

# MARCH MADNESS

# SWEET SIXTEEN

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THE MORNING SUN



Pittsburg State's women's basketball team qualifies for the NCAA Division II Elite 8 for the third time in school history. Play began Monday night in Pittsburg, Pa. COURTESY DEREK LIVINGSTON / PSU SPORTS INFORMATION DEPARTMENT

## GORILLAS: ELITE INDEED

### Many factors contribute to trip to Elite 8

By Jim Henry  
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What does it take to become an elite basketball team? Good players, of course, but those players have to work together as a team on both ends of the court. The players should be competitive, both during games and in practices. And the tight-knit connections produce friends for a lifetime. And don't doubt for a minute, it's a lot of fun. Pittsburg State's women's basketball team qualified for the NCAA Division II Elite 8 for the third time in school history. The 13 players and four coaches express why they believe this team is elite.

**Hannah Miller**, freshman guard: "Our work ethic is honestly. We really emphasize that it takes all 13 of us. Whether it's playing the whole game or at practice, we all compete at a high level. We use each other. The starters never failed to make it important to us as well. They always include us because at the end of the day, we're a team. We all have the same goal."

**Sydney Holmes**, senior guard: "The first thought that came into my mind was not even basketball. We're



good people. We help each other with homework. We're normal kids at the end of the day, and that's what makes us so elite. We're best friends. We're family, and anything on the court that you see, it's just 10 times better off the court."

**Clara Swearingen**, freshman guard: "I think it's how competitive we are. We're a very competitive group. We love to win. We're also very connected. We all get along super well, and we have really good chemistry."



**Karennia Gerber**, senior center: "I think what makes us different is the people we are outside of basketball and how we all have our priorities straight. We all take care of the little things. That's something we've talked about, even outside of basketball. If you have everything else in check, then you're able to really give your best and focus on basketball. We're a fun group to

be around. My favorite thing to say is we're just funny. I love being around all these girls."

**Maycee James**, junior guard: "In my opinion, all of our different leadership styles married together really well. We have people who lead vocally. We have people who lead with their actions. We never let each other get too high or too low about any particular thing offensively, defensively, in transition. Having those different types of personalities, we can all listen to each other and hear each other's feedback. That's what has allowed us to get this far, having those leaders on the court, on the bench. We all listen to each other; it doesn't matter if you get zero minutes or you get 35 to 40. Everybody has a valuable piece of information to share and to make us better."

**Hannah Nilges**, senior guard: "I think really we have written our own story. It's always been that, and we haven't really let any outside noise or anything tell us who we are or what we can do or what we can't do. When you keep your power within the 13 or 20 people



Pittsburg State junior guard Maycee James drives for a left-handed layup against Minnesota State in the Central Region tournament on March 15 at John Lance Arena. COURTESY DEREK LIVINGSTON / PSU SPORTS INFORMATION DEPARTMENT

ple in the locker room, nobody can take that away. That's what I credit it to."



**Macie Mays**, sophomore forward: "Honestly just our chemistry. We get along

so well. If you ask any one of us, we'd say we're best friends on and off the court, and I think that's something other teams don't have. That's why we're so special."

**Harper Schreiner**, junior guard: "Honestly we just have a lot of fun. We understand it's a game of basketball; at





Pittsburg State sophomore guard Jordan Frison is the MIAA Player of the Year after finishing second in the league in scoring (18.4) and first in assists (6.1). COURTESY DEREK LIVINGSTON / PSU SPORTS INFORMATION DEPARTMENT



Pittsburg State graduate guard-forward Avery Taggart was the Gorillas' second-leading scorer at 15.9 points per game, and his 99 3-point goals are second-most in PSU single-season history. COURTESY DEREK LIVINGSTON / PSU SPORTS INFORMATION DEPARTMENT



Pittsburg State senior guard R.J. Forney finishes his career third in school history in 3-point goals (240) and seventh in 3-point goal percentage (42.1 percent). COURTESY DEREK LIVINGSTON / PSU SPORTS INFORMATION DEPARTMENT

# Gorillas tie for second place in MIAA

By Jim Henry  
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For the second consecutive season, Pittsburg State made a strong showing during February and March to climb near the top of the MIAA men's basketball standings. The Gorillas went 7-2 in the final nine conference games to wind up tied for second place in the league standings with a 13-6 record. The postseason tournament run ended in the semifinal round as PSU beat Nebraska Kearney 96-63 before losing to Central Oklahoma 93-81, ending with an 18-12 record. "Probably the biggest thing I'll remember is the postive side as far as much as we lost last year with Marque (English), Jeramy (Shaw) and Max (Alexander) to still be able to finish record-wise in second place," Gorillas coach Jeff Boschee said. "That's pretty big. The

run that we went on toward the end of the year again was kind of similar to last year. "We had too many ups and downs at the beginning of the year that hurt us. The loss to Missouri Southern here, the loss against Northeastern State here really hurt us as far as being able to move on to the regional tournament." The Gorillas went 5-6 in games decided by six points or less, and five of those losses came during conference play. The Gorillas averaged 77.8 points per game and allowed 73.1. The offense was led by the MIAA player of the year and two of the best 3-point shooters in the league. Sophomore point guard Jordan Frison is PSU's first conference player of the year since Oscar Gonzalez in 1998-99. His 552 points rank 13th in school history, and his 18.4 scoring average is second in



the league behind Trey Phipps of Northeastern State (21.0). Frison erupted for five 30-point games during the last half of the season, highlighted by a 39-point outburst against UNK in the conference tournament. Frison led the MIAA in assists (6.1 per game), and his 183 assists broke the PSU single-season record. With 342 assists in just two seasons, he's already fourth on the PSU career list. The Gorillas were the MIAA's No. 1 3-point shooting team in both numbers (290) and accuracy (39.5 percent).

Avery Taggart, a graduate transfer from Missouri Southern, and senior R.J. Forney drilled 99 and 80 3-pointers, respectively, to rank second and third behind Washburn's Brayden Shorter (113). Forney (45.7 percent) and Taggart (43.6) are 1-2 in the league in 3-point shooting percentage. Taggart's 99 treys rank second in school history, and Forney's 80 treys are fifth. On the PSU career charts, Forney is third in treys (240) behind Gonzalez (272) and Eddie Jackson (271). Forney also is seventh in career 3-point percentage (42.1). "Having the player of the year is obviously something pretty special," Boschee said. "For as many ups and downs that we had at the beginning of year in trying to figure out how each other played together, I'm proud how we played." Looking ahead, the

Gorillas are scheduled to return their top-2 rebounders in Tane Pricor (5.8 per game) and Evan Jackson (5.0). "The guys who are returning like Evan who had a really good finish to the year, he has to get bigger, stronger, get better offensively," Boschee said. "Tane has to continue to make the jump that he made from last year to this year ... he has to make that next jump. The guys coming back have to understand the work they put in this summer is extremely important, and they have to be our best recruiters, too. If we bring guys in who we really like, they have to help us out and sell it as much as we do. "Trying to retain Jordan, trying to fend off these Division Is, that's the most important piece in recruiting right now is trying to keep him to stay. You have to embrace it. It is what it is. You can't be mad about it.

"We have to get bigger in certain positions, especially on the wing. With our freshman class, I think we've done that with Maddox Teeter, Ethan (Sage) and Landon (Short). We need to put a little more experience around them. With our injury problems at the 5 (center), we have to bring in another transfer 5." Boschee is 47-43 in his three years with the Gorillas with 39 victories in the last two seasons. "It's something we're proud of," he said. "We thought it would take a little bit longer, but last year's team and the jump that we made and really keeping most of the crew we had from that from that 8-20 season (in 2022-23). I will say it's made recruiting a little bit easier. ... They see the winning side of it and what we have to sell here at Pitt State. Hopefully we keep that going."

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GORILLAS  
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**Destiny Buerge**, sophomore guard: “What makes us a very elite team is we all just come together. We work hard, and we know each other in and out. We bond so well, and if you’re not bonding well, you might not have a well put-together team. I think we’ll go far because of how we are together. We lead well, whether you play or not. We’re there for each other. We back each other up. Like with ‘Nilly’ (Hannah Nilges) at Fort Smith, we were all there for her. That just shows how well we are together.”



**Ja’Miya Brown**, sophomore guard: “What makes our team elite is our chemistry, community and our bond. We’ll go to war for each other. For us, it’s bigger than basketball. We are a family from top to bottom, coaches to players to managers to training staff. We truly enjoy being around each other, which helps us to enjoy practices and games because we’re doing it together. Winning is fun, and we love to have fun.”



**Savannah Campbell**, junior center: “I’d say how close we are and the bond we have and how hard we work and how competitive we are. The consistency of doing that all year has gotten us to where we are today.”



**Grace Pyle**, senior guard: “I think just our mentality every day of competing with one another and appreciate each other. Be our best selves every day, and that’s 1 through 13 (players). That’s not just the five (seniors). Even players who don’t get minutes every night, they are a big part of the success, pushing us in

practice. I give a lot of credit to them, too.”



**Alba Lozano**, senior forward: “Our connection, and we want to be the best version of ourselves every day. And we’re willing to work hard for it.”

**Amanda Davied**, head coach: “For me, the thing I’ve noticed the most about this group is they don’t complain. They’re not angels—they do complain a little bit – but they don’t complain like we have in the past. We’ve worked on having gratitude, not about the basketball part but about who you get to be around every day and the things we’ve been given. We’re very fortunate here, and I think we need to always be recognizing that, all the opportunities we’ve had. And I think they are also very selfless. This group does a good job of sharing the leadership. We say leadership in every locker, and I think player-led teams are way better. We have leaders in different ways in all 13 in that locker room.”



**Kelby Fritz**, assistant coach: “The character of every kid, it’s different. It’s hard to put into words, but they care about each other on a different level.”



**Duston Green**, assistant coach: “Just how they come together every day on and off the court. There’s no real jealousy. They love to pick each other up. It’s not every day that you get to step in and get an opportunity to play at a really high level and compete nationally. But regardless of their role, everybody comes here and plays her role.”



**Max Olsan**, assistant coach: “I think everybody shows up the same every day. It gets to be really hard; it gets to be a long season, but when you have our seniors teaching the freshmen ... it’s a special group, and you don’t get that everywhere. The ability to show up the same every day, keep your head down and just work, it’s gotten us this far.”



Pittsburg State women's basketball coaches Kelby Fritz, Max Olsan, Amanda Davied and Duston Green (left to right) discuss strategy during the Central Region championship game on March 17 at John Lance Arena. COURTESY DEREK LIVINGSTON / PSU SPORTS INFORMATION DEPARTMENT

New coaching staff meshes well for Gorillas

By Jim Henry  
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Pittsburg State’s women’s basketball roster was dominated by veteran players for this season.

However, coach Amanda Davied had to hire an entirely new staff after Jacob Roark left to become coach at Faulkner and Luke Huddleston exited to become an assistant at Columbus State.

It’s pretty amazing how well new assistants Kelby Fritz, Duston Green and Max Olsan have meshed with each other and Davied and directed the Gorillas to a school-record 32 victories entering this week’s Elite 8 in Pittsburgh, Pa.

“I would say probably we tend to cover up each other’s downfalls in some way or another,” Fritz said with a laugh. “It’s the positivity that everybody has. It’s been fun. It’s an awesome staff to be a part of.”

“I think we all really respect each other and know that we’ll get our work done,” Olsan said. “We can’t tell the kids to show up every day and work if we don’t show up every day and work. It’s what we do.

“Coach Davied is awesome, just listening to everybody’s ideas and willing to take criticism, take input. Maybe we should try this, maybe we should try that, she’s always open to that. And at the end of the day, it’s her team and she brought us all here. We believe in her and her vision.”

“It’s been awesome,” Green said. “We all have our differences, which is what I feel like really helps us come together. Every day, somebody is a good cop and somebody is a bad cop. That also keeps the players on their heels to where they can’t come in and try to buddy-buddy anybody. Any given day you can be held accountable by everybody.”

Fritz knew all about Pittsburg State and the MIAA, having played three years and coached six years at Missouri Southern.

Green came to PSU from Arkansas-Fort Smith, and Olsan arrived after being an assistant at Boone (Iowa) High School.

Timing played a big role in the hiring of Green and Fritz.

“My friend Elena Lovato had told me about Coach Green before, and I didn’t make the move at the time,” Davied said. “The timing of Luke leaving in August, but I felt really comfortable because I had Max, who I had interviewed, so I knew we had somebody.

“But when I got talking to (Green) and talked to his references, it was like he could really help us in some areas. He has eight years of experience on the women’s side and had been around the collegiate level his whole life.

“Same with Fritz, it was complete timing. She would have never left Missouri Southern to come here

before, but the timing that she went and tried Division I (as an assistant at Indiana State) and she and I had a relationship of working against each other. Just the timing of that ... it feels to me like everybody is meant to be here for a purpose, and everybody is carrying their own weight.”

The circumstances were different for Olsan.

“We put it on Twitter that we’re looking for a GA,” Davied said. “He actually already had his master’s, and he had some experience with social media and video work. ... He was doing individual skill workouts with a really popular guy in Iowa, Shane Hennen. We needed a social media guy. He was a blessing in disguise for all those reasons.

“Just awesome people,” Davied said. “The challenge was to come in and hold our kids accountable at a really high level, and we did that as a group. It’s not that we have bad kids, but we had some complaining, some little things like that. Having that whole staff mentality of not giving them a way out on stuff really got these kids who were pretty good to go to the next level. I credit these guys a lot for what they have brought to our program with their past experiences and what they think.

“At this point, we have a killer staff and killer players. I’m so blessed to be around all of them.”



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Pittsburg State's players and coaches introduce themselves to the youngsters at the Estelle S. Campbell Boys and Girls Club in Pittsburgh, Pa. JIM HENRY / MORNING SUN STAFF

# 'They were just having fun'

By Jim Henry  
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PITTSBURGH, Pa. -- On the eve of the NCAA Division II Elite 8, Pittsburg State's players and coaches spent part of the day serving as coaches.

The Gorillas and the other seven teams in the field worked with elementary and middle school students at the Estelle S. Campbell Boys and Girls Club as part of the NCAA's community service projects.

The hour-long session for the Gorillas included working on ballhandling skills, footwork drills, games of dribble knockout, relay races while dribbling the ball and a game of Simon Says that lasted longer than anticipated.

"Honestly, the energy of the kids," senior guard Hannah Nilges said. "They were ready to go from the beginning. I think we fed off of their energy, too. They were pretty excited."

"It's just really cool seeing different communities," senior forward Sydney Holmes said. "Those kids are awesome, and they are very talkative, kind of different from our kids' camp. We had to get them warmed up a lit-



Pittsburg State's Clara Swearingen works with a girl on ballhandling technique on Sunday morning at the Estelle S. Campbell Boys and Girls Club in Pittsburgh, Pa. JIM HENRY / MORNING SUN STAFF

tle bit before they start talking to us. But it was a good experience."

One drill taught the kids how to do a jump stop on the yellow line after dribbling. One boy not only did a jump stop on the yellow line but also on the green line that was five feet closer. Perhaps he has a future

in track and field.

"They were just having fun," Nilges said. "I asked them if they wanted to play a game, and they were like 'No, there's too many of us.' But then they were all for it afterwards."

Nilges also served as the leader for Simon Says.



Pittsburg State assistant coach Duston Green oversees the final three kids remaining in dribble knockout. JIM HENRY / MORNING SUN STAFF

"They were pretty good," Nilges said. "They actually impressed me. I was running out of what to even do with them. That was

fun. Sometimes you have to get simple, and that actually works."

"I remember when we were doing Simon Says, a boys was like

"Can we do a basketball game?" "Holmes said. "Then by the end, he came up to me and he said 'Never mind. That was really fun.' "



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# Power conferences fill Sweet 16 bracket



Florida's Alijah Martin celebrates after his dunk in the Gators' 77-75 victory over two-time defending champion UConn on Sunday afternoon in Raleigh, N.C. (AP PHOTO/CHRIS CARLSON)

By JOHN MARSHALL  
AP Sports Writer

Years of bracket chaos have given way to the year of the power conference. Cinderella is staying home this time. The Sweet 16, a popular destination for bracket-busting mid-majors, will be made up entirely of teams from power conferences, a first since the bracket expanded to 64 teams in 1985. Not a St. Peter's or Loyola Chicago in the bunch. Not even a Butler or Gonzaga. The bracket was set up for this following a chalky first round, when the top four seeds went a combined 16-0 for the sixth time ever. Two No. 12 seeds got through to the second round and one 11. They all lost. Highest seed to reach the Sweet 16: No. 10 Arkansas. Everyone else is 6 or higher, with all four No. 1 seeds and three of the four 2s (sorry St. John's). There will be four conferences represented at regional sties in San Francisco, Newark, Indianapolis and Atlanta. That's the fewest in NCAA Tournament history and a far cry from the record of 11 (three times). Speaking of records,

the SEC racked up a trio of 'em. First, 14 teams made it into the bracket. Record. Then, six teams lost in the first round. Record. Now, seven SEC teams are in the Sweet 16. Sweet record. "We have worked hard as a league to get where we are this year and it's always tough," Tennessee coach Rick Barnes said. "But I would like to think even as fans that we would all have each other's back this time of year and then we can go back to what we normally do." The other conferences — all three — fared fairly well as well. The Big Ten was the early big bracket winner, becoming the first league to go 8-0 in the first round and stretched it to 10-0 until BYU knocked off Wisconsin. Four teams were bumped out in the second round, but Michigan State, Michigan, Purdue and Maryland are feeling sweet. The new-fangled Big 12 also represented itself well, matching a league record set in 2002 by landing four teams in the Sweet 16. Arizona is new to the Big 12 while Houston and BYU joined last year, so there were better odds than just a few years ago. Even



Duke forward Cooper Flagg drives past Baylor guard Robert Wright III during their NCAA Tournament second-round game Sunday in Raleigh, N.C. (AP PHOTO/STEPHANIE SCARBROUGH)

so, four teams — with Texas Tech — gives the league a chance at three national champions in the past five years. The ACC, maligned by a rough early March start, has one Sweet 16er and it's a good one. Duke and fabulous freshman Cooper Flagg were one of the favorites to win the national title to open the season and still look that way after toying with its first two NCAA Tournament opponents. "For us to win by this margin, I think this speaks to the level of killer instinct that our guys have, the competitiveness and the connectivity," coach Jon Scheyer said after the Blue Devils' 89-66 win over once-formidable Baylor. One thing is for certain: there won't be a three-peat. The first repeat champion since Florida in 2006-07, UConn kept the dream alive with an opening win over Oklahoma. The bid to join John Wooden's UCLA teams as college basketball's only three-peaters came to an emotional end on Sunday with a 77-75 loss to top-seeded Florida. "We're a passionate program," UConn coach Dan Hurley said, twice stopping to compose himself. "The players play with it. I coach with it. You're always (expletive) drained when it's over." The passion this year has been in the power — conferences.

## Florida ends UConn's bid for 3-peat

By STEVE REED  
AP Sports Writer

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — For 30 minutes, UConn showed the mettle and toughness that delivered back-to-back national championships for Dan Hurley, outplaying top-seeded Florida in the second round of the NCAA Tournament. And then Walter Clayton Jr. took over. The Gators' first-team All-America guard scored 13 of his 23 points in the final eight minutes on Sunday, including two crucial 3-pointers down the stretch, and Florida rallied to a scintillating 77-75 victory over the Huskies, ending UConn's pursuit of a third straight title. Florida (32-4) advanced to the Sweet 16 for the first time since 2017 and will play Colorado State or Maryland in the West Region semifinals in San Francisco. "This is a great win for our program," coach Todd Golden said. "The time was now for us to take that next

step. Again, Florida basketball, back where it belongs. Being in the Sweet 16 is a great step in the right direction. ... We made winning play after winning play down the stretch in the last six minutes." There's little doubt about that. But they also had help from the Huskies, who made some uncharacteristic mistakes, including twice allowing the Gators to corral offensive rebounds off missed free throws, resulting in four second-chance points. The Huskies (24-11) came in with modest outside expectations as a No. 8 seed but led for most of the second half. During his post-game news conference, Hurley struggled several times to hold back tears. "This was just historic run that these guys have been on and the guys that have worn the uniform the past couple years," Hurley said. "If it's going to come to an end for us, I wouldn't have wanted it to be in a game where



Florida guard Walter Clayton Jr. shoots over Connecticut forward Alex Karaban during their second-round game in the NCAA Tournament on Sunday afternoon in Raleigh, N.C. (AP PHOTO/STEPHANIE SCARBROUGH)

we lost to a lower seed. "There's some honor, I guess, in the way that this went down." UConn was seeking to become the first team to three-peat since UCLA's run of seven straight titles from 1967-73. The Huskies won the 2023 title in Houston and last year in Glendale, Arizona, joining Duke (1991-92) and Florida (2006-07) as the only schools to win back-to-back since the Bruins' run under John Wooden. Florida entered the game as a 9 1/2-point favorite and ranked No. 1 in KenPom's adjusted offensive efficiency by scoring 128.9 points per 100 possessions, and the Gators of the powerful Southeastern Conference joined fellow 1-seed Duke as the

only teams to rank in the top 10 on both sides of the ball, making them a popular pick to cut down the nets. But the Huskies' defense stymied Clayton and company for most of the game, holding Florida to 35% shooting through the first 30 minutes to build a 52-46 lead. The Gators chipped away and then Clayton showed why he's one of the best players in the country. He made a 3 from the right wing with 2:54 left to put Florida ahead 62-61, and teammate Will Richard followed with a steal and dunk. Clayton's 3 from the same spot with 1:06 left made it 70-64 — part of a 14-3 run that gave Florida an eight-point advantage with 40 seconds left.

## Washburn qualifies for men's Elite 8

By Jim Henry  
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There's also an MIAA representative in the NCAA Division II men's basketball Elite 8 this week. Washburn, the regular-season conference champion, is the No. 4 seed in the tournament in Evansville, Ind., after breezing through the Central Region tournament on its home floor. The Ichabods (29-3) play fifth-seeded and Southeast Region champion Lenoir-Rhyne (29-5) at 8:30 Tuesday night. No. 10 Lenoir-Rhyne made the Elite 8 for the first time thanks to a 76-74 overtime victory over UNC Pembroke. This is Washburn's fourth appearance in the Elite 8 in school history and the first since 2001. That season, coach Bob Chipman's Ichabods lost to Kentucky Wesleyan 72-63 in the championship game in Bakersfield, Calif. The Ichabods, who were upset by Central Oklahoma in the quarterfinals of the MIAA Postseason Tournament, met little resistance in the regional with victories over Harding 85-57, Concordia-St. Paul 94-78 and Minnesota State-Moorhead 93-65. Washburn guard Ja-

cob Hanna was named the region's most outstanding player after scoring 56 points in three games. Teammates Andrew Orr and Jack Bachelor joined him on the all-tournament team. The Ichabods' 29 victories are tied for second-most in school history behind the 1987 team that won 35 games and the NAIA national championship. OTHER GAMES Nova Southeastern (33-1) is the top seed and plays Assumption (22-9) in a quarterfinal game Tuesday night at 6. The Sharks are in the Elite 8 for the fourth straight year (132-5 combined record) and are looking for their third consecutive championship game appearance. They lead Division II in scoring (102.8 points per game), and all five starters average at least 12.1 points per game. Assumption won the East Regional as the No. 6 seed, capped by a 97-90 victory over fifth-seeded St. Thomas Aquinas. The afternoon session on Tuesday has third-seeded Dallas Baptist (33-4) vs. Lake Superior State (30-6) at noon and second-seeded West Liberty (30-4) vs. Cal State Dominguez Hills (28-5) at 2:30.

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