

INSIDE COLLEGE BASKETBALL

A WEEKLY SPIN AROUND THE WORLD OF COLLEGE HOOPS

Sports Buzz
OHIO

THE 10 MOST IMPORTANT THINGS IN COLLEGE BASKETBALL

1. KANSAS' BIG 12 TITLE STREAK IS SAFE AGAIN

Kansas showed last week why it's been impossible for 12 years to swipe a league title from its grasp. The Jayhawks started the week with a 75-65 win over West Virginia and then followed with a 76-72 win at Oklahoma. The win over the Sooners in Norman, a rematch of a three-overtime classic, was less dramatic than the meeting in January. Kansas jumped to a 20-6 lead and stymied Buddy Hield early. Guard Devonte Graham had the game of his life with 27 points and standout defense against the presumptive National Player of the Year. With OU and WVU out of the way, Kansas will be favored to win its final six Big 12 games.

2. DUKE IS BACK (SORT OF)

Just in time for the first of two games against North Carolina on Wednesday, Duke is finding its way. The Blue Devils — who lost four of five at one point in January — have now won four in a row. This week was especially critical as the wins came over Louisville, 75-65, and Virginia, 63-62 — even if the latter will give Duke haters material as Grayson Allen may have traveled when he hit the game-winning shot. While beating two upper-tier ACC teams is a good sign for this formerly unranked Duke team, don't forget the Blue Devils are still running a six-man rotation, and the return of veteran Amile Jefferson remains a mystery.



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3. KENTUCKY MADE ITS POINT

Kentucky's trip to South Carolina started oddly enough with coach John Calipari getting ejected in less than three minutes. It ended in familiar fashion — with Kentucky looking like the best team in the SEC. South Carolina had a chance to move into a tie for the conference lead with LSU, but the Wildcats aren't going away after an 80-61 win in Columbia. Since an embarrassing loss at Tennessee on Feb. 2, Kentucky has defeated Florida, Georgia and South Carolina by an average of 26.7 points per game. Maybe Calipari got ejected on purpose. Maybe he intended to get one technical and ran into a quick whistle. Either way, Kentucky is peaking in time for a stretch that includes road games against Texas A&M, Vanderbilt and Florida and a home finale against LSU.

4. NOTRE DAME IS DANGEROUS AGAIN

When Kentucky seemed invincible last season, Notre Dame was the team that gave the Wildcats their toughest test before the Final Four with a 68-66 decision in the Elite Eight. This Notre Dame team might not be that good, but the Irish are starting to look like a dangerous team down the stretch. Mike Brey's team has wins over North Carolina and Louisville in its last three to go with victories over Iowa on a neutral court and at Duke earlier this year. That's a nice résumé. The Irish have a star point guard in Demetrius Jackson, a solid big man in Zach Auguste and the nation's top offense, according to KenPom.com. The defense, ranked 230th on KenPom, indicates a ceiling, but the Irish are 8-1 against Duke, North Carolina and Louisville the last two seasons.

5. WISCONSIN'S GREG GARD IS MAKING HIS CASE

When Bo Ryan announced his retirement, his preferred successor was long-time assistant Greg Gard, but the school didn't seem convinced. Perhaps now UW has warmed up to the idea. Under Ryan, Wisconsin started 7-5 with three bad losses. Under Gard, the Badgers are 9-4. A seven-game winning streak has included wins over Michigan State, Indiana and — in a signature moment — at Maryland. In the process, Gard scrapped the offense that carried Wisconsin to back-to-back Final Fours but was ill-suited for the Badgers' personnel this season. A return to the swing offense, successful during Ryan's early run, has Wisconsin in contention for an NCAA Tournament invite.

6. ALABAMA'S AVERY JOHNSON IS WORKING WONDERS

Of the four hires in the SEC this season, Avery Johnson at Alabama looks like one of the best. Alabama beat Florida 64-55 in Gainesville to give the Tide a four-game win streak. The former NBA coach has quietly put together a solid NCAA Tournament résumé that includes wins over Wichita State, Notre Dame, South Carolina, Texas A&M and Florida. Athlon picked Alabama, which had to replace its top three scorers, 13th in the SEC. The Tide now could be in position to reach the NCAAs for only the second time since 2006.

PRIME TIME PLAYERS

Michigan State guard **Denzel Valentine** returned to the National Player of the Year discussion, averaging 28.5 points, 11.5 assists and 6.5 rebounds against Indiana and Purdue last week. ... Creighton is inching onto the bubble thanks to Boston University transfer **Mo Watson**. The 5'10" guard had 32 points, seven rebounds and five assists in an upset of Xavier and 18 points, five rebounds and 10 assists in a win over Marquette. ... **Rodney Bullock** helped pull Providence out of a funk with 23 points and 10 rebounds in a 75-72 win over Georgetown. It was the first time since Dec. 31 someone other than **Kris Dunn** or **Ben Bentil** led PC in scoring. ... Freshman **Brandon Ingram** averaged 21.5 points and 8.5 rebounds this week as Duke turned its season around with wins over Louisville and

Virginia. ... Cal guard **Jabari Bird** had his best week of the season in a big spot for the Bears, who swept the Oregon schools. Bird averaged 23.5 points and 6.5 rebounds while shooting 18-of-28 from the field against the Ducks and Beavers. ... Texas Tech has put itself in the NCAA Tournament conversation after back-to-back wins over Iowa State and Baylor. Guard **Keenan Evans** had 17 points in an overtime win over the Cyclones, and 21 points, five assists and four steals in an 84-66 road rout of Baylor. ... Tulane forward **Dylan Osetkowski** had a pair of double-doubles as the Green Wave won two overtime games featuring a total of four extra frames this week. Osetkowski had 23 points and 13 rebounds in a 94-87 upset of Memphis on Saturday and 16 points and 11 rebounds in a 100-92 triple overtime win at East Carolina on Wednesday.



Kansas guard Devonte Graham scored 27 points and held Oklahoma's Buddy Hield to 5-of-15 shooting in a key win.

7. TEXAS A&M HAS DISAPPEARED

Not long ago we were singing the praises of a Texas A&M team that looked like the class of the SEC. On Jan. 23, the Aggies were 17-2 and 7-0 in the SEC at the same time Kentucky was losing to LSU and Auburn. Now, the veteran Aggies are in a funk, losing five of six capped off by a 76-71 loss at LSU. Lucky for Texas A&M, the Aggies' final six SEC games include four home games and matchups with Ole Miss, Mississippi State, Missouri and Auburn. Still, this has been a troubling stretch for a veteran team.

8. THE SHOCKERS WERE SHOCKED

For the second time in two weeks, the nation's longest active home winning streak ended. On Jan. 29, Oregon ended Arizona's 49-game home win streak. And on Saturday, Northern Iowa handed Wichita State its first home loss since 2013, ending a 43-game winning streak. The 53-50 loss puts Wichita State into a precarious position for an NCAA at-large bid. The Shockers, 12-2 in a mediocre Missouri Valley, can't afford another loss before the league tournament. As for Northern Iowa, the Panthers have one of the strangest profiles in the country. Wins over Wichita, North Carolina and Iowa State would make Northern Iowa an NCAA at-large lock — if not for an 8-6 league record and seven losses outside of the RPI top 100.

9. THE PAC-12 IS TOPSY-TURVY

Looking for the most unpredictable conference race? Look out West. The top six teams in the Pac-12 are separated by a game and a half. Just last week, Oregon was in first place, but the Ducks lost back-to-back games against Cal and Stanford this week. Arizona has fought through injuries all year to move into a tie with Oregon at 9-2 after sweeping the Los Angeles schools last week. Why has the Pac-12 been so unpredictable? Winning on the road has been a chore. The top four teams (Arizona, Oregon, Colorado and Utah) are a combined 12-15 on the road in conference play and 22-3 at home. The next two teams, USC and Cal, are 1-10 on the road and 13-0 at home.

10. JOSH PASTNER IS NEARING THE END

Parting ways with coach Josh Pastner is going to be expensive for Memphis, but it might be getting too costly to keep him. Memphis fell to 14-11 and 5-7 in the American with a 94-87 overtime loss to Tulane, a team that entered this week with one conference win. The Tulane loss comes only weeks after Memphis lost at home to East Carolina. The Tigers should be one of the flagship programs in the AAC, but they're flirting with a losing record in conference play, something Memphis hasn't done since 1999-2000.

Tyler Ulis, Kentucky

Kentucky's John Calipari has said sophomore point guard Tyler Ulis is an extension of the coach on the court, and it certainly looked that way after Cal's ejection against South Carolina. Ulis scored 27 points and added 12 assists in the 89-62 rout of the Gamecocks. During Kentucky's three-game win streak over South Carolina, Georgia and Florida, Ulis is averaging 19.7 points on 54.2 percent shooting. He's had 31 assists and three turnovers during that span.



ATHLON SPORTS TOP 25 (FEB. 15)

1. Kansas (21-4)
2. Oklahoma (20-4)
3. Villanova (22-3)
4. North Carolina (21-4)
5. Iowa (20-5)
6. Xavier (22-3)
7. Virginia (20-5)
8. West Virginia (20-5)
9. Michigan State (21-5)
10. Maryland (22-4)
11. Miami (20-4)
12. Iowa State (18-7)
13. Oregon (20-6)
14. Notre Dame (18-7)
15. Kentucky (19-6)
16. Arizona (21-5)
17. Purdue (20-6)
18. Duke (19-6)
19. Dayton (21-3)
20. SMU (21-3)
21. Louisville (19-6)
22. Providence (19-7)
23. Wisconsin (16-9)
24. Indiana (20-6)
25. Utah (19-7)

FRESHMAN OF THE YEAR WATCH

1. **Ben Simmons, LSU** The Australian import is still having one of the most prolific rookie seasons in college basketball history. He leads all freshmen in scoring (19.3 ppg) and rebounding (12.0 rpg) and is third in assists (5.2 apg).
2. **Jamal Murray, Kentucky** Third nationally in scoring among all freshmen, Murray is averaging 18.8 points per game and has shown the ability to put the Cats on his back at times this season.
3. **Brandon Ingram, Duke** Ingram is playing out of position for the Blue Devils, but he's still averaging 17.2 points and 6.7 rebounds per game.
4. **Henry Ellenson, Marquette** One of four freshmen averaging a double-double (16.6 points, 10.0 rebounds), Ellenson has at least made Marquette a tough out in the Big East after the Golden Eagles finished 13-19 last year.
5. **Diamond Stone, Maryland** The center is averaging 14.3 points per game in Big Ten play — tied for the team lead with Player of the Year candidate Melo Trimble — in addition to 6.2 rebounds and 2.2 blocks.

Graham and Ulis: Harrison McClary/Athlon Sports

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