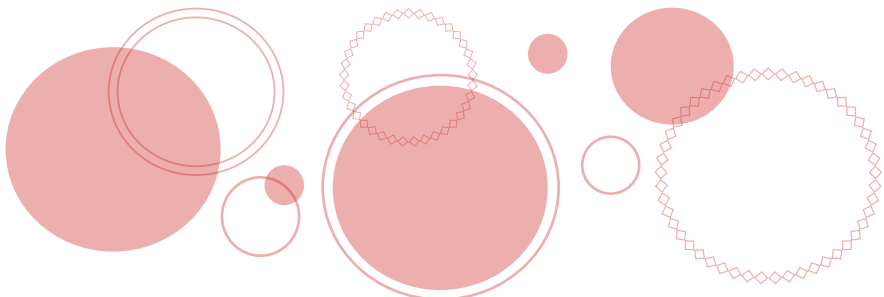




Sports



WOMEN'S BASKETBALL:

UCONN, SOUTH CAROLINA COLLIDE AGAIN ON NATION'S BIGGEST STAGE

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PHOENIX – The UConn women's basketball team (38-0) isn't preparing for Friday's Final Four showdown with South Carolina (35-3) any differently than it has prepared for a game all season.

It wouldn't make sense to. Whatever the Huskies have done to this point — 38 games and five months into the season — has worked.

"We're still playing to win," said Azzi Fudd of the team's mindset heading into Friday. "We're still going to play our hardest, scout the same, treat the game like it's the biggest one we've played all year — and it is."

The Huskies took the court for warmups before Thursday's open practice in the same boisterous way they have the previous 38 times — laughing and joking with each other in between stretches on the baseline and deliberating on the podium about the power of friendship.

It wouldn't normally be indicative of a team that's in the Final Four for the 25th time in program history, and the 17th time in the last 18 years, but it is. The unblemished Huskies have blasted their previous 54 opponents by an average close to 40 points per night and have only played in a single one-possession game since last February.

But Friday night is undeniably unique: it'll mark the first time Connecticut and South Carolina meet in the postseason before the national championship game, and the first NCAA Tournament meeting between the two juggernauts not being preceded by one in the regular season.

Geno Auriemma didn't care for the uniqueness of Friday's circumstances as much as he did about the Gamecocks' unique roster overhaul from the teams' last meeting, however.

"Obviously, this is a different South Carolina team than the one we played last year," Auriemma said. "Our two wins against them last year don't really mean anything going into tomorrow — the way [last year's national championship] was played has no bearing on tomorrow."

He's right, even if he's talking in coachspeak. South Carolina only returns five players (not including the injured Chloe Kitts) who played in last year's title game against the Huskies.

"They've added some really key pieces," Auriemma continued. "I think they're a much better team than they were last year. Really hard to prepare for. They've shot the ball exceptionally well this year. They've added the size that is hard to match up with."

That they have, coach. Ranking inside the top five nationally in field goal percentage

(50.8, third), paint points per game (46.8, second) and second-chance points per game, the Gamecocks have been buoyed by their uncanny size upfront and ruthless aggression on the defensive end of the floor.

"They're a very big team," Sarah Strong said Thursday. "They definitely have us beat in size. Being able to dig out in the post, make the rotation on the skips [will be vital]."

Joyce Edwards, South Carolina's linchpin on both sides of the floor, Alica Tournbeize, a mid-season import and Madina Okot spearhead one of the nation's hardest frontcourts that seldom loses the war on the boards.

The Gamecocks don't kick it out very often, attempting less than 17 3-pointers per game, but when they do, either Tessa Johnson, Raven Johnson or Ta'Niya Latson is waiting — usually with a steady hand.

Tessa Johnson, one of two Gamecocks to score in double

figures against the Huskies last April, hasn't missed a 3-pointer since March 21 and is the go-to option for Dawn Staley on the perimeter. Raven Johnson, the venerable senior leader, leads the team in assists and runs the point in transition.

It's a tough outfit to beat, and one that the Huskies will have to let shoot from the perimeter if they want to quell the inevitable

inside attack that awaits them in the Mortgage Matchup Center.

"The habits that we've built all year long in practice and games will definitely help keep us settled, keep us calm, keep us together this weekend," Fudd said of her final two games as a collegian.

WHO: UConn (38-0) vs. South Carolina (35-3)
WHAT: NCAA Tournament National Semifinal
WHERE: Mortgage Matchup Center, Phoenix, Ariz.
WHEN: Friday, April 3, 7 p.m. EST



PHOTO BY CONNOR SHARP, PHOTO EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Wilker's Weekly: Potential Busts and Steals of the 2026 NFL Draft

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Bust: ED Keldric Faulk, Auburn
Draft Projection: Round 1

While I had Keldric Faulk selected by the New England Patriots at No. 31 in my mock draft last week, I have my concerns about the Auburn Tiger. Faulk has excellent size, standing at 6-foot-6, 276 pounds, and his 2024 production was strong: seven sacks, with two coming against No. 5 Georgia, along with a forced fumble. The concerns center around his 2025 production, when he recorded only two sacks, and went the last seven games without taking down the QB. His pass rush win rate also dropped this season. His measurables are very similar to ex-top 10 pick Tyree Wilson, who has 12 sacks in three seasons. Faulk is five pounds heavier, and his arms are over an inch shorter. He wasn't nearly as productive as Wilson was collegiately, either. Whether selected top 10 or top 32, averaging four sacks per season as a first-round pick is very disappointing, and it doesn't seem unreasonable to say Faulk might have a similar career path.

Steal: DT Xzavian Harris, Ole Miss
Draft Projection: Rounds 4-5

Xzavian Harris would immediately come into the NFL as one of the league's largest players. Standing at 6-foot-8, 330 pounds, he's a behemoth of a defensive tackle. With teams putting less value on the nose tackle archetype, the position's value has dropped in recent years. Furthermore, Harris has had his own set of issues off the field. He was arrested twice during his Ole Miss career on serious charges, and that could see teams not look to select him until later on the board. I've yet to see any consensus boards fea-



Zachariah Branch of the Georgia Bulldogs on the field. Branch is a wide receiver for the team. PHOTO COURTESY OF @ZACHARIAHBRAND ON INSTAGRAM

ture him in the top 100 due to his off-field issues, but he is tied for the 41st best player in the class according to Lance Zierlein, with a 6.34/8.00 overall grade. That's just 0.02 points short of Clemson's Peter Woods, who has been mocked in top 10 in 2026.

Bust: QB Ty Simpson, Alabama
Draft Projection: Top 40

Alabama quarterbacks don't have a great track record in the NFL: Tua Tagovailoa, Mac Jones and Bryce Young haven't lived up to the hype that came with their draft positions. Unfortunately, I'm not sure Ty Simpson will change that narrative. Due to the nature of the quarterback position, Simpson has gotten some first round hype, and I slotted him 21st to the Steelers in my mock draft last week. The trouble with Simpson is as follows: he isn't

an overwhelming athlete, he doesn't have a rocket arm, and he didn't light up the scoreboard against great teams. His latter half of the year was very bad. The Crimson Tide started the season 8-1, with wins over three top 15 teams. Following a 23-21 loss to No. 11 Oklahoma, however, Simpson collapsed. Despite a 56-0 win over Eastern Illinois the net week, Simpson finished with 147 yards and 2 interceptions. They finished the year 3-2, and Simpson had a 58.5% completion rate during that time, with a 2:1 TD:INT ratio. Excluding their game 56-0 win over EIU, Simpson's squad averaged 17.8 PPG, and had a point differential of -39 across four games. Simpson could be a game manager, but he won't live up to his first-round billing.

Steal: LB Harold Perkins, LSU
Draft Projection: Rounds

4-6

A former five-star recruit, Harold Perkins missed almost all of his junior season with a torn ACL before returning to LSU last year. His 2022 was a spectacular one, recording 72 tackles, 7.5 sacks, forcing three fumbles, and nabbing an interception during his first year in the Bayou. He backed up his play in year two in Death Valley, notching 74 tackles, 5.5 sacks, three forced fumbles, and an interception. Against LSU's four top 10 opponents last season, he totaled 22 tackles, 2 sacks, 2 interceptions, a forced fumble, and a fumble recovery. When it matters, Perkins steps up. His injury and size (223 pounds) have caused him to slide down draft boards, and PFF has him as low as No. 221. Despite those concerns, nabbing 2022's No. 5 ranked recruit in the nation.

Boom-or-Bust: WR Zachariah Branch, Georgia
Draft Projection: Top 75

Zachariah Branch is one of the most interesting receiver prospects in this draft in my eyes. He came in at 5-foot-9, 177 pounds, which will likely led to him playing the majority of his snaps in slot, as he did in college: almost 80% of his pass snaps came from the inside. Slot receivers are valuable enough to select in the first two rounds of today's NFL, and when you consider Branch is a Jet Award winner, given to the best return man in college football. He returns both kicks and punts, and in the 2023 season during which he won the award, he housed one of each. He ran a 4.35 40-yard dash at the NFL Combine, as well, making him a top candidate to be a contributor at the next level.

The issue with Branch isn't athleticism, or special teams acumen, and his production for the Bulldogs last season was solid: he had 81 catches for 811 yards and 6 touchdowns. Four of those six touchdowns were against ranked competition. The controversy with Branch is surrounding his route tree. Over 51% of his routes were screens, while 54% of his catches came on screens, and 39% of his yards came from screens. If a team believes he can handle a more diverse route tree at the next level, Branch being selected in the first round is a real possibility.

ESPN's Mel Kiper had him as his No. 24 ranked player in the entire class not long ago, while PFF ranks him 75th overall, and the 14th receiver overall. Walter Football's most recent mock has Branch landing with the Jets at No. 44. If Branch lands with a team like the Chiefs at No. 40, he could be the steal of the draft, but his fate could be far different if the Browns select him at No. 24, for example.