

More Teams Are Contenders This Women's College Basketball Season

And some teams at the top have worked hard to get better ahead of the N.C.A.A. tournament in March.



By Natalie Weiner

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As the college basketball season began in earnest this week, the front-runners in the women's game — Stanford, Maryland, South Carolina and Connecticut — have, like usual, imposed their will on weak nonconference opponents. But as the season gets deeper into its schedule, those powerhouses can expect more competition in their pursuit of an N.C.A.A. championship.

There are star-studded teams across several conferences, more so than at any point in women's college basketball history thanks to the sport's increasing parity. The N.C.A.A. and its unequal treatment of women athletes was the story of the 2021 tournaments and off-season. Yet on the court this season, several teams have a chance to surprise fans during a women's tournament that will, for the first time, be marketed as March Madness alongside the men's tournament.

South Carolina's Aliyah Boston is greeted by Stanford forward Francesca Belibi after South Carolina lost by 1 point in the national semifinal last season. Eric Gay/Associated Press

A missed buzzer beater spurred change for South Carolina's best player.

After her last-second attempt at taking down Stanford in the Final Four bounced off the rim, Aliyah Boston wept in a clip that is sure to be replayed during every high-profile game for South Carolina this season. Stanford then beat Arizona to win the 2021 national title, and Boston and her squad went to work in the off-season. Boston, a 6-foot-5 forward, lost 20 pounds, improving her physical condition to match her position as South Carolina's centerpiece.

South Carolina is taking the pursuit of its second title so seriously that it made Dawn Staley one of the highest-paid coaches in women's college basketball, with only Connecticut's Geno Auriemma matching her earnings. This season, the Gamecocks are once again welcoming the top overall recruiting class, headlined by Atlanta point guard Raven Johnson. Kamilla Cardoso, a 6-foot-7 center, also joined the team from Syracuse, where she was the Atlantic Coast Conference's freshman of the year.

With the additions, South Carolina entered the Associated Press Top 25 poll at No. 1 and quickly knocked off No. 5 North Carolina State on the road in its season opener. Boston had five blocks, suffocating the Wolfpack even as she struggled offensively. Boston's game-shifting dominance could lead South Carolina back to the Final Four, but first it has regular season matchups with No. 4 Maryland, No. 2 Connecticut and No. 3 Stanford.

Kamilla Cardoso left Syracuse, where she was the Atlantic Coast Conference's Freshman of the Year. Daniel Dunn/USA Today Sports, via Reuters

The Pac-12 and Big Ten are highly competitive.

The story of the 2021 N.C.A.A. women's basketball tournament was its first all-Pac-12 championship game. In spite of the fact that Stanford, a blue-chip team, won the title, the unexpected rise of Arizona and fan favorite Aari McDonald served as further evidence of the growing parity within the game. Though McDonald has moved on to the W.N.B.A., plenty of her bracket-busting former peers within both the Pac-12 and the Big Ten are still around to make those conferences even more competitive.

Like Arizona, Oregon upset a Southeastern Conference team (Georgia) in the tournament. But unlike No. 22 Arizona, No. 10 Oregon's young core remains intact, featuring 6-foot-5 Nyara Sabally and 6-foot-7 Sedona Prince — whose viral TikTok video about the lacking workout facilities at the N.C.A.A. women's basketball tournament spurred much of the national conversation about gender equity in college sports. No. 14 Oregon State and No. 20 U.C.L.A. are also perennial threats in the Pac-12, and leading the pack is Stanford, which is returning all but one member of its championship team.

Nyara Sabally, left, and Sedona Prince, right, are teammates on the Oregon Ducks. Carmen Mandato/Getty Images

In the Big Ten, the teams behind some of the 2021 tournament's most compelling upsets — Michigan, Iowa and Indiana, which knocked off No. 1-seeded North Carolina State in the round of 16 — still have most of their core players. Michigan senior Naz Hillmon and Iowa sophomore Caitlin Clark, both of whom emerged as national stars during the tournament, will be especially rewarding to watch. Plus, Maryland is bringing back the most prolific members of its top-scoring offense, juniors Ashley Owusu and Diamond Miller, after the Terrapins were upset in the round of 16.

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Kim Mulkey's departure from Baylor is shaking up both the Big 12 and the SEC.

The most surprising news of the off-season came courtesy of Kim Mulkey, who left Baylor after 21 seasons there to coach Louisiana State.

Mulkey turned Baylor into three-time N.C.A.A. champions and dominated the Big 12, where the Bears won the last 11 conference titles. Now she is entering the much more competitive Southeastern Conference with a meaty new contract (she is the third-highest paid coach in women's college basketball) and several transfers, including sophomore Hannah Gusters, who followed Mulkey from Baylor. Mulkey's debut season with the Tigers will show if she can compete in what has long been considered women's college basketball's toughest league. L.S.U. is starting the season unranked.

Coach Kim Mulkey left Baylor for Louisiana State. Eric Gay/Associated Press

In her wake, Mulkey leaves a more open Big 12. Baylor, ranked No. 7, still appears to be at the top of the heap thanks in large part to preseason Associated Press all-American pick NaLyssa Smith. Nicki Collen, who previously led the W.N.B.A.'s Atlanta Dream, is the team's new head coach, and is working with only two returning starters and five total returning players. Texas and West Virginia are also ranked, at No. 25 and No. 19, with the Longhorns fighting to make another deep run in the tournament following their upset of Maryland in the round of 16.

UConn is betting on youth to get back to the top.

After decades of obliterating the competition, the most dominant team in women's college basketball has found itself in an uncharacteristically long title drought. With 11 national championship banners hanging in Storrs, Conn., titles are an expectation rather than an aspiration. Five years without one (even though in 2020, the N.C.A.A. basketball tournaments were canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic) only heightens the already enormous pressure on freshman Azzi Fudd and sophomore point guard Paige Bueckers, friends who happen to be among the most hyped women's college basketball recruits in recent memory.

UConn's Paige Bueckers, left, is a sophomore and Azzi Fudd, right, is a freshman. Pat
Eaton-Robb/Associated Press

Bueckers was the first freshman to win the women's John R. Wooden Award last year after averaging 20 points, 5 rebounds and 6 assists per game, earning her now-copyrighted moniker, Paige Buckets. Fudd enters N.C.A.A. competition with endorsements from professionals like Elena Delle Donne and Stephen Curry. But tearing anterior cruciate and medial collateral ligaments kept Fudd from padding her high school shooting statistics, as did canceled games and seasons during the coronavirus pandemic — all only increasing anticipation among fans eager to see her play for the venerable Huskies.

Together, alongside veterans like Olivia Nelson-Ododa, Evina Westbrook and Christyn Williams as well as the all-Big Ten transfer Dorka Juhász from Ohio State, Fudd and Bueckers are expected to be nothing less than unstoppable. “Are they aware that this is UConn women's basketball and that the object is to win four games in March?” Auriemma told reporters before the season. “Because if they're just going to be content to be good and not think long term, then I think we'll come up short.”