



Sports

Men's Basketball: Huskies head to No. 10 Villanova

by Jorge Eckardt
STAFF WRITER
jorge.eckardt@uconn.edu

After a commanding win over Providence on Tuesday, the UConn men's basketball team is headed down to Pennsylvania to take Villanova in the two schools' long-awaited first matchup of the season.

UConn (10-5, 7-5 Big East) has had a bit of a roller coaster of a season so far, largely due to injuries to multiple key pieces. In fact, it's actually worked out really well for UConn from a competitive standpoint that their first two matchups vs. Villanova were postponed, because they would have been without James Bouknight and Andre Jackson for both of them. Now, though, the team is relatively back to full strength, so the Huskies will get to run out their best possible lineup.

Villanova (13-3, 8-2 Big East) is doing its usual thing, pacing the Big East and remaining one of the best teams in college basketball. They are, however, actually coming off of a loss, but it was to Creighton, the team in second place in the Big East, so it's not totally crazy that happened. One interesting note though is that Villanova hasn't lost back-to-back conference games in over a calendar year, so UConn is going to have its work cut out for them if they want to break that streak.

The Wildcats aren't a particularly tall team, with no one on their roster standing taller than 6-foot-9, and only two of them have gotten minutes. They also have a combined 25 blocks on the season — a mark that is dead last



James Bouknight makes a pass during a home game in May of 2020. Bouknight and the Huskies will head down to face the No. 10 ranked Villanova Wildcats on Saturday. PHOTO BY MAGGIE CHAFOULEAS, ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

in the conference — and no one on their roster is even in double digits. For comparison, the Huskies have six players on their roster who are 6-foot-9 or taller, and Isaiah Whaley by himself has 44 blocks. The Huskies, in that cate-

gory, lead the conference on a per game basis by over a block a game.

However, what Nova lacks in height they make up for in scoring. The Wildcats are led by a starting lineup that has stayed consistent for 15 out of 16 games this season,

and all five starters are averaging over 10 points per game. They sit at third in the conference with 78.6 points per game as opposed to UConn's 71.3 which ranks seventh. They're also efficient, shooting 46.1% from the field which

ranks third in the league and 38.2% from 3, which ranks first. The Huskies are shooting 43.4% from the field and 35.5% from 3, and rank seventh and fifth in those areas, respectively.

Sophomore forward Jeremiah Robinson-Earl leads the charge, averaging 15.6 points per game this season on 50% shooting from the field and 32.1% shooting from 3. He's also the team's best rebounder, as his 7.3 boards per game also lead the Wildcats.

Senior point guard Collin Gillespie is right behind him, averaging 14.1 points per game on 41.2% shooting from the field and 37.6% from 3. Gillespie is the team's primary distributor, leading the team with 5.1 dimes a game, a mark that is second in the conference only to Xavier's Paul Scruggs.

Sophomore guard Justin Moore is second in the assists department with about 3.2 per game and third in scoring with 13.4 points per game. He does so on 43.3% shooting from the field and 33.7% from 3.

Senior forward Jermaine Samuels is fourth in the scoring department with 11.4 points per game, doing so shooting a clean 50% from the field and grabbing 6.4 boards, the second most on the team. While he's taken the fewest amount of 3s of the starting five this season, he's hit them at the highest clip, shooting 46.2% from behind the arc.

Redshirt junior guard Caleb Daniels rounds out the starting five, averaging 10.9 points per game on a really solid 45.7% from the field and 43.1% from 3.

Tip-off is scheduled for 1 p.m., and the game can be watched on FOX.

MHOC Preview: UConn set to face BU this weekend

by David Sandoval
STAFF WRITER
david.sandoval@uconn.edu

UConn looks to turn things around in their weekend matchup against No. 11 Boston University after their heavy 4-0 defeat against Providence, ending their three-game win streak. The icebus will make one last stop on the road on Friday before returning to the Freitas Ice Forum for Saturday's rematch.

According to head coach Mike Cavanaugh, he acknowledges that the Huskies (8-8-2) will have to put out a valiant effort against BU (8-2).

"It's gonna be a tremendous challenge for our team this weekend," Cavanaugh said. "They've been playing great hockey, taking series from Boston College and UMass ... They've been very consistent. They're gonna be certainly a formidable opponent, and we're gonna have to be on top of our game, for sure."

Looking at the opponents, the Terriers currently sit in the No. 2 spot in the Hockey East Power Index. Hosting the Huskies at the Walter Brown Arena, BU look to keep their three-game win streak, their most recent victory being 5-1 against Vermont. Sophomore and graduate forwards Jay O'Brien and Max Kaufman, respectively, will be players that UConn's defense will want to look out for,



UConn beats UNH 7-4 in the XI Center on Feb. 1, 2020. The Huskies will host the Boston University Terriers this weekend. PHOTO BY KEVIN LINDSTROM, PHOTO EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

as O'Brien will be fresh off a hat-trick in the same game, Kaufman assisting two of the goals.

As for the Huskies, they're only two places underneath the Terriers in the Hockey East Power Index, but with a 6.08 HEPI difference between the two schools. Aside from Jonny Evans continuing his form, leading the team with 12 goals and 10 assists and leading with 22 points this season, and the commendable efforts of Jachym Kondelik with 16 assists and Tomas Vomacka being a wall

between the goal, Vladislav Firstov is certain to miss out in the weekend series, Cavanaugh confirmed, following a knock he picked up in last week's game. Another player he doesn't expect to go on the ice this weekend is Hudson Schandor, but Cavanaugh said it will be a "game day decision" if the freshman forward is fit enough to play.

Both games will start at 4 p.m. on Friday. The game can be heard on ESPN 97.9 FM, and Saturday's home match will be televised on CW20.

Women's Basketball: UConn looking to stay hot during home stretch as they travel to face Xavier

by Benjamin Berg
STAFF WRITER
benjamin.berg@uconn.edu

her hot scoring stretch against Xavier and has a good chance to do so.

UConn's leading scorer, freshman guard Paige Bueckers (21.1 points-per-game) is also in the midst of a prolific scoring stretch. Bueckers has scored at least 19 points in eight straight contests, shooting an incredible 60% (27/45) from 3-point range. Against Xavier, Bueckers previously scored 19 points with nine assists in the win.

Defensively, UConn's top priority will be to slow down redshirt freshman Nia Clark, who's averaging 14 points-per-game on 44% 3-point shooting. Xavier is averaging an impressive 66.9 points-per-game for the season, but luckily for UConn, they are in the midst of a brilliant defensive stretch. In the past three games, the Huskies are allowing an average of 40 points-per-game and haven't allowed an opponent to score 60 points since Feb. 3 against St. John's.

The game will begin at 3 p.m. Eastern.

UConn Scoreboard

Men's basketball
Saturday



Upcoming Games



Men's Hockey, Sunday, 4 p.m.

Freitas Ice Forum



Softball, Friday, 11 a.m.

Fort Myers, FL

Instagram of the Day



@uconnwsoc

Tweets of the Day

Benjamin Berg
@bergwergy3030

BREAKING: the New York Yankees and OF Jacoby Ellsbury have come to an agreement on a 7 year contract extension worth double his previous annual salary. Sides came together quickly despite Ellsbury literally telling New York they were "making a mistake."

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Baseball: Huskies set to open season with series against No. 5 Virginia

by Conner Gilson
ASSOCIATE SPORTS EDITOR
conner.gilson@uconn.edu

After a red-hot start to 2020 that was cut short due to COVID-19, UConn baseball is finally back as the Huskies travel to Virginia to face off against the Cavaliers for their opening series. Head coach Jim Penders can't wait for his team to get back into action.

"I have never looked forward to a season as much as I've looked forward to this one," Penders said on a Zoom call with the media on Wednesday. "It's been the longest off-season of my life. For most of us, not playing a game since mid-March, it's been difficult. That lack of competition has been a strain along with a lot of other things with regard to COVID and our current situation. We're just chomping at the bit to get going and see a different uniform."

UConn heads into 2021 with some lofty expectations, entering as the preseason favorite to win the Big East Conference in their first year back after earning five of eight first place votes. Four Huskies also earned individual preseason honors, with Kyler Fedko selected as the Big East Preseason Co-Player of the Year while Christain Fedko, Reggie Crawford and Caleb Wurster were all placed on the Preseason All-Big East Team.

But for Fedko, who shares the Player of the Year honor with Tyler Sheddler-McAvoy of Seton Hall, this season isn't about the individual accolades, but what they can do as a team.

"With all these awards coming out, it's easy to lose sight of the team and bonds that we have as a community," Fedko said. "It's more staying



UConn Baseball takes home a 9-1 win against Central Connecticut State University on April 30, 2019. Kyler Fedko (pictured above) and the Huskies kick off their season this weekend. PHOTO BY BRANDON BARZOLA, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHY/THE DAILY CAMPUS

together and doing our thing and just doing what we know best. It's not really pressure coming into a new conference and being a favorite. It's just doing what we know how to do and everyone doing their job."

The younger of the Fedko brothers is UConn's best bat, slinging an impressive .412/.434/.627 line and leading the team in hits (21), runs scored (12) and homers (2) in his 13 appearances last season. He ended the year on a six-game hit streak and will look to carry that momentum into the new year with a tough first matchup.

Behind the sophomore, UConn has plenty of other pieces contributing to their offensive firepower. Captain Chris Winkle is back for a fifth year after slinging .348/.404/.457 last season, as well as Freshman All-American Reggie Crawford who

led the team with 16 RBIs and junior Erik Stock who put together an absurd .484/.556/.581 line in nine appearances.

On the mound, Ben Casparius will finally get to play in a Huskies uniform after transferring from North Carolina last season. The junior from Westport, CT will step in as the Huskies ace and is the No. 1 prospect in the Big East according to D1 baseball.com. And in the matchup between the Huskies' top-hitter and ace pitcher, it seems Casparius has the edge early.

"I always have to face him at 8 or 9 in the morning, 30 minutes after waking up with an energy drink popped and minimal food," Fedko said. "It is the worst experience ... He probably has struck me out 10 out of the last 12 at-bats. He makes me

so mad ... I'm really glad that I don't have to face him again."

Matching up against a tough opponent in Virginia this weekend though, all facets of this UConn team are going to have to be firing on all cylinders if they want to repeat their early success from last year.

The Cavaliers are returning several key players from 2020 that should allow the team to compete in an incredibly deep Atlantic Coastal Conference. Virginia sat at 14-4 before last season was cut short, and with these pieces back are once again NCAA tournament hopefuls.

UVA's best hitter is second-year freshman Chris Newell, who slashed a .407/.545/.729 line, adding 24 hits, a team-best 20 RBIs and four homers in 18 starts. Behind Newell, seven other batters hit over .300 in

their shortened season, highlighted by Zack Gelof. The sophomore heavy-hitter tallied 22 hits, a team-high six doubles and five home runs, and 18 RBIs on the year. There is talent up and down the lineup that will force UConn to stay on top of their game in each at-bat.

Pitching has been the downfall of these Virginia teams in recent years, but they seem to have finally found a solution in Andrew Abbott and Griff McGarry.

After going undrafted in the 2020 MLB draft due to a high asking price, Abbott is back for another year. In nine appearances (mainly in relief) for the Cavaliers, the junior went 3-0 and looked dominant, boasting a 1.35 ERA and striking out 18 batters in 13.1 innings. Abbott may transition to a starting role this season and pitch close to 100 innings, making him a name to watch in Virginia's rotation.

McGarry meanwhile, is the ace from last season who also went 3-0 in his four appearances, putting together an impressive 1.35 ERA and striking out 31 batters though 20 innings. He also tallied 19 walks on the season, something the Huskies' savvy lineup can pick up on early.

This series will be a through one to start the year for UConn, but Penders says this is the competition they must face if they hope to go somewhere come postseason.

"Ultimately, we want to win a national championship," Penders said. "In order to be the best, you have to beat the best ... They expect to win, no matter who we're playing."

This weekend series kicks off a 17-game road stretch for the Huskies, with games set for Friday and Saturday at 3 p.m. and 1 p.m. respectively, before it wraps up with a Sunday game at 1 p.m. All three games can be watched through the ACC Network.

Softball: Huskies look to showcase talent at FGCU invitational

by Cole Stefan
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
cole.stefan@uconn.edu

After a weekend invitational washed away by torrential rain, the UConn Huskies will look to play a full series in Fort Myers, Florida this weekend. This will be the third time in four years that the Huskies travel down in February to Fort Myers with the exception being in 2019.

Second-year head coach Laura Valentino will look to continue the momentum that was set last season into this season as the Huskies look to build off last season's 16-5 record, their best start since 1993. The team has many talents available at any positions from graduate students to a hefty freshman class.

Leading the charge is an experienced group of upperclassmen that could make this team dangerous for years to come. Senior Reese Guevarra had a solid day at the plate last weekend while juniors Aziah James and Sami Barnett (redshirt) brought the power and the speed.

Two impressive hitters who should continue to rake this weekend are seniors Olivia Sappington and Brianna Marcelino, both of whom hit close to .350 last year prior to the cancellation of the season.

The underclassmen should not go unnoticed though as sophomore Meghan O'Neill had a good day on the mound on Friday, surrendering four runs (three earned) on six hits, and freshman Jana Sanden knocked in a critical run to split the lead against Ohio in half.

Although none of these numbers will be in the record books, this was a good test to observe some of the future talent the Huskies have to offer.

While O'Neill started the first game of the season, the Huskies have an ace in Marybeth Olson, a senior whose 10 wins last season were extremely impressive as she accounted for over 60% of the team's total wins and struck out 80 batters. Look for those two to take the mound to kick off the weekend.



After 11 innings, UConn women's softball clinched a 2-1 win at home against the Quinnipiac Bobcats on April 30, 2019. Reese Guevarra (pictured above) and the Huskies kick off their season this weekend. PHOTO BY MAGGIE CHAFOULEAS, ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

The Huskies also have help in freshman Payton Kinney, who should pitch the third game of the weekend, and if she performs well, the Huskies will have a strong pitching tandem that will dominate opposing hitters.

The opponents, almost like last weekend, are formidable. None of them are ranked, but they should not be counted out of the picture just yet.

Northern Illinois went 7-15 last season, but some key players returning are Danielle Williams, a junior who hit .417 last season, and Bianca Barone, who led the team with 12 runs batted in. They also bring back junior Katie Keller, whose .394 batting average was second on the team. Sophomore Delaney Ostrowski, junior Amber Bumbalough and sophomore Sam Mallinder all had two wins last sea-

son on the mound.

This will be their first action of the season and their ninth game all-time against UConn. Northern Illinois leads the all-time series 5-3, but UConn will look to inch closer with a win this weekend.

Then there's Florida International. The Golden Panthers (3-0) swept Florida Atlantic and Winthrop last weekend and have a hot bat in junior Vanessa Gallegos, who hit .700 with a home run and picked up 10 RBIs. Behind her is senior Tori Jones, who batted .667 over the past weekend.

Their ace is junior Kendahl Dunford, who won both of her games and has an ERA of 1.27. The Golden Panthers also have options in Kallie Jones and Brooklynn Linemann, both of whom have one win combined.

Florida International leads the

all-time series 6-1, but the Huskies look to chop that lead down to size this weekend.

Finally, the host Florida Gulf Coast Eagles look to get stronger after a solid 19-8 finish last season. The Eagles (1-3) played a four-game set against the No. 24 UCF Golden Knights (formerly No. 21), picking up their lone win via a Taylor Bauman three-run home run in the third game of the series.

Bauman is mainly a pitcher, but in the one game she did pitch in, she picked up a complete game and limited the Knights to two runs. The senior's performance against the Knights garnered her A-Sun player of the week honors.

At the plate, the Eagles are led by senior Hope Hernandez and redshirt junior Farley Callaghan, both of whom batted .333 over four

games. Sophomore Jordyn Gendron bats .286 but is tied for the homerun lead with Bauman.

One thing to note here, the Eagles lead the all-time series 7-1 with the Huskies hoping to cut that deficit to 7-3 after the weekend.

The Huskies will play the Northern Illinois Huskies, Florida International Golden Panthers and host Florida Gulf Coast Eagles in five games over three days.

The Huskies will play Northern Illinois once at noon on Friday, then play Florida International at 2:15 p.m. on Friday and 4:15 p.m. on Saturday, followed by Florida Gulf Coast on Saturday at 6:30 p.m. followed by an 11:30 a.m. first pitch on Sunday.

Live streams will be available for games against Florida Gulf Coast only. They can be accessed via their YouTube channel.

Sports

Photo of the Day | Stay focused



Sophomore Lia Laprise attempts a pass during the women's lacrosse game against UMass Lowell on Feb. 21, 2020. PHOTO BY MAGGIE CHAFULEAS, ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Women's hockey powers towards playoffs

by **Karthik Iyer**
STAFF WRITER
karthik.iyer@uconn.edu

With Friday's game at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia canceled due to inclement weather, the UConn field hockey team lies in wait preparing for Sunday's home game against the University of New Hampshire. UConn is looking to carry over the momentum from their big 5-0 win against Hofstra in the season opener and continue their strong start to the season.

Last season, the UNH Wildcats averaged 1.83 goals per game on 12 shots with an on-goal shot percentage of 58.3%. In comparison, the Huskies averaged 5.0 goals per game on 23 shots with an on-goal shot percentage of 65.2%. This game should be a solid tune-up match for the Huskies who will need all their offensive firepower to be successful later in the season. Defensive discipline and sound offensive execution will be the key to limit the Wildcats' goal-scoring opportunities. The season opener proved that the UConn women still have a solid roster with veteran leadership and a host of talented new faces.

These new team members include Erin Daly from Yorktown/Lakeland, New York; Claire Van Den Noort from Baricum, Netherlands; Morgan Kaufman from West Lawn, Pennsylvania; Aiyo Young from Palm, Pennsylvania; Anna Horan from Limerick, Ireland and Ana Carney from Woodbridge, Connecticut.

These freshmen are coming into



The UConn field hockey team shutout Providence 3-0 at the George J. Sherman Family Sports Complex on Oct. 11, 2019. The Huskies host UNH this weekend. PHOTO BY SOFIA SAWCHUK, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

a UConn field hockey program that emphasizes winning culture and playing sound fundamental field hockey. Kourtney Kennedy, senior back for the Huskies and Big East defensive player of the week, was a force against Hofstra as she racked up two goals and an assist in the winning effort. Her defensive prowess also served to anchor the Huskies in the

big confidence boosting win.

A bored goalie is a sign of a stout defense. Junior goalie Cheyenne Spencer only had to make one save in the season debut. This level of team cohesion, crisp passing and overall team chemistry will be instrumental in racking up another potential win on the Huskies' home turf.

A big key to the game will simply

be creating many shot opportunities and controlling the time of possession. One of the telling losses last season against Maryland occurred due to UConn being outshot in creating chances on goal by a margin of 10 shots on goal to three in favor of Maryland. While this can be seen as an aberration, these games early in the season pose as learning experiences for the younger players so they can contribute with the veterans when games get tough and adversity rises against the other big conference threats.

Make sure to tune in on Husky Live to support the women's field hockey team in their quest to start the 2020-21 season 2-0 at 1 p.m. on Sunday, Feb. 21.

Women's Lacrosse Preview: UConn opens its season against Hofstra

by **Evan Rodriguez**
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
evan.2.rodriguez@uconn.edu

After an unexpected delay to an anticipated women's lacrosse season, the UConn Huskies are set to start their season on the road Saturday against Hofstra at 1 p.m. Due to travel restrictions to the Central Connecticut Blue Devils, the Huskies were unable to kick off their season Wednesday and are now forced to begin their season against a difficult Hofstra team.

Led by head coach Shannon Smith, Hofstra is coming off a close 10-9 win in their season opener against Saint Joseph's University on Wednesday. In that game, Hofstra had two hat tricks from Alyssa Parella and Grace Langella and two goals from Ariana Esposito. The team's defense looked great in that game and should prove a challenge to the Huskies in this upcoming matchup.

For the Huskies, they come into this game ranked fourth in the Big East Preseason Coaches'

Poll and will look to prove the doubters wrong in this matchup. Coached by 11th year head coach Katie Woods, the team is led by midfielder Sydney Watson and attacker Lia LaPrise, who were both named to the Preseason All-Big East team. Watson, the top goal scorer for the Huskies, returns this season after collecting 27 goals and a team-leading 49 draw controls. She will be essential to the Huskies' success this season. Lia LaPrise, who led the Huskies in scoring in 2020, will look to replicate her success this year in the Big East after a season performance that saw her place fifth in the country in assists and ninth in points per game. This game is also the debut for new assistant coach Kiley Anderson, who is coming to UConn after her tenure as a volunteer assistant coach at Yale University.

This game is the first matchup between UConn and Hofstra since March 3, 2009, when Hofstra topped UConn 12-8. The Huskies are looking forward to changing that narrative in this matchup.



The Huskies win against UMass Lowell 20-14 on Friday, Feb. 23, 2020. Sydney Watson (pictured above) and the Huskies kick off their season this weekend. PHOTO BY MAGGIE CHAFULEAS, ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

UConn Women's Soccer Preview: Huskies open their season against Rhode Island in the program's return to the Big East

by Sebastian Garay-Ortega
STAFF WRITER
sebastian.garay-ortega@uconn.edu

The UConn women's soccer team is set to open up its season against non-conference opponent Rhode Island on Sunday, Feb. 21 at 2 p.m.

This will be the first time the team will host a contest at its new home, the Joseph J. Morrone Stadium, and it'll hope to accompany this change in scenery with an improvement in overall performance. The Huskies finished last season with a 6-8-3 record, but failed to make both the AAC conference tournament as well as the NCAA tournament. Moreover, although they were crowned champions of the AAC in 2014 and 2016, over the past couple of years, they have failed to keep up with their conference rivals, and have been mediocre at best.

However, its return to the Big East conference after a nine year absence allows the team to begin a new chapter in a conference where it had its most success. They were crowned champions of the conference on two occasions, and were regular season champions eight times spanning back to 1995. Furthermore, they made the NCAA tournament a total of 28 times.

Head coach Margaret Rodriguez will be tasked with managing a very young squad, with a total of 11 freshmen and six sophomores. Despite this, she will be aided by the veterans in the squad such as forward Kess Elmore. The redshirt junior started all 17 regular season games last season, and led the team with four goals and six assists. Right behind her is fellow forward Yamilee Eveillard. The senior started seven of the 15 games she played, and finished the season with three goals.

The center back partnership is also something that can put Rodri-



The UConn Women's Soccer lost to East Carolina University in Dillon Stadium on Sept. 26, 2019. The Huskies kick off their season this weekend. PHOTO BY KEVIN LINDSTROM, PHOTO EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

guez at ease. Senior Melina Couzis and sophomore Jacqueline Harnett were a solid pairing at the back last season, both scoring one goal and assisting their teammates on two occasions.

Whereas the Huskies are set to open their season this weekend, the Rams traveled to Providence last weekend to take on the Friars in what would be their first loss of the season. Nevertheless, the scoreline can be quite deceiving: Rhode Is-

land held Providence to only three shots in the first half, and went into the half all square. Although Providence would ultimately dominate the second half, the defensive showing by head coach Megan Jesse's squad is something the squad needs to be wary of, as they'll have to find a way to break down a staunch defensive block.

The Rams come into the new season having finished with a 4-9-5 record last season. Junior midfielder

Rebecca D'Anna played all 16 games and was the focal point of the team, finishing the season with four goals. Junior forward Brooke Cavino proved to be deadly when given the opportunity, as she finished the 2019 season with three goals. Finally, Tali O'Leary is one of the most dynamic players on the squad; the sophomore can play either in the midfield or as a forward, and is one of the team's main playmakers. She finished last season with two goals and one assist.

Overall, the Huskies main objective will be to stifle the opposition from the start. The Rams will come in hungry to attain their first victory, and if UConn does not make a statement in the opening minutes, they will increase the confidence of the opposing team, something they cannot afford to do. Elmore and Eveillard will look to lead their squad to victory in UConn's long awaited return to the Big East.

Celtics Weekly Report: Floating around .500 and the need to move the ball

by Dylan Haviland
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
dylan.haviland@uconn.edu

Welcome back to another edition of our Celtics weekly report. This week we look at the continued struggles of the C's as they stand at 14-14, their lackluster defense against some of the league's best stars and one aspect of the offense that I believe must improve for the Celtics to win games.

Dealing With Mediocrity

The Celtics started this season 7-3, with impressive wins over the Milwaukee Bucks and Indiana Pacers. They looked like they could be the contenders fans believed they would be heading into the season, but then COVID-19 hit the team hard taking out bench players and crucially benching star Jayson Tatum. Since their great start, the Celtics have recorded a less than stellar 7-11 record, dropped to No. 5 in the East and currently sit only one game ahead of three teams with the possibility to fall all the way to No. 8. As if it couldn't get worse, the Celtics can't seem to win against the league's worst teams, with losses to the Pistons, Wizards and Hawks sending fans into a spiral of gloom. The promising start to the season has been lost, and we are left with questions as to chemistry and talent as the C's try to lift themselves back up to the top four teams in the conference.

Perhaps the biggest questions that have been asked are on Tatum's health following his bout with COVID-19. In a media conference before their Tuesday night win against the Denver Nuggets, Tatum commented on the lasting impacts of the virus on him, explaining, "I think it messes with your breathing a little bit." He continued on, clarifying that "I have experienced some games where, I don't want to say [I was] struggling to breathe, but, you know, you get fatigued a lot quicker than normal."



Atlanta Hawks forward John Collins (20) tries to steal the ball against Boston Celtics forward Jayson Tatum (0) during the second half of an NBA basketball game, Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021, in Boston. PHOTO BY CHARLES KRUPA, AP

This would explain some of Tatum's recent struggles, including a six-point outing against the Wizards Sunday night in which he shot 3-14 from the field. The effects that COVID-19 has on young athletes like Tatum are still unknown, and so all we can do is hope that these lingering effects are short term and not career-altering.

I believe the team understands that they are not playing up to their standards as of late, as emerging star Jaylen Brown mentioned in his post-game press conference against following a loss to the Hawks Wednesday night.

"We've just got to find some consistency, and that was probably tough to watch, it's tough to play, but I think that there's a lot to learn and im-

prove on moving towards the future," Brown said.

With still an incredibly young roster, the team is learning what it takes to compete at the highest levels in the NBA, especially when luck is not on their side on the injury front. This brings me to one big absence from the team in Marcus Smart. After suffering a left calf injury early in a game against the Lakers, Smart was sidelined for two to three weeks, but as we approach the end of the three week window it appears that Smart will be sidelined for even longer as he continues to work his way back. His defensive impact is a crucial cog of the Celtics defense, and without him on the floor the defensive intensity has not been present. This is especially prev-

alent as superstars across the league continue to drop 30- and 40-point games on them. Unless they can pick up their intensity, they will be shredded apart until their all NBA defender comes back.

The Importance of Moving The Ball

Another flaw of the Celtics over their losing stretch has been in inability to move the ball in their offense. So far this season, The Celtics are 28th in the league in assists, highlighting an offensive identity that encourages isolation and one-on-one offense more than passing and setting up efficient shots around the floor.

Realistically speaking, I'm not expecting the Celtics to turn into a Golden State Warriors style offense, but I

do expect the ball to flow much more than it has been this season. One of the problems is the amount of isolation plays the Celtics run, ranking fifth in the NBA in isolation frequency, yet only rank 24th in points per possession on those isolation plays. On top of this, the Celtics stars are not considered playmakers, with Tatum only averaging 4.7 assists and Brown with 3.6 assists per game. Considering that these two touch the ball the most on the team, it would make sense if they had higher assist totals. I believe that the problem stems from a bench that is inconsistent and not filled with good 3-point shooters, as well as an identity that values Brown and Tatum creating for themselves over the ball moving to the open man.

With this said, this style of offense can work, but it is heavily reliant on Brown and Tatum performing well every night, putting immense pressure on the two young stars to do most of the production for the team. If head coach Brad Stevens wants to continue this approach, then I want to see Brown and Tatum become more of a passing threat with the ball in their hands. More action off of the ball would help open up shooters for easy shots, while also opening up driving lanes for the Celtics superstars to attack the rim, where I believe they are at their best. An added benefit to increased ball movement is that it stretches out the defense, forcing them to always be on the move while keeping track of their assignment. Against weaker defenses, this will lead to far more scoring opportunities and will help immensely in getting wins over teams at the bottom of the league.

That's all for this week, next week we will see if the Celtics can bounce back as they face the Atlanta Hawks at home before heading out for road games against the New Orleans Pelicans, Dallas Mavericks and Hawks.