Daily SPORTS

MEN'S BASKETBALL:

Huskies survive early offensive struggles against Syracuse to secure 72-52 victory



UConn men's basketball takes on Syracuse on Oct. 13th 2026 at Mohegan Sun Arena in Uncasville, CT. The Huskies took a decisive victory in the preseason clash 72-52.

PHOTO BY ALEX RENZULLI, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

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UNCASVILLE — The last time UConn forward Nik Khamenia and Syracuse Head Coach Gerry McNamara shared a court, they were doing so under far different circumstances.

For one, both were wearing different colors. Khamenia was sporting royal blue, fittingly as a member of the No. 1-seeded Duke Blue Devils and McNamara was covered in Siena green as he made his first NCAA tournament appearance leading the No. 16-seeded Saints.

Khamenia scored just three points as a member of the Blue Devil bench. However, McNamara nearly became a household name. Coaching Siena to an 11-point halftime lead, the Saints had the basketball world on edge for a few hours waiting to see if they could pull off the early upset, coming up just short in the end.

Half a year later, Khamenia had traded in one shade of blue for another by transferring to UConn while McNamara was sporting the familiar threads of his alma mater and where he had spent the first decade and a half of his coaching career after being named Syracuse's head coach in late March.

When the pair met again on Tuesday night at the Mohegan Sun Arena for an exhibition game, admittedly with drastically lower stakes, it was Khamenia playing spoiler this time around.

While Duke gutted their way to an early 4-1 lead, it was Khamenia who turned the Huskies' tides around after a sloppy start. With McNamara just inches away, crouched down and clapping furiously at defender Sadiq White Jr., Khamenia drained a three pointer. That field goal, the first for the Huskies almost five minutes into the contest, tied a game that the Orange would never again lead.

Khamenia ensured McNamara began his latest Syracuse tenure on a loss, leading UConn to 72-52 victory in his UConn debut.

With former UConn Head Coach Jim Calhoun sitting courtside and Syracuse legend Carmelo Anthony in attendance to watch his son, Orange guard Kiyan Anthony, the opening minutes of the contest harkened back to the trademark physicality that defined the original Big East.

The two teams combined for five fouls within the first three minutes. The Huskies had contributed four fouls, including a trio of offensive fouls, by 16:53.

While those fouls and a backcourt violation prevented the UConn offense from scoring a field goal until almost five minutes into the contest, it began to find its footing when Seton Hall transfer center Na'jai Hines made his UConn debut with 16:53 to go in the first.

Though the Huskies' expected starter made his UConn debut as a substitute in deference to fellow newcomer Oskar Giltay, the 6-foot-11 center showed immediately the presence he brings to the paint when in the contest. Helping to settle the UConn offense after the shaky start, Hines gave a taste of his capabilities by cleaning up on a missed Silas Demary Jr. jumper before dishing out an alley-oop slam to extend the UConn lead to six with 11:49 to play in the first.

Finishing the contest with a team-high 17 points, the sophomore shined in both the paint and from the line, mixing in a 7-for-8 performance at the foul stripe between multiple loud dunks.

While the Orange tied the contest twice more before halftime, Khamenia suffocated both attempts with a pair of momentum-shifting plays. After Syracuse tied the game at 13 with 8:32 left to play in the first, it was Khamenia who put the Huskies back up by five with a three-pointer that forced a Syracuse timeout.

Coming out of the timeout, Syracuse posted a trio of three pointers in the final five minutes of the first to set up a game-tying second-chance make in the paint from Kiyan Anthony with just under two minutes to go in the half.

Once again, it was Khamenia ensuring the Huskies went into the half with momentum. Missing an open three-point attempt off the front of the rim, the rebound shot straight back at Khamenia, who dumped it off to Demary Jr. at the top of the key. Demary Jr. made his attempt from beyond the arc and Nils Machowski added in two more points as the clock expired to send the Huskies into halftime with a five-point lead.

The Orange again threatened out of the break, with junior guard Gavin Doty landing a turnaround jumper 20 seconds in. As if on cue, Khamenia again found the ball on the other end of the floor and sank his third three-pointer of the contest.

Finishing with a team-high plus-22 rating, Khamenia scored 12 points, going 4-for-12 from the field and 3-for-5 from three.

Demary Jr., the Big East Preseason Player of the Year, scored one more, rebounding from a slow start to score 13, including six points from the line. The 2026 All-Big East defender also contributed a team-high two steals. Khamenia and forward Colben Landrew also posted two takeaways.

In addition to Khamenia and Giltay, Landrew made his UConn debut as a member of the starting lineup in place of the injured Braylon Mullins. The freshman, who has been competing with returner Jayden Ross for a starting role, scored eight points in 28 minutes and also pulled in four rebounds.

Ross flirted with foul trouble and was limited to 20 minutes, though the senior finished the contest tied with Khamenia with a team-leading three assists.

Rusty first half followed up by "UConn Standard" in the second half

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The new year for the UConn men's basketball team tipped off to an undeniably rough start. There were seven turnovers between both teams in the first four minutes of play; from balls thrown away into the second row to players stepping on the baseline, your typical "preseason" game.

Being without Braylon Mullins on Tuesday meant more opportunities for players to earn minutes. The freshman duo of Colben Landrew and Junior County stepped up to the plate and delivered. After being held scoreless in the first half, County buried three triples in the second half to finish with 9 points.

The sloppy start saw the Huskies go scoreless for the 100 seconds and saw the first field goal come at the 15:21 mark as Duke transfer Nik Khamenia nailed a deep three-pointer. Once he saw that first shot fall, he fired eight more shots in the first half, hitting two more.

Defensively, however, UConn did not disappoint. Forcing nine turnovers in the first half saw Syracuse Head Coach Gerry McNamara irate and the Huskies bench on the other end of the floor loving it.

An important piece for those defensive stops was Stanford transfer Oskar Giltay, who picked up a pair of blocks in the first half. Giltay started at the center position after Hines was seen on the bench pregame with a wrap on his right knee.

Off the bench, Na'Jai Hines was the MVP of the night as he poured in a team-high 17 points on 5-for-7 from the field and 7-for-8 from the charity stripe. The Seton Hall transfer also made an impact on the defensive end, finishing the night with two blocks and a steal. Hines putback layup and alley-oop slam set up by Demary got the Mohegan Sun crowd rocking.

With Tarris Reed and Eric Reibe no longer with the program, the Huskies had to pivot rather quickly to get a new duo of big men. Dan Hurley may have found the answer in Giltay and Hines.

What seemed different from this squad compared to years past is their scrappiness down low, no matter the size. Khamenia and County both picked up two first-half offensive rebounds apiece, which contributed to the 12 UConn offensive rebounds compared to their 11 defensive boards in the first 20 minutes.

UConn went into the halftime locker room with just a five-point lead and came out of the locker room looking like a different team, making sure Syracuse had no hope for the remaining 20 minutes. It looked as if they were ready to play up to the UConn standard.

The shooting picked up as the Huskies shot 12-for-25 in the second half, compared to a not-so-nice 11-for-31 first half.

The Huskies opened the second half on a 10-2 run, quickly pulling away before an 11-3 spurt — capped off by a Hines layup — which brought the crowd to its feet for the first "U-C-O-N-N" chant of the season. Syracuse was suffocated defensively, held to just 5-for-17 shooting during the surge. The defensive intensity picked up as the team held Syracuse to an 8-for-29 shooting in the second half, including defensive coach's dream, holding the Orange to 1-for-15 shooting from downtown.



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