.1% 3PT), who spent the summer recovering from a foot injury, could be the X-factors for this group. PJ Hall (15.3 PPG, 5.7 RPG, 39.8%) is one of the ACC's best big men. NC State transfer (via La Salle) Jack Clark (9.0 PPG, 6.9 RPG) slots in at the other forward spot. Ian Schieffelin (5.5 PPG, 4.1 RPG) started 22 games last season and he will provide depth down low with Holland's Ben Leyte who transfers from UNC Greensboro. The Tigers are one of the best shooting teams in the league in all phases and ranked second in defensive efficiency, but the pressure is on to get to the NCAA Tournament on a more regular basis, which is something that Brownell has only done three times in 13 seasons.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	83.5 (#32/#3)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	62%

DUKE

2022 RECORD: 27-9 SU, 16-20 ATS, 14-22 O/U

After Mike Krzyzewski's retirement, there were more than a few that thought Duke would slowly slide downhill as a program. Duke's demise was greatly exaggerated as Jon Scheyer went 27-9 in year one and has the Blue Devils as one of the favorites to cut the nets down in Glendale next April. With four returning starters, a couple of key reserves, and the nation's No. 2 recruiting class, expectations are high in Durham as they typically are. Duke had been shuffling one-and-dones in and out over the last few years, but this year only two depart. Jeremy Roach (13.6 PPG, 3.1 APG, 2.5 RPG) gives Duke a senior guard leader that the program has not had in a while. He switched roles with Tyrese Proctor (9.4 PPG, 3.3 APG, 3.1 RPG) to move more off the ball in the middle of last season. Freshmen Jared McClain and Caleb Foster are both Top 25 national recruits. They and Jaylen Blakes (3.3 PPG) provide depth. The centerpiece is 7-footer Kyle Filipowski (15.1 PPG, 8.9 RPG) who is the frontrunner for ACC Player of the Year and a National Player of the Year contender. His classmate Mark Mitchell (9.1 PPG, 4.5 RPG) returns to help on the boards along with freshman forwards TJ Power and Sean Stewart, also Top 25 national recruits, and graduate student Ryan Young (6.4 PPG, 5.5 RPG). Duke only averaged 72.0 PPG (9th in ACC) because they shot just 33.5% (10th) from the 3. Expect that to improve with the freshmen. Duke has multiple options to score inside, makes free throws (76.6%), and was +7.9 in rebounding margin (5th nationally). If they can return to form shooting the 3, then there is a good chance that they return to the Final Four.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	89.0 (#7/#1)
RETURNING STARTERS	4
RETURNING MINUTES	79%

FLORIDA STATE

2022 RECORD: 9-23 SU, 13-19 ATS, 17-14 O/U

With the recent retirements of Mike Krzyzewski and Roy Williams and the departure of Mike Brey, 75-year-old Leonard Hamilton now finds himself as the dean of ACC coaches in his 22nd year in Tallahassee. However, the Seminoles' 9-23 record last year was Hamilton's worst season at Florida State. To make matters worse, two of his top three scorers transferred in the offseason. So, Hamilton brings in transfers of his own with Primo Spears coming in from Georgetown via Duquesne and Josh Nickelberry, who began his career at Louisville but was the A-10 Sixth Man of the Year last year at La Salle. Darin Green Jr (13.4 PPG, 2.9 RPG, 36.4% 3PT) is the club's returning leading scorer. Jalen Warley (6.8 PPG, 3.3 APG) started 22 games in the backcourt last season. Up front are Jaylen Gainey, a two-time Ivy League Defensive Player of the Year at Brown, who missed last season at FSU with an ACL injury, and Cam'Ron Fletcher (10.8 PPG, 7.5 RPG) who played in only 10 games last year due to his own ACL injury. 6-foot-11 Baba Miller (4.3 PPG, 3.7 RPG) missed 16 games last year due to an NCAA suspension for receiving travel from his native Spain but has guard skills for a big man. Jamir Watkins comes in from VCU's NCAA Tournament team. And 6-foot-10 Cam Corhen (8.3 PPG, 3.5 RPG) started 22 games last season. The Seminoles will not be the disaster they were last year, but with all the new pieces, they for sure finish in the bottom half of the league.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Florida State went 2-8 ATS in their final 10 games last season and 1-9 ATS as a road favorite over the past three seasons, which is the second-worst cover rate for any team with at least one road cover as a favorite in that span.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	77.5 (#81/#10)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	57%

GEORGIA TECH

2022 RECORD: 15-18 SU, 16-15 ATS, 14-16 O/U

Josh Pastner took Georgia Tech to one NCAA Tournament in seven seasons and was let go. His replacement is Damon Stoudamire, a 15-year NBA veteran, who has been in coaching since 2008 with stints at Rice, Memphis, Arizona, and five seasons as the head coach at Pacific from 2016-21. Most recently he was an assistant with the Boston Celtics. Long term, Stoudamire will need to tap into the fertile recruiting ground of Atlanta. In the short term, he had to just fill out a roster as only four players remain from last year's roster. One of those is Miles Kelly (14.8 PPG, 3.4 RPG, 37.9% 3PT, 89.8% FT), who looks to be the breakout player on this team. He is supported in the backcourt by the other three returnees — Lance Terry (10.1 PPG, 2.8 RPG, 38.8% 3PT, 81.4% FT), point guard Kyle Sturdivant (8.6 PPG, 3.3 APG, 2.3 RPG), and Deebo Coleman (9.5 PPG, 2.9 RPG). Ole Miss transfer Amaree Abram and Florida transfer Kowacie Reeves both averaged over 8.0 PPG at their former schools. The frontcourt is brand new with Western Carolina transfer Tyshaun Claude, who led the Southern Conference in total rebounds. NC State transfer Ebenezer Dowuona and UMass transfer Tafara Gapare join as rebounders and rim protectors. The Yellow Jackets backcourt can compete, but they will struggle in a league with elite post players. Georgia Tech will finish at least near the cellar in Stoudamire's inaugural season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Georgia Tech was 6-1 ATS as an underdog of at least four points in February and March last season. Also, the Under is 55-27-1 in games in which Georgia Tech is a home underdog since the start of the 2009-10 season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	76.5 (#86/#11)
RETURNING STARTERS	4
RETURNING MINUTES	56%

LOUISVILLE

2022 RECORD: 4-28 SU, 13-19 ATS, 16-15 O/U

A member of Louisville's 1986 National Championship team, Kenny Payne could not have had a worse year in his debut season at his alma mater. His Cardinals went 4-28 (2-18 in ACC play). Louisville has one of the best college basketball fan bases in America and its attendance dipped to under 12,500 in a 22,000-seat KFC Yum! Center that used to be near sold out nightly. The Cardinals finished last in the ACC in 15 different statistical categories. Payne knew he had to upgrade the talent and appears to be on track for doing so with the addition of Illinois transfer point guard Skyy Clark and small forward Tre White from USC. Mike James (10.1 PPG, 3.3 RPG, 35.7% 3PT) returns on the wing. Louisville has size down low with 6-foot-10 Brandon Huntley-Hatfield (6.7 PPG, 5.4 RPG), who battled foot injuries last season, 6-foot-8 JJ Traynor (6.9 PPG, 3.8 RPG), 6-foot-9 Emmanuel Okorafor (4.4 PPG, 4.2 RPG), 6-foot-8 Miami transfer Danilo Jovanovich, and 7-foot-1 five-star freshman Dennis Evans. There are nine newcomers in all for the Cardinals this season and Payne will have to find a way to integrate them with the four key returners that have stuck around through a lot of losing. Payne is as well-connected as any coach in college basketball when it comes to getting players, but the jury is still out whether he can coach them.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Louisville went 2-9 ATS in non-conference play and are 3-12 ATS as a home favorite the past two seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	73.5 (#121/#14)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	36%

MIAMI

2022 RECORD: 29-8 SU, 22-15 ATS, 17-19 O/U

Jim Larranaga and Miami made a surprise run to the Elite Eight in the 2022 NCAA Tournament as a 10 seed. Last year, they went one round further as the Hurricanes reached the Final Four, for the first time in program history, as a 5 seed, and defeated Indiana, Houston and Texas to do it. Miami has seven NCAA Tournament wins over the last two years after a combined eight in the previous 95 years of program history. Although the ACC Player of the Year Isaiah Wong departs, the cupboard is not bare in Coral Gables. Point guard Nijel Pack (13.6 PPG, 2.7 RPG, 2.3 APG, 40.4% 3PT, 88.2% FT) and wing Wooga Poplar (8.4 PPG, 3.3 RPG, 37.5% 3PT, 86.7% FT) should have big seasons with quality depth behind them, including Bentley Joseph (5.3 PPG, 2.1 RPG, 39.8% 3PT) and Kyshawn George (Switzerland) and Paul Djobet (France), who both stand 6-foot-7 and continue Miami's run of big guards. Up front, Norchad Omier (13.1 PPG, 10.0 RPG) is one of the country's top big men, Matthew Cleveland (13.8 PPG, 7.4 RPG) is one of the nation's biggest impact transfers from Florida State, and AJ Casey will get a substantial role upgrade. The Hurricanes led the ACC in scoring last season (79.1 PPG) courtesy of ranking top 20 nationally in shooting percentage (48.0%) and free throw percentage (78.4%). They also ranked third in rebounding margin due to double-double machine Omier and were third in turnover margin with Pack running the show. "The U's" Final Four run was no flash in the pan and Larranaga is building a consistent winner at Miami.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams that have been an underdog at least 17 times since the 2020-21 season began, Miami has the best underdog cover percentage at 33-13 ATS.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	83.0 (#38/#5)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	52%

NORTH CAROLINA

2022 RECORD: 20-13 SU, 11-22 ATS, 14-19 O/U

This time last year, North Carolina was off being the national runner-up and was a consensus preseason No. 1. The Tar Heels ended up going 20-13 but finished seventh in the ACC and missed the NCAA Tournament. Lack of chemistry and uneven roster construction was an issue. Expectations are more reasonable this season, but there is still optimism for Hubert Davis's club with Armando Bacot (15.9 PPG, 10.4 RPG) and RJ Davis (16.1 PPG, 5.1 RPG, 3.2 APG, 88.1% FT) returning. Davis and the now departed Caleb Love (Arizona) did not exactly mesh well together. Perhaps freshman five-star point Elliot Cadeau, who reclassified, is what is needed considering UNC ranked 310th nationally in assist rate last season. Notre Dame transfer Cormac Ryan comes in to help outside shooting that ranked dead last in the ACC (31.2%), as does Brown transfer Paxson Wojcik (38.0% 3PT). Seth Trimble is a good distributor backing up at point but needs better shooting. Harrison Ingram (10.5 PPG, 5.8 RPG, 3.7 APG) was a double-figure scorer last year at Stanford where he was the 2022 Pac-12 Freshman of the Year. Louisville transfer Jae'Lyn Winters (8.9 PPG, 5.3 RPG) and Jalen Washington will also see reserve minutes in the frontcourt. The Tar Heels look to be a deeper team and should have better chemistry with two strong senior leaders. They could be a deep threat in March if Davis manages his rotations better than he did last year.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

North Carolina is 10-20-2 ATS on the road the past three seasons, tied for the sixth-worst ATS cover rate in that span and situation.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	87.5 (#15/#2)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	44%

NC STATE

2022 RECORD: 23-11 SU, 16-16 ATS, 17-17 O/U

The Wolfpack returned to the NCAA Tournament last season after a four-year drought and removed at least some pressure off Kevin Keatts. Like many programs, NC State is going to have to rely on the transfer portal to make back-to-back NCAA Tournament appearances as only three players who averaged more than 10.0 minutes per game return. The Pack's starting backcourt of Terquavion Smith and Jarkel Joiner are gone, as is nearly 35.0 PPG. Casey Morsell (11.8 PPG, 4.4 RPG) returns on the wing. The point guard position is up for grabs with Stanford transfer Michael O'Connell, Arizona State transfer DJ Horne, and LJ Thomas competing for the spot. Jayden Taylor transfers in from Butler where he averaged 12.9 points a game last year. Kam Woods averaged 17.3 a game at North Carolina A&T and MJ Rice comes in from Kansas, so the Wolfpack add plenty of dribble penetrators that can get to the rim for a team that was second in the ACC for scoring (77.7 PPG). DJ Burns Jr. (12.5 PPG, 4.8 RPG) is the other returning starter alongside Morsell. He will be assisted down low by a pair of 6-foot-10 transfers — Ben Middlebrooks from Clemson and Mohamed Diarra from Missouri, along with 6-foot-9 returnee Ernest Ross. Keatts is a Rick Pitino disciple so the Wolfpack will press full court and shoot a lot of threes. Even with all the newcomers, NC State looks like a mid-pack team in the ACC that has a shot to return to the NCAA Tournament.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

NC State is 21-39-3 ATS at home since the 2019-20 season began. Also, the Over is 32-20 since the 2018-19 season began.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	81.0 (#54/#6)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	39%

NOTRE DAME

2022 RECORD: 11-21 SU, 10-21 ATS, 16-14 O/U

After 23 years, Mike Brey and Notre Dame parted ways and Micah Shrewsberry leaves Penn State to return to South Bend where he had his first head coaching job at NAIA IU South Bend in 2005. This looks to be a great fit for both Notre Dame and Shrewsberry. Heck, his high school alma mater (Cathedral HS - Indianapolis) was nicknamed the Fighting Irish. However, it will not be easy early as these Fighting Irish won just 11 games last year, finished 14th in the ACC, and loses its top seven scorers. Shrewsberry will trot out a backcourt predominantly comprised of freshman guards, which include two of his signees at Penn State — Logan Imes and son Braeden Shrewsberry — and Indiana Mr. Basketball Markus Burton, who scored nearly 2,200 points in his career at nearby Penn HS and will likely provide most of the scoring punch for this group. Northwestern transfer Julian Roper II comes in as a strong shooter at the wing position, but only played 15 games last year due to an ankle injury. J.R. Konieczny redshirted last year but will also contribute on the wing. In the frontcourt, Shrewsberry also brings in a duo from Penn State — Kebba Njie, who started 26 games, and Carey Booth, son of former Penn State standout Calvin. Tae Davis transfers in from Seton Hall. Matt Zona (1.7 PPG, 1.4 RPG) is the only senior on the roster. Shrewsberry should prove to be one of the best new hires long-term in this coaching carousel cycle, but the Irish are going to take their fair share of beatings this year.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over went 11-6-1 in Notre Dame's final 18 games. Also, they were just 3-14 ATS as a favorite.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	72.0 (#150/#15)
RETURNING STARTERS	0
RETURNING MINUTES	2%

PITTSBURGH

2022 RECORD: 24-12 SU, 24-11 ATS, 22-14 O/U

Jeff Capel has certainly had his ups and downs at Pittsburgh but last year was an "up" as he won ACC Coach of the Year honors leading the Panthers to a 24-12 (14-6 in ACC) record and their first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2016. This year, the Panthers do lose 63.2% of their scoring but leading scorer and big forward Blake Hinson (15.3 PPG, 6.0 RPG, 38.0% 3PT) is a good starting point. Most of Pitt's returning production is in its frontcourt, with Hinson, 6-foot-11 Federiko Federiko (6.6 PPG, 5.3 RPG), and twin brothers 7-foot Guillermo Diaz Graham (3.5 PPG, 3.2 RPG) and 6-foot-11 Jorge Diaz Graham (2.9 PPG, 2.2 RPG). Zack Austin also transfers in from High Point, where he averaged 14.1 points and 5.4 rebounds per game and was the Big South Freshman of the Year in 2022. He also has potential as a shot blocker (2.1 BPG) as does 6-foot-10 four-star freshman Papa Kante. William Jeffress started 16 games in 2021-2022 but missed all of last season with a foot injury and will see minutes as arguably the team's best defender. The backcourt does not have near the depth of the frontcourt and is essentially brand new with only one experienced guard, Rhode Island transfer Ishmael Leggett (16.4 PPG, 5.8 RPG, 2.4 APG). The other guards are true freshmen Jaland Lowe and Carlton Carrington. Pitt will defend and rebound with the best of the ACC, but a return trip to the NCAA Tournament is contingent on how quickly this young backcourt can get up to speed and replace four senior departures.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over was 18-6 in games with a closing total of 145 or less last season. Also, they went 7-1 as a road underdog last season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	80.5 (#60/#8)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	36%

SYRACUSE

2022 RECORD: 17-15 SU, 16-15 ATS, 18-14 O/U

It is a new era for Syracuse Basketball as Jim Boeheim retired after 47 seasons. Adrian Autry, a former Orange star in the early 1990's and an assistant under Boeheim for the last 12 seasons, takes over the program. Autry is going to put his own stamp on the program. While that does not necessarily mean that the 2-3 zone is taken out of the playbook, Syracuse may look unrecognizable at times playing substantially more man-to-man defense. It is a necessary change considering 48.0% of the shots taken by Orange opponents were threes (42.0& of makes), which caused Cuse to be 264th nationally in scoring defense. Judah Mintz (16.3 PPG, 4.6 APG) led the ACC in steals (1.8 SPG) and eschewed going into the NBA Draft. He is likely the main beneficiary of Autry's new style. J.J. Starling is a former McDonald's All-American who transfers in from Notre Dame. Kyle Cuffe redshirted last year with a hand injury after transferring from Kansas. Auburn transfer Chance Westry and Quadir Copeland can help at both ends on the wing. Benny Williams (7.2 PPG, 4.1 RPG) must be more of a factor scoring down low as does Chris Bell (6.6 PPG, 1.8 RPG). Maliq Brown (5.7 PPG, 4.6 RPG) should also step forward. A couple of skyscrapers also join the program to provide rim protection with 7-foot-4 Florida State transfer Naheem McLeod and 7-foot-2 freshman William Patterson. Autry is more in tune with the modern game than Boeheim, but it may take another year or two for Syracuse to compete with the ACC's premier programs.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams that have spent at least two seasons at the Division I level, the Orange have had the highest percentage of games go Over the total since the 2016-17 season began at 49-23 in that stretch.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	75.5 (#91/#12)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	55%

VIRGINIA

2022 RECORD: 25-8 SU, 13-19 ATS, 17-16 O/U

UVA shared ACC regular season champion honors with Miami last year and won 25 games before being upset in the NCAA Tournament first round by Furman. Last year's Cavaliers were the fourth-oldest team in the country, but this year lost four starters and six contributors, so Tony Bennett had to be extra active in the transfer portal. ACC Defensive Player of the Year Reece Beekman (9.5 APG, 5.3 RPG, 3.0 RPG) led the conference in assist-turnover ratio (3.36-1) and now gets to run the show on his own with Kihei Clark's graduation. He looks around and sees only a couple of returning contributors — sharp-shooting guard Isaac McKneely (6.7 PPG, 2.2 RPG, 39.2% 3PT) and wing Ryan Dunn (2.6 PPG, 2.9 PPG). The rest are all new players to the program including Georgetown transfer Dante Harris, who averaged 11.9 PPG there and will play both at the point and off the ball along with Andrew Rohde, the Summit League Freshman of the Year at St. Thomas. Virginia certainly will not be as big at the rim this year with the loss of its two tallest players to the portal. Jordan Minor was the Northeast Conference Player of the Year at Merrimack last season, averaging 17.4 and 9.4 and will provide the bulk of the scoring and rebounding up front. Jake Groves can be a stretch four and shot 38.1% from the 3 at Oklahoma. Virginia will be the team that is slept on in the ACC but be careful as they are still a nightmare to play against with how they defend and slow the tempo (360th of 363 last year).

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Under went 5-1 in games with a closing total greater than 132 last season. Also, they are just 5-18 ATS as a favorite of more than nine points since Feb. 1, 2021.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	83.5 (#32/#3)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	30%

VIRGINIA TECH

2022 RECORD: 19-15 SU, 13-21 ATS, 19-15 O/U

Mike Young and the Hokies had made two straight NCAA Tournament appearances, but a 19-15 mark last year in a weaker ACC sent them to the NIT. A thin bench proved to be Virginia Tech's undoing. This year's group is Young's typical gritty and smart bunch that should be a lot deeper this season. Point guard Sean Pedulla (15.0 PPG, 3.6 RPG, 2.8 APG) wore down a bit last season due to playing 35.7 minutes a night as did Hunter Cattoor (10.8 PPG, 3.7 RPG, 42.4% 3PT), who battled a fractured elbow. MJ Collins (4.1 PPG, 2.4 RPG) returns on the wing but shot just 26.5% beyond the arc. Rodney Rice (7.4 PPG, 3.3 RPG) was limited to eight games with a variety of injuries but adds to a potentially potent backcourt. In the frontcourt, transfers will be highly counted upon, including Mekhi Long, who had 11 double-doubles at Old Dominion last season, Northwestern transfer Robbie Beran, and North Carolina transfer Tyler Nickel. Lynn Kidd (5.0 PPG, 3.4 RPG) and Mylyjael Poteat (3.4 PPG, 2.0 RPG) are the only returners inside. The Hokies were 12-4 with their full allotment of starters last season, but just 7-11 when one or more starters were out. Assuming better health for this group as a whole, Virginia Tech should have a bounceback season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams that have been an underdog at least five times since the 2019-20 season began, the Hokies have the worst underdog cover percentage at 11-22 ATS.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	81.0 (#54/#6)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	54%

WAKE FOREST

2022 RECORD: 19-14 SU, 18-15 ATS, 20-13 O/U

Steve Forbes has won 44 games in his last two seasons at Wake Forest, but an NCAA Tournament berth still eludes him in Winston-Salem. His teams can score (3rd in ACC last year - 76.6 PPG) but have not been able to get stops (13th in ACC last year - 73.8 PPG). The offense should still be strong with Damari Monsanto (13.3 PPG, 3.6 RPG, 40.5% 3PT, 86.8% FT) and Cameron Hildreth (12.4 PPG, 5.3 RPG, 2.8 APG) returning along with several transfers, including Kevin Miller, who averaged 18.5 a game at Central Michigan last year before a foot injury sidelined him after four games, Abramo Canka, a player from Italy who could not crack UCLA's rotation last season, and Hunter Sallis, a former five-star recruit who never quite found his role at Gonzaga. Andrew Carr (10.7 PPG, 6.0 RPG) started every game at the four last year. And 7-footer Matthew Marsh (6.1 PPG, 4.2 RPG) should be more of a factor inside, along with 6-foot-11 Elton Reid III, another Gonzaga transfer. Forbes has a substantially deeper team this year and will still be prolific offensively, even with the loss of Tyree Appleby's 18.0 points per game. The Demon Deacons have not been to the NCAA Tournament since 2017, but they have a great shot to return this season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over went 8-0 with a closing total of 141.5 or less last season. Also, they are 22-13-1 ATS at home the past two seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	80.0 (#65/#9)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	51%

AMERICA EAST
PREVIEW

By Greg Peterson

The conference has gone through Vermont in recent seasons with the Catamounts earning at least a share of the regular-season title each of the past seven seasons with three NCAA Tournament appearances in the last four seasons.

Conference teams went 63-48-3 against the spread at home last season.

Vermont will have to overcome losing five of their top six scorers from last season to stay atop the league. Matt Veretto returns after averaging 8.9 points and 3.0 rebounds per game. He came on late in the season, with 12.5 points per game on 48.4% 3-point shooting in the final 12 games.

The conference has a lot of slower teams in terms of tempo with Bryant being an outlier, ranking 26th nationally in possessions per game. Vermont and New Hampshire were 307th or slower in possessions per game.

New Hampshire was 358th in the country in field-goal shooting percentage and last in road field-goal shooting percentage last season but still went 9-7 in conference play thanks to ranking 16th in the nation in turnovers per offensive play. The Wildcats' top returner is F Clarence Daniels, who was eighth in the nation in rebounds per game. He averaged 15.3 points, 10.7 rebounds and 1.3 steals per game last year.

Maine's 13 wins in the first season under coach Chris Markwood were their most since the 2011-12 season. The Black Bears bring back Kellen Tynes, who led all Division I players with 3.3 steals per game last season. He also averaged 14.3 points, 4.6 rebounds and 3.8 assists.

After winning a program-record 26 games last season, UMass Lowell brings back F Abdoul Karim Coulibaly, who had 11.4 points and a team-high 7.6 rebounds per game for a team that was fifth in the nation in rebound rate last season. Top shot blocker Max Brooks is also back after posting 8.3 points, 5.4 rebounds and 1.8 blocks per game for a team that ranked 12th in the nation in blocked shots at 8.5%.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
75.0	VERMONT
71.0	UMASS-LOWELL
68.5	BRYANT
66.5	MAINE
64.0	BINGHAMTON
63.0	MD-BALT COUNTY
63.0	NEW HAMPSHIRE
62.0	ALBANY
59.0	NEW JERSEY TECH

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	MAINE
3	BRYANT
3	UMASS-LOWELL
2	ALBANY
2	BINGHAMTON
2	NEW HAMPSHIRE
2	NEW JERSEY TECH
1	VERMONT
0	MD-BALT COUNTY

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
71%	MAINE
65%	BRYANT
62%	UMASS-LOWELL
43%	NEW HAMPSHIRE
40%	VERMONT
38%	BINGHAMTON
37%	ALBANY
35%	NEW JERSEY TECH
10%	MD-BALT COUNTY

AMERICAN ATHLETIC *PREVIEW*   By Adam Burke

It looks to be another exciting season in the American Athletic Conference, but a changing of the guard may be taking place. Just as their football brethren did, Houston, UCF and Cincinnati have moved over to the Big 12. Houston was the class of the AAC last season with a 17-1 conference record, an overall mark of 33-4 and a trip to the Sweet 16, where Final Four participant Miami proved to be too much to handle.

While the football additions seem to have watered down the conference as a whole on the gridiron, the additions may actually strengthen the conference on the hardwood. Charlotte, Florida Atlantic, North Texas, Rice, UAB and UTSA are the newcomers making the move from Conference USA. It does appear that FAU, North Texas and UAB will be more than formidable challengers based on what they did last season, as the Owls captivated the nation with their run to the Final Four and North Texas beat UAB in the NIT championship game.

In fact, FAU may very well be the class of this conference, as last year's Final Four team is more or less intact for head coach Dusty May this season. Memphis, while still talented, has to replace nearly 40 points per game from Kendric Davis and DeAndre Williams.

In terms of holdovers, Tulane returns Jaylen Forbes and Kevin Cross, who combined to average 33.3 of Tulane's nearly 80 points per game. Otherwise, the triumvirate of FAU, UAB and North Texas may be able to push aside AAC squads like Wichita State and Temple in the standings. Like I said, while the football side of the ledger took a hit, the basketball profile of the conference has clearly risen with these new programs.

If there is a dark horse to be found, perhaps it could be the USF Bulls. South Florida canned head coach Brian Gregory and replaced him with Amir Abdur-Rahim, who was previously at Kennesaw State and led the Owls to a 26-9 record and their first NCAA Tournament berth last season.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
84.5	FLORIDA ATLANTIC
84.5	MEMPHIS
77.0	TULANE
76.5	UAB
75.5	WICHITA STATE
75.0	NORTH TEXAS
73.5	EAST CAROLINA
73.5	SOUTH FLORIDA
72.5	TEMPLE
72.0	CHARLOTTE
72.0	SMU
71.5	RICE
65.5	TULSA
64.5	TX-SAN ANTONIO

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
5	FLORIDA ATLANTIC
4	RICE
3	CHARLOTTE
3	EAST CAROLINA
3	SMU
3	TULANE
2	TEMPLE
1	MEMPHIS
1	NORTH TEXAS
1	SOUTH FLORIDA
1	TX-SAN ANTONIO
1	WICHITA STATE
0	TULSA
0	UAB

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
90%	FLORIDA ATLANTIC
79%	EAST CAROLINA
69%	RICE
61%	TULANE
58%	SMU
51%	CHARLOTTE
32%	UAB
31%	NORTH TEXAS
30%	SOUTH FLORIDA
25%	TEMPLE
23%	WICHITA STATE
10%	TX-SAN ANTONIO
9%	MEMPHIS
6%	TULSA

CHARLOTTE

2022 RECORD: 22-14 SU, 22-14 ATS, 14-20 O/U

Charlotte is one of five teams with a new head coach, as Aaron Fearne has taken over for Ron Sanchez, who went back to Virginia to be an assistant with Tony Bennett. Fearne was an assistant under Sanchez, so he's been trained in the pack-line style of defense and the glacial pace of the Cavaliers, but all of his playing and most of his coaching experience comes from Australia, where he was the head coach of the Cairns Taipans for nearly a decade before getting a job in the States. The 49ers are short on returning offensive production, as Brice Williams (13.9 PPG) and Aly Khalifa (11.7 PPG) both transferred to other schools.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Charlotte is 10-4 ATS as an underdog of 12 points or fewer since Feb. 15, 2022 and 15-4 ATS as a favorite of at least -9 since Feb. 1, 2015.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	72.0 (#150/#10)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	51%

EAST CAROLINA

2022 RECORD: 16-17 SU, 21-11 ATS, 17-16 O/U

Second-year head coach Michael Schwartz was an assistant under Rick Barnes at Tennessee and replaced Joe Dooley, whose best season was a .500 finish in 2021-22. The Pirates played formidable defense under Schwartz and finished just outside the top 150 in adjusted defensive efficiency per Bart Torvik, but they were among the worst teams in the nation on offense. ECU was outside the top 300 in 2P% and 3P% offense, but they did get a high percentage of their misses back. This is an extremely young roster with only two seniors who barely played last season and a smattering of juniors, so more growing pains should be expected. One big storyline is that the Pirates hired former Texas Tech head coach Mark Adams, who resigned after allegations surfaced that he made inappropriate and racially insensitive comments, as an assistant coach and defensive specialist.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

East Carolina was 20-13 ATS last season. Also, the Over is 16-9 in East Carolina's non-conference games the past two seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	73.5 (#121/#7)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	79%

FLORIDA ATLANTIC

2022 RECORD: 35-4 SU, 25-11 ATS, 19-17 O/U

The biggest surprise of the college basketball season came out of Boca Raton and just about everybody of consequence is back for another run. Dusty May's Owls shocked the world by making it all the way to the Final Four behind guys like Johnell Davis (13.8 PPG), Alijah Martin (13.4 PPG) and big man Vladislav Goldin (10.2 PPG). FAU played an exciting, team-oriented brand of basketball and rode that wave through Conference USA and on into March Madness. It will come down to the holdovers as the Owls return eight of the top nine from last season, but they are the only team in the conference to not score any Transfer Points per the preseason rankings of Bart Torvik. Depth isn't a huge concern, but the Owls were 11-2 in games decided by six or fewer points and ranked in the top 45 in both 2P% and 3P%. How much sustainability could there be from last year's 35-4 team that went 19-15 with a lot of the same personnel during the 2021-22 season? Factor in a stronger conference and I'm skeptical.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Florida Atlantic had the fourth-best cover rate in the country last season with a 25-11-1 ATS record and went 12-2 ATS in non-conference games.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	84.5 (#27/#1)
RETURNING STARTERS	5
RETURNING MINUTES	90%

MEMPHIS

2022 RECORD: 26-9 SU, 16-17 ATS, 19-16 O/U

The winners of the transfer portal sweepstakes in the AAC are the Tigers. Memphis added Alabama point guard Jahvon Quinerly, Florida State transfer Caleb Mills and Wichita State's Jaykwon Walton, three players who were badly needed with an exodus of talent, including leading scorer Kendric Davis (21.9 PPG). The unheralded member of the transfer crew just might be four-time transfer Jordan Brown, who averaged 18.2 points and 8.8 rebounds per game for Louisiana. From a ceiling standpoint, Memphis has a tremendously high one, but this time, it isn't because of one-and-dones and highly touted freshmen. This is a very experienced roster, but all of the players come in from different places, so the faster the Tigers gel, the better off they're going to be. They do still have a four-star freshman in Mikey Williams, but this season is about how the upperclassmen play.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Memphis is 13-3 ATS as an underdog the past three seasons, which is the best cover percentage for any Division I team in that span and situation.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	84.5 (#27/#1)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	9%

NORTH TEXAS

2022 RECORD: 31-7 SU, 21-14 ATS, 18-17 O/U

North Texas is one of the six newcomers to the AAC that can make some noise. They'll have to do so without head coach Grant McCasland, who bounced to Texas Tech. Longtime associate head coach Ross Hodge takes over, not having been a head coach since 2011, but the style of play from the Mean Green shouldn't change. Star scorer Tylor Perry (17.3 PPG) is gone and so are two other double-digit scorers from last season in Kai Huntsberry (12.3 PPG) and Abou Ousmane (11.1 PPG). Hodge was active in the transfer portal, but it will be hard to find scorers in the early going. UNT's glacial pace and standout defense could throw conference foes for a loop, but playing at such a slow tempo also requires a degree of offensive efficiency that the Mean Green may not have.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Since the start of the 2019-20 season, North Texas has the best conference cover percentage in the country with a 49-28-2 ATS record.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	75.0 (#101/#6)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	31%

RICE

2022 RECORD: 19-16 SU, 15-16 ATS, 22-10 O/U

While some of the relocated Conference USA teams project to be immediate forces in the AAC, Rice is not one of those. The Owls had a winning record for just the second time under head coach Scott Pera and actually played in the CBI, but they were 301st in adjusted defensive efficiency per Bart Torvik and have to replace leading scorer Quincy Olivari (18.7 PPG). Travis Evee (15.6 PPG) and Max Fiedler (11.1 PPG, 7.6 RPG, 5.0 APG) are two strong building blocks. Sophomore Mekhi Mason (9.9 PPG) and some transfers are likely to help replace Olivari, but the Owls still look like a team that will struggle mightily on defense. Rice leaned in last season and played at nearly a top-50 tempo per Torvik. Expect them to play even faster this season, making them a good Over bet on a regular basis.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Rice was 22-10 to the Over last season. Also, they are 6-16-1 ATS as an underdog of at least 8 points since Jan. 10, 2021.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	71.5 (#156/#12)
RETURNING STARTERS	4
RETURNING MINUTES	69%

SOUTH FLORIDA

2022 RECORD: 14-18 SU, 17-13 ATS, 21-11 O/U

USF has a new head coach in Amir Abdur-Rahim, who led Kennesaw State to the NCAA Tournament last season as the Atlantic Sun champions. That means he's plenty familiar with Chris Youngblood, Brandon Stroud and Kasen Jennings, who all followed their head coach to Tampa. Minutes are available on the Bulls roster with the departures of Tyler Harris (16.9 PPG), Russel Tchewa (11.1 PPG) and others. This is a talented but largely disjointed group, aside from the trio of former Owls, so South Florida looks like a slow starter that could really improve as the season goes along. Abdur-Rahim is a young and energetic guy and his team should show a lot of fight. With a lot of underdog roles coming in the new-look AAC, they might be the kind of team that battles until the end and plays well as a pup in conference play.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over was 20-8 in the last 28 games of last season. Also, they are 15-28 ATS at home the past three seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	73.5 (#121/#7)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	30%

SMU

2022 RECORD: 10-22 SU, 12-17 ATS, 21-11 O/U

The transition from longtime head coach Tim Jankovich to Rob Lanier did not go well in Dallas last year. After going 24-9 in 2021-22, the Mustangs nearly flipped their record and went 10-22 in 2022-23. Lanier seemed more interested in improving the program's culture than he did wins and losses, so it was something of a throwaway year by design. Two of the team's better offensive players, Zach Nutall (13.2 PPG) and Efe Odigie (11.3 PPG), have moved on, leaving Zhuric Phelps (17.5 PPG) to work with a lot of new faces. The Mustangs finished 3-13 in Quadrant III-or-better games last season and now the conference is deeper and tougher. While Lanier went to the transfer portal and brought in some talent in Butler's Chuck Harris and B.J. Edwards from Tennessee, this is a big mountain to climb for a roster that struggled on both ends of the floor last season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams with at least four neutral-court games played since the 2019-20 season began, SMU has the highest neutral-court Over rate at 9-1.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	72.0 (#150/#10)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	58%

TEMPLE

2022 RECORD: 16-16 SU, 18-12 ATS, 16-15 O/U

First-time head coach Adam Fisher has learned from some of the best in the business, as a former disciple of Jay Wright and Jim Larranaga. Fisher hails from Jamison, Pa., a mere 19.5 miles from the Temple University campus, and recruiting the tri-state area is such an important part of the gig. Fisher, who went to Penn State and then spent the last three seasons there as an assistant, inherits a roster in transition full of transfers. Leading scorer Khalif Battle (17.9 PPG) moved on, but he recruited a lot of East Coast help that couldn't crack rotations at bigger schools. Temple does look pretty weak on the interior as a smaller team. Under Micah Shrewsberry at Penn State the last two seasons, the Nittany Lions were 352nd and 320th in adjusted tempo. Most Larranaga and Wright teams were on the slower side. Expect Temple to pass the ball around looking for shots on offense to help the undersized defense.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over went 8-3 in Temple's final 11 games last season. Also, they are 23-11-2 ATS in their last 36 games as a road underdog.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	72.5 (#138/#9)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	25%

TULANE

2022 RECORD: 20-11 SU, 13-18 ATS, 19-11 O/U

The infusion of C-USA teams will have a different effect on everybody, but I think it really hurts a team like Tulane. The Green Wave believed they were progressing toward something under fourth-year coach Ron Hunter. They started to run the floor a couple seasons ago and had really picked up their offensive performance. The conference seemed a little weaker in the middle around them and the Green Wave won 20 games for the first time since 2012-13. Unfortunately, the conference is stronger at the top and in the middle now. This remains a solid roster, led by Jaylen Forbes (18.5 PPG) and Kevin Cross (14.8 PPG), but other efficient offenses are now present in the conference to pick apart Tulane's matchup zone defense. As it is, opponents shot 35.7% from 3 against Hunter's defense and that number could stay the same or get worse with more offense in the league.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over was 15-5-1 in Tulane's final 21 games. Also, they are 3-12 ATS since Nov. 8, 2022 as a favorite of at least -5.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	77.0 (#84/#3)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	61%

TULSA

2022 RECORD: 5-25 SU, 3-24 ATS, 15-15 O/U

To say that the 2022-23 season was a rough one for Tulsa would be a giant understatement. The Golden Hurricane won just one out of 18 conference games and finished 5-25 overall for first-year head coach Eric Konkol, previously at Louisiana Tech. Konkol spoke this offseason about a commitment to defense, so I'm not sure if Tulsa will win more games, but they'll at least try to defend better throughout the season. This is a roster undergoing a complete turnover, as several new faces are in via the transfer portal, including 11 new scholarship guys. With so many issues all over the court, fixing both the offense and the defense all at once is a daunting task, but it seems like Tulsa will try to keep opponents at bay as much as possible this season, so look for some Unders out of this year's bunch.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams that have had at least 18 games listed on the betting board in any season since 2000, Tulsa had the worst full-season cover rate of any team at 4-24-2 ATS.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	65.5 (#252/#13)
RETURNING STARTERS	0
RETURNING MINUTES	6%

UTSA

2022 RECORD: 5-25 SU, 3-24 ATS, 15-15 O/U

The recent success of the football team has not translated to the basketball court. UTSA has won 20 combined games over the last two seasons with a 7-31 record in Conference USA action. With the move to the AAC, which should ultimately help a lot on the gridiron, this team looks like a bottom-feeder on the hoops side for the foreseeable future. Head coach Steve Henson will try to maintain some semblance of job security while welcoming in basically a brand-new roster. UTSA is among the league's lowest teams in returning production and will effectively be starting from scratch. To make matters worse, Henson's teams have ranked outside the top 200 in adjusted defensive efficiency per Bart Torvik in each of the last four seasons. It could be a long year in San Antonio.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over was 11-3 in UTSA's final 14 games last season and the Over was 8-1 in games with a closing total of 145 or higher.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	64.5 (#269/#14)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	10%

UAB

2022 RECORD: 29-10 SU, 17-19 ATS, 24-14 O/U

The loss of Jordan "Jelly" Walker may be the single most impactful departure for any team in the conference. He scored 22.3 points per game and was the leader of a senior-laden roster that finished second to North Texas in the NIT. Fellow seniors Trey Jemison (9.1 PPG, 8.3 RPG) and KJ Buffen (10.7 PPG, 6.8 RPG) are also gone, so this is something of a rebuilding year for head coach Andy Kennedy. Kennedy is an excellent coach, but UAB has one guy on the roster who started a game last season, and the level of competition has taken a step up in the AAC. It will also make the Blazers a tough team to handicap early in the season because they may decide to play fast or slow based on how everything comes together. They may be the greatest unknown in the conference going into the season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over is 46-24-1 in their games the past two seasons, the second-highest Over percentage in the country.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	76.5 (#86/#4)
RETURNING STARTERS	0
RETURNING MINUTES	32%

WICHITA STATE

2022 RECORD: 29-10 SU, 17-19 ATS, 24-14 O/U

The job that Paul Mills did at Oral Roberts garnered national attention, as he started just 22-42 with the Golden Eagles over his first two seasons before making a Sweet 16 run just two seasons later in 2021. After winning 30 games with a perfect 18-0 record in Summit League play, Mills and superstar Max Abmas decided to move on, as Mills wound up at Wichita State and Abmas became a Texas Longhorn. Former head coach Isaac Brown was unable to fill the very large shoes of Gregg Marshall, so his tenure ended after three seasons and Mills comes in with a retooled roster and a lot of unknowns. In the defense-optional Summit League, ORU bombed away from 3 or got dribble-drive looks thanks to Abmas. The Shockers don't have an offensive identity yet, but Mills is a sharp coach and this team should look better by season's end than it looks going into the season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

At 19-6-1 ATS in true road games the past three seasons, the Shockers have the best road cover percentage in that span and were the only team to not suffer an ATS loss in a true road game last season at 10-0-1.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	75.5 (#91/#5)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	23%

ATLANTIC 10 *PREVIEW*

By Aaron Moore

As the conferences above the Atlantic 10 in the college athletics food chain deal with so much turmoil spurred on by football, this basketball-centric league has enjoyed stability and a relatively manageable geographic footprint among its 15 member schools.

On the court, the A10 is looking to improve its profile, which took a hit last season. Virginia Commonwealth was the only school to receive an NCAA Tournament invitation, the first time since 2005 the conference didn't earn multiple bids. KenPom ranked the A10 behind the WAC and Ivy League last year.

Get ready to hear plenty of Norm Nixon references this year as the resurgence of Duquesne will get this Pittsburgh school more attention than it has had in decades. The Dukes are the preseason favorite. The school uncharacteristically spent big money to hire Keith Dambrot away from Akron in 2017 in order to build up the program to coincide with the improvements made to UPMC Cooper Fieldhouse.

Those investments may pay dividends in 2024 and push the Dukes into the tournament for the first time since the Nixon-led group in 1977.

Loyola-Chicago is also trying to turn back the clock, one with a much different time frame than the Dukes. Last year the Ramblers' inaugural A10 season ended with a spot in the basement, marking the end of the amazing run that started with a berth in the 2018 Final Four. This year's squad can bounce back with more experience and a couple of key transfers.

Dayton and VCU will once again be in a position to challenge for a regular-season title and conference tournament success.

Keep an eye out for St. Bonaventure, which has the defense and experience to capitalize on the home-court advantage at the Reilly Center.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
80.5	DAYTON
78.5	DUQUESNE
78.5	VCU
78.0	LOYOLA-CHICAGO
75.0	SAINT LOUIS
74.0	GEORGE MASON
73.5	ST. BONAVENTURE
72.5	FORDHAM
72.5	RICHMOND
71.0	DAVIDSON
69.0	MASSACHUSETTS
69.0	RHODE ISLAND
68.5	LASALLE
68.0	SAINT JOSEPH'S
67.5	GEORGE WASHINGTON

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
5	LOYOLA-CHICAGO
5	ST. BONAVENTURE
5	SAINT JOSEPH'S
3	DUQUESNE
3	FORDHAM
2	DAVIDSON
2	DAYTON
2	GEORGE WASHINGTON
2	LASALLE
1	GEORGE MASON
1	MASSACHUSETTS
1	RICHMOND
1	SAINT LOUIS
0	RHODE ISLAND
0	VCU

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
89%	SAINT JOSEPH'S
87%	ST. BONAVENTURE
74%	LOYOLA-CHICAGO
61%	LASALLE
59%	DUQUESNE
51%	DAYTON
49%	FORDHAM
45%	GEORGE WASHINGTON
43%	DAVIDSON
38%	RICHMOND
32%	SAINT LOUIS
31%	MASSACHUSETTS
26%	GEORGE MASON
13%	RHODE ISLAND
11%	VCU

DAVIDSON

2022 RECORD: 16-16 SU, 16-15 ATS, 10-21 O/U

Not only did Davidson lose Sam Mennenga and Foster Loyer, who combined to average more than 30 points a game for a team that averaged just less than 70, but Desmond Watson (9.4 PPG) has moved on to conference foe Loyola. That leaves the trio of Grant Huffman, David Skogman and Connor Kochera, who all scored in single digits last season, to fill a major void. Their experience with Matt McKillop's style and the development of stretch big man Reed Bailey should prevent the Wildcats from finishing where the Ramblers did last season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams that were an underdog in at least five games last season, Davidson had the highest Under percentage in games as an underdog, going 11-1 to the Under.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	71.0 (#160/#10)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	43%

DAYTON

2022 RECORD: 22-12 SU, 16-18 ATS, 12-22 O/U

After flirting with the NBA Draft, DaRon Holmes II is back. The first-team All-Atlantic 10 forward was spectacular on both ends of the court last season, averaging 18.4 points and 8.1 rebounds a game. Expecting Holmes to do something similar this season to what Obi Toppin did in 2020 is justifiable. The Dayton offense is at its best when Malachi Smith is running it, but injuries have caused the junior point guard to miss 19 games over the last two seasons. According to coach Anthony Grant, Smith recently reached full-go status after offseason ankle surgery. Shooter Koby Brea (6.8 PPG, 3.3 RPG), however, is still recovering from April surgery in which rods were inserted into both tibias. The Flyers have the talent to earn an A10 title, they just need the corresponding health.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Under was 9-2 in Dayton's final 11 games last season and the Under was 22-12 in their games as a whole last season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	80.5 (#60/#1)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	51%

DUQUESNE

2022 RECORD: 20-13 SU, 17-16 ATS, 18-15 O/U

For some casual college hoops fans, the thought of the Dukes being the class of the conference might seem odd. However, for those watching the A10 closely, it's not a surprise, more of an expected growth. They went from six wins in 2022 to 20 last season. Leading that improvement and the possibility of a conference crown is senior guard Dae Dae Grant, who scored 15.5 points a game last season. He should compete for A10 Player of the Year. Grant is teamed up again with Jimmy "Tre" Clark III, who led the league in steals. The Dukes also landed Hassan and Fousseyni Drame, the twins who helped Saint Peter's make a tournament run two years ago and started every game for La Salle last season. Another transfer, 6-7 Andrei Savrasov (Georgia Southern), gives Duquesne more experience and outside scoring potential from a big man. Expect a lot of long-range shots from a team that was top 50 last season in 3-point percentage.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams with at least six neutral-court games played since the 2020-21 season began, Duquesne has the highest Over rate in those games at 11-1.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	78.5 (#72/#2)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	59%

FORDHAM

2022 RECORD: 25-8 SU, 20-13 ATS, 19-14 O/U

Another team looking to transition from former pushover to true contender. This lofty label isn't a common occurrence in the Bronx. The Rams, like Duquesne, made a sizable leap up to 25 wins last season from a 16-16 record in 2022. Much of that is due to coach Keith Urgo's arrival a year ago to replace Kyle Neptune, who moved to Villanova. This team plays strong defense, particularly on the perimeter (69th in the country in 3-point percentage defense). Transfers will be the key to replacing last year's key duo of Darius Quisenberry and Khalid Moore. Japhet Medor (13.7 PPG) comes north from Texas-San Antonio to provide offense. Joshua Rivera (10.6 PPG, 5.3 RPG), who was All-Patriot League last year at Lafayette will provide some more length. Holdovers Antrell Charlton, Kyle Rose and Will Richardson are familiar with Urgo's defense and are expected to increase their offensive output.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Fordham is 23-11 ATS at home over the past two seasons, including a mark of 6-2 ATS as a home underdog. Also, the Over was 16-4 when the closing total was less than 140 in their games last season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	72.5 (#138/#8)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	49%

GEORGE MASON

2022 RECORD: 20-13 SU, 18-15 ATS, 12-21 O/U

This program is rebuilding after coach Kim English moved on to Providence, taking the Patriots' best player, Josh Oduro, and another starter in Justyn Fernandez. New coach Tony Skinn, a member of the 2006 Final Four team, went to the transfer portal to fill a lot of open positions. He got potential starters in Darius Maddox (Virginia Tech), Keyshawn Hall (UNLV) and Jared Billups (Siena). Maddox, who averaged 8.5 points a game last season, will be the focal point for Skinn's offense. Since Skinn is a protege of Maryland coach Kevin Willard, look for GMU to be a defensive-minded group.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Nine of George Mason's final 11 games went Under the total last season. Also, they are 14-7 ATS as an underdog the past two seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	74.0 (#114/#6)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	26%

GEORGE WASHINGTON

2022 RECORD: 16-16 SU, 16-15 ATS, 19-12 O/U

The league's top scorer, James Bishop (21.6 PPG), is back for GW. So is 6-foot-5 guard Maximus Edwards, the Atlantic 10 Rookie of the Year. The program with a new nickname will also have a lot of new players surrounding Bishop in his quest to be A10 Player of the Year. Gone are seven players to graduation and the portal. Six newcomers replace them, including Antoine Smith Jr. (Evansville) and top recruit Jacoi Hutchinson. Benny Schröder, a 6-foot-7 scorer, should find the A10 more accommodating than the Big 12, where he played sparingly last season for Oklahoma. Even with Bishop, all this turnover could lead GW to finish in the bottom tier of the standings.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over was 15-6 in their final 21 games last season. Also, they are 11-5-1 ATS as a home underdog since the 2020-21 season began.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	67.5 (#217/#15)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	45%

LA SALLE

2022 RECORD: 15-19 SU, 18-15 ATS, 17-17 O/U

What Fran Dunphy did last year guiding his alma mater back to a level of respectability and two A10 tournament wins was seriously one of the best coaching jobs in the nation. This season it will take even more of his magic to get the Explorers anywhere near their record of 15-19 in 2023. Twins Hassan and Fousseyni Drame bolted, as did Josh Nickelberry, the A10 Sixth Man of the Year, now at Florida State. For a team that won't have a player taller than 6-foot-8 make any real contributions, La Salle will rely heavily on Khalil Brantley, who averaged a team-leading 14.3 points per game last season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams with at least five neutral-court games played since the 2020-21 season began, La Salle has the highest neutral Under rate at 10-1.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	68.5 (#203/#13)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	61%

LOYOLA-CHICAGO

2022 RECORD: 10-21 SU, 9-22 ATS, 16-14 O/U

The first year in the A10 for the Ramblers didn't go well, so they hit the free-agent market, make that the transfer portal, hard. Joining the top three scorers from last season (Phillip Alston, Braden Norris and Ben Schwieger) are a pair of Ivy Leaguers, Greg Dolan and Dame Adelekun. The biggest addition is Desmond Watson, who left Davidson. This gives Loyola possibly the best depth in the conference and should ignite a turnaround on both ends of the court after they ranked worse than 240 nationally in offense and defense last season, according to KenPom. When coach Drew Valentine's first team in 2022 was at its best, the Ramblers were a defensive-minded squad. This team should return to that style with added scoring. There is a good chance they could go from worst to first in the A10.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Loyola Chicago went 9-22 ATS last season. Also, the Over is 19-8 at home the past two seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	78.0 (#78/#4)
RETURNING STARTERS	5
RETURNING MINUTES	74%

MASSACHUSETTS

2022 RECORD: 15-16 SU, 14-16 ATS, 13-18 O/U

Coach Frank Martin's first season in Amherst began strong with a 9-3 start and a tournament win in Myrtle Beach. His intense defensive style seemed to be working. That was until injuries derailed the season, resulting in a sub-.500 mark (15-16). Not surprisingly, that started the wave of players leaving the program. Matt Cross (12.2 PPG, 6.3 RPG) stayed and so did Keon Thompson (5.8 PPG). They will be joined by Josh Cohen, co-Northeast Conference Player of the Year, who scored 21.8 points a game at Saint Francis (Pa.). Also, Martin nabbed a four-star high school recruit in guard Jaylen Curry. This could be the darkhorse team of the A10 if they can endure Martin's relentless defensive style. Last season, they surprisingly played at a fast pace, finishing 34th in KenPom's adjusted tempo.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Massachusetts is 23-12 ATS as an underdog since the 2016-17 season began, but just 5-10 ATS as a road favorite in that span.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	69.0 (#193/#11)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	31%

RHODE ISLAND

2022 RECORD: 9-22 SU, 12-19 ATS, 18-13 O/U

After URI failed to even reach double digits in wins (9-22) in the first year of the Archie Miller era, the Rams have basically a new roster for him in Year 2. Brandon Weston and 6-foot-10 Josaphat Bilau are the notable holdovers. In order for URI to compete and play the style of defense that Miller's successful teams normally do, he will have to cobble together a lineup relying on transfers Zek Montgomery (Bradley), Jaden House (High Point) and Luis Kortright (Quinnipiac). These new guards will look to run and improve an offense that was ranked in the 300s by Bart Torvik for most categories last season. If the new players fit the Miller mold, unlike last year's group, the Rams will push for the .500 mark.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Rhode Island was 2-13 ATS last season as a favorite or an underdog of three or fewer points.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	69.0 (#193/#11)
RETURNING STARTERS	0
RETURNING MINUTES	13%

RICHMOND

2022 RECORD: 15-18 SU, 12-21 ATS, 16-17 O/U

The Spiders ended 2023 on a downward trend, finishing 15-18. Coach Chris Mooney had to walk away from the team late in the season because of a heart issue. That seems resolved as he begins this year relying on transfer Jordan King (Siena and ETSU) to guide the offense after last year's point guard, Jason Nelson, left for crosstown rival VCU. Even more of a loss is leading scorer Tyler Burton (19.0 PPG), who is now at Villanova. The quasi-Princeton offense will run through 7-footer Neal Quinn, who will act as a distributor at the high post — a staple of Mooney's playbook. One of the Spiders' problems last season was they ranked near the bottom of D1 (348th) in offensive rebounding percentage.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Richmond went 3-13 ATS in their final 16 games and went 5-15 ATS in conference play, finishing with the fifth-worst cover percentage among Division I teams last season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	72.5 (#138/#8)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	38%

ST. BONAVENTURE

2022 RECORD: 14-18 SU, 17-15 ATS, 15-17 O/U

The Bonnies have continuity — a valuable commodity not seen as much elsewhere in the conference. Their top five scorers from last season are back. And they added veteran talent to the roster with a pair of graduate transfers with New York state ties. Mika Adams-Woods, who scored 9.1 points a game and averaged 1.1 steals a game last season with Cincinnati, and Charles Pride from Bryant have the defensive versatility and rebounding skills to work nicely with coach Mark Schmidt's style of play. St. Bonaventure will need to pick up its defense from last season as its efficiency there slipped to 122nd in the nation, according to Bart Torvik. The scoring will once again be handled mostly by guard Daryl Banks (15.4 PPG), who is in the mix for A10 Player of the Year. The composition of this roster should do very well for the Bonnies in their quest to once again quietly challenge for an A10 title.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

St. Bonaventure is 1-8 ATS as a road favorite the past two seasons, but they are 35-20 ATS as a home favorite since the 2018-19 season began.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	73.5 (#121/#7)
RETURNING STARTERS	5
RETURNING MINUTES	87%

SAINT LOUIS

2022 RECORD: 21-12 SU, 13-18 ATS, 15-16 O/U

Last season Saint Louis had a lot of returning stars and its sights set on a tournament berth. Unfortunately, that never transpired and coach Travis Ford starts over without Javonte Perkins, Javon Pickett and Yuri Collins. It's hard to see the Billikens not taking a big step back this season. Gibson Jimerson, a 6-foot-5 wing, will play his fifth season and will continue to bomb away from behind the arc, where he has a career shooting percentage of better than 40.0%. Mike Meadows comes over from Portland and he, too, should provide some outside punch. Defensively, Ford will rely even more on another fifth-year player, the physical Terrence Hargrove Jr.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Saint Louis is 29-18-1 ATS at home the past three seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	75.0 (#101/#5)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	32%

SAINT JOSEPH'S

2022 RECORD: 16-17 SU, 20-13 ATS, 16-16 O/U

Saint Joseph's has had five straight losing seasons and has not made the NCAA tournament since 2016. The talent coach Billy Lange has on this year's roster should bring a winning season at a minimum. The trio of Erik Reynolds II (19.6 PPG), Cameron Brown (13.3 PPG) and Lynn Greer III (4.1 AGP) give the Hawks arguably the best backcourt in the conference. Up front, Kacper Klaczek is back for his junior year, 6-foot-9 Rasheer Fleming, 7-foot Charles Coleman and the arrival of international big man Christ Essandoko, who should help a team that finished last season 287th in the country in defensive rebounding. This Saint Joseph's team has the backcourt talent and size to not only earn a winning record but to make a long-shot run at a title.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Saint Joseph's was 13-4 ATS in their final 17 games and went 9-0 ATS when they had a rest disadvantage last season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	68.0 (#207/#14)
RETURNING STARTERS	5
RETURNING MINUTES	89%

VCU

2022 RECORD: 27-8 SU, 17-16 ATS, 14-21 O/U

The Rams are starting another cycle that has become so common for this program. A lively young coach brings VCU wins and attention, then becomes a target for a larger school looking to turn its fortunes around. Jeff Capel to Anthony Grant to Shaka Smart to Will Wade eventually led to Mike Rhoades having six successful seasons and three NCAA Tournament bids. Like those before him, Rhoades moved on, in this case to Penn State. He is replaced by Ryan Odom, a coach with a resume that will keep VCU near its "team to beat" status. It will be a lot of work for the former UMBC and Utah State head coach who has to revamp the roster. Ace Baldwin, the 2023 Atlantic 10 Player of the Year and Defensive Player of the Year, is now with Rhoades in Happy Valley. However, Odom brought some of his old players with him as well. Sean Bairstow and Max Shulga, from Utah State, should step right in as the team's top two options on offense. Kuany Kuany from California brings some Power Five-level talent. Jason Nelson coming in to run the point from rival Richmond will give the new-look Rams and Odom a good chance of defending their conference title.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

VCU is 26-14 ATS versus conference opponents over the past two seasons. Also, the Under is 38-24-1 in VCU's non-conference games since the 2018-19 season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	78.5 (#72/#2)
RETURNING STARTERS	0
RETURNING MINUTES	11%

ATLANTIC SUN *PREVIEW*

By Adam Burke

The Atlantic Sun Conference took a huge hit with the loss of Liberty, as the Flames followed the path of the football team and moved into Conference USA. The Flames were the class of the conference last season and actually finished in the top 10 in effective field goal percentage offense per Bart Torvik. However, Liberty lost to Kennesaw State in the A-Sun Championship Game, which sent the Owls to the dance and the Flames to the NIT.

While it doesn't help the profile of the conference to lose a relative powerhouse like Liberty, it could make things a lot more interesting. The A-Sun also lost Jacksonville State to the Sun Belt, but the conference still has a high level of intrigue because there are so many teams that play such different styles of basketball.

Kennesaw State will participate in this conference for one more season, as they'll move to the FBS ranks for football next year and join Conference USA. Head coach Amir Abdur-Rahim moved on to South Florida, so the Owls went and got Alabama assistant Antoine Pettway, who will bring a much different style of play to northwest Georgia. Leading scorer Chris Youngblood followed his head coach to USF, but the Owls bring back point guard Terrell Burden (13.5 PPG, 4.1 APG) and Demond Robinson from last year's NCAA Tourney team.

The Owls have become the top dogs and have a target on their backs, but Stetson is a team capable of making noise while bombing away from 3-point land. They were 11th in the nation in 3P% last season and return two double-digit scorers from last season in Jalen Blackmon (15.4 PPG), Stephan Sewnson (10.9 PPG, 39.8% from 3), while also adding 7-footer Treyton Thompson from Minnesota.

Eastern Kentucky's breakneck pace under head coach A.W. Hamilton worked well last season, as the Colonels won 12 of 18 conference games and return leading scorer Devontae Blanton (16.9 PPG). While EKU was fairly inefficient on offense, they ranked in the top-50 in tempo and may run even more this season with way more upperclassmen that know the offense.

Overall, there are a lot of above average offenses and really bad defenses in the conference. With Liberty gone and Kennesaw State in a bit of a transition, the team that plays defense may have the best shot at winning this conference. That may very well be Lipscomb, who will rely heavily on junior Jacob Ognacevic (17.7 PPG). Lipscomb had their best defensive season under head coach Lennie Acuff last year and have played at a much faster tempo the last two seasons than they did in 2021.

Those looking for a surprise contender might find it in Florida Gulf Coast, as former Penn State head coach Patrick Chambers starts his second season with a much-improved roster thanks to the transfer portal.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
74.5	EASTERN KENTUCKY
72.5	FLORIDA GULF COAST
69.5	LIPSCOMB
68.5	KENNESAW STATE
68.5	STETSON
68.0	BELLARMINE
68.0	NORTH ALABAMA
67.5	QUEENS COLLEGE
67.0	AUSTIN PEAY
65.0	JACKSONVILLE
61.5	NORTH FLORIDA
59.5	CENTRAL ARKANSAS

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	BELLARMINE
4	EASTERN KENTUCKY
4	LIPSCOMB
4	NORTH ALABAMA
3	CENTRAL ARKANSAS
3	FLORIDA GULF COAST
3	QUEENS COLLEGE
3	STETSON
2	KENNESAW STATE
1	JACKSONVILLE
1	NORTH FLORIDA
0	AUSTIN PEAY

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
91%	EASTERN KENTUCKY
83%	BELLARMINE
78%	FLORIDA GULF COAST
73%	NORTH ALABAMA
63%	STETSON
57%	LIPSCOMB
56%	CENTRAL ARKANSAS
54%	QUEENS COLLEGE
46%	KENNESAW STATE
23%	NORTH FLORIDA
21%	JACKSONVILLE
7%	AUSTIN PEAY

BIG 12 *PREVIEW*

By Matt Youmans

It's no surprise that Kansas headlines a majority of the preseason Top 25 media polls, including Blue Ribbon, ESPN and Lindy's. Bill Self is a coaching wizard with lots of experience in reloading. He brings back three starters from a 28-win team and adds 7-foot-2 Hunter Dickinson, the top player in the transfer portal. While the Jayhawks are not ranked No. 1 in all of the polls, and by all of the oddsmakers and respected analytics websites, they are close to it. Still, a team full of Self-confidence has plenty of competition at the top of its own conference. Kansas (12-1 odds), Houston (20-1) and Texas (22-1) are among the top 12 teams on the NCAA championship odds board at DraftKings, and Baylor (30-1) is not far behind.

The best conference in college basketball is getting better. Two of the past three NCAA champions came from the Big 12 — Kansas in 2022 and Baylor in 2021. The Jayhawks were set to be the NCAA's No. 1 overall seed in 2020, when the tournament was canceled during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Texas Tech reached the title game in 2019. Ken Pomeroy's analytics website (KenPom.com) rated the Big 12 as the nation's top league last season and it has ranked in the top two for five consecutive years. The conference has expanded to 14 teams (Houston, BYU, Cincinnati and UCF join the crowd this season) and is flexing its strength at the top with no weaklings at the bottom.

Dickinson, a transfer from Michigan, is a preseason All-American and one of many high-profile newcomers. Houston lured senior guard LJ Cryer from Baylor, Texas hooked senior guard Max Abmas from Oral Roberts, and Baylor replaced Cryer by adding senior guard RayJ Dennis, a former Toledo star who was voted the Mid-American Conference's top player. The Bears could have the league's top NBA prospect in freshman guard Ja'Kobe Walter, a McDonald's All-American who turned down Kansas and Texas.

Iowa State, Kansas State, Oklahoma State and Texas Tech are potential surprise teams on the rise. West Virginia's stock has fallen after the resignation of coaching legend Bob Huggins.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
92.0	KANSAS
91.0	HOUSTON
88.0	BAYLOR
88.0	TEXAS
86.0	TCU
84.0	KANSAS STATE
83.0	IOWA STATE
83.0	TEXAS TECH
82.5	BYU
82.0	CINCINNATI
81.5	OKLAHOMA
80.5	OKLAHOMA STATE
80.0	WEST VIRGINIA
77.0	UCF

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	BYU
3	KANSAS
2	CINCINNATI
2	HOUSTON
2	KANSAS STATE
2	OKLAHOMA
2	OKLAHOMA STATE
2	TCU
2	TEXAS
1	BAYLOR
1	IOWA STATE
1	TEXAS TECH
1	UCF
0	WEST VIRGINIA

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
69%	BYU
49%	TCU
48%	HOUSTON
43%	KANSAS
39%	OKLAHOMA STATE
36%	TEXAS
35%	IOWA STATE
31%	BAYLOR
30%	CINCINNATI
30%	TEXAS TECH
29%	KANSAS STATE
26%	OKLAHOMA
16%	UCF
10%	WEST VIRGINIA

BAYLOR

2022 RECORD: 23-11 SU, 17-16 ATS, 18-16 O/U

Freshman guard Ja'Kobe Walter, a McDonald's All-American, is primed to be the Bears' next big-time star. Walter will need to live up to the hype because Baylor must replace scoring leaders Adam Flagler, Keyonte George and LJ Cryer, who transferred to Houston. Walter is an elite defender and scorer who also was recruited hard by Kansas and Texas before committing to Bears coach Scott Drew. Cryer will be missed, but Drew also scored by landing senior guard RayJ Dennis, a former Toledo star who was voted the Mid-American Conference's top player. Baylor's only returning starter is senior forward Jalen Bridges, who averaged 10.3 points and started all 34 games for a 23-win team. As usual, Drew has plenty of prospects on his roster and the ceiling is high, but his new-look team does not appear comparable to the Bears' 2021 national title team.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Since the beginning of the 2018-19 season, the Bears are the lone team to have a winning record straight up as an underdog at 8-6.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	88.0 (#9/#3)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	31%

BYU

2022 RECORD: 19-15 SU, 18-14 ATS, 16-16 O/U

Aly Khalifa is about to take the Big 12 by surprise, if Cougars coach Mark Pope knows something about talent evaluation. Pope has compared Khalifa, a 6-foot-11 transfer from Charlotte, to reigning NBA MVP Nikola Jokic of the Denver Nuggets. Khalifa is a relative unknown after displaying his scoring, rebounding, passing and 3-point shooting skills in Conference USA. BYU needed a big man to help Fousseyni Traore, a 6-foot-6 forward who led the team in scoring (12.9 PPG) and rebounding (7.8 RPG). Pope's roster lacked experience and size last season, when the Cougars finished 19-15 and were knocked out in the West Coast Conference semifinals. Spencer Johnson, a senior who averaged 11.1 points and shot 46.1% from 3, and sophomore point guard Dallin Hall lead a deeper backcourt. This team appears prepared for the step up in competition, though the Cougars will finish in the league's bottom half.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Cougars are 10-5-2 ATS against ranked opponents and 20-11-2 ATS as an underdog over the past four seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	82.5 (#44/#9)
RETURNING STARTERS	4
RETURNING MINUTES	69%

CINCINNATI

2022 RECORD: 23-13 SU, 23-12 ATS, 16-19 O/U

Soon after Aziz Bandaogo ended Cincinnati's season in the NIT, the 7-footer transferred from Utah Valley to join the Bearcats. Bandaogo had 15 points, 12 rebounds and four blocks in the quarterfinal game that impressed Cincinnati coach Wes Miller. Bandaogo's eligibility is pending approval by the NCAA, and he would be a big factor for the Bearcats. Miller lost leading scorer Landers Nolley and two other starting guards from a 23-13 team. The backcourt will have a new look with transfers CJ Fredrick (Kentucky) and Simas Lukosius (Butler) in addition to junior-college transfer Day Day Thomas and freshmen Jizzle James and Rayvon Griffith. James, the son of former NFL running back Edgerrin James, was a top-100 recruit. The front line will feature 6-foot-11 junior Viktor Lakhin, 6-foot-10 Temple transfer Jamille Reynolds and Bandaogo, if he's cleared to play. Miller needs time to make the new pieces fit.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams with at least 12 games played against ranked opponents since the start of the 2016-17 season, the Bearcats are the worst cover team in those games with a 6-26 ATS record.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	82.0 (#47/#10)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	30%

HOUSTON

2022 RECORD: 33-4 SU, 19-17 ATS, 17-19 O/U

It was a severe disappointment for Houston, a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament, to fall short of reaching the Final Four in its hometown. Cougars coach Kelvin Sampson also lost two first-round NBA Draft picks in Jarace Walker and Marcus Sasser. But there is plenty of good news for Sampson, who still has a top-10 team led by senior point guard Jamal Shead and senior shooting guard LJ Cryer, a transfer from Baylor. Damian Dunn, a Temple transfer, also will play a major role as a senior guard. The Cougars are always rugged defensively, allowing only 57.5 PPG to rank No. 2 in the nation last season, and strong up front. Sampson's roster is loaded with prospects, but only one player is taller than 6-foot-9, so matching up against dominant big men will be a problem. The move to the Big 12 means another 30-win season (33-4 last season) is unlikely.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Since the start of the 2017-18 season, Houston has the best cover percentage in the nation at 121-81-3 (59.9%) ATS.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	91.0 (#3/#2)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	48%

IOWA STATE

2022 RECORD: 19-14 SU, 16-17 ATS, 11-22 O/U

The basketball and football teams at Iowa State are mirror images — tough defensively and tough to watch offensively. The Cyclones ranked last in the Big 12 in scoring offense (67.6 PPG) and first in scoring defense (62.6 PPG) last season. T.J. Otzelberger did a clumsy coaching job in his previous stop at UNLV, but he has exceeded low expectations in Ames by recruiting surprisingly well. Omaha Biliew, a 6-foot-8 freshman, will make an immediate impact and could be a one-and-done prospect on the way to the NBA. Otzelberger must replace the top four scorers from a 19-14 team, but those scorers were not superstars. Sophomore point guard Tamin Lipsey will be surrounded by Biliew and several other new faces, including transfer guards Keshon Gilbert (UNLV) and Curtis Jones (Buffalo). Watch the development of 7-foot-1 freshman JT Rock and 6-foot-8 freshman Milan Momcilovic.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

All seven of Iowa State's games with a closing total above 135 went Under last season. Also, they are 19-4-1 ATS in the Big 12 Conference Tournament since 2010.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	83.0 (#38/#7)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	35%

KANSAS

2022 RECORD: 28-8 SU, 17-19 ATS, 17-18 O/U

An investigation of the Kansas program, stemming from the FBI's larger college basketball case that was launched in 2017, did not result in serious punishment when a ruling was announced Oct. 11. Bill Self, coach of the preseason No. 1 team in several polls, said he was happy to have the "cloud hovering above our program" cleared. He's also thrilled to have three starters returning from a 28-win team and the addition of 7-foot-2 Hunter Dickinson, a former Michigan star who was the top player in the transfer portal. Point guard Dajuan Harris, who has 77 career starts, and forwards KJ Adams and Kevin McCullar lead an experienced team that will need some young players to develop. Depth could be a concern if injuries hit, but the guard rotation is promising with newcomers Elmarko Jackson, Johnny Furphy, Jamari McDowell and Towson transfer Nicolas Timberlake. Self has a good shot to win his third national title.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Kansas was 2-7 ATS as a favorite of at least -6 after Dec. 2 last season. However, they are 11-2 ATS in the conference tournament since 2018.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	92.0 (#1/#1)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	43%

KANSAS STATE

2022 RECORD: 26-10 SU, 23-12 ATS, 20-16 O/U

Jerome Tang was a home-run hire by Kansas State. In his first season in Manhattan, Tang took over a losing team and went 26-10 with a run to the NCAA Elite Eight highlighted by victories over Kentucky and Michigan State. He's unlikely to repeat that high level of success this season, considering first-team All-Big 12 stars Keyontae Johnson and Markquis Nowell are gone, but he's still going to win. Creighton transfer forward Arthur Kaluma and North Texas transfer guard Tylor Perry are good replacements for Johnson and Nowell. Perry is a 3-point sharpshooter who was voted the top player in Conference USA. Tang has a few freshmen who will contribute and he welcomes back junior guard Cam Carter and 6-foot-10 senior forward Nae'Qwan Tomlin, who started 36 games and averaged 10.4 points. The Wildcats will not win the conference title, but Tang's team could hang with Kansas.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

From December 4 until the end of the season, Kansas State went 8-0 ATS as a favorite of -14 or less and are 15-2 overall in their last 17 games as a favorite of -15.5 or less.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	84.0 (#31/#6)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	29%

OKLAHOMA

2022 RECORD: 15-17 SU, 14-17 ATS, 16-15 O/U

Two years into the job in Norman, Porter Moser has not worked any miracles, as he did during an improbable NCAA Final Four run at Loyola Chicago. The Sooners are 34-33 with one NIT appearance. Moser will win bigger sooner or later, and it's likely going to happen later. He's adding seven newcomers, including five transfers, to help replace stars Grant Sherfield and Tanner Groves from last season. John Hugley IV, a 6-foot-10, 275-pound junior who transferred from Pittsburgh, provides the interior strength required in a physically demanding conference. Hugley is flanked by 6-foot-10 senior Sam Godwin (Wofford) and 6-foot-7 junior Jalon Moore (Georgia Tech). The leading returner scorer is sophomore guard Milos Uzan (7.6 PPG), who's joined in the backcourt by freshman Kaden Cooper and transfers Javian McCollum (Siena) and Rivaldo Soares (Oregon). This team needs help, but Sister Jean still lives in Chicago.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Oklahoma is 18-30-1 ATS as a favorite the past three seasons and 3-6-1 ATS as an underdog of 10 points or fewer since Jan. 8, 2023.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	81.5 (#49/#11)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	26%

OKLAHOMA STATE

2022 RECORD: 20-16 SU, 16-19 ATS, 16-19 O/U

Brandon Garrison, a 6-foot-11 freshman from Oklahoma City and a McDonald's All-American, is the most exciting addition to a new-look Oklahoma State team that's bigger on the front line and better suited to compete at a high level in the backcourt. Cowboys coach Mike Boynton brings back two starting guards — seniors Bryce Thompson (11.8 PPG) and John-Michael Wright (9.8 PPG) — and brings in an elite recruiting class. Thompson and Wright started all 36 games for a 20-16 team. East Carolina transfer guard Javon Small adds experience and scoring. Jamyron Keller, Justin McBride and Eric Dailey join Garrison as touted freshmen. Isaiah Miranda, a 7-foot-1 transfer from North Carolina State, and 6-foot-10 senior Mike Marsh give the Cowboys the size and skill needed to win in the Big 12. The talent level is high, and Boynton is an underrated coach who's a good bet to overachieve.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Oklahoma State was 2-8-1 ATS in their final 11 games last season and 3-9 ATS against ranked teams last season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	80.5 (#60/#12)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	39%

TCU

2022 RECORD: 22-13 SU, 17-17 ATS, 17-18 O/U

It's Emanuel Miller's time to contend for first-team All-Big 12 honors. The 6-foot-7 senior averaged 12.3 points and 6.5 rebounds last season as the Horned Frogs reached the NCAA Tournament for the second straight year. Miller will not be a one-man show, though. TCU coach Jamie Dixon added big-time transfer guards Avery Anderson (Oklahoma State) and Jameer Nelson Jr. (Delaware) to complement Miller and returning forwards JaKobe Coles and Chuck O'Bannon Jr. Nelson is a proven scorer who averaged 20.6 points last season in a minor conference. The Frogs have several other newcomers who could make the leap to major contributors, including 6-foot-11 Kansas transfer Ernest Udeh, 6-foot-9 Coastal Carolina transfer Essam Mostafa and Texas A&M-Corpus Christi transfer guard Trevian Tennyson. TCU won a total of 43 games the past two seasons and should win 20 this season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Under was 8-3-1 in TCU's final 12 games last season. Also, they are 11-1-2 ATS with a rest disadvantage the past two seasons, which is tied for the best cover rate for any team that has been at a rest disadvantage in at least seven games in that span.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	86.0 (#21/#5)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	49%

TEXAS

2022 RECORD: 29-9 SU, 19-18 ATS, 18-17 O/U

Rodney Terry took over as interim coach after Chris Beard was fired and earned the full-time job by guiding the Longhorns to the NCAA Elite Eight. Beard, who's now at Mississippi, is a better in-game coach, but Terry is up to the task and he can recruit. Max Abmas, a shooting star at Oral Roberts, transferred to Texas and will provide a big boost as a senior with 123 career starts. Terry brings back junior guard Tyrese Hunter, senior forward Dylan Disu, sophomore forward Dillon Mitchell and senior forward Brock Cunningham, so there's enough experience and talent on the roster to contend in the conference. A few other teams in the league look better on paper. The Longhorns, similar to Houston, lack size and need 6-foot-11 senior Kadin Shedrick, a Virginia transfer, to step up. Abmas is a dynamic playmaker who seems to be the key to everything.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Texas is 3-9 ATS as a road underdog the past two seasons. Also, the Under is 67-44-2 in non-conference games the past two seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	88.0 (#9/#3)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	36%

TEXAS TECH

2022 RECORD: 16-16 SU, 14-17 ATS, 19-12 O/U

Not that long ago, the Red Raiders reached the national title game. It was 2019, and Chris Beard was the coach. Beard later left for Texas, where he eventually was fired for an off-court issue. Beard was replaced at Texas Tech by his assistant, Mark Adams, who resigned in March amid controversy. Despite the volatility of the past few years, the Tech program is in great hands with new coach Grant McCasland, who led North Texas to the NIT title this year. The top returning scorer is sophomore guard Pop Isaacs, who averaged 11.5 points and earned a reputation as a fierce competitor. McCasland knows X's and O's and recruits well. He brought in five transfers — guards Darrion Williams (Nevada), Devan Cambridge (Arizona State), Chance McMillian (Grand Canyon) and Joe Toussaint (West Virginia) and 7-footer Warren Washington (Arizona State) — and will coach this group up and surpass most expectations.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Texas Tech is 4-11 ATS as a pick'em or favorite of -12 or less since Feb. 23, 2022.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	83.0 (#38/#7)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	30%

UCF

2022 RECORD: 19-15 SU, 18-16 ATS, 18-15 O/U

Only five college players were selected with the first 10 picks of this year's NBA Draft, and one of those players starred for UCF. Taylor Hendricks, a 6-9 forward, was the ninth overall pick by the Utah Jazz. The Knights lost Hendricks and two other double-digit scorers, leaving coach Johnny Dawkins in need of transfer help. Dawkins signed scoring guards Shemarri Allen (Missouri-Kansas City) and Jaylin Sellers (Ball State) to help junior Darius Johnson, the top returning scorer (10 PPG). A pair of 6-10 transfers — Ibrahima Diallo (San Jose State) and Omar Payne (Jacksonville) — give UCF some needed size in a physical league. Diallo started his career at Ohio State and Payne was initially a Florida recruit. The move to a new conference seems to be coming at the wrong time for a rebuilding team. Not finishing last is probably the most realistic goal.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over was 12-5-2 in their last 19 games last season. Also, they are 6-1 ATS in their last seven games as a favorite of at least 10 points.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	77.0 (#84/#14)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	16%

WEST VIRGINIA

2022 RECORD: 19-15 SU, 17-17 ATS, 21-12 O/U

The bizarre fall from grace of veteran coach Bob Huggins put a black eye on the West Virginia program. The Mountaineers must replace five starters and Huggins, whose tenure ended after a DUI arrest in Pittsburgh in June. Josh Eilert, an assistant to Huggins, was named interim coach. Eilert had to work hard to piece together a solid team that can trade punches in the nation's toughest league. Three transfers — point guard Kerr Kriisa (Arizona), shooting guard RaeQuan Battle (Montana State) and center Jesse Edwards (Syracuse) — will keep the Mountaineers from falling off a cliff after a 19-win season. The team picture shows almost all new faces, except for backup guards Kobe Johnson and Seth Wilson. The development of Florida State transfer guard Jeremiah Bembry could raise the ceiling for a team predicted to finish near the basement.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Mountaineers have the highest percentage of games going Over the total as an underdog since the 2020-21 season began at 27-11.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	80.0 (#65/#13)
RETURNING STARTERS	0
RETURNING MINUTES	10%

BIG EAST *PREVIEW*

By Greg Peterson

The conference houses the reigning national champion Connecticut Huskies, who did not win either the conference's regular season or tournament crown last season.

Marquette, despite ranking 308th in the country in rebound rate, won the regular-season and Big East tournament titles, this in a conference that had three teams in the country's top 15 in rebound rate.

The conference is made up of a bunch of teams that are not afraid to travel, going 73-56-2 against the spread in road games, and more specifically teams in the conference went 31-18-1 against the spread in the role of a road favorite last season.

Since the conference realigned before the start of the 2013-14 season, Villanova has won at least a share of the regular-season conference title seven times but has failed to do so either of the past two seasons while the conference has put at least four teams into each of the past 29 NCAA tournaments.

Only two teams in the conference have a coach who has completed three years at his respective school in Connecticut and Creighton with Providence, Georgetown and St. John's all making coaching changes during the offseason.

Gauging whether or not players who transferred at least twice and are not graduate transfers get waivers to be eligible is of importance as seven Big East teams have at least four incoming transfers who played at different Division I schools last season.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
90.5	CONNECTICUT
88.0	CREIGHTON
88.0	MARQUETTE
85.0	VILLANOVA
82.5	XAVIER
82.0	ST. JOHN'S
81.0	PROVIDENCE
77.5	SETON HALL
75.5	BUTLER
74.0	DEPAUL
73.5	GEORGETOWN

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
5	CONNECTICUT
4	MARQUETTE
3	CREIGHTON
2	PROVIDENCE
2	SETON HALL
2	VILLANOVA
2	XAVIER
1	BUTLER
1	DEPAUL
1	GEORGETOWN
1	ST. JOHN'S

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
85%	MARQUETTE
61%	CREIGHTON
52%	VILLANOVA
47%	PROVIDENCE
41%	SETON HALL
41%	CONNECTICUT
27%	DEPAUL
19%	XAVIER
18%	ST. JOHN'S
16%	GEORGETOWN
9%	BUTLER

BUTLER

2022 RECORD: 14-18 SU, 13-17 ATS, 9-22 O/U

Before the 2021-22 season, Butler went 40 straight seasons without losing 18 games or more but has lost 18 games or more each of the past two seasons. The Bulldogs were 303rd in points scored per possession last season. Jalen Thomas is the only returning player who scored more than two points per game last season, averaging 7.0 points, 4.7 rebounds and 1.1 blocks. Andre Screen, a 7-foot Bucknell transfer, will help him in the post after averaging 11.2 points, 5.6 rebounds and 1.3 blocks last season to aid a team that was 349th in offensive rebound rate. Posh Alexander enters from St. John's after averaging a career-worst 10.2 points, 4.2 assists and 2.0 steals per game last season. He ranked in the top 10 in the country in steals per game the previous two seasons. DJ Davis shot 40.2% from 3-point range with 15.0 points per game at UC Irvine last season, while Jahmyl Telfort was Northeastern's leading scorer, averaging 16.3 points per game. Michigan State transfer Pierre Brooks was 247Sports' No. 64 freshman recruit in the 2021 class. St. Francis (Pa.) transfer Landon Moore averaged 13.1 points and 3.6 assists per game on 36.0% 3-point shooting last season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Butler went 9-3-1 ATS as a favorite last year and just 5-13-1 ATS as an underdog.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	75.5 (#91/#9)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	9%

CONNECTICUT

2022 RECORD: 31-8 SU, 27-12 ATS, 21-17 O/U

The Huskies have to replace their top two scorers from last season's national championship team but bring back 7-foot-2 Donovan Clingan after he had 6.9 points, 5.6 rebounds and 1.8 blocks per game in 13 minutes per game last season, leading all qualifying Division I players in rebounds per minute. Tristen Newton is the top returning scorer, averaging 10.1 points, 4.5 rebounds, 4.7 assists and 1.1 steals per game for a Huskies team that was top 10 in the nation in points scored and points allowed per possession. Alex Karaban averaged 9.3 points and 4.5 rebounds per game on 40.2% 3-point shooting. Newcomer Cam Spencer averaged 13.2 points on 43.4% 3-point shooting last season at Rutgers. Freshman Stephon Castle was the No. 9 recruit in the 2023 class, according to 247Sports. Solomon Ball, the No. 42-rated freshman in the 2023 class, should provide an outside shooting option with a 6-foot-10 wingspan at a true height of 6-foot-3. Returning guard Hassan Diarra looks to get back to the 2021-22 form he flashed at Texas A&M when he averaged 6.2 points per game off the bench before scoring just 2.1 points per game last season for UConn.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

UConn's 27-11-1 ATS record last season was good for the second-best cover rate in the nation and they were 16-0-1 ATS in non-conference games last season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	90.5 (#4/#1)
RETURNING STARTERS	5
RETURNING MINUTES	41%

CREIGHTON

2022 RECORD: 24-13 SU, 19-18 ATS, 17-19 O/U

The Bluejays did not have a player outside of their starting five who averaged more than 3.4 points per game. They have to replace two of those starters and will look to Utah State transfer Steven Ashworth to help run the offense. Ashworth averaged 16.2 points, 4.5 assists and 1.2 steals per game on 43.4% 3-point shooting last season. Trey Alexander is back after logging 13.6 points, 4.2 rebounds and 2.6 assists on 41.0% 3-point shooting last season. Among qualifying Division I players last season, 7-foot-1 Ryan Kalkbrenner was sixth in field-goal shooting percentage at 69.5% with 15.9 points, 6.1 rebounds and 2.1 blocks per game. Leading rebounder Baylor Scheierman is back after averaging 12.8 points, 8.3 rebounds and 3.3 assists per game. He is the best returning free throw shooter at 84.0% for a team that was 11th in free throw shooting percentage and third in road free throw shooting percentage last season. The team adds size with 6-foot-10 Isaac Traudt, whom 247Sports ranked as the No. 81 freshman class recruit for 2022. Two transfers, Johnathan Lawson from Memphis and Francisco Farabello from TCU, should help with 3-point shooting.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Since the 2019-20 season began, Creighton is 25-14-1 ATS as an underdog and are 15-8 ATS as a road favorite of at least seven points.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	88.0 (#9/#2)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	61%

DEPAUL

2022 RECORD: 10-23 SU, 13-18 ATS, 16-15 O/U

DePaul's last NCAA Tournament appearance came in 2004, which was the last time the program won more than 20 games in a season. After playing in just 15 games last season because of injury, Caleb Murphy will look to get back to the 2021-22 form he had at South Florida when he averaged 11.4 points and 3.4 assists per game. Forward Da'Sean Nelson averaged 10.0 points and 4.8 rebounds last season. The Blue Demons added South Carolina transfer Chico Carter Jr., who averaged 9.8 points per game last season. He was 16th among Division I players with a 47.6% 3-point shooting percentage. Keyondre Young was ranked the No. 26 junior college transfer by JUCORecruiting.com after averaging 10.7 points, 4.9 rebounds and 1.7 steals per game as a 6-foot-9 wing at Triton last season. Wyoming transfer Jeremiah Oden, who averaged 9.6 points and 3.6 rebounds per game, came on strong late in the season. Mac Etienne was the No. 42 -rated freshman for the 2020 class by 247Sports but averaged just 1.6 points and 2.2 rebounds per game at UCLA. The Blue Demons were 344th in rebound rate and 35th in 3-point shooting percentage and lost the only three players on the roster with more than five made 3s who shot better than 36.5% from 3-point range.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

DePaul is 22-12-1 ATS in non-conference play since the 2019-20 season began. Also, the Over is 15-3 in their last 18 games as a favorite of at least five points.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	74.0 (#114/#10)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	27%

GEORGETOWN

2022 RECORD: 7-25 SU, 14-18 ATS, 18-14 O/U

Georgetown fired coach Patrick Ewing after the Hoyas went .500 or worse in five of his six seasons at the helm, including a 13-50 record the past two seasons. Ed Cooley moved from Providence to replace him. Top 3-point shooter Jay Heath returns after averaging 12.3 points, 3.9 rebounds and 1.1 steals per game on 37.3% 3-point shooting. He should be aided in the backcourt by Rowan Brumbaugh, who redshirted as a freshman last season at Texas. Ryan Mutombo, a 7-foot-2 center, played in just 12 games last season after averaging 5.1 points in 27 games as a freshman. Supreme Cook, a transfer from Fairfield, averaged 13.1 points and 8.5 rebounds last season. Illinois transfer Jayden Epps scored 9.5 points per game in the Big Ten last season. Dontrez Styles was the No. 63-rated recruit by 247Sports but spent the past two seasons on North Carolina's bench. Ismael Massoud made 41.8% of his 3s and 89.7% of his free throws with 5.4 points per game as a 6-foot-8 wing at Kansas State last season. Guard Wayne Bristol Jr. returns. He only scored 3.3 points per game last season, but he averaged 12.5 points and 4.3 rebounds per game on 40.0% 3-point shooting while at Howard during the 2019-20 season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Hoyas are 6-15-1 ATS as a home underdog the past two seasons, but are 14-5 ATS as an underdog of at least 11.5 points since Jan. 1, 2021.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	73.5 (#121/#11)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	16%

MARQUETTE

2022 RECORD: 29-7 SU, 23-13 ATS, 17-19 O/U

Who needs the transfer portal when you bring back seven of your top eight scorers from last season? Tyler Kolek had the most steals per game (1.8) last season of any returning player. The senior guard averaged 12.9 points, 4.1 rebounds and 7.5 assists on 39.8% 3-point shooting for an offense that was 12th in points scored on a per-possession basis, fourth in assist-to-turnover ratio and fourth in 2-point shooting percentage. Top 3-point shooter David Joplin is back after scoring 9.2 points per game on 39.9% 3-point shooting. Kam Jones averaged 15.1 points, two assists and 1.4 steals per game last season. Oso Ighodaro is the only returning player who averaged more than 4.1 rebounds per game last season with 11.4 points, 5.9 rebounds, 3.3 assists and 1.5 blocks per game as a 6-foot-9 big man for a team that was 308th in rebound rate. Chase Ross had 4.6 points and 1.2 steals per game last season, while Stevie Mitchell averaged 7.9 points, 3.5 rebounds and 2.3 steals over the final 12 games of the season for a defense that was 17th nationally in turnovers forced per play.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Marquette's 6-1 ATS record as a road favorite was tied for the best road favorite cover percentage for any team that was a road favorite at least five times last season. Also, the Under was 9-3 in their games with a closing total of 145 or lower last season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	88.0 (#9/#2)
RETURNING STARTERS	4
RETURNING MINUTES	85%

PROVIDENCE

2022 RECORD: 21-12 SU, 18-14 ATS, 17-15 O/U

Coach Ed Cooley left the program after winning at least 18 games each of the past 10 seasons, excluding the 2020-21 season. New coach Kim English convinced top scorer Bryce Hopkins to stay with the program after logging 15.8 points, 8.5 rebounds, and 2.3 assists per game last season. That's big for a core that was 14th in rebound rate last season. English brings three players with him from George Mason, including top scorer Josh Oduro, a 6-foot-9 forward who averaged 15.6 points, 7.9 rebounds and 2.6 assists per game last season. Davonte "Ticket" Gaines averaged 7.3 points and 6.1 rebounds per game at George Mason, down from 10.2 points and 8.1 rebounds per game on 40.2% 3-point shooting the previous season. Justyn Fernandez logged just 4.1 points per game as a freshman last season. Devin Carter returns after averaging 13 points, 4.9 rebounds, 2.5 assists, 1.8 steals and 1.1 blocks per game. Garwey Dual, a 6-foot-5 freshman guard, was rated No. 47 in the 2023 class by 247Sports. The Friars get back Corey Floyd, who scored 2.6 points per game on 41.9% 4-point shooting last season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Providence is 18-7 ATS as an underdog of +5.5 or less since Dec. 3, 2020.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	81.0 (#54/#7)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	47%

SETON HALL

2022 RECORD: 17-16 SU, 17-14 ATS, 13-19 O/U

Three of the Pirates' top four scorers from last season return, including leading scorer Al-Amir Dawes, who had 12.6 points and 1.1 steals per game on 38.2% 3-point shooting. Kadary Richmond had 10.1 points, 5.2 rebounds, 4.1 assists and two steals per game on 44.4% 3-point shooting. Dre Davis averaged 9.6 points and 3.3 rebounds per game. He also shot 52.0% on 3-pointers in conference play, which ranked 17th among qualifying Division I players. Dylan Addae-Wusu enters from St. John's after averaging 9.3 points, 4.4 rebounds, 2.4 assists and 1.6 steals per game last season. Austin Peay transfer Elijah Hutchins-Everett averaged 11.9 points and 6.1 rebounds per game as a 6-foot-11 forward the past two seasons. Transfer Jaden Bediako averaged 6.0 points, 4.9 rebounds and a block per game as a 6-foot-10 starting center at Santa Clara last season. Sadraque NgaNga, a 6-foot-10 forward, transfers in after playing just 6.5 minutes per game at Boise State. Seton Hall was 17th in the nation in free throws stamped per possession but was just 300th in free throw shooting percentage.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams that have been a home underdog at least seven times the past three seasons, the Pirates have the worst cover rate in the county at 1-9 ATS.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	77.5 (#81/#8)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	41%

ST. JOHN'S

2022 RECORD: 18-15 SU, 15-17 ATS, 16-16 O/U

The Red Storm ranked 348th in percentage of points that came on 3-point shots last season, and incoming coach Rick Pitino will look to keep the reliance on 3-point shots low. His Iona Gaels were 279th in that category last season. Big man Joel Soriano was fourth among qualifying Division I players in rebounds per game with 15.2 points, 11.9 rebounds and 1.4 blocks per game with a double-double in 19 of his last 24 games. He'll get help from former Harvard forward Chris Ledlum, who averaged 18.8 points and 8.5 rebounds last season. Transfer Zuby Ejiofor was little used at Kansas but was the No. 47 freshman recruit in the 2022 class, according to 247Sports. Glenn Taylor Jr. averaged 11.6 points, 3.7 rebounds and 2.2 assists per game as a starter at Oregon State last season. Jordan Dingle was second in the country in points per game at Penn last season, averaging 23.4 points. Daniss Jenkins averaged 15.6 points, 4.4 rebounds, 4.9 assists and 1.4 steals under Pitino at Iona last season. RJ Luis registered 11.5 points and 4.6 rebounds at UMass last season. Nahiem Alleyne will look to get back to his 2020-21 form at Virginia Tech when he scored 11.1 points per game before averaging just 5.2 points per game at UConn last season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

St. John's has the most neutral-court covers without an ATS loss the past two seasons at 7-0.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	82.0 (#47/#6)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	18%

VILLANOVA

2022 RECORD: 17-17 SU, 14-20 ATS, 16-18 O/U

The Wildcats were .500 or worse for the second time in 20 seasons last season and turn to leading scorer and rebounder Eric Dixon (15.4 PPG, 6.6 RPG), a 6-foot-8 wing, to turn things around. Justin Moore played just 13 games last season, but Villanova went 7-3 in its last 10 games with Moore averaging 14.9 points, 3.6 rebounds and 3.1 assists. Maryland transfer Hakim Hart should help in the backcourt after posting 11.4 points, 4.1 rebounds, 2.6 assists and 1.2 steals per game in the Big Ten last season. TJ Bamba averaged 15.8 points and 3.7 rebounds at Washington last season. Richmond transfer Tyler Burton had 19.0 points, 7.4 rebounds and 1.5 steals per game. Hard-nosed guard Chris Arcidiacano started 20 games for the Wildcats last season. Mark Armstrong and Jordan Longino combined for 10.3 points on 80.0% free throw shooting for a team that led the nation in free throw shooting percentage each of the past two seasons. Villanova also was seventh in percentage of field goals from 3-point range, 29th in turnovers per possession and 353rd in percentage of missed shots at home (17.7%) that resulted in an offensive rebound.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Since the 2012-13 season, the Wildcats have the best cover rate in America at 218-155-8 ATS record.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	85.0 (#25/#4)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	52%

XAVIER

2022 RECORD: 27-10 SU, 20-17 ATS, 23-14 O/U

All four Musketeers who started at least 22 games last season are gone, so Xavier will look to top returning scorer Zach Freemantle for a big season. He averaged 15.2 points, 8.1 rebounds and 2.9 assists per game. He made 63.8% of his 22 3-point attempts for a team that ranked fourth in 3-point shooting percentage and second in assists per possession. Unfortunately, Freemantle is expected to be out until January with a foot injury. Jerome Hunter, the only other returning player who averaged more than 4.7 points per game last season, is out indefinitely because of a medical issue. Western Kentucky transfer Dayvion McKnight averaged 16.5 points, five rebounds, 3.8 assists and 1.8 steals per game. Fellow Conference USA transfer Quincy Olivari had 18.7 points, 5.9 rebounds, 2.2 assists and a steal per game last season at Rice. North Texas 6-foot-10 transfer Abou Ousmane averaged 11.1 points, 6.0 rebounds and 1.3 blocks per game last season. Xavier will look to improve a defense that was 283rd in opponent 3-point shooting percentage and 166th in points allowed on a per-possession basis.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Xavier is 40-61-2 ATS as a favorite since the 2018-19 season started. Also, the Over is 24-13 in their non-conference games the past three seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	82.5 (#44/#5)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	19%

BIG SKY *PREVIEW*

<div align="right">By Adam Burke</div>

Defense is usually optional in the Big Sky Conference, where a lot of tough situational spots and very different styles of play are present. Eastern Washington started league play with a 16-0 record before losing two games and then bowing out against an inferior Northern Arizona team with an 81-80 thriller in the quarterfinals. The Lumberjacks actually made it to the finals before running out of gas late against Montana State.

The Bobcats are the reigning two-time conference champs, but success at the mid-major level gets you noticed and that is the case for Danny Sprinkle, who went from Bozeman to Logan as the new head coach at Utah State. With heavy losses and Sprinkle to the south, the Bobcats are expected to take a big step back, which opens up the conference for everybody else.

Matt Logie takes over at Montana State and the Bobcats hit the transfer portal hard to replace three double-digit scorers, including Raequan Battle (17.7 PPG). The Bobcats had one of the best frontcourts in the conference last year, but both Jubrile Belo (12.8 PPG, 6 RPG) and Great Osobor (10.1 PPG, 4.6 RPG) are gone, so the strength of the Montana State roster is no more.

Could archrival Montana be the team to step in? Continuity is not a problem, as three starters, including Aanen Moody (16.1 PPG), are back and head coach Travis DeCuire's 10th season with the program begins. Speaking of rivals, maybe it is time for Weber State to get back on the radar. Head coach Eric Duft had a rough start to the season replacing longtime fixture Randy Rahe, but the Wildcats went 15-7 over the final 22 games and took Montana State to double overtime in the conference tournament.

Another thing that makes Weber State so interesting this season is a trio of Europeans, including Finland's Viljami Vartiainen, who shined in the FIBA Under-18 'B' Tournament. Players like that would appear to give the Wildcats a higher ceiling than other hopefuls like Eastern Washington, who did pummel a dejected Washington State team in the NIT, but lost a ton of production, including three double-digit scorers.

Extreme losses are also the story for Northern Colorado, as the Bears lost Dalton Knecht (20.2 PPG) and Daylen Kountz (17.3 PPG). For a team whose path to victory is outscoring the opposition in a fast-paced game, that's a lot of production to replace.

While Weber State looks like the top dog to me, the long shot of interest is Sacramento State. Head coach David Patrick has plenty of NBA experience and you can see "Moreyball" concepts all over the place, including the "no 3s" defense. Now in his second full season, Patrick has a roster that can do more "rim and 3" on offense as well. Expect a big uptick in pace also.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
72.0	WEBER STATE
70.0	EASTERN WASHINGTON
70.0	MONTANA
68.0	PORTLAND STATE
66.0	NORTHERN ARIZONA
65.0	SACRAMENTO STATE
64.5	MONTANA STATE
63.5	NORTHERN COLORADO
62.5	IDAHO STATE
53.0	IDAHO

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
5	WEBER STATE
3	EASTERN WASHINGTON
3	MONTANA
2	IDAHO STATE
2	NORTHERN ARIZONA
2	NORTHERN COLORADO
2	PORTLAND STATE
2	SACRAMENTO STATE
1	MONTANA STATE
0	IDAHO

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
71%	WEBER STATE
66%	PORTLAND STATE
62%	MONTANA
47%	IDAHO STATE
46%	NORTHERN ARIZONA
40%	EASTERN WASHINGTON
30%	SACRAMENTO STATE
26%	NORTHERN COLORADO
22%	MONTANA STATE
3%	IDAHO

BIG SOUTH *PREVIEW*

By Adam Burke

As far as one-bid, "low-major" conferences go, the Big South usually has some pretty decent teams. Five of the conference's nine teams ranked in the top 195 for Bart Torvik by season's end and three teams ranked from 148th to 169th for Ken Pomeroy. It is one of those conferences where coaches have some success and then springboard into bigger jobs, so there can be a lot of turnover on that front.

There is also more turnover thanks to the transfer portal, as players who thrive in this conference get to move on to bigger and better things as well. We see a lot of major colleges and universities getting interested in players once they've been developed somewhere else, as opposed to recruiting them as incoming freshmen.

But, not all teams get ravaged by the portal and reigning champion UNC Asheville gets to build a team around fifth-year senior Drew Pember. Pember scored 20.9 points per game and had 9.1 rebounds per contest as one of the nation's most productive players. The Bulldogs went 16-2 in league play, but needed a huge comeback against Campbell to punch a ticket to the Big Dance, where the fun was short-lived in a lopsided loss to UCLA.

Campbell is now in the CAA, so the runner-up from last season won't stand in the way of teams like Radford and Longwood when it comes to chasing down UNC Asheville. Radford struggled heading into the conference tourney with four losses in the last six regular season games and fell a point short against Campbell in the semis. But, the Highlanders went to the CBI and played well before succumbing to eventual tournament champion Charlotte.

With Bryan Antoine (11.4 PPG), Justin Archer (7.7 PPG), and DaQuan Smith (13.9 PPG) all back, the Highlanders have a great shot to win this league, especially if Lenoir-Rhyne transfer TJ NeSmith can be the scorer he was in lower-division action.

Meanwhile, the Lancers have a lot to replace and have hit the transfer portal hard in hopes of returning to the NCAA Tournament after taking down the conference's lone bid in 2022. A rebuilding Longwood squad may open the door for a team like High Point to make a push. The Panthers have a first-year head coach in Alan Huss, whose analytics-heavy approach may help the team come together quickly with tons of transfers.

The team most poised for significant improvement is Winthrop. It was a really rough season for the Eagles last season due to injury, but that allowed a lot of underclassmen and backups to play big minutes. Even with the losses, Winthrop was 14th in Effective Field Goal Percentage offense per Torvik, but fell apart defensively. Head coach Mark Prosser led a healthier team to 23 wins in 2022 and may very well get back to that this season.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
72.0	UNC-ASHEVILLE
71.5	WINTHROP
70.5	RADFORD
69.0	GARDNER WEBB
67.5	LONGWOOD
65.0	USC UPSTATE
63.5	HIGH POINT
62.0	PRESBYTERIAN
60.0	CHARLESTON SOUTHERN

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	UNC-ASHEVILLE
4	WINTHROP
3	CHARLESTON SOUTHERN
3	RADFORD
3	USC UPSTATE
2	GARDNER WEBB
2	LONGWOOD
2	PRESBYTERIAN
1	HIGH POINT

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
75%	UNC-ASHEVILLE
66%	WINTHROP
62%	GARDNER WEBB
57%	PRESBYTERIAN
55%	RADFORD
53%	USC UPSTATE
45%	LONGWOOD
44%	CHARLESTON SOUTHERN
25%	HIGH POINT

BIG TEN *PREVIEW*

By Wes Reynolds

The 2023 season marked yet another in which the Big Ten came up lame in March. Last season, the conference sent eight teams (tying the SEC for most bids), but only earned six combined wins in the NCAA Tournament. Purdue became just the second No. 1 seed to lose in the first round. Only Michigan State reached the Sweet 16 as the Big Ten failed to send any school to the Elite Eight.

The Big Ten has failed to send a team to the Final Four since 2019 (Michigan State). But that is not the worst of it as it translates to success in March. The last time a Big Ten team won the National Championship was in 2000 with, you guessed it, Michigan State. There are many theories and legitimate discussion points for why the conference has not gotten it done in the NCAA Tournament including styles of play and the conference's physical play being officiated differently in March.

Perhaps Purdue (+220) will earn redemption for the conference and for itself after being knocked out of last year's tournament by 16 seed Fairleigh Dickinson. National Player of the Year Zach Edey is back and attempting to become the first repeat National Player of the Year since Ralph Sampson in 1982-1983. The Boilermakers also welcome back all five starters from a team that swept the regular season and conference tournament titles.

Michigan State (+260) returns five of its top six scorers and adds a top five national recruiting class with two McDonald's All-Americans.

With a clear top two to begin the season, you can make an argument for any order for the next eleven spots. After all, Northwestern (28-1) had to win its final conference game to be a 2 seed in the Big Ten Tournament. Had the Wildcats lost that season finale at Rutgers (30-1), they would have been a 9 seed. Other teams trying to finish in that first tier of the league include Maryland (+800), Indiana (+800), Illinois (+900), Wisconsin (10-1), Ohio State (12-1), Michigan (20-1), and Iowa (30-1).

There is just one new coach in the conference this season as Mike Rhoades takes over at Penn State (40-1) for Micah Shrewsberry, who goes back home to Indiana to take over at Notre Dame. Rhoades brings Ace Baldwin, his best player at VCU, with him as part of a group of nine transfers from the portal.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
91.5	PURDUE
88.5	MICHIGAN STATE
86.5	ILLINOIS
86.0	WISCONSIN
85.5	MARYLAND
83.5	INDIANA
83.5	NORTHWESTERN
83.5	OHIO STATE
83.0	IOWA
81.5	MICHIGAN
81.0	NEBRASKA
81.0	RUTGERS
76.5	PENN STATE
73.5	MINNESOTA

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
5	PURDUE
5	WISCONSIN
4	MICHIGAN STATE
3	ILLINOIS
3	MARYLAND
3	NEBRASKA
3	NORTHWESTERN
2	IOWA
2	MICHIGAN
2	MINNESOTA
2	OHIO STATE
2	RUTGERS
1	INDIANA
0	PENN STATE

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
93%	WISCONSIN
86%	PURDUE
78%	MICHIGAN STATE
62%	MARYLAND
61%	NORTHWESTERN
60%	ILLINOIS
55%	RUTGERS
47%	MINNESOTA
45%	IOWA
45%	NEBRASKA
38%	OHIO STATE
35%	MICHIGAN
26%	INDIANA
6%	PENN STATE

ILLINOIS

2022 RECORD: 20-13 SU, 17-15 ATS, 15-17 O/U

Last year the Illini had a solid 20-win season with wins over Texas and UCLA and went to the NCAA Tournament but felt disappointed with the campaign in Champaign. Brad Underwood went into the portal to add reinforcements for his veterans first-team All-Big Ten wing Terrence Shannon Jr (17.2 PPG, 4.6 RPG) and Coleman Hawkins (9.9 PPG, 6.3 RPG). Underwood accumulated veterans for his veterans with the additions of wing Marcus Domask, who was All-Missouri Valley at Southern Illinois, power forward Quincy Guerrier (Oregon/Syracuse), and shooting guard Justin Harmon (Utah Valley). Domask and Guerrier have combined for almost 2,900 points and 1,300 rebounds in their respective careers. The Illini should be solid in the frontcourt with a slimmed down Dain Dainja (9.5 PPG, 5.5 RPG) at center, plus Amani Hansberry, the Gatorade Player of the Year out of Maryland. Illinois will only go farther if its 3-point shooting improves. Last season, the Fighting Illini ranked dead last (14 of 14) in the conference and 340th nationally for 3-point percentage at 30.8%. The three transfers — Domask (34.8%), Guerrier (34.7%) and Harmon (34.0%) — could improve upon that along with freshman guard Dra Gibbs-Lawhorn, who shot 39.0% from 3 in the Overtime Elite league last season. Illinois has depth in the backcourt, but can they find a true point guard that it lacked last season? The Illini should be back in the NCAA Tournament.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams that have been a road underdog at least twice the past three seasons, Illinois has the best cover percentage at 8-2 ATS.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	86.5 (#18/#3)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	60%

INDIANA

2022 RECORD: 23-12 SU, 16-19 ATS, 20-14 O/U

Mike Woodson has the Indiana program in better shape than where he found it with two consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances after a five-year drought. Indiana has to find a way to replace over 34 points with the departures of first-round NBA Draft pick Jalen Hood-Schifino and All-American Trayce Jackson-Davis. Indiana was second in the Big Ten in scoring (76.0 PPG) last year but lost 76.0% of its production. Senior point guard Xavier Johnson (9.9 PPG, 4.9 APG, 3.3 RPG) only played 11 games last year due to a foot injury but returns along with Trey Galloway (6.7 PPG, 3.0 RPG). Even with the exit of Jackson-Davis, the frontcourt still looks to be the team's strength with five-star freshman forward Mackenzie Mgbako, a former Duke commit, who spurned Kansas to come to Indiana, and former McDonald's All-American Kelel Ware transferring in from Oregon. Ball State wide body import Peyton Sparks was the MAC Freshman of the Year and second-team All-MAC last year. Miami transfer Anthony Walker will be counted on mainly for defense. The newcomers along with the returning Malik Reneau (6.1 PPG, 3.7 RPG) should make for a productive unit, but the Hoosiers will need more from the guards. Indiana could also serve itself to shoot more from the outside. They were fourth in the league last year (36.8%) but only scored 22.9% of its points from 3. Despite the roster losses, expect Indiana back in the NCAA Tournament.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Hoosiers have the worst road cover percentage since the start of the 2016-17 season with a 25-48-3 ATS record.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	83.5 (#32/#6)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	26%

IOWA

2022 RECORD: 19-14 SU, 17-16 ATS, 19-14 O/U

Last year was the typical season that Hawkeyes fans have become accustomed to in Iowa City. The team will play an uptempo offense that runs good stuff, moves the ball well (1st in assists - 16.4) and scores a lot of points (1st in the Big Ten - 80.1 PPG) and cannot get any stops at the other end (last in scoring defense - 74.7 PPG). Iowa was also last in the conference for effective FG% defense. The Hawkeyes lost their top two scorers (Kris Murray and Filip Rebraca), but they lost a lottery pick (Keegan Murray) the season prior and still led the conference in scoring just like they did in 2022 after Luka Garza and Joe Wieskamp graduated. Scoring points is never a problem in Fran McCaffery's system. Preventing points is always a problem. Iowa returns two double-digit scorers in the backcourt with Tony Perkins, who is also the squad's best ball-handler, distributor, and perimeter defender, and Payton Sandfort, whose younger brother Pryce joins the program this year as a freshman. While McCaffery had to hit the transfer portal to bolster the frontcourt, he will need his son Patrick (9.8 PPG, 3.5 RPG) to step up and play a larger role. Ben Krikke transferred in from Valpo and led the Missouri Valley Conference in scoring (19.4 PPG, 21.0 PPG in league play) en route to making First-Team All-MVC. Iowa has the looks of a bubble team come March.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Iowa is 24-10 ATS at home the past two seasons as a favorite - no other team has covered more than 21 home games the past two seasons in that role.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	83.0 (#38/#9)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	45%

MARYLAND

2022 RECORD: 22-13 SU, 22-13 ATS, 12-23 O/U

The Terrapins improved from 15-17 to 22-13 and returned to the NCAA Tournament in Kevin Willard's second year in College Park, where Maryland went 16-1 last year (lone loss to UCLA) including an unbeaten mark of 10-0 in conference play. However, the Terps only won one road game (at Minnesota - 14th out of 14 in the conference last year), and that is why they finished T-5th instead of being a league title contender. Expectations are higher this season though with the return of all-conference guard Jahmir Young (15.8 PPG, 4.6 RPG), who transferred in from Charlotte last season and immediately became one of the toughest covers in the conference. Young will be supported in the backcourt by Virginia Gatorade Player of the Year and highly touted 6-foot-5 freshman DeShawn Harris-Smith. Loyola Marymount transfer Chance Stephens is a 3-point specialist and Jabari Long, who played for Willard at Seton Hall, provides depth. Julian Reese (11.4 PPG, 7.2 RPG) returns as one of the conference's best post players along with the toughness and energy of Donta Scott (11.3 PPG, 6.0 RPG) down low. Freshman Jamie Kaiser is a good shooter and scorer who will likely start immediately on the wing. This roster will need to shoot better (44.8% - 10th in Big Ten) and actually prove they can win away from the Xfinity Center. Just a couple road wins will put them safely in the NCAA Tournament.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Maryland was 17-5 ATS as a favorite last season Also, the Under was 20-9 in their final 29 games.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	85.5 (#24/#5)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	62%

MICHIGAN

2022 RECORD: 18-16 SU, 19-14 ATS, 19-15 O/U

The Wolverines did what seemed almost impossible last season. They had two Top 15 NBA Draft picks (Jett Howard and Kobe Bufkin) and a second-team All-Big Ten post man (Hunter Dickinson) and went just 18-16 and missed the NCAA Tournament. Now Dickinson (transferred to Kansas) is also gone, and Michigan is having to reload from the transfer portal. Nimari Burnett comes in from Alabama and can score from the wing but is a career 29.0% 3-point shooter and is at his third school in three years. Oliver Nkamhoua (10.8 PPG, 5.0 RPG) transfers in from Tennessee and will be counted on to produce immediately down low. Dug McDaniel is small (5-foot-11, 175 pounds), but quick and held his own as a freshman point guard (8.6 PPG, 3.6 APG, 3.1 RPG) in the Big Ten. Princeton transfer Jaylin Llewellyn (7.0 PPG, 3.3 RPG) was thought to be the incoming point man but tore his ACL eight games into last season. Michigan, despite the loss of Dickinson, is a bit more proven in the frontcourt with Terence Williams II (6.1 PPG, 5.9 RPG) who struggled to shoot the ball (25.0% 3PT), Tarris Reed Jr. and Nkamhoua. Trey Jackson transfers in from Seton Hall and Will Tschetter showed flashes but needs to be more consistent. The defense should still be one of the league's best, but how much of the 60+ points a game can they replace from the departures of Howard, Bufkin and Dickinson?

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Michigan is 3-9 ATS as a favorite of at least -7.5 since Jan. 1, 2022, but they did go 7-1 ATS in their final eight games last season. Also, they are 38-19 ATS following a straight up loss since the 2017-18 season began, which is the best ATS cover rate in that situation.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	81.5 (#49/#10)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	35%

MICHIGAN STATE

2022 RECORD: 21-13 SU, 17-17 ATS, 17-17 O/U

Sparty returns four starters along with a Top 5 recruiting class and this looks like the best team Tom Izzo has had in East Lansing since the 2019 Final Four team. Point guard A.J. Hoggard (12.9 PPG, 5.9 APG), Tyson Walker (14.8 PPG, 2.9 APG), and Jaden Akins (9.8 PPG, 4.0 RPG). McDonald's All-American and Illinois Gatorade Player of the Year Jeremy Fears Jr. and sophomore Tre Holloman add to a backcourt that arguably gives Izzo his best group of guards in almost two decades, but they will need to cut down on turnovers (12th in turnover margin last year). Expect the Spartans to push more in transition (306th in adjusted tempo last year) this season. While Joey Hauser must be replaced up front, Malik Hall (8.9 PPG, 4.3 RPG) should make a big jump after battling a foot injury all last season. Mady Sissoko, Jaxon Kohler and Carson Cooper are also an interchangeable trio in the middle. 6-foot-6 freshman Coen Carr is a freak athlete who can jump out of the gym and won the Dunk Contest at the Final Four. The prize of this year's recruiting class is 6-11 McDonald's All-American Xavier Booker, who is more of a stretch big than a pure center. He can block shots and rebounds and shoots 3s but is still lacking a bit of physical strength. Booker adds another shooter to a team that was third nationally in 3-point percentage (39.3%). As always, Izzo put together a challenging non-conference schedule so do not be surprised if Michigan State loses a couple early and then really starts to come together in February for a potentially deep March run.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams with at least 66 home games played since the 2015-16 season began, the Spartans have the best home cover percentage at 75-46-1 ATS.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	88.5 (#8/#2)
RETURNING STARTERS	4
RETURNING MINUTES	78%

MINNESOTA

2022 RECORD: 9-22 SU, 14-16 ATS, 14-17 O/U

Ben Johnson knew he had a major rebuild at his alma mater when he took the job. In his first two seasons, he finished T-13 and 14th last season and has gone 6-33 in Big Ten play. The Gophers had just nine scholarship players last season and had only three players suit up for all 31 games. They were last in the conference for scoring (62.9 PPG, 350th nationally), rebounding margin (-3.4, 327th), turnover margin (-3.2, 352nd), and dead last (363rd) nationally in free throw percentage at just 61.9%. At least the Gophers have 13 healthy scholarship players heading into the season. Former McDonald's All-American Dawson Garcia (15.3 PPG, 6.7 RPG), after stints at North Carolina and Marquette, transferred back to his home state school and finished the season strong after missing five Big Ten games due to various injuries. Pharrell Payne (8.2 PPG, 5.2 RPG, 69.3% FG) had a baptism by fire down low last year. Joshua Ola-Joseph (7.4 PPG, 2.7 RPG) will switch between forward spots. With the exit of point guard Ta'Lon Cooper (South Carolina), Pepperdine transfer Mike Mitchell Jr. and Howard transfer Elijah Hawkins will battle for the spot. On the wing, 2022 Minnesota Mr. Basketball Braeden Carrington (5.9 PPG, 3.6 RPG) battled injuries all last season. The Gophers will win more than two league games just having a full allotment of bodies, but another finish in the conference cellar is likely.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Under went 9-1 in non-conference games last season, which tied for the highest non-conference Under percentage in the country

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	73.5 (#121/#14)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	47%

NEBRASKA

2022 RECORD: 16-16 SU, 13-19 ATS, 15-16 O/U

From February 1 until the end of the regular season, the team with the best record in the conference was Nebraska. One of the primary reasons for the Huskers improvement from 4-16 to 9-11 in conference play last year was their slowing of tempo. The Huskers were No. 1 in adjusted tempo amongst Big Ten teams in Hoiberg's first three seasons, but they dropped to fifth last year and their defense improved to the 10th best defensive efficiency and ranking seventh in defensive effective field goal percentage. Nebraska graduates three starters but returns a potential first-team All-Big Ten guard in the "Japanese Steph Curry" Keisei Tominaga (13.1 PPG, 40.0% 3PT). Tominaga is not the only sharpshooter in the backcourt with the addition of Charlotte transfer Brice Williams, who averaged 13.8 points per game and shot 40.0% from the 3. Ahron Ulis started 27 games at Iowa last year, but now looks for a fresh start in Lincoln. Nebraska has brought in 6-foot-11 Bradley transfer Rienk Mast, who put up 13.8 points, 8.0 rebounds and 2.4 assists per game, and shot 35.0% from the 3. Juwan Gary (9.5 PPG, 6.5 RPG) started 17 games at the four last season before shoulder surgery. He will share time at the spot with Josiah Allick, who had over 1,000 points and 600 rebounds during his stints at UMKC, and most recently New Mexico. Nebraska is finally playing like they should in the Big Ten, but still are a bit short on talent.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Under went 9-1-1 in non-conference games last season, which tied for the highest non-conference Under percentage in America.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	81.0 (#54/#11)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	45%

NORTHWESTERN

2022 RECORD: 22-12 SU, 21-13 ATS, 14-20 O/U

Chris Collins won the Big Ten Coach of the Year and the Jim Phelan Award for getting the Wildcats back into the NCAA Tournament for the second time in school history. While Chase Audige elected to turn pro, point guard Boo Buie (17.3 PPG, 4.5 APG, 3.4 RPG) elected to return for a fifth year. Buie is also the head of the defense that ranked 10th nationally and first in the Big Ten for turnover margin (+4.3). His new running mate in the backcourt will be Princeton graduate transfer Ryan Langborg, who started the last two seasons for the Tigers and was a key part of their surprise Sweet 16 run last season as a 15 seed. Ty Berry (8.5 PPG, 4.8 RPG) is also a key defender for the Wildcats and improved in both defense and rebounding, but his 3-point shot left him last year, dropping from 38.0% down to 29.0% from outside the arc. Very few players in the Big Ten took the leap last season that 7-footer Matthew Nicholson (6.3 PPG, 5.4 RPG) did from playing just 89 minutes in his first two seasons. Brooks Barnhizer (7.6 PPG, 4.9 RPG) plays a hybrid 3-4 role for the 'Cats. The Wildcats look to be right in the middle of the pack in the conference, but that may be good enough to make back-to-back trips to the NCAA Tournament for the first time in school history.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Wildcats were the only team to play at least five games against ranked teams last season and cover in all of them with a 6-0 ATS record.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	83.5 (#32/#6)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	61%

OHIO STATE

2022 RECORD: 16-19 SU, 14-21 ATS, 18-17 O/U

Last year, Ohio State posted its worst record in 25 years and finished 13th in the Big Ten. Chris Holtmann started four freshmen in the final seven games and the Buckeyes finished the season 5-2. One of those freshmen, Brice Sensabaugh, left for the NBA, but the rest of that group is back along with another Top 10 recruiting class, so the Buckeyes could be even younger this year. Point guard Bruce Thornton (10.6 PPG, 2.6 APG, 2.7 RPG, 37.5% 3PT) was the only Buckeye to start every game last season. Roddy Gayle Jr (4.6 PPG, 1.6 RPG, 42.9% 3PT), four-star freshman Scotty Middleton, and Penn State transfer Evan Mahaffey will compete for the minutes at the other guard and wing positions. Center Zed Key (10.8 PPG, 7.5 RPG) posted six double-doubles last year but was shut down mid-February to have shoulder surgery. He may take a bit of a step back minutes wise to share time in the post with Felix Okpara (4.0 PPG, 3.6 RPG). Jamison Battle averaged over 17.3 points a game in the two years before last season and he will play the prototypical stretch four but will also need to help more on the boards. The Buckeyes will be able to shoot the ball (3rd in the league for field goal, 3-point, and free throw percentages), but the emphasis has to be on defense as they rated bottom five in the league for most defensive categories.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

From Jan. 5 until Feb. 26, Ohio State went 1-14 ATS last season before covering six of their final seven games.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	83.5 (#32/#7)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	38%

PENN STATE

2022 RECORD: 23-14 SU, 22-13 ATS, 20-17 O/U

The Nittany Lions made their first NCAA Tournament appearance in 12 years but now find themselves with their fifth head coach in that same timespan (fourth since 2020). Micah Shrewsberry leaves after two seasons to go back home to the state of Indiana and takes over at Notre Dame. Enter Mike Rhoades returning to his home state from VCU, where he led the Rams to three NCAA Tournament appearances in five seasons. Rhoades had to hit the transfer portal and hit it hard. Nine transfers join the Penn State roster which lost all of its starters from last year's team that made the Big Ten Tournament Championship Game. The transition starts with Rhoades' backcourt at VCU — point guard and Atlantic 10 Player of the Year Ace Baldwin Jr (12.7 PPG, 5.8 APG, 2.9 RPG, 2.2 SPG) and off-guard Nick Kern Jr. (5.3 PPG, 2.7 RPG, 62% FG). Two members of North Carolina's national runner-up team — Puff Johnson (4.1 PPG, 2.7 RPG) and D'Marco Dunn (2.7 PPG, 0.7 RPG) — also join the backcourt. RayQuawndis Mitchell (17.3 PPG, 3.8 RPG) was All-Summit League last year at UMKC. The frontcourt has some size with 6-foot-11 Favour Aire, who played 14 games for Miami's Final Four team last year, and 6-foot-11 Qudus Wahab (over 1,000 points and 700 career rebounds), who transfers in from Georgetown via Maryland via Georgetown. Rhoades may not be able to run the full "VCU Havoc" press in the Big Ten.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Penn State covered each of their last nine games in the role of an underdog. Also, they have the best cover percentage at 14-1 ATS in neutral-court games over the past two seasons among teams with at least eight such games.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	76.5 (#86/#13)
RETURNING STARTERS	0
RETURNING MINUTES	6%

PURDUE

2022 RECORD: 29-6 SU, 13-21 ATS, 15-20 O/U

A magical season for Purdue included winning the Big Ten regular season title by three games, winning the Big Ten Conference Tournament, earning its first No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament since 1996 and having its first National Player of the Year since Glenn Robinson in 1994. However, that season ended about as unceremoniously as possible with the Boilermakers becoming just the second No. 1 seed to lose in the first round to a No. 16 seed. Fairleigh Dickinson surrounded National Player of the Year 7-foot-4 Zach Edey (22.3 PPG, 12.9 RPG, 2.1 BPG, 60.7% FG) in the post and dared Purdue to make 3s and the Boilers could not. They shot 5-for-26 from the outside (32.2% season — worst in 10 years). Purdue's all-freshman backcourt of Braden Smith (9.7 PPG, 4.4 APG) and Fletcher Loyer (11 PPG, 2.4 APG) were not able to stay in front of the smaller and quicker FDU guards. Purdue has exited in the first round in four of the last eight NCAA Tournaments and Matt Painter has been unable to shake the "can't win in March" tag. This year, Painter brings back all five starters with Edey, Smith, and Loyer, along with forwards Caleb Furst (5.5 PPG, 4.6 RPG) and Mason Gillis (6.8 PPG, 3.8 RPG). It all starts with Edey, who is arguably the toughest matchup in college basketball. Forwards Ethan Morton (3.8 PPG, 2.4 APG) and Trey Kaufman-Renn (4.5 PPG, 1.8 RPG) will see more minutes. Lance Jones is a graduate transfer from Southern Illinois and scored 1,500 points and hit 205 3s in his career there. Despite the lack of recent March success, Purdue is on a short list of bona fide national title contenders this season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Purdue was 4-12 ATS as a -8.5 favorite or greater at home from Jan. 24 until the end of the 2022-23 season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	91.5 (#2/#1)
RETURNING STARTERS	5
RETURNING MINUTES	86%

RUTGERS

2022 RECORD: 19-15 SU, 20-14 ATS, 14-20 O/U

The Scarlet Knights were sitting at 16-7 and looking good for a third straight NCAA Tournament appearance. Then, Rutgers finished 3-7 in their last 10 games and found themselves out of the field. Now they find themselves having to replace their entire starting backcourt due to unexpected transfers. So, Steve Pikiell goes right back into the transfer portal to grab Noah Fernandes (UMass via Wichita State) and Austin Williams (FIU via Hartford via Marist). They will mix in with Derek Simpson (7.1 PPG, 1.5 APG) and 6-foot-8 freshman Gavin Griffiths. That group will have to shoot the 3 better as Rutgers only made 5.7 3s per game (last in Big Ten) and shot just 32.1% (13th) from the outside. The Scarlet Knights do bring back their most important piece with 6-foot-11 big man Clifford Omoruyi (13.2 PPG, 9.6 RPG, 2.1 BPG) and his 7-foot-6 wingspan spurning the NBA Draft for one more year at Rutgers. Mawot Mag (7.8 PPG, 5.3 RPG), who suffered a season-ending knee injury in early February (Rutgers went 3-8 without him) will take over as the club's primary defensive stopper. Aundre Hyatt (8.8 PPG, 3.9 RPG) and Antwone Woolfolk also return for one of the conference's best frontcourts. Rutgers was the best defense in the Big Ten last year and they should make a return to the NCAA Tournament if the shooters around Omoruyi, who will see many double-teams, can actually make shots from the outside.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams that have been a home underdog at least nine times since the start of the 2019-20 season, Rutgers has the best cover rate in America at 11-1 ATS.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	81.0 (#54/#11)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	55%

WISCONSIN

2022 RECORD: 20-15 SU, 15-19 ATS, 17-18 O/U

Prior to last season, the Badgers had made the NCAA Tournament in 22 of 23 years. This year, Wisconsin should return to the NCAA Tournament as Greg Gard welcomes back 92.0% of his roster's scoring and 90.0% of his roster's minutes. Point guard Chucky Hepburn (12.2 PPG, 2.8 APG, 2.8 RPG) improved his 3-point shooting from 34.8% to 40.5%, but his shooting from 2 dropped from 42.4% to 35.7%. Hepburn returns along with sharpshooter Connor Essegian (11.7 PPG, 3.7 RPG, 69 3s) and Max Klesmit (8.4 PPG, 2.7 RPG). St. John's transfer AJ Storr (8.8 PPG, 38 3s) also adds another weapon in the backcourt. Wisconsin always seems to have productive bigs and this year is no exception with 7-footer Steven Crowl (12.1 PPG, 6.9 RPG, 2.5 APG). Tyler Wahl (11.3 PPG, 6.3 RPG, 2.5 APG) is the fifth returning starter. Due to its tempo (337th nationally), Wisconsin is not always going to score a ton of points, but they need to shoot the ball better as they were 13th in overall shooting percentage (41.4%) in the conference last year. They could also stand to rebound the ball better as they were -3.4 (13th) in rebounding margin. The Badgers never dazzle with talent, but they are an experienced, gritty bunch that will not be under .500 in the league this year.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over is 22-13 for Wisconsin in non-conference games the past three seasons. Also, they are 1-15 ATS since Dec. 5, 2021 as a favorite of at least five points.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	86.0 (#21/#4)
RETURNING STARTERS	5
RETURNING MINUTES	93%

BIG WEST *PREVIEW*

By Mike Somich

Welcome to the battle of California, with Hawaii added in for fun! The Big West will roll out 11 teams this year featuring 10 teams residing in the state of California including last year's co-champion and projected favorite University of California – Irvine. The big question heading into this season for the Anteaters will be how to replace the production from Guards Dawson Baker and DJ Davis who both bolted in the transfer portal. With no transfers coming in, Irvine will have to rely on 7-foot Junior Center Bent Leuchten to pick up the scoring slack from the inside and Devin Tills, who shot over 40.0% from beyond the arc last year, to light it up from range. The depth is here to make a run, but the lack of returning scoring makes it tough to swallow a short number.

The reigning tournament champions and co-champions in the regular season, the Santa Barbara Gauchos look to build off last season's 24-7 regular season record and punch their third ticket to the Big Dance in the last four years. While returning three of their top five scorers and best player Ajay Mitchell, the loss of Miles Norris to the NBA will create a large void. The Gauchos will need to match last year's efficiency on offense to be able to replicate their impressive season. They led the Big West in 2-point field goal percentage and turnovers last year while going 14-3 at home in the house of horrors that is the Thunderdome.

Perennial Big West powerhouse Long Beach State will try to bounce back this season after a disappointing seventh place finish in conference last season. To do so, they will need big seasons from the Traore brothers who enter their junior season as the projected top two scorers for the Beach, who return the lion's share of their production from last year. The 3-ball was a big problem last season, shooting just 29.0% from beyond the arc. They went to the portal to try to shore that area up by adding Messiah Thompson from Alabama A&M. He shot 38.0% from distance last season.

Hawai'I will try to ride the wave to a conference title on the back of their upper class led lineup, which will start four seniors. Last season, the Rainbow Warriors relied on a stout defense, both inside and outside the arc, ranking seventh in the nation in field goal percentage allowed.

The most intriguing team in the conference is the Cal State Fullerton Titans. After a 6-6 start to league play, they ripped off six conference wins in a row to head into the tournament 12-6. The Titans made a run to the conference tournament final before falling to UC Santa Barbara and now return five seniors and three juniors from last year's squad. They will be a major player if they can keep the late season momentum rolling into the new campaign.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
75.0	UC-IRVINE
74.5	LONG BEACH STATE
72.5	HAWAII
72.5	UC-SANTA BARBARA
71.0	CAL DAVIS
71.0	CS-FULLERTON
68.0	UC-RIVERSIDE
67.0	CAL SAN DIEGO
65.0	CS-BAKERSFIELD
61.0	CS-NORTHRIDGE
58.5	CAL POLY-SLO

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	LONG BEACH STATE
3	CAL DAVIS
3	CAL SAN DIEGO
3	CS-FULLERTON
3	CS-NORTHRIDGE
3	HAWAII
3	UC-IRVINE
2	CS-BAKERSFIELD
2	UC-RIVERSIDE
2	UC-SANTA BARBARA
1	CAL POLY-SLO

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
77%	CAL DAVIS
77%	LONG BEACH STATE
59%	CAL SAN DIEGO
57%	UC-IRVINE
55%	HAWAII
51%	UC-SANTA BARBARA
48%	CS-FULLERTON
40%	CS-NORTHRIDGE
38%	CS-BAKERSFIELD
34%	UC-RIVERSIDE
20%	CAL POLY-SLO

CAA *PREVIEW*

By Tim Murray

For the first time since 2012, the CAA almost notched a win in the NCAA Tournament last March. Charleston was tied at 53 with San Diego State with 3:27 to go, but the Aztecs prevailed 63-57 and eventually made a run to the NCAA championship game. After dropping the second game of the season to North Carolina, Charleston won 20 straight games, finished with 31 victories and was rated 71st in KenPom.

Pat Kelsey enters his third year as the head coach of Charleston, and the Cougars are the favorites to repeat as CAA champions. Five Cougars averaged in double figures last season, and Charleston needs to replace three of them. Dalton Bolon (first-team All-CAA), Ryan Larson (third-team All-CAA) and Pat Robinson (Sixth Man of the Year) are all gone. Additionally, Jaylon Scott (All-CAA Defensive team) departed. F Ante Brzovic (11.6 PPG, 5.9 RPG), a third-team All-CAA selection, is one of the returnees. G Reyne Smith (10.8 PPG) is also back. Kelsey was busy in the portal, adding four players who are expected to be impactful. Bryce Butler (West Liberty) and Kobe Rodgers (Nova Southeastern), who played against each other in the Division II national championship game, will team up at Charleston. Butler was the leading scorer in D2 last season with 829 points. CJ Fulton comes to Charleston as a grad transfer from Lafayette, where he earned third-team All-Patriot League honors. The Cougars also added F Frankie Policelli, who averaged 13.7 points and 9.4 rebounds per game at Stony Brook. The Cougars are a tough team to prepare for in the CAA as they averaged more than 70 possessions per game last season.

While Charleston is primed to repeat as CAA champions, Drexel returns 11 of 12 of its top scorers from last year's team. Forward Amari Williams is the only first-team All-CAA selection who returns. Williams is also the two-time CAA Defensive Player of the Year. The Dragons are expecting a leap from G Justin Moore (not Villanova's Justin Moore). The Dragons offense dipped from No. 147 in offensive efficiency in 2022 to No. 257 in 2023. If Drexel can improve offensively, the Dragons could head back to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 1996.

Hofstra did not reach the NCAA Tournament last year but upset Rutgers in the first round of the NIT. Speedy Claxton was named CAA Coach of the Year last year but will need to replace CAA Player of the Year Aaron Estrada, who led the conference with 20.2 points per game. Guard Tyler Thomas was a second-team All-CAA selection last year. Thomas averaged 16.5 points per game and connected on 40.0% from beyond the arc. The Pride added some size up front with 6-foot-10 F Jacco Fritz from Canisius.

Other CAA teams to keep an eye on this season are UNC Wilmington and Towson. The Seahawks went 24-10 last year and lost in the CAA championship game to Charleston. UNC Wilmington returns second-team All-CAA selection F Trazarien White (14.1 PPG). The Seahawks will be one of the more experienced teams in the CAA, bringing back over 70.0% of minutes played from last season. Towson will need to replace G Nicolas Timberlake, who is now at Kansas. The first-team All-CAA selection averaged 17.7 points per game last year for Pat Skerry's squad. Forward Cam Holden (14.5 PPG, 7.7 RPG), a second-team All-CAA selection, also has departed. Forward Charles Thompson is the Tigers' top returning player. He averaged 12.2 points per game and was an All-CAA Defensive Team selection. Nendah Tarke, a transfer from Coppin State should be an impact player. Delaware lost first-team All-CAA G Jameer Nelson Jr. to TCU but returns F Jyáre Davis. Davis averaged 15.3 points and 5.6 rebounds per game last season. Head coach Martin Ingelsby added five transfers to the Blue Hens' roster, including Gerald Drumgoole, who has played at Pittsburgh and Albany. He led the Great Danes in scoring, assists and steals last season.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
75.0	COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON
74.0	HOFSTRA
73.5	DREXEL
73.0	UNC-WILMINGTON
70.5	TOWSON STATE
68.0	DELAWARE
66.5	NORTHEASTERN
64.5	STONY BROOK
62.5	CAMPBELL
62.0	HAMPTON
62.0	WILLIAM & MARY
61.5	ELON
61.5	MONMOUTH
54.0	NORTH CAROLINA A&T

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	DREXEL
4	MONMOUTH
4	UNC-WILMINGTON
3	CAMPBELL
3	ELON
3	HOFSTRA
3	NORTHEASTERN
2	COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON
2	DELAWARE
2	HAMPTON
2	STONY BROOK
2	TOWSON STATE
2	WILLIAM & MARY
0	NORTH CAROLINA A&T

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
87%	DREXEL
71%	UNC-WILMINGTON
52%	NORTHEASTERN
51%	HOFSTRA
51%	ELON
51%	STONY BROOK
50%	HAMPTON
46%	MONMOUTH
44%	WILLIAM & MARY
44%	DELAWARE
37%	CAMPBELL
35%	COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON
27%	TOWSON STATE
5%	NORTH CAROLINA A&T

CONFERENCE USA *PREVIEW*

By Greg Peterson

Conference USA might be the most unrecognizable league in the country over the last few years as just five of the 14 schools that began the 2021-22 season remain.

C-USA added four schools in the offseason to make it a nine-team conference, including Liberty. The Flames spent the past five seasons in the Atlantic Sun, where they won at least a share of the conference crown in each season.

Liberty's offense will look different this season with Darius McGhee gone after averaging 22.8 points and 3.0 assists per game for an offense that was 20th in points scored per possession. The tempo should be consistent despite the loss as Liberty has ranked 302nd or lower in possessions per game each of the past eight seasons.

A pair of WAC schools in Sam Houston State and New Mexico State also enter the conference. New Mexico State made the NCAA Tournament eight of the past 11 seasons but has the most moving pieces of any in the country.

New Mexico State had its 2022-23 season cut short because of a sexual assault scandal. Jason Hooten took over as the team's new coach after guiding Sam Houston State to a 26-8 record a season ago, but he had to overhaul the whole roster with transfers and freshmen, some of whom may not receive a waiver to play this season.

Sam Houston State hired from within to replace Hooton and new head caoch Chris Mudge has to replace much of a roster that ranked 15th nationally in 3-point shooting percentage and 11th in points allowed per possession.

Among the five returning schools in C-USA, Middle Tennessee is the only one that finished better than 8-12 in conference play last season. The Blue Raiders lose three of their top four players in steals per game from a team that was 22nd in the country in turnovers forced per offensive play.

Western Kentucky also has a new coach. Rick Stansbury was replaced by former Texas A&M Corpus Christi coach Steve Lutz, who made back-to-back NCAA Tournaments in the Southland with an up-tempo style. He brought in former Purdue guard Brandon Newman to give the team an outside shooting presence.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
78.0	LIBERTY
73.5	MIDDLE TENN STATE
73.0	LOUISIANA TECH
71.0	UTEP
70.0	WESTERN KENTUCKY
69.5	FLA INTERNATIONAL
69.5	SAM HOUSTON STATE
69.0	NEW MEXICO STATE
66.5	JACKSONVILLE STATE

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	LIBERTY
3	FLA INTERNATIONAL
3	MIDDLE TENN STATE
3	UTEP
2	JACKSONVILLE STATE
2	LOUISIANA TECH
1	SAM HOUSTON STATE
0	NEW MEXICO STATE
0	WESTERN KENTUCKY

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
60%	MIDDLE TENN STATE
60%	FLA INTERNATIONAL
57%	LIBERTY
53%	UTEP
42%	LOUISIANA TECH
40%	SAM HOUSTON STATE
28%	JACKSONVILLE STATE
21%	WESTERN KENTUCKY
0%	NEW MEXICO STATE

HORIZON LEAGUE *PREVIEW* By Tyler Shoemaker

Key storylines for the Horizon League heading into 2023-2024 are the notable loss of Antoine Davis — who nearly broke Pete Maravich's all-time NCAA scoring record — from Detroit Mercy, the return of star guard Marques Warrick to auto-bid recipient Northern Kentucky, and whether transfer-heavy Youngstown State can repeat as regular season champions under coach Jerrod Calhoun, as they do return leading scorer Brandon Rush (13.9 PPG).

The top four teams from last season — Youngstown State, Northern Kentucky, Milwaukee and Cleveland State — all look to be back in the mix at the top of the conference yet again. On the flip side, IUPUI and Green Bay — who combined for just four wins last year — can probably expect more of the same at the bottom of the conference; although, Green Bay made a coaching change after last season to bring in Sundance Wicks from Wyoming to try to turn things around.

There's no shortage of talent in the league, as Wright State adds transfer Tanner Holden back into the mix after his short stint at Ohio State, while returning Horizon League Freshman of the Year Brandon Noel also returns to join first-team All-Horizon guard Trey Calvin. Milwaukee returns second-team All-Horizon guard BJ Freeman and Elijah Jamison, who was voted by league coaches as the breakout player of the year. In that same poll, IUPUI was voted as the conference's "sleeper team", led by guard Jlynn Counter. Additional transfers to keep an eye on who look to make immediate impact are Cleveland State guard Tevin Smith, Detroit guard PJ Fuller (who has the unenviable task of trying to replace Antoine Davis' production), 6-foot-11 Yves Nkomba at IUPUI, and sharpshooter Jalen Jackson at Purdue Fort Wayne.

Overall, this again projects to be a top-heavy league, with the top four teams a notch above the rest. An interesting dynamic of the Horizon League is the contrasting styles that some of these teams play. You have Northern Kentucky, which was 342nd in possessions per game last year, and on the flip side there's Milwaukee, which was ninth in the nation in adjusted tempo, per KenPom. The T Shoe Index has a "points added" metric, which is essentially a measure of how fun a team is (technically, it's how many points toward an Over/Under a team contributes, but that doesn't sound as fun); how good is your offense and how bad is your defense? In this metric, Youngstown State was 20th in the nation last season; conversely, Northern Kentucky had the 18th lowest rating. Styles make fights, and there should be some exciting bouts this season in the Horizon League.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
74.0	WRIGHT STATE
70.5	CLEVELAND STATE
70.5	NORTHERN KENTUCKY
69.0	WI-MILWAUKEE
69.0	YOUNGSTOWN STATE
65.5	OAKLAND
63.0	ROBERT MORRIS
62.0	DETROIT
61.0	IUPUI
60.5	PURDUE FT WAYNE
58.0	WI-GREEN BAY

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	WI-MILWAUKEE
3	CLEVELAND STATE
3	NORTHERN KENTUCKY
3	OAKLAND
3	ROBERT MORRIS
3	WRIGHT STATE
1	WI-GREEN BAY
1	YOUNGSTOWN STATE
0	DETROIT
0	IUPUI
0	PURDUE FT WAYNE

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
78%	IUPUI
72%	WRIGHT STATE
65%	WI-MILWAUKEE
58%	CLEVELAND STATE
58%	NORTHERN KENTUCKY
55%	OAKLAND
40%	ROBERT MORRIS
22%	WI-GREEN BAY
20%	YOUNGSTOWN STATE
12%	PURDUE FT WAYNE
12%	DETROIT

INDEPENDENT *PREVIEW*

By Greg Peterson

Now Division I's lone independent, the Chicago State Cougars are coming off of an 11-win season after winning seven games or fewer each of the previous eight seasons and return the top two players in points and rebounds from last season. Wesley Cardet averaged 16.6 points, 5.0 rebounds, 3.1 assists, and 1.0 steals per game on 34.4% 3-point shooting while Jahsean Corbett had 14.2 points and 8.8 rebounds per game. Kedrick Green has the best 3-point shooting percentage of any returning player, logging 3.9 points and 2.0 assists per game on 37.8% 3-point shooting last season while the duo of Bent Davis and Deshawn Jean-Charles combined for 13.4 points and 6.3 rebounds per game last season for a team that ranked 299th in possessions per game and 36th in percentage of missed shots that resulted in an offensive rebound.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
59.5	CHICAGO STATE

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
3	CHICAGO STATE

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
67%	CHICAGO STATE

IVY LEAGUE *PREVIEW*

By Aaron Moore

While other conferences of a similar profile tend to get more attention from the media and bettors, the Ivy League has quietly risen to bonafide mid-major status. Princeton's Sweet 16 run a year ago only reinforced that assessment.

Getting back there will be a challenge as only four Ivy League schools have ever made it that far, and prior to Princeton, the last one to do it was Cornell in 2010. A more attainable goal is maintaining its KenPom ranking as the 12th best conference a year ago.

Once again, the Ivy features a strong upper tier of teams capable of winning the regular season and tournament titles.

Princeton is one of them even though some of the key cogs from last year are gone, namely big man Tosan Evbuomwan (15.1 PPG, 6.3 RPG) and outside threat Ryan Langborg (12.7 PPG). Returning for coach Mitch Henderson's meticulously run offense are Matt Allocco (10.7 PPG) and Ivy Rookie of the Year Caden Pierce, the team's leading rebounder (7.3 RPG). That should allow Princeton to keep its defensive rebounding edge (7th in the country last year), a key for the Tigers to dictate tempo.

Similar to a season ago, Yale starts as the conference favorite with a bulk of contributors from last year's squad that lost to Princeton in the Ivy tournament final coming back. Those include 3-point shooter August Mahoney (10.9 PPG, 45.7% 3PT), scorers Matt Knowling (13.6 PPG) and John Poulakidasis (12.0 PPG) and the distributor Bez Mbeng (3.4 APG). Bart Torvik has this year's version ranked inside the Top 100 (80). This squad will rely on its defense (Top 50 in Adjusted Efficiency according to KenPom) and rebounding (11th in the country in defensive rebound rate). This combination led Yale to an O/U mark of 10-17-1 a year ago.

Brown keeps inching closer to the conference elite and this year it could happen with seven of their eight top scorers back for another year in Providence. One of those is guard Kino Lily Jr. (16.9 PPG) who is in play for the conference Player of the Year. In a league where rebounding is so important, Brown will once again have Nana Owusu-Anane (8.2 RPG) paired in the frontcourt with a healthy Kalu Anya (6.2 RPG) who missed the last nine games of the season due to a left hand injury. Brown should finally make its first Ivy Tournament appearance.

The Bears prepped for this season of expectations by playing exhibition games this summer in France. That type of offseason work is not a usual occurrence for Brown.

Cornell and Pennsylvania have an outside chance to contend. The Big Red will rely on 3-point shooting behind Nazir Williams (12.9 PPG) while Steve Donahue's Quakers will need to spread the production around to offset the major loss of Jordan Dingle, the Ivy Conference Player of the Year who moved on to St. John's.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
77.5	YALE
73.5	PRINCETON
72.0	CORNELL
70.0	BROWN
69.5	PENNSYLVANIA
66.0	DARTMOUTH
66.0	HARVARD
63.5	COLUMBIA

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
5	COLUMBIA
4	BROWN
4	CORNELL
4	YALE
3	DARTMOUTH
2	HARVARD
2	PENNSYLVANIA
2	PRINCETON

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
99%	COLUMBIA
81%	CORNELL
77%	BROWN
75%	DARTMOUTH
73%	YALE
54%	PENNSYLVANIA
48%	PRINCETON
29%	HARVARD

METRO ATLANTIC *PREVIEW*

By Aaron Moore

Rick Pitino's brief but memorable run in the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference with two NCAA tournament bids during his three seasons is done.

Not only did Pitino bolt for St. John's, he took four key contributors — Sadiku Ibine Ayo, Daniss Jenkins, Cruz Davis, and Quinn Slazinski — with him. But Slazinski decommitted from St. John's and is now at West Virginia.

Iona also lost the MAAC Player of the Year Walter Clayton Jr. who went back to his home state of Florida to join the Gators.

Even with all this turnover, Iona will remain in contention because of what Pitino's replacement, Tobin Anderson, the architect of 16th seeded Fairleigh Dickinson's upset over No. 1 Purdue, can bring to the new look Gaels.

Defensively, Anderson will have more talent to implement his trademark full court pressure. That relentless style worked well for him at DII Saint Thomas Aquinas and was the main reason his FDU squad surprised the Boilermakers.

On offense, Anderson will rely on graduate transfers Joel Brown (California) and Wheza Panzo (Stetson), along with Greg Gordon (Dyersburg State) from the JUCO ranks. The 7-foot holdover Osborn Shema (7.0 PPG, 4.7 RPG) needs to advance from project to focal point in order to hold off upstart Rider in the standings.

The Broncs lost their top player, Dwight Murray Jr., but look like the conference favorite with the return of guard Allen Powell (10.4 PPG) and high intensity big man Mervin James (12.0 PPG, 6.8 RPG). They also welcome the addition of UMass transfer T.J. Weeks Jr. Broncs' coach Kevin Baggett has done well in the regular season with a conference title and six top three finishes to his credit over 11 seasons. His problem has been the tournament quarterfinals where he has advanced only once.

Canisius will contend based on the return of four of its top six scorers from a year ago. Most possessions will feature guard Tahj Staveskie (12.4 PPG, 2.8 APG) controlling the tempo. This experienced group must improve on defense. Last season, the Golden Griffins gave up a league worst 72.3 PPG in a conference where most teams want to keep it in the mid-60s.

Former Hofstra and Fordham head coach Tom Pecora takes over at Quinnipiac after the departure of Baker Dunleavy who returned to his Villanova roots to serve as the Wildcats' general manager. The Bobcats are coming off a 20-win season and will rely heavily on the veteran guard Matt Balanc who was second on the team in scoring last year with 12.0 PPG. Quinnipiac welcomes a national champion to its roster with the addition of 6-foot-9 forward Richie Springs who played in 19 games for Connecticut a year ago.

Siena, with its decisive home court advantage (nearly 70.0% winning percentage) at the MVP Arena, should remain a factor in the MAAC even though the Saints lost seven of their top eight scorers from last year.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
71.5	IONA
71.0	ST PETERS
70.0	SIENA
67.5	RIDER
67.0	MOUNT ST MARYS
66.5	QUINNIPIAC
65.0	FAIRFIELD
65.0	MARIST
65.0	NIAGARA
64.5	CANISIUS
60.5	MANHATTAN

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
3	CANISIUS
3	FAIRFIELD
3	MARIST
3	QUINNIPIAC
3	RIDER
3	SIENA
3	ST PETERS
2	MOUNT ST MARYS
2	NIAGARA
1	IONA
1	MANHATTAN

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
62%	MARIST
57%	CANISIUS
52%	MOUNT ST MARYS
49%	RIDER
36%	ST PETERS
35%	QUINNIPIAC
33%	FAIRFIELD
28%	NIAGARA
18%	SIENA
12%	MANHATTAN
9%	IONA

MID-AMERICAN *PREVIEW*

By Tim Murray

The Mid-American Conference is the epitome of "mid-major" college basketball. The MAC champion tends to be a 12 or 13 seed and is usually a popular upset selection in the First Round of the NCAA Tournament. Last year, Kent State closed as just a four-point underdog against Indiana but lost, 71-60. In 2022, Akron led UCLA with less than three minutes to play before falling, 57-53. Ohio upset four-seed Virginia in 2021, 67-63. Per KenPom, the MAC has taken a dip in overall conference rankings over the past handful of years. Last year, the MAC finished #19 (out of 33 conferences). In 2022, the conference finished #20 but in 2020 and 2021, the MAC was #12.

Entering the 2023-24 season, the MAC has stability on the bench. No coaches left for higher level jobs (i.e. Nate Oats leaving Buffalo for Alabama in 2019) and only two coaches were fired. Bowling Green hired Southern Utah head coach Todd Simon and Buffalo hired Villanova associate head coach George Halcovage. Simon took over a 6-24 program at Southern Utah in 2016 and guided the Thunderbirds to three straight 20-win seasons before departing for Bowling Green. Last year, Southern Utah finished #111 in KenPom. The Falcons could be a surprise team in the MAC this season.

Tod Kowalczyk enters his 14th season as the head coach of the Toledo Rockets. Toledo has not reached the NCAA Tournament since 1980, but the Rockets did win the regular season in the MAC the last two seasons. Kowalczyk will have to replace a ton of production from last year's 27-8 team. RayJ Dennis was the unanimous MAC Player of the Year but transferred to Baylor. Dennis averaged 19.6 points and 5.8 assists per game. First Team All-MAC selection JT Shumate and Second Team All-MAC selection Setric Milner have also departed. Shumate and Milner both averaged over 16.0 points per game. The Rockets were dynamic offensively last year finishing fifth in the country in offensive efficiency. Toledo also finished second nationally in 3-point field goal percentage and fifth in effective field goal percentage. There is no doubt that the Rockets should take a step back but Dante Maddox will likely take a step up in production (11.3 PPG, 45% from 3). The Rockets also added F Ben Wright from William & Mary and PG Sonny Wilson. Wilson was rated as the #23 point guard recruit in the country by 247 Sports.

The best returning player in the MAC is Akron's Enrique Freeman. Freeman was a First Team All-MAC player last year averaging 16.8 points and 11.2 rebounds per game. The 6-foot-7 fifth-year senior is a force defensively, winning 2022 MAC Defensive Player of the Year and was named to the MAC All-Defensive Team the last three seasons. Head coach John Groce, entering year seven at Akron after his stint at Illinois, will have to figure out how to replace the production of Xavier Castaneda. Castaneda led the MAC in scoring last year (21.7 PPG). The Zips might have added the most impactful transfer in the conference in former Butler F Ali Ali. Ali Ali started his collegiate career at Akron. In 2021, he led the Zips in scoring and was named Second-Team All-MAC. Guard Mikal Dawson missed all of last year and will be reunited with Ali Ali in the backcourt this season. The Zips enter the season as the highest rated MAC per KenPom (#102).

The last team from the MAC to win a game in the NCAA Tournament was Ohio and the Bobcats enter the 2023-24 season rated #114 by KenPom. Head Coach Jeff Boals, entering year five in Athens, will have to replace F Dwight Wilson. Wilson led Ohio in scoring and rebounding and was a Second-Team All-MAC selection. The Bobcats return the next three top scorers from last year's squad: Jaylin Hunter (13.2), AJ Brown (10.3), Miles Brown (10.0). In the transfer portal, Ohio added G Shereef Mitchell from Creighton and G/F Ike Cornish from Maryland. Mitchell played 99 career games for the Blue Jays but only averaged 2.6 points per game over his time in Omaha. Cornish was a four-star recruit coming out of high school but never popped in his two years at Maryland.

Kent State defeated Toledo in the MAC Championship last year to earn the conference's automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament. The Golden Flashes lost to Indiana by 11 in the First Round and head coach Rob Senderoff, in year 13, will have to replace three players that averaged double figures last year. Guard Sincere Carry was the 2022 MAC Player of the Year and was named First Team All-MAC last season. Carry was also the MAC Tournament MVP last year and named to the All-MAC Defensive team. Guard Malique Jacobs joined Carry on the All-MAC Defensive team last season and he will also need to be replaced. The Golden Flashes finished 41st in defensive efficiency last season. In the transfer portal, Kent St. brought in MAC Freshman of the Year, Reggie Bass, from Central Michigan. Bass averaged 12.4 points per game last year and averaged 26.0 points per game over the final five games of the season. If you remove the 2020-21 COVID affected season, the Golden Flashes have won 20 or more games in each of the last four seasons. Kent St. will certainly be in the mix once again this season.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
75.5	AKRON
75.5	KENT STATE
74.5	OHIO U
72.5	TOLEDO
67.5	NORTHERN ILLINOIS
67.0	BUFFALO
66.5	BOWLING GREEN
66.0	MIAMI OHIO
65.0	BALL STATE
61.5	EASTERN MICHIGAN
61.5	WESTERN MICHIGAN
60.5	CENTRAL MICHIGAN

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	MIAMI OHIO
3	AKRON
3	EASTERN MICHIGAN
3	NORTHERN ILLINOIS
3	OHIO U
2	CENTRAL MICHIGAN
2	KENT STATE
2	TOLEDO
2	WESTERN MICHIGAN
1	BALL STATE
1	BOWLING GREEN
1	BUFFALO

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
65%	OHIO U
60%	NORTHERN ILLINOIS
58%	AKRON
49%	EASTERN MICHIGAN
44%	WESTERN MICHIGAN
42%	MIAMI OHIO
41%	KENT STATE
38%	CENTRAL MICHIGAN
34%	TOLEDO
24%	BUFFALO
21%	BOWLING GREEN
20%	BALL STATE

MID-EASTERN *PREVIEW*

By Greg Peterson

MEAC teams went 17-11-2 against the spread as home underdogs last season, despite Norfolk State being the only team in the conference that was better than 196th in the country in points scored on a per possession basis on offense and five teams 308th or worse in this category.

The aforementioned Norfolk State has never had a losing record in league play in their 25 seasons playing conference games in the MEAC and last season was the first time since the 2010-11 season in which the team won fewer than 66.6% of their MEAC conference games. The Spartans now have to replace three of the four players that averaged at least 4.6 points per game and played in at least 14 games last season.

Howard got the MEAC's automatic bid to the 2023 NCAA Tournament and will attempt to replace three of their top four scorers from last season with Seth Towns, who won Player of the Year honors in the Ivy League while at Harvard during the 2017-18 season, but has played in 25 games with zero starts in five seasons since.

Cardio is a must in the conference as Coppin State, Morgan State, and South Carolina State all ranked 11th or faster in possessions per game last season, with Norfolk State the only team in the conference last season outside the top 98 in possessions per game and Maryland Eastern Shore has feasted off the reckless speed on defense.

Morgan State will fight an uphill battle this season with having to replace a combined 36.2 points per game with top scorers Malik Miller and Isaiah Burke gone from a team that was one of the fastest in tempo in the country.

Maryland Eastern Shore has ranked eighth or better in turnovers forced on a per possession basis the past two seasons after opting out of the 2020-21 season entirely, but must replace its top four scorers from last season with all four averaging at least 1.5 steals per game each.

Delaware State has won 10 games or fewer in eight straight seasons and finished in the bottom 12 of the nation in points scored per possession each of the past three seasons, but return leader in points, rebounds, and steals from last season, Martaz Robinson. Robinson had 11.8 points, 5.6 rebounds, and 1.5 steals per game on 36.6% 3-point shooting, and leader in assists, Corey Perkins, is back after logging 5.5 points, 3.8 assists and 1.3 steals per game last season.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
66.0	HOWARD
65.5	SOUTH CAROLINA STATE
65.0	NORFOLK STATE
61.0	NC CENTRAL
58.5	DELAWARE STATE
58.0	MORGAN STATE
55.5	MD-EAST SHORE
53.5	COPPIN STATE

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
5	DELAWARE STATE
3	SOUTH CAROLINA STATE
2	HOWARD
1	MORGAN STATE
1	NORFOLK STATE
0	COPPIN STATE
0	MD-EAST SHORE
0	NC CENTRAL

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
73%	DELAWARE STATE
46%	NORFOLK STATE
35%	HOWARD
34%	SOUTH CAROLINA STATE
31%	MORGAN STATE
20%	MD-EAST SHORE
16%	NC CENTRAL
9%	COPPIN STATE

MISSOURI VALLEY *PREVIEW* **By Tyler Shoemaker**

The Missouri Valley conference returns five teams who won 20+ games a year ago, including conference tournament champion Drake, who finished 27-8 on the season and looks to get back to the NCAA tournament this year behind conference Player of the Year, Tucker DeVries.

The other returning 20+ game winners from last year are Bradley, Indiana State and Southern Illinois. Bradley was the regular season champ last year and returns three of its top four players in what the team is hoping is an encore run to the top of the conference again in '23-'24.

Newcomers a year ago, Belmont, Murray State and UIC, look to gain footing in the conference in year two. On the flip side, Evansville, Valparaiso and Illinois State combined for just 12 total wins last year, but all have coaches within their first two seasons, so are looking to climb by establishing stability and utilizing the transfer portal to their advantage.

There is no shortage of players to watch this season in the MVC, beginning with the aforementioned MVP, DeVries of Drake. Defensive ace Malevy Leons returns to bolster Bradley in what should be an All-MVC type of season for him. Bowen Born of Northern Iowa, Rob Perry of Murray State and Donovan Clay of Missouri State are all standouts to keep an eye on this season. Belmont (Cade Tyson, 13.6 PPG), Evansville (Kenny Strawbridge, 14.4), Illinois State (Darius Burford, 12.9), Missouri State (Donovan Clay, 11.9), Murray State (Rob Perry, 14.4) and Northern Iowa (Bowen Born, 17.9) all return top scorers this year, and there is a plethora of impactful transfers on the way.

The T Shoe Index has a "points added" metric, which is essentially a measure of how fun a team is (technically, it's how many points towards an Over/Under a team contributes, but that doesn't sound as fun); along with your tempo, how good is your offense and how bad is your defense? The MVC leader in this TSI metric last season was Indiana State, with a 74.6 — which is in the top 50 nationally; conversely, Southern Illinois is in the bottom five nationally with just a 64.8. So, go ahead and circle those Indiana State vs Southern Illinois matchups this season, as they'll be the biggest contrasts in style of any two teams in the league.

Other notable "fun" teams are Belmont (53rd), Murray State (128th) and Valparaiso (170th), while Missouri State (bottom 25) is a team more like Southern Illinois in terms of their (lack of) fun rating.

POWER RATING
#	TEAM
79.0	DRAKE
75.5	BRADLEY
75.5	NORTHERN IOWA
74.5	INDIANA STATE
73.5	MISSOURI STATE
72.5	BELMONT
72.5	MURRAY STATE
69.5	ILLINOIS STATE
67.5	SOUTHERN ILLINOIS
67.0	IL-CHICAGO
60.5	EVANSVILLE
60.5	VALPARAISO

RETURNING STARTERS
#	TEAM
4	EVANSVILLE
4	NORTHERN IOWA
3	BRADLEY
3	IL-CHICAGO
3	ILLINOIS STATE
3	MISSOURI STATE
3	MURRAY STATE
3	SOUTHERN ILLINOIS
2	BELMONT
2	DRAKE
2	INDIANA STATE
0	VALPARAISO

RETURNING MINUTES
%	TEAM
91%	NORTHERN IOWA
63%	MISSOURI STATE
63%	ILLINOIS STATE
61%	MURRAY STATE
54%	BRADLEY
50%	EVANSVILLE
50%	IL-CHICAGO
48%	DRAKE
44%	BELMONT
36%	INDIANA STATE
32%	SOUTHERN ILLINOIS
12%	VALPARAISO

MOUNTAIN WEST *PREVIEW*

By Jonathan Von Tobel

There are not many conferences that have improved the perception of it more than the Mountain West has over the last two seasons. After three seasons of finishing no higher than 10th in KenPom's conference ratings, the Mountain West has finished sixth and seventh the last two years, and four teams in each of those seasons earned NCAA Tournament bids. San Diego State's run to the national championship game seemed to legitimize the respect the conference had earned, but this season will be about multiple teams finally taking the next step and winning a game in March.

The Aztecs reign as conference favorites this season, but they are weak favorites at the top of a conference loaded with parity. Boise State brings back arguably the best player in the conference in forward Tyson Degenhart, and he is playing a new position. New Mexico boasts the best backcourt duo in the Mountain West with both Jaelen House and Jamal Mashburn Jr. back in uniform. Nevada is one of the oldest and most experienced teams in the country. A run at the regular season title for any of these teams will be a challenge, and even further down the board are teams like UNLV and Colorado State that are brimming with talent.

Plenty of folks are down on this conference due to it getting eight tournament teams over the last two seasons, but only having five wins from one team to show for it. However, this conference is loaded once more. KenPom has the Mountain West seventh in its preseason conference rankings, ahead of the West Coast Conference and American Athletic. On the surface this looks to be another multi-bid league this season.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
81.5	NEW MEXICO
80.5	BOISE STATE
79.0	NEVADA
78.5	COLORADO STATE
78.5	UNLV
76.5	SAN DIEGO STATE
75.0	UTAH STATE
73.5	SAN JOSE STATE
73.0	FRESNO STATE
70.0	AIR FORCE
66.5	WYOMING

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	AIR FORCE
3	BOISE STATE
3	COLORADO STATE
3	FRESNO STATE
3	NEVADA
2	NEW MEXICO
2	SAN DIEGO STATE
2	SAN JOSE STATE
2	UNLV
1	WYOMING
0	UTAH STATE

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
67%	NEVADA
64%	COLORADO STATE
59%	BOISE STATE
55%	AIR FORCE
53%	NEW MEXICO
52%	SAN DIEGO STATE
51%	SAN JOSE STATE
49%	FRESNO STATE
20%	UNLV
16%	WYOMING
0%	UTAH STATE

AIR FORCE

2022 RECORD: 14-18 SU, 17-14 ATS, 18-14 O/U

Four starters return for Air Force this season, and not one senior is on this roster. Head coach Joe Scott has a roster that is the best he's had in his second stint at the Air Force Academy, and that will mean a jump in the standings for the Falcons. Rytis Petraitis is the leading returning scorer for Air Force this season. Petraitis is a sophomore forward who will play the five for the Falcons. He's an efficient scorer who shot 48.3% and grabbed 6.2 rebounds per game. Guard Ethan Taylor is the second-most important piece for Scott this season. Taylor averaged 7.1 points and 3.1 assists per game, but most importantly he shot 38.4% from beyond the arc. Shooting figures to be a weakness for this Air Force team — Taylor is the only player who shot better than 33.7% — but the offense will be better. The Falcons run a Princeton offense under Scott, so that means long possessions and high assist rates. Air Force ranked 348th in the country in tempo last season, and that does not figure to improve much this season. The Falcons are usually a team bettors chalk up to as poor, but capable of stealing a win at home against a better opponent like it did to New Mexico last season. However, the Falcons might have more in store for bettors this season, and should be a team worth betting on in conference play.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Air Force is 7-1 ATS against ranked teams since the start of the 2018-19 season. Also, the Over is 35-22 in home games since the start of the 2019-20 season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	70.0 (#174/#10)
RETURNING STARTERS	4
RETURNING MINUTES	55%

BOISE STATE

2022 RECORD: 24-10 SU, 16-15 ATS, 17-15 O/U

Boise State has been one of the premier basketball programs in the Mountain West under Leon Rice, and the roster that returns this season will once again have the Broncos knocking on the door of a conference championship. Boise State is the lone program in the conference that did not lose a single starter to the transfer portal. Tyson Degenhart (14.1 PPG, 5.3 RPG) is back, but with new responsibilities on the floor that will maximize his potential. Last season Degenhart was forced to play at center for the Broncos, but the additions of transfers Cam Martin from Kansas and O'Mar Stanley from St. John's will allow Degenhart to slide down to his natural position of power forward. Chibuzo Agbo and Max Rice round out the three returning starters for Rice. Agbo (11.5 PPG, 4.8 RPG) is a resourceful forward that shot 40.2% from 3-point range, ranked 18th in free throw rate in conference play (31.9%) and shot 83.0% from the line. Rice — son of head coach Leon Rice — is a knockdown shooter who hit 40.9% of his attempts from deep last season and should be a threat from deep once again. Boise State has a hole at point guard due to the departure of Marcus Shaver, but Roddie Anderson — a UC San Diego transfer who averaged 13.1 points and 31.3 minutes per game last season — will likely fill the role. The betting market has the Broncos as the clear-cut second-best team in the conference, but there is value in betting on this team to win the Mountain West, as they are on the same level as San Diego State.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Boise State was 2-10 ATS in their final 12 games last season, but are 19-8-1 ATS as an underdog the past three seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	80.5 (#60/#2)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	59%

COLORADO STATE

2022 RECORD: 15-18 SU, 13-19 ATS, 18-13 O/U

Injuries ruined what could have been a promising season for Colorado State, but this season projects to be just as intriguing if the Rams can stay healthy. Isaiah Stevens — the program's career assist leader and second-ranked career scorer — returns for a fifth season in Fort Collins. Josiah Strong is back for a sixth season as well, which gives head coach Niko Medved one of the most experienced backcourts in the country. Make no mistake, this team has some potential. The Rams were 8-4 SU/6-6 ATS through the first 12 games last season with wins over South Carolina and St. Mary's before injuries wrecked the roster. With three starters back — Jalen Lake, a junior guard who shot 37.7% from deep, among them — this team has the potential to upend the top of the Mountain West. Colorado State does lose some big names from last season as well, but to replace those players Medved brought in some prized transfers. Javonte Johnson — a New Mexico transfer who averaged 5.8 points and 3.6 rebounds — should slide into one of the frontcourt spots nicely. Nique Clifford who comes in from Colorado averaged 5.9 points and 3.9 rebounds last season. Johnson can be a knockdown shooter who has experience in the conference, and Clifford comes with the reputation of a stout defender. Medved is also one of the best offensive minds in the conference, so with a guard like Stevens and better health the Rams should be a team worth tailing at the window.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Rams had the highest percentage of their home games go Over the total among Division I teams last season with a 12-2-1 record last season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	78.5 (#72/#4)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	64%

FRESNO STATE

2022 RECORD: 11-20 SU, 12-18 ATS, 13-17 O/U

Fresno State was an unlucky team last season. The Bulldogs were 4-8 in games decided by six or fewer points, and opponents shot over 40.0% from 3-point range against them. Better luck and improved health should allow Fresno State to bounce back this season, but it will need the help of some key transfers to get there. The familiar name on this roster this season is Wyoming transfer Xavier DuSell. The former Cowboy averaged 8.0 points and 2.6 rebounds last season, but most importantly he shot 42.2% from deep. He and Utah Tech transfer Isaiah Pope — a 42.5% shooter last season — will give this starting lineup the shooting it desperately needs. Isaiah Hill is the Bulldogs' leading returning scorer from last season (12.6 PPG). However, all three pale in comparison to the hype Arizona State transfer Enoch Boakye is getting. Head coach Justin Hutson has a history of utilizing skilled bigs — Orlando Robinson comes to mind — and Boakye could be the next center for him to build around. Bettors can expect defense to be this team's calling card once more this season, and their methodical style will likely have the program finishing 300th or lower in tempo, a key trait of Hutson's teams. Media polls selected the Bulldogs to finish last in the Mountain West, but the betting odds have them at 30-1 to win the regular season title, well ahead of Wyoming, San Jose State and Air Force. That variety of opinion speaks to what this season could be for Fresno State: volatile.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Under was 12-6 in games with a closing total less than 130 last season and the Under is 26-13-1 since the 2020-21 season began.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	73.0 (#132/#9)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	49%

NEVADA

2022 RECORD: 22-11 SU, 19-12 ATS, 19-13 O/U

Injuries threatened to derail Nevada's season in 2022, but instead the Wolf Pack went 14-3 in the first 17 games and eventually earned a berth in the NCAA Tournament. Now those injuries can be viewed in a positive light, as starters who were expected to play last season are back, and their replacements gained valuable playing time a season ago. Having said that, the conversation around Nevada has to start with the backcourt. Kenan Blackshear and Jarod Lucas return after combining to average 31.1 points per game. Lucas is an excellent scorer who also ranked 27th in the nation in turnover rate (8.3%) despite having the third-highest usage rate on the team. Blackshear is an nifty passer — he was 56th in the nation in assist rate — who gets to the free throw line frequently. Alongside Blackshear and Lucas on the wing is Nevada's third returning starter: Tré Coleman. Coleman earned All-Defensive team honors last season, and he is a balanced player who averaged 6.3 points, 3.1 rebounds and 2.6 assists per game. The frontcourt is a question with the transfer of Will Baker to LSU, but Nick Davidson is a skilled 6-foot-9 forward with a pick-and-pop game, and 7-foot-1 transfer Jeriah Coleman will provide minutes at center. Hunter McIntosh — one of the aforementioned injured players — returns as well. McIntosh was penciled in last season to be a starting piece, but this season he provides Nevada with shooting off the bench. The Wolf Pack caught the betting market sleeping last season with a 19-12-1 ATS record, but they fell off at the end of the season with a 2-5 SU and ATS record in their last seven games. Nevada likely won't be catching any team this season, but this is a team that can surpass the 20-win mark once again and compete for a NCAA Tournament bid.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Nevada is 7-2 ATS as a favorite of at least six points since Feb. 16, 2022. Also, the Over is 48-29 in conference games since the 2019-20 season began.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	79.0 (#69/#3)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	67%

NEW MEXICO

2022 RECORD: 22-12 SU, 16-15 ATS, 22-11 O/U

New Mexico only brings back two starters from last year, but those two starters — guards Jamal Mashburn Jr. and Jaelen House — are arguably the best players at their position in the conference. Mashburn and House combined to average 36.0 points per game last season, and both shot better than 37.0% from beyond the arc. Any team built around guards of this level is going to be successful, but the scary part about New Mexico is that the Lobos got better in the transfer portal. The biggest name brought in this season is another guard in Jemarl Baker from Fresno State. Baker — who is playing his seventh season of college basketball — is a high-volume scorer who averaged 12.1 points per game last season, but is capable of enormous scoring nights like when he dropped 43 points on 13-of-14 shooting against Chicago State last season. The frontcourt is not as solidified as the backcourt for Pitino, but there is potential there. The Lobos are still waiting — as of media days on Oct. 12 — for transfer Nelly Junior Joseph from Iona to arrive due to visa issues, but when he does join the program he should be a force. Mustapha Amzil comes in from Dayton after averaging 9.3 points per game last season, and he is a skilled passer who will allow this stacked backcourt to do more off the ball. Guard depth is always key to success in college basketball, and New Mexico has that and more this season. Bettors can get this team at 14-1 to win the conference, and that is a price worth running to grab.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

New Mexico played 12 of their final 15 games Over the total last season. Also, they are 6-20-1 ATS as a favorite of -5.5 or less since the start of the 2018-19 season

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	81.5 (#49/#1)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	53%

SAN DIEGO STATE

2022 RECORD: 32-7 SU, 19-18 ATS, 16-22 O/U

Only two starters return from last year's squad, and head coach Brian Dutcher must replace five players who averaged at least 16.0 minutes per game. Dutcher does get two integral pieces to the Aztecs' run back this season in Darrion Trammell and Lamont Butler. Trammell only averaged 9.8 points per game for the season, but averaged 16.5 points in SDSU's wins over Alabama and Creighton in the NCAA Tournament. Butler — who will be remembered for his game-winning jumper against FAU — averaged 8.8 points per game last season. Those two are projected to be part of a starting lineup with two other seniors: Jay Pal — a senior transfer from Campbell — and Jaedon LeDee, who played in all 38 games last season for SDSU and averaged 7.9 points and 5.3 rebounds off the bench. Dutcher has led this program to at least 21 wins every season since taking over the program in 2018 and it would be foolish to expect anything less with four seniors in the starting lineup. From a betting perspective, this team might enter this season somewhat overvalued. The Aztecs were just 19-18-1 ATS last season, and they are conference favorites coming off a run to a national championship. That might lead to the market overvaluing a team with quite a bit of turnover, making SDSU a potential team to consistently bet against when the season begins.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Under is 22-6 as an underdog in San Diego State's last 28 games, which is the highest rate as an underdog in that span.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	76.5 (#86/#6)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	52%

SAN JOSE STATE

2022 RECORD: 21-14 SU, 22-12 ATS, 17-17 O/U

In the four seasons prior to last San Jose State had won a combined 24 games. Last season the Spartans won 21 contests and had their first winning conference record since joining the Mountain West. Tim Miles has two starters back this season, but with five freshmen and three sophomores on this roster it's clear the objective will be to develop the future while competing today. Alvaro Cardenas will be the key cog for SJSU this season. Cardenas was the second-leading scorer last season, and he ranked 15th in the Mountain West in assist rate (20.1%). He will have a sharp-shooter in the starting lineup next to him in Trey Anderson who shot 38.1% on 3-point attempts last season. Forward Robert Vaihola (7.6 PPG, 6.5 RPG) returns as well, and while he is not considered a returning starter — he came off the bench for all 34 games last season — Vaihola is a massive returning piece for Miles. The Spartans like to play slow and with size, so Washington State transfer Adrame Diongue — a 7-foot center who was once a top-100 recruit — figures to be a massive part of the rotation. The Spartans nearly tripled their win total last season, so it should not come as a surprise that the team went 22-12 ATS overall and 13-7 ATS in conference play. Miles loses quite a bit of production from last season, and SJSU will not surprise anyone this season. It would seem that one of the best bets in college basketball is all but gone, but Miles will have this team playing competitive basketball once again.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

At 11-4 ATS as a favorite the past two seasons, the Spartans have the third-best cover percentage as a favorite in that span among teams that have been a favorite in at least seven games.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	73.5 (#121/#8)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	51%

UNLV

2022 RECORD: 19-13 SU, 16-15 ATS, 21-9 O/U

Defense has been the identity for UNLV under head coach Kevin Kruger, but it is the offense that will decide what kind of a season the Rebels will have. UNLV finished with the fourth-worst offensive rating in conference play last year (102.2), according to KenPom. The lack of a true point guard was one of the biggest factors in the Rebels' offensive struggles last season, and that is why the addition of five-star guard Dedan Thomas Jr. is so important. Thomas will start at point guard for UNLV this season, and by all accounts the freshman guard has this offense humming in offseason practices. Around him is a core of returning production, led by Luis Rodriguez and Justin Webster. Rodriguez is a solid wing defender who averaged 10.7 points and 5.7 rebounds per game last season. Webster is a sniper from deep that shot 46.0% from beyond the arc last season. Joining that trio in the starting lineup will be Oklahoma transfer Jalen Hill, a Las Vegas native who averaged 9.7 points and 5.8 rebounds in the Big 12 last season. Defense will still be the identity for UNLV this season. Kruger emphasizes switching and deflections which leads to an offense that gets most of its opportunities in transition. The difference this season should be a team that can actually perform when the game slows down. The Rebels likely won't be a threat to win the conference, but defense will be a strength and if the offense can improve then this team will be a good team to back regularly when the season begins.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over was 19-7 in the Rebels final 26 games last season. Also, they are 2-8 ATS as a home underdog the past two seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	78.5 (#72/#4)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	43A 20%%

UTAH STATE

2022 RECORD: 26-9 SU, 21-13 ATS, 20-14 O/U

Utah State has been one of the premier programs in the Mountain West the last four seasons, but that success has led to its third head coach in four seasons, as Danny Sprinkle — formerly of Montana State — takes over the program. That change at head coach also led to a mass exodus of players in the offseason. Sprinkle lost 100% of the scoring from last season, and was left with a pair of redshirt players and a walk-on in Landon Brenchley who played nine minutes last season. In an effort to rebuild the roster Sprinkle brought in two players from his time at Montana State: Darius Brown and Great Osobor. Osobor was the more effective player of the two transfers — he averaged 10.1 points and 4.6 rebounds last season — and that was despite averaging only 19.0 minutes per game. Brown put up 9.1 points per game under Sprinkle, but he is a deadly shooter who hit 39.7% of his 3-point attempts. Those two figure to be a focal point of an offense which — Sprinkle himself admitted at media days — will have trouble scoring. Given the roster turnover it is surprising to see Utah State tied with Nevada for the sixth-best odds to win the conference. Sprinkle is a good coach that won 52 games his final two seasons at Montana State, but given the roster turnover this team could be one of the worst in the Mountain West. If those odds represent the market perception of Utah State this could be one of the most overvalued teams in the country, let alone the conference in which it plays.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Since the 2018-19 season began, Utah State has the worst road underdog cover percentage in America at 3-13-1 ATS.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	75.0 (#101/#7)
RETURNING STARTERS	0
RETURNING MINUTES	0%

WYOMING

2022 RECORD: 9-22 SU, 11-19 ATS, 16-14 O/U

Things have gone downhill quickly for Jeff Linder and Wyoming since a run to the NCAA Tournament two seasons ago. Wyoming was devastated by injuries last season, and the roster has been completely overhauled this year due to transfers and expiring eligibility for key players. Only one starter returns from last season's team, and the most impactful name will likely be Tulsa transfer Sam Griffin. Griffin is a high-volume scorer who averaged 15.2 points per game on 39.2% shooting from the floor. He is one of three transfers that project to be starters for Linder this season. The other two are Akuel Kot from Fort Lewis and Mason Walters from Jamestown. Walters is an NAIA All-American who averaged 26.6 points and 9.4 rebounds a season ago. The Cowboys have frequently operated out of the post the last few seasons due to the presence of both Graham Ike and Hunter Maldonado, so how this version of the Cowboys looks on offense remains to be seen. It figures to be a tough season for Wyoming regardless, and the team will have to overcome offseason drama that centered around Linder's treatment of players. Two program building blocks are gone, and the staff is rebuilding with lower level transfers. In a conference like this it would not be surprising to see the Cowboys slide to the bottom and put forth a similar record as the 9-22 SU/10-19-1 ATS mark last season.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over is 48-29-1 in conference games since the start of the 2019-20 season. Also, they are 2-7 ATS as a favorite of more than seven points since Jan. of 2021.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	66.5 (#233/#11)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	16%

NORTHEASTERN *PREVIEW*

By Greg Peterson

Despite being the lowest-ranked conference in KenPom and until Fairleigh Dickinson won two NCAA Tournament games, the NEC did not have a 20-win team in the conference.

Merrimack won the conference tournament but could not partake in the NCAA Tournament due to NCAA transition rules, but the Warriors will be eligible for the Big Dance this season after leading the nation in turnovers forced on a per possession basis last season.

The conference welcomes the lone Division II school transitioning to Division I in Le Moyne, who might be best known for defeating Syracuse in an exhibition in 2009.

St. Francis NY, which cut its sports program, was the only team in the conference that covered in more than half of their games last season, with every other team going 121-147-2 against the spread last season — worst among returning teams in a conference in America.

Ranking 29th in possessions per game, Long Island University was the only team to rank in the top 113 in possessions per game last season, looking to the Strickland family to turn things around. Former NBA guard Rod Strickland was hired late in the 2022 offseason and brought in sons Tai Strickland from Georgia Southern and Terrell Strickland from James Madison.

The amount of returning experience has a wide range in the NEC, as St. Francis PA loses each of their top five scorers from last season while Sacred Heart returns seven of their top eight scorers from a season ago.

Only two teams had an offense ranked better than 278th in points scored on a per possession basis, with Fairleigh Dickinson by far the most efficient offense in the NEC, ranking 63rd in points scored per possession. But the Knights lost their coach, Tobin Anderson, and top two scorers from last season.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
64.5	SACRED HEART
64.5	WAGNER
63.0	FARLEIGH DICKINSON
63.0	ST FRANCIS-PA
62.0	CENTRAL CONNECTICUT
62.0	MERRIMACK
58.5	STONEHILL
54.5	LONG ISLAND
53.5	LEMOYNE
71.0	DAVIDSON

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	LEMOYNE
4	SACRED HEART
3	CENTRAL CONNECTICUT
3	FARLEIGH DICKINSON
3	WAGNER
2	LONG ISLAND
2	MERRIMACK
2	STONEHILL
0	ST FRANCIS-PA
1	GEORGE MASON

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
82%	SACRED HEART
70%	LEMOYNE
67%	CENTRAL CONNECTICUT
61%	FARLEIGH DICKINSON
52%	WAGNER
37%	LONG ISLAND
35%	MERRIMACK
32%	STONEHILL
16%	ST FRANCIS-PA
38%	RICHMOND

OHIO VALLEY

PREVIEW

By Adam Burke

Realignment has had some kind of impact on virtually every conference — and there is a lot more to come — but teams moving around did a lot of damage to the Ohio Valley Conference. The conference profile dropped precipitously with the departures of Belmont and Murray State. The Bruins and Racers had been nationally relevant at times and were among the top mid-major programs in the nation.

Jacksonville State and Austin Peay also both moved on, weakening the overall strength of the conference. It looked like the league was there for the taking for Morehead State, who did win the regular season crown, but got upset by eventual champion Southeast Missouri State in the conference tournament.

This season, things appear to be setting up the same. Morehead State enters the season as the big favorite to win the league. Head coach Preston Spradlin will have to find a new frontcourt option without Alex Gross (11.9 PPG, 7.4 RPG), but that is usually an annual strength of his as the bench boss. Point guard Mark Freeman (15.0 PPG) is back and Southeastern transfer Riley Minix averaged 25.4 PPG and 13.6 RPG. He's stepping up in competition, but this is still a weak league with minimal defense.

So, who will challenge the Eagles? That remains to be seen. A lot of the other programs feel pretty interchangeable here, as health will go a long way in deciding who steps up and who doesn't. Health hurt Tennessee State last season with injuries to Christian Brown and Zion Griffin. Brown is back and the backcourt looks strong for the Tigers with him alongside holdover Marcus Fitzgerald Jr. (13.6 PPG) and Eastern Illinois transfer Kinyon Hodges (14.4 PPG).

A lot of teams play fast in this league, which could help the Tigers with those guards running the show. Southeast Missouri State has to replace three double-digit scorers, led by Phillip Russell (18.1 PPG) and actually entered the OVC Tournament with a losing record at 15-16. But, the RedHawks aren't the only team replacing people. Tennessee Tech lost three of its top four scorers. And UT Martin lost 30.9 points per game with Parker Stewart (16.1 PPG) and KJ Simon (14.8 PPG) moving on.

The one team that seemed to stay largely intact is SIU Edwardsville and that's the dark horse to look at here in the OVC. Three of their four double-digit scorers are back in Ray'Sean Taylor (who will miss the start of the season recovering from a torn ACL, 15.5 PPG), Damarco Minor (14.3 PPG), and Shamar Wright (10.6 PPG). The loss of DeeJuan Pruitt (10.6 PPG, 8.5 RPG) hurts on the glass, but this could be one of the league's best defensive teams. Playing any ounce of defense gives you a chance in the Ohio Valley.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
69.5	MOREHEAD STATE
66.0	TENNESSEE STATE
65.5	SE MISSOURI STATE
65.5	SIU EDWARDSVL
64.5	TENN-MARTIN
64.0	ARK-LITTLE ROCK
62.5	TENNESSEE TECH
61.0	SOUTHERN INDIANA
60.0	WESTERN ILLINOIS
58.0	EASTERN ILLINOIS
56.0	LINDENWOOD

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
3	EASTERN ILLINOIS
3	LINDENWOOD
3	MOREHEAD STATE
3	SOUTHERN INDIANA
3	SIU EDWARDSVL
2	SE MISSOURI STATE
2	TENN-MARTIN
2	TENNESSEE TECH
2	WESTERN ILLINOIS
1	ARK-LITTLE ROCK
1	TENNESSEE STATE

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
69%	SIU EDWARDSVL
52%	TENN-MARTIN
49%	MOREHEAD STATE
47%	TENNESSEE TECH
39%	SE MISSOURI STATE
37%	TENNESSEE STATE
36%	EASTERN ILLINOIS
35%	WESTERN ILLINOIS
27%	ARK-LITTLE ROCK
26%	LINDENWOOD
16%	SOUTHERN INDIANA

PAC-12 *PREVIEW*

By Matt Youmans

If there are five kids in a family and the parents are asked to pick their favorite, they probably will be hesitant to name one for fear of offending the other four. But there is an answer because there is always a favorite. Picking the team to beat in the Pac-12 Conference — a family that is about to splinter in several directions — is not easy. The five candidates, in alphabetical order, are Arizona, Colorado, Oregon, UCLA and USC. Oddsmakers and handicappers don't care about offending teams, so the favorite by a narrow margin is Arizona.

The Wildcats, listed at 20-1 odds to win the NCAA championship, get the nod ahead of the Bruins and Trojans, each posted at 30-1 at DraftKings. Oregon (60-1) and Colorado (90-1) are not as popular with the betting public, but it's a mistake to overlook the Ducks and Buffaloes in what appears to be a wide-open race at the top. In a new era of college basketball, which features free agency via the transfer portal and major roster turnover on a yearly basis, forecasting the next five months is a tricky business. The Pac-12 will be a treat, with as many as seven potential NCAA Tournament teams among the 12, but also a trick to predict.

Arizona arguably has the best point guard-center combo with Caleb Love, a North Carolina transfer, and 7-foot senior Oumar Ballo. UCLA coach Mick Cronin has a mystery team that looks like a sleeping giant on paper. USC has the preseason player of the year, senior guard Boogie Ellis, and the conference's top incoming freshman, guard Isaiah Collier. Colorado has two stars to headline the most experienced team in the league. Oregon has an elite big man and high expectations.

The conference's second five consists of Utah, Arizona State, Stanford, Washington and California, which has a completely different look constructed by new coach Mark Madsen. Oregon State and Washington State are fighting an uphill climb and will be left behind when the Pac-12 becomes the Pac-2 — if the league still exists in any form after this season.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
88.0	ARIZONA
86.5	USC
85.0	UCLA
84.5	COLORADO
83.5	OREGON
83.0	STANFORD
81.5	UTAH
79.5	ARIZONA STATE
79.5	WASHINGTON
78.0	WASHINGTON STATE
75.5	CALIFORNIA
71.0	OREGON STATE

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	UTAH
3	COLORADO
3	OREGON
3	OREGON STATE
3	STANFORD
3	USC
2	CALIFORNIA
2	WASHINGTON
1	ARIZONA
1	ARIZONA STATE
1	UCLA
1	WASHINGTON STATE

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
69%	COLORADO
65%	STANFORD
65%	OREGON STATE
63%	UTAH
51%	USC
46%	WASHINGTON
44%	OREGON
38%	ARIZONA
36%	CALIFORNIA
28%	WASHINGTON STATE
28%	ARIZONA STATE
18%	UCLA

ARIZONA

2022 RECORD: 28-7 SU, 17-16 ATS, 18-17 O/U

A first-round NCAA loss to Princeton put a damper on what coach Tommy Lloyd accomplished last season, when the Wildcats won the Pac-12 tournament and went 28-7. If there's a criticism of Lloyd, it's that his teams lack defensive toughness. This year's team is certainly not lacking size, with senior Oumar Ballo one of four 7-footers on the roster. Lloyd lost four of his top six scorers, including 6-foot-11 Azuolas Tubelis and guards Kerr Kriisa and Courtney Ramey, but he's an ace recruiter who knows how to reload. Caleb Love (North Carolina), Jaden Bradley (Alabama) and Keshad Johnson (San Diego State) arrive in Tucson as high-profile transfers. Kylan Boswell is a sophomore who could run the point and allow Love to be more of a scorer. Lloyd has the pieces to the puzzle, and Arizona probably deserves to be the league favorite.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

At 6-14-1, Arizona has the worst underdog cover rate in college basketball since the 2018-19 season began.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	88.0 (#9/#1)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	38%

ARIZONA STATE

2022 RECORD: 23-13 SU, 17-19 ATS, 18-18 O/U

Living on the edge is the norm for Sun Devils coach Bobby Hurley, who always seems perched on the NCAA bubble on Selection Sunday. Arizona State got invited to the First Four in Dayton, Ohio, in March, and Hurley was able to celebrate a 98-73 win. Now he's finding replacements for four starters from that team. Junior guard Frankie Collins is the only returning starter. Collins will get help in the backcourt from junior Jamiya Neal, LSU transfer Adam Miller, Houston Baptist transfer Brycen Long and junior-college addition Malachi Davis. The frontcourt muscle will come from 6-foot-9 senior Alonzo Gaffney and LSU transfer 7-footer Shawn Phillips. The Devils were the fourth and final Pac-12 team to land in the NCAA field last season, but it's doubtful they have enough experience, talent and size to sneak in this time.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over was 16-8-1 in their last 25 games last season. Also, they are just 6-15 ATS as a home favorite the past two seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	79.5 (#67/#8)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	28%

CALIFORNIA

2022 RECORD: 3-29 SU, 13-19 ATS, 15-16 O/U

The Golden Bears were a giant embarrassment last season, finishing 3-29 with two conference wins. A former Stanford star, Mark "Mad Dog" Madsen, is coming to the rescue in Berkeley. Madsen's biggest addition is 6-foot-11 senior Fardaws Aimaq, who played for Madsen at Utah Valley and is a former Player of the Year in the Western Athletic Conference. Aimaq makes the Bears immensely improved. Devin Askew, a senior scoring guard, is one the few returning players. Madsen brought in transfer guards Keonte Kennedy (Memphis), Jaylon Tyson (Texas Tech) and Jalen Cone (Northern Arizona). In terms of a win-total increase, this could be the nation's most improved team if Aimaq stays healthy. It's not going to be a major surprise if the Bears reach .500 and some sort of postseason tournament. Stanford made a mistake by not firing Haase and hiring Madsen.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams that were a favorite in more than two games last season, California went 1-6 straight up as a favorite, tied with Coastal Carolina for the nation's worst record.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	75.5 (#91/#11)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	36%

COLORADO

2022 RECORD: 18-17 SU, 15-20 ATS, 16-19 O/U

Tad Boyle is nowhere near as flamboyant as "Coach Prime" Deion Sanders, but Colorado is coming in basketball, too. The Buffaloes bring back 84.0% of their scoring and two of the league's top five returning scorers in senior forward Tristan da Silva and junior guard KJ Simpson, who each averaged 15.9 points. Cody Williams, a 6-foot-8 forward, arrives as a five-star recruit, and 6-foot-10 Assane Diop is another big part of a hyped recruiting class. Joe Hurlburt is a 6-foot-11 redshirt freshman who figures to contribute to an imposing front line. Boyle has several role players, including 6-foot-8 senior guard Luke O'Brien, surrounding his two veteran stars and many newcomers. Colorado is a bit under the radar, but this is a team ready for prime time. The Buffaloes could win the conference and make a run in March.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Colorado has the worst road cover rate since the start of the 2014-15 season with a 37-67-2 road ATS record.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	84.5 (#27/#4)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	69%

OREGON

2022 RECORD: 21-15 SU, 17-19 ATS, 18-18 O/U

Injuries and inexperience tripped up the Ducks last season, when coach Dana Altman won 21 games yet missed the NCAA Tournament for the second straight time. Oregon has two big men to build around in 6-foot-11 senior N'Faly Dante and 7-foot junior Nate Bittle. Dante is a potential star in a conference loaded with talented centers and power forwards. Senior guards Jermaine Couisnard and Keeshawn Barthelemy add leadership and maturity. Altman always reloads and has done it again by adding touted freshmen Kwame Evans, Mookie Cook and Jackson Shelstad. The top transfers are Kario Oquendo (Georgia) and Jesse Zarzuela (Central Michigan), plus junior-college sharpshooter Jadrian Tracey. If the injury bug stays away, the Ducks can run with Arizona, Colorado, UCLA and USC. The NIT is not something that interests Altman, who will likely bounce back and lead this team to the NCAA Tournament.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over is 15-5-1 in Oregon's neutral-court games since the 2019-20 season began, the fourth-highest Over percentage among teams with more than 10 neutral court games played in that span.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	83.5 (#32/#5)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	44%

OREGON STATE

2022 RECORD: 11-21 SU, 14-15 ATS, 11-20 O/U

In March 2021, Wayne Tinkle coached Cinderella. The Beavers made an improbable run to the Pac-12 tournament title and reached the NCAA Elite Eight. It was downhill from there as Oregon State finished 3-28 the following season and 11-21 last season. The Pope will be called on to create optimism — Jordan Pope, a guard who led the team in scoring (12.6 PPG) as a freshman. Pope, senior Dexter Akanno and sophomore Justin Rochelin will form a more experienced backcourt. The Beavers are counting on 6-foot-9 sophomore Tyler Bilodeau and 6-foot-10 newcomer Thomas Ndong to produce in the paint. Tinkle is a coach you root for to succeed, but his 10th season in Corvallis could be his last. Oregon State has no prayer of contending in the Pac-12 and would be better off in the Mountain West.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams that have been a home favorite at least three times the past two seasons, the Beavers 2-11 ATS record gives them the second-worst cover rate as a home favorite the past two seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	71.0 (#160/#12)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	65%

STANFORD

2022 RECORD: 14-19 SU, 17-16 ATS, 19-14 O/U

It was somewhat surprising that Jerod Haase was retained as coach after a 14-19 finish. Haase has failed to reach the NCAA Tournament in his seven years and needs to stop that disappointing streak to enjoy any job security. He finally has a veteran team, led by senior forwards Spencer Jones (14.1 PPG) and Brandon Angel. It would be impossible to compete in this season's Pac-12 without a horse in the paint, and the Cardinal have that in 7-foot-1, 250-pound junior Maxime Raynaud. Senior guards Michael Jones, a Davidson transfer, and Jared Bynum, a Providence transfer, will see a lot of time in a backcourt that adds touted freshmen Kanaan Carlyle and Andrej Stojakovic, a five-star recruit and son of former NBA star Peja Stojakovic. But Haase has had talented teams and underachieved, so this is a wait-and-see situation.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over is 39-26 in conference play over the past three seasons. Also, they are 10-3 ATS in their last 13 games as a favorite of at least -4.5.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	83.0 (#38/#6)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	65%

UCLA

2022 RECORD: 31-6 SU, 20-15 ATS, 19-18 O/U

Almost everything about the Bruins will be unfamiliar. Jaime Jaquez Jr. and Tyger Campbell, the stars who led the program's return to national prominence, are gone along with almost 90% of last season's scoring. UCLA led the league in scoring defense (60.7 PPG) and claimed the outright conference title. What will be familiar is the intense face of coach Mick Cronin, who has won 99 games in four years in Westwood. Adem Bona, a 6-foot-10 sophomore, is the top returner. The Bruins will be big. Bona is joined by 7-foot-3 Aday Mara from Spain, 6-foot-10 Kenneth Nwuba, 6-foot-10 Devin Williams and 6-foot-9 Berke Buyuktuncel from Turkey. The backcourt is filled with new faces, so keep an eye on Dylan Andrews, Will McClendon, Brandon Williams, Jan Vide and Utah transfer Lazar Stefanovic. UCLA is a fringe Top 25 team in the preseason, but the infusion of talent means the ceiling is high.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

UCLA is 28-15-1 ATS at home the past three seasons. Also, since Jan. 16, 2022, the Bruins are 14-5 ATS as a favorite of at least 11 points.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	85.0 (#25/#3)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	18%

USC

2022 RECORD: 22-11 SU, 17-16 ATS, 17-16 O/U

While he's not the biggest name in a USC recruiting class that ranks among the nation's finest, Isaiah Collier is considered by some to be the country's No. 1 freshman. The bigger name is Bronny James, son of LeBron. But a summer health scare with his heart leaves Bronny's status in doubt. The Trojans will have plenty of talent with or without James. Senior guard Boogie Ellis is the league's preseason Player of the Year after averaging 17.7 points. Junior guard Kobe Johnson and 6-foot-11 senior Joshua Morgan are defensive standouts who also score. The Trojans will defend the rim with muscle and size as 7-foot-1 Vincent Iwuchukwu returns from a health scare and 6-foot-6 senior DJ Rodman, son of Dennis, transfers in from Washington State. USC coach Andy Enfield has an intriguing team that should improve on last year's 22-11 record, health permitting.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

USC is 28-15 ATS on the road since the 2019-20 season began; which is fifth-best in the nation in that span.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	86.5 (#18/#2)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	51%

UTAH

2022 RECORD: 22-11 SU, 17-16 ATS, 17-16 O/U

Craig Smith is a sharp coach, something he proved in his previous stop at Utah State, but he has had problems lifting the Utes up the Pac-12 ladder. Branden Carlson, a 7-foot senior, gave Smith a boost in the offseason by pulling his name out of the NBA Draft. Carlson averaged 16.3 points and 7.5 rebounds on his way to being voted First-Team All-Pac 12. Senior guards Gabe Madsen, who averaged 11.6 points, and Rollie Worster also will be team leaders. The top newcomer will be 6-foot-10 freshman Jake Wahlin, a prep star in Utah. The bad news is Lazar Stefanovic, a double-figure scorer and part-time starter, transferred to UCLA. Smith went 11-20 in his first year and 17-15 last season. This should be Smith's best team in Salt Lake City, a team capable of winning 20 games, but the league schedule will be challenging.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Since the start of the 2019-20 season, the Utes are 12-29-2 ATS in road games, tied with Virginia Tech for the worst road ATS cover rate in that span.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	81.5 (#49/#7)
RETURNING STARTERS	4
RETURNING MINUTES	63%

WASHINGTON

2022 RECORD: 16-16 SU, 17-15 ATS, 19-12 O/U

Keion Brooks Jr. did not live up to his recruiting hype at Kentucky yet blossomed in his first season with Washington by averaging 17.7 points and 6.7 rebounds. The senior forward will again be among the top scorers in the Pac-12. Senior point guard Sahvir Wheeler, another Kentucky transfer, joins Brooks in Seattle this season. Transfer additions are a theme for coach Mike Hopkins, who finished 16-16 in his sixth season and was lucky to be brought back for a seventh. Hopkins is in win-now mode. Rutgers transfer point guard Paul Mulcahy is joined by newcomers Anthony Holland (Fresno State), Moses Wood (Portland) and Nate Calmese (Lamar). Hopkins reached out for help in the offseason and lured 83-year-old coaching legend Larry Brown as a staff analyst. The Huskies have a higher ceiling this season, mostly due to Mulcahy and Wheeler in the backcourt.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over was 18-9-1 in games with a closing total of 143 or less. Also, they are 28-15 ATS in conference play the past two seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	79.5 (#67/#8)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	46%

WASHINGTON STATE

2022 RECORD: 17-17 SU, 16-17 ATS, 14-20 O/U

Instead of dwelling on what the Cougars lost, which was a lot, coach Kyle Smith went to work on a rebuilding job the offseason. Washington State lost leading scorers Mouhamed Gueye to the NBA and TJ Bamba to Villanova as a transfer. DJ Rodman also left for USC. Joseph Yesufu (Kansas), Isaac Jones (Idaho) and Jaylen Wells (Sonoma State) were Smith's top transfer additions. He also recruited prep stars Rueben Chinyelu, Spencer Mahoney and Isaiah Watts. Senior forward Andrej Jakimovski is the team's top returning scorer (7.7 PPG). The Cougars tied for fifth in the Pac-12 and went 17-17 in Smith's fourth year. Smith is a good coach in a tough spot. Washington State will be fortunate to finish .500 even if Chinyelu, a 6-foot-11 freshman from Nigeria who prepped at the NBA Academy, develops into a pro prospect.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Washington State is 4-14 ATS as a favorite of between two and 11 points since Feb. 4, 2022, but they did go 10-4 ATS at home last season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	78.0 (#78/#10)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	28%

PATRIOT LEAGUE *PREVIEW*

By Greg Peterson

The conference has been controlled by Colgate in recent years with the Raiders having a 44-4 straight-up record in conference play the past three seasons and having ranked in the top three in America in 3-point shooting percentage in each of those years.

Teams in the Patriot League went 86-76 against the spread last season in road games but half of the teams in the conference have new coaches who have to try to continue this success.

With the academic requirements of Patriot League teams, very few transfers enter the conference and despite the coaching changes, the average number of returning minutes for each team is 56.1%, which is fourth among all Division I conferences.

Navy has finished either first or second in conference win percentage each of the past three seasons with a consistent approach of playing a slow tempo, but the team does have to replace all five of its top scorers from a season ago.

As a whole, the conference had a slow tempo last season with Lehigh averaging the most possessions per game of any team in the conference. The Mountain Hawks were 140th in possessions per game while every team was 89th or worse in points allowed on a per possession basis. Additionally, six different teams were 268th or lower in total possessions per game last season, with American being the slowest of them all, ranking 358th out of 363 DI teams in possessions per game. But the Eagles might play a different style with Duane Simpkins as the new head coach.

Army, Bucknell, Holy Cross, and Lafayette all made coaching changes in the offseason and the biggest is the return of Dave Paulsen (Holy Cross) to the Patriot League.

Paulsen delivered three NCAA Tournament appearances to Bucknell in 2011, 2012, and 2013 before taking the George Mason job, where he went 95-91 in six seasons before spending the past two seasons as one of the main assistants for Fordham's recent renaissance.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
74.5	COLGATE
66.5	AMERICAN
65.5	LEHIGH
64.0	LOYOLA-MD
63.5	LAFAYETTE
63.0	NAVY
62.0	ARMY
62.0	HOLY CROSS
60.0	BOSTON U
59.5	BUCKNELL

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	AMERICAN
4	LEHIGH
3	COLGATE
3	HOLY CROSS
3	LOYOLA-MD
2	BUCKNELL
2	LAFAYETTE
1	ARMY
1	NAVY
0	BOSTON U

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
76%	AMERICAN
67%	LEHIGH
67%	LOYOLA-MD
64%	HOLY CROSS
61%	COLGATE
53%	LAFAYETTE
45%	BUCKNELL
33%	ARMY
27%	NAVY
26%	BOSTON U

SEC *PREVIEW*

By Zach Cohen

Last year, Alabama was the No. 1 overall seed in the NCAA Tournament, and seven other SEC programs made it to the Big Dance. The Crimson Tide didn't end up living up to their lofty expectations in March Madness, bowing out to eventual runner-up San Diego State. Now, Alabama is expected to take a step back in 2023-24, which isn't surprising considering the Tide need to replace SEC Player of the Year Brandon Miller. But Nate Oats' team isn't going to be a pushover either. Alabama is a program that can now be counted on to have good guard play on a yearly basis, and the team added a big-time transfer in Grant Nelson, who stuck out like a sore thumb playing for North Dakota State last season.

Tennessee is actually the SEC team that enters the 2023-24 season with the most hype. The Vols are +300 favorites to be SEC regular-season champs as they return a bulk of last year's contributors — which is something considering they finished the year as KenPom's sixth-ranked team. Kentucky is right behind with John Calipari's team being +400 to win the conference. The Wildcats have a star-studded freshman class with four five-star recruits — including D.J. Wagner, the son of 2001 McDonald's All-American Dajuan Wagner. Then Texas A&M sits at +450 to be the SEC regular-season champion, with the Aggies another group that returns most of last season's key contributors.

Arkansas, Florida, Auburn and Mississippi State are also expected to be good teams this season. The Gators have the potential to really sneak up on people, as Todd Golden is a rising star on the sideline who brought in a good crop of transfers after a disappointing first season in Gainesville. Things get a bit more questionable when you start talking about Ole Miss, Missouri and LSU. And Georgia, Vanderbilt and South Carolina are looking like the bottom dwellers this season.

It should, however, be noted that at least six SEC teams have made the NCAA Tournament in each of the last five years. SEC teams continue to hire better and better coaches, and the amount of on-court talent is on par with any other conference in basketball. So this conference season should be an absolute gauntlet for everyone. And a few legitimate contenders could easily emerge.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
89.5	TENNESSEE
88.0	ALABAMA
87.5	ARKANSAS
87.0	TEXAS A&M
86.5	KENTUCKY
86.0	AUBURN
84.5	MISSISSIPPI STATE
83.0	FLORIDA
82.5	MISSOURI
81.5	LSU
80.5	OLE MISS
78.5	GEORGIA
78.5	VANDERBILT
74.0	SOUTH CAROLINA

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
5	MISSISSIPPI STATE
4	TEXAS A&M
3	SOUTH CAROLINA
3	TENNESSEE
3	VANDERBILT
2	ALABAMA
2	ARKANSAS
2	AUBURN
2	FLORIDA
2	LSU
2	MISSOURI
2	OLE MISS
1	GEORGIA
0	KENTUCKY

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
81%	TEXAS A&M
79%	MISSISSIPPI STATE
58%	AUBURN
57%	TENNESSEE
46%	SOUTH CAROLINA
41%	VANDERBILT
40%	OLE MISS
37%	MISSOURI
35%	ARKANSAS
34%	GEORGIA
33%	LSU
26%	FLORIDA
25%	ALABAMA
21%	KENTUCKY

ALABAMA

2022 RECORD: 31-6 SU, 21-16 ATS, 16-20 O/U

Nobody in the conference lost as much talent as the Crimson Tide. Brandon Miller (18.8 PPG), Noah Clowney (9.8 PPG, 7.9 RPG), Jahvon Quinerly (8.7 PPG, 3.6 APG) and Charles Bediako (6.4 PPG, 6.0 RPG, 1.8 BPG) are all gone from last year's group. However, Nate Oats did well to bring in Hofstra transfer Aaron Estrada (20.2 PPG, 5.5 RPG, 4.3 APG, 1.5 SPG). He and Mark Sears will make for a high-powered backcourt to execute one of the nation's most up-tempo systems. Rylan Griffen should also make a leap in his sophomore season, and Cal State Fullerton transfer Latrell Wrightsell Jr. (16.3 PPG) can provide an offensive punch. But Grant Nelson is the guy with the ability to help Alabama get back to the top. He looks the part of a future NBA player and averaged 17.9 points and 9.3 rebounds per game for North Dakota State last season. Nelson moves absurdly well for a big man and is working hard on his outside shot. If the stroke improves, the Crimson Tide will be very dangerous this season. And they'll be even more dangerous if freshman Jarin Stevenson lives up to the hype.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Alabama went 10-3 ATS as a favorite of -9.5 or less after Christmas last season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	88.0 (#9/#2)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	25%

ARKANSAS

2022 RECORD: 22-14 SU, 17-17 ATS, 15-20 O/U

What Eric Musselman did in the transfer portal after last season was just outrageous. After losing star freshmen Anthony Black and Nick Smith Jr. to the NBA, the Razorbacks desperately needed an infusion of talent at guard. Well, Musselman ended up landing Temple transfer Khalif Battle (17.9 PPG), Louisville transfer El Ellis (17.7 PPG) and Houston transfer Tramon Mark (10.1 PPG). All three are capable of playing high-level basketball, even in the SEC. And they're joining Davonte Davis, a marksman from deep and a great leader, and freshman Layden Blocker, a highly regarded point guard recruit. When you add all this firepower to a frontcourt that features Trevon Brazile and Makhi Mitchell, you're looking at a team with an extremely high ceiling. Plus, 6-11 freshman Baye Fall looks like a future NBA player. The question with this team is how it'll come together. But Musselman has been able to quickly patch things together before, and there's no reason he can't do it again. The Razorbacks might take some time to figure things out, but don't be surprised if they come together late and start looking like a championship team.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Under was 11-6 in games with a closing total of 141 or less last season. Also, they are 6-1 ATS as a road favorite of at least -4.5 since Feb. 5, 2017.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	87.5 (#15/#3)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	35%

AUBURN

2022 RECORD: 21-13 SU, 16-17 ATS, 21-13 O/U

The odds suggest Auburn is the seventh-best team in this conference, and it's entirely possible the Tigers will be just that. If they are, it means that freshman Aden Holloway lived up to the hype. A five-star recruit out of North Carolina, Holloway chose Auburn over Tennessee, LSU, Syracuse and Miami. He'll instantly get the keys in a Bruce Pearl offense that can occasionally be as potent as any. And joining him in the backcourt is K.D. Johnson, who had a down 2022-23 season but has been a double-digit scorer in the past. The Tigers are also hoping that Denver Jones, who averaged 20.1 points per game at FIU, can provide them with the wing scoring they need. And Auburn should be good in the frontcourt, with Jaylin Williams and Johni Broome making up a good combination. The two of them combined to average 25.4 points and 13.1 rebounds per game last season. Broome also blocked 2.4 shots per game, so he'll be the anchor of the Auburn defense. Auburn was 33rd in the nation in adjusted defensive efficiency last season, and having Broome back should help the Tigers stay in that range, or even improve.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Auburn is ninth in home cover rate as a favorite among teams that have been a home favorite in at least 30 games since the start of the 2015-16 season, going 61-38-2 ATS in that span.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	86.0 (#21/#6)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	58%

FLORIDA

2022 RECORD: 16-17 SU, 16-17 ATS, 16-17 O/U

Florida was a good defensive team in 2022-23, finishing 31st in the nation in KenPom's adjusted defensive efficiency rating. However, the Gators didn't have many guys who could put the ball in the hole. Fortunately, coach Todd Golden did a lot to address that after the season. He brought in Zyon Pullin, who averaged 18.3 points per game last season at UC Riverside. He also added Iona's Walter Clayton Jr., who averaged 16.8 points per game and shot 43.1% on 5.2 3s per game last season. The two transfers should make up a good SEC backcourt, and they'll have a ton of firepower on the wing with Riley Kugel returning. Kugel, a guy that a lot of NBA teams are looking at, should be in for a big leap in his sophomore season. Overall, the spacing should be a lot better this season. Florida will also be extremely tough inside with Seton Hall's Tyrese Samuel and Marshall's Micah Handlogten coming in as the frontcourt starters. All in all, Florida could be one of the more surprising teams in college basketball this year. Golden is a very smart coach and he now has real talent to work with.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Since the 2014-15 season began, Florida is 30-48-1 ATS, tied with Saint Mary's for the worst underdog cover percentage in the country.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	83.0 (#38/#8)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	26%

GEORGIA

2022 RECORD: 16-16 SU, 11-21 ATS, 16-16 O/U

Terry Roberts and Kario Oquendo, who each averaged double digits in scoring last season, are no longer with the Bulldogs. The hope in Athens is that Niagara transfer Noah Thomasson, who averaged 19.5 points, 3.8 rebounds and 3.5 assists per game last year, can provide firepower in the backcourt. Joining him is Silas Demary, a four-star recruit out of North Carolina, and Justin Hill, who averaged 8.6 points and 2.9 assists per game for the Dawgs last year. Demary is more of a playmaker, while the other two will be focused on buckets. The question with the Bulldogs is whether somebody will emerge as a consistent threat on the wing. They could be at a significant disadvantage there against SEC competition. And Georgia will also be rather weak at center. All in all, this team is lacking in talent compared with the rest of the SEC. White is a good coach, but this is more of an NIT roster than a March Madness roster.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Among teams with more than 10 losses the past two seasons, Georgia has the worst ATS record coming off of a straight up loss at 11-29 ATS.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	78.5 (#72/#12)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	34%

KENTUCKY

2022 RECORD: 22-12 SU, 16-18 ATS, 21-13 O/U

John Calipari has been under a lot of heat for Kentucky's performance in recent seasons, but he has a loaded team this year featuring four five-star freshmen. The most exciting of the bunch might be Robert Dillingham, who is a dynamic scorer. He's absurdly quick, has serious athleticism and can create his own shot. D.J. Wagner also has the looks of a tremendous guard, as he can score for himself while also setting up his teammates. But 6-8 Justin Edwards was the highest-ranked recruit in the class and could be one of the top picks in the 2024 NBA Draft. He is an outrageous athlete and should be a matchup nightmare when he sizes up and plays power forward. Aaron Bradshaw is the fourth five-star, and he'll likely man the middle for Kentucky at 7-1. He's an incredibly talented kid whom Calipari will be able to mold however he sees fit. And it's also hard to ignore four-star Reed Sheppard, who should be a great shooter as a freshman. Kentucky is simply bringing in a ton of talent on a team that already has Antonio Reeves, who averaged 14.4 points per game last season. And West Virginia transfer Tre Mitchell is a proven commodity at forward and gives the Wildcats a little seasoning. No SEC team is as talented as Kentucky. And this collection of freshmen fits better together than some of Calipari's previous teams. That said, the sky's the limit in Lexington.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Kentucky is 2-10 ATS in neutral-court games the past two seasons and is the only team in the country with 10 ATS losses in that situation.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	86.5 (#18/#5)
RETURNING STARTERS	0
RETURNING MINUTES	21%

LSU

2022 RECORD: 14-19 SU, 10-22 ATS, 16-16 O/U

Tulane's Jalen Cook was one of the best players in the transfer portal as he averaged 19.9 points, 4.9 rebounds, 2.9 assists and 1.8 steals per game for the Green Wave last season. So it was absolutely massive that LSU was able to add him. This is a team that was desperate for talent, and Cook should immediately be one of the better guards in the SEC. LSU also did well to add Vanderbilt's Jordan Wright and Nevada's Will Baker. All three will start for the Tigers immediately, and they make this a much better team. It'll also be interesting to see how Santa Clara transfer Carlos Stewart's game translates. He averaged 15.2 points per game last season, so he might add some offensive punch off the bench. But overall, I'm still down on the overall roster that Matt McMahon has put together, and I'm starting to question whether he's cut out for a job like this. Last year, the Tigers were outside of the top 150 in both offensive and defensive efficiency. And while this is a new cast of characters, I can see the result being somewhat similar. This team went 14-19 last season and another losing record seems likely.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

LSU ended last season going 4-15 ATS in their final 19 games.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	81.5 (#49/#10)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	33%

MISSISSIPPI STATE

2022 RECORD: 21-13 SU, 16-18 ATS, 13-21 O/U

Mississippi State was ninth in KenPom's adjusted defensive efficiency last season and didn't lose much from that group. So I'd expect the Bulldogs to be pretty damn good defensively in 2023-24. But this team should be a lot better offensively, which is why it seems there's a chance Mississippi State can do some real damage in the SEC this season. In addition to bringing back big man Tolu Smith, who averaged 15.7 points and 8.5 rebounds per game last season, Mississippi State hit big in the transfer portal by landing Marshall's Andrew Taylor. Last season, Taylor averaged 20.2 points, 4.7 rebounds and 4.7 assists per game and shot 36.4% from the outside. He's a big-time shotmaker out of the backcourt and should give this team some much-needed offensive juice, even if he does end up coming off the bench. His presence completely changes the outlook of this team.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Under went 10-1 in games with a closing total of 133 or higher last season and the Under was 12-2 in non-conference games last season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	84.5 (#27/#7)
RETURNING STARTERS	5
RETURNING MINUTES	79%

MISSOURI

2022 RECORD: 25-10 SU, 18-17 ATS, 18-17 O/U

MIssouri had as good an offense as anyone last season. The Tigers finished ninth in the nation in adjusted offensive efficiency, but their defense was a big weakness. And that bubbled to the surface when they were upset by Princeton in the NCAA Tournament. Now, this Tigers team is going to look very different. Missouri lost four of its five leading scorers: Kobe Brown (15.8 PPG, 6.4 RPG, 2.5 APG) and D'Moi Hodge (14.7 PPG), who are off to the NBA, and DeAndre Gholston (10.9 PPG) and Isiaih Mosley (9.6 PPG). Noah Carter (9.6 PPG, 4.0 RPG) is back to man one of the forward spots, and he should be in for a big year. And Nick Honor (7.9 PPG, 2.9 APG) is a real player at the point and has a lot more to him than we have seen the past couple of years. The Tigers also did well in the transfer portal, bringing in Colorado State's John Tonje (14.6 PPG) and Oral Roberts' Connor Vanover (12.7 PPG, 7.2 RPG, 3.2 BPG). Vanover has the potential to completely change the identity of this team. He's a legit rim protector and should guarantee that the Tigers defense is nowhere near as bad as it was last season. The issue is that the offense won't be as good. This will be a more balanced team, which could be a good thing. But the talent drop-off makes coach Dennis Gates' job harder. Perhaps highly touted freshman Trent Pierce can contribute sooner than later, which would change that a bit.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

As a favorite of at least six points, Missouri is 8-15 ATS and are 1-5 ATS as favorite of at least -6 since Dec. 2022.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	82.5 (#44/#9)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	37%

OLE MISS

2022 RECORD: 12-21 SU, 11-20 ATS, 17-16 O/U

Outside of Florida, Ole Miss could be the SEC team with the best chance of exceeding expectations this season. Chris Beard is now the head coach of this program. While he leaves a lot to be desired with his off-court behavior, there's no denying that he's one of the best coaches in all of college basketball. Beard gets Matthew Murrell (14.4 PPG) and Jaemyn Brakefield (11.1 PPG, 5.7 RPG) back after the two led the team in scoring last year, and he also added some serious talent from the transfer portal. Georgetown's Brandon Murray averaged 13.7 points per game last season, and he's slated to slot in as a starter on the wing. Beard also got guard Jaylen Murray, who averaged 12.5 points per game at Saint Peter's. Beard also landed Oklahoma State center Moussa Cisse, who averaged 8.0 rebounds and 1.9 blocks per game last season, and Western Kentucky's Jamarion Sharp, who averaged 4.1 blocks per game last year. With those two, the Rebels will have somebody on the court who can legitimately anchor the paint defensively at all times. The Rebels also added Auburn's Allen Flanigan, a microwave scorer who once looked like a legit NBA prospect. Overall, the talent is there for the Rebels to make a big one-year turnaround. And it isn't outrageous to think this team can contend in the conference if things break right.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Ole Miss was 4-13 ATS as an underdog last season, including a 2-8 ATS record as an underdog of at least five points since the start of 2023.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	80.5 (#60/#11)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	40%

SOUTH CAROLINA

2022 RECORD: 11-21 SU, 18-14 ATS, 15-15 O/U

South Carolina losing GG Jackson II is going to hurt, as this was a team that was seriously lacking in talent a year ago. So losing an NBA-caliber player isn't exactly going to help. But one thing head coach Lamont Paris did after the season was prioritize experience in the transfer portal. He brought in Ta'Lon Cooper (Minnesota), Stephen Clark (Citadel), BJ Mack (Wofford) and Myles Stute (Vanderbilt), who have all been big contributors at the college level already. And the Gamecocks did get Meechie Johnson back after a season in which he averaged 12.7 points, 3.7 rebounds and 3.6 assists per game. With that in mind, South Carolina won't be quite as green as it was last season, and the team should be a little more coachable. I'm not sure that will result in a winning record, but I think this team will be a lot more competitive in conference play. And I wouldn't be surprised if this is a group with a winning ATS record.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over is 31-11-2 in the Gamecocks road games the past four seasons, the highest road Over rate among teams with at least 20 road games played in that stretch.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	74.0 (#114/#14)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	46%

TENNESSEE

2022 RECORD: 25-11 SU, 18-18 ATS, 13-21 O/U

Tennessee lost Olivier Nkamhoua and Julian Phillips after last season but brought back Zakai Zeigler (10.7 PPG, 5.4 APG, 2.0 SPG), Santiago Vescovi (12.5 PPG, 4.6 RPG, 3.1 APG, 1.8 SPG) and Josiah Jordan-James (10.0 PPG, 4.7 RPG, 1.2 SPG). That's the core of last year's Volunteers team, which finished the season sixth in KenPom's adjusted efficiency rankings. That said, Rick Barnes' team should be special again in 2023-24, and the arrival of Northern Colorado transfer Dalton Knecht might put the Vols over the top. Last season, Knecht averaged 20.2 points and 7.2 rebounds per game, while also shooting 38.1% from 3 (on 6.3 attempts per game). Tennessee really needed a little firepower from behind the 3-point line, so Knecht is going to help in a big way. Now, this team has the toughness to shut opponents down and has the ability to go toe to toe with anyone offensively.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Tennessee is 16-6 ATS since Dec. 5, 2019 as a favorite of at least 17 points.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	89.5 (#6/#1)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	57%

TEXAS A&M

2022 RECORD: 25-10 SU, 23-12 ATS, 16-19 O/U

There are other teams with more upside, but the Aggies might have what it takes to win the SEC this season. Wade Taylor IV is my pick to win SEC Player of the Year, as the junior returns after having averaged 16.3 points, 3.9 assists and 1.7 steals per game last season. He really turned things up a notch toward the end of the season, finishing with at least 21 points in seven of his final 12 games. Taylor is a dynamic off-the-dribble shooter and he is fearless late in games. Texas A&M also brings back Tyrece Radford (13.3 PPG, 5.3 RPG), Henry Coleman III (9.0 PPG, 5.7 RPG) and Julius Marble (9.1 PPG, 4.1 RPG). And the team brought in two impact transfers, with Eli Lawrence (12.2 PPG, 4.1 RPG, 1.1 SPG) coming over from Middle Tennessee State and Jace Carter (16.6 PPG, 7.0 RPG, 1.8 SPG) coming from Illinois Chicago. Overall, the Aggies lost only one key contributor from last year, Dexter Dennis, and this was a group that was top 50 on offense and defense in KenPom's adjusted efficiency rankings. Buzz Williams has himself a squad in College Station.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

At 46-28 ATS the past two seasons, the Aggies have the most covered spreads over the past two seasons and are 29-14 ATS in SEC play in that span.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	87.0 (#17/#4)
RETURNING STARTERS	4
RETURNING MINUTES	81%

VANDERBILT

2022 RECORD: 22-15 SU, 20-17 ATS, 20-17 O/U

When Jerry Stackhouse was hired as the head coach at Vanderbilt, people expected this to be a good offensive team. Stackhouse did a good job of churning out high-level offenses as a G League coach with Raptors 905, and we have seen some good stuff out of the Commodores under him. Last season, Vanderbilt was 30th in the nation in adjusted offensive efficiency. So there is proof that Stackhouse can get a lot out of his talent in Nashville. But Vanderbilt still missed out on the tournament last season, and the Commodores still haven't made an appearance in March Madness since he arrived. And it doesn't feel likely that this group will change that. Losing big man Liam Robbins, who averaged 15.0 points, 6.8 rebounds and 3.2 blocks per game last season, is going to be really tough to overcome. Stackhouse did bring in some talent from the transfer portal, with Lehigh's Evan Taylor probably the best of the bunch. And Tyrin Lawrence and Ezra Manjon make up a good backcourt. But this team is somewhat lacking in star power, and they're going to be very small compared to the rest of the SEC. Only one player on this roster is 6-foot-10 or taller. That will be very tough to overcome unless Vanderbilt shoots the hell out of the 3-ball.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Under went 8-2 in games with a closing total of 144 or greater last season. Also, they are 25-8-2 ATS in a road or neutral-court environment the past two seasons.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	78.5 (#72/#12)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	41%

SOUTHERN

PREVIEW

By Tyler Shoemaker

Living in Greenville, S.C., the Southern Conference is near and dear to my heart. Not only does this conference provide an opportunity for me to attend some games, but the brand of basketball commonly played in this conference is electric and so fun to watch.

Key storylines heading into this season are whether or not my hometown Furman Paladins can recapture the magic from last season that put them in Cinderella's slippers in March. Western Carolina returning the most production in league, 20-win Samford reloading via the transfer portal after its first 20-win season this millennium, and whether cellar dwellers from last season in The Citadel and VMI (17 combined wins) can climb out of the basement. East Tennessee State will be breaking in new head coach Brooks Savage, ETSU's fourth coach in five years.

After losing its top two scorers from last season's NCAA Tournament run — Jalen Slawson (15.6 PPG) and Mike Bothwell (17.7 PPG) — Furman will look to JP Pegues to lead the charge this season after averaging 11.9 points per game last season. Other stars of this conference to keep an eye on are UNC Greensboro guard Keshaun Langley, Western Carolina guard Vonterius Woolbright, Samford forward Jermaine Marshall and Mercer forward Jalyn McCreary.

SoCon coaches voted Marshall the best pro prospect of the bunch after he averaged 13.3 points and 6.5 rebounds per game last season. In the same poll, coaches voted Wooldbright the player who scares them the most. The Citadel, after not having a player average more than 7.7 points or 3.3 rebounds per game last season, brought in 6-foot-10 Quentin Millora-Brown from Vanderbilt to help bolster the offensive production.

The T Shoe Index has a "points added" metric, which is essentially a measure of how fun a team is (technically, it's how many points towards an Over/Under a team contributes, but that doesn't sound as fun); along with your tempo, how good is your offense and how bad is your defense? In this metric, Furman is in the top 50 nationally with its run-and-gun style of play that makes them so successful and fun to watch, while Chattanooga and Samford are both in the top 100 nationally as well. Not a single SoCon team is in the bottom 100, further emphasizing my point that this league is one of the most under-the-radar fun conferences in college basketball.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
75.0	FURMAN
74.0	UNC-GREENSBORO
73.0	SAMFORD
69.5	WESTERN CAROLINA
69.0	UT-CHATTANOOGA
66.5	EAST TENN STATE
66.5	MERCER
65.0	WOFFORD
62.0	THE CITADEL
55.0	VMI

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
3	FURMAN
3	THE CITADEL
3	WESTERN CAROLINA
2	EAST TENN STATE
2	MERCER
2	SAMFORD
2	WOFFORD
1	UNC-GREENSBORO
1	UT-CHATTANOOGA
0	VMI

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
73%	WESTERN CAROLINA
60%	FURMAN
50%	SAMFORD
48%	UNC-GREENSBORO
41%	THE CITADEL
38%	MERCER
37%	WOFFORD
34%	EAST TENN STATE
23%	UT-CHATTANOOGA
17%	VMI

SOUTHLAND *PREVIEW*

By Greg Peterson

Five of the 10 Southland teams had an offseason coaching change, tied for the highest percentage of coaching turnover of any Division I conference, and each of these coaches inherited a flawed defense.

Only four teams in the conference return at least one player who averaged at least 9.5 points per game last season with one of those being McNeese State, which returns Christian Shumate, who put up 15.1 points and 9.7 rebounds per game last season. Shumate will have help from six transfers who played in Division I last season. There are a lot of moving parts in a conference that had only one team that ranked 143rd or better in turnovers per possession and six teams that were 300th or worse.

Lamar is one of the few teams that returns the bulk of its scoring. Four of its top six scorers are back. The Cardinals will look for a clean bill of health for 6-foot-9 center Adam Hamilton, who averaged 11.0 points and 5.8 rebounds per game in nine games last season.

Southeastern Louisiana returns the most minutes and percentage of points per game from last season with four of last season's top six scorers back, while New Orleans brings back the top individual scorer in Jordan Johnson. Johnson logged 18.0 points per game on 48.2% 3-point shooting, which was 11th among qualifying Division I players last season. The team was 14th in 3-point shooting percentage but also 362nd among 363 Division I teams in turnovers per possession.

Former Maryland assistant Tevon Saddler takes over at Nicholls after Austin Claunch left to join the Alabama coaching staff. Saddler has to replace seven of the Colonels' top eight scorers from last season, though assists leader Micah Thomas returns.

The Northwestern State Demons bring in Rick Cabrera as their new coach after most recently being the coach for Tallahassee Community College. Cabrera will have to replace the top three scorers from last season.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
66.5	MCNEESE STATE
63.5	NEW ORLEANS
63.0	SE LOUISIANA
63.0	TEXAS A&M-COMM
61.5	NICHOLLS STATE
61.5	TEXAS A&M CC
59.0	LAMAR
57.5	INCARNATE WORD
57.0	NORTHWESTERN STATE
54.0	HOUSTON CHRISTIAN

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	SE LOUISIANA
3	LAMAR
3	NEW ORLEANS
2	MCNEESE STATE
2	TEXAS A&M-COMM
1	HOUSTON CHRISTIAN
1	INCARNATE WORD
1	NICHOLLS STATE
1	NORTHWESTERN STATE
0	TEXAS A&M CC

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
69%	NEW ORLEANS
60%	LAMAR
48%	MCNEESE STATE
48%	SE LOUISIANA
44%	TEXAS A&M-COMM
36%	HOUSTON CHRISTIAN
26%	INCARNATE WORD
13%	NICHOLLS STATE
6%	TEXAS A&M CC
5%	NORTHWESTERN STATE

SUMMIT *PREVIEW*

By Zach Cohen

The Summit League was dominated by Oral Roberts last season. However, Paul Mills, who guided Oral Roberts to four straight winning seasons, is now the head coach at Wichita State. The Golden Eagles promoted from within, tabbing Russell Springmann as Mills' replacement. In Springmann, the team has a familiar face to keep the culture in place. He spent time at Florida and Texas earlier in his career, so he's an exciting mind who could have more to offer.

Losing Max Abmas, a two-time Summit League Player of the Year, to Texas is another blow. Perhaps Issac McBride can rise to the occasion after an efficient scoring season. But can anybody replace 7-foot-5 center Connor Vanover? The Summit League Defensive Player of the Year transferred to Missouri after averaging 12.7 points, 7.2 rebounds and 3.2 blocks per game last season.

South Dakota State looks like the team to beat. The team lost its second and third leading scorers from last season, but Zeke Mayo is back after averaging 18.2 points per game. He has a shot at walking away from this season as conference Player of the Year. And the Jackrabbits have talent in the frontcourt to complement his firepower. Wyoming transfer Nate Barnhart, a 7-footer, comes in as a proven rim protector. He gives them some much-needed grit.

North Dakota State will have a hard time replacing Grant Nelson, a legit NBA prospect who transferred to Alabama. But the Bison bring back enough of last year's rotation, with Andrew Morgan and Boden Skunberg being two players that can lead this team. And North Dakota State has talented players coming into the program, with Eli Bradley one to be excited about. He's a marksman out of Bishop Gorman, one of the top high schools in the country. This is a deep team that plays the right way. That should give them a shot at contending.

I would have loved St. Thomas if Andrew Rohde didn't transfer out. A first-team All-Summit League player, he was good enough to make the move to Virginia. Without him and Riley Miller, the program is facing uncertainty. They'll need a big year out of Raheem Anthony, who averaged 24.6 points per game in D3 last season.

South Dakota will be a very interesting team to figure out. Last year, the Coyotes jacked up shots from behind the 3-point line. But South Dakota lost a lot of last year's contributors. And the Coyotes replace them with players who prefer attacking the basket. South Dakota also expects UCF transfer Lahat Thioune to be a legitimate post presence. So this team is going to be playing a completely different offensive style than last season. That could be effective if these guys play to their potential. This should be a good defensive team.

Kansas City is solid defensively and plays at a slow tempo. When the Roos are at least decent offensively, they're going to have a chance to win games. With that in mind, Marvin Menzies' team can't be slept on this season. If any of the Roos' transfers can come in and make an instant impact offensively, they have a good shot at finishing in the top half of the conference. Anderson Kopp has an outside shot at being one of the five best players in this conference, but he needs some help.

A lot would have to break right for North Dakota to be relevant in the conference this year. I just don't see any legitimate go-to guys on this team. Perhaps Treysen Eaglestaff can step up and fill that role. But the Fighting Hawks don't play a winning style of basketball. Last season, they were a mediocre 3-point shooting team, and they were miserable at guarding the 3. That's a bad combination.

There isn't much to say about Denver and Omaha. The Pioneers will put a lot on the plate of guard Tommy Bruner, who averaged 15.9 points and 4.2 assists per game last year. But he doesn't have much help around him. That'll make it easy for opponents to defend Denver. Meanwhile, the Mavericks do return a lot of talent from a young team, so perhaps they'll be a bit more competitive this season. But head coach Chris Crutchfield has a lot of work to do in order to get this team back into the top half of the conference. The good news is that he does appear to be building something nice with Omaha.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
70.5	ORAL ROBERTS
69.5	SOUTH DAKOTA STATE
68.0	NORTH DAKOTA STATE
66.0	NORTH DAKOTA
66.0	ST THOMAS-MN
63.5	NEBRASKA-OMAHA
62.5	DENVER
62.5	MISSOURI-KC
58.0	SOUTH DAKOTA

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	NORTH DAKOTA STATE
4	NEBRASKA-OMAHA
3	MISSOURI-KC
3	NORTH DAKOTA
3	SOUTH DAKOTA STATE
2	DENVER
2	ORAL ROBERTS
2	ST THOMAS-MN
0	SOUTH DAKOTA

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
83%	NEBRASKA-OMAHA
74%	NORTH DAKOTA STATE
68%	SOUTH DAKOTA STATE
61%	NORTH DAKOTA
52%	DENVER
49%	MISSOURI-KC
45%	ST THOMAS-MN
33%	ORAL ROBERTS
26%	SOUTH DAKOTA

SUN BELT *PREVIEW*

By Greg Peterson

Going from worst to first in the Sun Belt is more attainable than in most conferences. In the first year with many former Conference USA teams moving to the Sun Belt, Southern Miss went from 1-17 in Conference USA to winning the Sun Belt regular-season crown, while Georgia State finished last after making the 2022 NCAA Tournament.

Southern Miss turns to Illinois and St. John's transfer Andre Curbelo to keep the Golden Eagles near the top of the conference after losing three of their top four scorers from last season, but Austin Crowley, who averaged 16 points per game, returns.

Arkansas State, which finished last in the conference last year, will look to crank up the tempo with former Alabama assistant Bryan Hodgson taking over as coach and bringing in a host of transfers who should lead to great offensive efficiency and more versatility.

The conference features a wide variety of styles with Marshall and James Madison ranking 22nd or faster in possessions per game while five teams were 292nd or lower in possessions per game.

After making the 2023 NCAA Tournament, Louisiana is tasked with replacing its top three scorers from last season and the only two players who had more than 4.1 rebounds per game last season. G Kentrell Garnett is among the returnees. He had the 14th-best 3-point shooting percentage among qualifying Division I players at 47.3% two seasons ago before making 41.7% of his 3s last season.

Outside shooting is at a premium as the conference had six teams rank 302nd or worse in 3-point shooting percentage, which makes James Madison dangerous. The Dukes ranked 31st in the country in 3-point shooting percentage last season and return top scorer Terrence Edwards, who's 45.8% 3-point shooting was 31st among qualifying Division I players.

The conference did not have a team in the top 42 in points allowed on a per-possession basis but had seven teams in the top 100 in points allowed per possession.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
74.0	JAMES MADISON
73.0	APPALACHIAN STATE
72.5	MARSHALL
72.5	SOUTH ALABAMA
71.0	ARKANSAS STATE
70.0	LA-LAFAYETTE
70.0	OLD DOMINION
69.5	TEXAS STATE
69.0	GEORGIA STATE
68.0	SOUTHERN MISS
67.0	GA SOUTHERN
67.0	TROY
64.5	COASTAL CAROLINA
63.0	LA-MONROE

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
5	APPALACHIAN STATE
4	GEORGIA STATE
3	ARKANSAS STATE
3	OLD DOMINION
3	TEXAS STATE
2	JAMES MADISON
2	LA-LAFAYETTE
2	MARSHALL
2	SOUTH ALABAMA
2	SOUTHERN MISS
2	TROY
1	COASTAL CAROLINA
1	GA SOUTHERN
1	LA-MONROE

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
75%	APPALACHIAN STATE
66%	ARKANSAS STATE
56%	GEORGIA STATE
48%	LA-MONROE
47%	SOUTHERN MISS
46%	TEXAS STATE
46%	JAMES MADISON
42%	OLD DOMINION
41%	LA-LAFAYETTE
38%	MARSHALL
35%	TROY
27%	SOUTH ALABAMA
22%	GA SOUTHERN
21%	COASTAL CAROLINA

SWAC *PREVIEW*

By Greg Peterson

The SWAC champion has received a 16 seed for the NCAA Tournament in 23 of the past 24 seasons due in large part to teams challenging themselves out of conference and playing lots of buy games on the road as big underdogs, leading to losses.

As a whole, the conference went 72-63 against the spread in non-conference games last season and many teams within the conference will look to strong defense and slow tempos to stay in games and perhaps spring upsets.

Grambling was the conference's top defense last season, ranking seventh in the nation in points allowed on a per-possession basis, but brought back just two players who logged more than three rebounds per game last season.

Former NBA guard Mo Williams, the coach of Jackson State, brought in a former consensus top-100 recruit and former starter at Ole Miss, Daeshun Ruffin, to help a team that was 348th in turnovers committed per possession. Unfortunately Ruffin announced in late September that he will miss the 2023-24 season because of injury.

The Tigers do have leaders in points (Ken Evans) and assists (Chase Adams) back but likely will lean on post play with Alabama State transfer Jordan O'Neal to fortify things after averaging 7.1 rebounds per game last season.

The team that represents the conference in the NCAA Tournament is usually not the regular-season champion, and that was the case with Texas Southern last season. The Tigers have won five of the last six SWAC tournaments and did so last season after finishing eighth in the regular season. They will look to improve despite returning just one of their top four scorers.

Bethune Cookman hopes to make noise after ranking 357th in 2-point shooting percentage last season. Point guard Zion Harmon returns after averaging 13.7 points, 2.8 assists and 1.0 steals per game last season. Fellow guard Damani McEntire has generated at least 2.0 steals per game each of the past two seasons, ranking 41st among qualifying Division I players in steals per game last season.

In each of the past two seasons, Alcorn State has won the league's regular-season crown but settled for the NIT after failing to win the SWAC tournament. Three of the top four scorers from last season return, including Jeremiah Kendall, who averaged 11.1 points and a team-high 6.7 rebounds per game.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
68.0	TEXAS SOUTHERN
67.0	JACKSON STATE
65.0	GRAMBLING
64.5	ALCORN STATE
62.5	SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY
59.0	ARK-PINE BLUFF
59.0	PRAIRIE VIEW A&M
58.5	ALABAMA A&M
57.5	FLORIDA A&M
57.0	BETHUNE-COOKMAN
56.0	ALABAMA STATE
51.5	MISSISSIPPI VALLEY ST

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
5	JACKSON STATE
3	ALABAMA STATE
3	ALCORN STATE
3	MISSISSIPPI VALLEY ST
2	ALABAMA A&M
2	ARK-PINE BLUFF
2	BETHUNE-COOKMAN
2	FLORIDA A&M
2	GRAMBLING
2	TEXAS SOUTHERN
1	SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY
0	PRAIRIE VIEW A&M

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
79%	JACKSON STATE
48%	ALCORN STATE
48%	MISSISSIPPI VALLEY ST
47%	ARK-PINE BLUFF
47%	ALABAMA STATE
45%	TEXAS SOUTHERN
44%	BETHUNE-COOKMAN
42%	GRAMBLING
36%	ALABAMA A&M
33%	FLORIDA A&M
19%	SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY
5%	PRAIRIE VIEW A&M

WAC *PREVIEW*

By Mike Somich

Defined as a one-bid league, the WAC promises to be a fun and competitive conference once again in 2023-24 despite the defections of New Mexico State and Sam Houston State. Last year's conference tournament champion Grand Canyon has been installed at the top of the preseason rankings and for good reason. The Lopes lost Chance McMillian to Texas Tech in the portal but return three of their top four scorers, including leading scorer Rayshon Harrison, who averaged 17.8 PPG for this up-tempo offense that was 23rd in the nation from beyond the arc, shooting 37.6%. Grand Canyon was able to add depth through the portal as well, especially up front, landing three players over 6-foot-8 from Power Five schools to address their rebounding needs.

Another team that can light it up from the outside, Stephen F. Austin, projects to finish second in the conference behind the NCAA's 10th-best long-range percentage, 38.0%. They return their top four scorers, including Sadaidriene Hall and former Kansas recruit Latrell Jossell, who both took nice steps forward in their sophomore campaigns.

The Redhawks from Seattle University boast the most returning minutes for any team in the WAC, including senior Cameron Tyson, who is one of the preseason favorites for WAC Player of the Year. All five projected starters are juniors or seniors for a Redhawks team that will need to improve from beyond the arc to have a chance at a WAC title. Expect them to offset poor shooting with a quick tempo. Last season they ranked 75th in the country in possessions with 72.0 per game.

Last year's regular-season champion, Utah Valley, is expected to see a dramatic fall from grace this year. After a 15-3 conference record, they are projected to finish eighth of 11 this season due mainly to losses in the transfer portal and to graduation. Just how much did they lose? Jaden McClanahan and Ethan Potter are the leading returning scorers with 2.2 and 1.3 points per game, respectively. The Wolverines did add five players in the transfer portal, but this will not be anything like last season's team.

If you are looking for a wild card, look no further than University of Texas Arlington. They finished a paltry 6-12 in conference last season, but they hit the portal hard and brought in six players, including Phillip Russell and DaJuan Gordon. Last year, Russell averaged 18.1 points and 5.1 assists per game and shot 36.1% from distance. If the Mavericks gel, they have a chance to upset the apple cart in the WAC.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
76.5	GRAND CANYON
74.5	SF AUSTIN
73.0	SEATTLE
71.0	ABILENE CHRISTIAN
69.0	CAL BAPTIST
69.0	UTAH VALLEY STATE
68.0	TX-ARLINGTON
67.5	SOUTHERN UTAH
66.5	TARLETON STATE
64.5	UTAH TECH
63.0	TX-RIO GRANDE

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
4	SF AUSTIN
4	UTAH TECH
3	SEATTLE
3	TARLETON STATE
3	TX-RIO GRANDE
2	ABILENE CHRISTIAN
2	GRAND CANYON
2	TX-ARLINGTON
1	CAL BAPTIST
0	SOUTHERN UTAH
0	UTAH VALLEY STATE

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
72%	SEATTLE
58%	SF AUSTIN
57%	GRAND CANYON
56%	ABILENE CHRISTIAN
35%	TX-RIO GRANDE
31%	TARLETON STATE
31%	CAL BAPTIST
28%	TX-ARLINGTON
24%	UTAH TECH
3%	UTAH VALLEY STATE
3%	SOUTHERN UTAH

WEST COAST *PREVIEW*

By Jonathan Von Tobel

The West Coast Conference has been disrespected by many who check in during the NCAA Tournament to chastise Gonzaga for not playing in a tougher conference. Those who follow college basketball know the WCC has been a solid conference for many years with good programs like San Francisco and Santa Clara that have been regularly winning 20 games every season. Still, Gonzaga is the king of the conference with St. Mary's right behind and this season it seems that the Bulldogs' control of the WCC is at risk.

At WCC media days it was the Gaels who were voted the best team in the conference by the coaches, not the reigning regular season champions. It is not a shock that St. Mary's is considered to be the best team this season when you consider the returning talent, but the vote is an example of the type of season Gonzaga could be in for. Five impact players from last season are gone, no blue chip prospect will don a Bulldogs jersey and the roster is built on transfers from all around the country. The betting market has Gonzaga as the odds-on favorite to win the WCC regular season title, but it's a price that seems to be inflated by the history of the program.

The conference should challenge for more than just two bids this season as well. San Francisco landed a massive transfer in Mike Sharavjamts that should help the Dons push for 20 wins once again, Herb Sendek has Santa Clara on the verge of turning into an NBA prospect hot-spot and Loyola Marymount is a deep team with hopes of building on a 19-12 season. There is also some intriguing depth to this conference when it comes to upstart teams like Portland and Pacific.

Don't be fooled by the talking heads in March. This is a good conference with plenty of talent.

POWER RATING

#	TEAM
90.5	GONZAGA
81.0	ST. MARYS (CA)
79.0	SAN FRANCISCO
75.5	LOYOLA-MARYMOUNT
72.5	SANTA CLARA
71.5	PORTLAND
70.0	PACIFIC
69.5	PEPPERDINE
67.5	SAN DIEGO

RETURNING STARTERS

#	TEAM
3	PACIFIC
3	ST. MARYS (CA)
2	GONZAGA
2	LOYOLA-MARYMOUNT
2	PEPPERDINE
2	PORTLAND
2	SAN FRANCISCO
1	SAN DIEGO
0	SANTA CLARA

RETURNING MINUTES

%	TEAM
70%	ST. MARYS (CA)
62%	PACIFIC
51%	PORTLAND
45%	PEPPERDINE
41%	SAN FRANCISCO
39%	LOYOLA-MARYMOUNT
39%	SAN DIEGO
30%	GONZAGA
19%	SANTA CLARA

GONZAGA

2022 RECORD: 31-6 SU, 15-21 ATS, 21-15 O/U

Three starters and two other players who averaged over 16.0 minutes per game are gone from last year's team. Mark Few brought in highly touted transfers in Ryan Nembhard, Graham Ike and Steele Venters to soften the blow, but this version of Gonzaga will not be rated like the teams of the last few seasons. Few is expected to run with two point guards on the floor this season in Nolan Hickman — a returning starter who averaged 7.7 points, 2.4 rebounds and 3.1 assists per game — and Nembhard. Nembhard averaged 12.1 points and 4.8 assists for Creighton last season, and the expectation is that he will help the Bulldogs maintain a tempo which fell outside of the top 10 for the first time since the 2019-2020 season. Ike is a former Wyoming standout who averaged 19.5 points and 9.6 rebounds in his last full season. His fit will be interesting to watch, as Ike played for a slow-paced Wyoming team that allowed him to take his time working in the post on offense. Gonzaga is still going to be one of the best teams in the WCC this season, but they are not the powerhouse they once were. Last season the Bulldogs' power rating was too high and it led to a 15-21 ATS record. Bettors could see a similar phenomenon with this team. They are the odds-on favorite to win the conference regular season title, and KenPom has them fifth in his preseason rankings. That is a lot of respect for a team retooling its roster in a good conference.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Gonzaga is the only team in the country to be an underdog in fewer than 13 games since the 2018-19 season began, going 2-4 ATS as an underdog in that stretch.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	90.5 (#4/#1)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	30%

LOYOLA-MARYMOUNT

2022 RECORD: 19-12 SU, 17-12 ATS, 18-12 O/U

Loyola Marymount had one of the most efficient pick-and-rolls in the country last season, and that was mostly due to having an elite guard in Cam Shelton. However, Shelton and his 21.4 points per game are gone, and head coach Stan Johnson is rebuilding his backcourt this season. Transfers Justice Hill (LSU) and Dominick Harris (Gonzaga) are expected to fill the void in the backcourt for LMU. Hill was one of the key cogs for Murray State's run to the NCAA Tournament two years ago, and should recapture his form in a more stable environment this season. Harris is a former four-star recruit who was limited by a foot injury last season. Both guards should thrive in Johnson's system. They also have the benefit of playing with an insanely talented frontcourt. Keli Leaupepe is a 6-foot-6 forward who is listed at 245 pounds but looks like he weighs about 15 pounds heavier. He is an elite rebounder who can hit from distance if left open and get to the free throw line with regularity. Leaupepe plays up front with Alex Merkviladze who averaged 7.1 points and 4.0 rebounds last season. Johnson added more depth to this frontcourt by landing Cal transfer Lars Thiemann in the portal, a 7-foot-1 center who averaged 9.5 points and 5.4 rebounds. It's hard to replace a guard that produced as well as Shelton did, but some high upside transfers and a frontcourt that is one of the deepest in the WCC will make the Lions a tough out almost every night in league play.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Loyola Marymount was 10-5 ATS at home last season. Also, the Over is 43-25 in their home games since the 2018-19 season began.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	75.5 (#91/#4)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	39%

PACIFIC

2022 RECORD: 15-18 SU, 15-16 ATS, 16-15 O/U

Pacific nearly doubled its overall win total from Leonard Perry's first season last year, and the Tigers look like they could continue with that natural progression this season. Perry has three starters and eight lettermen back from last year's team, and one of them is an All-WCC player. Moe Odum only averaged 5.6 points and 3.5 assists per game last season, but that is an impressive stat line for a freshman in a good conference. Odum's season culminated with a 22-point showing against Pepperdine in the WCC tournament, and he is one of the most important pieces for the Tigers this season. Tyler Beard — the leading returning scorer from last season — is also back in the fold. Beard shot 42.9% from 3-point range last season, and he is one of two 40.0% shooters in the projected starting lineup; Judson Martindale being the other (40.0%). Donovan Williams also returns, and is one of three seniors on the roster. Williams can stuff the stat sheet, as evidenced by his 7.1 points and 3.6 rebounds per game last season. Pacific also has some proven depth on the bench in senior Nick Blake, and wings Greg Outlaw and Cam Denson. There is no doubt that Perry has some real tools to work with this season, and if there were a team that could surprise bettors with a solid ATS record in conference play it would be Pacific.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Pacific has the second-worst cover percentage in college basketball over the past two seasons at 19-38-2 ATS and the second-worst non-conference cover rate since the 2015-16 season at 32-53-3 ATS.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	70.0 (#174/#7)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	62%

PEPPERDINE

2022 RECORD: 9-22 SU, 11-18 ATS, 20-9 O/U

Pepperdine is not expected to do much in the WCC this season — the coaches voted the Waves to finish seventh at media day — but they will be entertaining. NBA fans in particular might want to check out Pepperdine basketball once in a while to watch sophomore forward Jevon Porter, the younger brother of Denver Nuggets forward Michael Porter Jr. Porter is a 6-foot-11 wing player with the skill-set of a guard. He can pull up from anywhere on the floor, and his length makes his jump shot almost impossible to contest. He shot just 35.1% from beyond the arc last season, but that was a symptom of high-volume and he will be a threat to improve on his 12.1 points and 7.2 rebounds per game from last season. With Porter on the floor will be Houston Mallette, a 6-foot-5 guard with an NBA game as well. Mallette is a great shot-creator who can come off screens, catch-and-shoot and finish. He averaged 13.0 points on 41.4% shooting from the floor last season so he can improve his shot selection; something head coach Lorenzo Romar admits to needing to be more vocal about. Hearing how talented these two scorers are, bettors might be surprised to see this team picked so low, but Porter and Mallete are all the Waves really have. Malik Moore is a good guard who shot 42.5% from beyond the arc last season and Boubacar Coulibaly will be a good defender but this bench is a massive question with six freshmen on the roster. It is very likely Pepperdine plays like it did last season: fast-paced with a low efficiency offense that is capable of exploding on any given night.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

The Over was 15-5 in games with a closing total of 159 or less. Also, they are 3-11 ATS as an underdog of 8.5 points or less since Dec. 1, 2021.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	69.5 (#183/#8)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	45%

PORTLAND

2022 RECORD: 14-19 SU, 14-17 ATS, 18-13 O/U

There was much expected of Portland last season, and it seemed that the Pilots would deliver on those expectations when it pushed North Carolina in the Phil Knight Invitational last November. However, Portland went 6-12 SU/7-11 ATS against WCC opponents and fell short of what many were expecting. This season the expectations of improvement remain, and if they are going to deliver on those then Tyler Robertson must continue producing at an incredible level. The 6-foot-6 wing is the Pilots best player and leading scorer from last season. He averaged 15.6 points, 5.5 rebounds and 5.3 assists, which is a stat line that shows his versatility. His fellow returning starter, Juan Sebastian Gorosito, is a deadly shooter who hit 39.6% of his attempts from deep last season. They are a strong duo to build an offensive oriented team on, but who defends is the real question for the Pilots. Last season, Portland finished 276th in adjusted defensive efficiency. Their interior defense was abysmal, and opponents took advantage by shooting 53.2% on all attempts inside the arc. On paper, there is no real fix to that issue for the Pilots this season. That upside on offense, combined with a tempo that ranked 92nd in the country and a defense that could not stop a soul led to a team that saw its games go 18-13 to the Over last season overall. Even further, conference games hit the Over at a 61.1% clip for Portland. That is exactly who the Pilots project to be once again this season, so while it's hard to buy in on this team competing for the top of the WCC it will at least be playing an entertaining form of basketball.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Portland is 11-4 ATS as an underdog of eight points or fewer since Shantay Legans took over the program prior to the 2021-22 season.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	71.5 (#156/#6)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	51%

SAN DIEGO

2022 RECORD: 11-20 SU, 10-19 ATS, 21-8 O/U

Steve Lavin's first season at San Diego went as poorly as it could go. The Toreros won only 11 games and finished 344th in the country in defensive efficiency (114.4). Lavin himself admits that the team did not gel, so he went out and took advantage of the transfer portal in a different way: He recruited the high school kids who weren't getting offers because coaches are too busy trying to grab established players. The result is a roster with 11 freshmen on it and a team which is a complete unknown at the bottom of the WCC projections. Lavin does have some proven commodities on this team, and they will be in the starting lineup. Wayne McKinney averaged 7.4 points and 2.5 rebounds last season and was an all-conference player his freshman year. Deuce Turner is the lone senior on the roster. He averaged 6.5 points per game last season and is a solid 36.6% shooter. Freshman forward Kevin Patton was a top-150 recruit who seems to be the cornerstone of this class for Lavin, and he is projected to start. At 6-foot-7 with incredible length the hope is that he can contribute immediately on defense. In the class as well are Jimmy Oladokun and Keyon Kensie, both 6-foot-8 wings with great athleticism. Given the amount of freshmen on this roster it's not hard to see why San Diego is being picked last in the WCC this season. Perhaps in two years Lavin will have a monster, but this season is one that will be plagued by growing pains as he gets his young team in gear.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

San Diego has had the highest percentage of conference games go Over the total the past two seasons at 24-10-2.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	67.5 (#217/#9)
RETURNING STARTERS	1
RETURNING MINUTES	39%

SAN FRANCISCO

2022 RECORD: 20-14 SU, 17-16 ATS, 14-19 O/U

San Francisco landed arguably the biggest fish of the offseason when Dayton transfer Mike Sharavjamts — lovingly referred to as Mongolian Mike — committed to playing for head coach Chris Gerlufsen. Sharavjamts is a lean and skilled forward who is 6-foot-8 but has the skill-set of a guard. He averaged 5.6 points and 1.9 rebounds last season, but he is only a sophomore who will develop into a potential NBA prospect. Sharavjamts fits wonderfully in the Dons' perimeter-oriented offense that is all about spacing and shooting, and his game will gel with that of guard Marcus Williams. Williams is the lone returning backcourt starter from last season. He shot 40.8% from 3-point range and ranked 11th in the WCC in individual assist rate (17.5%). San Francisco also boasts a stable of long wings in Josh Kunen, Ndewedo Newbury and Isaiah Hawthorne. One thing to watch with San Francisco is its shot selection this season. The Dons really leaned into the math game, and took 49.2% of their attempts from 3-point range. While the team shot 36.4% overall — the 48th-best clip in the country — it led to some volatile swings. Gerlufsen has mentioned this offseason about the need for his team to find more balance in its scoring opportunities, which would mean less 3-point attempts for San Francisco this season. Regardless, this team is clearly a cut above most of the WCC and another 20-win season should be in the cards.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

San Francisco is 20-37 ATS at home the past four seasons. Also, the Over is 43-29 in home games since the 2018-19 season began.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	79.0 (#69/#3)
RETURNING STARTERS	2
RETURNING MINUTES	41%

SANTA CLARA

2022 RECORD: 23-10 SU, 16-16 ATS, 15-16 O/U

Herb Sendek has quietly turned Santa Clara into a respected program in the WCC that regularly turns out NBA prospects, and there is little reason to believe the Broncos will fall off this season. Sendek does have to deal with the departures of Brandin Podziemski, Carlos Stewart and Keshawn Justice, but he used the transfer portal to fill the voids left by three double-digit scorers. Arizona transfer Adama Bal figures to be the standout addition for the Broncos this season. He averaged only 2.5 points and 1.0 rebound in 26 games for the Wildcats last season. Given Sendek's history of player development, there are many who believe Bal will finally deliver on his talent this season. The Broncos will likely roll out three guards with regularity this season, and one of those guards is fifth-year senior Carlos Marshall. Marshall averaged 10.0 points and 3.0 rebounds last season and hit 42.9% of his 3-point attempts before injuries ended his first year as a Bronco. If he is healthy and Mount St. Mary's transfer Jalen Benjamin hits, this could be a very talented backcourt for Santa Clara. Sendek also shored up the back end of his defense when he landed Virginia grad transfer Francisco Caffaro. For the season the Broncos were only 16-16 ATS, but they went 10-7 against conference opponents. Sendek has a strong track record here, and another winning ATS season in WCC play could be on the horizon.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Santa Clara went 7-1 ATS as an underdog of +6.5 or less last season. Also, the Over is 31-16 in road games since the 2018-19 season began.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	72.5 (#138/#5)
RETURNING STARTERS	0
RETURNING MINUTES	19%

ST. MARYS (CA)

2022 RECORD: 27-8 SU, 18-14 ATS, 16-18 O/U

The preseason odds might have St. Mary's second to win the West Coast Conference, but the Gaels very well could be the best team in the WCC this season. Randy Bennett has three starters back from an NCAA Tournament team that made it to the second round and won 14 games in conference play. The key for the Gaels last season was a defense which limited opponents to 0.914 points per possession. That will be a strength once again this season, due in large part to the return of Mitchell Saxen at center who was an elite rim protector with an average of 1.2 blocks per game. Do not confuse hard-nosed defense and slow pace for a lack of offense though, as Bennett himself will tell you. St. Mary's finished 44th in adjusted offensive efficiency last season (112.6) and Alex Ducas' return will help the Gaels replicate that success. Ducas averaged 12.5 points per game last season and shot 41.4% from 3-point range. He and Aidan Mahaney — a guard who averaged 13.9 points and shot 40.0% from deep — give Bennett two elite shooters on the floor at one time. St. Mary's is always going to be near the top of the standings in the WCC, but this season is setting up to be special. Those who are willing to invest in short-priced futures will have a valuable bet in St. Mary's to win the regular season title at +130. This is arguably the best team in the conference, and at the very least should carry near identical odds to Gonzaga to win this league.

"HOOP'S" BETTING NUGGET

Saint Mary's is 21-10-1 ATS at home the past two seasons and 13-1 ATS following a straight-up loss, the best cover percentage in America off of a loss.

MAKINEN'S PR (NAT/CONF RANK)	81.0 (#54/#2)
RETURNING STARTERS	3
RETURNING MINUTES	70%