# Colette's Commentary: Upsets expose the cracks at the top of women's college basketball rankings

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**Aaliyah Chavez of the Oklahoma Sooners going to shoot a basket. The Sooners played the Texas A&M last night.**

PHOTO COURTESY OF @OU_WBBALL ON INSTAGRAM

The NCAA women's college basketball season is in full swing and has already been defined by numerous upsets, rattling the rankings and displaying the vulnerabilities of top teams. These shocking games have also highlighted the hidden strength of overlooked teams that are now on the rise.

The string of upsets began at the opening of the season with a top ten upset when No. 16 Baylor defeated No. 7 Duke in Paris. Duke had a breakout 2024-25 season and a strong performance in March after making it to the elite eight, giving them a top 10 ranking going into this season. The ranking came with high expectations for the team to bring the same dominance to the 2025-26 season. The game remained close going into the fourth quarter with a tied 43-43 score as Baylor kept showing determination after ending the first quarter down by four points. Redshirt sophomore guard Taliah Scott started the quarter off hot for Baylor with an immediate 6-0 run. Duke struggled to go on their own run, eventually ending the quarter with only nine points. Scott took advantage of this to close the win for Baylor with a pair of free throws, ending with a score of 58-52.

Duke continued to struggle for the rest of the early season with a 3-6 start, falling out of the Associated Press top 25 rankings. However, Duke has had a turnaround in the midseason with a current 11-game winning streak and a 9-0 record in the ACC, putting them at No. 20 in the rankings.

The upsets have continued into the midseason with No. 16 Oklahoma upsetting No. 2 South Carolina in an overtime thriller, marking the programs' third win in 35 all-time games against AP top two teams. Oklahoma had a rough start to SEC play with three losses in a row to Ole Miss, Kentucky, and LSU, dropping from No. 5 to No. 16 in AP rankings.

Oklahoma freshman Aaliyah Chavez led the team's win overtime. Chavez scored 15 of her 26 points in overtime, cementing herself as a front runner in the race for national freshman of the year. Chavez also recorded 8 assists in the game, cementing the completeness of her game. Oklahoma senior center Regan Beer also aided in the win with 18 points and 14 rebounds. South Carolina's star junior guard Tessa Johnson kept the game close, scoring 19 points, but ultimately was no match for Oklahoma who won 94-82. Oklahoma's 94-point win marked the most points the Gamecocks have allowed since losing 95-89 to Arkansas in the 2019 SEC tournament quarterfinals. The 12-point win also tied for the second largest overtime win against an AP top two opponent, just behind Utah that beat No.2 UCLA in 2024, and tied with Virginia Tech, that beat No. 2 NC State by 12 points.

Notre Dame, usually at the top of the rankings in women's basketball and often notable rival for the Huskies, has also experienced its fair share of upsets this season. The Fighting Irish started the season off ranked No. 6 but have since fluctuated in and out of the top 25 rankings. Their fall out of the rankings followed back-to-back losses to Georgia Tech and Duke, marking the first time unranked since 2021.

The first loss occurred on New Years Day when unranked Georgia Tech defeated No. 18 Notre Dame in a 95-90 overtime win. Notre Dame suffered a poor defensive performance and was unable to overcome a 9-0 run by the Yellow Jackets, despite strong performances from Hannah Hidalgo with 26 points and Cassandre Prosper with 19 points.

Notre Dame's second loss, which brought the team outside of the top 25 rankings, occurred just three days later. Notre Dame struggled to force turnovers and score in transition, which are two areas the program has excelled in in previous seasons. Hidalgo also struggled in the game shooting at a lower percentage than normal, despite putting up 22 points. Duke took an 82-68 win through a combined effort with all five starters scoring in double-digits and outrebounding Notre Dame 39-31. The loss brought the team out of the rankings, making it the first time since 2019 the UConn v. Notre Dame rival game was an unranked matchup.

Ultimately, these upsets have captured the flaws in teams once viewed as unbeatable and highlighted the talent of programs that have long been overlooked. As the season continues and the rankings continue to shift, one thing has become definite: no team is guaranteed a spot at the top of the rankings.

# AVA'S ANGLE: THE FERNANDO MENDOZA EFFECT

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Indiana football is more than its undefeated, national championship status — it's an oath to how success is represented in young adults, specifically referring to quarterback Fernando Mendoza.

Indiana football completing a historic 16-0 season and winning the program's first-ever national championship is astonishing on its own. But this season was more than just the outcome for the Hoosiers; it was about their pure dominance and the team's characteristics that led it all the way to the top.

Mendoza started his college football career playing three seasons with the California Golden Bears before transferring to Indiana in December 2024 for his senior campaign. After using his redshirt his freshman year, he played nine games for Cal in 2023, passing for 1,708 yards, 14 touchdowns and 10 interceptions while running for 86 yards and two touchdowns. Then in 2024 with the Golden Bears, Mendoza started 11 games. Throwing for 2,003 yards, 16 touchdowns and six interceptions while running for 105 yards and two more touchdowns. In Mendoza's single season in Bloomington, he threw for 3,535 yards, 41 touchdowns and six interceptions to go along with 276 yards and seven more rushing touchdowns. For his conference, Mendoza was named Big Ten Most Valuable Player and All-Big Ten First team for his dominant performance.

Other than statistics, Mendoza has never been a loud and flashy player, staying under the radar and being overlooked at the start of his career. It took quiet discipline for years to later improve his game and become the steady force that led the Hoosiers to be national champions.

Today's age of college football is filled with NIL deals, personal brands, individual spotlights on social media and more, but Mendoza set himself apart. In interviews or media coverage, he constantly redirected credit for his success towards his faith, his family and his teammates rather than his own personal accomplishments. Mendoza consistently focused on gratitude over self-entitlement.

A part of his life that got some of the most media attention is his relationship with his mother. Elsa Mendoza has been the most influential person in Mendoza's life. She is often seen in a wheelchair at games as she has been battling multiple sclerosis for 18 years. Mendoza stated that when life gets tough, his first instinct is not to complain, but to think about what his mother deals with every day. That perspective is prominent on the field with how he prepares, how he plays and his leadership. It's just pure effort every single day out of Mendoza.

Mendoza's mindset is refreshing and is something that will define a generation and play out far beyond the lines on a football field. To shape how young individuals show up to work and the effort that is maximized day in and day out. Mendoza did not just win, he modeled how to win: "Fernando Mendoza effect."

Mendoza's senior season with Indiana showed people across the country what it takes to win. They saw the pure discipline, humility and accountability play out through the whole year all up until Mendoza was holding up the national championship trophy. It is well known that college football players dedicate most of their time and energy to their team from winter workouts to the moment that they step onto the field for the season opener. Mendoza handled the spotlight and nationwide attention differently than most. In the national championship post-game interview, ESPN even highlighted Mendoza's cut-up arm from being tackled on his touchdown play to show his true grit and willingness to do whatever was needed for his team to succeed.

These kinds of lessons matter for young people all over the nation. Mendoza exemplified a different version of success, and people got to witness it in real time and follow along every step of the way.

The Mendoza Effect is incredibly important in the workforce. Hiring managers will recognize attributes like Mendoza's in recent college graduates and entry-level employees with the way pressure is handled, responses to feedback, teamwork, taking accountability and sharing credit to where it belongs. Creating higher standards for what job environments should be like with the right-minded people involved will change the work culture in a positive way. Asking, "how can I help my team win?" is the best kind of mindset a person can have, which is exactly what Mendoza is all about on and off the football field.

Outside of being a national champion, Mendoza also won the 2025 Heisman Trophy. The most prestigious award in college football, the Heisman Trophy is given annually to the nation's most outstanding player who combines skill with diligence, perseverance and hard work, all of what Mendoza represents. In addition to the Heisman Trophy, Mendoza also won the Maxwell, Walter Camp and Davey O'Brien Awards, and was named a consensus All-American distinction.

Through the college football playoffs, Mendoza shared his tactics to avoid distractions and stay locked in to football. He said he only has two apps downloaded on his phone: LinkedIn and YouTube. As his LinkedIn bio describes, this is a part of his "process-driven and detail-oriented" mindset which focuses on being a high-level performer and growing his professional development rather than being drowned out by social media noise. On Wednesday, Front Office Sports reported that Mendoza and LinkedIn have agreed upon an indefinite partnership where Mendoza will be involved in a "more integrated capacity."

As Head Coach Curt Cignetti turned around the Indiana football program in just two seasons, accumulating a 24-2 overall record, Mendoza played an incredibly significant role in defining the Hoosiers this year. Mendoza raises the bar for expectations on the football field, in the corporate world and overall in life. He shows how important discipline is in whether the whole world is watching or not.

Indiana had a remarkable culture this season, which gave it a competitive advantage and guided it to become a national champion in Miami at Hard Rock Stadium.

Mendoza is inspiring young people every day and will continue his football journey in the National Football League, as he just announced he is declaring for the 2026 NFL draft. NFL mock drafts have long been forecasting Mendoza's selection as the No. 1 overall pick for this year's draft. The Las Vegas Raiders, who are in need of a quarterback, will have the first pick on April 23. Although his time in college football has come to an end, the Mendoza effect will remain in play and have a long-lasting impact in the college sports world, continuing to define the true meanings behind success.



**Fernando Mendoza posing with the Rose Bowl Trophy after winning against Alabama Crimson Tide 38-3. Mendoza and the Hoosiers went on to win the National Championship.** PHOTO COURTESY OF @FERNANDOMENDOZA ON INSTAGRAM