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Arizona Daily Star

SUNDAY, MARCH 21, 2021 • SECTION C

Editor: Ryan Finley / sportsed@tucson.com



Arizona is dancing again, and it's Aari-eally 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



PHOTO BY MAMTA POPAT / ARIZONA DAILY STAR

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



KELLY PRESNELL / ARIZONA DAILY STAR 2020

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.

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 state: Baptiste is average

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.

rebounds in her first year since transferring from Virginia lech. **Best game:** Baptiste scored 18 points and hit five 3-pointers in the Wildcats' Dec. 4 win over UCLA in McKale Center.



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 aver-

aging 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.



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



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

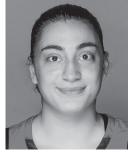
coming off the bench. **Best game:** Manumaleuga scored nine points — all of them coming on 3-pointers — in the Wildcats' Dec. 23 win over Idaho in McKale Center.



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.



Derin Erdogan

Freshman, No. 10
Position: Guard
Height: 5-6
Hometown (club team): Istanbul,
Turkey (Istanbul Universitesti 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.



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.



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.



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.



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.



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.



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.



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. De-

spite 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.



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.



Adia Barnes Head coach

Assistant coaches:

Salvo Coppa, Tamisha Augustin, Jackie Nared-Hairston

SUNDAY, MARCH 21, 2021 / ARIZONA DAILY STAR C3



It's go time for our women's basketball team as they head into the first round of the NCAA tournament.

Get your gear and cheer them on to the next round!

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PERFECT LEADER' MCDONALD HAS RETURNED CATS TO RELEVANCE

By PJ Brown

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

When Aari McDonald makes a promise, you can bet she's going to deliver.

The day she arrived on campus as a transfer from Washington, McDonald told fans she would "bring championships to UA."

As the Wildcats slogged to just six wins in McDonald's redshirt year, she promised her teammates they would turn the program around - and fast.

That's exactly what McDonald has done.

Monday's NCAA Tournament opener against Stony Brook marks the official return of the UA to the national stage. It's been a steady progression. In McDonald's first year in a Wildcats uniform, she led her team to a WNIT title. Last year, the momentum carried through as Arizona was ranked in the Top 25 for the first time in more than a decade. They were on their way to hosting the first two rounds of the NCAA Tournament before the pandemic shut it down.

McDonald and the UA has filled the last three years with firsts, none bigger than Monday's.

"I'm happy and just blessed to be here and I'm pretty sure my teammates can say the same," McDonald said. "This is what we waited for, a year later, and we're finally here. It's just crazy to think we'd be here. But definitely, I'm excited. I'm just ready to play, honestly."

McDonald played in the NCAA Tournament during her freshman time. year at Washington. She averaged 13.6 points in three games, adding five steals and two blocks. She had a monster game in the first round against Montana, scoring 15 points, grabbing seven rebounds. dishing two assists and adding one 890 points that season, smashblock.

than a third or fourth option behind Huskies stars Kelsey Plum and Chantel Osahor.

one of the best all-around players in the country. Over the last two weeks, she has taken her leadership role up a notch while the Wildcats prepared for their first NCAA Tournament in 16 years.

"She's just been a perfect leader, and now we just have to go out there and play for her," junior for best shooting guard as a junior ment semifinals. guard Bendu Yeaney said. "She's a while being named the Pac-12's senior on this team that has given Defensive Player of the Year. She er of the Year and Co-Defensive get her as far as possible."

called her "the total-package kid" and "the type of player you want victory against No. 4 Stanford. to build a championship culture



REBECCA SASNETT / ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Aari McDonald had the UA in or near the top 10 all season as the Wildcats are back in the NCAA Tournament for the first time in 16 years.

MONDAY

- What: NCAA Tournament, first round: No. 3 seed Arizona
- vs. No. 14 seed Stony Brook • When: 11 a.m.
- TV: ESPN2
- Radio: 1400-AM

In just her second game as a Wildcat, McDonald scored 39 points. She was named Pac-12 Player of the Week twice in a three-week span.

McDonald would go on to score ing records held by both Barnes At the time, McDonald was a and former UA men's star Khalid first player since 2000 to score 800 points, grab 200 rebounds. dish 150 assists and register 90 Now, McDonald is the star and steals in a single season. The Wildcats went won the WNIT, filling McKale Center along the

to the nation what those in Tucson already knew — that she was the Ann Meyers Drysdale award vanced to the conference tournafor Arizona, UA coach Adia Barnes one of Arizona's biggest wins in Donald's speed, something she's have come before her in the last the country to watch.... program history, a 73-72 overtime learned to harness as a senior. Mc- 15 years. She is "a little more fo-

Despite the praise, Barnes had chose to stay in college for one ing her way through multiple deno idea that McDonald would ac- more year. At the time, McDonald fenders to get to the basket. complish so much in such a short said she had unfinished business:

UA'S 2020-21 STATS

	IVIIII.	PIS.	Reb.	ASL.	DIK.	Su.	FG%0	3P1%	F 1 70
McDonald	33.0	19.3	5.1	4.5	0.0	2.7	38.9	29.6	79.8
Reese	24.4	11.3	5.2	0.5	0.3	1.0	47.9	38.1	73.5
Baptiste	26.0	8.3	5.7	1.0	0.1	0.9	43.3	31.4	84.4
Thomas	31.3	7.7	3.3	1.5	1.2	2.0	42.1	39.7	90.0
Pellington	15.2	5.8	1.9	0.8	0.1	0.6	40.2	5.9	46.2
Ware	17.7	4.6	4.5	0.4	1.2	0.5	43.8	33.3	68.0
Yeaney	22.5	4.0	3.2	1.1	0.1	0.8	33.7	26.9	52.8
Pueyo	21.7	3.6	3.5	1.5	1.2	1.8	33.3	36.7	75.0
Manumaleuga	3.3	1.3	0.1	0.3	0.3	0.1	30.0	37.5	50.0
Erdogan	3.9	1.1	0.5	0.3	0.0	0.0	41.7	14.3	75.0
Smith	6.1	0.9	1.3	0.1	0.2	0.1	50.0	0.0	0.0
Conner	6.0	0.6	0.6	0.2	0.0	0.0	16.7	16.7	0.0
Mote	3.5	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.2	50.0	50.0	0.0
Garcia	3.6	0.4	0.8	0.0	0.2	0.0	14.3	0.0	0.0
Conner	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

Min Dtc Roh Act RIk Stl FG% 3PT% FT%

complementary player - no more Reeves. McDonald became the taking her teammates to actually neuvering around people is inplay in the tournament. When she stinctual - you can't teach that. It made her announcement, she said separates her." that "the best is yet to come."

backed it up.

The Wildcats have been ranked throughout her senior season, She followed that up by proving landing in the top 10 in 13 of 17 possible weeks. They swept Oran elite player. McDonald won in the Pac-12 standings and ad-

McDonald earned Pac-12 Play- Bracket to get Arizona's best. ment was canceled, McDonald on the pedal and go lateral, weav-

Now, McDonald and the Wild-It wasn't all talk; McDonald has cats will try to separate themselves from the rest of the NCAA Tournament pack. They're seeded third in a region that also includes Southeastern Conference regular-season champion Texas A&M egon on ESPN, finished second and an NC State team that's seeded No. 1 for the first time in program history.

McDonald wrote a letter for The Donald knows when to shift into cused, tuned in and ready to play" After the 2020 NCAA Tourna- another gear and when to ease up as the tournament opener nears, Barnes said.

> is the one to lead our team back (to ing to cherish every game, do our Said Barnes: "Her way of ma- the NCAA Tournament)," Barnes best."

UA'S 2020-21 SCHEDULE

Overall record: 16-5 Pac-12 record: 13-4							
Date	Opponent 1	ime/result					
Nov. 29	Northern Arizona	W. 76-63					
Dec. 4	UCLA*	W, 68-65					
Dec. 6	USC*	W. 78-77					
Dec. 10	Arizona State*	W, 65-37					
Dec. 18	at Colorado*	W, 62-59					
Dec. 20	at Utah*	W, 77-60					
Dec. 23	Idaho	W, 96-42					
Jan. 1	Stanford*	L, 54-81					
Jan. 3	California*	W, 69-33					
Jan. 10	at Wash. St.* (OT)	L, 69-71					
Jan. 14	Oregon*	W, 57-41					
Jan. 17	Oregon State*	W, 67-51					
Jan. 22	Utah*	W, 66-54					
Feb. 8	at Oregon*	W, 79-59					
Feb. 12	Washington State	W, 60-51					
Feb. 14	Washington*	W, 75-53					
Feb. 19	at California*	W, 59-50					
Feb. 22	at Stanford*	L, 48-62					
Feb. 28	at Arizona State* (C	OT) L, 64-66					
March 4	Washington State&	W, 60-44					
March 5	UCLA&	L, 49-58					
March 22 Stony Brook% 11 a.m.							
* — Pac-12 games							

& — Pac-12 Tournament in Las Vegas $\% - \text{NCAA Tournament in Texas} \\ \text{Home games in } \textbf{bold}$

said. "That's what she came to Expect the rest of the Mercado Arizona for; what she set out to do. She's a great player - offensively and defensively - who has her all to us. Now it's time for us to did it all while enduring a stress Player of the Year honors. She is Player's Tribune that she is play- impacted UA in so many ways. repay her and give her all and try to fracture in her left tibula. She re- the only player to lead the league ing for the seniors who didn't get And the community. They've emturned in time to score 20 points in scoring and steals for three con- to play in the tournament last sea- braced her, they love her and she's When McDonald signed to play and hit the game-winning shot in secutive years. Barnes credits Mc- son and for all of the Wildcats who one of the most exciting players in

"I don't want to see her go. I wish I had 700 games left with her. She's had a phenomenal career in Arizona. She's not ready to "It's extremely special that Aari go home; neither am I. We're go-

BONVICINI: CATS WILL BE JUDGED BY HOW THEY PLAY IN MARCH

By Alec White

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

For the first time since 2005, the Arizona women's basketball team is dancing. Monday's game against Stony Brook marks the Wildcats' first appearance in 16 years; Joan Bonvicini was the Wildcats' coach then, and was in charge the previous six times the UA made the tournament.

Bonvicini, who now works as a TV analyst, talked to the Star this week about Arizona's run, Aari McDonald's impact, the Wildcats' depth, her memories of coaching in the NCAA Tournament and a recipe for success in March.

How do you view what Adia Barnes has been able to do with this Arizona program?

she took over the program, particularly the culture was not what has been and how she's built everything around it. But really, (it) was the addition of Aari MacDonald as a recruit that really set the respect Aari McDonald has." trajectory for the program.

"It's been nothing short of remarkable in not just wins for the program but wins in so many othhave fans this year, but the prowant to attend. And not just lo- uted offensively.



A: "Well, it's really nothing Arizona coach Joan Bonvicini answers a question during a news confershort of amazing because when ence at the 2005 NCAA Tournament. The Wildcats haven't appeared in the tournament since; that drought will end Monday in San Antonio.

you wanted. That's what her base cally, but across the country. Peo-Arizona program and particularly the job of Adia has done and the

point with the Wildcats this year?

A: "I thought the Oregon game, er ways. Obviously, we couldn't (on Feb. 8), because that's when it seemed like everything was workgram has grown in the amount of ing together. They were shooting people who follow it, cover it and well, and a lot of players contrib-

ple are very much recognizing the an elite level. And I believe that like her to show her jumper a little happened in the middle of the season. I think another game that they really played well, although they When did you see a turning weren't a highly ranked team, was against Utah at home (on Jan. 22).

"I think for Arizona to advance particularly the one on the road and go deep is a number of other like her to show her jumper. All of players outside of Aari McDonald them need to average double figneed to step up and do it on a consistent basis."

What do you like about some

MORE BONVICINI ON OUR PODCAST

To hear the full conversation with former UA women's basketball coach Joan Bonvicini, check out the latest Wildcast podcast, available on Apple Podcasts and Google Play.

zona team outside of every Mc-

with Sam Thomas. She's a senior. She came in the program before anyone recognized it. I call her like a little bit of everything. She's a that's the reality. SUSAN WALSH / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS very good defender. Amazing how many shot blocks she gets.

"I like Cate Reese, obviously; (she) was a five-star recruit. (She's) quick, can shoot the jump-"I think this year, they went to er, take it around the basket. I'd little bit further out and continue to get rebounds.

"I like Trinity Baptiste, I think bigger than her size. Again, I'd really make a deep run."

of the other players on this Ari- seen from McDonald's game in tell you, is the kids were thrilled."

her senior year ...

A: "I believe her greatest improvement has been as a leader and being more vocal, which is as important as all the other things. I think her teammates have recognized from when they stepped on campus, that she's the go-to person."

What can we expect from Arizona in this tournament?

A: "Both Arizona and Aari, particularly, are going to get more attention now than they ever have A: "I think you've got to start been in the tournament. I told Adia this, too, that as good as a regular season as you had, really you're judged on the postseason. the Swiss Army knife, and she does And whether that's fair or not,

> "You can prepare for quickness, but until you've coached against it and seen Aari in person, you won't believe it. I think that's going to be an advantage for Arizona."

Take us back to that moment bit more, both mid-range and a in time when you're coaching Arizona and what it's like to be in that postseason environment.

A: "When you go to the tourshe's physical. I think she plays nament, it is just exciting. It's fun, the environment is different. But I've got to say this year, it's going to be completely different. There'll ures, or close to it, for the team to be some fans, but not like it normally is. It's still fun to compete on **Describe the evolution you've** the big stage. The best way I can



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NOV. 29: NO. 7

ARIZONA 76. NAU 63

Reese scored 21 points and

grabbed 11 rebounds as the Wildcats won their season

She said it: "I'm proud that

we got the jitters out. We

got our first game out - we

were undefeated 'til today.

Now we're still undefeated

which is good. ... I think you'll

see us improve in the next

few days." — UA coach Adia

Barnes

What went down: Cate



Arizona head coach Adia Barnes waves the net after her Wildcats dropped Northwestern 56-42 in the championship game of the WNIT at McKale Center in 2019

RANKING ADIA BARNES' BIGGESTWI AS ARIZONA'S HEAD COACH

By Justin Spears ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Adia Barnes has been a part of some of the best teams in Arizona women's basketball history, both as a player and coach. In fact, Barnes is just one of 11 coaches alltime to play and coach their alma mater in the

NCAA Tournament. In five seasons, Barnes has shaped the Wildcats into one of the top women's basketball programs on the West Coast and a contender in the always-loaded Pac-12 Confer-

As the third-seeded Wildcats prepare for their first NCAA Tournament game in 16 years, when they face No. 14 Stony Brook on Monday in the Mercado Region, here's a look at the UA's best wins under Barnes:

CATS ROUT BRUINS FOR BARNES' FIRST WIN OVER A TOP-10 TEAM

- When: Jan. 31, 2020 • Where: McKale Center
- Opponent: No. 8 UCLA
- Score: 92-66

• What went down: Arizona fell to UCLA in Westwood in the beginning stages of Pac-12 play — then avenged their loss by dismantling the eighth-ranked Bruins by 26 points in Tucson. Star guard Aari McDonald poured in 14 of her 27 points in the first quarter and shot 10 of 15 from the field, while Sam Thomas added a then season-high 20 points, with Cate Reese recording a near double-double 13 points and nine rebounds. As a team, the Wildcats shot 54.7% from the field as

UCLA was held to 34.4%. • She said it: "I mean, a huge, huge win for us against a very good team. ... We always talk about with this program — about leaving a legacy. And this is how

you start. I'm just proud of them." — Barnes

ARIZONA SNAPS LOSING SKID TO DEVILS

- When: Dec. 30, 2018
- Where: McKale Center • Opponent: No. 17 Arizona State • **Score**: 51-39
- What went down: It only took Barnes two seasons to secure a win over rival Arizona State, a program • Score: 83-58 the direction of Charli Turner Thorne, but then UA

dropped four straight contests against the Sun Devils. Once again, McDonald set the tone for Arizona by scoring 13 of the Wildcats' 17 first-quarter points and finished the game with 24. Despite a rocky second half scoring for both teams, Arizona prevailed on its home court to hand ASU its third loss of the season. Since then, Arizona has beaten ASU four out of the last five games, splitting with the Sun Devils this season.

• She said it: "This win definitely proves that we can do some big things in the conference." —

WILDCATS HOLD OFF NINTH-RANKED **UCLA TO START CONFERENCE PLAY**

- When: Dec. 4, 2020
- Where: McKale Center • Opponent: No. 9 UCLA
- **Score**: 68-65

• What went down: Arizona usually begins its Pac-12 portion of the schedule closer to New Year's. but the COVID-19 pandemic proved nothing is normal. Less less than a week after the Wildcats season-opening win over Northern Arizona, No. 7 UA hosted ninth-ranked UCLA in front of a fan-less

McKale Center with artificial crowd noise pumped in. Arizona shot 6 for 25 from 3-point range and was outrebounded by UCLA, but the Bruins struggled in the third quarter and scored just six points and missed 16 consecutive shots, which sparked a 9-0 run by the Wildcats. Despite UCLA cutting Arizona's lead to a single possession with a few minutes remaining, the UA closed out the game with a McDonald putback and a clutch 3-pointer by

 She said it: "It was a very ugly win. Normally, you play these type of games another month from now, so it's a big difference playing in early December. Both teams, you're not as sharp, less cohesiveness." — Barnes

transfer finished the night with 18 points and 11

ARIZONA CLIPS DUCKS ON ESPN **FOR FIRST TIME UNDER BARNES**

- When: Jan. 14, 2021
- Where: McKale Center
- Opponent: No. 10 Oregon Score: 57-41

• What went down: If you look at the all-time series results between Arizona and Oregon, there's a steady flow of Ls in recent history for the Wildcats - 10-straight for the UA going back to Barnes' first season at the helm. If there was ever a time for Barnes and the Wildcats to strike while the iron was hot and take down the Ducks, it was this season considering the Ducks were without top-10 WNBA draft picks in Sabrina Ionescu (1), Satou Sabally (2) and Ruthy Hebard (8). Arizona began the contest, which was the program's first-ever regular-season home game on ESPN, with a 14-0 run, took a 17-2

lead over the Ducks and never looked back. • She said it: "From the first quarter, I knew we were controlling the game. We had them flustered, and I've never seen Oregon players flustered like that. Everybody was locked in, and everybody wanted this win bad." — McDonald

MCDONALD SCORES CAREER-HIGH 44 POINTS IN ROAD WIN AT TEXAS

- When: Nov. 17, 2019
- Where: Frank Erwin Center, Austin, Texas • Opponent: No. 22 Texas

that has maintained supremacy in the state under • What went down: McDonald could tell she was in a different zone during pregame warmups in Austin, or as she said: "I'm in my bag." McDonald put together the greatest scoring performance in UA history by hanging 44 points on the Longhorns. The then-iunior made 14 of her 18 field-goal attempts and sank all 14 of her free throws. With prior wins over North Dakota, Santa Clara and Chicago State, a 25-point win over a top-25 opponent on the road, the season after Arizona won the WNIT. showed the

Wildcats were a program on the incline. • She said it: "No one could guard Aari. She proved when it counted ... how she's going to step up and perform, that she is one of the best guards in the

ARIZONA OUTLASTS OREGON STATE IN OVERTIME IN CORVALLIS

- When: Feb. 9, 2020 · Where: Gill Coliseum, Corvallis, Ore.
- Opponent: No. 9 Oregon State • Score: 65-58 in overtime
- What went down: The Beavers snuck away from

Tucson with a game-winning bucket earlier in the season, which fueled motivation for an Arizona team itching for its first-ever win over a top-10 team on the road. Arizona starts and ends with McDonald. Where: McKale Center

who will go down as arguably the best women's bas- • Opponent: No. 4 Stanford ketball player in program history. But the supporting • Score: 73-72 cast is what has allowed the Wildcats to flourish into a Pac-12 power — and just when Arizona faced adversity on the road, it was Dominique McBryde who stepped up and propelled Arizona to victory with her season-high 19 points, eight rebounds and four blocks. The UA's overtime win broke a 12-game losing skid to the Beavers. The triumph was also the first step in a four-game winning streak.

Virginia Tech transfer Trinity Baptiste. The graduate She said it: "I think we really wanted this win. We didn't want to end the game with another overtime buzzer-beater, last-second buzzer-beater, whatever it may be." — McBryde

ARIZONA TAKES DOWN ASU IN TEMPE FOR FIRST TIME IN 19 YEARS

• When: Dec. 29, 2019

• Where: Desert Financial Arena, Tempe Opponent: ASU

• Score: 58-53 • What went down: Heading into the game, Arizona

was ranked No. 18 in the Associated Press Top 25 poll while ASU was unranked. On paper, the Wildcats were favored to win this game, but a job had to be done considering the Wildcats hadn't beaten the Sun Devils in Tempe since 2000. Plus, Arizona was riding a 17-game winning streak that dated back to the start of the 2019 WNIT run. An undefeated record against an arch rival on the road (reminder: pre-pandemic, so fans were in attendance) was a collapse in the making, but the poised Wildcats, with Sam Thomas' clutch free-throws down the stretch and Cate Reese's double-double (17 points, 11 rebounds), staved off ASU in Tempe for the first time in 20 seasons. It also boosted the winning streak to 18 games, which at the time was the

longest active stretch in the country. • She said it: "Right now, I think this team feels like they can beat anybody. And I love that. And there were times when, in the last year we would have folded before the WNIT — let's say during the Pac-12 last year. This year, we calmed down, then we made some big shots, had some big defensive stops, and I thought they did a really good job." — Barnes

ARIZONA SWEEPS OREGON FOR FIRST TIME IN A DECADE

• When: Feb. 8, 2021 • Where: Matthew Knight Arena, Eugene, Oregon

• Opponent: No. 11 Oregon • **Score**: 79-59 • What went down: Following a positive COVID-19 test linked to the program, Arizona quickly dis-

covered the negative effects of the pandemic and missed four games in 17 days. Bad news: Arizona had to face No. 11 Oregon after beating the Ducks in January. Good news: UA was rested and Reese was motivated to have a career performance after hearing Oregon players slighting her ability to shoot and operate away from the basket. Reese made 11 of 14 field-goal attempts, including all three of her 3-point attempts, and scored 25 points. Despite only leading by a point at halftime, Arizona outscored Oregon 27-14 and cruised to a 20-point victory on ESPN. Barnes grabbed her second win against the Ducks after losing her first 10 and Arizona swept Oregon for the first time

since 2011 • She said it: "I just heard some stuff they were saying about me. I took that personal." — Reese

ARIZONA CUTS DOWN FOURTH-RANKED STANFORD IN OT

four of those wins picked up between 2000-04. lifted Arizona to victory in front of 7,838 fans at McKale Center — the Wildcats' first-ever win over a top-five opponent in program history. It took four seasons, but Barnes finally gained a

• She said it: "Going down the stretch against Tara and in overtime is always scary because they just find a way to win big games. We found a way to gut it out — we rebounded better in the second half. I just thought it was a great win with different people stepping up. Just a huge win with four players in double digits. ... I think we continue to say leave a legacy. And that's what we do. I'm just so proud of just the way we fought." — Barnes

UA WINS WNIT IN FRONT OF SOLD-OUT MCKALE CENTER

 When: April 6, 2019 Where: McKale Center

• What went down: Unique. Magical. Surreal. However you want to describe the April afternoon at McKale Center in 2019, playing for the WNIT championship was territory Arizona hadn't experienced since 1996, when Barnes was just a sophomore at the UA. The buildup to the title game in Tucson was what made the journey so special; the Wildcats were 18-13 and fresh off a loss to Oregon in the Pac-12 Tournament, but they generated buzz around the city. Barnes promoted tickets and challenged Arizona fans to pack McKale Center. Each game Arizona played in its 2019 WNIT run, the next one had more

fans in attendance. The first game's recorded attendance against Idaho State? 3,265 fans. The championship game? A sold-out crowd of 14,644 spectators, which remains a Pac-12 record. There was a can't-lose vibe for Arizona and the Wildcats, fueled by a raucous McKale Center crowd, led Northwestern for nearly 37 minutes. That was the first time Arizona cut down the nets under Barnes. Maybe the next time Barnes is on a ladder holding scissors, it's for a championship

 She said it: "If you would have said we are going to win the WNIT and sell out with almost 15,000 people. I would have said 'huh?' But we did it. This city has been amazing ... They were determined to win this thing. They had that attitude. I love that they played with heart. We always say 'made for it' and I think they were made for it and the whole city was made for this situation."

• What went down: Five wins, 40 losses. That was Arizona's record against its Pac-12 superior Stanford since the turn of the new century with There's no debate which program has represented the Pac-12 on the national level. The Cardinal has won two national championships and appeared in the Final Four 13 times under Hall of Fame head coach Tara VanDerveer, and Stanford was once again a juggernaut in the 2019-20 season. Although Stanford star Kianna Williams tallied 27 points, six rebounds, five assists and two turnovers, Arizona scored 23 points off the Cardinal's 22 turnovers and five Wildcats recorded double-figure scoring. McDonald wasn't a factor offensively until crunch time, when she scored 13 of her 20 points in the final 15 minutes including overtime, and the guard's late-game heroics, a game-winning 3-pointer with eight seconds left on the clock in overtime,

JAN. 22: NO. 10 ARIZONA 66, UTAH 54 What went down: Cate Reese scored 11 points and grabbed nine rebounds. victory over the Pac-12's mainstay, which is one of her top moments since returning to her alma finishing one rebound shy of the 17th double-double of her career, and Arizona held

on despite a sloppy fourth She said it: "I can't even really be happy right now; it's a blessing. But we played like crap. I feel like we lost. We've got to get better." — Aari McDonald

FEB. 14: NO. 10 ARIZONA 75,

• Opponent: Northwestern

• Score: 56-42 What went down: The UA combined for 12 3-pointers with senior forward Sam Thomas leading the way with a career-high six, as the Wildcats won on Senior Day. **She said it:** "We're just so much better when Sam is on point and she's aggressive. We're just a better team." Adia Barnes

FEB. 28: ASU 66, NO. 9 ARIZONA 64, OT What went down: Arizona State hit 10 of 18 from the 3-point line, with Taya Hanson leading the way on 5-of-7 shooting, and the Sun Devils stunned their in-state rival in with more significance.

NCAA TOURNAMENT DEC. 4: NO. 7 ARIZONA 68. NO. 9 UCLA 65 What went down: Trinity

ARIZONA'S ROAD TO THE 2021

SPORTS

SPORTS

Arizona seeking 'leader of men'

to resurrect football program

SPORTS

op-10 teams collide at McKale

Baptiste collected her first double-double as a Wildcat, posting 18 points and 11 rebounds, and Arizona opened Pac-12 play with a hard-Cats handle jitters, 'Jacks fought victory in McKale to set up early showdown **She said it:** "It was a dog fight." – Baptiste

DEC. 18: NO. 6

COLORADO 59

What went down: Aari

McDonald overcame poor

an 8-for-8 effort from the

finished with 24 points.

She said it: "I loved our

shooting in the first half with

line in the fourth quarter and

poise in the second half. Too

bad we didn't start that way."

ARIZONA 62.

DEC. 10: NO. 6 SPORTS ARIZONA 65. ASU 37

What went down: The Wild cats hit 11 of 31 3-pointers against ASU, the best they've ever shot from beyond the arc against the Sun Devils, and won handily. Aari McDonald hit a career-high five 3s. **She said it:** "My teammates were finding me. Once you see the ball go in, it gives you confidence. Like, 'OK, I'm going to shoot another one and see if this goes in.' It went in and I was happy." — McDonald

DEC. 23: NO. 6

won handily

ARIZONA 96, IDAHO 42

What went down: Helena

Pueyo hit all four of her

3-point attempts, part of

a 58-point showing by the

Wildcats' bench, and the UA

She said it: "We have never

had 58 bench points in all

the years I've been here,

and hopefully we'll have it

again." — Adia Barnes

JAN. 10: WSU 71,

NO. 7 ARIZONA 69

What went down: Char-

lisse Leger-Walker made

a layup at the buzzer in

State rallied past No. 7

tough break but it has

to be a learning lesson

for our team. We made

some tough shots down

the stretch but it wasn't

enough." — Adia Barnes

WASHINGTON 53

She said it: "We gave them

stick around. Then they just

punched us in the face and

took it from us. And that's

unfortunate." — Adia Barnes

momentum, we let them

Arizona by two.

overtime and Washington

Wildcats 'bring it,' rout rival Arizona State to stay perfect

SPORTS

gained inside track to job

Pueyo's four 3s spark Wildcats Tubelis could keep spo

SPORTS

Cougars rally past Cats on buzzer-beater in overtin

Opponents living on line

Aller in instanting on the state of these and the state of the state o

as Cats can't stop hacking

No. 10 Arizona outlasts Utah,

still not happy with showing

All smiles on Senior Day

as Wildcats drub U-Dub

SPORTS

"They took it from us": ASU upsets No. 9 Cats in O

At home in Arizona, Sutherland

rallies to win Cologuard Classic

SPORTS

SPORTS

Wildcats seen QK in showin

JAN. 1: NO. 1 **STANFORD 81.**

NO. 6 ARIZONA 54

McDonald

What went down: Haley Jones posted 18 points and 10 rebounds as the Cardinal handed UA its first loss. She said it: "It's one of our worst games this season, but credit to them because they made us play that way. That's why they are No. 1; they are No. 1 for a reason.



ARIZONA 57. NO. 10 OREGON 41 What went down: Sam Thomas finished with 10 points, six rebounds and

four steals as the Wildcats over the Ducks. **She said it:** "I knew we controlled the game when I saw them get flustered.

Everyone was locked down and we really wanted it." -Aari McDonald

FEB. 8: NO. 10 ARIZONA 79, NO. 11 OREGON 59

What went down: Cate Reese scored 25 points and No. 10 Arizona completed a season sweep of 11th-ranked Oregon with a 20-point win

n Eugene. She said it: "We keep raising the bar for ourselves. I think we're all pretty excited about the win." — Reese



Cats deliver marquee win

with dismantling of Ducks

SPORTS

What rust? No. 10 Cats clobber No. 11 Ducks

SPORTS

Mediocre Cats stare down next challenge: No. 17 USC

Wildcats off to a slugging start,

SPORTS

smash Southern Utah in opene

Frinity for 2: Baptiste shines as

FEB. 19: NO. 10 **ARIZONA 59, CAL 50**

What went down: Aari McDonald scored 28 points and No. 10 Arizona beat the pesky Golden Bears. She said it: "They played like they had nothing to lose. They gave us all they had for 40 minutes. They played like they wanted it more for almost 40 minutes. We just can't do that. We can't overlook opponents. I'm really proud of Cal." — McDonald

MARCH 4: NO. 11 **ARIZONA 60, WSU 44**

What went down: Trinity Baptiste led the Wildcats with 17 points while shooting 8 of 11 from the field, and Arizona opened the Pac-12 Tournament with a quarterfinals win in Las Vegas. She said it: "We don't want

(PAC-12 TOURNEY)

to go home." — Baptiste

78, USC 77

What went down: Aari McDonald played 39 of 40 possible minutes, scoring 30 points, as the Wildcats eked out a win

She said it: "I don't want any more gritty wins like this, but it just shows that this team is competitive. We want to win. A couple of years ago, we wouldn't have come back from these deficits. It just shows how competitive we are and we have the will to win." — McDonald



DEC. 20: NO. 6 ARIZONA 77. UTAH 60

What went down: Aari

McDonald scored 19 points to extend her double-digit scoring streak to 72 games. the longest active streak in the nation, and Arizona routed the Utes. She said it: "We're growing, we're getting better. We are not playing our best basketball at all. I think that



we're going to play better in a month. ..." — UA coach Adia Barnes JAN. 3: NO. 6 ARIZONA

What went down: Aari McDonald finished with 12 points, eight assists and six steals as the Wildcats allowed just 33 points - the fewest they've ever allowed in a conference game. She said it: "I thought we got better today. Are we where we need to be? Absolutely not. We are not where we need to be. We do have to improve. But we're on the

69. CAL 33



JAN. 17: NO. 11 ARIZONA 67. OREGON STATE 51

right track." — Adia Barnes

What went down: Helena Pueyo scored 15 points, tying her career-high, and the Wildcats completed a **She said it:** "She needs to shoot the ball more." -Lauren Ware, on Pueyo

FEB. 12: NO. 10

early-season loss.

Sam Thomas

FEB. 22: NO. 4

STANFORD 62.

over the UA.

McDonald

NO. 9 ARIZONA 48

ARIZONA 60, WSU 51

What went down: Cate

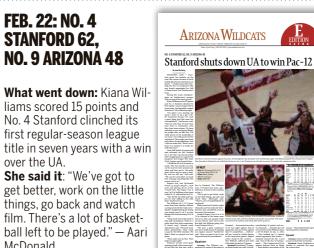
She said it: "They're the

nice we were able to take









How Cardinal knocked off Cats for second tim



MARCH 5: NO. 9 UCLA **59. NO. 11 ARIZONA 49** (PAC-12 TOURNEY)

What went down: All-Amer icans Michaela Onyenwere and Aari McDonald each scored 24 points, but Onyenwere's Bruins held on to beat the Wildcats in the Pac 12 Tournament semifinals. She said it: "Nothing to do about it. We have to bounce back and get better. We have a week to get better prepared for the NCAA Tour nament." — Adia Barnes



EQUITY IMPORTANT AS WILDCATS MAKE NCAA TOURNAMENT RETURN



Greg Hansen

ow 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. eighth season, 2015-2016, and 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 paid \$210,000, even though her career Pac-12 record would sink to

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-tochange 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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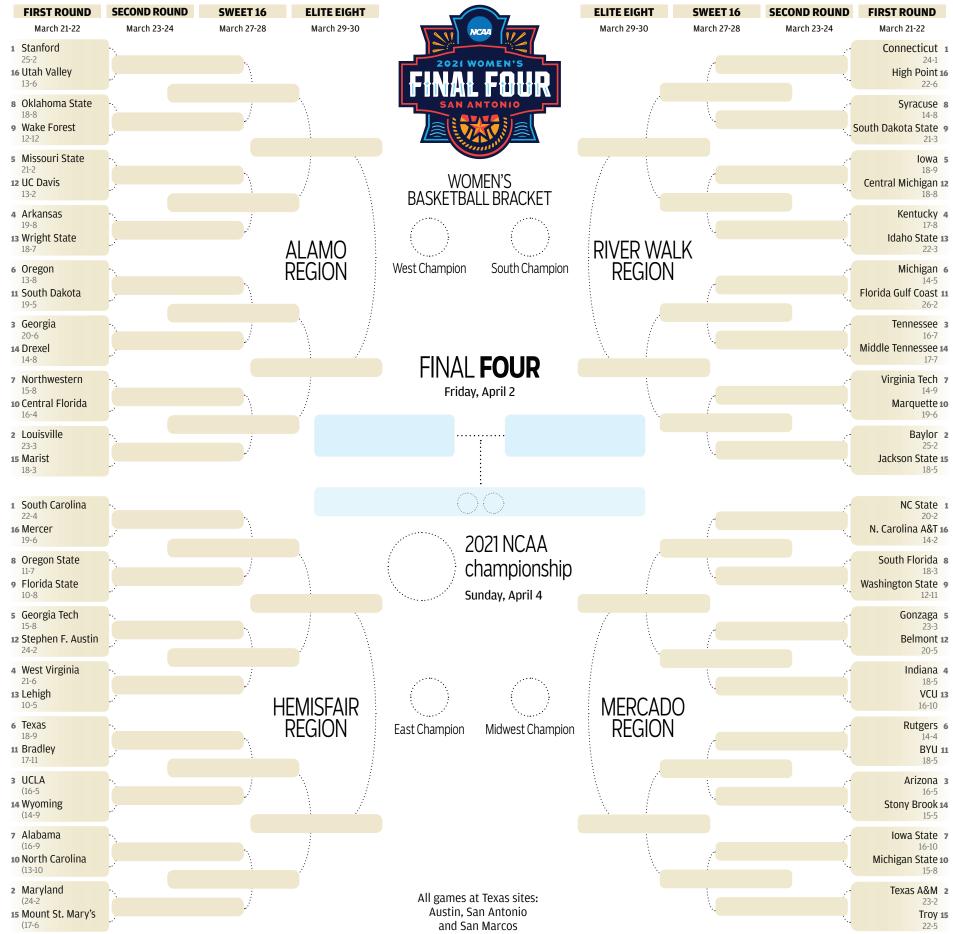
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AFTER 63 TOURNAMENT PICKS, STANFORD LEFT STANDING

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

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 38year 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



ISAAC BREKKEN / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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

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: ford, Oklahoma State, UC Davis, Arkansas, South Dakota, Georgia, Northwestern, Louisville.

Second-round winners: Stanford, Arkansas, Georgia, Louis-

Regional semifinal winners: Stanford, Louisville.

Regional champion: Stanford.

Hemisfair Region

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 ing matchup awaits in the Sweet

ville potentially await the Cardinal will have to get through an Ore- sensation Caitlin Clark, or Kengon State team that has figured tucky with star Rhyne Howard. A&M. itself out after a long coronavirus Get to the Elite Eight and Baylor pause, and then potentially UCLA or Maryland.

> Bailey, North Carolina; Kysre Lady Bears coach Kim Mulkey had Gondrezick, West Virginia; Ashley Owusu, Maryland.

has won 19 straight and has a good hia, Syracuse; Reinna Davis, Tenshot to pull off the victory as a 12 seed over Georgia Tech.

First-round winners: South Carolina, Oregon State, Stephen Kierstan Bell. Once she became F. Austin, West Virginia, Texas, UCLA, North Carolina, Maryland.

Carolina, West Virginia, UCLA, Maryland.

Regional semifinal winners: South Carolina, Maryland. Regional champion: Maryland. Baylor.

River Walk Region

Analysis: UConn has made the **Analysis:** South Carolina has a 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 tantaliz-

could be waiting for the Huskies. They were supposed to play in Jan-Other players to watch: Janelle uary, but that got canceled when

COVID-19. Other players to watch: Paige **Upset Watch:** Stephen F. Austin Bueckers UConn; Tiana Mangakanessee; NaLyssa Smith, Baylor.

Coast is led by Ohio State transfer down Maryland, the top-scoring eligible early on, the team hasn't lost. The Eagles will have to find a ever year since 2008, but lost in the **Second-round winners:** South way to slow down Big Ten Player of the Year Naz Hillmon.

First-round winners: UConn, Syracuse, Iowa, Kentucky, Florida Huskies will find a way to end that Gulf Coast, Tennessee, Marquette,

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

UConn, Baylor. Regional champion: UConn.

Mercado Region

Analysis: N.C. State knocked matchup. Dana Evans and Louis- Final Four, Dawn Staley's squad 16 with either Iowa and freshman 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

Regional final winners: Indiana, Texas A&M.

Regional champion: Texas

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 **Upset watch:** Florida Gulf defense and will find a way to slow team in the nation.

UConn has made the Final Four national semifinals the last three times, albeit two of those came on last-second shots in overtime. The skid and reach the title game.

National champion

Stanford and UConn met in the **Regional semifinal winners:** 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

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.

Oregon State, 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 sec-

ond-seeded team overall. Poffenbarger is happy to have the best of two UConn in January but lis. Now, she's contributing for the tourney-bound Beavers. Middletown High School her back for both prom and periences. graduation.

the point in my small town a role and not having to do of midyear enrollees playwhere I was ready to move everything," Poffenbarger ing for several teams in the on to the next thing."

of her best friends, Olivia general. Going from liter- and 2-seeded Ohio State. Miles, enrolled early at No- ally being in high school a tre Dame. They talk regu- few months ago to, we're in inch freshman, enrolled any game since.



JOHN LOCHER / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

worlds: She enrolled at Oregon State's Talia Von Oelhoffen graduated early from her high school in Pasco, Washington, and went straight to Corval-

"A lot of what we discuss "I haven't had any re- is knowing our role, find- unique to the women's said. "But also just talking men's tournament, includ-

in Maryland will welcome larly about their shared ex- college and taking college at Gonzaga in December

classes."

Early enrollees aren't while playing 47 minutes Darius is making the most over 14 games. The Buckgrets," she said. "I was at ing our role and fitting into game. There are a handful eyes pressed guard Meechie Johnson Jr. into some significant minutes in January due to an injury, though he's It has helped that one about being in college in ing top-seeded Gonzaga appeared in just 17 games overall and hasn't played 1.1 rebounds. Ben Gregg, a 6-foot-10- more than 10 minutes in

and has averaged 1.2 points valuable for early enrollees, NCAA Tournament." 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 can't put you in a dorm

"It just blows me away. Every time I lose my pa- life:"

tience, coach Shannon (Perry-LeBeauf) '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 Dominque 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 midseason.

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

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-While any minutes are be projected them into the

> 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 now," Darius said with a grin, "'you've seen the good

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 for whatever came along guard, a player who joined the Wildcats in January as an early enrollee, is one day away from playing in her first NCAA Tournament Feb. 14 against Washgame. The third-seeded Wildcats (16-5) will take on No. 14-seed nervous and "super tense." Stony Brook (15-5) at 11 a.m. Monday in San Antonio.

Conner is one of 15 players the opportunity to start their col-Tournament.

Conner was starring for AZ Barnes called to see she'd be inter-

will receive an extra year of eligibility.

Conner's response? "Shoot, sign me up," she said. "I was ready

with that."

Conner logged her first minutes in a game Madison ington. She said she was

mess up. Don't do this," she said.

"I think I needed to calm myacross the country who jumped at self down from that because you Pac-12 and 137th nationally. don't play good when you're tight lege careers a semester early. Five and tense, worried about making play in the Pac-12; three of them a mistake. I had to get into that - Conner, Oregon State's Talia groove of like, Iknow, it's new, I've helped make the transition to the Von Oelhoffen and UCLA's Dom- played basketball before. It's not a college game easy. She talks exteninique Darius — made the NCAA new thing that I'm doing. It's just a higher level?"

Conner played against Cal and and made appearances in both tate that everyone playing during away win over Washington State playing 10 minutes or sitting on 14 points, I think and was Pac-10



career.

Tournament NCAA tality will help the Wildcats when it matters.

"It was like, 'Oh my god, don't threat; the Wildcats hit just 31.8% of their 3-pointers this season, a mark that ranks seventh in the

Conner has been watching film her former coach took a moment with her teammates, who have sively with the Wildcats' coaches, especially Barnes.

anything else change me," Conner

Conner won the first having a good mindset. And don't you have an opportunity to play gold jersey — for "pas- let that discourage me, because I sion plays" – of her UA shouldn't even be here right now. It's an opportunity – just stay Expect Conner to find motivated and keep my work ethic minutes in Monday's and keep working hard."

Conner has found a way to fit opener. Barnes has said in, too – even if her teammates Conner's shooter's men- joke that they're playing with an eighth-grader.

In that regard, Conner shares The UA could use the long-stance something with her coach. Barnes similarly started her UA career at age 17. Asked this week about how Barnes would've handled playing high school team, which is run by in the NCAA Tournament just a ex-Sabino coach Jaamal Rhodes. The guard should be ready. few months after joining the team, It stung when AZ Compass Prep to think.

"That's a tough question," Joan Bonvicini said. "Basketball-wise, Adia played well, yet (her) freshman year was a big adjustment for Barnes told Conner "don't let her. Being accountable to rules – the pandemic-shortened season in the quarterfinals. That week, the bench the entire time – just Freshman of the Year. I think if bit more."

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 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 Compass Prep when coach Adia Arizona State down the stretch, anybody or the circumstances or Adia was always late. That was an definitely wanted to take this opissue. It's hard (to adjust) as you portunity," Conner said. "I defiested in making the leap to college. of Arizona's Pac-12 Tournament said. "Focus on myself, and how I have to be more accountable in nitely would not change my deci-There wasn't much of a risk in dogrames. She scored her first basket, can get better and help the team. college basketball. Adia was pretty sion. ... I'm so happy to be here. I ing it, she said; NCAA rules dic- a 3-pointer, in the Wildcats' run- No matter what that is — if that's good right away and she averaged definitely would not change that. I gave up something to get a little

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

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 semifi-

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 the conversation."

Wildcats return to the tour- ance, on Monday. nament for the first time



SEAN RAYFORD / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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.



ISAAC BREKKEN / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

said. "I'm not one of the Four years after making the Sweet 16 with Washington, Aari McDonald now leads a UA team that has plans to get at least blue bloods yet, but I'm in that far. UA has made the regional semifinals only once in program history, in 1998

Wildcats back: The ing its first NCAA appear-

Texas A&M meets No. 15 since 2005 and meet No. 14 nervousness but nervous is scared." seed Troy on Monday night. Stony Brook, which is mak-good for basketball," coach

Adia Barnes said. "Scared is ing its first trip to the Big 16 with Washington in 2017. season. bad, and we don't have any Dance in 16 years, they do "There is going to be the players on our team that are have tournament experi- to return to Arizona for an- VCU on Monday.

Though Arizona is mak- Donald reached the Sweet time in school history this She put off a WNBA career

"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

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 Kaylynne 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 ence on the roster after Mc- the AP Top 25 for the first

The Hoosiers play No. 13

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 Yeaney 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 Arizoplaying and coaching has had an everything." especially big impact.

cally at the school they are coach- Wildcats are used to - no hanging questions and act it out like cha- do."



KELLY PRESNELL / ARIZONA DAILY STAR

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," out in their teammate's rooms, no rades," she said. some inside view of being at the tournament. ... I think that that's really helpful for all of us, especialna's first-timers. UA forward Cate we all feel a little bit isolated. I think Reese said Barnes' experience both that's great to have her insight into

While things may look a lit-"There are not many coaches tle different, especially being on heads up — you know, the phone kind of the other stuff — the noise. out there that have played specifi— a little stricter lockdown than the where you flip it ... you have to ask We're focused on what we need to

Reese said. "But also her having stopping in the hotel's gift shop, no getting coffee in the lobby — they are still having fun.

ly with such a weird year coming in of the boredom. When the team here, especially with the pandemic, was finally allowed to eat meals tosomething in mind.

"We played, I think it's called

"I'm trying to make it fun. We gave them a gift bag downstairs full of stuff and essentials for the tour-Barnes has helped to break some nament here. I'm trying to do what

gether in their assigned large conthe moment. ... We're happy that ference room, Barnes had a little no one tested positive. We're, like, ready to go.

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're fine and we're enjoying 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 "I think that all that stuff is just 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."







