



Sports

MEN’S BASKETBALL: NO. 5 UCONN, NO. 15 ST. JOHN’S MEET IN HARTFORD IN HIGH-STAKES BATTLE

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The 2023-24 season saw UConn win its first Big East regular season title since the 2005-06 season and its first outright title since the 1998-99 season. Last season, St. John’s won its first regular-season title since the 1991-92 season and its first outright title since the 1984-85 season.

On Wednesday night in Hartford, the two will play for what could be the deciding game for this season’s Big East regular-season title.

“We can’t afford to lose another game in the regular season in the Big East if we want to win the league,” Dan Hurley said on Saturday.

The No. 6 Huskies (25-3, 15-2 Big East) suffered a setback last week when they were stunned by Creighton in a raucous crowd in Storrs, Conn. They bounced back with one of the most complete games of conference play, a 73-63 win at Villanova, leading by as many as 21 points.

“We played elite-level defense, and we were pretty sharp on offense when we got shots on goal,” Hurley said. “Obviously, the turnover situation reared its ugly head, but I just thought we rebounded the ball, we guarded, we played offense at a high level and our depth kicked in. That’s kind of like bulletproof basketball right there.”

That “elite-level defense” was a massive improvement from recent games. According to Stathead’s Katie Sharp, before the win at Villanova, UConn had four of its five-worst defensive performances in the previous four games. Sharp also noted that the 91 points scored by Creighton were the most points allowed by UConn in a home conference game since Feb. 1, 2003’s loss to Boston College, when the Eagles scored 95 points.

The offensive distribution was terrific on Saturday, though. UConn had nine players with at least 4 points, two rebounds and one assist. According to Sharp, that is the only time over the last 15 seasons when this has occurred.

The bench scoring was terrific, with 22 points from the reserves. The center position stood out against a double-double machine in Duke Brennan; both Tarris Reed Jr. and Eric Reibe feasted, combining for 19 points, 11 rebounds, four assists and four blocks on 8-of-10 shooting. Reed had 12 points and six rebounds on 5-of-10 shooting against St. John’s, while Reibe was a non-factor with just 2 points in five minutes due to foul trouble.

“I think Tarris played his best game as a UConn player versus Villanova,” Hurley said. “Hopefully something clicked with Tarris after the Creighton game, because his ball screen defense, his rim protection, his screening, his post-ups were all the best that they’ve been since he’s been here.”

Braylon Mullins had a career-high 25 points in the loss to Creighton, which earned him Big East Freshman of the Week honors. He put up 11 points on 4-of-8 shooting against the Red Storm in New York City.

But all eyes will be on the performance of Silas Demary Jr., who is expected to

be on the All-Big East First Team when the regular season ends. Despite finishing the St. John’s game with 18 points, seven rebounds and five assists on 7-of-11 shooting, the former Georgia Bulldog turned the ball over nine times. Last time out, Demary had 9 points and six assists, but turned the ball over seven times. For UConn to get back in the race for the Big East regular season title, he must take care of the ball much better than he has been lately.

“He’s a great player, we’ve got great respect for him,” St. John’s head coach Rick Pitino said on Tuesday. “He’s one of the premier guards in the country. It’s more the style [of St. John’s defense] than anything else; it’s not his weakness.”

No. 15 St. John’s (22-5, 15-1 Big East) is one of the hottest teams in the country with a 13-game winning streak, with only one loss since the calendar flipped to 2026. It is the longest streak since a 19-game winning streak during the 1984-85 season, which included 14 consecutive wins in Big East play.

That included a signature win at home over Connecticut, where Zuby Ejiofor proved that he is the front-runner for Big East Player of the Year. That will be a tall task for Tarris Reed Jr., as Ejiofor averages 15.9 points and 7.2 rebounds per game on 53.4% shooting. He was a beast in the first meeting, putting up 21 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists on 6-of-10 shooting.

“The guy’s tenacious,” Hurley said on Tuesday. “He’s probably one of the most tenacious players in the country.”

The Red Storm control their own destiny for back-to-back regular season titles, which has not been done since the 1985 and 1986 seasons, the latter of which was not outright.

While Ejiofor is having an elite season, Bryce Hopkins has been just as impressive. He was named the Big East Player of the Week after averaging 19 points and 10 rebounds to go with 1.5 assists and 1.5 steals per game in the last two games. In the first meeting against the Huskies, Hopkins had 14 points and six rebounds on 4-of-7 shooting.

Pitino told reporters that Ian Jackson, who did not play in the 81-52 blowout win over Creighton, will play against the Huskies. Jackson suffered a right ankle sprain on Wednesday night against Marquette and averages 10.4 points per contest this season.

It will be a battle between two top-15 defenses. As of writing, UConn ranks 13th in defensive efficiency on KenPom while St. John’s ranks 15th. UConn has a significant upper hand offensively, ranking 23rd in terms of efficiency, while the Johnnies are 45th.

The team is dealing with some bumps and bruises, and there might be a player on the injury report before the game on Wednesday.

Tip-off from PeoplesBank Arena is set for 7 p.m. and can be watched on NBC Sports Network (for YouTube TV subscribers) and Peacock. It is a stripe-out theme, and fans are encouraged to wear the colors matching their section.



UConn Men’s Basketball plays Creighton University at Gampel Pavilion in Storrs, Conn. On Feb 18, 2026. The crowd hyped up the team throughout the entire game.

PHOTO BY SYDNEY CHANDLER, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/DAILY CAMPUS



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