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Arizona Daily Star

# NCAA EXTRA

SUNDAY, MARCH 21, 2021 • SECTION C

Editor: Ryan Finley / sportsed@tucson.com



## WILDCATS READY TO STEP UP

In first 'Big Dance' in 16 years, McDonald and UA are hoping for five-encore performance

PHOTO BY MAMTA POPAT / ARIZONA DAILY STAR

**Arizona is dancing again, and it's Aari-early big deal**

After COVID-19 canceled 2020 tourney, UA's star ready for national stage. **C4**

**Greg Hansen: Equity takes center stage at tournament**

Things are better in 2021, but — as scandals show — there's still room to improve. **C8**

**Cats' Conner ready for first tournament game at age 17**

Sharpshooting guard enrolled at the UA in January with hopes of helping in March. **C10**

**T SPORTS SECTION STARTS ON C13**

Go to Page C13 to read up on Saturday's high school state title games, men's NCAA Tournament results and more.



Aari McDonald beats the drum to celebrate the Wildcats' Dec. 10 win over Arizona State in McKale Center. The Wildcats open NCAA Tournament play on Monday against Stony Brook. KELLY PRESNELL / ARIZONA DAILY STAR 2020

# MIX OF VETERANS, NEWCOMERS LEAD CATS INTO TOURNEY



## Trinity Baptiste

**Senior, No. 0**  
**Position:** Forward  
**Height:** 6-0  
**Hometown (high school):** Tampa, Florida (Hillsborough HS); transfer from Virginia Tech  
**2020-21 stats:** Baptiste is averaging 8.3 points and a team-high 5.7 rebounds in her first year since transferring from Virginia Tech.  
**Best game:** Baptiste scored 18 points and hit five 3-pointers in the Wildcats' Dec. 4 win over UCLA in McKale Center.



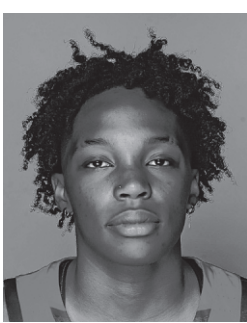
## Derin Erdogan

**Freshman, No. 10**  
**Position:** Guard  
**Height:** 5-6  
**Hometown (club team):** Istanbul, Turkey (Istanbul Universitesi SK)  
**2020-21 stats:** Erdogan is averaging 1.1 points and 0.5 rebounds per game coming off the bench.  
**Best game:** Erdogan scored four points and played 16 minutes in Arizona's Dec. 23 win over Idaho.



## Bendu Yeaney

**Junior, No. 23**  
**Position:** Guard  
**Height:** 5-10  
**Hometown (high school):** Portland, Oregon (St. Mary's Academy); transfer from Indiana  
**2020-21 stats:** Yeaney is averaging 4.0 points and 3.2 rebounds per game in her first year at Arizona after transferring from Indiana.  
**Best game:** Yeaney scored 14 points and played 40 minutes in Arizona's Feb. 28 overtime loss to rival ASU in Tempe.



## Shaina Pellington

**Junior, No. 1**  
**Position:** Guard  
**Height:** 5-8  
**Hometown (high school):** Pickering, Ontario, Canada (Dunbarton); transfer from Oklahoma  
**2020-21 stats:** Pellington is averaging 5.8 points and 1.9 rebounds per game in her first season with the Wildcats since transferring from Oklahoma.  
**Best game:** Pellington scored 16 points in 16 minutes in the Wildcats' Dec. 23 win over Idaho at McKale Center.



## Mara Mote

**Sophomore, No. 11**  
**Position:** Guard  
**Height:** 5-11  
**Hometown (club team):** Cesis, Latvia (TTT Riga)  
**2021-21 stats:** Mote is averaging 0.5 points and 0.2 rebounds per game coming off the bench.  
**Best game:** Mote scored three points and played 11 minutes in Arizona's Dec. 23 win over Idaho.



## Cate Reese

**Junior, No. 25**  
**Position:** Forward  
**Height:** 6-2  
**Hometown (high school):** Cypress, Texas (Cypress Woods)  
**2020-21 stats:** The Wildcats' second-leading scorer and primary post presence, Reese is averaging 11.3 points and 5.2 rebounds per game. She shoots 47.9% from the field, tops among Arizona's regulars.  
**Best game:** Reese scored 25 points in 29 minutes and hit 11 of her 14 shots from the field in the Wildcats' Feb. 8 win over Oregon.



## Aari McDonald

**Senior, No. 2**  
**Position:** Guard  
**Height:** 5-5  
**Hometown (high school):** Fresno, California (Brookside Christian); transfer from Washington  
**2020-21 stats:** The Pac-12 Player of the Year has been Arizona's primary scorer, averaging 19.3 points per game while taking an incredible 145 shots this season — no other player on the UA roster has more than 90. McDonald also averages 5.2 rebounds and 4.5 steals per game while continuing her reputation as one of the most tenacious defenders in the West.  
**Best game:** McDonald scored 30 points and added four rebounds and two assists in Arizona's Dec. 6 win over USC in McKale Center.



## Helena Pueyo

**Sophomore, No. 13**  
**Position:** Guard  
**Height:** 6-0  
**Hometown (club team):** Palma de Mallorca, Spain (Segle XXI)  
**2020-21 stats:** Pueyo is averaging 3.6 points and 3.5 rebounds per game coming off the bench.  
**Best game:** Pueyo scored 15 points in 30 minutes in the Wildcats' Jan. 17 win over Oregon State in McKale Center.



## Lauren Ware

**Freshman, No. 32**  
**Position:** Forward  
**Height:** 6-5  
**Hometown (high school):** Bismarck, North Dakota (Century)  
**2020-21 stats:** The highly touted freshman is averaging 4.6 points and 4.5 rebounds per game. Despite playing just 17.7 minutes per game, Ware ranks second on the team with 25 blocks; only Sam Thomas (26) has more.  
**Best game:** Ware had 12 points in 27 minutes in Arizona's Dec. 6 win over USC in McKale Center.



## Tara Manumaleuga

**Sophomore, No. 3**  
**Position:** Guard  
**Height:** 5-10  
**Hometown (high school):** Queensland, Australia (Hillcrest Christian College)  
**2020-21 stats:** Manumaleuga is averaging 1.3 points per game coming off the bench.  
**Best game:** Manumaleuga scored nine points — all of them coming on 3-pointers — in the Wildcats' Dec. 23 win over Idaho in McKale Center.



## Sam Thomas

**Senior, No. 14**  
**Position:** Forward  
**Height:** 6-0  
**Hometown (high school):** Las Vegas, Nevada (Centennial)  
**2020-21 stats:** Arizona's most well-rounded player averages 7.7 points, 3.3 rebounds, 2.1 steals and a little more than one block per game. She shoots 39.7% from 3-point range, tops on the team.  
**Best game:** Thomas scored a season-high 20 points on 7-of-8 shooting in Arizona's Feb. 14 win over Washington.



## Semaj Smith

**Junior, No. 34**  
**Position:** Center  
**Height:** 6-6  
**Hometown (high school):** Long Beach, California (St. Anthony)  
**2020-21 stats:** Smith is averaging 0.9 points and 1.3 rebounds per game off the bench.  
**Best game:** Smith scored two points and grabbed two rebounds in a season-high 13 minutes during the Wildcats' Dec. 23 win over Idaho in McKale Center.



## Madison Conner

**Freshman, No. 4**  
**Height:** 5-11  
**Hometown (high school):** Chandler (AZ Compass Prep)  
**2020-21 stats:** Conner is averaging 0.6 points and 0.8 rebounds per game since arriving on campus in January after graduating from high school early.  
**Best game:** Conner scored her first college basket, a 3-pointer, in a March 4 Pac-12 Tournament win over Washington State.



## Marta Garcia

**Freshman, No. 22**  
**Position:** Forward  
**Height:** 6-3  
**Hometown (club team):** Sevilla, Spain (Segle XXI)  
**2020-21 stats:** Garcia is averaging 0.4 points and 0.8 rebounds per game coming off the bench.  
**Best game:** Garcia hit her only shot attempt in Arizona's Dec. 10 win over Arizona State in McKale Center.



## Adia Barnes

Head coach

## Assistant coaches:

Salvo Coppa, Tamisha Augustin, Jackie Nared-Hairston

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# EQUITY IMPORTANT AS WILDCATS MAKE NCAA TOURNAMENT RETURN



Greg Hansen

How things have changed and are becoming more equitable in women's basketball:

- UA coach Adia Barnes appeared on three Zoom conference media sessions last week, fielding dozens of questions from ESPN, CBS, the Associated Press, every conceivable Tucson sports media platform and even a 9-year-old young lady who aspires to be a journalist. Monday's NCAA Tournament opener against Stony Brook will be televised on ESPN2.

One of Barnes' comments hit the bullseye: "There are a lot of voices out there, and people care now. They didn't care five years ago. They didn't care in the '90s. (But) they care now?"

Compare that to Barnes' days as an All-Pac-10 forward at Arizona, when the UA's second-round NCAA Tournament game against No. 2 seed Rutgers was televised only on Cablevision of the Raritan Valley in New Jersey. Compare that to Barnes' first-ever NCAA Tournament game, 1997, against Western Kentucky, which wasn't televised anywhere. Now the ESPN platform televises all 63 women's NCAA Tournament games.

"I don't want the message of the NCAA Tournament to be one of disparity," Barnes said Friday. "We're on the main channels. There is progress. (But) I hope for my daughter it's going to be better."

- Pac-12 women's basketball referees are paid about \$3,000 per game, on average. That's the roughly same as Pac-12 men's basketball officials. The most accomplished officials, men's and women's, like Tucson's Chris Rastatter (men's) and Bob Scofield



REBECCA SASNETT / ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The Arizona Wildcats cheer as their name is called during last week's NCAA Tournament selection show. Monday's opener against Stony Brook will air on national television — a change from Adia Barnes' time as a player.

(women's), can earn more than \$3,000 per game.

Some leagues still pay men's officials a bit more than women, but it's close. The Pac-12 restructured its pay for officials about 10 years ago. In Barnes' days, Pac-10 referees were paid roughly \$750 per game. Women's officials of a generation ago were essentially a Triple-A level of basketball officiating. That is changing.

- Barnes last week agreed to a five-year contract extension through 2026. Her base salary will move from \$404,000 to a much higher figure, perhaps close to \$700,000, by 2026.

It simply puts her in the ballpark with Pac-12 contemporaries. Oregon's Kelly Graves recently signed an extension through 2029 and will earn \$1.3 million in the final year of his deal. Oregon State's Scott Rueck, who was paid \$385,000 as recently as 2017, is now signed through 2027

with a current compensation of \$740,000.

ASU's Charli Turner Thorne, probably the second most accomplished women's basketball coach in Pac-12 history, last month signed an extension through 2024; she earned \$544,000 this season.

Not all Pac-12 coaches are so well paid. Utah's Lynne Roberts is at \$295,000 and Colorado's J.R. Payne at \$300,000. But they haven't commanded Top 25 programs.

- Arizona cared so little about its women's basketball program in the pre-Barnes days that it kept renewing the contract of coach Niya Butts even though she had successive Pac-12 records of 4-14, 3-15, 3-15 and 1-17 from 2012-15.

Yet Butts was retained for an eighth season, 2015-2016, and paid \$210,000, even though her career Pac-12 record would sink to 24-110.

That would never happen now.

Last week, Washington fired fourth-year coach Jody Wynn even though it still owed her \$950,000 through 2023. The Huskies had gone from the Final Four in 2015-16 — Barnes' last season as a Washington assistant coach — to a combined 8-26 in conference games the last two seasons.

In five years, Barnes has turned Arizona into what her old Washington program used to be. The Huskies flipped and have become what Arizona used to be.

"I still have a Final Four ring from my Washington days," Barnes said.

- In the spring of 2011, Sean Miller threatened to leave Arizona to become the head coach at Maryland. Part of the negotiations to keep Miller in Tucson included use of charter jets to all UA men's road games.

Yet Arizona's women's basketball teams strictly flew in

commercial airlines until Barnes and her team were given access to charter jets for a few trips in 2018-19 and 2019-20. Finally, this season, Arizona's women's basketball team flew in charter jets to all six road trips. The cost is significantly higher and was especially noted during the financial drain of the pandemic.

"For sure, it's getting better," said Barnes, who has frequently expressed thanks to UA athletic director Dave Heeke. "When I played, we had nothing like we have now. We had community showers. We've made a ton of progress."

- Women's coaches rarely get recycled. "Women in our profession don't get second chances," said Barnes.

Only two Pac-12 women's basketball coaches of the last 30 years — June Daugherty, who coached at Washington and then WSU, and Chris Gobrecht, who coached at Washington and then USC — were given a second chance to coach in the league. (Mark Trakh is in his second stint as USC's head coach).

That's not true in men's basketball.

For example, Oregon's Ernie Kent, ASU's Herb Sendek, Cal's Ben Braun, OSU's Ritchie McKay, Washington's Bob Bender and Lorenzo Romar and WSU's Paul Graham all were rehired as head coaches after being fired in the Pac-12 the last 25 years.

- One area that hasn't shown much change is competition within the NCAA Tournament. When men's 15th-seeded Oral Roberts stunned No. 2 Ohio State on Friday, it became the 27th time a 15th or 14th men's seed has won a first-round game.

Incredibly, no women's No. 15 or No. 14 seed has ever won a first-round NCAA Tournament game. That's a record of 0-104. That's one of the slowest-to-change components of women's basketball, one that Barnes isn't in a hurry to see change.

The Wildcats open Monday against No. 14 seed Stony Brook.

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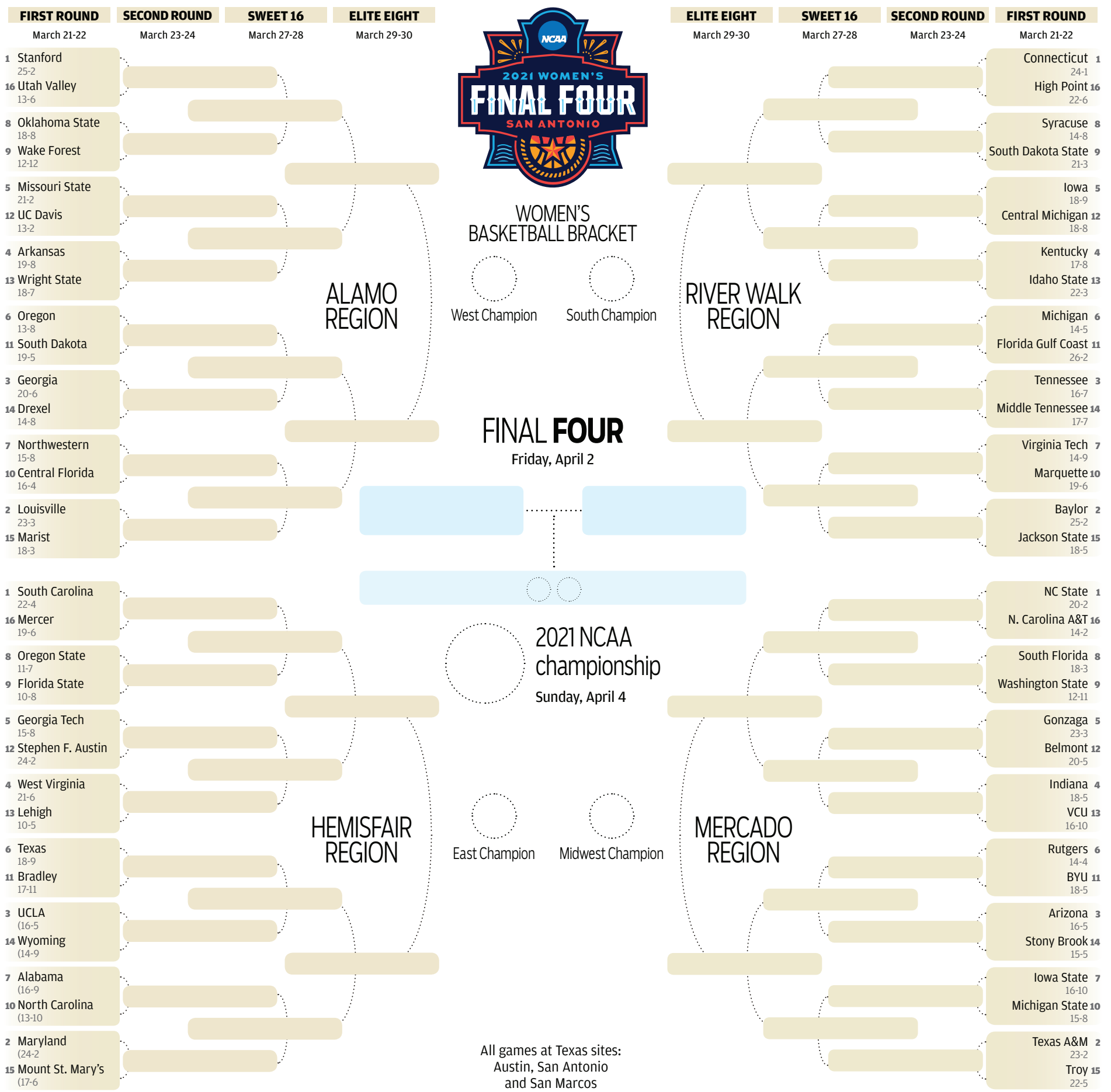
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# AFTER 63 TOURNAMENT PICKS, STANFORD LEFT STANDING

By Doug Feinberg

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The women's NCAA Tournament field is set and now the fun begins with 64 teams descending on the San Antonio region for the event that was canceled in 2020.

This will be a tournament like no other, with every game played on neutral courts and teams that make the Final Four having to basically live out of a hotel room for three weeks. Here's a look at what could happen over the next few weeks in tournament brackets.

There are a couple of rules to live by:

**Chalk rules:** A No. 1 seed has won the national championship the past eight tournaments and 12 of 13. The only time that didn't happen was 2011 when Gary Blair led Texas A&M to the title as a two seed. Also since 2005, at least two of the No. 1s have made the Final Four every year except for 2016.

**Lack of major upsets:** Looking to pick a 14, 15 or 16 seed for an upset? Might want to look elsewhere as there has been only one victory by any of those seeds in the 38-year history of the tournament. That was when 16th-seeded Harvard knocked off No. 1 Stanford in 1998. The No. 14, 15 and 16 seeds are winless since.

**Watch out for 12s:** Just like in the men's bracket, the 12 seeds have some success in recent years upending the 5s. At least one 12 has made it out of the first round in three of the last four tournaments. And some advice too:

**Wait:** Don't rush to fill out your bracket this year because there is that chance a key player or coach could test positive for COVID-19, which could really change the dynamic of the tournament.

And now the picks:

## Alamo Region

**Analysis:** Stanford is definitely the top overall seed for many reasons. The Cardinal are deep, led by Haley Jones and Kiana Williams, talented, and have already spent two months on the road, so three weeks in a hotel room shouldn't faze them too much. It won't be easy with a high-scoring Arkansas team as a potential Sweet 16 matchup. Dana Evans and Louis-



Coach Tara VanDerveer leads a top-seeded Stanford team that won the Pac-12 Tournament and is viewed as one of the teams to beat in the NCAA Tournament, which begins Sunday and Monday.

ville potentially await the Cardinal in the regional final.

**Other players to watch:** Chelsea Dungee, Arkansas; Natasha Mack, Oklahoma State; Hannah Sjerven, South Dakota.

**Upset watch:** UC Davis will continue the trend of 12s knocking off 5s as the Aggies have a good shot to upset Missouri State, which opted out of the Missouri Valley Conference tourney before the semifinals because of COVID-19 concerns for its opponent.

**First-round winners:** Stanford, Oklahoma State, UC Davis, Arkansas, South Dakota, Georgia, Northwestern, Louisville.

**Second-round winners:** Stanford, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisville.

**Regional semifinal winners:** Stanford, Louisville.

**Regional champion:** Stanford.

## HemisFair Region

**Analysis:** South Carolina has a lot of young talent, but unfortunately not much tournament experience. The Gamecocks could go a long way led by Aliyah Boston and Zia Cooke. Getting to the Final Four, Dawn Staley's squad

will have to get through an Oregon State team that has figured itself out after a long coronavirus pause, and then potentially UCLA or Maryland.

**Other players to watch:** Janelle Bailey, North Carolina; Kysre Gondrezick, West Virginia; Ashley Owusu, Maryland.

**Upset Watch:** Stephen F. Austin has won 19 straight and has a good shot to pull off the victory as a 12 seed over Georgia Tech.

**First-round winners:** South Carolina, Oregon State, Stephen F. Austin, West Virginia, Texas, UCLA, North Carolina, Maryland.

**Second-round winners:** South Carolina, West Virginia, UCLA, Maryland.

**Regional semifinal winners:** South Carolina, Maryland.

**Regional champion:** Maryland.

## River Walk Region

**Analysis:** UConn has made the Final Four every season since 2008 and the young Huskies will be tested to get there. No coach Geno Auriemma for the first two rounds and then potentially a tantalizing matchup awaits in the Sweet 16 with either Iowa and freshman

sensation Caitlin Clark, or Kentucky with star Rhyne Howard. Get to the Elite Eight and Baylor could be waiting for the Huskies. They were supposed to play in January, but that got canceled when Lady Bears coach Kim Mulkey had COVID-19.

**Other players to watch:** Paige Bueckers UConn; Tiana Mangakahia, Syracuse; Reina Davis, Tennessee; NaLyssa Smith, Baylor.

**Upset watch:** Florida Gulf Coast is led by Ohio State transfer Kierstan Bell. Once she became eligible early on, the team hasn't lost. The Eagles will have to find a way to slow down Big Ten Player of the Year Naz Hillmon.

**First-round winners:** UConn, Syracuse, Iowa, Kentucky, Florida Gulf Coast, Tennessee, Marquette, Baylor.

**Second-round winners:** UConn, Kentucky, Florida Gulf Coast, Baylor.

**Regional semifinal winners:** UConn, Baylor.

**Regional champion:** UConn.

## Mercado Region

**Analysis:** N.C. State knocked off two No. 1 teams this season,

beating South Carolina and Louisville. So the Wolfpack, led by versatile post Elissa Cunane, can clearly play with anyone in the country. However, it might come down to balance, and no team in the region is more balanced on offense than Texas A&M.

**Other players to watch:** Arella Guirantes, Rutgers; Aari McDonald, Arizona; Ashley Joens, Iowa State.

**Upset watch:** BYU could give Rutgers a tough test in the first round, but watch out for Indiana potentially knocking off N.C. State in the Sweet 16. The Hoosiers have had a great season and have a talented post player of their own in Mackenzie Holmes, who could match up with Cunane.

**First-round winners:** N.C. State, South Florida, Gonzaga, Indiana, Rutgers, Arizona, Iowa State, Texas A&M.

**Second-round winners:** N.C. State, Indiana, Rutgers, Texas A&M.

**Regional final winners:** Indiana, Texas A&M.

**Regional champion:** Texas A&M.

## The Final Four

Whoever gets this far will have been living in a hotel for three weeks and that's no small feat on its own. Stanford, UConn, Maryland and Texas A&M have been stellar all season.

The Cardinal have played strong defense and will find a way to slow down Maryland, the top-scoring team in the nation.

UConn has made the Final Four ever year since 2008, but lost in the national semifinals the last three times, albeit two of those came on last-second shots in overtime. The Huskies will find a way to end that skid and reach the title game.

## National champion

Stanford and UConn met in the 2010 title game in the Alamodome and after an ugly offensive first half, the Huskies came away with a 53-47 win. The Cardinal will win this time, ending UConn's undefeated streak in championship games and giving Tara VanDerveer her third national championship.



# FRESHMEN WHO GRADUATED EARLY GAIN NCAA TOURNEY EXPERIENCE

By Janie McCauley

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

UCLA assistant coach Tasha Brown calls her “Little Intern” — and Dominique Darius doesn’t mind.

Darius realizes how much she still has to learn about college basketball when most young women her age are in their final push toward high school graduation.

Players like Darius who graduated early are not only gaining a head start and valuable experience in their college basketball careers as early enrollees, they have been counted upon to help teams across the country keep their seasons going when players are held out for COVID-19 protocols.

Now, some — including Arizona’s Madi Conner — will make their March Madness debuts on the big stage in the NCAA Tournament.

When Darius arrived in Southern California in late December eager to quickly rediscover her form after minimal organized basketball for nine months, Bruins coach Cori Close made one thing immediately clear: no pressure on Darius to deliver big shots right away, she just needed to absorb as much as she could.

“I’m getting in the groove of things,” Darius said. “The first day I walked in I got there early and I was just getting shots up because I hadn’t shot in like a week because I was quarantined and I was like, ‘Dang, I don’t have my shot or a feel for the game,’ but it was OK, they weren’t expecting me to.”

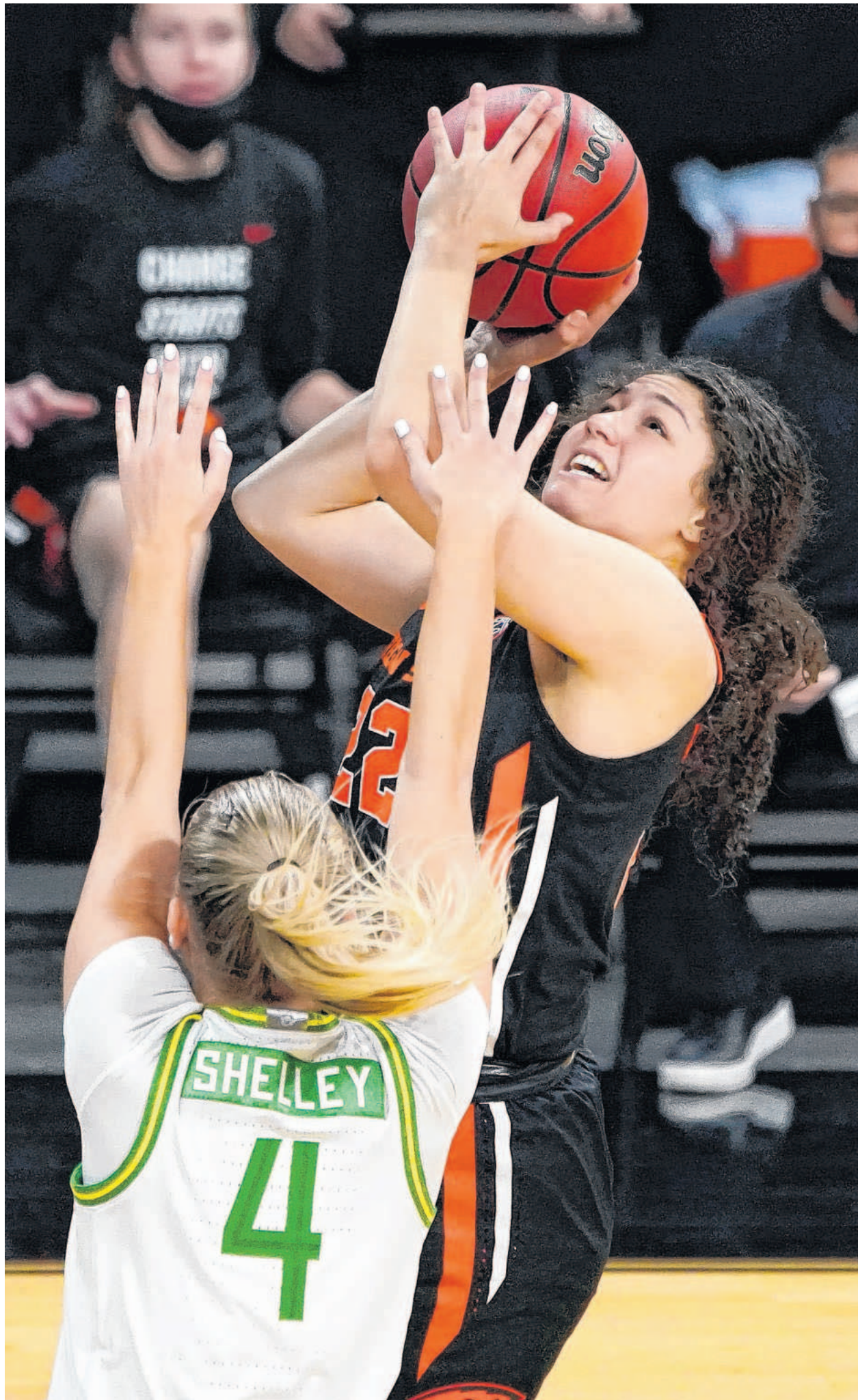
Darius, who attended Blair Academy boarding school in New Jersey but didn’t have a senior season because of COVID, has spent numerous hours playing catch up through film study and extra work in the gym.

At Oregon State, the Hemisfair Region eighth-seeded Beavers are getting a boost from Talia von Oelhoffen. Saylor Poffenbarger is doing the same for UConn, the No. 1 seed in the River Walk Region and the tournament’s second-seeded team overall.

Poffenbarger is happy to have the best of two worlds: She enrolled at UConn in January but Middletown High School in Maryland will welcome her back for both prom and graduation.

“I haven’t had any regrets,” she said. “I was at the point in my small town where I was ready to move on to the next thing.”

It has helped that one of her best friends, Olivia Miles, enrolled early at Notre Dame. They talk regu-



Oregon State’s Talia von Oelhoffen graduated early from her high school in Pasco, Washington, and went straight to Corvallis. Now, she’s contributing for the tourney-bound Beavers.

JOHN LOCHER / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

larly about their shared experiences.

“A lot of what we discuss is knowing our role, finding our role and fitting into a role and not having to do everything,” Poffenbarger said. “But also just talking about being in college in general. Going from literally being in high school a few months ago to, we’re in

college and taking college classes.”

Early enrollees aren’t unique to the women’s game. There are a handful of midyear enrollees playing for several teams in the men’s tournament, including top-seeded Gonzaga and 2-seeded Ohio State.

Ben Gregg, a 6-foot-10-inch freshman, enrolled

at Gonzaga in December and has averaged 1.2 points while playing 47 minutes over 14 games. The Buckeyes pressed guard Meechie Johnson Jr. into some significant minutes in January due to an injury, though he’s appeared in just 17 games overall and hasn’t played more than 10 minutes in any game since.

While any minutes are valuable for early enrollees, Darius is making the most of her time.

She gave UCLA an immediate lift as the program’s third top-30 recruit in as many years. In 14 games, she averaged 9.1 points and 1.1 rebounds.

“It just blows me away. Every time I lose my pa-

tiency, coach Shannon (Perry-LeBeauf) says, ‘She’s a high school senior, Cori,’ Close said. “Really, it’s amazing, because physically she’s ready. She’s high-level athletic, long, strong, great body for the game, great athlete. But all the mental side, all the skills, the pace of the play those are a lot of adjustments there.”

“I think Dominique has a great future for us and I told her all along ... ‘all you can do is grow from this.’”

From a coach’s perspective, it’s tough to know how the player will do thrown into the pressure-packed conference schedule mid-season.

Oregon State’s Von Oelhoffen graduated early from her small high school in Pasco, Washington, and soon afterward arrived on campus in Corvallis.

Beavers coach Scott Rueck said, “It was kind of a mystery to add a high-schooler to your team at that point.”

But Von Oelhoffen provided immediate perimeter depth and impressed everyone with her ability to quickly learn multiple positions.

“It’s crazy, and it happened so fast, but you know it’s COVID and everything you kind of just roll with the punches,” Von Oelhoffen told the Pac-12 Networks. “So it’s kind of my new normal.”

Though Cal is not playing in the postseason, coach Charmin Smith is thankful for Mia Mastrov’s timely arrival that allowed the Golden Bears to keep playing games. And Smith knows what NCAA Tournament experience could mean to other such freshmen like Darius.

“For Dominique at UCLA to have tournament experience, that’s crucial,” Smith said.

No. 1 overall seed Stanford didn’t have the chance to bring anyone early, yet Hall of Fame coach Tara VanDerveer is all for it.

“It’s a bonus year,” VanDerveer said. “Really, everyone has an extra year. ... I think it’s great that they’ve allowed them to do that and they’ve been able to take advantage. It has helped some teams that were really low in numbers and may be projected them into the NCAA Tournament.”

In addition to the experience on the court, Darius received another perk: She got out of dormitory living her first year of college.

“Coach Cori said, ‘We can’t put you in a dorm now,’” Darius said with a grin, “‘you’ve seen the good life.’”

## JUST MONTHS REMOVED FROM HIGH SCHOOL, SHARPSHOOTING CONNER READY TO HELP UA

By PJ Brown

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Madison Conner is living in the moment.

And what a moment it is.

Arizona’s 17-year-old freshman guard, a player who joined the Wildcats in January as an early enrollee, is one day away from playing in her first NCAA Tournament game. The third-seeded Wildcats (16-5) will take on No. 14-seed Stony Brook (15-5) at 11 a.m. Monday in San Antonio.

Conner is one of 15 players across the country who jumped at the opportunity to start their college careers a semester early. Five play in the Pac-12; three of them — Conner, Oregon State’s Talia von Oelhoffen and UCLA’s Dominique Darius — made the NCAA Tournament.

Conner was starring for AZ Compass Prep when coach Adia Barnes called to see she’d be interested in making the leap to college. There wasn’t much of a risk in doing it, she said; NCAA rules dictate that everyone playing during the pandemic-shortened season

will receive an extra year of eligibility.

Conner’s response?

“Shoot, sign me up,” she said. “I was ready for whatever came along with that.”

Conner logged her first minutes in a game Feb. 14 against Washington. She said she was nervous and “super tense.”

“It was like, ‘Oh my god, don’t mess up. Don’t do this,’” she said.

“I think I needed to calm myself down from that because you don’t play good when you’re tight and tense, worried about making a mistake. I had to get into that groove of like, ‘I know, it’s new, I’ve played basketball before. It’s not a new thing that I’m doing. It’s just a higher level.’”

Conner played against Cal and Arizona State down the stretch, and made appearances in both of Arizona’s Pac-12 Tournament games. She scored her first basket, a 3-pointer, in the Wildcats’ runaway win over Washington State in the quarterfinals. That week,



Madison Conner

Conner won the first gold jersey — for “passion plays” — of her UA career.

Expect Conner to find minutes in Monday’s NCAA Tournament opener. Barnes has said Conner’s shooter’s mentality will help the Wildcats when it matters.

The UA could use the long-stance threat; the Wildcats hit just 31.8% of their 3-pointers this season, a mark that ranks seventh in the Pac-12 and 137th nationally.

The guard should be ready. Conner has been watching film with her teammates, who have helped make the transition to the college game easy. She talks extensively with the Wildcats’ coaches, especially Barnes.

Barnes told Conner “don’t let anybody or the circumstances or anything else change me,” Conner said. “Focus on myself, and how I can get better and help the team. No matter what that is — if that’s playing 10 minutes or sitting on the bench the entire time — just

having a good mindset. And don’t let that discourage me, because I shouldn’t even be here right now. It’s an opportunity — just stay motivated and keep my work ethic and keep working hard.”

Conner has found a way to fit in, too — even if her teammates joke that they’re playing with an eighth-grader.

In that regard, Conner shares something with her coach. Barnes similarly started her UA career at age 17. Asked this week about how Barnes would’ve handled playing in the NCAA Tournament just a few months after joining the team, her former coach took a moment to think.

“That’s a tough question,” Joan Bonvicini said. “Basketball-wise, Adia played well, yet (her) freshman year was a big adjustment for her. Being accountable to rules — Adia was always late. That was an issue. It’s hard (to adjust) as you have to be more accountable in college basketball. Adia was pretty good right away and she averaged 14 points, I think and was Pac-10 Freshman of the Year. I think if

you have an opportunity to play an extra semester it advances your game, helps your maturity-wise and gives you a head start.

“Adia has confidence in Madi. I asked her how she was in practice and she said, ‘She’s killing us’ (by playing against the starters). When you see positive things happening in practice and your head coach has confidence in you, that’s a big thing. The time when she’s going to shine will happen soon.”

Conner still follows her former high school team, which is run by ex-Sabino coach Jaamal Rhodes. It stung when AZ Compass Prep lost in the final of The Grind Session World Championships.

Conner knows she could’ve helped them, but bigger things awaited her.

“It kind of stinks that I couldn’t finish the season with them, but I definitely wanted to take this opportunity,” Conner said. “I definitely would not change my decision. ... I’m so happy to be here. I definitely would not change that. I gave up something to get a little bit more.”

# NC STATE, A&M CHALLENGE CATS IN TOUGH MERCADO REGION

By Kristie Rieken

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAN ANTONIO — While top-seeded North Carolina State with star Elissa Cunane is a slight favorite in the Mercado Region of the NCAA Tournament, No. 2 seed Texas A&M and its bevy of veterans could be poised to knock off the Wolfpack.

Then there is third-seeded Arizona, which can't be overlooked in this region with two-way standout and Pac-12 player of the year Aari McDonald leading the way.

N.C. State is in the tournament, which is being held entirely in the San Antonio area, for the 26th time overall but earned a No. 1 seed for the first time. The 6-foot-5 Cunane, who is averaging 16.6 points and 8.1 rebounds a game, was named the most valuable player of the Atlantic Coast Conference Tournament as N.C. State won it for the second straight season.

"The No. 1 seed is a great honor, obviously," N.C. State coach Wes Moore said. "You know me. I'd just as soon stayed No. 2 and laid low. You still got to go out either way and work."

The Wolfpack open the tournament on Sunday against 16-seed NC A&T.

Texas A&M coach Gary Blair does not share Moore's feelings about the top seed.

The Aggies won the SEC regular season title after beating No. 1 seed South Carolina, but likely lost their shot to be a top seed in the tournament for the first time after losing to Georgia in the tournament semifinal.

Blair was a bit irked that his team didn't get a 1-seed but said it gives Texas A&M a chance to prove people wrong. The Aggies are in their 15th straight tournament under Blair, and it's the 10th anniversary of their only national title in 2011.

"I love to go out and show people what this team can do and what this coaching staff and I can do to put together a game plan," Blair said. "I'm not one of the blue bloods yet, but I'm in the conversation."

Texas A&M meets No. 15 seed Troy on Monday night.

**Wildcats back:** The Wildcats return to the tournament for the first time



Kayla Wells has helped one-time national champion Texas A&M burst back onto the national scene this season. The loaded Aggies will get to play all their NCAA Tournament games within three hours of their campus.



Four years after making the Sweet 16 with Washington, Aari McDonald now leads a UA team that has plans to get at least that far. UA has made the regional semifinals only once in program history, in 1998.

since 2005 and meet No. 14 Stony Brook, which is making its first NCAA appearance, on Monday.

"There is going to be the

nervousness but nervous is good for basketball," coach Adia Barnes said. "Scared is bad, and we don't have any players on our team that are

scared."

Though Arizona is making its first trip to the Big Dance in 16 years, they do have tournament experi-

ence on the roster after McDonald reached the Sweet 16 with Washington in 2017. She put off a WNBA career to return to Arizona for an-

other year.

"It's pretty much do or die right now, so we got to play literally like it's gonna be our last game ever," she said.

McDonald led the Pac-12 in scoring (19.4) and steals (2.7) a game for the third straight season and has scored at least 10 points in 87 straight games, which is the longest active streak in the nation.

**Double trouble:** Gonzaga, the fifth seed in the region, may have opponents seeing double in the tournament. That's because the Bulldogs have two sets of twins on the roster: the Wirth sisters and the Truong sisters.

LeeAnne and Jenn Wirth are 6-foot-3 starting forwards for the fifth-seeded Bulldogs (23-3). The identical twins come from an athletic family: Their father, Alan Wirth, played for the Oakland Athletics and older sister Christina played for the WNBA's Indiana Fever after a college career at Vanderbilt.

Jenn is the older of the two, by 18 minutes.

"It's a cliché answer but also the truth — you just have a built-in best friend," said Jenn, who has averaged 12.8 points and 8.2 rebounds this season.

Then there's sophomore guards Kayleigh Truong and Kaylynn Truong, also identical Twins.

Gonzaga (23-3) will face No. 12 seed Belmont on Monday. The Zags are making their 12th overall appearance in the tournament. Belmont is in the tournament after winning its fifth Ohio Valley Conference tournament title in the last six years behind the stellar performance of freshman Destinee Wells, who scored a career-high 32 points in the title game.

**Rise of the Hoosiers:** Indiana is the No. 4 seed in the region; the Hoosiers highest seed in program history.

Their previous best seed was being No. 6 in 1983 when just 36 teams made the tournament, and their best seed in the 64-team field was No. 8 in 2002 after earning a top-10 ranking in the AP Top 25 for the first time in school history this season.

The Hoosiers play No. 13 VCU on Monday.

## BARNES' NCAA TOURNAMENT EXPERIENCE SHOULD HELP UA'S FIRST-TIME DANCERS

By PJ Brown

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Adia Barnes is a first-time head coach in the NCAA Tournament. But she's been here before.

As a player, Barnes led the 1998 Wildcats to the Sweet 16 — further than any other Arizona squad in history. As an assistant coach at Washington in 2016, Barnes was on the bench when the Huskies made a run to the Final Four. (Days later, she was named Arizona's head coach).

Barnes will talk to her players about the experience leading up to Monday's tournament opener against Stony Brook.

"I'm trying to get them to visualize what it's like in a normal year with thousands of people walking around, all the festivities, all the excitement, the whole city shuts down for the tournament," Barnes said.

Only three players on the UA roster have NCAA Tournament experience. Aari McDonald played her freshman year at Washington, and the Huskies made it to the Sweet 16. Bendu Yeane advanced to the second round with Indiana two years ago, and Shaina Pellington played in the first round with Oklahoma three years ago.

Their experience helps Arizona's first-timers. UA forward Cate Reese said Barnes' experience both playing and coaching has had an especially big impact.

"There are not many coaches out there that have played specifically at the school they are coach-



Arizona's Cate Reese said the Wildcats look at tough times as a chance to prove how tough they are. "When we were shut down for a little bit, we didn't really look at that as a negative," said the forward.

ing at — I think that that's great," Reese said. "But also her having some inside view of being at the tournament. ... I think that that's really helpful for all of us, especially with such a weird year coming in here, especially with the pandemic, we all feel a little bit isolated. I think that's great to have her insight into everything."

While things may look a little different, especially being on a little stricter lockdown than the Wildcats are used to — no hanging

out in their teammate's rooms, no stopping in the hotel's gift shop, no getting coffee in the lobby — they are still having fun.

Barnes has helped to break some of the boredom. When the team was finally allowed to eat meals together in their assigned large conference room, Barnes had a little something in mind.

"We played, I think it's called heads up — you know, the phone where you flip it ... you have to ask questions and act it out like char-

rades," she said.

"I'm trying to make it fun. We gave them a gift bag downstairs full of stuff and essentials for the tournament here. I'm trying to do what we can.

"We're fine and we're enjoying the moment. ... We're happy that no one tested positive. We're, like, ready to go.

"I think that all that stuff is just kind of the other stuff — the noise. We're focused on what we need to do."

### A new look

Barnes says her team has a different focus already.

"I think there's an excitement. There's just a different look in their eyes," Barnes said. "Practice is a lot sharper — it's less time. Some players are probably happy because we only have a set 90 minutes. They're probably so excited about that. But there's just a focus, it's clicking, we're going faster, everything's moving smoother. That tells me there's more of a focus. I think we're, it's just tournament time. I think it at this point, everybody steps up a little bit."

### Resilient Cats

Reese said perseverance has helped her team get through a year unlike any other.

"There are so many different obstacles that not only us, but every team has to get past," Reese said. "I think that we've done a great job. When we were shut down for a little bit, we didn't really look at that as a negative, we came together.

"I think our chemistry got better during that week. There have been so many different things that we've had to get over. ... (We) just stuck together as a team.

"At the end of the day, we get to play basketball. I think that's one of the most important things. That's just what we have to keep in mind. I think that being resilient every day has really helped."

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