TIA CHAN:

BEHIND THE MASK

by Thaddeus Sawyer
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
HE/HIM/HIS
thaddeus.sawyer@uconn.edu

Five years before Tia Chan posted a career-high 57 saves in the Hockey East Championship, her final home game, the chances of her ever calling the Toscano Family Ice Forum seemed small.

That's not just because, at that time, the forum was nothing more than a set of blueprints.

"She wanted to be here at UConn," said Head Coach Chris MacKenzie after practice on Monday. "She was recruited by other schools, had come to visit us.

We had not pursued her maybe as much as she pursued us."

Five seasons of game action and over 2,500 saves later, it would be hard for MacKenzie to complain about the return on investment with Chan, especially as the two-time team captain leads the Huskies into the second NCAA tournament in her time at UConn, the second in team history.

"We got to see her play and, you know, we saw the athleticism, but the whole programs built off of people that wanted to be at UConn and make it better," MacKenzie said. "I think she's a prime example of that."

For Chan, the decision to come to UConn boiled down to the family atmosphere and continuity of the coaching staff.

"We've had so many sets of sisters here, like [Tristyn and Ainsley Svetek], [Jaime and Danielle Fox], and you wouldn't send your younger sister here if it wasn't a good place," Chan said following Monday's practice, one of her last at Toscano. "So, when I committed here, that was part of my decision. Like, it's a good place because you send your younger sister."

Indeed, even on UConn's current roster, freshman defender Camryn Grimley is the younger sister of former UConn assistant captain Riley Grimley. Grimley, who graduated following last season, assisted the game-winning goal in overtime against Northeastern in the 2024 Hockey East Championship to send UConn on their first tournament run. Ainsley Svetek also had an assist on that play. Chan made 38 saves and didn't allow a goal in that contest.

"It felt like family, felt like home," Chan said.

After arriving in Storrs, Chan hit the ground running.

Starting 10 games her freshman year, Chan allowed just 1.49 goals per contest and set her first career-high at 40. That small sample size was already enough to secure a spot on the Hockey East All-Rookie Team, the first of many honors to come.

"Obviously, things have changed," Chan said. "You know, we used to be in the [Mark Edward Freitas Ice Forum], and just like the building is so different now. The crowd that we get is insanely different."

The Ontario native missed her true sophomore season while playing for Team China in the 2022 Winter Olympics, but picked up right where she left off in 2023. Chan made her first Hockey East All-Star team on the Hockey East third team. 2023 was also the first time that Chan etched her name into the UConn record book, finishing with top 10 single-season marks in save percentage and goals against average.

"We've had some really amazing goalies here," Chan said. "Elaine Chuli, Meg Warrener, Annie Belanger; there's so many I could name. Just to be in the conversation with those players is amazing."

Chan would end up doing far more than just be in the conversation. Over the next three seasons, Chan racked up over 1,500 saves.

According to the UConn women's hockey record book, she currently sits at 2,504 on her career, one away from tying Belanger for second most in program history. Her 1.51 career goals against average leaves her one spot below Warrener. She will finish her career with the most wins (54 and counting), highest save percentage (.945) and shutouts (23 and also still possibly going up) in program history.

Her eight shutouts in 2024 set a new single season record, a list on which she also holds the third and tenth spots on. Chan's name is also littered on the single season save percentage and goals against average lists.

The achievements don't stop with the stats. After winning the award for a second straight season in 2026, Chan is a two-time Hockey East Goaltender of the Year, also being named a first-team conference all-star both years.

After her performance in this year's Hockey East Championship, she was named tournament MVP. The graduate student was also a top-10 finalist for the Patty Kazmaier award, which honors the top women's player across the entire NCAA.

"To be able to get awards and records and all these other things, it definitely feels good," Chan said. "It's a confidence booster, but I have to give credit to my team. There's no way I get here without them, without my coaches. All their support, how they help me on the ice, everything."

One of the players giving Chan support and praise is fellow captain and Ontario native Kyla Josifovic, who Chan says she trains with during the offseason.

"She has really good highlight saves," Josifovic said prior to the Hockey East Championship. "But other than that, I think she's just very consistent in her game. Sometimes it could go unnoticed just because she's just so consistent. We just appreciate her and she's just done so well this year."

In that championship, Chan was at the top of her game, allowing just one goal across almost 100 minutes.

"When we did the starting lineup, Northeastern's crowd, I was like, 'oh, that's pretty loud,'" Chan said. "Then our starting lineup came, and the building erupted.

I've never heard it that loud in here for a men's or a women's game."

The UConn student section quickly made their presence known, holding up posters depicting brick walls and chanting "Tia" after big saves.

"I'm 100% serious when I say this: I don't know if we win that game without the crowd," Chan said.

Despite playing in the NCAA postseason before as well as the Winter Olympics, Chan said that she still holds that performance amongst her best.

"Of course that one, it's up there," Chan said. "You know, any game where you win a trophy, it's got to be in the top couple of your best games."

Chan will have the chance to win one more championship as a Husky. UConn still just four wins away from hoisting the first National Championship trophy in UConn hockey history.

Though Chan says that she understands that it's do-or-die time, she also believes that she and her teammates do their best work under pressure.

"100% confidence," Chan said. "There's no doubt we can do anything that we set our mind to."

LATO'S LENS:

UPSETS, TOP PERFORMERS AND CONFERENCE TOURNAMENT PREDICTIONS FOR THIS WEEK IN COLLEGE BASKETBALL

by Tyler Lato
STAFF WRITER
HE/HIM/HIS
tyler.lato@uconn.edu

The college basketball regular season came to a close last week. This only means one thing: March Madness is back.

Several conference tournaments have begun, with teams across the country fighting for an automatic bid to the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Tournament. For others, the next few days will determine if their name is worthy of being called on Selection Sunday.

Before the madness truly begins, let's look at college basketball's biggest upsets and top performers from last week, followed by my predictions for this week's Power conference tournament champions.

Biggest Upsets

Saturday, Mar. 7: BYU 82, No. 10 Texas Tech 76

You can't get any more unpredictable than 2025–26 BYU. After falling out of the top 25 due to several losses to unranked opponents, the Cougars rallied from an eight-point halftime deficit to stun No. 10 Texas Tech.

The duo of Robert Wright III and AJ Dybantsa has been nothing short of impressive this season. Wright, who transferred from Baylor, accounted for 27 points, six rebounds and two assists. Not to mention, 24 of his 27 points came in the second half.

Meanwhile, Dybantsa chipped in with a respective 21 points, six rebounds and four assists. He finished the regular season averaging 25.2 points, 6.8 rebounds and 3.9 assists, boosting his claim for college basketball's freshman of the year accolade.

Saturday, Mar. 7: Marquette 68, No. 4 UConn 62

Experts had the fourth-ranked UConn Huskies penciled in to win at least a share of the Big East regular season title on Saturday with a win over 11-19 Marquette. But then again, this is March.

The Huskies led the Golden Eagles throughout the majority of the first half, clinging to a measly 35-33 halftime lead.

Then, Marquette came back. Guard Royce Parham drilled a three-pointer nearly six minutes into the second half to give the Golden Eagles their first lead of the game, and rallied for a 68-62 win.

UConn head coach Dan Hurley was ejected in the game's final seconds for arguing with an official, triggering a $25,000 fine by the Big East for unsportsmanlike conduct.

With the loss, the Huskies remain the two-seed for the Big East tournament, while St. John's clinched the regular season title and the one-seed.

Saturday, Mar. 7: George Mason 86, No. 25 Saint Louis 57

The Robbie Avila-headed Saint Louis Billikens took their fourth loss of the season on Saturday to Atlantic 10 rival George Mason in crushing 86-57 fashion for both squads' regular season finale.

The Patriots' defense was stellar from start to finish, holding Avila to only two points throughout the whole game. Senior guard Jahari Long complemented their defense by adding 21 points and nine rebounds, followed by Korey Mincy's 15 points, five rebounds and five assists.

The win marks George Mason's first win over a ranked opponent since February of 2024, when they defeated then-No. 16 Dayton.

Though the now 23-8 Patriots are a long shot to receive an at-large bid for the Big Dance, an A-10 conference tournament victory is certainly not a long shot.

Top Performers

Cameron Boozer (forward), Duke, recorded a 26-point, 15-rebound and nine-assist double-double in top-ranked Duke's 76-61 rivalry victory over North Carolina.

Brayden Burries (guard), Arizona, scored a career-high 31 points in the Wildcats' 89-79 come-from-behind victory against Colorado.

Eian Elmer (guard), Miami Ohio, helped clinch the MAC regular season title and an undefeated regular season by recording 32 points and 12 assists in their overtime victory against Ohio.

Yaxel Lendeborg (guard), Michigan, scored 27 points, including 19 in the first half, in the No. 3 Wolverines' 90-80 win over No. 8 Michigan State.

Xavier Amos (forward), Loyola-Chicago, added 25 points, four rebounds and one assist in a loss to No. 25 Saint Louis.

Conference Tournament Predictions

Big 12: Houston

The No. 5 Cougars, under the helm of head coach Kelvin Sampson, are a mark of consistency amongst the college basketball world. Entering the tournament as the two-seed, they're poised to make a deep run in the Big Dance and are a favorite to defend their Big 12 crown. Though their road to the championship game will not be easy by any means, they have freshman guard Kingston Flemings in their back pocket, who is averaging 16.5 points, 3.9 rebounds and 5.4 assists per game. Coupled with their traditionally strong defense, the Cougars are my favorite to win the conference tournament.

ACC: Duke

How can you not pick Duke for this one? The No. 1 Blue Devils cruised to an ACC regular season title and have been, by far, the most dominant team in the conference. They're led by forward Cameron Boozer, son of NBA legend Carlos Boozer, who is averaging 22.7 points, 10.2 rebounds and 4.1 assists per game. Not to mention, their rival, North Carolina, is banged up and without star freshman guard Caleb Wilson. Regardless, the Blue Devils are clear-cut favorites for this one.

Big Ten: Purdue

The No. 18 Boilermakers are fresh off a loss to unranked Wisconsin but have all the pieces of the puzzle to make a run and win the Big Ten title. With big man Trey Kaufman-Renn and two-time All-American guard Braden Smith, the "Spoiler Makers" possess one of the most balanced duos in the conference. If they can withstand the intensity of the loaded Big Ten tournament bracket, they have a strong shot at cutting down the nets at the United Center.

SEC: Florida

This one is tough. The SEC is as even a playing field as it gets, with five of its teams holding a spot in this week's AP Top 25. However, it's hard to pick against the defending national champions. After a slow start to the season, the No. 4 Gators soared up the rankings and clinched the regular season title. On top of that, they return many key players from last year's season, like Thomas Haugh, Alex Condon and Rueben Chinyelu. They're also joined by former Princeton star Xavian Lee, who seems right at home in Gainesville. Again, it's hard to pick against this Florida team, despite such an even pool of teams.

Big East: UConn

If there's anything I've learned about a Dan Hurley-coached UConn team, it's that they always respond. We saw that last year when the Huskies were seconds away from upsetting the eventual national champion Florida in the Round of 32 after a fairly bad season for program standards. We saw what the Huskies are capable of doing earlier in the season, with wins over BYU, Kansas, St. John's, Florida and Illinois. If they play like they did then, winning the tournament is the farthest thing from a pipe dream.