Daily Sports

BIG EAST BALLER UPDATE NO. 2:

UCONN SEPARATES ITSELF FROM REST OF THE LEAGUE

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In a down year for the Big East, UConn has separated itself from the rest of the conference as one of the top national title contenders this season.

In this edition of Big East Baller Update, we will highlight all of winter break in one of basketball's premier conferences.

Weekly Awards

Player of Winter Break: Zuby Ejiofor, forward, St. John's (18 ppg, 7.7 rpg, 3.2 apg, 1.8 spg, 1.3 bpg, 52.6 FG%, 30 3P%, 69.1 FT% in nine games)

The preseason Big East Player of the Year is living up to the title this season. Over the winter break, the reigning Big East Most Improved Player ranked third in scoring in the conference, 10th in assists per game, second in offensive rebounding, sixth in steals per contest and fifth in blocks per game. His best performance over winter break came at Georgetown on New Year's Eve. The Garland, Texas native had 25 points, 10 rebounds, seven assists, two steals and one block on 7-of-9 shooting and a terrific 10-of-13 outing from the free-throw line.

Freshman of Winter Break: Nigel James Jr., guard, Marquette (20.1 ppg, 5.3 apg, 3.1 rpg, 1.7 spg, 49.6 FG%, 50 3P%, 62.8 FT% in nine games)

There were many other freshmen in contention for this honor: the Providence duo of Stefan Vaaks and Jamier Jones, UConn's Braylon Mullins and Villanova's Acaden Lewis. However, despite the disappointing season Marquette has had so far, you cannot overlook that James led all scorers in points per game over winter break. To cap off winter break, James had the best game of his career with 38 points, eight assists, three rebounds and two steals on 13-of-20 overall shooting and 4-of-6 from downtown in a thrilling overtime win over Providence. This freshman class is elite, and James is not being talked about enough.

Best game during winter break

Marquette stuns Providence in overtime, 105-104

The best winter break game came on the last day. At the Fiserv Forum in Milwaukee, Marquette shocked Providence with a thrilling overtime win. James's career performance was just mentioned, but Ben Gold also played a huge role in the win with 14 points and made the game-winning free throw with four seconds left in the extra frame. Providence outscored Marquette by 10 points in the second half to force overtime. James had 20 second-half points and tied the game on a layup with 18 seconds remaining in overtime.



Freshman Nigel James Jr. from Marquette passing between two players from the Xavier Men's basketball team. Over winter break, James led all scorers in points per game.
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Best games this week

(excluding Villanova at No. 2 UConn)

Xavier at Creighton (7 p.m., FS1)

Neither team is outstanding, but here is a game where Creighton could create some separation in the Big East. Xavier is in the middle of an expected down year after Sean Miller departed for the head coaching job at Texas, but former New Mexico head coach Richard Pitino is looking for a third consecutive win after losing three straight games. Meanwhile, Creighton has had a roller coaster season in Big East play so far. The Bluejays need to stop that trend and get back to similar heights before February comes around.

Georgetown at Providence (Saturday, 12:30 p.m., TNT)

Seeing former Providence coach Ed Cooley return to the Amica Mutual Pavilion is always must-see TV. The hatred runs deep in Friartown. Neither team is having the best of years; Cooley's appearance in Providence alone makes this list.

St. John's at Xavier (Saturday, 2:30 p.m., TNT)

Like Creighton, St. John's can use a big road game at Xavier as an opportunity to continue the momentum as arguably the second-best team in the Big East. This season has not gone according to plan for head coach Rick Pitino but look out for the Red Storm as we turn the corner to February. Meanwhile, Xavier has two big opportunities, with the other mentioned earlier.

Seton Hall at DePaul (Saturday, 5 p.m., truTV)

DePaul's vibes are high after a big win over Marquette that resulted in head coach Chris Holtmann buying drinks at a local bar for students. Could he be the guy to turn the program? As the weekend approaches, we'll see if DePaul can continue its momentum, or if Seton Hall establishes itself as a tournament contender with a critical road victory over the Blue Demons.