

Daily

Sports

Men's basketball takes on Temple looking to end 4-game skid

by Andrew Morrison
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Through six conference games, the UConn men's basketball team has one win. One.

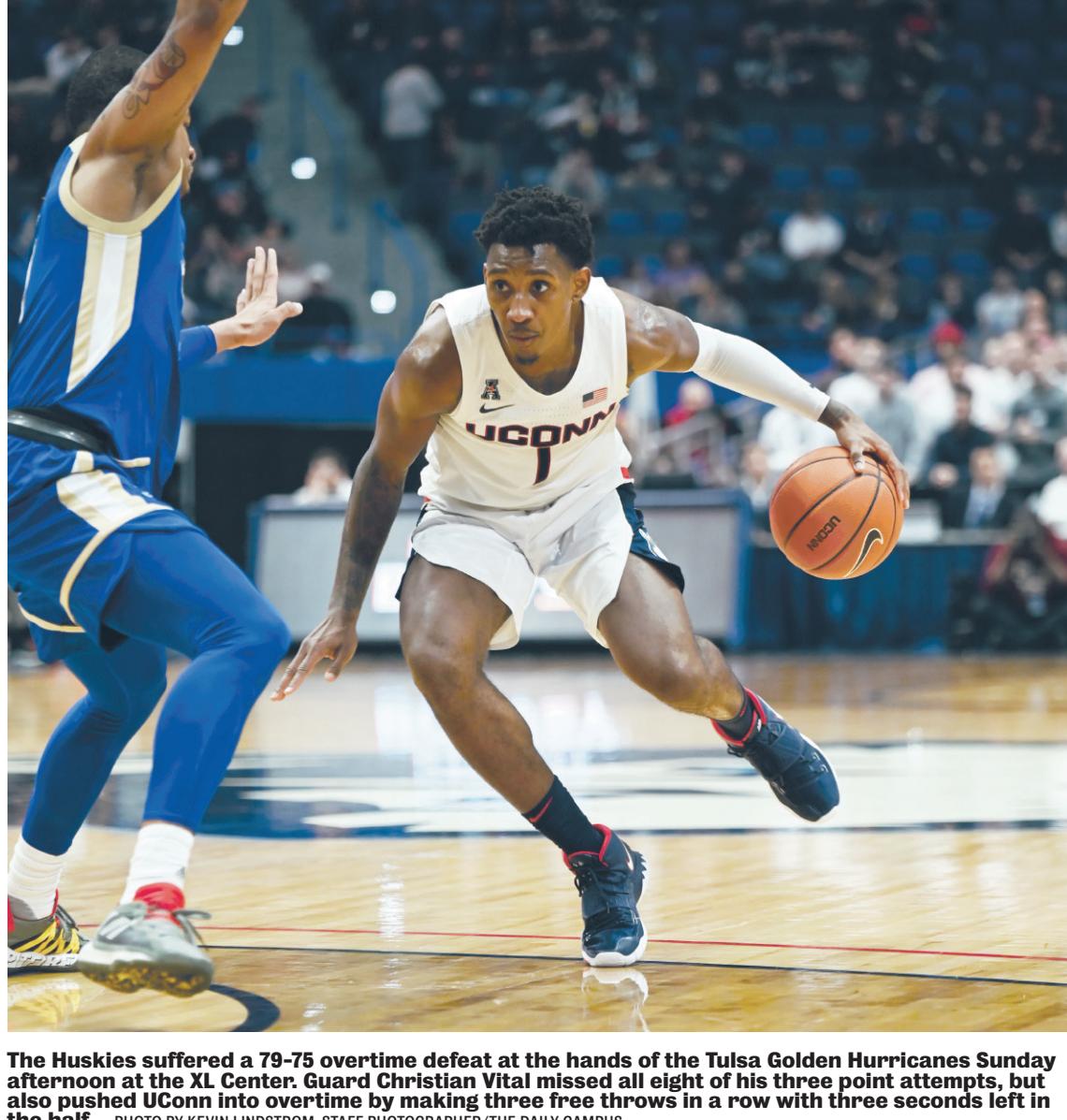
The Huskies have lost four in a row. The competition has been tough, sure. There have been more than a few devastatingly close losses. But there's no getting around the fact that it's been a nightmarish start to conference play for UConn — the worst since it joined the conference.

"I don't think I've ever seen a team go through a four-game stretch like this," head coach Dan Hurley said after Sunday's loss. "It's been a brutal-ass period."

The good news is that UConn (10-9, 1-5 The American) gets to return home on Wednesday, considering the Huskies remain winless (0-4) in true road games this season. Since Hurley arrived at UConn, his teams have gone just 5-18 away from home. By comparison, UConn has five wins at Gampel Pavilion this season alone.

The other good news is that Temple (10-9, 2-5 The American) is weaker, on paper at least, than any team the Huskies have faced during the current four-game losing streak. But the Owls come in equally hungry for a win, having dropped all three contests since their upset victory over then-No. 16 Wichita State.

If the Huskies hope to come away with a win, it'll need to happen on the defensive end. Temple has the second-lowest scoring offense in the conference (67.9 points per game) while UConn has quietly transformed into one of the strongest defensive teams in the country, sitting at No. 34 nationally in defensive efficiency.



The Huskies suffered a 79-75 overtime defeat at the hands of the Tulsa Golden Hurricanes Sunday afternoon at the XL Center. Guard Christian Vital missed all eight of his three point attempts, but also pushed UConn into overtime by making three free throws in a row with three seconds left in the half. PHOTO BY KEVIN LINDSTROM, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Shutting down the Owl offense begins with silencing the two-headed beast of the Temple backcourt, senior Quinton Rose and junior Nate Pierre-Louis, who combine for over 26 a game. Rose has the third-most career points in the history of The American, trailing former UConn guard Jalen Adams by 61 points for second place.

Temple is led by first-year head coach Aaron McKie, who took over for long-time coach Fran Dunphy after last season. McKie played at Temple and served as an assistant coach for five seasons before taking the helm this year.

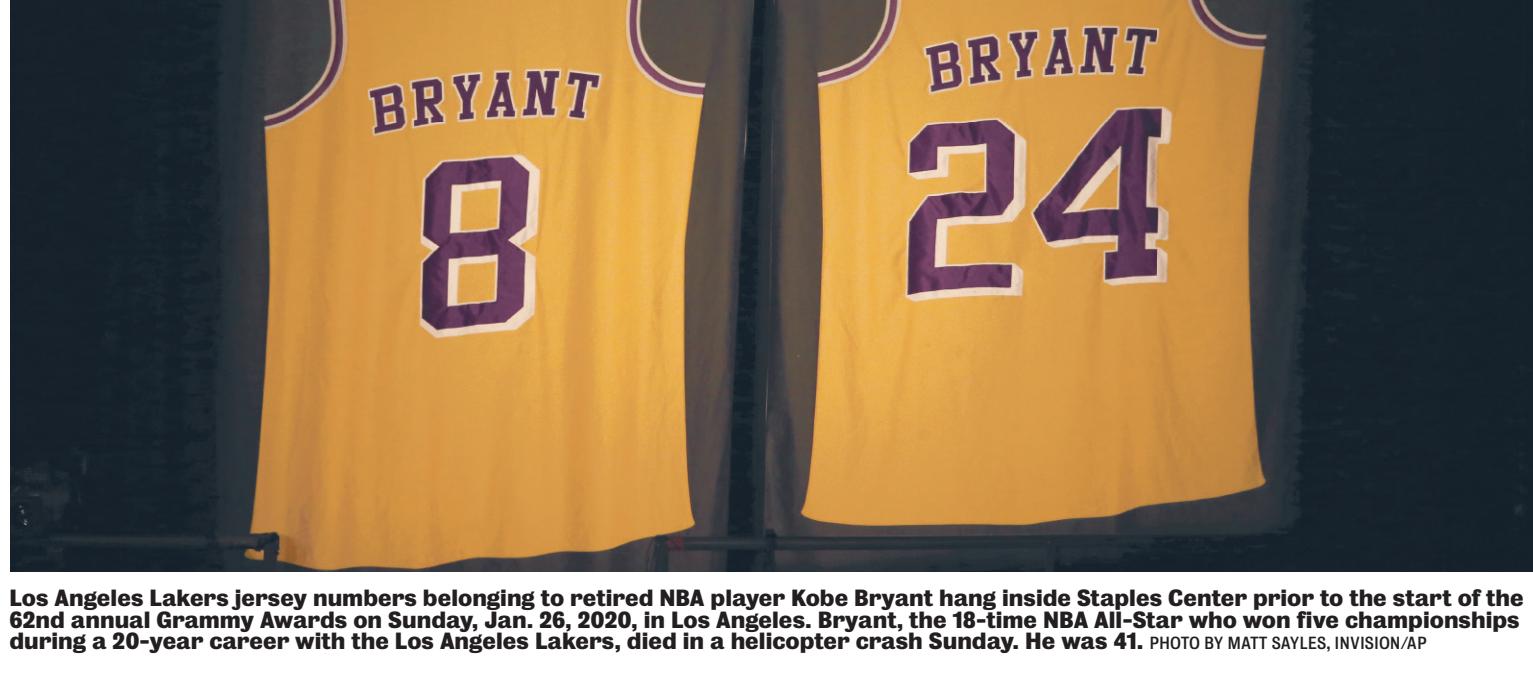
On the UConn side of things, the loss of sharpshooter Tyler Pol-

ley has had an even larger impact than feared, as the Huskies' floor spacing and long range shooting has crumbled since his season-ending injury. UConn is just 20 for 83, or 24%, from 3-point land during the four-game slide.

See TEMPLE, p. 11

See WICHITA, p. 11

Kobe Point/Counterpoint: 8 or 24?



Los Angeles Lakers jersey numbers belonging to retired NBA player Kobe Bryant hang inside Staples Center prior to the start of the 62nd annual Grammy Awards on Sunday, Jan. 26, 2020, in Los Angeles. Bryant, the 18-time NBA All-Star who won five championships during a 20-year career with the Los Angeles Lakers, died in a helicopter crash Sunday. He was 41. PHOTO BY MATT SAYLES, INVISION/AP

by Kevin Arnold,
ASSOCIATE SPORTS EDITOR,
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and Danny Barletta,
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On Sunday, the world lost a basketball icon when Kobe Bryant, his daughter Gianna and seven others were killed in a tragic helicopter accident. Bryant is one of the only athletes in any sport to make two

different jersey numbers so popular, wearing No. 8 for the first 10 years of his career before switching to No. 24 for the final 10. He excelled while wearing both so much that the Los Angeles Lakers retired both in 2017, the only player in league history to receive such an honor. To honor him today, we will debate which version of Kobe was better: 8 or 24.

Arnold:

When I think of Kobe Bryant, I think of him as the absolute face of the Lakers and with No. 24 on his back. There's no doubt he was great in No. 8, but Shaq was also in town for a stretch including all three titles. Kobe willed the Lakers to two championships in the post-Shaq era, winning Finals MVP in each. Oh, and his one

and only league MVP came in his second season in wearing no. 24. Kobe went to the All-Star Game 10 times, was named to the All-Defensive 1st team five times and the All-NBA 1st team seven times, all in the second half of his career. Mamba was never more Mamba than when he wore no. 24.

Barletta:

No. 24 Kobe was amazing,

but I think no. 8 Kobe, also known as "Frobe" due to his afro hairstyle, was even better. When I think of Kobe wearing no. 8, so many of his most iconic moments and highlights come to mind: dropping 55 on Michael Jordan, hitting a then-record 12 3-pointers in a game, the classic buzzer beater over the Phoenix Suns in the playoffs and of course, the 81-point game. Young Kobe was so dynamic on the court and made plays that made you go, "Wow," something that didn't happen as much in the latter half of his career. Also, we shouldn't penalize him for having a Hall-of-Fame teammate in Shaq for his first three titles. People always say Kobe was carried to those titles by Shaq, but that wasn't really the case. He averaged over 25 points per game in those three championship runs. Yes, Shaq won the MVPs of the Finals, but Kobe was just as much the reason they were there. He consistently played at the same level as Shaq in the rounds leading up to the Finals, even outplaying him in some series like the 2001 Western Conference Finals. Kobe was just as important to the three-peat as Shaq, and he did it wearing No. 8.

See KOBE, p. 10

THIS WEEK IN UCONN SPORTS

Men's Basketball



1/29, 7 p.m.

Philadelphia, PA



1/30, 7 p.m.

Gampel Pavilion

1/31, 7 p.m.

Durham, NH

INSTAGRAM OF THE DAY



@uconnwbb

let's all just go back to being friends

TWEETS OF THE DAY



Safid Deen

@Safid_Deen

Andy Reid says he had a Cuban sandwich in his hotel when he got to Miami last night. Today: rice, beans and pork. "I'm all in. I'm ready," Reid says of the South Florida Cuban food. #SBLIV

Boomer Esiason

@7BOOMERESIASON

No joke, I'd bet a million bucks there is more than one #coronavirus case in NYC. Pay attention people.

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Hey Sean J: It's Super Bowl week?

by Sean Janos

STAFF WRITER

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Wait, is it actually Super Bowl week? I could hardly tell.

There is an obvious reason why there is less buzz around Super Bowl LIV than any I can remember. Sunday morning marked the end of the precious lives of Kobe Bryant, his daughter Gianna and seven other passengers of a helicopter that went down in Calabasas, California.

As a result, news outlets, sports and others have been focusing on mourning these deaths and celebrating the life of Bryant. Personally, I've found it difficult to write about anything besides Kobe this week.

At the Pro Bowl Sunday night, the NFL had a moment of silence in Bryant's memory. Packers players Davante Adams and Za'Darius Smith also specialized their touchdown and sack celebrations in Kobe's honor.

Super Bowl media day came and went Monday, with the only non-Kobe-related soundbyte coming from Tyreek Hill's impression of his quarterback.

"Kermit the Frog, sounds just like that," Hill said about Patrick Mahomes. He then joked that he wouldn't get the ball anymore if he kept poking fun at his quarterback. "I can't do that anymore. He won't throw me the ball anymore."

Lighthearted joking like this will help the world of sports heal following the tragedy.

Mahomes, who is typically referred to as a gunslinger, said to



Kansas City Chiefs' Patrick Mahomes, right, greets San Francisco 49ers' Jimmy Garoppolo during Opening Night for the NFL Super Bowl 54 football game Monday, Jan. 27, 2020, at Marlins Park in Miami. PHOTO BY MORRY GASH, AP

ESPN, "He made a big impact on my life for sure."

Those who know basketball know that Bryant, too, was a gunslinger on the court.

Other Chiefs players also described Kobe's impact on them.

"I had the opportunity to meet Kobe, and he's just an unbelievable person," Travis Kelce told Fox Sports. "You can't say enough about who he was and his impact."

"He's one of my biggest idols," Frank Clark, California native,

said to NFL.com. "The one person I looked to for inspiration and strength when going through what I was going through growing up was Kobe Bryant."

San Francisco 49ers players also explained to the media what the Black Mamba meant to them. Tight end George Kittle said that other than his parents, Kobe was the reason he played sports in the first place. In addition to football, Kittle played high school basketball in Norman, Oklahoma.

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Sunday saw UConn (10-9) lose to Tulsa (14-6) in overtime by a score of 79-75. The same ghosts came back to haunt the Huskies, once again finding it difficult to maintain their composure and effectively close out the game. Akok Akok played an absolutely enormous part in the Huskies even being in the game with his 13 points, seven blocks and seven rebounds.

Most importantly, however, was his screen to give Christian Vital an open look from beyond the arc, subsequently being fouled and tying it up from the free-throw line. James Bouknight also had a strong performance, putting up 16 points alongside Christian Vital's 11 points. Sidney Wilson also had a strong impact off the bench, putting up 12 points and grabbing seven boards. Despite their best efforts, however, Tulsa's bench presence was just too much for the Huskies. Martins Igbantu's 28 points and 10 rebounds, alongside Darien Jackson's 14 points, helped put the game out of reach.

No. 21 Houston beat South Florida (8-12) 68-49, once again behind the efforts of Dejon Jarreau, who put up 12 points, six assists and four rebounds. Fabian White Jr. was also able to put 11 points, and

"Just his mindset, the 'Mamba Mentality.' I wore the No. 24 in high school in my freshman and sophomore year because of him and I wore Kobe Bryant shoes because of Kobe Bryant. Every time I laced up my basketball shoes I felt like I had Kobe Bryant with me; I had a little part of him," Kittle said to Fox Sports. "I had his jumper, I had his fadeaway. The amount of hours I spent practicing that fadeaway from the corner, and I never made it! But I tried and I always thought I was Kobe. He was an icon. He was a hero of mine."

Richard Sherman was lucky enough to be close to Bryant.

"He was a friend of mine. He was a mentor. He meant a lot to this world, and he made a positive impact. There's nothing I can really say to quantify his impact on myself and on others," Sherman said to USA Today. "I'm gonna go out there and try to play some dominating ball just like he wanted. The 'Mamba Mentality' still lives on."

Super Bowl Sunday will mark exactly one week since Bryant's passing. In the world of sports, every athlete is connected to one another. They understand the hard work that it takes, and respect the toll it takes on your mind and body, no matter the sport.

Bryant's "Mamba Mentality," his dedication to his craft and his fearless competitiveness can be adopted by all athletes and applied to all sports. I'm excited to see who will ball out like Kobe this upcoming Sunday.

Caleb Mills bench presence once again proved to be a problem for the opposition, scoring 11 points.

The SMU Mustangs will look to continue their hot streak in conference and prove they are a force to be reckoned with as they take Cincinnati (12-7). Wednesday will see No. 21 Houston take on East Carolina (9-11) as they look to continue to climb higher in the rankings. No. 14 Memphis will look to bounce back against a solid UCF team, while UConn faces Temple with both looking to get back to winning ways. Finally, South Florida faces Tulane, with both still looking to get something out of their seasons.

MBB heading to Temple

TEMPLE, cont. from p. 12

Most of the team's veterans have been either ineffective or nonexistent, especially the backcourt duo of Christian Vital and Alterique Gilbert, who figured to be the team's leading scorers this season. Vital and Gilbert combined to shoot 5-for-22 in the overtime defeat to Tulsa, including 1-of-13 from beyond the arc.

"Five-for-22 with those guys, we won't win many more games this year if they don't play better," Hurley said after Sunday's loss. "If your freshmen are your best players in a game against a 5-1 conference opponent, it's gonna be hard to win."

Junior Josh Carlton has also seen his minutes dwindle, and it's not exactly hard to see why. Carlton has been held scoreless in back-to-back games, mostly due to tentative finishing at the rim, and has had numerous inexcusable lapses on the defensive end. Isaiah Whaley, when not in foul trouble, has provided a lift off the bench, but UConn needs Carlton, the reigning Most Improved Player of The American, to start playing like it.

"He's had a rough stretch, a lot of this game is mental. But in a game like that, where you're trying to beat a 5-1 team, you've had three excruciating losses ... it was disheartening," Hurley said about Carlton's performance on Sunday. "We got our ass kicked at center ... but it's also my fault. I've got to figure out a way."

The only reason that UConn has managed to stay competitive in the midst of the upperclassmen struggles has been the stellar play of the new guys. Akok Akok was the best player in a UConn uniform on Sunday, blocking seven(!) shots with 13 points. James Bouknight, who had a team-high 16, continues to thrive as the Huskies' best pure scorer. Jalen Gaffney has really come on as of late, earning crunch time minutes on Sunday over Gilbert.

"We've got to just move on and play," Bouknight said after Sunday's wdefeat. "We can't stay down too long and we can't sulk."

Wednesday's game begins at 7 p.m. at Gampel Pavilion.

AROUND THE AMERICAN

WICHITA, cont. from p. 12

Wichita State (17-3) were also able to beat UCF (11-8) 87-79 behind Dexter Dennis's 18 points and 11 rebounds. Temple fell to 10-9 after their loss to Pennsylvania by a margin of 66-59; AJ Brodeur's 19

points were vital for the Quakers, who now stand at 8-7. Also, Jayden Gardner's 27 points were

enough for East Carolina (9-11) to beat Tulane (10-9) by a score of 81-62.

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by Jonathan Synott

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Kemba Walker, PG, Boston Celtics:

This past week, the NBA announced its list of starters for the All-Star game, and it came as no surprise that UConn's own Kemba Walker made the list for the second straight time. It will be Walker's fourth straight All-Star Game appearance, voted the top backcourt player in the Eastern Conference by both the media and the players involved in the election process. He is joined by Trae Young, edging out players like Kyle Lowry and former Celtic Kyrie Irving for the starting roles. Over his last four games, he has done nothing but prove he deserves the honor. Leading his team to a 3-1 record, Walker has put up an average of 25 ppg, including 72 in his last two games combined. He has attained 5.2 apg and 3.5 rpg while only giving up six turnovers. During this span, he earned an incredible total plus/minus of +55. Just a game and a half back from No. 2 in the East, Walker and the C's hope to jump up to a higher seeding (currently No. 4) in the second half of the season.

UConn Alumni, USA Women's Basketball:

On Monday, four former Huskies took the court at the XL Center against their alma mater, but this time as representatives of the USA Basketball team. Both teams wore black bands during the game to honor Kobe Bryant and his daughter Gianna, who both passed away in a helicopter crash on Sunday. Both were fans of the UConn women's basketball program, and had been seen recently in attendance. Gianna



Boston Celtics guard Kemba Walker (8) reacts to a call during the first half of an NBA basketball game against the Memphis Grizzlies in Boston, Wednesday, Jan. 22, 2020. PHOTO BY CHARLES KRUPA, AP

Bryant was a talented AAU basketball player who aspired to be a future UConn Husky basketball player someday. Three Husky alumni started the game for USA. Leading the team in time played, Tina Charles had six points, nine rebounds and five assists in 22 minutes. Sue Bird had a solid nine points and three assists on 3-for-5 shooting in 20 minutes of play. Breanna Stewart had an off night, earning just three points while shooting 1-of-7 from the field, in her first live action since tearing her Achilles last April. She also had three assists, three

rebounds and a steal in 17 minutes. Recent alum Katie Lou Samuelson came off the bench for USA Basketball with two points on three shots. Husky Legend Diana Taurasi is rostered on the team but was out with back soreness and did not dress to play.

Andre Drummond, C, Detroit Pistons:

With trade rumors surrounding him as the Feb. 6 deadline approaches, Drummond continues to put up solid numbers while his team declines. The Pistons (17-31) are currently on a three-game losing streak. Drummond did not play two of Detroit's four games last week, but when he

did play, he averaged 17.5 ppg, 14.5 rpg and 3.0 apg. He had a great day on the glass Saturday against the Brooklyn Nets, grabbing a whopping 21 total rebounds (seven of those were offensive). He scored 20 points on 8-of-20 shooting and went 4-for-8 from the charity stripe. In that game, he played an astounding 40 full minutes and blocked two shots. The Pistons seem ready to move on from Drummond, a talent down low on a team destined for the bottom of the East this season. The Pistons are reportedly asking for a first round draft pick or a quality young player in

return for Drummond, who is getting paid 27 million dollars this year and another 28 million next year. With the asking price and the hefty contract in a guard-dominated league, interest at that price is low, but teams such as the Hawks, the Celtics and the Knicks have reportedly reached out to the Pistons to get a trade completed.

Jeremy Lamb, SG, Indiana Pacers:

A consistent starter for the current No. 5 in the East, Jeremy Lamb has quietly impressed this season. Over his last three appearances, Lamb has earned 16 ppg, including 28 last game, where he led the Pacers in scoring to a win over the Trail Blazers. In this span, he has also attained five rebounds, seven assists and only one turnover while shooting a nice 57.6% from the floor. The Pacers are 2-1 in their last three, and are only a game back from Lamb's former teammate Kemba Walker and the Celtics.

Shabazz Napier, PG, Minnesota Timberwolves:

Napier started out this year as a role player, coming off the bench, bouncing from team to team and never starting more than 10 times in a single season. Today, he seems to have found a home (at least for now) in Minnesota. He has started his last 20 games for the T-Wolves, and while he may not be the flashy scorer that his former teammate Kemba is, he has been putting up noticeable numbers. Over his last three games, Napier is averaging 9.7 ppg, 8.7 apg, 6.7 rpg and 2.0 spg. While team success is a different story (14th in the West), Napier is stuffing the stat sheet, something he had yet to do in his career.

Sports

Photo of the Day | Reunited and it feels so good



The UConn women's basketball team hosted the U.S. National Team for an exhibition game on Monday. There were five former Huskies on the roster, and in the end Team USA came out on top, winning 79-64. PHOTO BY KEVIN LINDSTROM, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

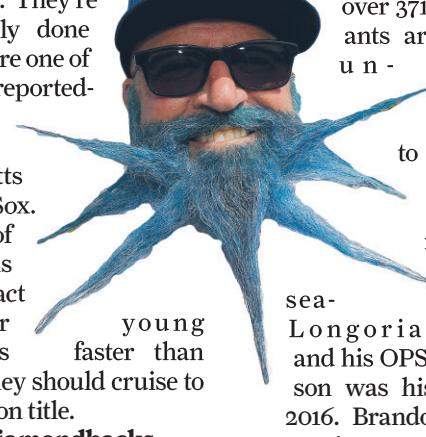
MLB Offseason Outlook: NL West

by Jorge Eckardt
STAFF WRITER
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The NL West just might be the weirdest division in baseball. They were the only division in baseball to not have a team win less than 70 games, but their second-place finisher, Arizona, was the worst out of all second-place finishers. The Diamondbacks finished the season 21 games back of the Dodgers, with the next biggest disparity being the Athletics finishing 10 games back of the Astros. So, let's get into what the West's 2020 season will look like. Spoiler alert: After the Dodgers, your guess is as good as mine.

Los Angeles Dodgers

It's still the Dodgers' division to lose. Los Angeles has won the West every year since 2014, and they're in no position to lose it anytime soon. Sure, they let Cy Young Award runner-up Hyun-Jin Ryu walk, but their rotation is still really solid with Clayton Kershaw, Walker Buehler, Kent Maeda, Julio Urias and Alex Wood. They also added Blake Treinen to their bullpen, who could be in line for a huge bounce-back season. But mainly, aside from Ryu they really didn't lose much, and no one else in the division added enough to catch them. They're not necessarily done either, as they're one of the top teams reportedly interested in acquiring Mookie Betts from the Red Sox. Unless some of the other teams add an impact player or their talent develops faster than anticipated, they should cruise to another division title.



Arizona Diamondbacks

The Diamondbacks are probably the only team that can rea-

sonably try to compete with the Dodgers in 2020. Their recent addition of Starling Marte helps their case, but at this point in Marte's career, he likely won't be that big a difference-maker. They also poached Madison Bumgarner from the Giants, but compared to their rotation from the majority of last season, which included Zack Greinke, they pretty much just tread water. Their offense is solid, led by 2019 breakout star Ketel Marte, David Peralta, Marte, Eduardo Escobar, Carson Kelly and offseason addition Kole Calhoun, but it's not one that's going to really make you afraid to face it. Really, the Diamondbacks are just fine. They'll probably win 81 and lose 81, give or take five games or so. They're not good, they're not bad, they're just there.

San Francisco Giants

The Giants are another one of those teams who aren't necessarily the worst, but they're not going to do anything impactful in 2020. They lost Bumgarner to the Diamondbacks and closer Will Smith to the Braves while also not making any serious additions. Aside from a couple of players here or there, most notably Mike Yastrzemski who had a really solid rookie season with an OPS of .852 and 21 home runs over 371 at-bats, the Giants are just old and uninspiring.

In 2020, Johnny Cueto will be 34, and has a grand total of 69 innings pitched in the past two seasons. Evan Longoria will be 34, and his OPS of .762 last season was his highest since 2016. Brandon Belt will be 32. Brandon Crawford will be 33. Tony Watson will be 35. Jeff Samardzija will be 35. Even Buster



In this Sept. 27, 2019, file photo, Colorado Rockies third baseman Nolan Arenado warms up before a baseball game against the Milwaukee Brewers in Denver. Rockies star Arenado said he feels disrespected after Colorado general manager Jeff Bridich acknowledged listening to trade offers for the seven-time Gold Glove winner. PHOTO BY DAVID ZALUBOWSKI, AP

Posey will be 33, as the anchor from those three even-year World Series victories has fallen far from his MVP form. Don't expect much from this team in 2020, and there's even a decent chance that they'll finish in last place.

Colorado Rockies

The Rockies' entire offseason has been completely taken over by the gripes of one rather important player: Nolan Arenado. Perhaps the best third baseman in the MLB, Arenado has made it clear that he's unhappy in Colorado, seemingly stemming from the fact that the Rockies are yet another team that isn't really trying to compete in 2020 or anytime soon. The feeling right now is that he's likely to be dealt, but even if they end up keeping him they're not the most exciting team out there. Like the Diamondbacks, they're just eh. Aside from Are-

nado, they have some solid offensive pieces like Charlie Blackmon and Trevor Story — David Dahl is pretty good — but aside from that their lineup is filled out with a bunch of just average bats like Daniel Murphy, Raimel Tapia, Ryan McMahon and Tony Wolters. Their pitching staff is also questionable, with their top starting being German Marquez, Jon Gray and Kyle Freeland and bullpen arms being Scott Oberg and Wade Davis. There's just nothing about the Rockies that screams playoffs. Could they finish above .500? I guess, but as of right now that seems like a bit of a stretch.

San Diego Padres

The Padres are actually the team that's the most intriguing to me on this list, and I think there's a real chance that they can finish above .500 for the first time since 2010. They have a bunch of

young talent that should only be getting better, such as Fernando Tatis Jr., Chris Paddack and Francisco Mejia. They recently acquired Tommy Pham from the Rays, who should be a serious impact bat in the middle of their lineup, Eric Hosmer can still hit a bit and Kirby Yates was the best relief pitcher in all of baseball last season. And of course, who can forget Manny Machado, who signed a mega-deal with the Padres last offseason? If they can acquire Mookie Betts from the Red Sox like they're rumored to have interest in, being the other top suitor along with the Dodgers, then it would add a serious dynamic bat to their lineup and make them a legitimate "worst to first" contender. They still need some work, but I think this is the beginning of the upswing for the Padres.

Remembering Kobe: 8 vs 24

KOBE, cont. from p. 12

Arnold:

It didn't really matter what number Kobe was wearing, he consistently dropped jaws and brought crowds to their feet. He banked in a game-winning 3-pointer over Dwyane Wade. He ruptured his Achilles tendon and made two free throws before hobbling off the court. He scored 60 points, including the go-ahead bucket, in his final game. He did all of that in the no. 24. The latter half of his career was also his transition into becoming a family man and being "a girl dad." Both Natalia and Gianna were born in the no. 8 era, but were likely too young to remember anything before Kobe made the swap to his original high school number. Gigi's love for basketball grew courtside of Lakers'

games, watching no. 24 school defenders and pass on the "Mamba Mentality" down the lineage.

Barletta:

There is no doubt that Kobe became a much more likeable guy over the second half of his career. Between his image off the court and his growing legend as one of the NBA all-time greats, people started to really like and respect him more while he donned no. 24. Kobe had some off-the-court issues and an oozing confidence that rubbed people the wrong way, but talking strictly on the court, no. 8 was just better. The end of Kobe's career was plagued by injuries and losing seasons, starting with the Achilles tendon rupture in 2013. He was never quite the same after that, as he suffered injuries to his knee and shoulder in the fol-

lowing seasons. Until his iconic 60-point farewell, we never really saw a truly dominant Kobe Bryant again. Meanwhile, while wearing no. 8, Kobe broke into the league as an 18-year-old kid straight out of high school and established himself as an All-NBA type player by age 20. He knew he could be one of the best players ever, and he consistently put in work to make that happen. He ended his time with No. 8 with arguably his best season, when he averaged an astounding 35.4 points per game and was an MVP snub. I believe that no. 8 Kobe was just slightly better than no. 24, but honestly, it doesn't matter. Kobe was amazing in both numbers and his legend as a player and person will live on forever. What else can I say? Mamba out.



In this June 7, 2009 file photo Los Angeles Lakers guard Kobe Bryant (24) points to a player behind him after making a basket in the closing seconds against the Orlando Magic in Game 2 of the NBA basketball finals in Los Angeles. Bryant died in a helicopter crash Sunday, Jan. 26, 2020. He was 41. PHOTO BY MARK J. TERRILL, AP

North American League of Legends begins again

by Ashton Stansel

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North America has never fallen quite so hard as they did at Worlds last year. While the LCS, which prior to last year was known as the NALCS, has never succeeded at Worlds, there had been promising signs. Cloud9 had spent years known as North America's best hope for international success, and other teams like TSM had managed to fight their way out of groups before. Most importantly, only a few months earlier at MSI, Team Liquid bested 2018 World Champions Invictus Gaming for second place, leading many to believe they'd be a force to be reckoned with at Worlds.

Unfortunately, they were wrong. Clutch Gaming, Cloud9 and Team Liquid floundered at Worlds, ending at 0-6, 1-2 and 3-3, all eliminated before playoffs even began.

And yet, coming into 2020, if you looked at the fans, you'd never see the failure. North American fans are used to failure; until 2018 — bar the first Worlds, which most don't count — a North American team had never made it past the quarterfinals. Most North American teams have never even made it out of groups, including fairly undisputed best North American player, Doublelift. No matter how poorly the teams did the year before, fans will always enter the season believing, beyond a doubt, that their team will be the one to win it all.

As teams hit the stage for the first weekend, expectations were high, and many players rose to the challenge. One standout was rookie player Johnson, Dignitas' starting bot laner. He played last year on Team SoloMid's Academy roster, but these first two games were his first games ever in the LCS, and he played extremely well, helping his team to a 2-0 week. He played Senna and Ashe, finishing the week with a 10-1-10 KDA.



Immortals versus Liquid at the North American League of Legends Championship Series Spring Finals Las Vegas (NA LCS Spring Finals Las Vegas) at Mandalay Bay Event Center in Las Vegas, NV, USA on 16 April, 2016. PHOTO COURTESY OF FLICKR

Another standout was Fly Quest's jungler Santorin. A veteran player with over half a decade of pro experience, despite only being 22, Santorin had struggled for several years after leaving TSM in 2015. He floundered in Europe, lasting just three weeks on H2K before being kicked after a 1-5 start. Santorin returned to North America in 2018 on Fly Quest, where he's been ever since. Despite a decent season last year, Santorin never looked as good as he did this week, ending with an 11-5-21 KDA on Rek'Sai and Lee

Sin. The key for Santorin will be avoiding another season of down-hill performances, but his Week 1 was certainly a good start.

Then there was Cloud9's mid-laner, Nisqy. An import from last year, the mid-laner was pretty good in 2019, helping Cloud9 to a second place in summer and a Worlds appearance. He started this season on what's quickly become his signature pick, Veigar, and bodied Team Liquid and their mid-laner, the ex-Cloud9 Jensen. In the team's second game, he played another favor-

ite, Zoe, and helped shut down another ex-Cloud9 mid-laner, this time GoldenGlue, helping guide his team to a 2-0 week that helped to quiet some of the doubters around the new C9 lineup. Nisqy's next test will be to prove that he can play things that aren't Veigar or Zoe, as his hero pool has seemed somewhat limited in the past.

Finally, there was the Player of the Week, Froggen. Another member of the 2-0 Flyquest lineup, Froggen was absolutely dominant, finishing the week 10-2-11

with an incredible performance over both CLG and Evil Geniuses. Froggen, who's always been a good player, showed another level this week, dominating his opponents and playing incredibly clean League of Legends as he led the underdog team to victory.

While these players' performances Week 1 cannot be understated, it's the weeks that are still coming that are going to show what teams will rise to the challenge and be able to fight to improve North America's reputation.

Bubble teams that will and will not do enough to make this year's NCAA Tournament

by Tamir March

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With the conference slate just about halfway done, we're beginning to start thinking and hearing about teams in the infamous "bubble." For those who aren't aware, this is referring to college basketball programs on the verge of making the 68 team NCAA tournament field. Due to this season's parity, the bubble is going to be larger than usual, along with some surprise omissions come selection Sunday. Teams in power five conferences have every opportunity to build their resume as they are likely playing one or two good teams every week, while lower conferences only have a few games a year to impress the committee. However, this talk is all a bit premature, as some of these schools may well have their bubble burst well before the conference tournament (Sorry UConn).

IN: Rutgers Scarlet Knights
I had a whole piece prepared for Illinois, but then I realized they are not on the bubble at all and are, in fact a near lock to make the tournament (barring disaster of course). Rutgers has been one of the bigger surprises of the season given that Rutgers basketball, or any of their athletic programs has not received a lot of (positive) national attention in recent years. They are currently nationally ranked as they boast a 15-5 record after navigating themselves very well through an early tough Big Ten slate. Rutgers has transformed the "RAC" into a fortress, boasting impressive home wins over Seton Hall, Wisconsin and Penn State. The Scarlet Knights have a balanced scoring attack with seven players averaging over seven points per game, including 12 points per game from sophomore standout Ron



Rutgers guard Geo Baker (0) reacts towards guard Caleb McConnell (22) after making the game winning basket during the second half of an NCAA college basketball game against Nebraska on Saturday, Jan. 25, 2020, in Piscataway, N.J. (AP Photo/Adam Hunger) PHOTO BY ADAM HUNGER, AP

Harper Jr. What is going to get Rutgers into their first NCAA tournament since 1991 is their defense, which ranks 9th in the country in adjusted defensive efficiency. They have held opponents to under 60 points in half of their games. If Rutgers picks up a couple road conference wins, which I believe they are fully capable of, they will be dancing come March.

OUT: Michigan Wolverines
The fact that Michigan would be anywhere near the bubble did not seem feasible after beating Iowa State, North Carolina and Gonzaga en route to a Battle For Atlantis championship. Since then, Michigan has a 4-8 record with two of those wins

coming against UMass Lowell and Presbyterian. A groin injury to Michigan's most versatile player, Isaiah Livers, is responsible for much of this downfall. Just look at their last game against Illinois in which Livers re-injured his groin. Before he exited the game the Wolverines had the game completely in control, but after coming out of the game following an elaborate dunk attempt, Michigan looked a shell of themselves before eventually falling to a last second jumper from Ayo Dosunmu. The extent of Livers' injury is unknown. To quite literally add insult to injury, it was announced Monday that senior point guard Xavier Simpson was suspend-

ed indefinitely for a violation of team rules. Without either of their best players, I don't see how Michigan makes the tournament, despite a few impressive early wins.

IN: Rhode Island Rams
Current UConn coach Dan Hurley's former employer is looking poised to make a surprise return to the NCAA tournament. The Rams have the best backcourt in the A-10 in Fatts Russell and Jeff Dowtin, who combine to average 33.5 points a contest. Russell is talented enough to take over any game, as was shown by a 32 point performance on the road against West Virginia, while also being second in the country in steals. That being said, Rhody has much

more than just their dynamic point guard. Double-double machine Cyril Langevine and Georgetown transfer Antwan Walker (#twansback) anchor a frontcourt that has the capability to dominate the glass against anybody in the country (even you Obi Toppin). Rhode Island has already passed two of the tougher tests the A-10 has to offer, beating St. Bonaventure and VCU on the road during this six game win streak they find themselves on. If their stars continue to play up to their abilities, combined with improved shooting from Jacob Toppin and Tyrese Martin, the Rams will almost certainly earn an invitation to the dance.

OUT: Virginia Cavaliers

The defending national champion Virginia Cavaliers will have a three season post-season stretch unlike any other. From losing in the first round as a one seed, to winning it all, to my projection: Not making it all this year. The talent was a question from day one, as the Hoos lost their big three of Ty Jerome, Kyle Guy and Deandre Hunter to the NBA. Virginia appeared to not miss a beat by winning their first seven games in typical Virginia low scoring fashion. Since that point they are 6-6 including a 29 point drubbing at the hands of underperforming Purdue. We know Virginia is good enough on the defensive end to win the tournament as long they have at least an adequate offense. The problem is they have nowhere close to that. Kenpom ranks them as the 257th ranked offense in terms of efficiency. That is absolutely horrid. A tough remaining ACC schedule which includes Louisville twice and a visit from Duke will make it tough for Virginia to have enough wins to make the tournament.