SPORTS SPECTRUM: THE 2026 ALL-STAR GAME WAS ALRIGHT

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After the sour taste of the entire event last year, serious questions were asked regarding the future of the All-Star Game and whether it was going to be a staple. Some fans even wished to do away with the format. However, a lot has changed in the year since in format, faces and location.

The Empty Arena Paradox

The 2026 Rising Stars tournament was held on Friday, featuring top rookies and sophomores, such as former Big 12 Freshman of the Year VJ Edgecombe, and a reunion in competition of the 2024 National Championship team: Donovan Clingan, Tristen Newton, Cam Spencer, and Rising Stars MVP of the previous year, Stephon Castle. With notable G League talent being involved in the competition, there was ample room for them to display their talent.

Then why, many wondered, was the arena reported to be over 95% empty?

The weekend was hosted at the Los Angeles Clippers' home arena, the Intuit Dome, which caused prices to skyrocket. SeatGeek reported that prices for the entire weekend jumped near 50%. This makes the accessibility even worse than it was last year.

Often, a popular sentiment people like to throw out regarding these games is that people simply do not care and that there are better things to be doing in Los Angeles on a Friday night — but how can fans care if it costs $2,000 to see all of this young talent in person?

3-point and Skills Contest

Many critics believe that the removal of the skills challenge was a result of Victor Wembanyama and now former NBA veteran Chris Paul effectively cheating. No matter how funny the display was, it might have been the nail in the coffin for the contest as a whole, which was replaced by the Shooting Stars contest — a team-based event featuring current stars and former legends.

On the other hand, there was definitely some confusion in regard to the announcement of Damian Lillard participating in the 3-point contest, as the star had injured himself in the postseason prior. However, he joined Larry Bird and Craig Hodges as the only three-time winners in NBA history.

The media conversation: What counts as trying?

This year, media conversations around the All-Star Game sang its praises. As opposed to negative sentiment from the game last year, many praised it despite initial skepticism of the format. Some say that the game was needed, with high praise from the New York Times' Athletic NBA Staff.

With the only real sour spot of the evening being the dunk contest, which has, more or less, begun to phase out of relevancy with stars not performing, a question comes to mind—is this what it looks like when players try?

Wembanyama, an up-and-coming basketball player, has promised to "deliver" on hopes of being the new face of the league. Generational talent aside, he, many agreed, was the sole saving grace of the weekend.

"I ain't gonna lie," Anthony Edwards, All-Star Game MVP said, "Wemby set the tone. He came out playing hard. Hard not to match that."

Wembanyama may have been on the team that lost, appearing to be visibly frustrated afterwards, but his passion for the game is undeniable, and in his own words, "It's a game I personally cherish — so being competitive is the least I can do."

Conclusion: better than last year

The attitude around this year's All-Star Game was more positive than the year before, perhaps having to do with the slow phasing out of the NBA on TNT crew alongside more positive-toned conversations around the game from the NBA-on-NBA crew and NBA on Amazon Prime.

A lot of the news around the weekend has little to do with the content of the game itself. However, there are always opportunities for growth — the next apparent being the cost and price of the fan experience.

ELLIOT'S WEEKLY TIP-OFF: ONE MONTH AWAY FROM MADNESS

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We are officially one month away from the start of March Madness, but with this week's slate, madness might erupt early.

Last week saw every top 16 team shift in the rankings somehow.

Previously No. 1 Arizona lost their first two games of the season. First on the road to No. 9 Kansas, and then home against No. 16 Texas Tech in overtime. Their schedule continues to challenge them with a game against No. 24 BYU on Feb. 18, followed by No. 2 Houston on Feb. 21. Arizona has finally shown weakness, and teams are taking advantage of it.

How will the previous top team respond to the losses, and will they be able to rebound with the tough schedule ahead?

Current No. 1 Michigan has a tough top 5 matchup on Feb. 21 against No. 3 Duke. The Blue Devils are coming off a win against ranked Clemson responding well after their heartbreak in Chapel Hill last week.

No. 20 Arkansas will visit No. 25 Alabama for their first ranked SEC opponent since mid-January. The Razorbacks sit second in the conference with The Tide in a close third. Arkansas is 4-4 against ranked opponents this season, and the Crimson Tide are 2-5.

Both teams wish they could be higher in the rankings with the opportunity to highlight their skills and get back on track before March.

Miami (OH) moved up another spot this week still holding the only undefeated record in the country. They take on Bowling Green on Feb. 20, only beating them by 10 during their last matchup.

No. 7 Purdue hosts Indiana in a key rematch. Indiana spoiled Purdue last time the two programs met, beating them 72-67 at home. The Boilermakers will hope to get some payback and hold their top 10 ranking.

The Jayhawks can rebound with this win as they must prepare for both No. 2 Houston and No. 4 Arizona again next week. The tough schedule should help them eventually prepare for the Big 12 tournament and for March.



UConn men's basketball takes on Georgetown in Gampel Pavilion on Feb. 14, 2026. The Huskies won 79 – 75 against the Hoyas, and celebrated Alex Karaban's program record of 116 wins.
PHOTO BY ELLA GORHAM, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

On Feb. 21, the Big 12 will display some key matchups which could shake up their conference rankings.

No. 8 Kansas will host Cincinnati in a daytime showdown with the Jayhawks looking to bounce back after their loss to No. 5 Iowa State. This was following their huge win at home taking down No. 1 Arizona. Their visit to Iowa State ended in an 18-point defeat.

No. 13 Texas Tech will face Kansas State after their big win against No. 1 Arizona last week. Although Kansas State has struggled and sits at the bottom of the Big 12, we are approaching March and miracles can happen.

The nightcap for the Big 12 has No. 6 Iowa State against No. 23 BYU in a showdown of top ranked teams. Iowa State got their grove back dominating Kansas last week after their loss to a weak TCU side. With a tough end of the schedule still to come, their time to get hot could not be better as they look to make a deep run next month.

In the ACC, No. 14 Virginia hosts UMiami in a battle of hot teams. The Hurricanes are on a streak defeating No. 11 North Carolina last week, holding an impressive 20-5 record on the season. Looking to take down another ranked ACC opponent, they will travel to Virginia in hopes of moving into the top 25.

In the SEC, No. 19 Vanderbilt will host Tennessee after they slipped out of the top 25. Still a dangerous team to face, the Volunteers have beaten Alabama, Louisville and Houston who were all ranked when they faced off. The two programs will end the season in Knoxville against one another, but as coaches always say, the most important game is the next one.

This week highlights top programs taking the hardcourt and going all out to win these games. With all sorts of drama shaking up the rankings last week, teams continue to prepare for the postseason.

Every team is showing some weakness; it is hard to say who will cut down the nets this year.

Teams will have the next few weeks to clean up and make their run for one shining moment.

WILKER'S WEEKLY: PATRIOTS OFFSEASON PREVIEW

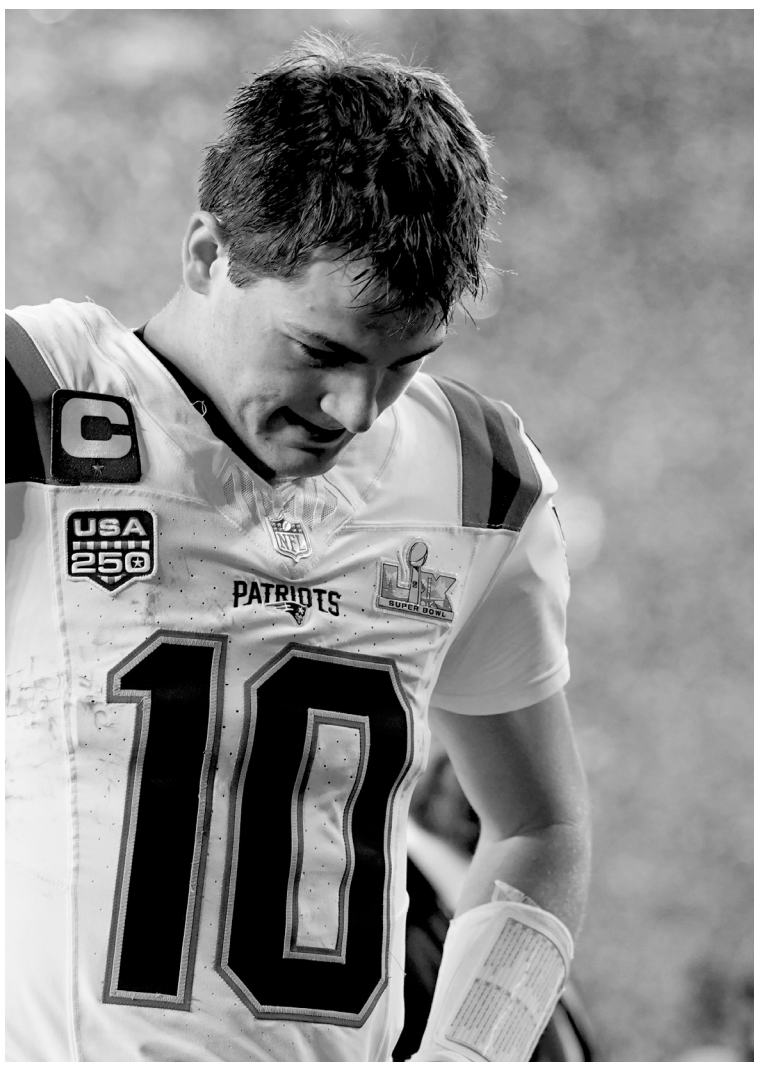
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The New England Patriots lost their eighth Super Bowl this season with a score of 29-13 against the Seattle Seahawks. While heart breaking, they made it so far and fell short; the team's future is among the brightest in the entire NFL.

The vast majority of the Patriots' core is still very young. Drake Maye, TreVeyon Henderson, Milton Williams, Christian Barmore, Christian Gonzalez and Craig Woodson are all 26 or younger, as is Will Campbell if he can bounce back in 2026. They've set a high floor at 14-3, but there's no doubt the team has the potential to win a Lombardi.

The Patriots are tenth in effective cap space and have 12 draft picks in 2026. After spending by far the most of any team in free agency last season, a more modest spending year could be in order. Back in 2021, the Patriots were first in free agency spending, just as they were last offseason. In 2022, they ranked 30th, spending less than $28 million, after a 10-7 season. Of the nearly $300 million spent in total contracts in 2021, 51.7% was guaranteed at signing. They spent 22.8% more in total contracts in 2025 relative to 2021, but similarly, 48% was guaranteed at signing. Another massive spending bout this offseason would no doubt improve the roster, but it may not be feasible for the Krafts, who seem to stagger their spending. Since Tom Brady's departure in 2020, the Patriots have been 28th, 1st, 30th, 14th, 13th, and 1st in free agency spending. On average, that's puts them in 14.5th place in spending despite a pair of bottom-5 finishes and first place finishes.

If New England is to be more modest this offseason, I'd expect re-signing '25 contributors and bringing in budget options might be a priority. Thayer Munford, Khyiris Tonga and Jack Gibbens will all cost very little despite having sizable roles down the stretch. Players like K'Lavon Chiasson and Jaylinn Hawkins have earned themselves a bigger market, and while neither is likely to see lucrative deals, the $10-12 and $7-9 million ranges seem reasonable for each respective player.



New England Patriots players walk off the field after a loss to the Seattle Seahawks in the NFL Super Bowl football game on Sunday, Feb. 8, 2026, in Santa Clara, Calif.
PHOTO COURTESY OF AP PHOTO/JULIO CORTEZ

Players like Chargers running back Najee Harris and Giants safety Dane Belton could be an excellent budget finds for New England in free agency. Harris missed all but two games with a torn Achilles this season but would offer an experienced third back behind Henderson and Rhamondre Stevenson should the team release Antonio Gibson. Mike Vrabel's defense thrived with three safeties on the field in Tennessee, so bringing in Belton regardless of Hawkins' future could be a move to help add depth and bring a Tennessee element to New England.

The Patriots could also look to players who have been or could be released by their teams as cap casualties. The Dolphins released Tyreek Hill and Bradley Chubb on Monday, while the Packers have been rumored to cut Elgton Jenkins and Rashan Gary. While less likely, Giants nose tackle Dexter Lawrence's name has been tossed around as a cap casualty as well.

If New England is to make a big swing in free agency, there are candidates. Aside from the aforementioned cut candidates, A.J. Brown and George Pickens (franchise tag likely) could be trade candidates on the offensive side of the ball. Maxx Crosby has been named in trade talks, while it's been rumored the Bengals will opt not to use the franchise tag on Trey Hendrickson. Any of these moves will be costly, in terms of finances and potentially draft picks, but none of them are out of the question.

The final big money move the Patriots could make would be to retain one of their own. For the first time in his career, Christian Gonzalez is eligible for a contract extension. His Super Bowl performance was arguably the best game of his career, and his playoff performances across the postseason were something to behold. He's become the highest paid cornerback in football with an extension, eclipsing Sauce Gardner's four-year, $120.4 million deal. It seems a real possibility Gonzalez will become the first cornerback to hit the $31 million per year mark, thus one-upping Williams as the highest paid Patriot of all-time.

All-in-all, the Patriots have the opportunity to take some big swings this offseason to improve their squad. Already one of the most promising young teams in the NFL, it's incredibly encouraging to see them have the resources to acquire a top receiver or edge defender. If New England wants to return to the Super Bowl in 2027, they'll need to make some major upgrades to the roster, and in the coming months, we'll see exactly what those upgrades are.