SPORTS

MEN'S BASKETBALL:
HUSKIES LOOK TO RELY HEAVILY ON YOUNGER CORE

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NEW YORK, N.Y. -- With the new era of college basketball switching from recruiting high schoolers to looking for players through the transfer portal the UConn men's basketball program has embraced the new tradition.

The Huskies have welcomed 10 new faces, seven of which have come through the transfer portal. Of these new players, seven of them are underclassmen.

"It's a challenge in itself," Braylon Mullins said. "We've been doing a pretty good job. And just keeping everybody at a high standard and the intensity has not changed since I've gotten here."

With many players from last season gone, many heads turn to the new senior players like Jayden Ross and Silas Demary Jr. to be leaders of this new-look UConn team.

"It's a blessing to be able to have the privilege and responsibility [to be a leader] on a team like UConn," Ross said. "You think about the standard we've been able to hold over the last few years, getting to the national championship three times in the last five years."

This season starts with a heavyweight non-conference schedule. Demary Jr. made sure to let his newer teammates know that nothing is going to be easy.

"I told them it's going to be a grueling season. Nothing's easy," said Demary Jr. during a media availability last week. "Everything we are doing here is going to prepare us for the game. So just being able to embrace it and attack every day the right way and at least know that we're going in the right direction."



UConn men's basketball player Jayden Ross attends Big East Media Day at the Marriot Marquis in Manhattan, N.Y. on Thursday, October 1, 2026. Ross was on the team roster last year, helping bring the Huskies to the National Championship game.

PHOTO BY MORGAN BLANCHARD, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Embracing that mindset is especially critical following a major shift in veteran leadership.

Last season, 10 of the Huskies were upperclassmen. That number is down to six this season. Of the 10 players who departed Storrs after last season, the leader of the team, Alex Karaban, played all four of his seasons at UConn. Karaban was a key piece in winning two national championships and losing him to the NBA hit the team hard.

"It's different," Mullins said when asked about Karaban no longer being on the team. "I think us returners kind of try to step into that role. But it's hard to fill a void of AK [Karaban]. He was the standard of this program."

Although he may only be a sophomore, Mullins is already viewed as a veteran player with tendencies towards being a leader. Many rumors swirled about whether Mullins would return for his sophomore season or take his talents to the NBA, but he ultimately decided to stay in Connecticut. He believes the current roster already has great chemistry despite so many new faces.

"I think this group is going to mesh very well. But I think the connectivity that we have is going to help us on the floor." Mullins said.

Mullins hit the game-winning shot last season to defeat Duke to send UConn to the Final Four but now feels like he has moved past it.

"I kind of forgot what the tournament was like because ultimately, we didn't win," said Mullins. "This summer I've been in the weight room; I think that's been a main priority for me. Having the ball in my hands more on the court, being more assertive and trying to get everybody better on the team."

That growth that Mullins has been working on has fit directly into Hurley's formula of building a team. He believes the success from the UConn program comes from returning a "core big three."

"If you look at our teams that we've had success with, it's that returning four: Jordan Hawkins, Adama Sanogo, Andre Jackson," said Hurley. "You bring back the Karaban, the Donovan Clingan, the Tristen Newton; that's where a lot of our success has been built around."

The staff strategically crafted this season's team in the same manner.

"We return Silas [Demary Jr.], we return Braylon [Mullins], we return Jayden Ross. We bring in some high-level freshmen we believe in, and then we pick our spots in the portal."

Along with Hurley, both freshman Colben Landrew and Junior County have stood out to Ross. Landrew, who is an explosive forward that attacks the basket and can bury the deep ball, was named Big East Preseason Freshman Player of the Year on Thursday. The 6-foot-6 forward and Mississippi native averaged 23.9 points and 6.5 rebounds during his senior season as he led Wheeler High School in Marietta, Ga., to a state championship. Landrew is expected to play a big role this season and Hurley has high praise for the five-star prospect.

Joining Landrew in this season's incoming class is 6-foot-5 County. The 2026 Utah Gatorade Player of the Year averaged 19.1 points, 6.2 rebounds and 3.7 assists. County is capable of scoring at all three levels. 247Sports describes County's IQ as being able to scramble the defense.

"Super great young men, college ready," said Ross. "I think they're going to bring a lot more to the table than even what people already think about."

FROM THE COURT TO A COURTROOM:
ELIGIBILITY LIMBO LINGERS IN BIG EAST

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NEW YORK, N.Y. — UConn head coach Dan Hurley couldn't say enough about his starting point guard, Silas Demary Jr., at Big East Media Day on Thursday.

Even with the right leg of his suit pants soaked with coffee after an errantly thrown microphone knocked over the cup that he had been periodically sipping from, Hurley seemed to be in a positive mood as he declared Demary Jr. the best returning player in the Big East.

As Hurley began to rattle off compliments about Demary Jr.'s postseason play last March, the veteran Big East coach began to trail off as he prepared to acclaim Demary Jr. as the best in another category, coming to a pause at a lingering realization.

"That's hard for me to say it because you also have people in court rooms," Hurley said. "You don't even know exactly who's eligible."

About two hours later, St. John's Head Coach Rick Pitino took the podium in front of a room of reporters, the last Big East men's coach of the day to speak. The second question asked to Pitino, only after the Hall of Famer answered whether he expected the New York Yankees to win the World Series (a yes), was if he expected the four players on the Red Storm roster who are currently ineligible to play this season.

"I think they're all going to be eligible, and I think we're looking forward to developing a new group of guys into a really good unit," Pitino said.

"New" is certainly an apt word to describe the Red Storm's 2026-27 roster. Eleven of the 16 players on St. John's listed roster are newcomers, with nine being transfer portal additions.

Of those 11 new players, four are currently ineligible for a myriad of reasons. That included forward Babacar Sane and guard Quinn Ellis, both of whom are widely projected to be in St. John's starting lineup.

Sane was originally ruled ineligible by the NCAA due to his prior experience in the NBA G League. Ellis is 23-year-old United Kingdom native who played 36 games in the EuroLeague last season.

Auburn transfer and 2026 All-SEC Third Team selection Keyshawn Hall and Indiana transfer Reed Bailey are also waiting on rulings to see if the NCAA will grant them a fifth year of eligibility, mirroring the new age-based eligibility model that went into effect this fall.

Answers to the eligibility questions could be on the horizon. The New York Supreme Court granted Sane a temporary restraining order in September to allow him to work out and practice with the team, according to Thomas Cavanagh of Rumble In The Garden. Sane had a court hearing scheduled for Oct. 1 to determine his eligibility, according to Zach Braziller of the New York Post.

Still, St. John's is not unique to having players in eligibility limbo. Fellow Big East school Providence is waiting to hear on former G League guard Dink Pate. In the SEC, former St. John's star and 2025 Big East Player of the Year RJ Luis Jr. is hoping to suit up for LSU.

Xavier Head Coach Richard Pitino, Rick's son, said that he is still waiting to find out whether one of his players will be eligible. That player, forward Filip Borovicanin, led the Musketeers with 245 rebounds last season in his fourth and presumed final year of eligibility.

"I got into this profession to be a basketball coach, not a lawyer, but I get a lot of phone calls that people think I am a lawyer," Richard Pitino said. "It is what it is and we're trying to kind of manage as best we can."

Though Borovicanin is attempting to gain a fifth year of eligibility, Richard Pitino said that the announcement of the age-based eligibility model was poorly timed.

"I think the NCAA made a mistake," Richard Pitino said, referring to the adoption of the age-based eligibility model. "I understand what they're trying to do, but they could have easily announced it around now and a lot of these guys would have other opportunities. But I also see where they're coming from.

You have to have rules. You have to kind of draw a line in the sand a little bit."

Marquette Head Coach Shaka Smart, who is waiting to find out if transfer guard Colin Porter will be eligible, said that coaches are being left in a tough position as NCAA rules change.

"I think the coach's job is to put together the best team he can put together," Smart said. "Once we have a set rule in terms of eligibility, whether it's academic eligibility, whether it's amateurism eligibility, it'll make it easier for coaches to do that."

Smart also said there are different levels at which coaches have recruited ineligible players.

"Some coaches, just like always, have kind of gone to the end of the spectrum in terms of what might be allowable or what might not or what the courts might say you can go do, and that's their prerogative," Smart said. "Now, we're 32 days away from the first game. I would rather be in the position of a UConn that knows exactly who they're going to have than maybe someone on the other side that has no idea."

UConn forward Jayden Ross said that UConn has benefited from knowing their entire roster is eligible compared to other teams.

"I think we go about things the right way, and it almost makes me feel like we're ahead of the game a little bit," Ross said.

Hurley, who finalized his roster back in early July, said that UConn constructed its roster based on the group of players the university compliance office stated would be eligible.

"The NCAA is our governing body," Hurley said. "They give us the rules that we're told that we need to build our team through. You're told that last year, and that's how I built my team.

I think, for me, that's how we all should have built our team. Knowing that there were players that were not going to be eligible and you had to get them eligible through the judicial process, to me, is not the way to do it."

Hurley said he did not have the stomach to watch clips of older players seeking additional eligibility during the portal process this past offseason. He also said he would shy away from scheduling high-major nonconference games with teams rostering former G League or older European professionals who he said should not be playing college basketball.

"Did the staff come in and say, 'hey, there's this 23-year-old dude from Poland or whatever and he had a full beard, three kids, a wife, only wanted to take online classes and wouldn't go to study hall because he was a grown-[expletive] man?'" Hurley said. "

I didn't think that I should put him in a locker next to [freshman forward] Colben Landrew, who is 17 years old, just graduated from high school."

Despite the uncertainty about eligibility, returning Saint John's guard Ian Jackson said that the questions have not had a negative effect on team chemistry throughout the summer and preseason.

"That's not really something I worry about," Jackson said. "I leave that up to the courts and things like that. I just worry about hooping, and from what I've seen from the guys so far, they did great. They're gonna help us tremendously."

Rick Pitino said that it is not the player's fault for seeking eligibility but rather the NCAA's for changing eligibility rules when they did.

"That's not their fault," Rick Pitino said. "It's the NCAA's fault, because you can't change the rules midstream. One thing I don't pay attention to is, I worry about St.

John's. I don't worry about any other programs except St. John's."

However, Hurley said he believes the onus is on coaches to build rosters consisting of eligible players.

"If the compensation and the NIL would have started a lot sooner, we wouldn't be here in this chaos," Hurley said. "I think if the coaches just chose to follow the rules and regulations that were put forth by our governing body, we wouldn't be here."