HUSKY HOOPLA:

UConn Women's Basketball 2026-27 projected starting lineup



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Decimated by injuries year after year, the UConn women's basketball team has become acquainted with starting an amalgamation of different players — the only ones healthy enough to put on a uniform — each night.

But last year was different. Last year, UConn was, for the most part, healthy. Healthy enough to play through the nagging aliments and rehab them in the off season, that is.

Connecticut started just four different lineup combinations in 39 games last season and got 36 games out of its primary lineup of KK Arnold, Ashlynn Shade, Azzi Fudd, Sarah Strong and Serah Williams.

Fudd and Williams are gone, selected in the WNBA Draft, but the other three return and welcome seasoned veteran Jana El Alfy back at center and sophomore Blanca Quiñonez into the starting lineup.

G — KK Arnold, Sr. (McCreven)

Given head coach Geno Auriemma's tendency to lean on returning, experienced talent, expect Arnold to reassume her position as UConn's starting point guard as a senior.

Arnold, an All-Big East selection last season, averaged only 6.9 points per game on 54.4% shooting in a tertiary scoring role as a junior but handed out a Big East-best 174 assists and swiped 102 steals as the tip of the spear for UConn defensively.

The four-year program veteran boasts 71 starts and 117 career appearances and has been a stalwart for the Huskies since she arrived on campus in 2023. Expect her shot diet to evolve as a senior, particularly from 3.

Arnold should again rival Strong for Big East Defensive Player of the Year and offers the steady hand offensively UConn needs with Fudd's 17.3 points per game now gone.

G — Ashlynn Shade, Sr. (McCreven)

Auriemma humorously characterized Shade's game ahead of UConn's preseason opener against Syracuse with a grin and a laugh.

"She plays with a passion and she plays exceptionally hard," Auriemma said of Shade, who's started 83 games since 2023. "She competes on every possession. She'll go a month where she won't make a shot, and then she'll go a month where she'll make every shot."

Shade won't lead the team in scoring. She won't pace the team in rebounds, and she won't hit 15 field goals a night. She'll dive for every single loose ball. She'll miraculously pull down an offensive rebound over three defenders to extend a possession. She'll hit a timely 3-pointer after stonewalling an opponent on defense.

Shade is the ultimate hustle player, and a defensive pest UConn desperately needs with Fudd gone.

F — Blanca Quiñonez, So. (Becker)

While Quiñonez is still rehabbing a shoulder injury, it is probable that she will return to the starting lineup once she is fully healthy. As a freshman, she stood out for the Huskies during March Madness, especially in crucial games down the stretch, like the Sweet 16 against North Carolina and the Elite 8 against Notre Dame.

Last season, Quiñonez averaged 10.7 points and 3.1 rebounds per game. Last year, she also brought home the Big East Freshman and Sixth Woman of the Year Award.

Standing at 6-foot-2, Quiñonez brings size to the court, as well as versatility. As the program calls it, Quiñonez is a "hybrid" player. The Ecuador native can protect the rim, but, more importantly, she can change the tempo of any game once she checks in.

F — Sarah Strong, Jr. (Becker)

The reigning National Player of the Year is back in action, as Strong is set to begin her journey as an upperclassman. Strong had a dominant sophomore campaign, taking home every single Player of the Year award.

On the hardwood, she averaged 18.7 points and 7.7 rebounds a game, leading her team in almost every single category besides assists. In her 59th career game, she became the third player in program history to reach 1,000 points.

Often compared to Maya Moore, Strong has made waves in just two years as a Husky. With her stacked trophy case, it's a no-brainer she'll be on the starting lineup this year, although Head Coach Geno Auriemma said there's even more she can bring. He emphasized she's transitioning into a facilitator on the court, using her voice more and evolving into a leader.

F — Jana El Alfy, Redshirt Jr. (Becker)

When the UConn women's basketball program was plagued with injuries in the 2024-25 season, El Alfy answered the call. During her redshirt freshman campaign, she started in 27 of the Huskies' 40 games, including the National Championship.

Last season, she played in every single game but only started one. She averaged 4.0 points and 4.1 rebounds per game. Now, as she begins her redshirt junior season, El Alfy is the longest tenured player on the squad.

With her size and veteran presence, she makes a great replacement for Serah Williams down low, alongside small forward Blanca Quiñonez.

HUSKY HOOPLA:

Projected men's starting five



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After coming up one win shy of a third national championship victory in four seasons, UConn head coach Dan Hurley hit the transfer portal to fill in the blanks around a trio of returning top contributors from last season.

G — Silas Demary Jr., Sr. (Badeau)

There was never any doubt of who would anchor the backcourt. Fresh off being voted 2026-27 Big East Preseason Player of the Year, Demary returns to Storrs with some unfinished business. In his first season with the Huskies last year, the Georgia transfer averaged 10.1 points, 4.5 rebounds and 5.9 assists per game. Demary's first exhibition game this year against Syracuse featured a rocky start in the first half but picked up in the second half, finishing with 13 points of 3-for-12 shooting, five rebounds and two steals. Hurley refers to Demary as "the best ball hawking point guard in the country," and hopes to hold true this season. While his defensive intensity sets the tone, Demary's impact goes beyond the stat sheet — including the clutch, underappreciated pass he tipped in the Elite Eight that paved the way for Braylon Mullins' phenomenal game-winning shot.

G — Braylon Mullins, So. (Sawyer)

Mullins' freshman season was completely redefined in a matter of 10 seconds by his deep buzzer-beating three against Duke to send the Huskies to the Final Four, undeniably one of greatest shots in March Madness history. The ESPY-nominated "Boozer Beater" immediately made Mullins a household name.

Ironically, Mullins' three-point ability was more average than elite as a freshman, as he shot 33.5% from beyond the arc. For a guy who is possibly the most common breakout candidate mentioned across the country and who is gunning to become a lottery pick in the 2027 NBA Draft, that mark stands as a clear area of needed improvement.

Even beyond that, more will be asked of Mullins in his second year, both on and off the court. As a member of the returning nucleus the team is banking on, Mullins will need to take on a bigger leadership role while also being asked to do more offensively, including occasionally taking on the role of ball handler.

Mullins demonstrated on occasion that he can carry an offense, as evidenced by his 25-point outburst against Creighton on Feb. 18, 2026. The next step is to prove he can close in on that level on a more consistent basis and improve his 12 points per game average. While Demary Jr. was the obvious choice for Preseason Big East Player of the Year, there is a realistic possibility that the Huskies go as far as Mullins' development takes them this season.

F — Nik Khamenia, So. (Sawyer)

Speaking of Mullins' game winner, Khamenia was across the court watching from the Duke bench after subbing out of the game just seconds prior.

Fast forward half a year, Khamenia and Mullins are roommates, and the former is the heir apparent to replace the player who assisted Mullins on that shot, Alex Karaban.

While the physical similarities between the two players are undeniable — both are listed at 6-foot-8 and within five pounds of each other — their other common trait is a shared do-it-all ability.

Karaban finished last season top three on the roster in points per game, 3-point makes, rebounds, assists and steals. Khamenia finished in the top three in each of those stats in Tuesday's scrimmage against Syracuse. While there's plenty of projection taking place for a guy who scored just 5.7 points per game as a freshman for the Blue Devils, Khamenia said that he got to learn from Karaban when the now-Sacramento King visited the team over the summer.

"Just picking his brain a little bit and learning from him and things that he found that helped him succeed here," Khamenia said after Tuesday's exhibition game. "I know he went to three national championships, played here four years, so those are extremely big shoes to fill."

F — Jayden Ross, Sr. (Sawyer)

Ross is the archetype for a program that emphasizes development as much as UConn. Arriving in Storrs three years ago as a four-star recruit, Ross averaged just 4.4 minutes as a freshman on the 2024 championship team before finding a rotational role in 2025, nearly tripling his minutes.

Last season, the forward appeared in 38 games and found his groove come postseason time. Starting with the Big East Tournament Quarterfinals against Xavier, Ross posted three or more rebounds in seven of nine postseason games and notched three multi-steal performances. The 6-foot-7 forward also shot 50% from beyond three on 16 attempts, putting up a 39.1% success rate on the season.

Should Ross stay out of foul trouble, something he struggled with early against Syracuse when he was charged with two offensive fouls within the first two minutes, he is capable of buoying the UConn defense alongside Demary Jr. while also making up for some of the lost 3-point production from Karaban's departure.

While Big East Preseason Freshman of the Year Colben Landrew has been breathing down Ross' neck for this spot, it's the upperclasman's job to lose.

C — Na'jai Hines, So. (Badeau)

The big man transfer from Seton Hall has a 6-foot-11-inch frame and uses every last bit of it as the defensive anchor of the team. Hines led the Big East in blocks per game last season with 2.2 in 31 appearances, all of which came off the bench. Now that he may be slotted into a starting role, Hines will have the opportunity to blossom into another star center that gets UConn fans in a frenzy. Hines put up a team-high 17 points in only 19 minutes in the exhibition against Syracuse. That performance came off the bench as transfer Oskar Giltay earned the nod on Tuesday and may compete with Hines for the opening night starting role. The 6-foot-11-inch sophomore from Belgium had four points and a pair of blocks in his 18 minutes on Tuesday. In his two matchups against UConn last season, Hines scored 10 points and seven rebounds on Jan. 13 and a double-double of 11 points and 11 boards on Feb. 28. With Tarris Reed Jr. off to the NBA, Hines has massive shoes to fill — and if his early flashes are any indication, the ceiling for the five position remains sky-high.