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WOMEN'S BASKETBALL:
THE EVOLUTION OF SARAH STRONG

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NEW YORK, N.Y. -- Six months ago, Sarah Strong was gutted.

Strong and her teammates in the UConn women's basketball program lost to South Carolina in the Final Four in April.

After going undefeated throughout their 2025-26 campaign, they lost 62-48 against the Gamecocks in Phoenix, Ariz.

At the time though, instead of focusing on the loss, Head Coach Geno Auriemma offered to look at it as a way to light a fire underneath Strong and his roster.

"She's carried a huge load for this team. An awful lot falls on her," Auriemma said after the loss. "I don't think Sarah Strong needs me to put any fire or motivation or anything into her. We'll be back here next year. She'll make sure of that."

As a sophomore, Strong was named the AP National Player of the Year, averaging 18.4 points and 7.7 rebounds each game.

Along with her National Player of the Year award, she racked up all of the Player of the Year awards including the Naismith Trophy, the Wooden Award, the Wade Trophy and the Ann Meyers Drysdale Award.

Now, as she enters her third year as a Husky, fans won't see the same Sarah Strong hit the hardwood.

In fact, they're going to see a completely evolved version of the forward.

"She's National Player of the Year now, and it's pretty hard to get that much better," Head Coach Geno Auriemma said when asked about Strong. "Whatever we've seen the last two years, which is pretty incredible, I think there is more that she has."

According to Auriemma, he's seen glimpses of this new edge in practice.

Strong took this past summer off, sitting out of practice alongside her teammates and USA basketball to rest and rehab an Achilles injury she suffered last season.

However, it appears as if Strong will come back this season as good as ever.

"She's just more sure of herself," Strong's teammate KK Arnold said. "She's leading by example [...] she's also using her voice more. That leadership piece, it was always there but now it's more evident."

Even as Strong becomes an upperclassman, her former teammates like Azzi Fudd and Paige Bueckers have left a void that the North Carolina native must fill on the court.

The Huskies' head coach often noticed an apprehensiveness from the forward each time she tried to take a shot.

For example, if Fudd or Bueckers were on the court, she'd pass it to them instead of taking the shot.

"She was like a reluctant star," Auriemma said, describing Strong's first two years playing alongside Bueckers and Fudd. "There's no one to defer to this year."

For years, Bueckers and Fudd have been the go-to players for their squad. This season, Strong is that player.

"Without question, every single possession," Auriemma said. "That gives her so many opportunities to do so many more things."

What Strong is doing in practice now, though, is what she hasn't done in years prior.

Instead of waiting throughout possessions like she had done before, there's no time for her to wait now.

Auriemma emphasized that in the moments that Strong does wait, that's when the flukes like an incomplete or miscommunicated pass occur.

During practices, Auriemma is encouraging her to use her voice, which he argues is better than how many points or rebounds she can score.

To see the fully evolved Strong in action in her junior year campaign, tune in on Monday, Oct. 12, when UConn will gear up to take on the Syracuse Orange for an exhibition matchup.

Tip-off is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. at Mohegan Sun Arena.



UConn women's basketball player Sarah Strong at Big East Media Day on Oct. 1, 2026 at the Marriott Marquis in Times Square. As a sophomore Strong was named the AP National Player of the Year, averaging 18.4 points and 7.7 rebounds each game.

PHOTO BY MADISON HENDRICKS, ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL:
THE BIG EAST IS 'IN A TOUGH SITUATION'

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NEW YORK, N.Y. — Ask any of the Big East's 11 women's basketball head coaches about the current state of the conference and they'll all spit back the same exhausted response: The Big East — which behind UConn's wrath has produced 11 national championships and 27 Final Four appearances — needs to be better.

More importantly, though, and perhaps more explicitly, the Big East must take advantage of the NCAA Tournament expanding from 68 to 76 teams in 2026-27. It's do-or-die.

"I'm not sure why we're being overlooked," Providence head coach Erin Batth said. "We always have some great games and some great teams. Playing more on TV will help; we need to be seen, and we need to do our job in the non-conference, too."

For as axiomatic as that is, Batth is right: The Big East needs to win the games it's supposed to win. As the "Power Four" conferences — the Big 12, Big 10, SEC and ACC — swell to 16 and 18 teams, respectively, it becomes increasingly paramount that the Big East picks off those teams in November and December.

The league's TV deal, signed before the start of last season, includes games on FOX Sports, NBC Sports/Peacock, TNT Sports and ESPN+, giving the conference ample opportunity to be seen by both the college basketball world and high-profile recruits.

"The Power Four conferences have done all they can do to try and stack their leagues," Maquette head coach Cara Consuegra said. "That's no surprise to anybody. We're that next conference that's fighting really hard to show our quality, which recruits will like."

But how are these chippy Big East squads, all 11 of them, supposed to compete with the cash-lined pockets of the SEC and Big 10 with, in some cases, less than half the budget to build their rosters?

"Retention," Creighton head coach Jim Flanery said when asked about what will help the Big East compete with the Power Four. "Being able to keep your players, I think, is huge. The portal is very expensive, so being able to retain older players that have chemistry create the best teams."

Flanery's Bluejays and Denise Dillon's Villanova Wildcats have combined for seven NCAA Tournament bids in the past five seasons, joining UConn as the regulars of the conference in March Madness. All three teams, especially Creighton, were built on a bedrock of retention. Both Villanova and Creighton, as well as St. John's, can be found on most bubble projections on bracketology sites.

"We went to the tournament four years in a row, and we had five kids that stayed five years," Flanery said. "That's the biggest thing — you've got to be able to retain players."

It's become increasingly more difficult to retain players each off season without large swaths of money laying around, though. Not retaining players in turn, Flanery says, leads to less team chemistry. Less team chemistry usually lends itself to slower starts in the non-conference. Slower starts in the non-conference lessens the chance of the Big East sending more teams to the postseason.

It's cyclical — and incredibly disheartening for coaches attempting to rebuild programs.

"We're in a tough situation," Georgetown head coach Darnell Haney said. "Some of these other conferences outside of the Power Four, like the Atlantic 10, they have an upper echelon and a really low echelon. So, what happens with these NET rankings is that they're beating the snot out of the bad teams while we may lose to St. John's. Anybody can beat anybody in this league, and I don't know if that hurts us come NCAA Tournament time."

Flanery offered a solution.

"You have to get kids on the team that play for each other," Flanery said. "If everybody comes from somewhere else — like the transfer portal — it's harder to get them to play for each other. So, to me, it's all about high school recruiting and retention."

The preseason conference awards back Flanery's theory: Of the 10 players selected to the All-Big East Preseason Team, eight remain at the same school they started at. The number includes seven players from conference frontrunners at Connecticut, Villanova and Creighton.

The formula, despite being archaic in an age of players going to five schools in five years, appears to work for teams abstaining from the transfer portal to sustain a culture. It might be what rehabilitates the conference from being swallowed up by the money of the Power Four.

"You can't win the derby with a donkey," Batth said. "You need to have stallions. And that's recruiting and that's retention. We're all trying to figure it out."



Big East Media Day on October 1, 2026 at the Marriott Marquis in Times Square. Media Day is an annual preseason kickoff event hosted by the BIG EAST Conference for its men's and women's college basketball programs.

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