

# Lady Vols looking forward to hosting No. 5 UConn

By **TERESA M. WALKER**  
AP Sports Writer

Tennessee hasn't been to a Final Four since 2008 and last beat UConn a year earlier when Pat Summitt won her seventh of eight national championships.

The Lady Vols also haven't been ranked since late November despite starting the season at No. 5. They can take a step toward ending a couple of those skids Thursday night when No. 5 UConn visits for the latest game in the rivalry between women's basketball's most storied programs. At least 12,000 fans will be in the stands, and ESPN's College Game Day also will be on hand.

Tennessee coach Kellie Harper said she's excited at the opportunity for a great atmosphere to showcase women's basketball at an elite level.

"I know our team is excited," Harper said. "Who would be right? And, you know, everybody wants to play in that kind of environment with that atmosphere and a lot of fans in the stands."

Geno Auriemma is no stranger to big games in Knoxville, Tennessee.

"The size factor you know, the athleticism factor, the crowd factor that's going to be down there, the circus-like atmosphere that surrounds a Connecticut-Tennessee game," he said. "Even though it's not quite at the level, you know, it's not the Beatles."

No, but the two women's programs with the most national championships attract attention from casual fans whenever they play. Summitt set the standard until Auriemma and UConn passed that mark and kept winning, adding an 11th title overall and fourth straight in 2016.

Tennessee (16-6) has won nine straight games since a seven-point loss at then-No. 2 Stanford. That winning streak hasn't been good enough to push the Lady Vols back into the Top 25 where they started the season. Harper was mixing in a handful of new players from the transfer portal and recruiting when Tennessee struggled early on.

Then she lost 6-foot-6 center Tamari Key for the season because of blood clots in early December — before that loss to Stanford.

Harper sees her La-

dy Vols finally playing much closer to what she expects after that their early eye-opener.

"I'm not going to say we've arrived and we're as good as we can possibly be," Harper said. "We want to keep working every day to get better. I think the early games really challenged us and gave the adversity."

Her Lady Vols will face a depleted UConn team with only eight players available.

Paige Bueckers and freshman Ice Brady are out for the season with injured knees. Azzi Fudd (knee) and Caroline Ducharme (concussion) are both out indefinitely. Ayanna Patterson returned from a concussion for their rout of DePaul on Monday night.

Auriemma said they will be more taxed by the Lady Vols' depth, athleticism and size.

"They're a really, really good team," Auriemma said. "They were struggling to find their way early on, and they seem to have put together. We have to handle the whole environment. Not an easy place to play, obviously. But our kids are excited about it. They're looking forward to it."

The Lady Vols also will have a home advantage they didn't when UConn last visited early in the pandemic when just 3,553 were in the stands for the Huskies' 67-61 win.

UConn guard Nika Muhl didn't play then. She said she wasn't on the same page as Auriemma during a bad stretch at practice and wound up benched that game.

"I was very mad, very disappointed," Muhl said. "So I'm definitely excited to go and just, you know, step up the court on that court for the first time. It's gonna be fun."

This is the fourth straight season these teams have played, and Harper favors continuing this rivalry — even with UConn having won all first three since the renewal. She sees both fan bases excited.

"And obviously, there's just a lot of extra noise, extra hype prior to the game with this matchup," Harper said. "I think you can see the national attention that it has drawn. ... The buildup has been probably really good for women's basketball and getting people talking about these two programs."

# Lady Bulldogs end losing streak, halt Moore County

By **Dennis Holley**  
Sports Writer

The Cornersville Lady Bulldogs (8-11, 0-3), looking to snap a five-game losing streak and needing a district win, welcomed the Moore County Raiderettes (14-8, 2-1) in a District 9-1A basketball game on Homecoming Friday night.

The Lady 'Dawgs, with senior Alicia Polk playing perhaps her best game of the year with a 26-point effort, grabbed an early lead over Moore County then withstood a third quarter run by the Raiderettes and stood tall with free throws in the fourth quarter to derail Moore County 53-40. Cornersville had not beaten the Lady Bulldogs since 2009.

"I was a little worried that Homecoming might affect the way we played but we came out ready and stayed locked in and on top and we were able to withstand the runs that Moore County made," Lady Bulldog coach Hayden McMahon said.

Polk started her night with a drive to the basket that put Cornersville on the board first, 2-0.

The Raiderettes employed a three-quarter court press that in the past has been a sore spot for the Lady 'Dawgs, but this time Cornersville went to Ady Gentry

down low where she was fouled, then sank two free throws.

Cornersville continued breaking the press with crisp ball movement and Polk scored on a short jumper then Gentry on the next possession, grabbed a rebound and put it in for a 10-2 lead after one quarter.

Pork stayed on target as the Lady Bulldogs held off a Moore County run led by two Madison Dingler three-pointers.

Gentry picked up her third foul and went to the bench but freshman Camille Franklin, showing much potential and learning on the fly, came in and contributed a key assist.

"When Gentry picked up her third foul we went from a man-to-man defense to a three-two zone and it helped us," McMahon said.

Dingler for MC then sank a three-pointer and Cornersville called time-out with the score, 17-10.

Annabelle Mulliniks drove a dagger into Moore County with back-to-back threes to make the score 23-10 at the half.

Polk drained a three-pointer for Cornersville, but the Raiderettes then made a seven-point run to cut the lead to 26-1.

Anna Wood hit back-to-back three pointers and the Lady

Bulldogs bounced back to a 32-17 lead.

MC's Paisley Logan drained a three-pointer to make the score 32-20, but Jayli Childress for the Lady 'Dawgs popped a short jumper and the lead moved out to fourteen points, 34-20.

Gentry, back in carrying three fouls, sank one of two free-throws to make the score 37-26 after three quarters.

The Raiderettes resorted to fouling as time ran down in the fourth quarter.

The Lady 'Dawgs, showing mental toughness, sank 14-of-17 free-throws with Polk sinking all eight of hers, as they grabbed their first district win of the season.

"This has been a long time coming, the last three or four games, we finally got over the hump, we practiced well and you know every player on my team is important to me. Great win!" McMahon said.

Moore County 2 8 16 14 - 40  
Cornersville 10 13 14 16 - 53  
Moore County (40): Paisley Logan 12, Katy Fletcher 11, Madison Dingler 7, Ellie Graham 5, Anna Harder 3, Macy Fletcher 2.  
Free Throws (7-18): K. Fletcher 2-for-3, M. Fletcher 2-for-4, Logan 1-for-2, Dingler 1-for-2, Graham 1-for-4, Harder 0-for-3.  
3 Point Goals (7): Logan 3, Dingler 2, Harder, K. Fletcher.  
Cornersville (53): Alicia Polk 26, Ady Gentry 7, Anna Wood 6, Annabelle Mulliniks 6, Jayli Childress 4, Franklin 2, Powers 2.  
Free Throws (17-23): Polk 8-for-8, Gentry 3-for-4, Childress 2-for-5, Powers 2-for-2, Franklin 2-for-4.  
3 Point Goals (6): Polk 2, Wood 2, Mulliniks 2.  
Halftime score: Cornersville 23, Moore County 10.

# Bulldogs unable to overcome slow start

By **Dennis Holley**  
Sports Writer

A slow start doomed the Cornersville Bulldogs in a 57-40 Homecoming loss Friday night.

The Cornersville Bulldogs (6-12 0-3 District 9-1A) could only tally a single basket in the first quarter against the Raiders (6-9, 1-2), then battled toe-to-toe the rest of the way but could not catch the Raiders as Cornersville fell 57-40.

"The first quarter was detrimental to the end of the ballgame although after the halftime we came out ready to go and cut the lead to ten points. We missed some close-in shots, and we need to work on finishing our shots. We are working hard, and we feel we are on the right path," Cornersville coach Dakota Brown

said. Hayden Grover for Cornersville finally ended the scoring drought with a basket close in, but at the end of the quarter Cornersville trailed 20-2.

Peyton Martin paced the Raiders in the first quarter with eight points, Alex Copeland added five points.

The second quarter saw the Bulldogs clawing back as Gage Lovell tallied six points and Kale Adcox added five but the damage had been done in the first quarter. Despite outscoring the Raiders 13-12 in the second quarter, Cornersville still trailed 32-15 at halftime.

Brown's halftime instructions must have motivated the Bulldogs. Cornersville, with the help of three-pointers by Lovell and Carter Neat, cut the lead to 32-

22 midway through the third quarter but could not get closer despite Ben Franklin powering in two baskets.

Moore County kept the Bulldogs at arm's length for the rest of the way and led 43-28 after three quarters.

The fourth quarter saw the Raiders shooting free throws as Dawson White sank 5-of-9 free throws. Cornersville countered with junior Ben Franklin scoring nine points.

Moore County 20 12 11 17 - 57  
Cornersville 2 13 13 12 - 40  
Moore County (57): Will Baker 16, Alex Copeland 12, Dawson White 11, Peyton Martin 10, Wes Clifton 3, Tristin Gray 2, Sawyer Parks 2.  
Free Throws (14-22) White 5-of-9, Copeland 3-for-3, Baker 4-of-4, Clifton 0-for-2, Martin 2-for-4.  
Three-point Baskets: (4) Baker 2, Copeland, Clifton.  
Cornersville (40): Ben Franklin 13, Gage Lovell 9, Kale Adcox 6, Hayden Grover 6, Carter Neat 3, Blaine Woodard 2, Colyn Schlig 1.  
Free Throws (10-23) Adcox 3-for-4, Woodard 2-for-4, Grover 1-for-3, Schlig 1-for-3, Lovell 0-for-1, Franklin 3-for-8.  
Three-point Baskets: (3) Lovell, Neat, Adcox.  
Halftime Score: Moore County 32, Cornersville 15.

# Braves' Grissom puts in extra work for shortstop competition

By **Charles Odum**  
AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA — The Atlanta Braves' commitment to giving Vaughn Grissom a chance to win the starting job at shortstop can't be questioned.

First, the Braves, who must replace Danby Swanson, scheduled Grissom for three off-season visits with third base coach Ron Washington for intense fielding drills, each lasting at least one week.

On Saturday, manager Brian Snitker said he hasn't even considered giving Grissom the chance to compete for playing time in left field this spring. Snitker and the Braves want Grissom to spend all his time at shortstop.

Then, Grissom was included with other prominent players made available to reporters at the Braves Fest for fans on Saturday. Projected starters at every position other than left field took turns in the media interview room. Grissom was the only shortstop on the list.

Grissom started 39 games at second base as the fill-in for the injured Ozzie Albies and only one game at shortstop last season. At 6-foot-3 and 210 pounds, Grissom has a big build for

a shortstop, and some doubt his defense will be strong enough to hold the job.

Washington, the 70-year-old former Texas Rangers manager respected for his defensive drills, has assured the Braves that he'll have Grissom ready by the start of the season.

"That's probably one of the most valuable pieces I have in my life right now, being able to bounce stuff off him," Grissom said of Washington.

Washington volunteered for the offseason work with Grissom.

"He was like, 'Let me have that kid for three different times,'" Snitker said. "It was great Vaughn took the time out of his winter and went down there and saw the value in it. It will be good. He's definitely going to have a leg up getting to spring training and having all of that."

Grissom pounced on the opportunity.

"I was stoked," he said. "I loved it. I couldn't wait to go for my first time already."

Washington and Grissom already have held two weeklong training sessions in New Orleans. One more week of drills is planned before Braves pitchers and catchers report for

spring training in North Port, Florida, on Feb. 13, followed by position players three days later.

The 22-year-old Grissom will compete with Orlando Arcia to replace Swanson, who signed a \$177 million, seven-year deal with the Chicago Cubs. Like first baseman Freddie Freeman, who signed with the Dodgers as a free agent before the 2022 season, Swanson was a respected team leader, and his departure leaves a void.

There will be a spotlight on either Grissom or Arcia.

"We're going to be fine," Snitker said. "We'll use the sum of our parts to make it happen."

Snitker left open the possibility that Grissom and Arcia could share the job.

"I think that's two really good options we could probably team up and not abuse either one of those guys and have a really good product," Snitker said.

The five-time defending NL East champion Braves acquired catcher Sean Murphy from Oakland to share time with Travid d'Arnaud and have a long list of possible starters in left field, including Eddie Rosario, Marcell Ozuna and newly sign Kevin Pillar.

Other positions look set entering spring training.

Grissom said he's ignoring speculation that positive reviews from Washington make him the favorite to win the starting job.

"It's reassuring in a sense," Grissom said. "It's cool, but baseball is a crazy sport. It's very humbling. I know you have to keep your head down and grind. ... To me, in my mind the job is not mine. I still have to earn it. I try not to listen to that stuff at all."

Grissom hit .271 with eight homers and 32 RBIs in 251 at-bats last season, exhausting his rookie status.

## Notes

RHP Mike Soroka, attempting a comeback from his second torn right Achilles tendon, said he expects to have no restrictions at the start of spring training. He'll compete for the No. 5 spot in the rotation. ... OF Ronald Acuña Jr., who played through knee soreness last season following surgery in 2021, said through a translator: "I think I'm back to feeling normal and healthy, feeling 100%. I definitely don't want to play DH anymore."

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