Sports

MEN'S BASKETBALL: UCONN'S GOT A NEW ATTITUDE AND NEW LOOK FOR 2026-27

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With just a third of last season's minutes returning, UConn men's basketball is establishing a new identity heading into this year.

These changes go beyond the unfamiliar faces on the roster. The Huskies have adopted a different attitude on the court, and it all starts in practice.

Despite being just seven points shy of a national championship last season, head coach Dan Hurley frequently expressed his frustration with the team's lack of "killer instinct," something he believes is critical to compete at the highest level. He referred to them as "a bunch of nice guys."

With 10 newcomers joining the program, the mentality seems to be changing.

Braylon Mullins, one of the few returning players from last year's roster, has noticed a shift in the team's competitiveness. Mullins described this group as having this year's group of having a level of "nastiness," something that wasn't present a season ago.

Hurley attributed the newfound edge to the competition taking place in practice. With all these new faces jockeying for position in the rotation, every practice represents an opportunity for players to establish themselves and earn more minutes.

For sophomore transfer Na'jai Hines, that mentality has become essential in the team's preparation.

"The way we practice, the way we come in every day and have a certain mindset, is to play hard," Hines said. "Play hard against any of our opponents."

The new competitive attitude has been accompanied by a noticeable increase in size on the roster. Hines and Oskar Giltay will anchor the frontcourt, along with 6-foot-8 transfer Nik Khamenia. Freshmen Colben Landrew and Junior County bolster UConn's size in the back court at 6-foot-6 and 6-foot-5, respectively.

Hurley credited the team's off-season strength training for helping them become more physically imposing.



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

PHOTO BY ALEXANDER RENZULLI, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

"I think J-Mac's done a great job in the summer and in the preseason with these guys, getting these guys stronger," Hurley said.

That physicality was on display in Tuesday night's scrimmage against Syracuse, where UConn came out on top 72-52.

The Huskies overwhelmed the Orange on defense, forcing 16 turnovers and taking 9 steals. UConn dominated the glass, turning 14 offensive rebounds into 18 second-chance points.

"I think our team defensively, this could be one of our best defensive teams," Hurley said. "I think we have great defensive potential.

He pointed to the team's versatility on defense.

"Silas may be the best ball-hawking point guard in the country," Hurley said. "The centers are both big, physical strong and athletic."

Despite the offense struggling in the first half, Hurley was pleased with the effort on defense.

"Defense is ahead of offense this time of year," Hurley said. "I just think that we showed a high level of defensive potential."

Tuesday's exhibition also provided another opportunity for the newcomers to make an impression.

With Mullins sidelined by an undisclosed lower body injury, minutes were left on the table for the players competing to establish themselves in the rotation.

Hines delivered the most dominant performance of the night, finishing with a game-high 17 points, eight rebounds and two blocks in just 19 minutes of run.

Khamenia also impressed with his unofficial UConn debut. The Duke transfer finished with 12 points and eight rebounds while knocking down three three-pointers. Khamenia credited Hurley's confidence in him to helping him adjust to the program.

"Having trust from coach, I mean, that means a lot," Khamenia said. "He let me mess up a lot when I first got here, like a lot."

County contributed nine points and seven rebounds in 17 minutes, while also knocking down three shots from beyond the arc. These performances offered an early look at UConn's depth with newcomers making their case for their spot in the rotation.

While the team is still developing its chemistry, Hurley believes the team's youth means that there is still more to unlock on the horizon.

"It's a young team, but it's a talented team and we will keep getting better," Hurley said.

After a season where UConn came within one victory of a seventh national championship, the team's new identity is coming into form through competition and physicality.

TORMENTED BY DEFEAT, UCONN SHARPENS 2026-27 GOAL: "WE CAN'T GET BACK TO THAT"

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They were told they had to win, and dominate while doing so, so most of the UConn women's basketball team didn't know how to react when it all unraveled in April.

They didn't know how to react when Geno Auriemma, their coach, the greatest winner in the history of the sport, trudged past them in a smoldering rage. Neck stiff. Jaw locked. Lips pressed thin, his eyes never moving off his shoes as he headed toward the locker room.

They didn't know how to react when Sarah Strong, the famously reticent superstar, became the avatar for UConn's implosion after she tore her own jersey in a spiteful rage, and Blanca Quiñonez lifted a crying Kayleigh Heckel's chin between plays.

Farther down the court, Azzi Fudd stood surrounded by wide-eyed teammates with her arms glued to her hips, stealing glances at the clock mounted on the back of the basket that counted down the final seconds of her UConn career.

Wiping her forehead with her jersey, Fudd jogged off the court for the final time as a Husky with a blank stare as South Carolina's "Step to the Rear" spilled out of the arena's sound system.

It was raw. It was jarring and disorienting. It was everything top-seeded and undefeated UConn, riding on the momentum of the greatest six-game stretch in the history of the NCAA Tournament the year before, was petrified of: losing.

UConn was haunted by and ultimately crumbled under the pressure and expectation of winning. This year's group, comprised of 10 of those same players, will be tormented by defeat as it looks up at the 12 national title banners that loom above in Gampel Pavilion.

But the only way to stop being haunted by those legends and champions in Gampel's rafters is to join them. This group knows that; it's been operating that way all summer.

"It's a tough loss, it's going to fuel us," Strong said this summer of UConn's 62-48 loss to South Carolina in the Final Four. "Internally, you want to be better than you were last year, and knowing how last year ended, we can't get back to that."

That seems to be the consensus in the Huskies' locker room — they can't get back to that feeling.

"The way the South Carolina game went for us this past year," senior guard Ashlynn Shade said, "definitely played a factor in how we are approaching coming back. When you get beat up that much and feel that defeated, you want to do everything you can do when you get back for the preseason, and everything you're doing just to be better."

Some players, like Shade, took time away from basketball to reset their minds after the season ended, staving off the temptation to come back immediately after such a blindsiding loss. Others, like Strong, obsessively rewatched the game this summer to remember the feeling and faces of defeat.

The team has been tethered to a heavy emotional weight this off-season as they repeatedly thought about everything they did wrong to ruin their perfect season. They've transformed that grief into motivation, though, with a new year on the horizon.

"I do," Strong said sternly this summer when asked if she still thought about the way UConn's season ended. "The whole team does. We're always thinking about last season and how it ended, but we're also focused on what we can do better with a new team."



UConn women's basketball faces Syracuse in an exhibition game Monday, Oct. 12, 2026, at Mohegan Sun Arena in Uncasville. The Huskies squished the Orange 88-60 in their first action of the season as part of the Hall of Fame Series Exhibition.

PHOTO BY PARKER MEYERS, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

FUN FACT ABOUT DAN HURLEY: HE KNOWS HOW TO SPEAK FRENCH

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The UConn head coach said as much at Monday's media availability in Hartford, though that may not be news to anyone who has sat particularly close to the Huskies' bench during one of Hurley's more expletory conversations with an official.

One language Hurley doesn't speak is Russian. If Hurley is looking for a new hobby come next offseason, perhaps Russian freshman Egor Amosov could give him lessons. However, for now, it would probably be best for Amosov to stick to attempting to break his way into the Huskies' rotation and continuing to learn a new language himself.

The day prior to Tuesday's scrimmage against Syracuse at the Mohegan Sun Arena, Hurley wondered aloud in a tongue-in-cheek manner how that language barrier might impact Amosov's ability on the court.

"Is he just going to completely forget the little bit of English that he's learned?" Hurley said.



Dan Hurley oversees the men's basketball game against Syracuse on Oct. 13, 2026 at Mohegan Sun Arena. The Huskies took home a win ending in 72-52.

PHOTO BY ALEXANDER RENZULLI, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

While the language barrier may make it a challenge picking up on the ever-intricate UConn systems and terminology, something that is universally understood is the impact of a made three-pointer. That's exactly what Amosov provided less than two minutes after getting on the court for the first time as a Husky on Tuesday.

Receiving a kickout pass from fellow freshman Colben Landrew after a missed jumper, Amosov shot over a closing Syracuse defender, Kiyan Anthony, and off the back of the rim for his first field goal in a UConn uniform. Though he failed to connect on his subsequent two attempts from beyond the arc, the early make was as nice a first impression as Amosov could have hoped for.

Pronounced (yay-gor) according to Hurley, who also said the 18-year-old does not respond well to his name being pronounced with a long (e) at the beginning, the Samara, Russia native was the Spanish Liga U Player of the Year in the U22 league's first year of play last season. Helping lead Real Madrid to a championship title, the 6-foot-8 forward averaged 14.6 points, six rebounds, 2.8 assists and 2.5 steals across 30 games. He also appeared for one game and one minute in the Liga ACB, the top level of men's professional basketball in Spain.

"I think he's a guy that we hope that we can develop that can get minutes at that spot," Hurley said after Tuesday's exhibition. "[Six-foot-eight] wings that are physically strong, they can make threes, that can pass the ball— he's got really good instincts for basketball."

Should Amosov find his way into the rotation, he would be the third freshman to do so, following Landrew and freshman guard Junior County.

Hurley typically operates with an eight-to-nine-man rotation. Amosov was ninth in minutes on Tuesday, though that was without Braylon Mullins on the floor due to injury.

Mullins, Nik Khamenia and Silas Demary Jr. are locks for the starting lineup. Jayden Ross will almost certainly beat out Landrew for the other forward spot, with Landrew being the first forward off the bench. One of Na'jai Hines and Oskar Giltay, likely Hines, will start at center, with the other serving as the backup. County is positioned as the backup point guard, with Nils Machowski set to be the backup shooting guard.

That's nine players. Adding a 10th could be pushing it, but it is not unheard of for Hurley, with the coach citing his time at both UConn and previous stops like Rhode Island as examples.

"We've had years where we've played to 10; [2023] we played 10," Hurley said at Monday's media availability. "For the way we like to use the four-man, he's a physically strong guy who has a skill set that's similar to an [Alex Karaban], that's similar to a [Nik Khamenia], so it kind of fits there. [...] If we've got 10 players that deserve to play, there's a path to it."

While Amosov would be the tenth player, the Huskies operated with two forwards coming off the bench last season in Ross and the since-transferred Jaylin Stewart. While minutes may not be abundant, Amosov could realistically settle into a secondary role behind Khamenia, a comparison that Hurley drew both during Monday's media availability and again after Tuesday's game.

"If he could just get accustomed to our language and understanding the terminology and being able to hear the terminology, whether it's our defensive principles, offensive principles and then be able to react in real time, he'll be in the rotation this year," Hurley said.