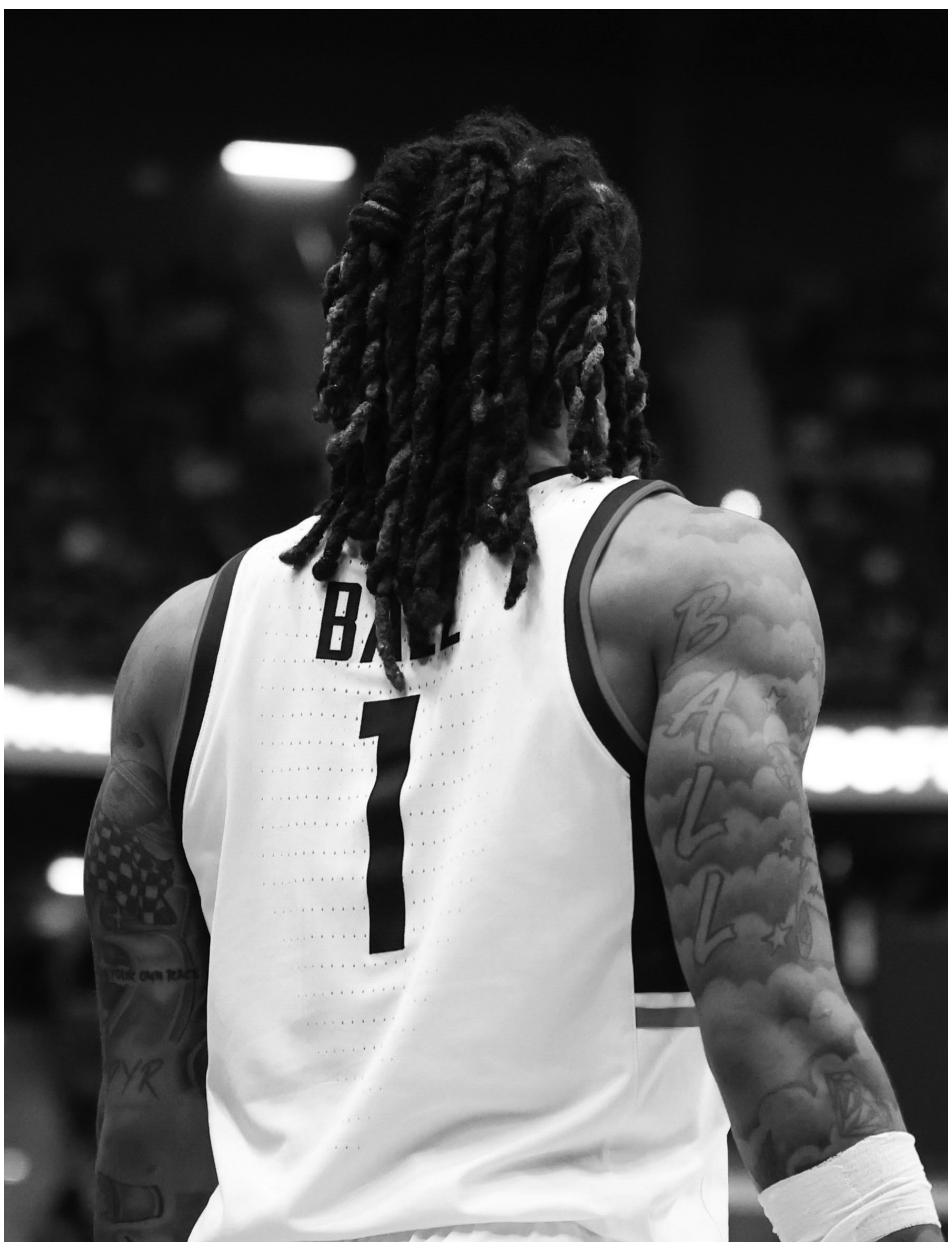
Men's Basketball:
SOLO BALL'S RETURN GIVES UCONN A MAJOR BOOST



UConn men's basketball player Solo Ball is cleared to return to full-contact practice. Ball had wrist surgery during the offseason.
FILE PHOTO/THE DAILY CAMPUS



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STORRS — Displayed above Dan Hurley during media availabilities in the Werth Champions Center Monday was a monitor that showed statistics from practice. In the last day, freshman Egor Amosov attempted the second-most shots on the team with an impressive 420. Coming in first by more than double, with 957 shots, was Solo Ball, just 54 days after being forced to watch the team's first official practice from the sidelines while getting shots up with a volleyball.

The UConn men's basketball social media account announced that Ball has been cleared to return to full-contact practice after offseason wrist surgery on Monday. Ball took the medical redshirt for this season before the 5-in-5 rules were imposed.

"Different players handle injuries and being out differently," Hurley said. "Solo is built way different. It was just crushing for him to not be playing basketball, competing, being out there with the team."

With the new rules imposed and Ball being able to heal ahead of schedule, it was only a matter of time before he would get back into the swing of things.

"He's been pestering us for a while," Hurley said. "I think it's been about six weeks since he started getting giddy about, eventually, getting back out there."

Ball has been warming up with the team prior to games, including throwing down some flashy dunks that sparked buzz online about whether the 2024 national champion would return earlier than expected.

With the injury of Duke transfer Nik Khamenia, Hurley mentioned there was a sadness around the program after it was announced the sophomore would be reevaluated in six-to-eight weeks. Now that one of the team's veterans in Ball is back earlier than expected, it may have already given the team a bit of a morale boost.

"I just think everyone's just so happy for [Ball]," Hurley said. "[The injury was] not good for him. He's needed to heal from what he went through."

Ball and Jayden Ross are the longest-tenured Huskies, the last two standing from UConn's 2024 national title squad. Having originally thought he would be off the court for an entire season, Hurley is grateful to have one of his most experienced players in Ball back with the team.

"You don't want the game to be taken away from him because he loves the game so much, and he loves to compete so much, and he loves his teammates so much and he loves UConn so much."

Beyond the emotional lift brought to the team, Ball's return injects high-level shot-making and championship-caliber experience back into what the team believes is the best backcourt in the country as it continues on its grueling nonconference schedule.

In the social media post, Hurley noted that Ball will "use the next few weeks as a ramp-up period until he is fully ready to return to game action." Looking "the next few weeks" down the schedule, the Huskies face No. 10 Illinois on Dec. 10, Mississippi Valley State on Dec. 8 and No. 11 Kansas on Dec. 12.

If everything goes according to plan, Connecticut can see their leader before Big East play begins.

Lombardi Lineup:
BREAKING DOWN THE PLAYERS ERA FESTIVAL

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The Players Era Festival is in its third season in college basketball and has expanded to pit 24 teams in a battle for massive NIL payouts.

Last year's rendition came with its fair share of critiques, the most notable being that it determined finalists based on point differential and other tiebreakers rather than a standard bracket like most multi-team events. Now, the event will be split into two tournaments, an 8-team and a 16-team bracket, where each will crown a separate champion.

Historically, participants have earned roughly $1 million just for participating, with another million as a reward for winning the tournament. Top brands are coming away with even more lucrative deals this year, as public records revealed Kansas will be paid just under $3 million before even stepping on the court. The financial incentives of joining the event have become far too great for these schools to ignore.

Like last year, the tournament has attracted many of the top college basketball programs, providing some of the biggest matchups throughout feast week. Eventual national champion Michigan established itself as a top team in the country after steamrolling last year's rendition, culminating in a 40-point blowout in the championship against Gonzaga. As a result, this tournament cannot be overlooked and will likely have major implications on rankings and seedings in March.

The Players Era 8 begins this week from Nov. 17-19, featuring No. 1 Florida, No. 8 Houston, and No. 15 Kansas, among other strong power five programs. Each team will be guaranteed three games, similar to the Maui Invitational.

The Players Era 16 will be held the following week from Nov. 24-28, headlined by Gonzaga, Michigan, Alabama, St. John's and numerous other contenders. Teams will be split into two brackets, with the winners of each playing a fourth game in the championship. The bracket reseeds teams to avoid conference matchups or rematches, and those in the championship will be forced to drop a future non-conference game to remain under the 32-game maximum.

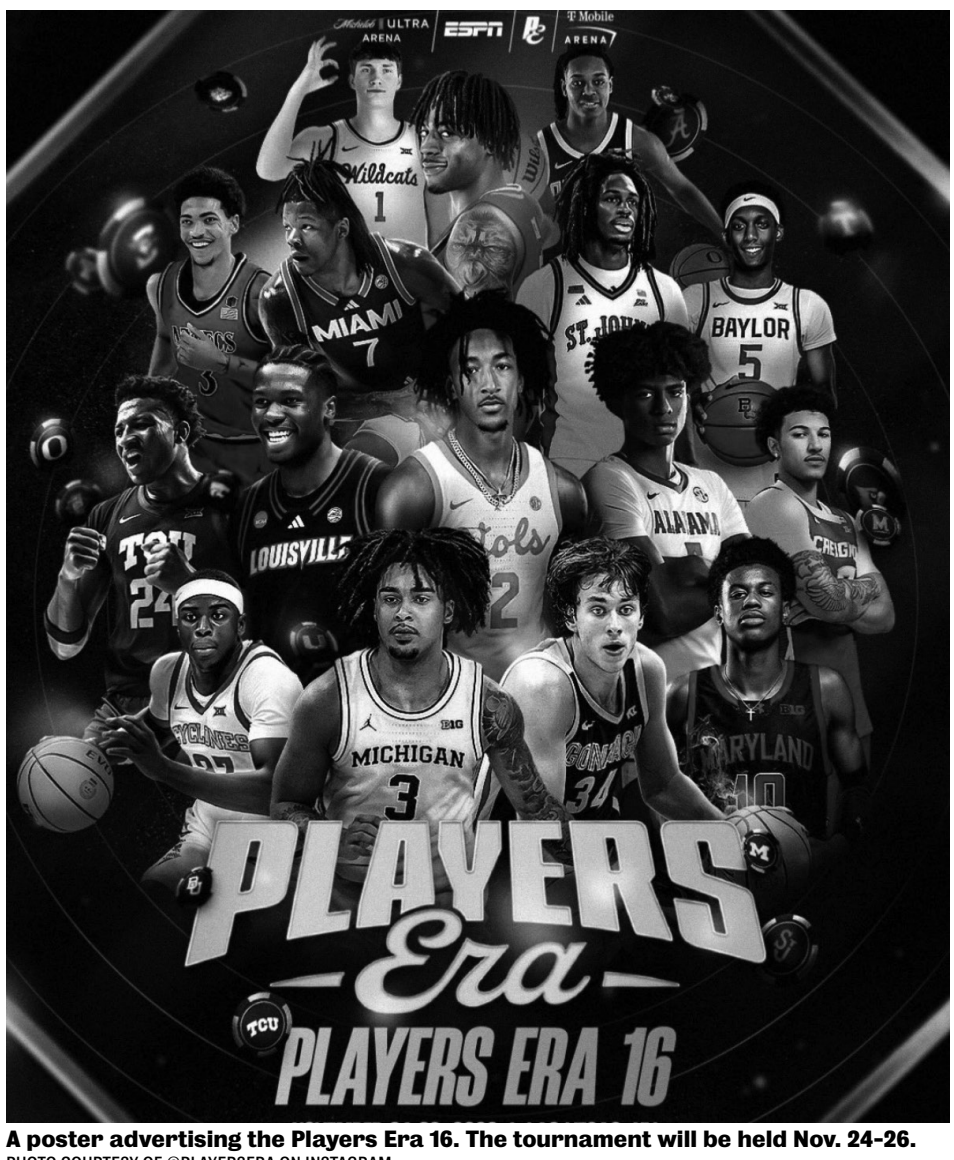
A common criticism of the Players Era that continues to linger is its exclusion of many mid-major programs. The only non-power five representation comes from the Pac-12 in Gonzaga and San Diego State, and the Mountain West with UNLV. Meanwhile, programs like Miami of Ohio, High Point and Santa Clara, for example, are boxed out as they continue to plead for marquee matchups to boost their strength of schedule and prove their worth.

This is part of a much larger issue in college basketball, where many of the top tier programs refuse to schedule talented mid majors due to the risk of an upset loss, instead opting for "buy games" against bottom barrel squads. As a result, these top mid majors are punished for a weak schedule that was largely out of their control. Some argue that allocating a few slots in a tournament like the Players Era could help alleviate this problem for a few teams, but instead the Vegas tournament opts to reward the wealthier power five teams while leaving potential underdogs in the dust.

Meanwhile, as the Players Era continues to grow, more concerns arise for long time prestigious events like the Maui Invitational and Battle 4 Atlantis. Not long ago, these tournaments were the top destinations for ranked teams to play meaningful basketball in November. Now, they're lucky to even attract one or two schools in the top 25.

Unlike other feast week tournaments, which often are hosted in smaller, more intimate venues that feature loud, passionate local environments, the Players Era Festival is hosted across two massive Las Vegas arenas. In its first two years, the event struggled to fill seats, resulting in relatively quiet, lifeless environments for most of the games, which many fans complained made it feel corporate and sanitized.

Ultimately, Players Era is just another example of the sport moving away from the traditions that separated it from other sports in favor of money. Instead of competing for the sake of the experience or prestige, schools are flocking towards the massive NIL payouts. The tournament will still provide some of the most exciting non-conference matchups of the year, but it remains deeply flawed.



A poster advertising the Players Era 16. The tournament will be held Nov. 24-26.
PHOTO COURTESY OF @PLAYERSERA ON INSTAGRAM



Tyran Strokes from Kansas University wears a Players Era hoodie. His team will participate in the Players Era 8 tournament Nov. 17-19.
PHOTO COURTESY OF @PLAYSERA ON INSTAGRAM