WILKER'S WEEKLY:

PATRIOTS DIVISIONAL OVERVIEW AND AFCCG PREVIEW

by Graham Wilker
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
HE/HIM/HIS
Graham.Wilker@uconn.edu

Before the season began, not even the most optimistic of New England Patriots fans would have thought we'd be getting ready for an AFC Championship showdown. Over the past month, the Patriots have been one of the most dominant teams in football, finishing the season with the second-best offense and the fourth best defense. Mike Vrabel and Drake Maye have completely transformed this team, but to finish this incredible run with a Lombardi, they'll need to start humming on offense again.

The Patriots have faced two opponents during their playoff run thus far: the L.A. Chargers and the Houston Texans. They took down both in dominant defensive performances, winning 16-3 and 28-16 respectively, with a Marcus Jones pick-six adding seven against Houston. In both games, Maye struggled. Against the Chargers, the challenges were prominent across the offense, while Maye's four fumbles were what cost the team a blowout win against the Texans. Albeit, both defenses are excellent, and the latter is one of the best units we've seen over the past decade. Nonetheless, Maye's shortcomings to this point have led to the team winning in spite of him, not because of him.

In their upcoming matchup against the Broncos, that must change. New England won't have to worry about Bo Nix in the AFCCG, as he broke his foot in their most recent matchup against the Bills. Jarrett Stidham, a fourth-round selection by New England in 2019, will instead be the signal caller for the Broncos.

Fans should be excited at the prospect of only Stidham standing in the way of a Super Bowl appearance. Aside from not having to face Nix, Stidham hasn't proven he's a starting caliber quarterback in the NFL, hence his backup role. He hasn't attempted a pass since the 2023 season, when he started two games for Sean Payton's squad. He completed 20 passes and had a touchdown in each game, finishing with a 60.6% completion rate, 496 yards, and a 2:1 TD:INT ratio. The Broncos went 1-1 and scored 15 PPG.

Given their backup quarterback being thrust into the starting position, relying more heavily on the run game could be a decision Payton and company make. While logical, the run game hasn't been all that successful for Denver this year. Second-round pick RJ Harvey averaged just 3.7 YPC, while Jaleel McLaughlin hasn't been entrusted with more than seven carries in a game all year. Third stringer Tyler Badie has -2 rushing yards during the playoffs. While it isn't impossible for J.K. Dobbins to return Sunday, he won't likely be 100%. He's been on IR since a Week 10 injury against the Raiders. He is far from their most productive back, totaling nearly 800 rushing yards and 5.0 YPC in ten games.

Between a home crowd and a nothing to lose attitude from Stidham, the Broncos could be dangerous. Courtland Sutton, Troy Franklin and Marvin Mims are the team's primary receiving threats, and while none of them could truly be considered elite, they've netted a 14-3 record with Nix at the helm. Sutton scraped 1,000 yards, Franklin managed 700 in his sophomore season and Mims' 93-yard performance led to a win last week. Evan Engram also caught 50 balls as the primary tight end.

Defensively, Nik Bonitto and Jonathan Cooper combined for 22 sacks, while Pat Surtain II is the best cornerback in football. Dre Greenlaw made his first appearance against the Bills since November, recording four tackles. He plays next to Alex Singleton, who notched 135 this year. Ja'Quan McMillian is one of the league's better slot corners, while Talanoa Hufanga and P.J. Locke shore up the back end. Riley Moss and Jahdae Barron are also contributors in the defensive backfield.

From top to bottom, the Broncos have one of the best defenses in football. While it isn't at the level of the Texans' unit, the Patriots could be in big trouble if Maye has four fumbles again this time out.

The Patriots should handle the Broncos: they're undefeated on the road this season and will be playing a quarterback who, by Sunday, won't have attempted a pass in 749 days. It's hard not to love their odds, particularly if they can limit turnovers. I'd predict a 28-13 win in favor of New England as they prepare to make their twelfth Super Bowl appearance.



The New England Patriots celebrating their win on Jan. 18, 2025. The Patriots won 28-16 over the Houston Texans.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS ON FACEBOOK

CONFERENCE CLASHES:

THE GAMES THAT WILL SHAPE THE COLLEGE BASKETBALL LANDSCAPE

by Elliot Koplas
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
HE/HIM/HIS
ejk23008@uconn.edu

Entering week 12 of the college basketball season, teams shift into their full conference schedules. This week delivers multiple matchups that are bound to shift the rankings and spark rivalries. As the league races heat up, every game increases in its importance of helping shape college basketball and the top 25 rankings.

As one of the only unbeaten teams left in the country, Arizona remains top of the rankings sitting at (18-0) on the season before their matchup tonight hosting Cincinnati. The Bearcats were 0-3 against top 25 teams this season before they stunned No. 2 Iowa State 79-70 and handed the Cyclones their second straight loss. With hope and fuel to their fire, Cincinnati will look to pull off another upset against the current top-ranked Wildcats.

Another unbeaten team, Nebraska, will take on Washington tonight as they look to continue their undefeated run. The Cornhuskers stand at No. 8 in the country, only facing off against two ranked opponents so far this season. With matchups against the stronger side of the Big Ten coming up, Nebraska will use these games to prepare for Michigan, Illinois and Purdue in the next few weeks.

No. 3 Michigan will face off against Ohio State on Friday, Jan. 23. The Wolverines have shown their dominance this season, dropping just one game on the year, putting up their case as a favorite to win the National Championship. As for the Buckeyes, their losses have mostly come from the top 25 teams, falling a few points short every time. They can keep it close against any team; they just need to focus on closing the games in high pressure situations. If they can improve that, they can make some noise in March.

Saturday's slate displays multiple big conference games, putting some of the best against each other. In the Big East, No. 2 UConn looks to notch their fifteenth straight win of the season after a nail-biter against Georgetown last weekend. Georgetown will also travel to Providence to take on the Friars in a highly anticipated rival matchup.

ACC powerhouses No. 22 North Carolina and No. 14 Virginia will face off in an eagerly awaited mashup. With the Tar Heels struggling in conference play, they will need this win to get back on pace as they prepare for the upcoming conference battles. As for the Cavaliers, they look to secure their sixth straight win after falling to Virginia Tech in triple overtime for their second loss of the season.

The Big Ten pits Illinois against Purdue in a top 12 matchup. Purdue is undefeated in conference play, competing for the top spot against Nebraska and sitting comfortably with the top teams in the country. Illinois has not lost since mid-December when they fell to undefeated Nebraska. Both programs have since continued their success; however, one will pause its run this weekend.

No. 6 Houston looks to take on No. 12 Texas Tech with both programs near the top of their conference, the Big 12. Houston came out as one of the favorites to cut down the nets this year even after their one and only loss to No. 17 Tennessee in November. They have since been on an 11-game winning streak, taking down two top 15-ranked opponents. As for Texas Tech, they have made some noise this year taking down Duke and BYU, showing they have the skill to defeat any program.

For one of the late-night games, Tennessee will travel to No. 17 Alabama. The SEC clash will test the Volunteers after falling short to Kentucky 80-78. The Tide has shown signs of inconsistency regardless of their offensive dominance. It is still early in conference play, but all games show importance and much needed practice in anticipation for March.

Monday of next week has No. 23 Louisville traveling to Durham to face the top ranked Blue Devils. Duke sits at No. 5 in the AP poll, losing only once this season but also defeating six top 25 teams. Even in times of trouble, the Devils have shown they belong in Indianapolis this April.

Lastly, No. 1 Arizona travels north to Utah where No. 13 BYU awaits the hottest team in America. The Wildcats have shown no signs of slowing down, demolishing any team in their way. The tough Big 12 schedule might catch up to them though as they will later face off against top 20 teams in four straight games.

Although half a season remains, the top teams are starting to make their separation from the others. With the top 6 teams in the country playing on another level, they show no signs of stopping.



Arizona's Brayden Burries dunks a basketball during their game against Utah Tech. Arizona won 93-67 during the Nov. 7, 2025 game.

PHOTO COURTESY OF @MAYEUXPHOTO ON INSTAGRAM