Sports

Photo of the Day |



The UConn Pep Band performs on March 20, 2026. Although the crowd was not in UConn's favor, the Huskies persisted and secured the win. PHOTO BY MADISON HENDRICKS, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/ THE DAILY CAMPUS

LATO'S LENS:

Madness unfolds as upsets shake up the Sweet 16

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After a hectic week of play-in games and the first and second rounds, I can confidently say that the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Tournament has lived up to its name: madness. While many high seeds are still alive, some lower seeds are starting to carve their way through the bracket.

The first four games of the Sweet 16 start tonight. Before you tune in, take a look at some of the highlights of the first two rounds, followed by some games to watch for the upcoming week of March Madness.

Greatest Upsets

No. 12 High Point 83, No. 5 Wisconsin 82

After winning the Big South Conference tournament the week before, the 12th-seeded High Point Panthers shocked the nation with an 83-82 victory over No. 5 Wisconsin in the tournament's first round last Thursday. The victory marked the program's first-ever NCAA tournament win.

High Point guard Chase Johnston scored his first two-point basket of the year on a fast-break layup to give the Panthers an 83-82 lead over the Badgers with 11.7 seconds left. Following Johnston's bucket, the Badgers had an opportunity to score. However, Owen Aquino blocked Badgers star guard Nick Boyd's shot, sealing the upset victory.

While Johnston finished with a solid 14 points, his batterymate Rob Martin had a career day, recording a 23-point, 10-assist double-double. Though the Panthers' run in the tournament came to an end after a loss to No. 4 Arkansas on Saturday, their victory will forever be etched in March Madness history.

No. 11 VCU 82, No. 6 North Carolina 78

It's not often a blue-blood team gets upset this early in the tournament, but it certainly happened during VCU's 82-78 overtime victory over the injury-ridden North Carolina Tar Heels.

The Atlantic 10 Conference tournament champions trailed the Tar Heels by as many as 19 points. However, they slowly climbed their way out of the deficit, eventually tying the game at 75-75 after Terrence Hill Jr.'s layup in the final seconds of regulation.

Tar Heels guard Seth Trimble made a free throw with 35 seconds left in overtime to give North Carolina a 78-77 lead, but it was short-lived after Hill drilled a critical step-back jumper to give the Rams a two-point lead of their own. While big man Henri Veesaar was fouled with 4.2 seconds left, he missed both free throws, essentially sealing the game for VCU.

Hill capped off his heroic performance with 34 points, five rebounds and five assists, shooting an incredible 7-for-10 from three-point range. Should he decide to stay in Richmond next season, the Rams could be favorites to make another run at the title.

No. 9 Iowa 73, No. 1 Florida 72

As I've said in several Lato's Lens articles: down goes No. 1.

The top-seeded Florida Gators came into March with the goal of defending their national title from the previous season. But the ninth-seeded Iowa Hawkeyes played spoiler, overcoming an off-game from star guard Bennett Stirtz to defeat the Gators in the game's final seconds.

The Hawkeyes dominated Florida early, but later lost their lead in the second half. With 8.9 seconds left and trailing 71-70, Stirtz kicked the ball out to junior forward Alvaro Folgueiras, who drained the game-winning three-point shot to give Iowa a 73-72 lead.

Florida guard Xaivian Lee had a last-second opportunity to win the game for the Gators, but his attempt was smothered.

Iowa's Tavion Banks scored 20 points and hauled in six rebounds, while Stirtz added 13 points of his own. This shows how deep this Iowa team truly is and how dangerous it can be moving forward in the tournament.

Top Performers

Tarris Reed Jr., C (UConn), recorded an incredible 31 points and 27 rebounds in the No. 2 Huskies' 82-71 first-round win over 15th-seeded Furman.

Cameron Boozer, F (Duke), contributed to No. 1 Duke's 71-65 comeback victory over No. 16 Siena with a 22-point, 13-rebound double-double.

David Mirkovic, F (Illinois), scored 29 points and added 17 rebounds in the Illini's dominant 105-70 win over No. 14 Pennsylvania.

Braden Frager, F (Nebraska), came off the bench to score the game-winning basket, lifting No. 4 Nebraska over No. 5 Vanderbilt in the second round of the tournament.

Darius Acuff Jr., G (Arkansas), ended High Point's Cinderella run with a 36-point, six-assist performance in No. 4 Arkansas' 94-88 victory.

Sweet 16 Games to Watch

Thursday: No. 11 Texas vs. No. 2 Purdue – 7:10 p.m.

Though it's unusual to refer to a team from the SEC as a Cinderella story, the No. 11 Texas Longhorns have played the part. They defeated North Carolina State in a play-in game to get into the tournament and have since beaten No. 6 BYU and No. 3 Gonzaga along the way.

They now face none other than No. 2 Purdue, fresh off a victory in the Big Ten championship game. Not to mention, the Boilermakers return several members of their 2024 national championship squad, including Fletcher Loyer, Braden Smith and Trey Kaufman-Renn. Nonetheless, this should be a good one, featuring a seasoned conference champion and this year's Cinderella squad.

Friday: No. 5 St. John's vs. No. 1 Duke – 7:10 p.m.

When I saw this as a potential matchup at the start of the tournament, I almost couldn't believe my eyes.

St. John's is anything but a five seed. Despite early-season struggles, they cruised to both Big East regular-season and tournament titles, even defeating No. 2 UConn twice along the way. And while Duke is clearly the favorite to win the tournament, they've looked shaky at times, especially after narrowly escaping Siena in their first-round game.

Keep an eye out for St. John's Zuby Ejiofor. Earning 2025-26 Big East Player of the Year honors, he's currently leading the team in almost every offensive category with 16.3 points, 7.3 rebounds and 3.5 assists. While Duke has the more talented roster on paper, Ejiofor is an equalizer.

Friday: No. 3 Michigan State vs. No. 2 UConn

Two premier programs. Two stacked rosters. Two seasoned head coaches. One goal.

This is as even a Sweet 16 matchup as there can be, with DraftKings listing UConn as a 1.5-point favorite. It also marks the second time the two programs face each other this season, with Michigan State facing the Huskies in a preseason exhibition game.

Though struggling offensively with several lackluster performances from junior guard Solo Ball, Tarris Reed Jr. is a bright spot in the Huskies' starting lineup and is critical on both ends of the floor. Not to mention, senior forward Alex Karaban is finally heating up again, especially after his career-high 27-point performance against No. 7 UCLA.

Meanwhile, Michigan State is led by junior forward Coen Carr and guard Jeremy Fears Jr. The two powered the Spartans past a red-hot Louisville squad in the second round of the tournament and look to do so again against the Huskies. Should Ball struggle again, the Huskies could be in for a long night.



Tarris Reed Jr. of the UConn Huskies looks to the ball during their first-round March Madness game against Furman University. Reed Jr. had a phenomenal performance, leading the team to an 82-71 win. PHOTO COURTESY OF @IAMTARRISREED ON INSTAGRAM.