Daily Sports

Previewing the 2026 UConn Quarterback Battle

by Thaddeus Sawyer
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
HE/HIM/HIS
thaddeus.sawyer@uconn.edu

How does a program go about replacing their best quarterback in almost two decades?

With the help of Biletnikoff Award finalist and probable day two NFL draft pick Skyler Bell, Joe Fagnano finished within the top 20 in the NCAA passing yards and touchdowns while completing the eighth most completions per game in the country with 23.75, according to the NCAA website.

With Fagnano out of eligibility and looking to get picked up by an NFL team in this month's draft, a quarterback battle is brewing for the Huskies.

Fagnano's departure marks just one ripple in an offseason rife with change. Head coach Jim L. Mora departed for Colorado State, with former Toledo coach and perennial MAC contender Jason Candle taking over.

The head coaching switch brought over 50 transfers into the program.

Saturday's Spring Game was the first time fans got an up-close taste at the new look Huskies, but it also gave some of the first insights on who is in line to replace Fagnano under center.

Mora holdover Tucker McDonald was the first quarterback out once the 11-on-11 portion of practice began and received plenty of first-team reps.

Despite appearing in just five games over three seasons with the Huskies and completing just four passes, the redshirt junior is the elder statesman in the battle.

"What I felt when I had early conversations with him was a guy that was hungry to compete, and a guy that was hungry to be better and wants to steadily improve," Candle said. "He thinks that he can make an impact on this football team. I think when there's a drive and there's a want to be great, couple of that with some people that will really invest into that player, I think good things usually come."

McDonald missed the majority of the last two seasons, first with a foot injury in 2024 and then a thumb injury in 2025. Though he originally entered the transfer portal after the coaching change, McDonald later opted to stay at UConn with the quarterback room wide open.

"I think he had as big a smile as anybody out there today being able just to be back to play football and be around his guys," Candle said.

However, while it was McDonald who was first up in the live scrimmage, it was redshirt sophomore Jake Merklinger who was the first quarterback to take the field for the Huskies when they opened practice with redzone offense. Merklinger threw for a touchdown on his first throw before ending his reps with a rushing score.

Merklinger, a Georgia native who originally attended Tennessee as a four-star recruit by 247Sports in the class of 2024, appeared in two games for the Volunteers across two seasons attempted.

"I think he's done a really good job," Candle said. "Just like Tucker, a guy that wants to compete and wants to continue to go win the job, right? And I've seen that from all those guys."

One of UConn's highest profile transfers from this cycle, Merklinger didn't appear again after redzone offense and later came out of the locker room in shorts and with a brace on his throwing hand. Candle didn't have any immediate updates on his status after the game.

Toledo transfer Kalieb Osborne was the only other quarterback to appear in both red zone offense and 11-on-11.

Osborne spent two seasons at Toledo with Candle before transferring to UConn, appearing in seven games for the Rockets. The redshirt freshman started the Boca Raton Bowl against Louisville, going 17 of 28 through the air with a touchdown in a 27-22 loss.



The University of Connecticut football team defeats Ball State at Rentschler field on Sept. 20, 2025. The Huskies defended a late attack from the Cardinals with a final score of 31-25.
PHOTO BY CONNOR SHARP, PHOTO EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

"He had a tough injury in high school, so being able to bounce back from that, kind of get his feet on the ground and play a little bit of football last year, I think you're only going to see his career ascend," Candle said.

Also on the roster is Tyler Smith, a Connecticut native who redshirted for UConn last season and appeared in the 11-on-11 portion of practice. Bo Polston, an incoming three-star freshman who originally committed to Toledo before flipping his commitment to follow Candle, enrolled in school in January and donned a UConn jersey for the first time but remained on the sideline in sweatpants.

Based on snaps during the redzone portion of practice, Merklinger and McDonald will get first cracks at the starting job with Osborne also in the mix for a top two role on the depth chart.

Still, Candle was quick to caution that the focus this spring has been on getting as many snaps for as many players as possible rather than developing a depth chart.

"We've rotated them pretty equally through the entire spring," Candle said. "We've given them all the opportunity to go in and be with the first team, be with the second team and be with the third team. So, you put ones, twos and threes on the tag for guys to get reps, but, again, I don't have a depth chart right now."

With just under five months between now and the season opener against Lafayette, the summer sessions will ultimately decide who the opening day signal caller is.

"...We head to the next phase of summer," Candle said. "We turn the team to the quarterbacks. We'll figure out whose leadership skills will surface and who we can count on when things get hard because they've really invested in their teammates."



UConn football becomes undefeated at home with a win over Air Force, 26-16 on Senior Day. Skyler Bell hit 2,000 receiving yards as a Husky, along with Cam Edwards hitting 1,000 rushing yards in a single season PHOTO BY HANNAH GRIMES, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS