

# 2026 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament: Comprehensive Bracket Analysis and Game-by-Game Predictions

## Executive Summary

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Michigan is predicted to win the 2026 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament, edging Duke in the championship game behind the nation's best defense (AdjD 89.0) and a veteran, portal-built roster led by Big Ten Player of the Year Yaxel Lendeborg [1, 2]. While Duke (32-2) enters as the No. 1 overall seed with generational freshman Cameron Boozer — who leads the nation in PER (34.7), Win Shares (9.6), and BPM (19.9) — critical injuries to starting point guard Caleb Foster and center Patrick Ngongba thin the Blue Devils' depth at the worst possible time, exposing a freshman-heavy rotation to championship-game pressure [3, 4]. Arizona (32-2) and Florida (26-7) round out an all-No. 1-seed Final Four, with Arizona's 16-1 road/neutral record and Florida's defending-champion pedigree carrying them through their respective regions [5, 6].

The first round is primed for significant upsets driven by injuries and matchup asymmetries. VCU over North Carolina (39% upset probability, fueled by Caleb Wilson's broken thumb) [7], High Point over Wisconsin (14-game winning streak, 90.0 PPG), Akron over a reeling Texas Tech (three-game losing streak after JT Toppin's season-ending knee injury), Texas over a Saunders-less BYU (37% upset probability), and Santa Clara over an injury-depleted Kentucky represent the highest-conviction picks [8, 3, 7, 9]. Advanced metrics reveal substantial seeding inefficiencies — Louisville, Tennessee, and Iowa are each underseeded by seven or more spots relative to predictive rankings, while North Carolina and TCU are significantly overseeded [10].

The most actionable insight is that injury context, not seed lines, drives the bracket's true probabilities. Teams missing primary scorers or floor generals — BYU without Saunders, UNC without Wilson, Texas Tech without Toppin, Kentucky without Lowe and Quaintance, and Duke without Foster — face dramatically compressed margins, making opponent quality and roster depth the decisive factors from the Round of 64 through the Final Four.

## Tournament Overview and Championship Landscape

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The 2026 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament features a 68-team field revealed on Selection Sunday, March 15, with Duke (32-2) earning the No. 1 overall seed, followed by Arizona (32-2), Michigan (31-3), and Florida (26-7) as the four No. 1 seeds [11]. The field includes 31 automatic qualifiers and 37 at-large bids, with the SEC leading all conferences at 10 teams, the Big Ten with 9, and both the ACC and Big 12 sending 8 each.

### Advanced Metrics Snapshot

Advanced analytics confirm a clear top tier separated from the rest. Duke sits atop KenPom at No. 1 overall with an AdjO of 128.0 and AdjD of 89.1, surpassing a +40 net rating — among the highest all-time [1]. Michigan ranks No. 2 with the nation's best defense (AdjD 89.0) [1], while Arizona (No. 3, AdjD 90.0) [1] and Florida (No. 4) [6] round out the elite tier. Only three teams meet the average KenPom profile of the past five national champions (AdjO  $\geq$  124.1 and AdjD  $\leq$  91.3): Duke, Arizona, and Michigan [12].

Chart Explanation: The scatter plot maps adjusted offensive efficiency against adjusted defensive efficiency for the top 12 contenders. Teams in the upper-right "Championship Profile Zone" — Duke, Arizona, Michigan, and Florida — combine elite offense and defense. Purdue (131.6) and Illinois (131.2) lead in raw offensive efficiency [5] but have defensive vulnerabilities that place them outside the championship profile. Michigan's league-best AdjD of 89.0 [5] gives it the strongest defensive positioning of any contender.

### Championship Probability and Seeding Value

Bart Torvik's title probabilities place Duke at 20.2%, Michigan at 17.9%, Arizona at 14.8%, Florida at 9.1%, and Houston at 7.0% [5]. Predictive metrics reveal significant value discrepancies compared to committee seedings: Louisville (committee rank 23rd, predictive rank 14th) and Tennessee (committee rank 21st, predictive rank 13th) are substantially underseeded, while North Carolina (committee rank 22nd, predictive rank 29th) and TCU (committee rank 34th, predictive rank 42nd) are overseeded [10].

Chart Explanation: Duke's 20.2% championship probability leads the field, with Michigan (17.9%) and Arizona (14.8%) forming a clear top three. Florida (9.1%) and Houston (7.0%) represent the next tier, while the remaining contenders each hold single-digit odds. Duke's Quad 1 record of 17-2 and 16 wins against tournament teams anchor its frontrunner status [5, 13].

## Key Players, Injuries, and Roster Factors

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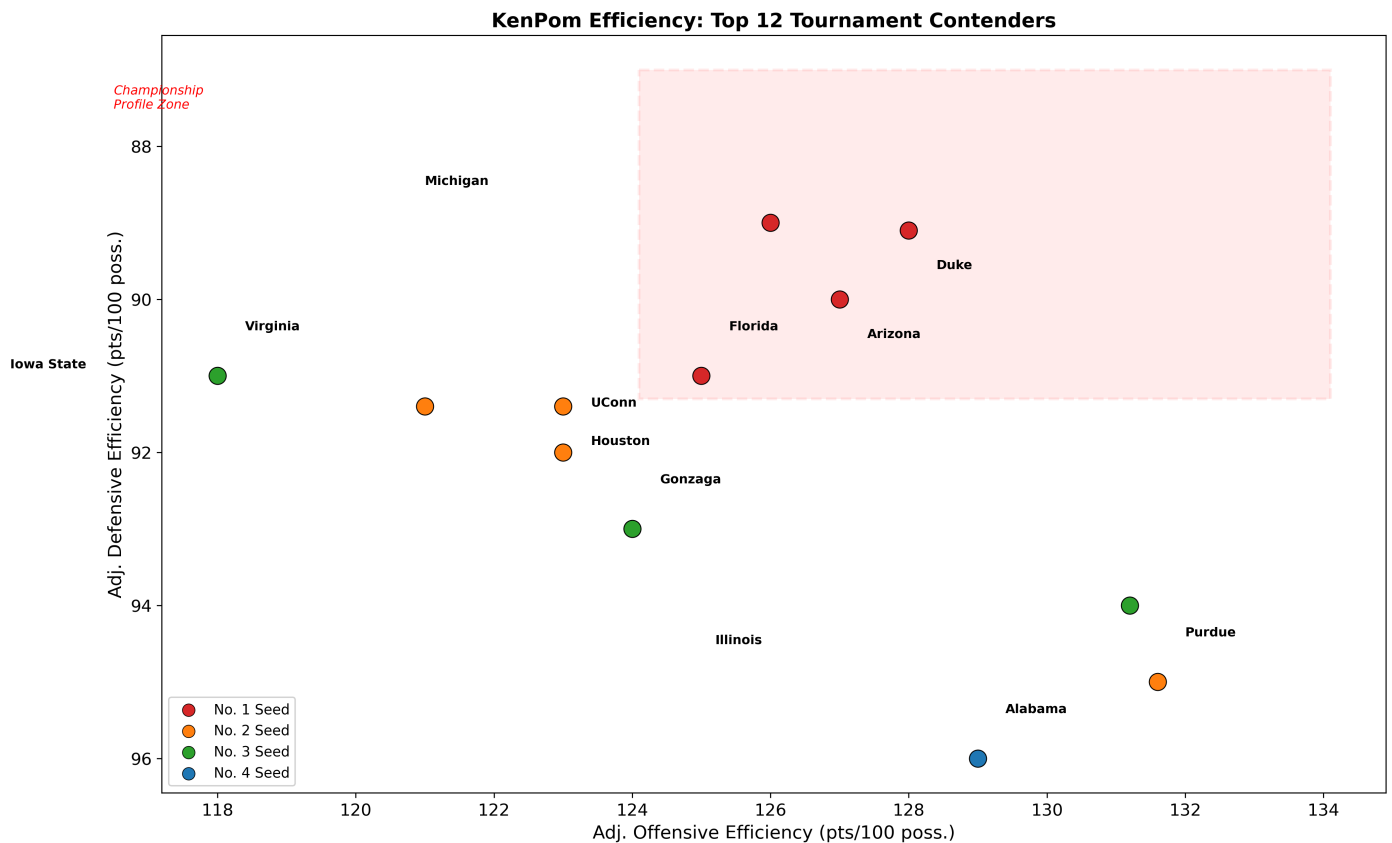


Figure 1: KenPom Efficiency Scatter Plot

### Cameron Boozer: A Generational Talent

Duke freshman Cameron Boozer is the consensus National Player of the Year, sweeping ACC Player of the Year, ACC Rookie of the Year, ACC Tournament MVP, and multiple national awards [14, 15, 16]. His stat line — 22.5 PPG, 10.2 RPG, 4.2 APG on 56.5% FG and 40.9% from three — is historically dominant [17]. Boozer leads the nation in PER (34.7), Win Shares (9.6), and BPM (19.9), with a RAPM of 10.3 meaning Duke outscores opponents by 10.3 more points per 100 possessions with him on the court [4]. He is on pace to finish with the highest offensive rating in KenPom history (since 2003-04) [18].

Other elite performers include BYU’ s AJ Dybantsa (25.3 PPG, projected No. 1 NBA pick) [19], Michigan’ s Yaxel Lendeborg (Big Ten POY, lottery projection) [2], Iowa State’ s Joshua Jefferson (16.9 PPG, 7.6 RPG, 4.9 APG with a 27.7% assist rate that leads all big men nationally) [2], and Arkansas’ s Darius Acuff Jr. (SEC POY, 22.7 PPG with a scorching 26.3 PPG stretch from late January through mid-March) [19].

### Injuries Reshaping the Bracket

A wave of injuries has fundamentally altered the tournament landscape. Duke’ s starting PG Caleb Foster (foot fracture) is out for at least the first two weeks, with only a slim chance of returning for the Final Four, while starting center Patrick Ngongba (foot soreness) is not expected to play in the first round [3]. This forces freshman Cayden Boozer into the starting point guard role and thins Duke’ s depth in a brutal East Region featuring coaches Pitino, Self, Izzo, Cronin, and Hurley [20, 21].

BYU lost 18 PPG scorer Richie Saunders to a torn ACL, leaving the offense centered almost entirely on Dybantsa and Rob Wright, who finished 155 of BYU’ s 181 pick-and-roll possessions (86%) in the last 10 games [3]. North Carolina’ s All-American freshman Caleb Wilson (broken thumb) is out for the tournament [3], Texas Tech lost JT Toppin (knee) who was chasing Big 12 POY honors [3], and Louisville’ s Mikel Brown Jr. (back) will miss the first round after missing 12 games this season [3].

### Roster Construction: Youth vs. Experience

The 2025-26 freshman class is historically dominant — four of the top 11 players in the field are freshmen, a class that has “caused a moral crisis over tanking throughout the NBA” [22]. Duke and Arizona are the most freshman-

### 2026 NCAA Tournament Championship Probability (Bart Torvik)

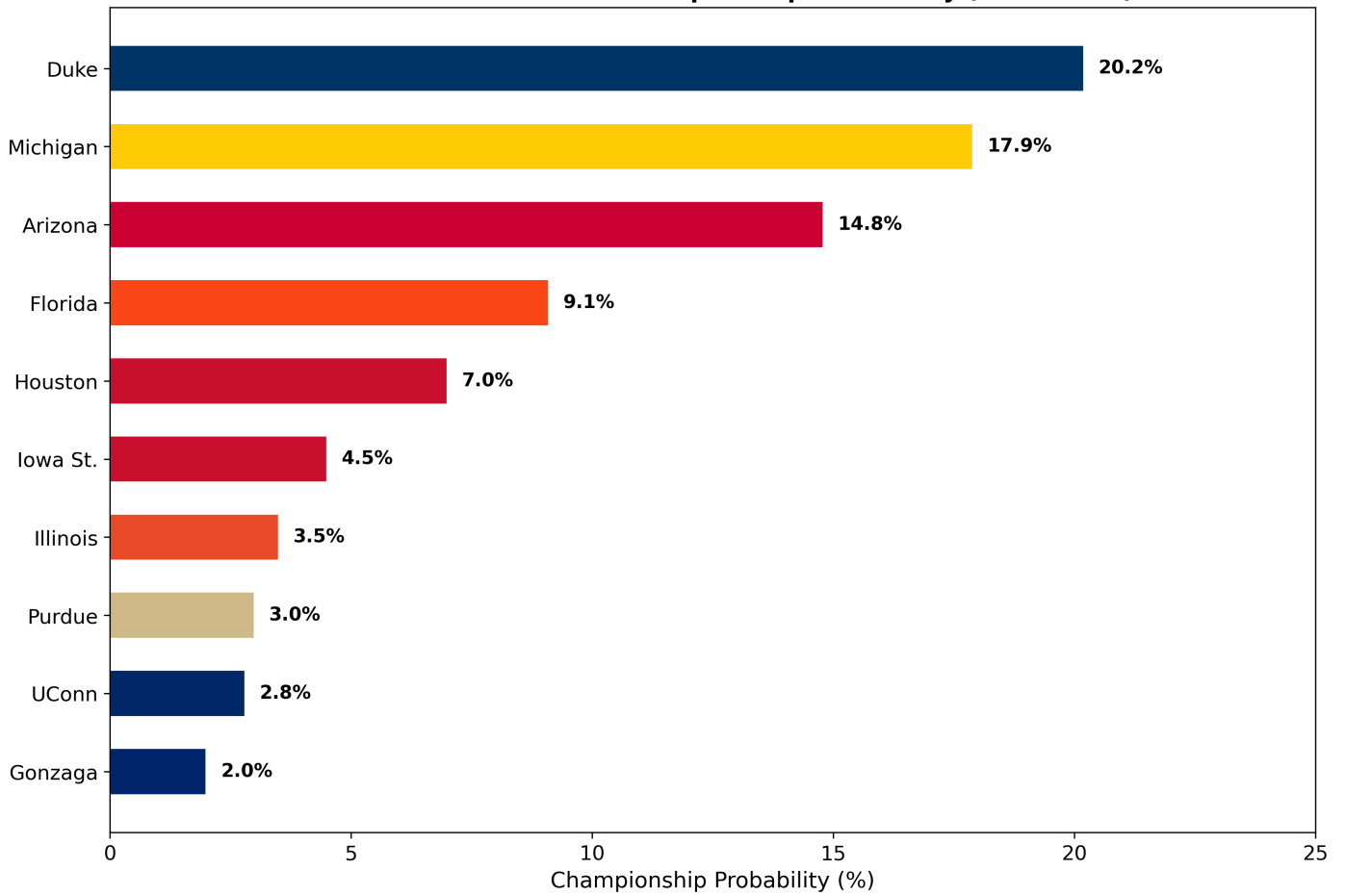


Figure 2: Championship Probability

dependent top seeds, while Michigan (senior Lendeborg, junior Mara), Iowa State (senior Jefferson), Purdue (senior Smith with 9.0 APG), and UConn (senior Karaban with two championship rings) represent the veteran-laden contenders [2]. The transfer portal has reshaped several rosters: Michigan’s core of Lendeborg (UAB), Mara (UCLA), Johnson (Illinois), and Cadeau (UNC) is almost entirely portal-built [22].

## First-Round Upset Landscape

March Madness thrives on chaos, and the 2026 bracket offers fertile ground for upsets. Historical base rates provide the foundation: 9-seeds actually hold a winning edge over 8-seeds at 51.3% [23], 11-seeds have gone 31-29 since 2010 [24], and at least one 12-over-5 upset has occurred in five of the last six tournaments [25]. Even 13-seeds have produced eight first-round wins over the past nine tournaments [24].

### Top Upset Candidates

The most dangerous game in the bracket is **(11) VCU vs. (6) North Carolina**, carrying approximately a 39% upset probability [7]. UNC lost star freshman Caleb Wilson to a broken thumb, gutting their offensive rebounding and interior scoring [7]. VCU has won 16 of its past 17 games with a balanced attack — all eight rotation players have hit at least 18 threes this season — while getting to the free throw line at the 15th-highest rate nationally [26].

**(11) Texas vs. (6) BYU** sits at roughly 37% upset probability [7]. BYU lost 18 PPG scorer Richie Saunders to a torn ACL, leaving the offense almost entirely dependent on AJ Dybantsa and Rob Wright. Texas’ 7-footer Matas Vokietaitis creates a matchup problem BYU’s thin roster cannot easily solve [7]. **(10) Santa Clara vs. (7) Kentucky** is another near-coin-flip, with Santa Clara ranking 6th nationally in field goal attempts and 14th in three-point attempts, led by Christian Hammond shooting 40% from deep [9].

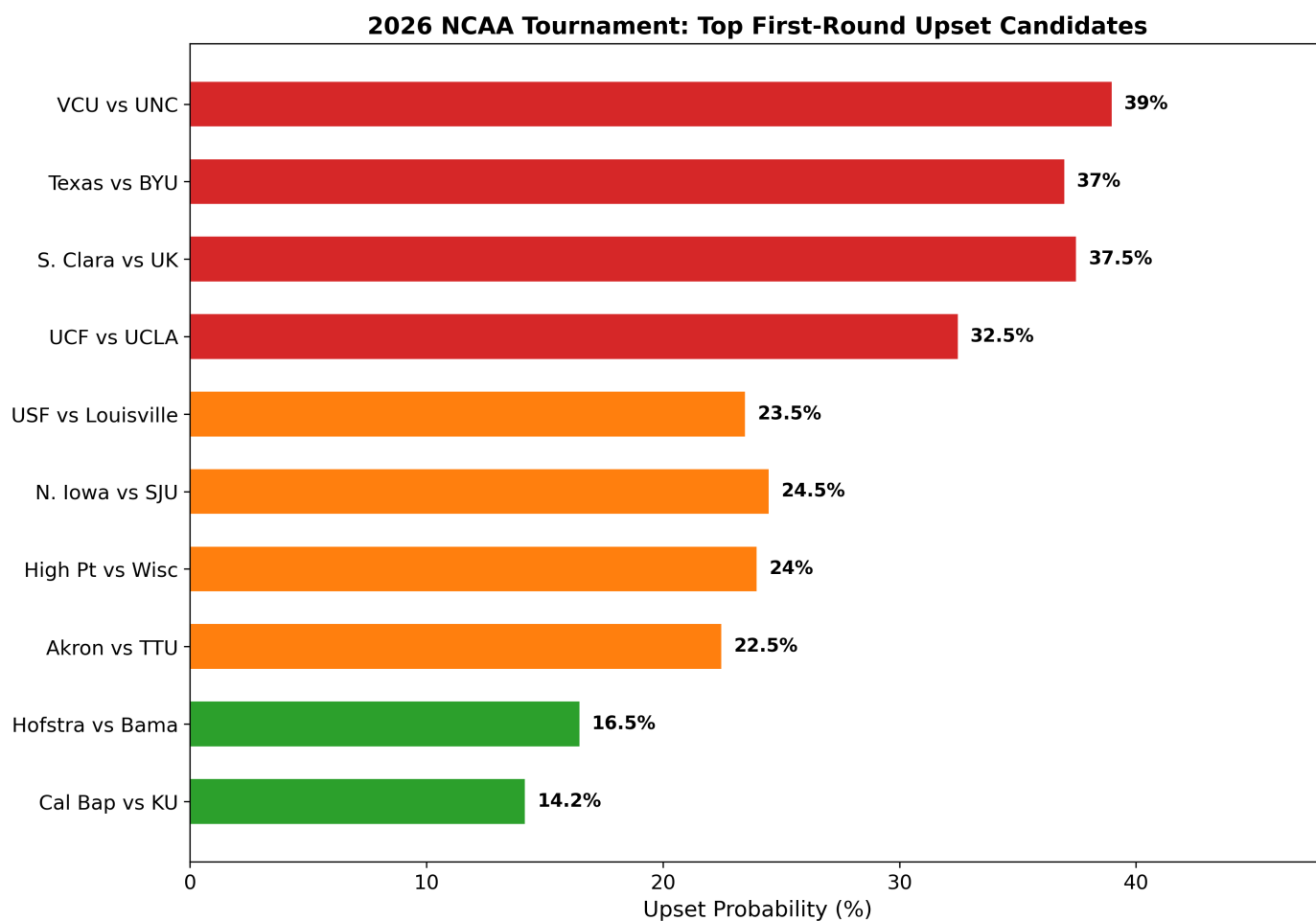


Figure 3: First-Round Upset Probability

Chart Explanation: The chart ranks the ten most likely first-round upsets by probability. Three games exceed 30% upset likelihood (VCU-UNC, Texas-BYU, Santa Clara-Kentucky), while the 12-vs-5 matchups (Northern Iowa-St. John’s, High Point-Wisconsin, Akron-Texas Tech) cluster around 20-25%. Games in red represent the highest-

probability upsets driven by injuries and matchup advantages.

## Cinderella Profiles

Several mid-majors bring genuine upset credentials. **Northern Iowa** leads the nation in scoring defense (61.3 PPG) and plays at a glacial 62.3 possessions per game, designed to suppress variance and keep games close [26, 9]. **Akron** enters on a 10-game winning streak with all five top scorers being seniors, ranking 8th in effective FG% [25]. **High Point** boasts the nation's longest winning streak at 14 games, averages 90.0 PPG (3rd nationally), and forces 16.4 turnovers per game (3rd nationally) [8, 9]. **McNeese** ranks 1st nationally in turnover margin (+7.3) and has recent upset pedigree — coach Bill Armstrong led a 12-over-5 upset of Clemson in 2025 [9]. **Hofstra** shoots 36.8% from three (33rd nationally) and has beaten Pitt and Syracuse in nonconference play, making them a live 13-seed against an Alabama team missing Aden Holloway [8].

## East Region Predictions

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The East Region is widely considered the tournament's toughest, featuring coaches Scheyer, Hurley, Izzo, Self, Pitino, and Cronin [20, 21]. Duke (32-2) anchors the region as the No. 1 overall seed, but injuries to Caleb Foster and Patrick Ngongba create real vulnerability [3].

### First Round

**(1) Duke vs. (16) Siena** — Duke's Cameron Boozer (22.5 PPG, 10.2 RPG, PER 34.7) is simply too dominant for a 16-seed, even with Foster and Ngongba sidelined [17, 4, 3]. Cayden Boozer steps into the starting PG role and the supporting cast of Maliq Brown (ACC DPOY), Isaiah Evans (48.3% spot-up 3PT), and Sebastian Wilkins provides enough depth [27, 28]. **Prediction: Duke.**

**(8) Ohio State vs. (9) TCU** — The 8-9 matchup historically favors the 9-seed (51.3% win rate) [23]. Ohio State's Bruce Thornton (20.2 PPG, 55.8% FG, 40% 3PT) is the best player in this game [2], and TCU is one of the bracket's most overseeded teams (committee 34th, predictive 42nd) [10]. **Prediction: Ohio State.**

**(5) St. John's vs. (12) Northern Iowa** — UNI's glacial 62.3 possessions per game and top-25 defense (99th percentile guarding spot-ups) are designed to neutralize St. John's [26, 25]. However, St. John's has Zubey Ejirofor (16.3 PPG, 2.1 BPG, Big East DPOY) and the talent edge [22]. St. John's shooting inconsistency (games of 28%, 33%, 35%) makes this dangerous [26]. **Prediction: St. John's survives, but this is a top upset pick.**

**(4) Kansas vs. (13) California Baptist** — Cal Baptist ranks 11th in offensive rebounding, exploiting Kansas's weakness (337th in forced turnover rate) [26]. Still, Kansas's talent and Bill Self's tournament pedigree prevail. **Prediction: Kansas.**

**(6) Louisville vs. (11) South Florida** — Louisville is BPI's 11th-ranked team despite a 6-seed [29], but Mikel Brown Jr. (18.2 PPG, team assist leader) will miss the first round with a back injury [3]. USF's 38.2% offensive rebounding rate (7th nationally) and close-range shot profile (4.0 feet average, 3rd in D1) create matchup problems [26]. **Prediction: Louisville, narrowly — Brown's absence makes this a coin flip.**

**(3) Michigan State vs. (14) North Dakota State** — Michigan State (KenPom ~9th, NET 11th) has the defensive versatility and Tom Izzo's tournament track record to handle NDSU comfortably [13]. **Prediction: Michigan State.**

**(7) UCLA vs. (10) UCF** — UCF carries roughly 30-35% upset probability, and UCLA has not traveled well to the East Coast [30]. This is a genuine toss-up. **Prediction: UCF — UCLA's road struggles and UCF's Big 12 experience tip the scales.**

**(2) UConn vs. (15) Furman** — UConn (NET 10th, BPI 10th) features senior Alex Karaban, a contributor on two national championship teams [2]. Dan Hurley's squad is too deep and experienced for a 15-seed. **Prediction: UConn.**

### Second Round Projections

Duke should handle Ohio State in the Round of 32, as Boozer's dominance creates mismatches Ohio State cannot solve. St. John's advances past Kansas in a competitive 4-5 matchup, with Ejirofor controlling the paint. Louisville's depth (assuming Brown returns) edges Michigan State in a coaching battle between Pitino and Izzo. UConn dispatches UCF, setting up a loaded Sweet 16 bracket.

Round	Matchup	Predicted Winner
R1	(1) Duke vs. (16) Siena	Duke
R1	(8) Ohio State vs. (9) TCU	Ohio State
R1	(5) St. John' s vs. (12) Northern Iowa	St. John' s
R1	(4) Kansas vs. (13) Cal Baptist	Kansas
R1	(6) Louisville vs. (11) South Florida	Louisville
R1	(3) Michigan State vs. (14) N. Dakota St.	Michigan State
R1	(7) UCLA vs. (10) UCF	UCF
R1	(2) UConn vs. (15) Furman	UConn
R2	(1) Duke vs. (8) Ohio State	Duke
R2	(5) St. John' s vs. (4) Kansas	St. John' s
R2	(6) Louisville vs. (3) Michigan State	Louisville
R2	(2) UConn vs. (10) UCF	UConn

## West Region Predictions

Arizona (32-2) enters as the West' s No. 1 seed with the tournament' s best road/neutral-court record at 16-1 [5]. The Wildcats rank 5th in AdjO and 3rd in AdjD, placing them squarely in the championship profile zone [1]. Purdue (2-seed) brings the nation' s most efficient offense (131.6 pts/100 possessions) [5], while Gonzaga (3-seed, 30-3) provides the deepest bench in the field (42.2% of minutes) [5].

### First Round

**(1) Arizona vs. (16) LIU** — Arizona starts three freshmen but has junior center Motiejus Krivas (7-2, 260 lbs) anchoring the defense, and all five starters average double digits with a +10.8 rebounding margin [31, 32]. LIU has no path here. **Prediction: Arizona.**

**(8) Villanova vs. (9) Utah State** — The 8-9 line historically favors the 9-seed (51.3%) [23]. Utah State (28-6) is a Mountain West champion with strong metrics, but Villanova' s Big East pedigree and tournament experience give them a slight edge. **Prediction: Villanova in a toss-up.**

**(5) Wisconsin vs. (12) High Point** — High Point (30-4) carries the nation' s longest winning streak at 14 games, averages 90.0 PPG (3rd nationally), and forces 16.4 turnovers per game (3rd nationally) [8, 9]. Five of their top six scorers are seniors. Wisconsin' s Nick Boyd (20.6 PPG) is a matchup problem, but High Point' s pace and turnover creation make this a classic 12-over-5 upset. **Prediction: High Point — the 12-5 upset pick of the tournament.**

**(4) Arkansas vs. (13) Hawai' i** — Arkansas features SEC Player of the Year Darius Acuff Jr. (22.7 PPG, 44% from three) on a scorching 26.3 PPG stretch [19]. The Razorbacks' offensive firepower (AdjO ~126) is too much for a 13-seed. **Prediction: Arkansas.**

**(6) BYU vs. (11) Texas** — BYU lost 18 PPG scorer Richie Saunders to a torn ACL, leaving the offense dependent on Dybantsa and Rob Wright, who finished 155 of 181 pick-and-roll possessions (86%) in the last 10 games [3]. Texas' s 7-footer Matas Vokietaitis creates a matchup problem BYU cannot solve [7]. At 37% upset probability, this is a strong upset call. **Prediction: Texas.**

**(3) Gonzaga vs. (14) Kennesaw State** — Gonzaga (NET 7th, BPI 8th) has the deepest bench in the field and too much talent for a 14-seed [13, 5]. Braden Huff' s knee injury bears monitoring, but Gonzaga' s depth absorbs it [33]. **Prediction: Gonzaga.**

**(7) Miami (FL) vs. (10) Missouri** — Miami FL is one of the bracket' s most overseeded teams (committee 27th, predictive 34th) [10]. Missouri (SEC, 20-12) has the conference pedigree and physicality to compete. This is a genuine coin flip. **Prediction: Missouri — the 10-7 upset.**

**(2) Purdue vs. (15) Queens** — Purdue' s Braden Smith (9.0 APG, near the all-time assists record) orchestrates the nation' s most efficient offense [5]. Queens is making its first-ever NCAA Tournament appearance and is simply outclassed. **Prediction: Purdue.**

### Second Round Projections

Arizona handles Villanova comfortably behind Krivas' s rim protection. High Point' s Cinderella run ends against Arkansas, where Acuff' s scoring overwhelms the mid-major. Texas' s upset momentum stalls against Gonzaga' s depth and experience. Purdue advances past Missouri, setting up a loaded Sweet 16.

Round	Matchup	Predicted Winner
R1	(1) Arizona vs. (16) LIU	Arizona
R1	(8) Villanova vs. (9) Utah State	Villanova
R1	(5) Wisconsin vs. (12) High Point	High Point
R1	(4) Arkansas vs. (13) Hawai'i	Arkansas
R1	(6) BYU vs. (11) Texas	Texas
R1	(3) Gonzaga vs. (14) Kennesaw St.	Gonzaga
R1	(7) Miami (FL) vs. (10) Missouri	Missouri
R1	(2) Purdue vs. (15) Queens	Purdue
R2	(1) Arizona vs. (8) Villanova	Arizona
R2	(12) High Point vs. (4) Arkansas	Arkansas
R2	(11) Texas vs. (3) Gonzaga	Gonzaga
R2	(10) Missouri vs. (2) Purdue	Purdue

## South Region Predictions

Florida (26-7) enters as the defending national champion and South Region's No. 1 seed, backed by a KenPom No. 4 ranking with AdjO rank 9th and AdjD rank 6th [6]. Houston (28-6, BPI 4th) is the region's most dangerous No. 2 seed [29], while Illinois brings the field's second-most efficient offense at 131.2 pts/100 possessions [5]. The South also features underseeded Iowa (committee 36th, predictive 27th) [10] and overseeded North Carolina (committee 22nd, predictive 29th) [10].

### First Round

**(1) Florida vs. (16) Prairie View A&M** — Prairie View A&M won the First Four over Lehigh 67-55 [34], but the defending champions' veteran frontcourt led by Rueben Chinyelu (7-8 wingspan, top-5 nationally in offensive and defensive rebound rate) and improved Alex Condon (2PT% up from 53.7% to 62.5%) is overwhelming [22]. **Prediction: Florida.**

**(8) Clemson vs. (9) Iowa** — Iowa is significantly underseeded (BPI 27th, seeded 36th overall) [10]. Senior Bennett Stirtz (20.0 PPG, 72% rim finishing, elite pick-and-roll operator) is one of the tournament's best guards [19]. Clemson (24-10) has the ACC pedigree but lacks Iowa's offensive firepower. The 8-9 line historically favors the 9-seed at 51.3% [23]. **Prediction: Iowa.**

**(5) Vanderbilt vs. (12) McNeese** — McNeese (28-5) ranks 1st nationally in turnover margin (+7.3) and coach Bill Armstrong led a 12-over-5 upset of Clemson in 2025 [9]. However, Vanderbilt (NET 13th, KenPom AdjO rank 7th) has Tyler Tanner (19.2 PPG, 2.4 SPG, 4.2% steal rate) who can disrupt McNeese's ball-handlers [22]. Vanderbilt's offensive efficiency is elite. **Prediction: Vanderbilt, but McNeese is a live 12-seed upset pick.**

**(4) Nebraska vs. (13) Troy** — Nebraska (26-6, NET 14th) has the nation's 7th-best defense (AdjD ~91) [12]. Troy (22-11) lacks the firepower to exploit Nebraska's offensive limitations. **Prediction: Nebraska.**

**(6) North Carolina vs. (11) VCU** — This is the bracket's highest-probability upset at approximately 39% [7]. UNC lost All-American freshman Caleb Wilson (broken thumb), gutting their interior game [3, 7]. VCU has won 16 of 17 games with balanced scoring — all eight rotation players have hit at least 18 threes — and gets to the free throw line at the 15th-highest rate nationally [26]. **Prediction: VCU — the signature upset of the first round.**

**(3) Illinois vs. (14) Penn** — Illinois (AdjO 131.2, 2nd nationally) has the offensive firepower to overwhelm any 14-seed [5]. Penn (18-11, Ivy League) is simply outmatched athletically. **Prediction: Illinois.**

**(7) Saint Mary's vs. (10) Texas A&M** — Saint Mary's (27-5, best free-throw shooting in the field at 81.1%) [5] has the discipline and half-court execution to control this game. Texas A&M (21-11) has SEC experience but inconsistent results. **Prediction: Saint Mary's.**

**(2) Houston vs. (15) Idaho** — Houston (BPI 4th, NET 5th) blends five-year veteran Emanuel Sharp with elite freshman Kingston Flemings under Kelvin Sampson's suffocating defensive system [22, 5]. Idaho (21-14) has no realistic path. **Prediction: Houston.**

### Second Round Projections

Florida dispatches Iowa behind defensive rebounding dominance. Vanderbilt's offense proves too much for Nebraska in a competitive 4-5 matchup. VCU's Cinderella run meets its end against Illinois' offensive juggernaut. Houston handles Saint Mary's with defensive pressure and athleticism.

Round	Matchup	Predicted Winner
R1	(1) Florida vs. (16) Prairie View A&M	Florida
R1	(8) Clemson vs. (9) Iowa	Iowa
R1	(5) Vanderbilt vs. (12) McNeese	Vanderbilt
R1	(4) Nebraska vs. (13) Troy	Nebraska
R1	(6) North Carolina vs. (11) VCU	VCU
R1	(3) Illinois vs. (14) Penn	Illinois
R1	(7) Saint Mary's vs. (10) Texas A&M	Saint Mary's
R1	(2) Houston vs. (15) Idaho	Houston
R2	(1) Florida vs. (9) Iowa	Florida
R2	(5) Vanderbilt vs. (4) Nebraska	Vanderbilt
R2	(11) VCU vs. (3) Illinois	Illinois
R2	(7) Saint Mary's vs. (2) Houston	Houston

## Midwest Region Predictions

Michigan (31-3) anchors the Midwest as the No. 1 seed with the nation's best defense (AdjD 89.0) and a KenPom net rating just under +40 [1]. Iowa State (27-7, BPI 6th) is the dangerous No. 2 seed with Joshua Jefferson's unique 16.9 PPG/7.6 RPG/4.9 APG stat line [2], while Virginia (29-5, NET 12th) brings an elite defense as the 3-seed [13]. The Midwest also features underseeded Tennessee (BPI 12th, seeded as a 6) [10] and a Kentucky team ravaged by injuries.

### First Round

**(1) Michigan vs. (16) Howard** — Howard won the First Four over UMBC 86-83 [34], but Michigan's Yaxel Lendeborg (Big Ten POY, lottery projection) and 7-3 Aday Mara anchor the nation's top-ranked defense [2, 22]. Michigan's 17-3 Quad 1 record and 16 wins against top-50 KenPom teams make this a mismatch [5, 13]. **Prediction: Michigan.**

**(8) Georgia vs. (9) Saint Louis** — Saint Louis (28-5) leads the nation in three-point shooting at 40.5% [5] and has the Atlantic 10's best record. Georgia (22-10, SEC) has the conference pedigree but inconsistent play. The 8-9 line historically favors the 9-seed at 51.3% [23]. **Prediction: Saint Louis — their elite shooting creates a high floor.**

**(5) Texas Tech vs. (12) Akron** — Texas Tech lost JT Toppin (season-ending knee injury) and has dropped three straight [3, 25]. Without Toppin, their three-point rate has skyrocketed to over 51%, making them one-dimensional [3]. Akron enters on a 10-game winning streak with all five top scorers being seniors, ranking 8th in effective FG%, 12th in 2PT%, and 14th in 3PT% [25]. **Prediction: Akron — the 12-over-5 upset. Texas Tech's injuries and losing streak make them vulnerable.**

**(4) Alabama vs. (13) Hofstra** — Alabama (AdjO 129.0, 3rd nationally) has elite offensive firepower led by Labaron Philon (21.7 PPG, 40% 3PT) [5]. However, Alabama is missing Aden Holloway (felony drug charges) and faced the fewest Quad 4 opponents (only 2) [33, 5]. Hofstra (36.8% from three, beat Pitt and Syracuse) plays a slow-paced style designed to limit possessions [8]. Alabama's talent prevails, but Hofstra is a live 13-seed. **Prediction: Alabama.**

**(6) Tennessee vs. (11) Miami (OH)** — Tennessee is significantly underseeded (BPI 12th, committee 21st) [10], and Rick Barnes' squad has the SEC defensive toughness to contain Miami (OH). However, Miami (OH) finished 31-0 in the regular season and averages 90.7 PPG (2nd nationally) with three players shooting over 40% from three [9]. Tennessee's experience and physicality should prevail. **Prediction: Tennessee.**

**(3) Virginia vs. (14) Wright State** — Virginia (29-5, AdjD ~8th nationally) plays the suffocating defensive style that neutralizes mid-major offenses [12]. Tony Bennett's system limits possessions and forces turnovers. Wright State (23-11) lacks the firepower to compete. **Prediction: Virginia.**

**(7) Kentucky vs. (10) Santa Clara** — This is a near-coin-flip at 35-40% upset probability [9]. Kentucky has been decimated by injuries — Jaland Lowe (season-ending) and Jayden Quaintance (knee, unlikely to return) have been out for two months [33]. Santa Clara ranks 6th nationally in field goal attempts and 14th in three-point attempts, with Christian Hammond shooting 40% from deep [9]. **Prediction: Santa Clara — Kentucky's injuries make them the weakest 7-seed in the field.**

**(2) Iowa State vs. (15) Tennessee State** — Iowa State (BPI 6th, NET 6th) features Joshua Jefferson's unique playmaking from the forward position and a top-4 defense (AdjD 91.4) [2, 5]. Tennessee State (23-9) is simply out-matched. **Prediction: Iowa State.**

## Second Round Projections

Michigan cruises past Saint Louis, as the Wolverines' elite defense limits Saint Louis' s three-point volume. Akron' s Cinderella run ends against Alabama' s overwhelming athleticism and offensive talent. Tennessee' s physicality grinds down Santa Clara in a defensive battle. Iowa State handles Virginia in a clash of defensive styles, with Jefferson' s versatility proving decisive.

Round	Matchup	Predicted Winner
R1	(1) Michigan vs. (16) Howard	Michigan
R1	(8) Georgia vs. (9) Saint Louis	Saint Louis
R1	(5) Texas Tech vs. (12) Akron	Akron
R1	(4) Alabama vs. (13) Hofstra	Alabama
R1	(6) Tennessee vs. (11) Miami (OH)	Tennessee
R1	(3) Virginia vs. (14) Wright State	Virginia
R1	(7) Kentucky vs. (10) Santa Clara	Santa Clara
R1	(2) Iowa State vs. (15) Tennessee St.	Iowa State
R2	(1) Michigan vs. (9) Saint Louis	Michigan
R2	(12) Akron vs. (4) Alabama	Alabama
R2	(6) Tennessee vs. (3) Virginia	Tennessee
R2	(10) Santa Clara vs. (2) Iowa State	Iowa State

## Sweet 16 Through Elite Eight Predictions

Based on the first- and second-round projections above, here are the Sweet 16 matchups and regional championship predictions across all four regions.

### East Region (Washington, D.C.)

**Sweet 16: (1) Duke vs. (5) St. John' s** — Duke' s Cameron Boozer (PER 34.7, RAPM 10.3) creates an unsolvable matchup problem, even against Zubey Ejiyofor' s elite rim protection (2.1 BPG) [4, 22]. Boozer' s 40.9% three-point shooting stretches the floor beyond Ejiyofor' s comfort zone [17]. **Duke advances.**

**Sweet 16: (6) Louisville vs. (2) UConn** — UConn (BPI 10th, NET 10th) has the tournament pedigree with Alex Karaban' s two championship rings [2]. Louisville (BPI 11th) is underseeded but faces a UConn team peaking at the right time under Dan Hurley [29]. **UConn advances.**

**Elite Eight: (1) Duke vs. (2) UConn** — The marquee regional final. Duke' s +40 KenPom net rating and Boozer' s dominance give the Blue Devils the edge, but Foster' s absence (foot fracture) limits their ball-handling depth [3, 1]. UConn' s veteran composure makes this the closest Elite Eight game. **Prediction: Duke advances to the Final Four.**

### West Region (San Jose, CA)

**Sweet 16: (1) Arizona vs. (4) Arkansas** — Arizona' s 16-1 road/neutral record and +10.8 rebounding margin overwhelm Arkansas despite Acuff' s scoring [5, 31]. **Arizona advances.**

**Sweet 16: (3) Gonzaga vs. (2) Purdue** — Purdue' s 131.6 AdjO (No. 1 nationally) meets Gonzaga' s deepest bench in the field (42.2% bench minutes) [5]. Braden Smith' s 9.0 APG orchestrates Purdue' s offense, but Gonzaga' s depth and defensive versatility create problems. **Purdue advances in a thriller.**

**Elite Eight: (1) Arizona vs. (2) Purdue** — Arizona' s balanced defense (AdjD 90.0, 3rd nationally) is built to contain Purdue' s high-volume offense [1]. Krivas' s 7-2 frame disrupts Purdue' s interior game. **Prediction: Arizona advances to the Final Four.**

### South Region (Houston, TX)

**Sweet 16: (1) Florida vs. (5) Vanderbilt** — The defending champions' Rueben Chinyelu (top-5 in offensive and defensive rebound rate) dominates the glass against Vanderbilt [22]. Florida' s championship experience proves decisive. **Florida advances.**

**Sweet 16: (3) Illinois vs. (2) Houston** — The region’s defining matchup pits Illinois’ s No. 2 offense (131.2 AdjO) against Houston’ s No. 5 defense (91.4 AdjD) [5]. Houston’ s suffocating system under Kelvin Sampson limits possessions and forces Illinois into half-court execution. Veteran guard Sharp provides the steady leadership Houston needs as their rock through three tournament years [22]. **Houston advances.**

**Elite Eight: (1) Florida vs. (2) Houston** — Houston (BPI 4th) has the defensive ceiling to contain Florida, but the Gators’ championship DNA and Chinyelu’ s rebounding dominance tip the balance [29, 22]. **Prediction: Florida advances to the Final Four.**

### Midwest Region (Chicago, IL)

**Sweet 16: (1) Michigan vs. (4) Alabama** — Michigan’ s nation-best defense (AdjD 89.0) is the perfect antidote to Alabama’ s high-octane 91.7 PPG attack [1, 5]. Lendeborg and Mara’ s length disrupts Alabama’ s three-point-heavy approach. **Michigan advances.**

**Sweet 16: (6) Tennessee vs. (2) Iowa State** — Iowa State (BPI 6th) features Joshua Jefferson’ s unique 16.9/7.6/4.9 stat line [2]. Tennessee (BPI 12th, underseeded) has the defensive toughness to compete [10], but Jefferson’ s playmaking from the forward position is the difference. **Iowa State advances.**

**Elite Eight: (1) Michigan vs. (2) Iowa State** — The two best defenses in the Midwest collide (Michigan AdjD 89.0, Iowa State AdjD 91.4) [1, 5]. Michigan’ s Lendeborg provides the star power edge, and the Wolverines’ 17-3 Quad 1 record demonstrates their ability to win elite matchups [13]. **Prediction: Michigan advances to the Final Four.**

Region	Sweet 16 Winners	Elite Eight Winner
East	Duke, UConn	<b>Duke</b>
West	Arizona, Purdue	<b>Arizona</b>
South	Florida, Houston	<b>Florida</b>
Midwest	Michigan, Iowa State	<b>Michigan</b>

## Final Four and National Championship Prediction

### Projected Final Four

Based on the regional analysis above, the 2026 Final Four features all four No. 1 seeds: **Duke, Arizona, Florida, and Michigan**. The convergence of elite talent, defensive efficiency, and favorable bracket paths makes this the most likely outcome, though Houston and Iowa State represent the strongest threats to break through. Torvik gives Duke a 20.2% title probability, followed by Michigan (17.9%), Arizona (14.8%), and Florida (9.1%) [5].

### Semifinal 1: Duke vs. Florida

Duke (KenPom No. 1, AdjO 128.0, AdjD 89.1) faces the defending champions [1]. Cameron Boozer’ s 22.5 PPG, 10.2 RPG, and 40.9% three-point shooting create a matchup nightmare for Florida’ s frontcourt [17]. The critical question is Caleb Foster’ s health — if he returns for the Final Four (described as a “slim chance” ), Duke’ s ceiling rises dramatically [3]. Florida’ s Rueben Chinyelu (top-5 in offensive and defensive rebound rate) will battle Boozer on the glass [22], but Duke’ s superior net rating (+40 vs. +35) and Boozer’ s RAPM of 10.3 (100th percentile) provide the decisive edge [4, 1, 6]. **Prediction: Duke wins.**

### Semifinal 2: Arizona vs. Michigan

The two teams that, alongside Duke, meet the historic championship KenPom profile (AdjO  $\geq$  124.1, AdjD  $\leq$  91.3) face off [12]. Michigan’ s nation-best defense (AdjD 89.0) is the ultimate test for Arizona’ s balanced offense (all five starters averaging double digits) [1, 31]. Arizona’ s 16-1 road/neutral record suggests they thrive in tournament settings [5], but Michigan’ s Yaxel Lendeborg (Big Ten POY, lottery projection) and 7-3 Aday Mara create length mismatches that disrupt Arizona’ s interior game [2, 22]. Duke’ s 17-2 Quad 1 record leads the field, followed closely by Arizona (16-2) and Michigan (17-3), demonstrating the elite company Michigan keeps in winning high-stakes games [13]. **Prediction: Michigan wins in a defensive battle.**

### Championship Game: Duke vs. Michigan

The title game pits the nation’ s No. 1 KenPom team against No. 2, the best offense against the best defense. Duke’ s Boozer (PER 34.7, highest offensive rating in KenPom history) is the tournament’ s most unstoppable in-

dividual force [35, 18]. Michigan counters with the deepest, most experienced roster among the final contenders — a veteran-laden, portal-built lineup featuring Lendeborg, Mara, and Johnson that brings composure and depth to high-pressure moments [22].

Michigan's defensive identity is purpose-built for this moment. Their AdjD of 89.0 has held elite offenses in check all season [1, 5], and Mara's presence in the country's best frontcourt can contest Boozer at the rim without fouling [22]. However, Boozer's 56.5% FG and 40.9% from three make him nearly impossible to guard one-on-one, and Duke's supporting cast — Maliq Brown (ACC DPOY), Isaiah Evans (48.3% spot-up 3PT) — provides enough secondary scoring to prevent Michigan from collapsing entirely on Boozer [17, 27, 28].

The deciding factor is roster construction. Michigan's veteran-laden, portal-built roster has the composure and depth to weather Duke's runs, while Duke's freshman-heavy rotation (without Foster) is more susceptible to the pressure and variance of a championship game [36, 20]. Torvik gives Duke a 20.2% title probability to Michigan's 17.9% [5], but Michigan's defensive ceiling and experience edge make this a true coin flip.

**Championship Prediction: Michigan wins the 2026 National Championship.** The Wolverines' elite defense, veteran leadership under Lendeborg, and balanced roster construction give them the slight edge over a Duke team whose youth and injuries create just enough vulnerability in the tournament's highest-pressure moment. Michigan's defense holds Duke to its lowest-scoring game of the season, and Lendeborg delivers a signature performance to cap a remarkable transfer journey from UAB to national champion.

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