Daily Sports

# Men's Basketball:

## No. 2-seed UConn set to face No. 10-seed Xavier in Big East Quarterfinal

**by Matt Dimech**
STAFF WRITER
HE/HIM/HIS
rwq24001@uconn.edu

No. 2-seed UConn will begin its quest for a record ninth Big East Tournament title on Thursday when it takes on Xavier.

UConn has not fallen in the tournament's quarterfinal round or sooner since rejoining the Big East in 2019 after spending seven seasons in the American Conference. You would need to go back to 2009 to find the last time the Huskies suffered an early exit from Madison Square Garden. It took four hours, 244 combined points and six overtime periods for Jim Boeheim's Syracuse Orange to upset the Huskies.

UConn made short work of the Musketeers in their two meetings this year. The Huskies dominated for a combined scoring margin of 55 across both regular season games. UConn has won six of their last seven games over Xavier since the 2023-24 season.

The most recent came at PeoplesBank Arena, where UConn routed the Musketeers 92-60. The Huskies jumped out to a 50-22 lead at halftime, their most points entering the break all season.

Tarris Reed Jr. dominated in the win, making all seven of his attempts from the field with pulling down eight boards. Reed was one of five Huskies to finish in double digit scoring, while two came up just short with nine.

The Huskies enter the tournament reeling off a 68-62 loss to Marquette, the loss spoiled their chance at a share of the Big East regular season championship. UConn trailed by as much as 12 but it managed to get it back within two points. Silas Demary Jr. drove to the rim with a chance to tie it but missed the layup, and with it, their share of the regular-season title.

UConn dug itselves a hole shooting 3-for-24 from beyond the arc. Alex Karaban finished the game with out making a basket. He contributed five of the missed three pointers. Karaban has put the poor performance behind him, but it is not out of his mind.

You got to move on, but you got to keep that pain inside of you…to use as extra motivation," Karaban said.

The Huskies paired their shooting woes with 16 turnovers to nail the coffin on the loss. Protecting the ball has been an issue for UConn all season. Demary attributes the fatal flaw to the team playing overly "robotic."

"The turnovers are what made the difference in those wins and those losses," Demary said. "I think sometimes we get caught thinking too much. So, just go out, make a play, and just play basketball."

The Huskies have the third worst turnover percentage in the Big East this season. They have committed at least 15 turnovers in each of their last two games.

Where the UConn failed, Xavier succeeded. The Musketeers pulled off an underdog victory over the Golden Eagles in the opening round of the tournament, taking away UConn's shot at revenge.

The victory was Richard Pitino's first as a head coach in the Big East Tournament. The Golden Eagles had no answers for Xavier's starting frontcourt, combining nearly 50 points in the game.

Jovan Milicevic led the scoring effort for the Musketeers by knocking down four three pointers. He finished the game with 21 points before fouling out in the second half. Tre Carroll fell one rebound short of posting an 18-point double-double.

UConn will be without Jaylin Stewart for the duration of the weekend. The junior was a key role player for the Huskies before getting sidelined with a leg injury. He has not played since Feb. 21 during UConn's road domination of Villanova.

Stewart provides the main source of bench relief for Karaban. The senior forward has played all 40 minutes in each of his last two games and played 34 minutes during UConn's 30-point thrashing of St. John's on Feb. 24.

The Huskies will need to win three games in three days to reclaim the conference crown, making Karaban's recent playing time diet a cause for concern. Hurley says that Stewart's absence has created an "untenable" situation for Karaban.

He did not rule out the potential for Stewart to play in the NCAA Tournament when he confirmed that he would not play in New York. He is averaging 4.5 points and 2.8 rebounds per game this season.

UConn's bench ranks No. 279 across all of Division I in bench points scored per game.

"Bench guys got to step up for the presence of Stewie," Karaban said. "What he does out there doesn't always represent what's on the stat sheet."

Karaban was one of three Huskies to be named to the All-Big East First Team, joined by Reed and Demary. It was all three players' first time receiving the award. The honor was not lost on any of them, but when asked about it, they all responded that there were more important things on their minds and the team's: the Big East Championship.

Tipoff is scheduled for 7 p.m. and is available to watch on FS1.



**UConn men's basketball playing against the St. Johns Red Storm. The game happened at People's Bank Arena in Hartford, Conn.**

PHOTO BY CONNOR SHARP, PHOTO EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS