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## Big challenge awaits Furman men

Preview, prediction for 1st-round game vs. UConn

**Zachary Huber**

Greenville News

USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

The Furman Paladins men's basketball team will face UConn in the opening round of the NCAA Tournament.

The Paladins (22-12) were given the No. 15 seed and will attempt to upset No. 2 UConn (29-5) on March 20 (10 p.m., TBS) in Philadelphia.

Furman secured its spot in 2026 March Madness after knocking off top-seeded East Tennessee State in the Southern Conference tournament final as a No. 6 seed.

Furman overloaded the Buccaneers with its 3-point shooting, knocking down 10 of its 26 attempts. Asa Thomas, Alex Wilkins, Charles Johnston and Tom House all knocked down a pair of threes. Forward Cooper Bowser also took over in the paint, scoring 21 points and grabbing 11 rebounds to secure his



Furman players celebrate on March 15 during the watch party at Timmons Arena in Greenville. ALEX MARTIN/GRENVILLE NEWS

first double-double of the season.

In 2023, No. 13 Furman upset No. 4 Virginia, thanks to a late 3-pointer from guard JP Pegues. Here is what to know about the Huskies and our prediction for Furman's first-round game.

**Furman will have its hands full with UConn frontcourt**

The Huskies are led by center Tarris Reed Jr. and forward Alex Karaban. Reed Jr. leads UConn in scoring and re-

bounding at 13.7 points and 8.1 rebounds per game. Karaban averages 12 points per game and has made several clutch shots during their national championship runs in 2023 and 2024.

Forwards Cooper Bowser, Charles Johnston and Ben Vander Wal will be tasked with slowing down UConn's top front-court players. For the Paladins to have a chance at the upset, it's imperative that Bowser, Johnston and Vander Wal stay out of foul trouble.

**Furman's Alex Wilkins vs UConn's Silas Demary Jr key matchup to watch**

Wilkins has had a phenomenal freshman season, averaging 17.7 points and 4.7 assists per game. He poured in 34 points and five assists in the Paladins' Southern Conference semifinal win against UNC Greensboro.

Guard Silas Demary Jr. is considered UConn's top defender. He averages 1.7 steals per game and is a top-15 finalist

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### SOUTH CAROLINA WOMEN'S BASKETBALL



South Carolina head coach Dawn Staley greets forward Joyce Edwards on Nov. 23, 2025, at Colonial Life Arena.

JEFF BLAKE/IMAGN IMAGES

# EXPERIENCED AND READY

Edwards is unlikely to repeat March Madness slump

**Lulu Kesin**

Greenville News

USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

COLUMBIA – Bree Hall got just one season with Joyce Edwards but it was enough to know that the 6-foot-3 forward would greatly benefit South Carolina women's basketball in the future.

After UConn's dominant 82-59 national championship win over South Carolina last April, Hall, then a senior, was asked what she learned about Edwards, who had just finished her first Women's NCAA Tournament as a freshman.

"She's an incredible player," Hall said. "She's going to come back for more, it's not over for her at all."

Now nearing 12 months later, Edwards is leading the No. 1 seeded Gamecocks (31-3) heading into her second NCAA Tournament.

The sophomore leads South Carolina with 19.6 points per game heading into the first round on March 21 (1 p.m. ET, ABC), against the winner of either Samford or Southern, both No. 16 seeds.

**Edwards struggled in 2025 March Madness**

South Carolina coach Dawn Staley has seen Edwards lead the team in scoring since her arrival on campus, breaking out as a freshman with an average of 12.7 points per game.

But then in the second round of last year's tournament, Edwards' offensive dominance took a harsh pause.

She went from 22 points in the opening round vs. Tennessee Tech to a season-low five against Indiana

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### CLEMSON MEN'S BASKETBALL

## Preview of Tigers' 1st-round matchup

**Derrian Carter**

Greenville News

USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

CLEMSON – Clemson basketball enters March Madness as a No. 8 seed in the South region.

The Tigers (24-10) will face No. 9 Iowa (21-12) on March 20 (6:50 p.m., TNT) in Tampa, Florida, at Benchmark International Arena.

The winner will face the winner between No. 1 seed Florida and No. 16 Prairie View/Lehigh in the second round on March 22.

Clemson has made March Madness in three straight seasons despite having its largest roster turnover under coach Brad Brownell. The Tigers added four freshmen and six transfers to join three returning players to help the team finish tied for fourth in the ACC standings and make the conference tournament semifinals.

The Hawkeyes (21-12) made the NCAA Tournament in their first season under coach Ben McCollum. Iowa finished ninth in the Big Ten standings and made the third round of its conference tournament.

Here's what to know about this first-round March Madness matchup and a score prediction.

**Can Clemson avoid another first-round exit?**

Clemson made the NCAA Tournament as a No. 5 seed after losing in the ACC Tournament semifinals last season, but No. 12 McNeese State upset the Tigers.

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Clemson guard Butta Johnson scores against University of Pittsburgh at Littlejohn Coliseum in Clemson on Jan. 31, 2025. KEN RUINARD/USA TODAY CO

## MEN'S NCAA TOURNAMENT

## Miami (Ohio) shows it belongs in March Madness



**Blake Toppmeyer**  
Columnist  
USA TODAY NETWORK

We really needed more proof, huh? Well, now we have it.

Miami (Ohio) belongs.

Not just in the First Four, but in the 64-team bracket most of us consider to be the *real* tournament.

The selection committee put Miami on the doorstep. Good enough. The Red-Hawks moved SMU out of the way and busted down the door en route to the first round.

In winning a First Four game, 89-79, with blistering shooting, Miami served more proof – seriously, why did anyone think we needed more proof? – that the best midmajor teams belong in the NCAA Tournament, even if they don't win their conference tournament.

Miami poured in the points and buried one 3-pointer after another, one night after Texas and N.C. State piled up bricks. As Miami's fans reveled in the stands after the latest deep bomb, it occurred to me that this was the most entertaining the First Four has ever been in 15 years of its existence in Dayton, Ohio.

### Pearl pretends he 'expected' this performance from Miami (Ohio)

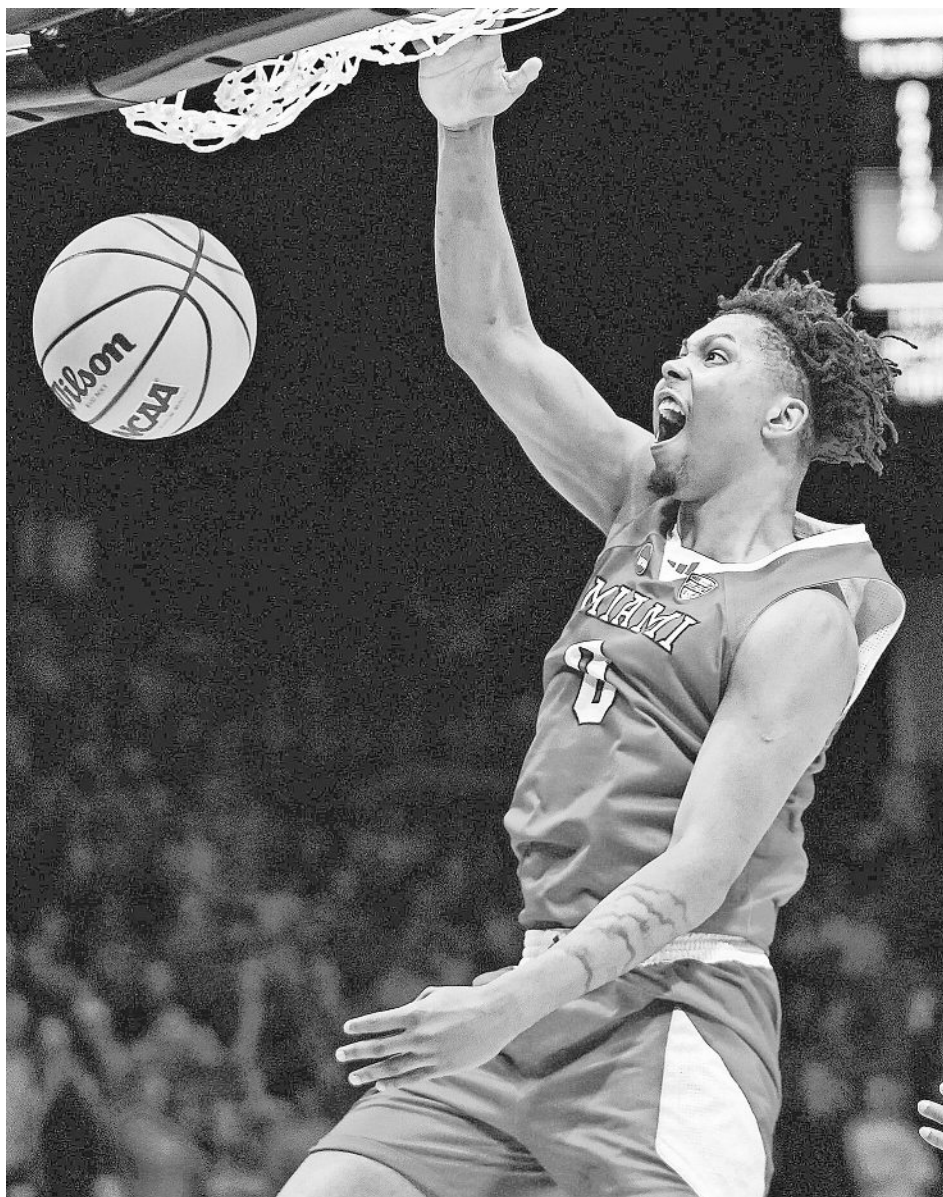
And all Bruce Pearl could do was chuckle like a cartoon character at half-time, with a silly grin on his face, after Miami drilled 10 first-half 3-pointers.

"This is kind of what we expected to see," Pearl said.

Sure you did, Bruce.

Some of us might have expected this, but *you* didn't. At least, Pearl acted as if he didn't think much of Miami as he shilled for Auburn, which employs Pearl and his son.

Using his TNT-provided stage as a pulpit for propaganda, Pearl repeatedly trashed Miami leading up to the Tournament, shamelessly feigning that an Auburn team (coached by Pearl's son, I'm sure that's a coincidence) that barely finished above .500 would make a worthy tournament pick, while pretending Miami might finish last in the



Miami (Ohio) wing Eian Elmer dunks in the second half of a First Four game against SMU on March 18 in Dayton, Ohio. FRANK BOWEN IV/THE ENQUIRER

Big East.

That was a bigger load of bull even than anything Pearl's ever told the NCAA suits.

Pearl couldn't possibly have believed half the hogwash he served. He's a lot of things, but he's no idiot.

Still, Pearl's relentless scrutiny of Miami kicked a hornet's nest.

More loons came out of the woodwork to question whether a 31-1 team deserved a bid, or whether it should go to a 12th-place team from a Power con-

ference amid a woefully weak bubble.

Well, now Miami's 32-1, after lighting up a Power Four opponent that couldn't duck them.

### Continuing legacy of midmajor upsets in March Madness

And, we shouldn't be surprised. We've seen this repeatedly, and not just from Miami.

The best midmajors belong – of course they do. They don't always pre-

vail, but they win often enough in these games that nobody should have been duped by Pearl's nonsense that a Division I team with 30-plus victories would finish last in a Big East that's not very good.

Miami answered all the naysayers, so emphatically that there's really only one question left: How far can it go?

Consider No. 6 Tennessee on upset alert.

Who can forget VCU, in 2011, going from First Four to Final Four?

Wally Szczerbiak, anyone? The Red-Hawks of Wally World reached the Sweet 16 in 1999 as a 10-seed.

Or, how about Manhattan? The Jaspers were the last-team-in to what was then a 64-team bracket in 1995. Fran Fraschilla's team, seeded No. 13, toppled Oklahoma.

"The tournament selection committee (is) not as dumb as people think," Fraschilla told reporters afterward, adding that "it is nice to show people we deserve to be here and can play with anyone."

The best midmajors keep proving that, too, even as their credentials are questioned.

Power Four teams hesitate to play teams like Miami in the regular season, and the little guy's strength of schedule suffers, even as wins pile up. But, there's no avoiding the Miamis of the world in March, at least so long as the selection committee keeps recognizing that winning nearly all of your games warrants a bid, no matter what the bobbleheads say.

The late Billy Packer just about lost it on Selection Sunday in 2006 when George Mason slipped in as an at-large 11-seed. After George Mason rattled off four straight wins to reach the Final Four, in one of the greatest Cinderella stories ever, Patriots fans chanted Packer's name.

And in the second half of this game, a pro-Miami crowd going bananas in the stands chanted, "Let's go RedHawks! Let's go RedHawks!"

I can think of another thing to chant. Shut up, Bruce.

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## Edwards

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in the second round, finishing 2-of-8 from the field with five turnovers.

South Carolina's upperclassmen carried the Gamecocks through Edwards' shooting struggles. She scored six points in the Sweet 16 against Maryland and a career-low four in the Elite Eight win over Duke.

Then, with help from going 5-of-6 from the free throw line, Edwards had 13 points and 11 rebounds in the Final Four victory over Texas.

She capped off her freshman year with 10 points and five rebounds in the

title game loss to UConn.

And a lot has changed since she left that court in Tampa, Florida.

### Edwards sophomore season with South Carolina

When Ashlyn Watkins announced she wasn't playing this season, Edwards' role immediately shifted, increasing her likelihood at starting with one forward officially out. Then Chloe Kitts tore her ACL in October, giving Edwards an even bigger role.

Down two veteran forwards, Edwards stood beside the only returning starter in point guard Raven Johnson, and joining Tessa Johnson and transfers Ta'Niya Latson and Madina Okot.

By her first 20-point performance, which came in the second game of the season against Bowling Green, there was something different about the sophomore version of Edwards.

Her post moves were multi-dimensional, giving her offensive more creativity and her teammates more options knowing she had a greater trust in what she could do inside the paint.

She's since had 19 games scoring over 20 points, highlighted by the career-high 34 points against USF on Dec. 18. She scored her 1,000th career point on Feb. 5, reaching the milestone in 64 games, five fewer than Gamecocks legend A'ja Wilson.

Edwards sits at 11th among scorers in this year's NCAA Tournament bracket.

In the SEC, she's fourth overall in points per game and second in field goal percentage at 58.7%.

"Joyce is just different, she looks more seasoned," Staley said. "She looks more like she understands what's happening. I think she really understands her power on both sides of the basketball. When you've been there before, you really have a good understanding of what you can do and where you've had success."

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## Clemson

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Clemson is in a similar situation after entering March Madness after a conference tournament semifinals appearance. Brownell isn't concerned though because the Tigers will have more time to prepare and no one on this season's roster played in that game. Dillon Hunter was out with a hand injury. Ace Buckner and Dallas Thomas both redshirted.

"Every year is different. Every situation is different," Brownell said March 15. "It's a little disappointing, bad luck, we've gone into the ACC Tournament and had (a) starter get hurt the last two years and not be able to play. That's not easy."

### What to know about Iowa in March Madness

Iowa won 20 games for the first time since 2021-22 to make its first NCAA Tournament in two seasons.

The Hawkeyes are led by senior guard Bennett Stirtz, a projected first-round pick in the 2026 NBA Draft who averages 20 points (sixth in the Big Ten).

Iowa is a defensive-focused team like Clemson, allowing just 66.0 points per game (17th nationally). The Hawkeyes average 75.2 points (193rd nationally).

Iowa has struggled late in the season, losing seven of its last 10 games, and has not made it out of the first round of March Madness since 2021.

### Can Clemson overcome Welling's

### injury?

Clemson lost starting center Carter Welling to a torn ACL in the ACC Tournament. He was the team's second-leading scorer (10.2 per game), top rebounder (5.4) and best shot blocker (24 total).

It marked the second straight season that the Tigers lost someone to injury before the NCAA Tournament.

Clemson played well without Welling in the second half against UNC in the conference quarterfinals but missed him vs. Duke in the semifinals. Brownell said the Tigers must rebound better overall for them to have a chance in March Madness.

"We're not as big as most of the teams we play... and our guards have to help rebound. It's going to be vital," Brownell

said.

### Prediction

**Clemson 68, Iowa 63:** The Tigers will advance to the second round of March Madness in a closely contested game. Both teams won't build big leads against each other, but Clemson will go on second-half run to take down the Hawkeyes.

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## Furman

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for the Naismith Defensive Player of the Year award. Demary has helped coach Dan Hurley's team be the 11th-best defense, according to KenPom.

### Furman's pace vs UConn's physical defense

The matchup between the Paladins and Huskies presents a stark contrast in styles. Furman prefers to spread the floor and play with pace, while UConn relies on its half-court defense and physicality to control games.

Thomas leads Furman with 79 made 3-pointers while shooting 39%.

UConn is holding opponents to 61 points per game and 30% shooting from behind the 3-point line, while allowing just over five 3-pointers per game.

### Furman vs UConn prediction

Furman made a tremendous run through the SoCon tournament as a No. 6 seed to earn a spot in March Madness. It also pulled off a major first-round upset against Virginia the last time it made the NCAA Tournament in 2023. But another upset may be too much to ask this time.

UConn has several things going for it. It has one of the best coaches in the country, Hurley, and a top-15 defensive

team. Karaban has championship experience for the Huskies. He was a critical player in their back-to-back national titles.

**Prediction:** UConn 82, Furman 65  
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