SAM'S SECTION: BOOZER, HOIBERG HEADLINE PART 1 OF MAJOR CONFERENCE AWARD PICKS

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Champ Week is here and it is now time to hand out awards.

In this week's edition of Sam's Section, I will go over my award picks for the ACC and Big Ten, with the Big 12 and SEC coming soon.

ACC

Player and Freshman of the Year: Cameron Boozer, forward, Duke (22.7 ppg, 10.2 rpg, 4.1 apg, 1.5 spg, 58.3 FG%, 40.7 3P%, 78 FT%)

Spoiler alert: Boozer will be my pick for National Player of the Year. For the first time since Jay Williams in the 2000-01 and 2001-02 seasons, Duke will have back-to-back National Players of the Year. Boozer has dominated the ACC, ranking second in scoring, leading the league in rebounds (and the only one averaging over 10 per game) and box plus/minus (+559). Since KenPom implemented its current format of the rating system in 2013, Boozer has the highest Player of the Year mark out of all players. He will be a contender for the No. 1 pick in June's NBA Draft.

Defensive Player of the Year: Maliq Brown, forward, Duke (3 drpg, 1.9 spg, 0.5 spg)

I was going to give this award to Syracuse's William Kyle III, but his team's below-average defense holds his case back. Enter Brown, who has anchored the No. 1 defense on KenPom. This could have easily gone to Boozer or Dame Sarr, but Brown has come off the bench and made a massive impact on the team's defense. He leads the ACC in steal percentage (5.9%) and tied for seventh in Hakeem percentage (sum of steal and block percentage; 9.2%) with Boston College's Jayden Hastings. There are few better guard defenders than Brown in college basketball. He would start for nearly every team but is lethal off the bench for Duke.

Sixth Man of the Year: Tru Washington, guard, Miami (Fla.) (11.9 ppg, 4.1 rpg, 1.7 apg, 1.9 spg, 45.7 FG%, 36.4 3P%, 73 FT%)

This could easily have been Brown as well, but Washington has come off the bench and averaged double figures in scoring this season. The New Mexico transfer has helped Miami earn a double bye for the ACC Tournament and secure a spot in the NCAA Tournament.

Most Improved Player: Juke Harris, guard, Wake Forest (21.7 ppg, 6.7 rpg, 1.7 apg, 1.3 spg, 45.2 FG%, 33.8 3P%, 77.6 FT%)

Harris came off the bench in 30 of the 31 games he played his freshman year, averaging 6.1 points per game. His sophomore season saw these numbers skyrocket, ranking top 15 in scoring in the country and third in the ACC behind Stanford's Ebuka Okorie and Boozer. He is one of five players nationally, as well as the only guard, to average at least 21 points and six rebounds per contest this season.

Coach of the Year: Jon Scheyer, Duke

Duke showed nearly zero drop-off from a tremendous run to the Final Four last season, despite losing the majority of its starting lineup. The Blue Devils have played one of the nation's toughest schedules and secured the No. 1 spot in the AP Poll after beating Michigan in late February. Scheyer becomes the first Duke coach to win this award since Mike Krzyzewski in 2000.

All-ACC Team:

G – Ebuka Okorie, Stanford
G – Boopie Miller, SMU
F – Malik Reneau, Miami (Fla.)
F – Cameron Boozer, Duke
F – Caleb Wilson, North Carolina



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Big Ten

Player of the Year: Yaxel Lendeborg, forward, Michigan (14.7 ppg, 7.2 rpg, 3.2 apg, 1.4 bpg, 1.2 spg, 50.8 FG%, 34.3 3P%, 82.7 FT%)

Lendeborg transferred to Michigan after playing at an All-American caliber level at UAB and he has not skipped a beat since arriving in Ann Arbor. If you want to see just how tremendous he is, look at the Wolverines' regular-season finale against Michigan State, putting up a season-high 27 points on 8-of-12 shooting (five of which were from 3-point range). He has proven to be unguardable throughout Big Ten play. While his numbers are nothing compared to what Boozer has done at Duke, Lendeborg is the best player on arguably the best team in the country.

Defensive Player of the Year: Zvonimir Ivisic, center, Illinois (3.5 rpg, 2.2 bpg)

Ivisic's 7-foot-2 height cannot be taught and he used that size to lead the Big Ten in Hakeem percentage at 14.3%. The Big Ten awarded Michigan's Aday Mara for this, but Ivisic has anchored Illinois to a much better defense than earlier in the year.

Freshman of the Year: Keaton Wagler, guard, Illinois (17.9 ppg, 4.9 rpg, 4.3 apg, 1 spg, 44.7 FG%, 41 3P%, 80.7 FT%)

This was not even a close one, with Wagler elevating himself to be one of the top picks in the upcoming NBA Draft. He is one of the many freshmen on the Wooden Award watch list, but the only freshman from the Big Ten on the list. Forget winning Freshman of the Year; Wagler certainly could have won Player of the Year.

Sixth Man of the Year: Braden Frager, forward, Nebraska (11.7 ppg, 3.9 rpg, 0.9 apg, 48.9 FG%, 34.8 3P%, 82.4 FT%)

Frager was one of the best freshmen in the Big Ten and he only started two of the 29 games he has appeared in for Nebraska. If Nebraska is to make a run this month, Frager's production is critical.

Coach of the Year: Fred Hoiberg, Nebraska

An absolutely easy decision. Nebraska was picked to finish 14th in the Big Ten preseason poll. Where did the Cornhuskers finish? Second. Two years after leading Nebraska to its first NCAA Tournament appearance in 10 years in 2024, the Cornhuskers are having their own version of the "Dream Season" that UConn had in 1990. Spoiler alert: Hoiberg is my National Coach of the Year pick as well.

All-Big Ten Team:

G – Jeremy Fears Jr., Michigan State
G – Keaton Wagler, Illinois
F – Pryce Sandfort, Nebraska
F – Yaxel Lendeborg, Michigan
C – Aday Mara, Michigan

THE RODRÍGUEZ- NARVÁEZ SWAP: ONE SEASON LATER

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Following the turn of the century all the way up to 2020, the two teams made just a single deal: swapping infielders Kelly Johnson and Stephen Drew in a one-for-one move at the 2014 trade deadline. It was the first trade between the two rivals in over 15 years.

The last trade before that took place in 1997. Brian Cashman was named general manager in 1998, meaning it was Cashman who waited those 15-plus years before authorizing his first deal with the Red Sox.

That changed in 2021. Needing to shed salary, the Yankees dumped reliever Adam Ottavino to the Red Sox along with prospect Frank German for cash considerations. Two years later, the Yankees made a minor but still notable move early in the 2023 season to reacquire outfielder Greg Allen, who was on a minor league deal with Boston, for prospect Diego Hernández.

The biggest swap yet came prior to 2024, when Boston shipped former fan favorite Alex Verdugo to the Bronx in exchange for reliever Greg Weissert and pitching prospects Richard Fitts and Nicholas Judice.

Verdugo struggled at the plate in his one season in pinstripes but was a defensive juggernaut in left during the Yankees' World Series run. Weissert developed into a key member of the Red Sox bullpen, while Fitts debuted before being part of the Cardinals' return in the Sonny Gray deal earlier this offseason.

While that was the first trade with lasting impact on the franchises since arguably the Sparky Lyle trade in 1972, it may end up residing in the shadow of the most recent deal between New York and Boston.

On Dec. 11, 2024, the Red Sox acquired Carlos Narváez from the Yankees in exchange for Elmer Rodríguez and international signing bonus pool money.

For the Red Sox, the need for a catcher was blatant. Connor Wong received the bulk of the playing time in 2024 for the second straight season. The then 28-year-old, the final direct piece of the Red Sox return in the 2020 Mookie Betts trade, showed offensive improvement. He lifted his batting average up 45 points and hit a career-high 13 home runs.



Connor Wong, a catcher and infielder for the Boston Red Sox.

PHOTO COURTESTY OF @WINY RADIO FACEBOOK

Still, Wong's defense regressed from 1.9 dWAR in 2023 all the way to −0.5 in 2024 and hit about 50 points lower against right handers than he did lefties. His backup, Danny Jansen, was largely a non-factor after arriving from the Toronto Blue Jays at the trade deadline and hit .250 with an OPS of .746. However, his main calling card was his major-league-ready defense. Widely regarded as an above average framer, he represented a higher-ceiling defensive alternative to Wong.

The Yankees were trading from an organizational strength. Former first-rounder Austin Wells had just posted a 2.5 WAR in his full season in the big leagues with Ben Rice also making his debut. Upper-level prospects Rafael Flores, Jesús Rodríguez and J.C. Escarra were also waiting in the wings.

Defensive specialist Jose Trevino was still on the roster at the time, though he was traded just over a week later to the Cincinnati Reds in exchange for reliever Fernando Cruz (Rodríguez's current Team Puerto Rico teammate in the World Baseball Classic).

At the time, Cashman told Yankees reporters, including Bryan Hoch of MLB.com, that teams were inquiring about that log jam.

"Our development system has produced a lot of catching," Cashman said. "We've had a lot of people hit us on our catching. It doesn't mean we'll do anything or not, but it's nice. We're definitely having people ask us about it."

In Rodríguez, the Yankees were acquiring a 2021 fourth rounder who had eclipsed 20 appearances and 80 innings for the first time in his career in 2024. The right hander reached High-A for the first time that year, making seven starts to a 3.77 ERA.

A season later, the long-term consequences of the trade are still not yet known, but the results look promising for both teams.

Narváez claimed the everyday catcher spot for Boston thanks to both an exceedingly poor season from Wong and an impressive first half at the plate for himself.

In his rookie season, Narváez hit .241 with 42 extra base hits. He was at his best prior to the All-Star weekend, slashing .273/.347/.439 prior to the break and .187/.233/.387 following. He was also worth 1.7 dWAR on the year.

Rodríguez transformed into a top 100 prospect, working to a 2.58 ERA over three levels 150 innings, making it all the way to Triple-A. The now 22-year-old came in at No. 82 on MLB Pipeline's preseason top 100 prospect list.

The pair almost got the chance to face each other on the field for the first time last week, as the Red Sox and Team Puerto Rico played an exhibition game in preparation for the tournament. Rodríguez got the start, while Narváez was slated to start at DH. While Narváez got scratched due to a back spasm, according to Tim Healy of the Boston Globe, both teams will be hoping for the sake of their own player that they will have plenty more chances to face each other.

Rodríguez may be hoping for that himself.

Yeah, it would have been fun," Rodríguez said to Mac Cerullo of the Boston Herald. "You don't see that often, we play against each other like that, and it will probably be my first time facing him, but we'll probably face each other in the long end."