

LOMBARDI LINEUP:

MLB PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR THIS SPRING

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Baseball in February and March usually consists of veterans finding their rhythm and battles for the last roster spots, but that will be different in 2026. While the game's biggest stars are away at the World Baseball Classic, many prospects and international talents will get a chance to shine with their MLB clubs. Whether they're representing their country in the tournament or playing in half-empty spring training parks, these are some players baseball fans should be paying attention to before the season begins.

Top Prospects Making Their Mark

As MLB Pipeline's No. 1 overall prospect, Pirates shortstop Konnor Griffin has already attracted the attention of many this spring. The 19-year-old shined at the plate on Tuesday with two home runs against the Red Sox, including one off former all-star Ranger Suarez. Scouts say Griffin could make his major league debut this season, and if he continues to perform this spring, that could be sooner rather than later.

Behind Griffin, Tigers shortstop Kevin McGonigle is another highly touted prospect looking to crack the majors. The No.

2 overall prospect has quickly risen through Detroit's rankings, dominating across the minor leagues and winning the 2025 Arizona Fall League MVP. He has been evaluated as one of the best pure hitting prospects this decade, with exceptional bat-to-ball skills and plate discipline. This spring training will be his first chance to experience MLB-level pitching and may be many fans' first impression of the exciting youngster's skills.

Rounding out the list of key prospects to watch is Athletics shortstop Leo De Vries. As the centerpiece of the trade that sent Mason Miller to San Diego, the 19-year-old switch hitter has so far proven to be worth the deal. Despite his young age, De Vries has already dominated through Double-A, putting up immediate production at the plate. With a rare combination of power and plate discipline, it's entirely possible that if he continues at his current pace, he may reach the MLB level sometime this year.

Japanese Stars Adjusting to the Majors

This offseason saw a trio of Japanese stars making the move to MLB, and this spring will be the first chance to see how they adjust. With names like Shohei Ohtani and Yoshinobu Yamamoto establishing themselves as some of the best talents in the league, these are key names to

follow going into the season.

Munetaka Murakami was once considered one of the most anticipated players to come from Japan of all time, with some calling him the "Japanese Babe Ruth." At just 22 years old, he became the youngest player in Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB) history to win the triple crown in a record-breaking 56 home run season. He won back-to-back MVPs in 2021 and 2022, but his production noticeably dipped in the last few years.

After posting a .318 batting average in 2022, that mark fell to just .244 in 2024 with a concerning 180 strikeouts. His 2025 season was hampered by an oblique injury, but he still showed his remarkable power in that span. The struggling Chicago White Sox still chose to give him a chance this offseason because of his immense upside. Murakami is certainly one of the biggest names to watch in the next month during spring training and the World Baseball Classic.

Another Team Japan representative in the WBC is Blue Jays' infielder Kazuma Okamoto. Filling in the void left by Bo Bichette's departure, Okamoto comes to Toronto after being one of the most consistent power hitters in the NPB, posting over 30 home runs in nearly all of the past seven seasons. He has already shown off that power af-

ter blasting a home run off Clay Holmes on Monday. Whether he can quickly adjust to the major league level will be crucial for the Blue Jays' outlook and could be a key factor in this year's AL East race.

After a disappointing 2025, the Houston Astros bolstered their rotation by signing right-hander Tatsuya Imai this off-season. He will be skipping the WBC this year to prioritize his major league club before the regular season begins. Imai features a mid-90s fastball and a unique arm-side slider that made NPB hitters look foolish last season. Unlike a typical slider that moves towards the glove-side, much like a screwball it breaks the opposite direction, but with sharper, sweeping movement. While he doesn't have triple-digit velocities like Yamamoto or Roki Sasaki, Imai is still an intriguing watch this spring.

All-Stars in New Threads

Like any offseason, this year has seen many big names find new teams in free agency. Now is the first time to see them with their new squads and how they fit into their organizations.

Possibly the biggest acquisition over the winter was Kyle Tucker going to the Los Angeles Dodgers, adding another all-star to an already stacked lineup. Only fueling the criticisms

of two-time World Series champion building a "super-team", Tucker's presence in that lineup could put it among one of the most talented of all time. Many will also point to this deal as an example of why MLB needs a salary cap with collective bargaining discussions looming next year.

Another major signing was Bo Bichette's surprising move to the New York Mets, where he will be forced to play third base for the first time in his career. Some have been skeptical of his ability to play third, given he was a below-average defender at shortstop throughout his time with the Blue Jays. However, he still brings an all-star caliber bat to a Mets team desperate to move past its past disappointments. New York is hoping to see him quickly adjust to his new role as they look to compete in the NL East after a lackluster 2025.

Between the arrivals of elite international talent and arrivals of exciting young prospects, this next month will showcase the future of the league. While the games themselves may not matter, many of these players will get a taste of MLB-level talent, which is more important than any other type of practice. In both the WBC and spring training, there is plenty to look out for this spring.

LATO'S LENS:

Upsets, top performers and must-see matchups for this week in college basketball

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What a week of college basketball. Over the last seven days, the nation saw some of the best college basketball the NCAA has to offer, with several top ten matchups being played all across America.

We're only one week away from March, so this means one thing: conference tournament season is upon us. The stakes are higher as teams vie for a spot and attempt to build momentum before the madness begins. So hang tight: here are some of college basketball's greatest upsets

and top performances from last week, along with some games to watch in the coming days.

Greatest Upsets

No. 23 BYU 79, No. 6 Iowa State 69

The BYU Cougars are perhaps the best eight-loss team in college basketball at this point in time. Having the best freshman in the nation in forward AJ Dybantsa, they've lost their fair share of big games but have also won a good deal as well, including their 79-69 upset over sixth-ranked Iowa State on Saturday.

Dybantsa defended his home arena nicely, dominating the opposing Cyclones from start to finish. The freshman recorded

an impressive 29 points, 10 rebounds and nine assists. His presence has been felt all over the league thus far, and he's already projected to be the top pick in this year's NBA Draft by several experts.

UCLA 95, No. 10 Illinois 94

After trailing by 23 points at halftime, the unranked UCLA Bruins rallied back to defeat No. 10 Illinois in overtime by a score of 95-94. Led by head coach Mick Cronin, the Bruins came into their Saturday game after a 30-point loss to Michigan and a 23-point loss to Michigan State. This comes to show how unpredictable college basketball can be.

New Mexico State transfer Donovan Dent sealed the victory for the Bruins after hitting the go-ahead layup with one second left in overtime, triggering Bruins fans to storm their home court. He finished the game with 14 points, three rebounds and a staggering 15 assists, while teammate Eric Dailley Jr. added another 20 points and six rebounds. UCLA's record now stands at 19-9. If they can sneak into the tournament, the Bruins can be a real problem in March.

No. 14 Kansas 69, No. 5 Houston 56

What is going on with the Big 12?

The Houston Cougars entered their showdown with No. 6 Iowa State ranked third in the country with a record of 23-2. But on Monday night, they were handed their third consecutive loss at the mercy of the No. 14 Kansas Jayhawks.

So, how did this happen? Well, everyone seemed to produce for the Jayhawks, as four players scored in the double digits. Senior Tre White scored a season-high 23 points along with five rebounds and one assist. Darryn Peterson added 14 points and four assists, while Melvin Council Jr. and Bryson Tiller chipped in with 11 points each in the win.

Top Performers

Seth Trimble, guard (North Carolina), scored a career-high 30 points, including two key free throws in the game's final seconds, to seal No. 18 UNC's 77-74 bounce-back win against conference rival Louisville.

Cameron Boozer, forward (Duke), led the No. 1 Blue Devils in nearly every offensive category with 24 points, 13 rebounds and two assists in their 100-56 walloping of Notre Dame.

Christian Anderson, guard (Texas Tech), filled in for the missing JT Toppin by recording 31 points, 14 rebounds and seven assists in the No. 16 Red Raiders' 80-68 victory over Cincinnati.

Anthony Dell'Orso, guard (Arizona), came off the bench to score 22 points in the No. 4 Wildcats' 73-66 victory over No.

2 Houston in a top five showdown.

Pryce Sandfort, forward (Nebraska), contributed to the No. 9 Cornhuskers' 87-64 win over Penn State with a career-high 33 points.

Games to Watch

Saturday, Feb. 28: No. 14 Kansas (21-7) at No. 2 Arizona (26-2)

Will lightning strike twice for the Jayhawks? Three weeks ago, the then ninth-ranked Jayhawks stunned the undefeated and top-ranked Wildcats by four points in their home arena in Lawrence, Kansas. This time, they'll venture westward to take on the Wildcats in the famed McKale Memorial Center in Tucson, Arizona. Should the Jayhawks win, it would mark yet another signature win for this young Kansas squad, proving themselves to be a contender, not a pretender.

Saturday, Feb. 28: No. 17 Alabama (20-7) at No. 22 Tennessee (20-8)

There's nothing quite like fast-paced, high-octane SEC basketball, especially between two virtually even teams like Alabama and Tennessee. The conference has been nothing short of a slaughterfest this season, with top-ranked teams knocking each other off what seems like every week. While a rowdy Tennessee home environment will surely help the Volunteers, Alabama sophomore guard LaBaron Philon Jr. is averaging 21.3 points, 3.3 rebounds and five assists per game, posing a tall task for the opposing defense.

Monday, Mar. 2: No. 4 Iowa State (24-4) at No. 2 Arizona (26-2)

What a week it'll be for Arizona. Just one day after their duel with Kansas, the Wildcats welcome yet another familiar foe to Tucson: the red-hot No. 4 Cyclones of Iowa State. Unlike their previous game, this matchup marks the first time the two Big 12 Conference members will play each other this season. With it being this late in the season, the game will pose a fantastic preview of how the upcoming conference tournament will pan out.



UConn men's basketball beats BYU at TD Garden in Boston, Mass. on Nov. 15, 2025. The huskies battled until the end, winning with a final score of 86-84.
PHOTOS BY SYDNEY CHANDLER, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS