



VSIN

COLLEGE BASKETBALL BETTING PRIMER

MIDSEASON UPDATE

WHAT YOU MISSED

FUTURES AND AWARDS ODDS UPDATE

PLUS...

- FIVE BIGGEST SURPRISES
- FIVE BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENTS
- BIG DANCE BRACKET FORECAST
- MATT YOUMANS TOP 25

CONTENTS

3
Welcome to the VSIN
College Basketball
Betting Primer:
Midseason Update

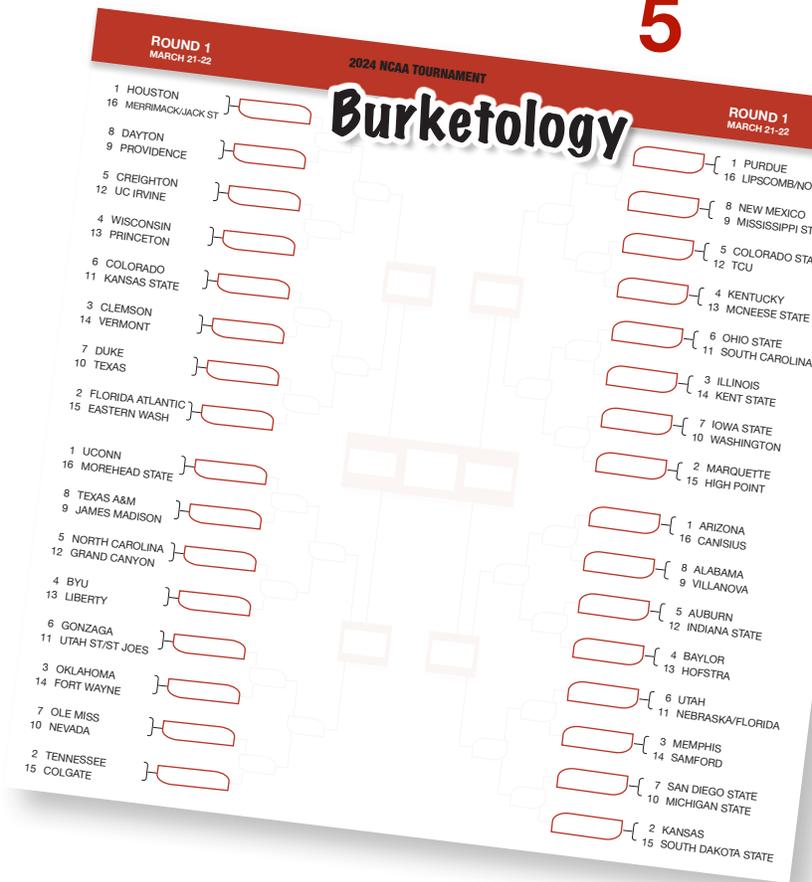
4
Halfway Best Bets

6
Matt Youmans'
Top 25 Poll 2.0

9
Top Five Surprises

11
Midway Mayhem

5



STEVE MAKINEN'S MIDSEASON POWER RATING TOP 25

TEAM	RATING	TEAM	RATING	TEAM	RATING
HOUSTON	93	KENTUCKY	89	CREIGHTON	85.5
PURDUE	92.5	TENNESSEE	88.5	OKLAHOMA	85
BYU	91.5	ILLINOIS	88	CLEMSON	85
ARIZONA	90.5	KANSAS	88	UTAH	85
ALABAMA	89.5	MICHIGAN STATE	87.5	COLORADO	85
DUKE	89.5	NORTH CAROLINA	87.5	GONZAGA	85
IOWA ST	89	BAYLOR	87	MISSISSIPPI STATE	84.5
AUBURN	89	FLORIDA ATLANTIC	87		
CONNECTICUT	89	MARQUETTE	87		

VSIN STAFF/CONTRIBUTORS

EDITORS/Writers: Zach Cohen, Michael Dolan, Steve Makinen, Mike Sansone, Matt Youmans
MANAGING EDITOR: Adam Burke
COVER: James Coleman
LAYOUT AND DESIGN: Matt Devine

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 ALL RECORDS WITHIN ARE AS OF JANUARY 2, 2024**

Greetings, everybody,

Maybe you're familiar with VSiN or maybe you're not, but one of our goals in 2024 is to close the gap between people who know who we are and what we do and the people who don't. In order to do that, we'll be releasing free betting primers throughout the year to cover major events or provide updates during the course of the season.

It seems only fitting that our first primer of the New Year is a "what you missed while you were watching football" update on the world of college basketball. Our College Basketball Betting Primer: Midseason Update is designed to fill you in on what has happened to this point in the season and even project out what could happen the rest of the way.

In this Primer, you will find:

- An Updated Top 25 from Matt Youmans
- A Futures/Awards Update from Zachary Cohen
- Surprise Teams and Disappointing Teams from Adam Burke
- "Burketology", Adam's interpretation of how the NCAA Tournament bracket stands as of now

It has been an interesting college hoops season thus far and this is the time of the year when a lot of bettors gravitate towards that sport. While the College Basketball Betting Primer: Midseason Update will be a useful resource to get you up to speed, we have lots of resources to help you with your handicapping, including:

- Greg Peterson's Daily Lines with Spread and Total Projections
- Peterson's Coast to Coast Hoops Podcast
- Adam Burke's Daily Best Bets (Mon-Sat)
- College Basketball Betting Splits
- Steve Makinen's College Basketball Daily Power Ratings
- Tyler Shoemaker's T Shoe Index Projections (Men's & Women's)

To get the full spectrum of tools, tips, and tricks, become a VSiN Pro Subscriber. We'll be running several specials in January and around the Super Bowl and March Madness, so find the deal that works best for you.

To those who have been with us, thank you for the support. To those who are new, welcome to the wonderful world of VSiN! We're happy to have you.

Adam Burke
Managing Editor, VSiN.com
aburke@vsin.com
@SkatingTripods on X



HALFWAY

BEST BETS

By Zach Cohen

throw rate on offense. I'd like to see the Cougars get to the line a bit more, but the team at least does a good job of preventing opponents from getting to the stripe. This is just a remarkable basketball team and I also like the price on BYU to win a national title (45-1).

OLE MISS REGULAR SEASON SEC CHAMPION (35-1)

This is definitely something of a dart throw, but the Rebels entered 2024 without a loss. I know they have had a relatively easy schedule thus far, and the analytics sites aren't very high on their body of work. However, Ole Miss did score a win over a Memphis team that is among the top 10% in KenPom's rankings. That proves that this Rebels team is capable of beating some good opponents, and a road win over UCF is nothing to sneeze at either. I'm just very high on any Chris Beard-led program, as I know they can be trusted to defend and value the basketball. This Ole Miss team is also shooting extremely well from 3, and I think the group is only going to get better as the season progresses. Beard built this team through the transfer portal, so these guys are getting to know one another on the fly. But the start to the season had to have built some confidence. And the SEC seems a bit more open than it has in recent years, with teams like Alabama, Auburn, Tennessee and Kentucky all having some flaws. That said, I think this number is a little off. I played Ole Miss to win the national title at an absurd price to start the year, but I'm adding a position for the conference after what I've seen thus far.

MICHIGAN STATE TO WIN NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP (30-1)

Everybody had fun pouncing on Michigan State after a loss to James Madison, and things looked especially bleak when the team got off to a 4-5 start through nine games. But the Spartans have found a nice little groove recently, and a blowout win over Baylor proves that this team still has championship potential. Torvik (and others) have had Michigan State ranked as a top-10 or top-15 team throughout, despite their win-loss record. That leads me to believe that we're going to see a much different Michigan State team in conference play, and I just think it's worth grabbing the Spartans at this price. A lot of people loved Michigan State to win the national title before the season, and that was when the Spartans were going off at 20-1. So, you're getting a better number on a team that still has elite talent and a world-class head coach. This is going to be a dangerous team to beat in March.

CLEMSON'S PJ HALL TO WIN WOODEN AWARD (100-1)

Hall isn't a guy that people were talking about heading into this season, but he entered the New Year averaging 20.5 points, 6.5 rebounds, 2.3 assists, 2.4 blocks and 1.2 steals per game for a Clemson team that Bart Torvik had as a borderline top-10 group. Hall was also first in the entire nation in Box Plus Minus (15.7) before the New Year, according to T-Rank. That put him slightly above Zach Edey (15.6). Edey is the heavy betting favorite to win this award, so that's a number you'll want to monitor over the next couple of weeks. If Hall continues to play at this high of a level, he's going to be impossible to ignore when it comes to this market. And I don't think any of this has been a fluke, as Hall is a player that has been highly productive throughout his college career. Last year, the big man averaged 15.3 points and 5.7 rebounds per game. He has just upped his offensive efficiency, and he is making a bigger impact on the defensive end. These odds just seem somewhat outrageous for the best player on a good team. I think you're going to see this number go way down as Hall starts playing high-profile ACC teams on a regular basis.

While a lot of people like to bet on futures before the season, there are always going to be long-term opportunities available for bettors. College basketball happens to provide more of them than other sports. This is actually a great time to be looking to the futures market, as we have gotten a glimpse into what some teams and players are — and could become. With that in mind, we can go searching for the best odds on things we want to bet and determine whether or not there's value.

We're also at a weird part of the season in which there are overreactions to single-game results, or hesitancy from oddsmakers and bettors to react to hot starts from teams and players that weren't rated highly before the year. I have identified a few teams I like on the futures market heading into conference play, and I also believe there's a player hiding in plain sight as a value bet to win the Wooden Award.

BYU BIG 12 REGULAR SEASON CHAMPION (+700)

Houston entered 2024 as the top-ranked team by both KenPom and Bart Torvik. However, BYU also ranked in the top five for both KenPom and Torvik. With that in mind, Mark Pope's team has looked elite to start the year, and that makes it hard not to like BYU as a legitimate contender to win this conference. BYU has six players averaging double digits in scoring, and the team plays a beautiful brand of basketball. The Cougars are a high-efficiency team when it comes to making 3s and also defending the 3-point line, so this team hits the most important shot in basketball at a tremendous clip, but it also defends that shot with real ferocity. If there is any shortcoming for BYU, it has been a low free-

Burketology

- 1 HOUSTON
- 16 MERRIMACK/JACK ST
- 8 DAYTON
- 9 PROVIDENCE
- 5 CREIGHTON
- 12 UC IRVINE
- 4 WISCONSIN
- 13 PRINCETON
- 6 COLORADO
- 11 KANSAS STATE
- 3 CLEMSON
- 14 VERMONT
- 7 DUKE
- 10 TEXAS
- 2 FLORIDA ATLANTIC
- 15 EASTERN WASH
- 1 UCONN
- 16 MOREHEAD STATE
- 8 TEXAS A&M
- 9 JAMES MADISON
- 5 NORTH CAROLINA
- 12 GRAND CANYON
- 4 BYU
- 13 LIBERTY
- 6 GONZAGA
- 11 UTAH ST/ST JOES
- 3 OKLAHOMA
- 14 FORT WAYNE
- 7 OLE MISS
- 10 NEVADA
- 2 TENNESSEE
- 15 COLGATE

- 1 PURDUE
- 16 LIPSCOMB/NORFOLK ST
- 8 NEW MEXICO
- 9 MISSISSIPPI STATE
- 5 COLORADO STATE
- 12 TCU
- 4 KENTUCKY
- 13 MCNEESE STATE
- 6 OHIO STATE
- 11 SOUTH CAROLINA
- 3 ILLINOIS
- 14 KENT STATE
- 7 IOWA STATE
- 10 WASHINGTON
- 2 MARQUETTE
- 15 HIGH POINT
- 1 ARIZONA
- 16 CANISIUS
- 8 ALABAMA
- 9 VILLANOVA
- 5 AUBURN
- 12 INDIANA STATE
- 4 BAYLOR
- 13 HOFSTRA
- 6 UTAH
- 11 NEBRASKA/FLORIDA
- 3 MEMPHIS
- 14 SAMFORD
- 7 SAN DIEGO STATE
- 10 MICHIGAN STATE
- 2 KANSAS
- 15 SOUTH DAKOTA STATE

A lot of things are left to be decided this college basketball season, but bracketologists are constantly analyzing and updating their projected fields for the NCAA Tournament. So, we thought, let's do the same in our College Basketball Betting Primer: Midseason Update. Thanks to the quick wit and sharp mind of my colleague Zachary Cohen, we're calling this "Burketology" and this is my take on where things stand in terms of an early look at March Madness.

OVERALL SEED

- 1 HOUSTON
- 2 PURDUE
- 3 ARIZONA
- 4 UCONN

- 5 TENNESSEE
- 6 KANSAS
- 7 MARQUETTE
- 8 FLORIDA ATLANTIC

- 9 CLEMSON
- 10 ILLINOIS
- 11 MEMPHIS
- 12 OKLAHOMA

- 13 BYU
- 14 BAYLOR
- 15 KENTUCKY
- 16 WISCONSIN

- 17 CREIGHTON
- 18 COLORADO STATE
- 19 AUBURN
- 20 NORTH CAROLINA

- 21 GONZAGA
- 22 UTAH
- 23 OHIO STATE
- 24 COLORADO

- 25 DUKE
- 26 IOWA STATE
- 27 SAN DIEGO STATE
- 28 OLE MISS

- 29 TEXAS A&M
- 30 ALABAMA
- 31 NEW MEXICO
- 32 DAYTON

- 33 PROVIDENCE
- 34 MISSISSIPPI STATE
- 35 VILLANOVA
- 36 JAMES MADISON (SUN BELT)

- 37 NEVADA
- 38 MICHIGAN STATE
- 39 WASHINGTON
- 40 TEXAS

- 41 KANSAS STATE
- 42 SOUTH CAROLINA
- 43 NEBRASKA (11 VS. 11 PLAY-IN)
- 44 FLORIDA
- 45 UTAH STATE (11 VS. 11 PLAY-IN)
- 46 SAINT JOSEPH'S

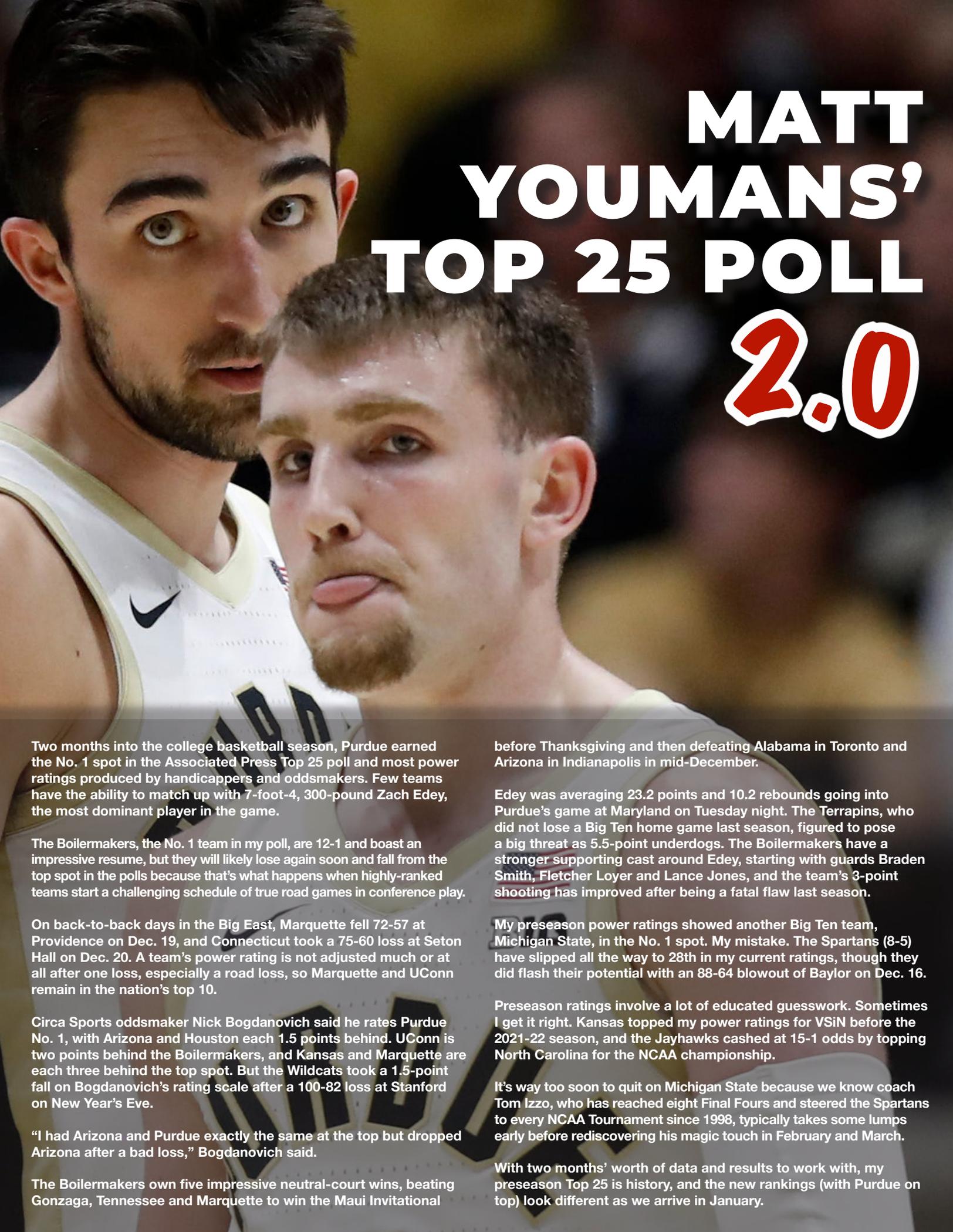
- 47 GRAND CANYON (WAC)
- 48 INDIANA STATE (MVC)
- 49 TCU
- 50 UC IRVINE (BIG WEST)

- 51 PRINCETON (IVY)
- 52 MCNEESE STATE (SOUTHLAND)
- 53 HOFSTRA (CAA)
- 54 LIBERTY (C-USA)

- 55 FORT WAYNE (HORIZON)
- 56 SAMFORD (SOCON)
- 57 KENT STATE (MAC)
- 58 VERMONT (AEC)

- 59 EASTERN WASHINGTON (BIG SKY)
- 60 HIGH POINT (BIG SOUTH)
- 61 SOUTH DAKOTA STATE (SUMMIT)
- 62 COLGATE (PATRIOT)

- 63 MOREHEAD STATE (OVC)
- 64 CANISIUS (MAAC)
- 65 LIPSCOMB (A-SUN)
- 66 NORFOLK STATE (MEAC)
- 67 MERRIMACK (NEC)
- 68 JACKSON STATE (SWAC)



MATT YOUUMANS' TOP 25 POLL 2.0

Two months into the college basketball season, Purdue earned the No. 1 spot in the Associated Press Top 25 poll and most power ratings produced by handicappers and oddsmakers. Few teams have the ability to match up with 7-foot-4, 300-pound Zach Edey, the most dominant player in the game.

The Boilermakers, the No. 1 team in my poll, are 12-1 and boast an impressive resume, but they will likely lose again soon and fall from the top spot in the polls because that's what happens when highly-ranked teams start a challenging schedule of true road games in conference play.

On back-to-back days in the Big East, Marquette fell 72-57 at Providence on Dec. 19, and Connecticut took a 75-60 loss at Seton Hall on Dec. 20. A team's power rating is not adjusted much or at all after one loss, especially a road loss, so Marquette and UConn remain in the nation's top 10.

Circa Sports oddsmaker Nick Bogdanovich said he rates Purdue No. 1, with Arizona and Houston each 1.5 points behind. UConn is two points behind the Boilermakers, and Kansas and Marquette are each three behind the top spot. But the Wildcats took a 1.5-point fall on Bogdanovich's rating scale after a 100-82 loss at Stanford on New Year's Eve.

"I had Arizona and Purdue exactly the same at the top but dropped Arizona after a bad loss," Bogdanovich said.

The Boilermakers own five impressive neutral-court wins, beating Gonzaga, Tennessee and Marquette to win the Maui Invitational

before Thanksgiving and then defeating Alabama in Toronto and Arizona in Indianapolis in mid-December.

Edey was averaging 23.2 points and 10.2 rebounds going into Purdue's game at Maryland on Tuesday night. The Terrapins, who did not lose a Big Ten home game last season, figured to pose a big threat as 5.5-point underdogs. The Boilermakers have a stronger supporting cast around Edey, starting with guards Braden Smith, Fletcher Loyer and Lance Jones, and the team's 3-point shooting has improved after being a fatal flaw last season.

My preseason power ratings showed another Big Ten team, Michigan State, in the No. 1 spot. My mistake. The Spartans (8-5) have slipped all the way to 28th in my current ratings, though they did flash their potential with an 88-64 blowout of Baylor on Dec. 16.

Preseason ratings involve a lot of educated guesswork. Sometimes I get it right. Kansas topped my power ratings for VSIN before the 2021-22 season, and the Jayhawks cashed at 15-1 odds by topping North Carolina for the NCAA championship.

It's way too soon to quit on Michigan State because we know coach Tom Izzo, who has reached eight Final Fours and steered the Spartans to every NCAA Tournament since 1998, typically takes some lumps early before rediscovering his magic touch in February and March.

With two months' worth of data and results to work with, my preseason Top 25 is history, and the new rankings (with Purdue on top) look different as we arrive in January.

THE REST OF MY MIDSEASON TOP 25...

2

KANSAS

The Jayhawks were here, one spot ahead of No. 3 Purdue, in my preseason ratings. Kansas, which was upset by Marquette in the Maui Invitational, has quality victories over Kentucky, Tennessee and UConn and a true road win at Indiana. Hunter Dickinson, the 7-2 transfer from Michigan, has been as exceptional as expected, but senior guard Kevin McCullar has become equally valuable and is the team's top scorer (20.4 ppg). The biggest problem facing the Jayhawks is their unreliable perimeter shooting.



3

CONNECTICUT

When fully healthy, the Huskies deserve this high rating. Sophomore center Donovan Clingan, a 7-2 force who could match up with Purdue's Edey, is out about two to three more weeks with a foot injury. UConn coach Dan Hurley lost center Adama Sanogo, guard Jordan Hawkins and forward Andre Jackson Jr. from the NCAA title team, yet still has a well-rounded roster with depth and size. Without Clingan, guards Tristen Newton and Cam Spencer and forward Alex Karaban can carry the team.



4

ARIZONA

Up from 11th in the preseason, the Wildcats reached No. 1 in the AP poll before losing to Purdue, Florida Atlantic and Stanford. Two transfers — guard Caleb Love (North Carolina) and forward Keshad Johnson (San Diego State) — have added scoring and toughness to coach Tommy Lloyd's team. A lack of depth is concerning, but Arizona should win the Pac-12 by a comfortable margin.



5

HOUSTON

A soft schedule leaves some doubts about the Cougars (13-0), who will get tested on the Big 12 road with games at Iowa State, TCU, BYU, Texas and Kansas in the next month. Houston coach Kelvin Sampson has a smaller team led by four guards — LJ Cryer, Emanuel Sharp, Jamal Shead and Damian Dunn. The Cougars (No. 8 preseason) claim victories over Texas A&M, Utah and Xavier, but that's not a lot to brag about, and it's tough to say this team merits its No. 1 rating by Ken Pomeroy (KenPom.com).



6

MARQUETTE

Tyler Kolek is arguably the nation's top point guard. The Golden Eagles are not especially strong in the low post, a weakness that showed in their loss to Purdue, but coach Shaka Smart will keep winning at a high level with experienced guards.



7

TENNESSEE

Despite consecutive losses to Purdue, Kansas and North Carolina in November, the Volunteers (9-3, No. 13 preseason) are rock solid defensively and added a 3-point threat in transfer Dalton Knecht. KenPom rates Houston first and Tennessee second in adjusted defensive efficiency.



8

KENTUCKY

The ceiling is high for the Wildcats (No. 14 preseason) due to abundant talent. Senior guard Antonio Reeves (19.0 ppg, 45.9% 3-point shooting) and freshman guard Reed Sheppard, a 56% 3-point shooter, are snipers. Seven-foot freshman Aaron Bradshaw has played in only five of 12 games.



9

NORTH CAROLINA

Unlike a year ago, the Tar Heels (No. 16 preseason) are coming together as a cohesive team with balance, led by junior guard RJ Davis (21.6 ppg) and 6-11 senior Armando Bacot. North Carolina has three losses (Kentucky, UConn and Villanova) and three quality wins (Tennessee, Oklahoma and Arkansas).



10

DUKE

Seven-foot sophomore Kyle Filipowski (18.0 ppg) is the real deal, and the Blue Devils are starting to grow up after I overrated them at No. 4 in the preseason. Duke has loads of talent and will be a dangerous team for the next three months.



11. MEMPHIS

Senior forward David Jones (21.2 ppg) leads a Tigers team that ranked outside of my top 25 in the preseason. It's easy to be impressed by Memphis' talent level, and Penny Hardaway has improved as a coach.

12. BYU

It's startling to see BYU rated No. 3 by KenPom, and it's wrong. The Cougars, who defeated San Diego State at home and lost to Utah on the road, have not faced a demanding schedule, and that's about to change in Big 12 play. Jaxson Robinson is the top scorer for a BYU team with plenty of talented guards and shooters. While this team looks legit, it also ranked outside of my preseason top 25, and there is a need to see more.

13. ILLINOIS

Who will step up to challenge Purdue in the Big Ten race? Illinois figured to be the top contender before leading scorer Terrance Shannon Jr. (21.7 ppg) was charged with rape and suspended. Shannon seems unlikely to return this season. The Fighting Illini still can be one of the league's top teams, though they are no longer elite without Shannon.

14. FLORIDA ATLANTIC

With the same cast of stars from the Final Four team, guards Johnell Davis and Alijah Martin and 7-1 Vladislav Goldin the Owls (10-3, No. 15 preseason) are doing mostly what was expected of them. However, it has been a wild ride. FAU shockingly lost to Bryant in November and as a 17.5-point favorite at Florida Gulf Coast on Dec. 30. The Owls beat Arizona 96-95 in double overtime on Dec. 23.

15. CLEMSON

The Tigers (11-1, unranked in preseason) picked up a big-time road win at Alabama in late November and lost 79-77 at Memphis in mid-December. Brad Brownell is an underrated coach with what appears to be a top-three team in the ACC.

16. BAYLOR

Freshman guard Ja'Kobe Walter, a McDonald's All-American, and senior guard RayJ Dennis, the Mid-American Conference's top player at Toledo, lead a talented and young team. The Bears (10-2) took mid-December losses to Duke and Michigan State, which will be growing pains on the road to success this season.

17. ALABAMA

The Crimson Tide rank No. 1 in adjusted offensive efficiency by KenPom. Alabama is a much better team than its 8-5 record, considering the losses came to Purdue, Arizona, Clemson, Creighton and Ohio State. Senior guard Mark Sears is the Tide's top scorer (19.3 ppg), shooting 45.6% from 3.

18. COLORADO STATE

The Rams put a stunning 69-48 beating on Creighton, a top-10 team at the time, in November and followed with a victory over Colorado. Senior guard Isaiah Stevens is the floor leader and top scorer for underrated coach Niko Medved. Colorado State, New Mexico, San Diego State and Nevada make up the Mountain West's top four.

19. WISCONSIN

The Badgers, who beat Marquette and Michigan State, will be a big factor in the Big Ten race. Wisconsin coach Greg Gard has good guards to go with veteran forwards Steven Crawl and Tyler Wahl.

20. TEXAS

While lacking a marquee win, the Longhorns (11-2, No. 17 preseason) should feel no shame in their losses to UConn and Marquette. Max Abmas, who transferred from Oral Roberts, and Tyrese Hunter are reliable scoring guards for coach Rodney Terry.

21. MISSISSIPPI

After losing his dream job at Texas, Chris Beard is reminding everyone he's an elite coach. The Rebels (13-0) have handled a weak schedule, although they did defeat Memphis. KenPom is not nearly as high on Ole Miss, rated 79th.

22. OKLAHOMA

Porter Moser is doing an outstanding coaching job with the Sooners, who were unranked in the preseason. Oklahoma owns solid wins against Arkansas, Providence and USC and took its only loss at North Carolina. A two-game road swing against TCU and Kansas in mid-January will tell if the Sooners are overrated.

23. NEW MEXICO

The Lobos (12-1) can go a long way with guards Jamal Mashburn Jr., Donovan Dent and Jaelen House. In New Mexico's loss at Saint Mary's in early November, House was injured and did not play. Richard Pitino is nowhere near an elite coach like his dad, but he's not bad.

24. ST. JOHN'S

Joel Soriano, a 6-11 senior and horse in the low post, is averaging 17.4 points and 10.3 rebounds after recording 25 double-doubles last season. Rick Pitino's team got off to a slow start, but the Red Storm (9-4, No. 22 preseason) is rising in the Big East.

25. GONZAGA

The Zags have taken a long fall from their preseason ranking of 10th, but their four losses (Purdue, UConn, San Diego State and Washington) are respectable. There is plenty of talent for coach Mark Few to work with, and this team still has a high upside.

THE NEXT 10

Creighton, Auburn, Michigan State, Miami, San Diego State, James Madison, Colorado, Iowa State, Nevada, Providence.

TEAMS THAT DROPPED OUT OF MY PRESEASON TOP 25

Michigan State (1), Arkansas (7), Creighton (9), Miami (18), Texas A&M (19), Villanova (20), Colorado (21), USC (23), Maryland (24), UCLA (25).

TOP FIVE

The non-conference portion of the college basketball season mostly wraps up once we hit the New Year, but there are some teams that have been pleasant surprises and have picked up some wins that the Selection Committee could look very favorably upon when March rolls around.

There is no guarantee that these teams continue to surprise during conference play, either because their performances could be classified as more of the norm than the exception or because they revert back to preseason expectations. For now, these are teams that the markets and pundits have been impressed with and ones that may shock you if you're just getting into college hoops.



SURPRISES

By Adam Burke

HERE ARE THE FIVE BIGGEST SURPRISES TO THIS POINT IN THE SEASON:



SOUTH CAROLINA GAMECOCKS

The Gamecocks will get tested a lot more during conference play in the SEC than they have in the non-conference portion of the year, but Lamont Paris has things going in the right direction down in Columbia. This is a South Carolina program that won 11 games all of last season. The Gamecocks had 11 wins before Christmas this season, including neutral-site triumphs over Virginia Tech and Grand Canyon. The value of the

transfer portal is very much on display for the Garnet & Black, as point guard and leader Meechie Johnson has stepped up his game as the main holdover, but Ta'Lon Cooper (Minnesota), Myles Stute (Vanderbilt), and B.J. Mack (Wofford) are among the transfers that have shined.



COLORADO STATE RAMS

It is hard to believe that Niko Medved's team went from being a top-50 team that was a No. 6 seed in the 2022 NCAA Tournament to a team that finished with a sub-.500 record and lost 12 of 18 games in Mountain West play during the 2022-23 season. The team that danced in March was the first since 2013, but Medved has a mid-major that nobody wants to face this year. The Rams have already beaten Creighton and Colorado

and got off to a 5-1 start in Quadrant 2 or higher games. This is a very experienced team led by Isaiah Stevens and Nique Clifford that went 1-12 in Quadrant 1 games last season, but they could be well-positioned for a high seed and their first Sweet 16 appearance since 1969.



JAMES MADISON DUKES

James Madison has been known as a football school for a while, but the momentum on the gridiron has carried

over to the hardwood. While the Dukes only have one signature win that came against Michigan State in overtime in the season opener, they entered the month of January with an unblemished record and three wins over Quadrant II or higher opponents. The Dukes finished last season ranked 114th by Bart Torvik and started this season just outside the top 100. After winning 22 games last season, including a 12-6 record in the first season as a Sun Belt member, head coach Mark Byington has his team well-positioned for its first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2013.



GEORGE MASON PATRIOTS

A strong non-conference showing for first-year head coach Tony Skinn culminated in a win on the road at Tulane to give the Patriots their 10th win of the season. Despite George Mason's success with 20 wins for the first time since 2017, they still fell short of their first NCAA Tournament berth since 2011. Under Skinn, the

Patriots have improved tremendously on offense and remained a quality defensive unit. As the longtime assistant at four stops, including Ohio State and Maryland, Skinn leads his team into a very deep Atlantic-10 Conference schedule. Transfers from Virginia Tech (Darius Maddox), UNC Wilmington (Amari Kelly), and UNLV (Keyshawn Hall) have added more scoring punch and this team is capable of hanging with the class of the conference.



SAINT JOSEPH'S HAWKS

Another A-10 team having an excellent start to the year is Saint Joseph's. The Hawks haven't gone dancing since 2016 and haven't had a winning season since then either. Billy Lange's bunch took Kentucky to overtime in Lexington on Nov. 20 in a losing effort, but also beat Villanova at the Pavilion on Nov. 29 as part of the Big 5 series featuring schools

in the Philadelphia area. For good measure, the Hawks beat Temple three days later in the first-ever championship game. This is Lange's fifth season and the Hawks have won more than 11 games just once. After going 16-17 last season, the Hawks look to be making another huge leap this season.

Deep Cuts (Honorable Mentions)

There are some lesser-known programs that deserve honorable mentions, so let's take a look at a few of those:



MCNEESE STATE COWBOYS

First-year head coach Will Wade was given an opportunity to return to the sidelines after losing his job at LSU following a number of recruiting violations. He was suspended for the first 10 games of McNeese's season, but that didn't stop his team from opening up the season with a win over VCU. The biggest win of the season came on Dec. 29 at Michigan to give McNeese 11 wins before the start of the New Year. The

Cowboys won 11 games total each of the last two seasons and have not had a winning record since 2011, but they are the clear favorites to win the Southland Conference this year.



CAL STATE NORTHRIDGE MATADORS

After going 14-48 over the last two seasons, Northridge hit the New Year with double-digit victories, including a beatdown of Long Beach State in the second game of conference action. The Matadors already have a win over UCLA, and while the Bruins are among this season's biggest disappointments, that was still a game in which Cal State Northridge closed a 17.5-point underdog. Signature wins are few and far between otherwise, but first-year head coach Andy Newman, who took Cal State San

Bernardino to the Division II Final Four last season, has his team taking smart shots and playing good defense. The Matadors haven't earned their way into the Big Dance since 2009, which, coincidentally, was the last time they had a winning season at 16-14.



HIGH POINT PANTHERS

Another first-year bench boss in a one-bid league has led his team to a tremendous start and that is Alan Huss at High Point. The Panthers also had 11 wins before the ball dropped on New Year's Eve and they have had

one winning season since 2016 and have zero NCAA Tournament appearances as a Division I program. The Big South is a much more competitive conference than the Southland, so the lone bid will be tough to secure, but the Panthers have three Quadrant III wins, which is more than they had in the last two seasons combined.

MIDWAY MAYHEM

By Adam Burke



Many of the usual suspects and blue-bloods are playing up to or exceeding expectations, but there are some teams that are not. Roster turnover is a huge deal in college basketball with so many kids leaving early for the NBA and now the transfer portal and NIL money have added extra wrinkles to projecting teams at the start of a season.

Conference play will bring opportunities to pick up signature wins and get a stronger profile for the NCAA Tournament, but some teams will absolutely be digging out of holes throughout January and February in hopes of making their win-loss records look a bit better and also remove the sting of a loss that shouldn't have happened.

HERE ARE THE FIVE BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENTS TO THIS POINT IN THE SEASON:



UCLA BRUINS

Things are not going well for either Los Angeles Pac-12 member, but what is happening at UCLA is downright stunning. Mick Cronin's team already had more losses by December 30 than last season's team and was one away from the 2021-22 team. A 6-7 start for UCLA included home losses to Cal State

Northridge and Maryland, as well as losses to Marquette, Gonzaga, Villanova, Ohio State, and Oregon. This is the youngest team that Cronin has had in his Bruins tenure and this could very well be a group on the rise as the season goes along, but UCLA doesn't have the shooters of the past and may flirt with the first losing season for the program since 2016.



ALABAMA CRIMSON TIDE

The metrics, at least on offense, still love Alabama, but the Crimson Tide dropped five games prior to the start of conference play. By this time last season, the Tide had already beaten Michigan State, North Carolina, Houston, Memphis, and Gonzaga. This season's losses have come against Ohio State, Clemson, Purdue, Creighton, and Arizona, who are all top-15 teams, but the Tide were awful defensively in each

one of those games and allowed at least 85 points to each of those five opponents. Programs that have achieved National Championship contender status are judged on how they do against the best of the best. To this point, the Tide have failed. They lost all five Quadrant I games and nearly got to last year's full-season loss total of six, with the sixth loss coming in the NCAA Tournament against San Diego State.



VIRGINIA CAVALIERS

The shine had slowly been coming off of the Cavaliers, but they may be just a run-of-the-mill team in the ACC this season. Virginia hit the New Year's holiday with a 22-point loss to a Notre Dame team that is a shell of what it once was. The Cavaliers only had three losses when the calendar flipped to 2024, but they lost

by 24 to Wisconsin, 23 to Memphis, and had that hideous effort against Notre Dame. Their "signature" wins were against teams ranked in the 30s in Florida and Texas A&M. Teams will still struggle to score against that pack-line defense, but Tony Bennett's bunch is on track for one of its worst offensive seasons since the early 2010s.



XAVIER MUSKETEERS

The transfer portal doesn't always work out or it can take a long time for a new group of guys to come together. We'll see which is the case for Xavier, as the Musketeers are off to a lackluster start to say the least. Losses to Purdue, Washington, Houston, and St. John's are all easily explained, but Xavier also has home losses to Oakland and Delaware

in games where they gave up over 1.15 points per possession. Sean Miller's team was 17-3 against Quadrant 2 to Quadrant 4 opponents last season. This year's team has already lost three games within that group and the Musketeers went into 2024 losing their only two true road games, with a whole lot more to come in Big East play.



IOWA HAWKEYES

The contrast between Iowa basketball and Iowa football has always been fascinating. The Hawkeyes can't score on the gridiron, but annually rank among the nation's top defenses. It is the opposite on the hardwood, but this year's team is finding it harder to

score points. Under Fran McCaffery, the Hawkeyes missed the NCAA Tournament from 2011-13 in his first three seasons, but have only missed the Big Dance twice since. This year could mark the third time, as the Hawkeyes look the part of a .500 team. Heading into 2024, seven of their eight wins were against Quadrant 4 opponents and they hadn't beaten a top-100 caliber team. None of their five losses - Creighton, Oklahoma, Purdue, Iowa State, Michigan - could be considered bad, but four of the five were by double digits and were egregiously bad defensive performances. The Big Ten looks down a notch or two this season, but Iowa looks down a notch or two as well.

Deep Cuts (Honorable Mentions)

There are some lesser-known programs that deserve honorable mentions, so let's take a look at a few of those:



COLGATE RAIDERS

I'm a big fan of smaller conferences and wanted to include some here because it has been a really rough start to the season for Colgate. The Raiders have won the Patriot League bid in four of the last five seasons and have won at least 20 games in every full season since 2018-19. They were 14-2 and 11-1 in Patriot League play during the shortened 2020-21 COVID year. But, this season, the Raiders started 6-7 for head coach Matt Langel and really played badly

around the holidays, losing by 17 to Illinois, 20 to Iona, and 13 to Cornell. The Patriot League is bad once again, so Colgate will have time to get it turned around, but they're off to a sluggish start.



FURMAN PALADINS

Bob Richey's tenure at Furman has only resulted in one NCAA Tournament appearance, but this is a team that has won at least 22 games in five of his six seasons, with the COVID-shortened 2020-21 campaign as the lone outlier. It will take a lot of work to get to that point this season, as the Paladins are off to a bit of a rough start, including a Dec. 30 loss to lower-division Anderson University with an enrollment of around

3,000 students. What is most concerning is that there are a lot of holdovers on the roster, but nobody has been able to consistently make up for the losses of seniors Mike Bothwell and Jalen Slawson from last year. There is something of a changing of the guard across the entire SoCon and Furman has gotten caught in that crossfire.



MONTANA STATE BOBCATS

Two-time defending Big Sky champs Montana State miss head coach Danny Sprinkle. Sprinkle has found immediate success at Utah State, but newcomer Matt Logie has not. The Bobcats lost to lower-division Rocky Mountain a week after Thanksgiving and also got

embarrassed by rival Weber State on the first weekend of Big Sky play. As conference play began, three of Montana State's five wins had come against non-Division I opponents and one-point wins over UC Riverside and Southern Utah weren't exactly impressive. We'll see if they get it turned around, but it looks like a transitional year in Bozeman.

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