

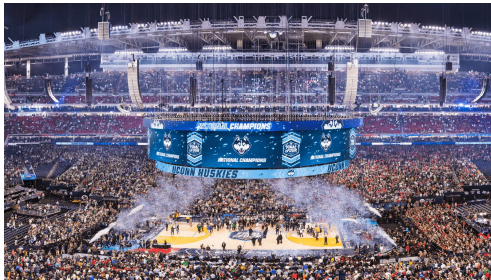
## OPINION

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Who Will Win the NCAA Men's Basketball National Championship? Not Who You Might Expect

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**Who will get to celebrate in the confetti like UConn did last season?** James Blakeway/Blakeway World Panoramas/Getty Images

The men's college basketball season kicked off this week, with [over 350 teams](#) in pursuit of a national championship — or at least with the possibility of making some noise in [March Madness](#). In reality, only a handful of teams have the talent and technique to be [crowned as champions in April](#).

Over the next five months, [nonconference and conference games](#) will be played, giving the [Selection Committee](#) ample data to seed each team and create a single elimination tournament bracket that will determine the winner.

The [Associated Press](#) releases weekly polls, providing useful information for fans (and coaches) to see where each team stands relative to the field. Yet, how predictive are such polls in determining the national champion?

[ESPN keeps a record of past polls](#), providing a historical perspective on what [sportswriters and broadcasters](#) believe are the best teams in the nation.

Between 2007 and 2023 (excluding 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic), there were 16 national champions. Just two teams (the University of Florida in 2007 and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2009) were ranked No. 1 in the first poll of the season. Twice a team (University of Connecticut in 2011 and

2023) went on to win the title after starting off the season unranked. Nine of the 16 championship teams were initially ranked between two and six. Three winning teams were ranked between nine and 18 when the season began.

What this suggests is that being ranked in the top six in the first AP poll *is* a reasonable predictor for winning the national championship. For this season, the University of Kansas, Duke University, Purdue University, Michigan State University, Marquette University, and Connecticut should all be happy with their initial top-six rankings.

However, the first poll relies exclusively on roster evaluation, not court performance. Based on prior years' data, looking out to Week 5, all 16 national champions were ranked in the top 12, with all but two in the top eight. Therefore, we are still a few weeks away from making such an assessment and prediction of which teams are more likely to clinch the title.

The ranking pattern for the national runner-up teams were more dispersed. Among the 16 national runners-up, eight were ranked in the top 10 in the first poll, with two not ranked (Texas Tech University in 2019 and University of Michigan in 2018).

In past Week 5 polls, three runners-up were unranked (North Carolina in 2022, Michigan in 2018, and Butler University in 2011). Ten teams that finished second were ranked in the top 13 by Week 5.

Among the national champions, 12 of the 16 teams had their Week 5 ranking improve or stay the same compared to their first-week ranking. This suggested that they were performing better on the court than what the sportswriters and broadcasters believed before the season began based on the roster alone, which is why the first poll of the season must be taken with a grain of salt.

In recent years' data, of the four teams which saw their rankings drop, the worst dropped by just six positions (Florida in 2007, going from No. 1 to No. 7).

Although there is significant noise in the AP rankings from week to week, the takeaway from this data is that teams ranked in the top 25 in the first poll are the best candidates to win the national championship. Moreover, those teams who improved their ranking by Week 5 were even more likely to become champions on April 8.

Of course, basketball is a game of inches, with the difference between the top 25 teams often decided by one errant pass or tipped ball. Injuries to key players can also derail a team's hopes of the title. On the flip side, an unheralded player can find his mojo and unexpectedly become a star.

That is why games are played on the court, not on computers or with the assessment of basketball pundits, as much as some fans may enjoy such numbers games and predictions. Such uncertainty will lead to low and mid-major teams upsetting power conference teams, giving national championship hopefuls a blemish on their resumes that can cost them a seed or two from the Selection Committee in March.

When [James Madison](#) University (from the Sun Belt Conference) upset Big 10 powerhouse [Michigan State](#) on [Nov. 6](#), it demonstrated that no national champion hopeful is immune from such blemishes. It also means that Michigan State's Week 5 ranking is likely to be significantly lower than their Week 1 ranking of No. 4.

So, rather than right out of the gate, in reality, the time to look at potential national champions is in the Week 5 AP rankings. That is when enough games have been played and the pre-season smoke has cleared enough to see which teams have the makings to win it all.

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