

MARCH MADNESS

 <p>Jana Van Gytenbeek  G #4 Graduate</p>	 <p>Taliah Scott  G #0 Redshirt Sophomore</p>	 <p>Darianna Littlepage-Buggs  G/F #5 Senior</p>	 <p>Bella Fontleroy  G/F #22 Senior</p>
 <p>Cameron Carr  G #43 Redshirt Sophomore</p>	 <p>Isaac Williams IV  G #10 Sophomore</p>	 <p>Obi Agbim  G #5 Fifth-year</p>	 <p>Tounde Yessoufou  G #24 Freshman</p>

Photos by Brady Harris, Mesha Mittanasala, Jake Schroeder, Sam Gassaway & Caleb Garcia

Scoring phenom Scott thrives at 3rd home

MARISSA ESSENBERG
Sports Writer

Long before she became one of the most electric scorers in college basketball, Taliah Scott was just a kid in Orange Park, Fla., chasing a ball around the driveway with her younger brother.

Basketball wasn't even her first love early on. For a while, it was gymnastics. But once she picked up a ball, there was no looking back.

"We grew up playing basketball," Scott said on the Sic 'Em Podcast with John Morris. "At first I was a gymnast, but when I was 9 I started playing basketball and it's been basketball ever since."

What followed was a journey that would turn the redshirt sophomore guard into one of the most dynamic players in the country.

Basketball was always close to home for Scott.

With a father who played Division I ball, Scott grew up around the game. By the time she reached high school, it was clear that hoops weren't just in her blood, but marked a path she was quickly making her own.

The McDonald's All-American filled it up as a star at St. John's Country Day School, finishing her high school career with nearly 3,000 points after reaching the 1,000-point mark before the end of her sophomore season and piling up almost every major accolade available to a high school player in Florida.

That scoring touch put her among the nation's elite, as she became Florida's girls basketball scoring champion by the end of her

senior year and the 11th-leading scorer in the country, averaging 36.2 points, 9.2 rebounds and 4.8 assists per game.

As the points piled up, the honors followed. Gatorade Florida Girls Basketball Player of the Year, Florida Dairy Farmers Miss Basketball and multiple local player-of-the-year honors soon became part of Scott's résumé.

The résumé quickly translated to the next level.

An Arkansas commit since before her senior season, Scott wasted little time making her presence felt in the SEC, starting 19 of 20 games for the Razorbacks and leading both the team and conference in scoring and minutes played, including a 29-point outburst in her collegiate debut.

Since then, Scott has never played a collegiate season without averaging at least 20 points per game.

For the 5-foot-9 shooter, that standard has always been the goal.

"There are so many great players in college basketball, and I want my name to be one of the first ones that is mentioned," Scott said on College GameDay.

Like Baylor, double figures became automatic for Scott at Arkansas, as she reached the mark in each of those 19 starts, including 13 with 20 or more points and three with at least 30.

Wherever she played, whatever hardwood she stepped on, buckets followed. But the journey hasn't only been defined by numbers.

After transferring to Auburn for her sophomore season, a wrist injury forced her into surgery before the year began, limiting

her to just three games and a redshirt. Even in that short stretch, she still averaged 20.3 points per game.

Then came stop No. 3. After months on the sideline, Scott entered the transfer portal again and made her way to the Big 12, where she found a home at Baylor and settled in as the centerpiece of head coach Nicki Collen's offense.

"She's become a leader on the court because your best player is usually the one people follow," Collen said. "In her first full season of college basketball, and with everything that has come with it, I'm super proud of her, the way she's succeeded on the court and her heart for her teammates."

In her first season with the Bears, Scott has taken the Big 12 by storm, from a 24-point outing in Baylor's season-opening win over then-No. 7 Duke to becoming the team's leading scorer, one of the conference's most dangerous offensive threats and the nation's No. 5 free-throw shooter at 90.0%, reaching double figures in every game she has finished.

Her impact has stretched far beyond Waco, as her name continues to surface alongside the nation's best.

Ahead of the NCAA Tournament, she sits No. 2 in the Big 12 in scoring and No. 17 nationally, continuing to stack accolades with seven Big 12 Starting Five honors in her first season in the conference.

"There's no doubt she's one of the premier scorers in the country," Collen said on The Matt Mosley Show.

The numbers have only reinforced the label. Scott this season became the 22nd player since



Taliah Scott  G
20.0 PPG 2.6 REB 2.9 AST
38.8 FG% 34.0 FG% 31 GP

2000 to join the 1,000 point club in 48 games or fewer, tying for the 19th-fewest games needed to reach the milestone.

From driveway battles in Orange Park to national leaderboards to finding a home in the green and gold, her journey has been defined by one constant: putting the ball in the basket.

No matter the jersey, that part has never changed. Buckets have always followed Taliah Scott.

WBB ready to dance into its final run of season

MARISSA ESSENBERG
Sports Writer

It's the first breath of spring, when the sun shines and flowers bloom. But for basketball fans, it's when dreams are made and hearts are broken, when professionals and students alike mysteriously call in sick just to spend the day glued to the couch in front of a split screen. It's the most wonderful time of the year. It's March.

For the 24th time in program history and the fifth under head

coach Nicki Collen, No. 21 Baylor is headed to the Big Dance. After piecing together its 25th straight 20-win campaign, finishing with a 24-8 overall record and a 13-5 mark in conference play, Baylor has played its way into March once again, now chasing a Deep Tournament run that slipped away in the second round a year ago.

"There's no tomorrow if you fear it," head coach Nicki Collen said after Sunday's tournament selection show. "So for us, we should be excited

about the opportunity and not take it for granted because not everybody is playing this time of year. We've got to give it our all because if you don't give it your all, you're going home."

The Bears land in Region 2, with the road to Sacramento lined with heavyweights and history.

Looming on Baylor's side are No. 3 seed Duke as a possible second-round matchup; No. 2 seed LSU, led by former Baylor head coach Kim Mulkey; and No. 5 seed Ole Miss, the team that delivered Baylor's season-

ending blow in the Round of 32 at Foster Pavilion a season ago.

With all eyes fixed on the task at hand, Baylor will face No. 11 seed Nebraska (19-12), who knocked off Richmond (26-8) in Wednesday night's First Four matchup, Friday at 1 p.m. in Durham, N.C.

For the second time in three years, the Bears head into the tournament preparing for an unknown first-round opponent, something Collen said starts with prioritizing Baylor's own approach over the uncertainty.

"We know who Duke is, if we should get there, but we also know it doesn't matter how confident you are if you don't get there," Collen said. "In March, you have to take it one game at a time. We need to play good basketball, understand the scouting report and take away personnel. That's where our focus needs to be over these next few days — understanding how teams are going to try to beat us."

That approach shaped Baylor's

DANCIN' >> A2

BEARS BACK FOR MORE

Baylor eyes redemption at College Basketball Crown



Brady Harris | Photographer

ALL IN Freshman guard Tounde Yessoufou boxes out a defender and goes for a put-back layup in the paint during Baylor's 96-81 win against UTGRV on Nov. 9, 2025.



Brady Harris | Photographer

THROWING IT DOWN Redshirt sophomore guard Cameron Carr slam dunks in Baylor's 92-73 loss to Texas Tech on Jan. 20.

JACKSON POSEY
Sports Editor

Baylor is looking for redemption. After a disappointing regular season featured three season-ending injuries and the program's worst finish since 2006-07, the Bears (16-16, 6-12 Big 12) will have a chance to flip the narrative at the College Basketball Crown.

The Las Vegas-based postseason tournament, which began in 2025 as part of FOX's push for exclusivity, features automatic qualifiers from three conferences (Big 12, Big Ten, Big East) and tiered NIL payouts for competing teams.

The Bears accepted their autobid offer on Monday, officially thrusting the program into

an alternative postseason tournament for the first time since 2017-18, when it made the second round of the NIT.

Baylor will likely be favored in its opening match against Minnesota (15-17, 8-12 Big Ten) at 9:30 p.m. April 1. After missing five straight NCAA Tournaments, the Golden Gophers hired Niko Medved, who was widely heralded for taking Colorado State to three NCAA Tournaments in four years. So far, the improvement have been minimal, as Minnesota finished with the same record as a year ago.

The Golden Gophers win games defensively, crawling the game to 62.5 possessions per 40 minutes, fourth-slowest in the nation per KenPom, and hold opponents under 70 points

per game. Their biggest offensive threat is Cade Tyson (19.6 points, 5.4 rebounds), a 6-foot-7 North Carolina transfer who shot 50.0/42.2/82.6 and finished sixth in the Big Ten in scoring.

If the Bears advance, they would face the winner of Oklahoma (19-15, 7-11 SEC) and Colorado (17-15, 7-11 Big 12) in the tournament semifinals at 12:30 p.m. April 4.

Porter Moser's Sooners were the first team out of the NCAA Tournament field. Led by sixth-year guard Nijel Pack (16.5 points), who has started 155 career games, Oklahoma ranks 18th in adjusted offensive rating and 25th in net strength of schedule. The team ranks No. 40 in KenPom's adjusted efficiency margin, best in the field.

The Bears felled the Buffaloes in Waco on

Feb. 4, 86-67, breaking a month long home losing streak. Tad Boyle's squad is led by the guard duo of freshman Isaiah Johnson (16.9 points per game) and Barrington Hargress (14.2 points, 4.5 assists). They have the lowest NET ranking of the three Big 12 teams in the field.

The semifinal winner will move on to the championship game at 4:30 p.m. April 5. The other side of the bracket features Stanford vs. West Virginia — whom Baylor beat Jan. 31 — and Rutgers vs. Creighton, whom the Bears beat in Las Vegas in November.

Baylor's will tip off its College Basketball Crown opener against Minnesota on April 1 at MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas. The game will be broadcast at 9:30 p.m. on FS1.

A look back: Recapping MBB's season

DYLAN FINK
Sports Writer

Before this season, Baylor was expected to be a competitive team in a highly skilled Big 12 Conference.

The Bears (16-16, 6-12 Big 12) were picked seventh in the conference preseason media poll. They finished the season 13th with a .500 record, the program's worst finish has seen since 2006-07.

Barring any long shot invitation to the NIT or Crown Tournament, Baylor has reached the end of a tumultuous season defined by the recurrence of equidistant moments. While on paper the 2025-26 team may not be one to remember fondly, the unique instances of the past season are worth a look back upon.

FULL ROSTER RECONSTRUCTION

By April 10, 2025, following freshman guard Robert Wright III's commitment to BYU, not a single player from the 2024-25 roster remained with the program. Head coach Scott Drew was left with the nearly impossible task of recreating 100% of production for the upcoming year.

While the task ahead was tall, it seemed not too much for the 2021 national champion as the Bears brought home a top 25 rated transfer portal class. 14 new players came into Waco ready to fling their green and gold afar on the hardwood.

"The team gets along," Drew said in September 2025.

"There's no cliques. You've got a lot of guys in similar situations, meaning, a kind of chip on the shoulder ... I think [the team] is excited to have a chance to prove some people wrong."

The Bears' attempt to catch lightning in a bottle and win big with an inexperienced squad did not pan out as many had hoped. Yet, much like Joey's season on the Bachelor, this year's cast found their way into the hearts of Baylor fans off the court.

"I feel like everyone is their own character," redshirt sophomore guard Cameron Carr said in September 2025. "I think it all goes together very well. Everyone has their own connection."

INJURY ISSUES ARISE ONCE AGAIN

In Star Wars, it's the empire that strikes back. In Waco, it's season ending injuries. Baylor saw three season ending injuries that greatly affected the depth of Drew's tossed-together squad.

Freshman forward Maikcol Perez (ACL) and junior center Juslin Bodo (forearm)

both suffered injuries that kept them from ever seeing the court in a Baylor uniform. Fifth-year guard J.J. White played just four games for the Bears before his number was called out for the season due to a foot fracture.

The Bears have had nine season-ending injuries since the program's national championship in 2021 and despite hopes for a turnaround, the mojo did not pan out any differently this year.

"Maikcol Perez just gets here and tears [his ACL] in the first week, so it's not like we wore him down," Drew said in February. "Bodo gets injured before he got here, so those are two of them. Now JJ gets a stress fracture ... That's one that happened on our watch."

With the injuries came depth struggles that led the Bears looking for any option to assist their thin rotation.

FORMER NBA DRAFT PICK JOINS PROGRAM MID-SEASON

In early November 2025, following Louisville's signing of a former G-League player to their active roster, Drew echoed Michigan State head coach Tom Izzo's sentiments against the NCAA ruling on X.

Drew soon took a lesson from Michael Corleone, who said in the Godfather Part II "Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer."

On Christmas Eve, Baylor announced the addition of the former 31st pick in the 2023 NBA draft, freshman center James Nnaji, to their team. The move brought national backlash against Drew that kept a judgmental eye on the Bears early in conference play.

In Nnaji's collegiate debut in a 69-63 loss at TCU to kick off Big 12 play, the 7'0" freshman welcomed to an eruption of Horned Frog boos. It didn't take long for the negative

attention to fade away as national media realized the newest Bear was going to be a long-term project rather than an immediate dominating impact.

"Let's be human first before the sport," Nnaji said in an interview with ESPN. "Let's

be human. But at the end of the day, the controversy doesn't bother me because I'm here to do my job, to help the team as much as I can, and to get better."

BEARS DEFENSE IS THE WORST IN OVER A DECADE

The biggest strength the Bears carried this season was their high-volume offense, which was ranked as high as fifth in the nation in December on KenPom. Projected first round picks Carr and freshman guard Tounde Yessoufou led the offensive production for Baylor as both averaged over 17 ppg.

The biggest weakness for the team was their defense. A lack of anchor in the post and poor rotational awareness throughout the year led the Bears to have the 128th worst defense in the nation.

The use of the pack-line defense, which prioritizes protecting the paint and allowing low percentage shots from deep, did not bode well for the Bears in conference play. Baylor's decision to allow a high number of shots beyond the arc from a Big 12 conference that averages 35% from three across the field led to the fourth worst opponent ppg average in the Big 12 with 63.8.

While post-defensive weaknesses can be accredited to the accumulated injuries the Bears suffered, once again defense proved to be a concern for the green and gold.

THERE'S ALWAYS NEXT YEAR

The biggest pros of this season are twofold. One — it is now over.

Two — it should never happen again.

Baylor played the role of Job this season. As soon as the newest test seemed to push the Bears to their limit, another one appeared. From full roster reconstruction to injuries, to the second hardest defensive strength of schedule in the nation the trials and tribulations were endless.

The stress of such a season can now be replaced with hope for next year. The Bears are expected to retain a large portion of their team, only losing four players to the greatly feared roster breaker of graduation.

While Yessoufou and Carr are expected to declare for the draft, the chances of a return for either of them are not zero. The development of sophomore guard Isaac Williams, Bodo Bodo's Baylor debut, as well as more expected returners should get Baylor fans through the long wait until next November.

In the meantime, Baylor fans, staff, and players alike should all sit down and take a huge sigh of relief. The long winter is over, and the sun of a much-deserved relaxing off-season is now here to shine again.

DANCIN' from A1

preparation as it readied for two different looks in Nebraska and Richmond.

"Richmond is very hard to scout because they're motion-based and they can shoot it," Colleen said. "Nebraska plays with great pace, they're aggressive defensively and they play through the paint. They're more set-driven. What I know is they're both good programs, so we're going to lean into what we can focus on."

With its entire active roster healthy, two weeks of rest and preparation behind them and a visit from former national champions Brittney Griner and Sophia Young-Malcolm, Baylor enters the final stretch of postseason play with fresh legs, a renewed mindset and a chance to turn that energy into a title run.

"There comes a certain point where it does get stale, and it was really good for their recovery, both mentally and physically," Colleen said. "It's allowed us to lean in and spend time together, so I think it was important for our bodies and, hopefully, for getting our minds right for what's ahead."

While March may be familiar territory for the program, the stage is still new for much of Baylor's lineup. Outside of the Bears' four seniors, few players have been tested under the bright lights of the NCAA Tournament, leaving Colleen to lean on her veterans to chart the course through Durham and toward Sacramento.

With point guard Jana Van Gytenbeek sidelined last season and center Kiersten Johnson not yet in a Baylor uniform, senior forwards Bella Fontleroy and Darianna Littlepage-Buggs stand alone as Baylor's only players with significant March experience in the green and gold. Behind them, that résumé gets thin fast, with Kyla Abraham next at 16 career NCAA Tournament minutes.

"We have a lot of players who haven't been in the NCAA Tournament or played valuable minutes in it," Colleen said.

READ MORE ABOUT BAYLOR'S PLAYOFF RUN HERE:





Jake Schreoder | Photographer

MADNESS AWAITS Sophomore forward Kayla Nelms (left) and freshman guard Marccayla Johnson celebrate after connecting on a basket before time expired in the first quarter during the Bears' 74-60 win on Feb. 22 against Arizona at Foster Pavilion.

Baylor eyes NCAA run after rough regular season finish

JEFFREY COHEN
Sports Writer

All eyes were on Baylor and TCU for the final game of the regular season. The matchup featured two squads vying for the top spot in the Big 12.

The game ended up with the Bears shooting 34% from the floor and 5-for-27 from beyond the arc. The defeat put a sour note on a difficult final stretch for Baylor's regular season; the Bears finished 5-5 with a conference tournament loss to Colorado.

"Disappointment is the biggest motivation, and while we're all disappointed with how the regular season ended, I think we're coming out with a new vengeance," redshirt sophomore guard Taliah Scott said after the Bears' 65-53 loss to TCU.

Despite the lackluster finish, Baylor finished third in the Big 12, boasting a 13-5 conference record while going 24-8 overall. The season marked the third time the Bears finished in the top three of the Big 12 under head coach Nicki Colleen.

"This team is hungry, and we're all ready to go and step up to whatever challenge we have," Colleen said.

Finding consistency was not an issue for most of the Bears' season. They went 12-2 in nonconference play with a signature victory over No. 7 Duke in Paris.

Their only losses came against No. 19 Iowa — by five points — and No. 2 Texas.

"The challenge right now is, you don't want to get complacent and you don't want to get comfortable because anyone in this league

can beat you," Colleen said in January after the Bears improved to 7-1 in Big 12 play with a win over UCF. "You're trying to hold serve at home and stay tied for first place. There's a lot on the line every night we step on the court when it comes to our goals and aspirations to become conference champions."

The Bears continued that momentum against Big 12 opponents. They rattled off eight straight wins with a victory over No. 10 Iowa State after dropping the conference opener to Texas Tech.

"When you get ranked and you're on a win streak, everyone's going to try to knock you off," Colleen said. "So you don't get to take days off — not if you really want to be a conference champion."

READ MORE HERE



Senior Kiersten Johnson finds new life at Baylor

MARISSA ESSENBURG
Sports Writer

In life and in basketball, second chances often come when needed, though not always when expected. For senior forward Kiersten Johnson, that moment came when she arrived in Waco for her final year of college basketball.

Johnson was no stranger to success when she arrived at Baylor. The Duncanville native spent three seasons at Oklahoma, helping the Sooners reach three straight NCAA Tournaments after a decorated high school career at one of the nation's most prolific programs. But in Waco, her story became about more than past accomplishments — it became about finding new life in a new chapter.

"There are players who are given new life," head coach Nicki Colleen said. "She was part of a winning culture at Oklahoma, so she understands what winning feels like. But for her, she has a lot of gratitude, and I don't think there's been a moment where she's lacked that. It shows in the way she shows up. She's such an important part of who we are."

While Baylor may have given Johnson new life, she has given plenty back in return. Her arrival helped fill the void down low after Baylor lost Aaronette Vonleh, who, like Johnson, joined the Bears for her final season. One of four seniors in Baylor's starting lineup, Johnson quickly established herself as one of the league's top shot blockers, trailing only Texas Tech's Jalynn Bristow.

Baylor fans got an early glimpse of what Johnson could bring in the paint when she posted her first double-double, including a career-high 11 rebounds and six blocks, in Baylor's 74-72 win over Davidson six games into the season.

"I'm thinking, 'Help my teammates,'" Johnson said following her career night. "I know they have my back, so I've got to have theirs. It's fun because it gets the team hyped, and it gets me hyped

too. Being able to block a shot is just fun."

Her presence around the rim was no accident, but the result of years spent developing against elite competition. The former four-star recruit and No. 24 forward in the class of 2022, Johnson, like several of her teammates, spent her summers on the EYBL circuit playing with ProSkills Texas, where she played alongside a roster featuring seven Division I players.

For Johnson, the journey to Baylor was far from ordinary, but one she embraced every step of the way.

"I had to do a lot of work when I got here. I had to do a lot of learning about myself, and I've appreciated everything I've gone through because it got me here and where we're going to go. I wouldn't be me without my team, the coaches and that support system pushing me."

While the postseason still lies ahead, Johnson said that more than anything Baylor may accomplish by the end of March, she will most cherish the relationships she has built in Waco.

"Being here has meant a lot to me," Johnson said. "This has been a new start for me, but I've really taken it all in. These girls I've met, they're the best, and they make this so much more fun. I'm having so much fun getting to play with them, and now I can't imagine my life without them. They're stuck with me."

After three seasons at Oklahoma, Johnson came to Baylor for one final year of college basketball. In Waco, she found more than a fresh start, embracing a new chapter marked by gratitude, growth and the relationships that gave her new life.

For the fourth and final time in her career, Johnson is heading to the NCAA Tournament — this time in green and gold. With one last March run ahead, gratitude is at the center of Johnson's final chapter in Waco.

"I've appreciated my time here," Johnson said. "I kind of wish I had a little more time here, but everything happens for a reason. I'm just blessed to be here [and] that Nicki decided to choose me."



Alyssa Meyers | Photographer

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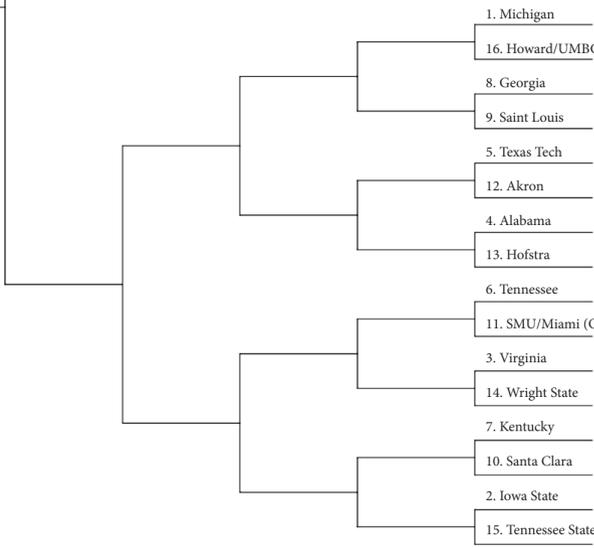
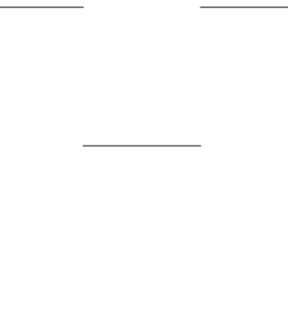
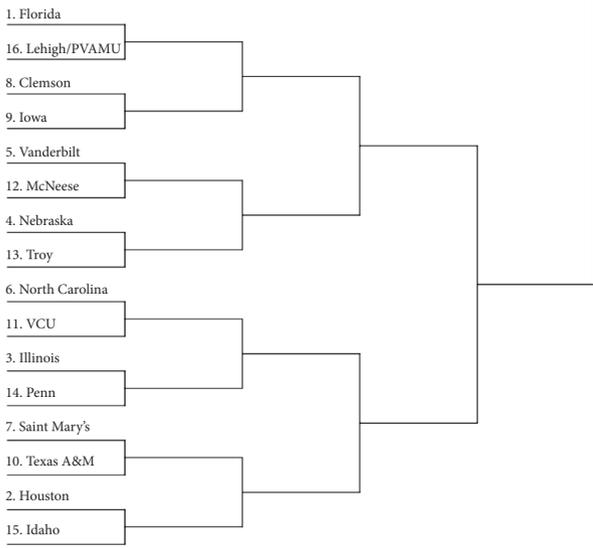
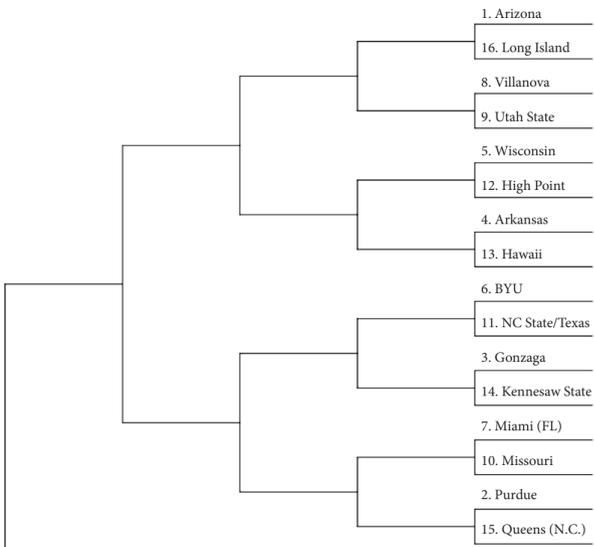
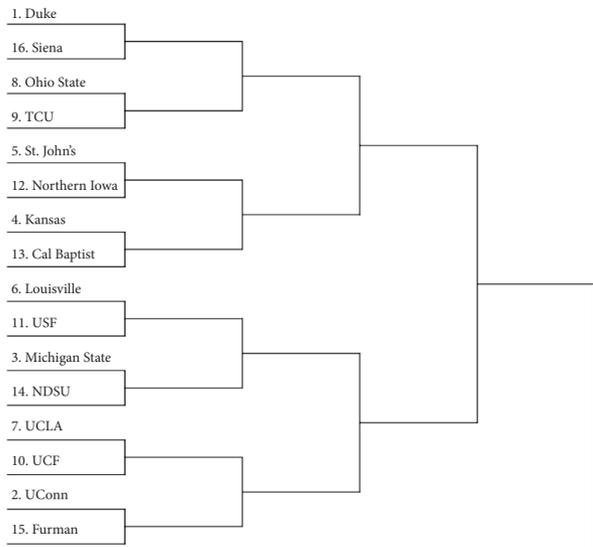
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Sports Take: Lariat's men's March Madness predictions

The Madness is back. It's the most wonderful time of the year, and nothing says "springtime" like watercooler bragging rights. Our sports desk, which collectively suffers from the plague known as "Ball Knowledge," will guide your ships toward the truth. Or maybe not. Guess we'll have to wait and see.

Jackson Posey | Sports Editor
Champion: Iowa State

The continued ubiquity of the transfer portal has tamped down hopes of traditional Cinderella runs. The old formula — scrappy seniors with four years of chemistry — simply isn't feasible anymore. The best routes, as Robert Frost mused, are those less taken.

Coach-player package deals will have a nice weekend: Ben McCollum and Bennett Stirtz will take No. 9 Iowa to the second weekend, while Saint Louis' Josh Schertz and Robbie Avila give No. 1 Michigan a run for its money. The relative lack of traditional upsets will spark fan furor.

In a defense-wins-championships world, three Big 12 teams (No. 1 Arizona, No. 2 Houston, No. 2 Iowa State) join No. 1 overall seed Duke in the Final Four. Along with Michigan, these are the four best teams in the country. All three matchups are tossups. But give me the Cyclones, who run the table on crazy shooting variance for Milan Momcilovic and a late hustle play by Joshua Jefferson.

Jeffrey Cohen | Sports Writer
Champion: Arizona

This men's basketball season has been ruled by the No. 1 seeds. Duke, Michigan, Florida and Arizona have proven to be legit. While those teams could make a serious case for the national championship, Arizona looks poised to make a run in its fifth season under Tommy Lloyd. The Big 12 champs are no strangers to top-25 competition, finishing 11-2 against ranked opponents, including six top-four seeds. The Wildcats are led by the Big 12 Player of the Year Jaden Bradley, All-Big 12 First Team Brayden Burries and Motiejus Krivas as well as All-Big 12 freshman Koa Peat.

Arizona also leads arguably the easiest region in the tournament with No. 2 seed Purdue, who finished seventh in the Big Ten and No. 3 seed Gonzaga, who has not faced a top-five seed since losing to No. 1 Michigan by 40 in November. This feels like Arizona's best chance at a chip since winning it all in 1997.

Marissa Essenburg | Sports Writer
Champion: Arizona

The harsh reality of college hoops in March is that injuries can flip a bracket faster than anything else.

Since November, Duke looked like a team that could win it all, and Michigan had the toughness to push the Blue Devils deep into Indianapolis. But with Caleb Foster out for Duke and L.J. Cason done for the year at Michigan, the shape of the field has shifted. What once looked like a path for the usual powers now feels wide open, and the team I think is best positioned to seize that opening is Big 12 regular-season and tournament champion Arizona.

Even 2025 national champion Florida, when healthy, has not looked as consistent all season as Arizona does



Brady Harris | Photographer

GETTING UP Freshman guard Tounde Yessoufou elevates for a two-handed slam in Baylor's 78-69 win over Washington.

right now. With Koa Peat back in the lineup and floor general Jaden Bradley playing his best ball, the Wildcats have all the tools to wear the crown, especially after the way they closed the regular season and then flat-out hooped through the conference tournament.

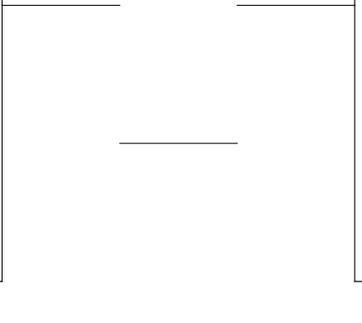
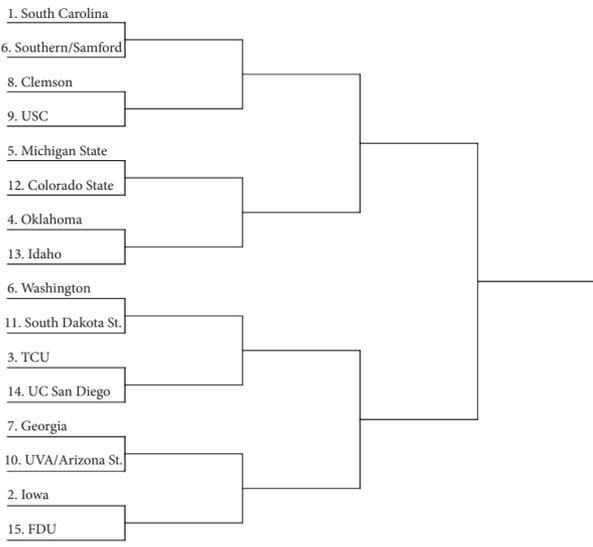
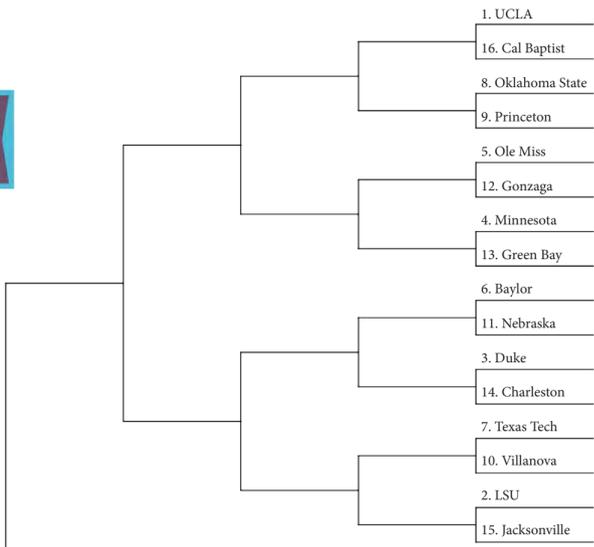
To me, Arizona is the steadiest of the No. 1 seeds because it has the right mix of tough guard play, size and the kind of physicality that travels this time of year. The Wildcats don't live and die by the 3-pointer, which makes them even tougher to rattle when shots are not falling. With the way they are playing right now, how healthy they look and how few holes they have, Arizona feels like the safest pick to cut down the nets in 2026.

Dylan Fink | Sports Writer
Champion: Kansas

This year's NCAA tournament will be one of the more straightforward brackets in recent memory. The glass slippers are laid out on the floor awaiting this year's handful of Cinderella teams. Alas, there will only be one memorable first round upset this year. No. 10-seeded Santa Clara will steal the nation's heart in its first tournament appearance since 1996, as they will conquer a poorly-managed Kentucky team 82-65.

Overall, the tournament will be led by Big 12 dominance, with the possibility of the first all-Big 12 Final Four meeting in Indianapolis, with matchups No. 4 seed Kansas facing No. 2 seed Houston in the east and No. 1 Arizona battling No. 2 Iowa State in the west. The outcome of this Final Four will be Kansas head coach Bill Self bringing home his third national title.

The Kansas Jayhawks will silence the most dominant team in the nation as they barely slide past Arizona. Freshman guard Darryn Peterson will prove why he should be the first overall pick in the NBA Draft as an emphatic two-point buzzer beater will give the public its most notable championship win since Villanova shushing North Carolina in 2016.



Sports Take: Lariat's women's March Madness predictions

At the Lariat, we have an incredible track record of making March Madness picks. (Don't Google that.) We reached into another dimension to bring sports desk together like the Spider-Men from that one movie. Check out our predictions below.

The women's NCAA Tournament always produces heavyweight matchups. The (relative) lack of Cinderella runs allows dynasties to flourish; UConn just earned its 15th No. 1 overall seed and is unsurprisingly joined on the 1-line by Texas and South Carolina.

Jackson Posey | Sports Editor
Champion: UCLA

This year, UCLA crashes the party, as Lauren Betts drops a 20-point double-double in the final to lead the No. 1-seeded Bruins past the Huskies. One year after their first Final Four appearance in the modern era, the Bruins win their first NCAA championship.

South Carolina has become a powerhouse in women's basketball under head coach Dawn Staley. The Gamecocks have won three national championships while appearing in seven Final Fours over the last 10 seasons. This year's team looks to continue that legacy as a No. 1 seed.

Jeffrey Cohen | Sports Writer
Champion: South Carolina

It is a difficult path for South Carolina in a region that features teams like Iowa, TCU and Oklahoma, but the Gamecocks have proven time and time again that they are up for the challenge. They finished 11-3 against top-25 opponents and seemed to get stronger as the season progressed. They blew out then-No. 5 Vanderbilt, Tennessee, and Ole Miss in the final month and a half of the regular season.

They have seen some close calls against the SEC's best but emerged on top. The tournament will be no different, as South Carolina marches its way back to another natty led by SEC scoring leader Joyce Edwards.

Unlike the men's side of March Madness, women's college basketball rarely delivers true Cinderella runs deep into the bracket. More often than not, the top of the bracket holds with powerhouse programs proving exactly where they belong. Women's college basketball is elite — it always has been — but the 2026 season might be the most competitive the game has ever been.

Marissa Essenburg | Sports Writer
Champion: UConn

The usual heavyweights — UConn, South Carolina and UCLA — are right where they so often are in March, guided by coaching royalty in Geno Auriemma, Dawn Staley and Cori Close. But 2026 has also belonged to the climbers, with Vanderbilt leaning on Mikayla Blakes' star power, Duke building its case as the season went on, and TCU, behind transfers Olivia Miles and Marta Suarez.

The top three spots in Phoenix without a doubt will be filled by the No. 1, No. 2 and No. 3 teams in the country: undefeated UConn, UCLA and Vic Schaefer's Texas Longhorns. But it's that No. 4 spot where I think things could get tricky. Still, I have South Carolina, led by point guard Raven Johnson, storming through Regional 4 to claim that final berth.

From there, I have Texas taking down UCLA and UConn moving past Dawn Staley and the Gamecocks. Even a year removed from No. 1 overall pick Paige Bueckers, the trio of Azzi Fudd, Sarah Strong and KK Arnold, along with the rest of the starting five and the depth coming off the bench, makes the Huskies look unstoppable. If they stay healthy, they look built to go back-to-back, with a perfect season and lucky No. 13 calling their name.

Dylan Fink | Sports Writer
Champion: UTSA

History. That is what will define the 2026 women's NCAA Tournament. Fans of college basketball everywhere will talk about this tournament for the rest of time. Included in everlasting history with such names as Socrates, Shakespeare, Attila the Hun and Martin Luther King Jr. will be the 2026 national champion 16 seed UTSA Roadrunners.

San Antonio has been the epicenter of basketball development for decades, and now it is taking over women's hoops on the back of the city's flagship university. The Roadrunners, led by electric senior forward Chyenney Rowe, will take the sporting world by storm with a dominant first round upset over top-seeded UConn.

Rowe, a team captain who averages 14 points and eight rebounds per game, will lead such a run that national pundits will be forced to open back up the women's college basketball GOAT conversation. Hey Caitlin Clark, we're good. The UTSA Roadrunners are here.

The Roadrunners will snag their first national title out of the hands of the heavily favored UCLA Bruins, who are notorious box-score merchants. When the tournament is all said and done, UTSA will never be forgotten as the first 16-seed ever to have the gift of hanging a banner in their rafters. The Roadrunners will hoist a convincing argument for the best women's college basketball team ever.



Jake Schroeder | Photographer

WORKING DOWN LOW Redshirt sophomore guard Taliah Scott goes up for a contested layup over TCU's Clara Silva in the regular season finale.



Sam Gassaway | Photo Editor

CONTINUING THE LEGACY From WNBA Coach of the Year to the helm of Baylor's storied program, Nicki Collen has navigated legacy, transition and pressure with equal parts grit and grace.

Sports Take: Bears take step back in WBB world

DYLAN FINK
Sports Writer

For over a decade, Baylor was the standard for women's basketball in the Big 12. Under current LSU head coach Kim Mulkey, the Bears won every regular season conference title from 2011 to 2021.

Since Mulkey's 2021 departure, Baylor has hoisted just one conference championship and hasn't made it past the Sweet 16 in the NCAA Tournament. The first five years of head coach Nicki Collen's tenure have seen continued winning, but a lack of dominance has left Baylor fans with questions about the path of the program.

"I am thrilled to be the head coach at Baylor University," Collen said in her opening press conference in 2021. "I believe it is the top job in the country for women's basketball. The success of this program speaks for itself, and I will begin working to ensure Baylor women's basketball continues to be a program that excels at the highest levels."

Since Collen took the job, the program's success has not quite continued as it was. National pundits have not been afraid to criticize Collen's continuation of the program.

A 2024 Washington Post feature on Mulkey called Baylor "no longer among the sport's upper tier, making it another structure abandoned and left to wither."

Collen has wasted no time in staring down public criticism and addressing the opinion that Baylor's time of dominance has come to an end.

"I'm not afraid to say I was really, really offended by the article that came out," Collen said following a 74-70 Sweet 16 loss to USC later that season. "And I didn't read any of it ... Don't know what happened. Didn't read the article. But nothing is withering in Waco ... And we're going to do it our way. And it's going to be just as good."

Two years later, the promise of being just as good has yet to be fulfilled. The credit of the fall from dominance, though, has less to do with the former WNBA Coach of the Year and more with massive changes to the landscape of college basketball.

Throughout the 2010s, three schools were seen as being a step above the rest of the nation: UConn, Baylor and Tennessee.

The three programs accounted for 15 NCAA championships across two decades from 2000-2020.

Since the beginning of the NIL era, everything has changed.

Women's basketball has become more popular in the public eye, seeing an 89% increase in viewership since 2024, according to Forbes. As the ceiling for talent increases, players are no longer choosing schools based off reputation.

With financial gain and a more even playing field in the picture, recruiting has become increasingly difficult for a program like Baylor, which isn't in the top three of NIL spending in their conference.

"There's more balance in the sport now," Collen said in January. "Not everyone can be paid top dollar at the same five schools. More parity now exists because of where players are choosing to go."

The Bears lost their second straight Big 12 title to TCU this season. These are the only two conference championships the Horned Frogs have ever achieved. The Fort Worth program has become a walking example of how the field of the sport is currently changing.

While Baylor is not looking down the barrel of "withering away," Collen has a large task ahead of her to prove the dominance she claims still exists in Waco.

With three key rotation pieces in Darianna Littlepage-Buggs, Bella Fontleroy and Jana Van Gytenbeek all facing the end of their college careers, the upcoming NCAA Tournament becomes the perfect stage for the Bears to prove their worth.

"I'm not really focused on the positives right now, but by 10 a.m. tomorrow I'll have moved on because my team needs me to move on," Collen said following a 62-53 loss to Colorado in the Big 12 Tournament. "If this doesn't wake them up, it's going to be a real short trip in the NCAA Tournament for us. We have to be tougher, we have to be more connected, execute better — we need each other. We have to stop talking and start doing."

If the Bears can't find a way to "start doing" in the current women's basketball landscape, then "withering away" from its former dominance may be what awaits the program on the horizon.

Baylor finds old faces in Durham Regional

JEFFREY COHEN
Sports Writer

The Bears are hoping to get back on track in the NCAA Tournament after a slow finish to the regular season, closing out with a 3-3 record.

Baylor struggled from the field against Colorado to open the Big 12 Tournament, shooting just 30.6% from the floor and 3-for-21 from three. The Bears tried to make up for the poor shooting game by winning the rebounding battle 37-33.

"We challenged them to go to the boards," head coach Nicki Collen said. "If you're not making shots, you've got to get extra possessions."

It was not enough to overcome the offensive woes as they dropped their first matchup of the tournament to the Buffs.

Baylor was selected as the No. 6 seed in the Sacramento 2 Regional, extending the program's streak to 22 consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances. The Bears will look to regain momentum on the national stage.

"The toughest teams win in March," Collen said. "If we're going to be good in March, the rest of March, we're going to have to toughen up."

This go-around, the Bears will find a new challenge in No. 11 seed Nebraska. They also could take on an earlier opponent in No. 3 seed Duke, who is matched up against No. 14 seed Charleston.

The Cornhuskers are coming off of their dominant win over Richmond in the First Four. They arrive as the final of 12 Big Ten teams in the tournament, finishing with a 7-11 conference record, but are coming onto the national stage on a down note. They went 2-7 in the season's final stretch, including a 72-69 loss to Indiana, the No. 13 seed in the conference tournament.

Nebraska struggled against seven NCAA Tournament-bound teams and its ranked opponents. The Cornhuskers lost by a combined 62 points against its four top-25 foes.

The Cornhuskers' offense is characterized by spreading the love. They rank third in the Big Ten with 18.4 assists per game while boasting a 1.33 assist-to-turnover ratio, sixth-best in the conference.

Baylor finds a familiar foe in the other

Durham matchup: No. 3 seed Duke. The Bears started their regular season with a statement win over the Blue Devils back in November. They won 58-52 in Paris behind redshirt sophomore guard Taliah Scott's 24-point Baylor debut. The Bears' victory over then-No. 7 Duke proved to be their best win of the season.

They are one of three teams Baylor has already faced in the Sacramento 2 Region, including No. 7 seed Texas Tech and No. 8 seed Oklahoma State.

Duke boasted a 16-2 conference record while finishing first in the ACC and winning the conference tournament title game over Louisville in overtime.

"The toughest teams win in March. If we're going to be good in March, the rest of March, we're going to have to toughen up."

NICKI COLLEN
HEAD COACH

Under ACC Coach of the Year Kara Lawson, the Blue Devils are led by Toby Fournier and Taina Mair, who both were named All-ACC First Team and Defensive Team.

They are set to take on No. 14 seed Charleston, the lone representative from the CAA after finishing with a 16-2 conference record and a conference tournament championship.

The Bears will face off against Nebraska at 1 p.m. Friday at Cameron Indoor Stadium in Durham, N.C. The game will be broadcast on ESPN.




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‘We knew nothing about it’

Small town north of Waco risks paying price in data center dispute

JOSH SIATKOWSKI
Staff Writer

Jim Jaska has been the mayor of Ross for 40 years. But in four decades at the helm of the 200-person community just north of Waco, he’s never seen a situation like this: plans for a \$10 billion data center are underway right in the little town’s backyard, threatening its rural identity — and he wasn’t told anything about it.

Lacy Lakeview, a suburb about 5 miles north of Waco, has been in contact with data center developer Infracore since April 2025, according to records. The discussions have centered around preparing a 526-acre plot of farmland for an industrial overhaul, fit with a complex of data centers and its own 1.2 gigawatt natural gas power plant.

The land is currently part of the City of Waco’s extrajurisdictional jurisdiction, meaning it requires annexation by Lacy Lakeview. Upon annexation, Lacy Lakeview plans to supply the millions of gallons of water required by the complex each day — and receive the substantial tax proceeds promised by the project.

But Lacy Lakeview is over seven miles away from the proposed site, whereas Ross is only footsteps from it. Despite this, Jaska and the Ross community only heard about the plans last winter, when a reporter from the Waco Bridge contacted people in the town for an article.

“[It] really upset me, because most of it is really good farmland,” Jaska said. “Now, all of a sudden, these people down North Katy [Road], they’re going to get up every day to this monstrosity



Josh Siatkowski | Staff Writer

UNDERDOGS Ross Mayor Jay Jaska, pictured in the Ross City Hall, is facing the biggest challenge of his 40 years in the role: developers want a \$10 billion data center in the town’s backyard.

across the road.”

Jaska, a former teacher and coach, grew up working on the land, which was privately owned. But today, the farming connection is weakened, he said.

“It got so many generations down the line that [the sellers] had no tie to the land,” Jaska said.

At a city council meeting on Tuesday night, councilmen and residents discussed the project and ways to prevent it, as they have since they learned about it late last year. Despite being at the center of the issue, Ross has found itself with little control over it.

“We checked with a second attorney, and he looked over the information that [the

city attorney] gave us, and he said, ‘I don’t see anything else at this time that you can do,’” Jaska said.

But that doesn’t mean residents aren’t trying. Sara Mynarcik-Lenart, who owns 85 acres of land in Ross that shares a border with the proposed data center site, is a leader of the data center’s opposition party. She’s been at weekly meetings since December, spreading awareness about the project and its dangers, which range from water usage to noise pollution to Ross’ potential destruction.

Attendance at these meetings has often exceeded the population of Ross, with the most recent one drawing over 350 people, both in

person and online. Mynarcik-Lenart said that Texas landowner rights are vast and give power to Infracore; she’s helped bring the Ross’ lack of control to a global stage.

“The opposition to it is no longer confined to the city, county and state,” Mynarcik-Lenart said at the County Commissioner’s office on Tuesday morning.

“It has received national and international media exposure. This past weekend, Sharon Goldman, Fortune Magazine reporter, interviewed landowners who will be directly affected by the proposed data center project. She also met with local elected officials to understand their role in the project.”

The working title of Goldman’s piece, Mynarcik-Lenart said, is “Ross, Texas: When a neighboring city controls the data center vote.”

Mynarcik-Lenart also said that British YouTuber Josh Otten, who runs the account Ordinary Things and has over a million subscribers, visited Ross recently in preparation for a video.

In addition to public awareness and outrage, the only legal avenue of opposition has been to petition McLennan County to prohibit any future tax abatements for the developers. But just like Lacy Lakeview, McLennan County is also incentivized by future tax revenues promised by the data

center, so they might not be on the small town’s side.

Direct communication with Infracore, whose chief executive is data center professional Braham Singh, has been equally challenging. Mynarcik-Lenart said that Singh came to a December meeting in Ross, but she has not heard from him since. She also said that there were, at one point, websites on which residents could submit queries, but those have since been taken down.

“The phone numbers on their websites are not answered,” Mynarcik-Lenart said. “There’s no way of contacting these people.”

Even though Mynarcik-Lenart called Lacy Lakeview and Infracore’s discussions “very secretive,” she and Jaska have refrained from villainizing Lacy Lakeview and Mayor Charles Wilson, whom Jaska, in small-town fashion, coached in high school. Jaska and Mynarcik-Lenart acknowledged the need for the tax revenue, and Mynarcik-Lenart, whose career was in education technology, said that she understands the inevitability of advancement.

“Am I against AI?” Mynarcik-Lenart said. “Am I against data centers? No, because I know how important this is. It’s the location that concerns me the most. The steamrolling. The lack of transparency. The fact that they’re trying to put something in where the existing infrastructure doesn’t exist. And I know once that infrastructure is here, then all of this will blow up and be an industrial park.”

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Clothing design, coffee, community

Baylor alum uses self-taught clothing design business to give back to community

KALENA REYNOLDS
Arts & Life Editor

For Baylor alum Jacob Davis, creativity and service have always been at the forefront of his life. From working in radiology at a hospital to being a barista at Be Kind Coffee and a self-taught clothing designer, Davis has crafted a life of fullness through expressing himself with self-taught clothing design.

While Davis' inspiration stems from a variety of muses, his main source is his grandmother, who passed away from cancer in 2018.

"A lot of things are dedicated towards her," Davis said.

Three years ago, Davis began his path in clothing design by making tote bags.

"They were terrible," Davis said. "I still have them just to look at how far I've come."

Davis dove into experimentation of his skills by making dress shirts for himself, learning every step in his bedroom.

"I [watched] a lot of YouTube videos and just any books I could find," Davis said.

As Davis grew deeper into his fashion identity, he began to craft a range of clothing items and styles, including western wear, boots and bespoke men's and women's wear.

Davis stated that historical elements largely influence the aesthetic of his design.

"I'm really fascinated with history and a story that you can tell," Davis said. "So a lot of my pieces have World War I uniforms that I took apart"

Davis said his purpose in using World War I uniforms is to showcase the often-overlooked details and time that it took to make the attire.

As for other inspirations, Davis drew on Hispanic culture and memories of his grandmother to create a line of jackets.

"There's a yellow one, that one I made for my grandma," Davis said. "The three Hispanic jackets were made for Hispanic Heritage Month. So I'm donating the proceeds to a scholarship for a Spanish student when they graduate high school."

Davis said that even though he's not Hispanic, he is intentional in paying homage to the culture throughout his design.

"I'm not Hispanic, but my friends are, and so they've helped, especially during my grandma's passing," Davis said. "They've helped me financially, emotionally, and so paying it back to the Hispanic culture as well as just giving back and keeping my grandma's name alive."

For the business side, Davis credited his job at Be Kind Coffee with helping him connect with clients.

Be Kind Coffee co-owner Alex Sanchez said that between working at a hospital, working at Be Kind and owning a clothing design company, Davis keeps extremely busy. However, there is one trait that separates him from the rest.

"Being of service to others ... that's where it feels like Jacob's head is at a lot of

time," Sanchez said.

As for Davis' business, Sanchez said "the sky is the limit" for his opportunities.

"I think Jacob is in a really cool point in this creative endeavor," Sanchez said. "If he chooses to do that, then this will become a full-time thing that he will be more successful at than he thinks."

While Davis' business continues to grow, his creative vision continues to expand. Previously, Davis has created a dress inspired by stained glass in a local church, as well as a bullfighter jacket.

"If you can give me the groundwork, I'll build something from that," Davis said. "I'm definitely open for commissions, and I think in a unique way."

Davis connects with clients and showcases his work through his Instagram, @jaeedav. Davis said it takes around a month to a month and a half for clients to receive a full garment.

"If you keep trying, you never know what something's going to lead to," Davis said. "I started by making really bad tote bags, really bad shirts, and it led to me helping manufacture small brands, making dresses and making a wedding dress."

Davis said that, above all else, his company's priority is to serve others.

"It's helping my community, everything I do," Davis said. "I try to give back in a way, whether it's through school supplies, whether it's through a scholarship and also representing my grandma."

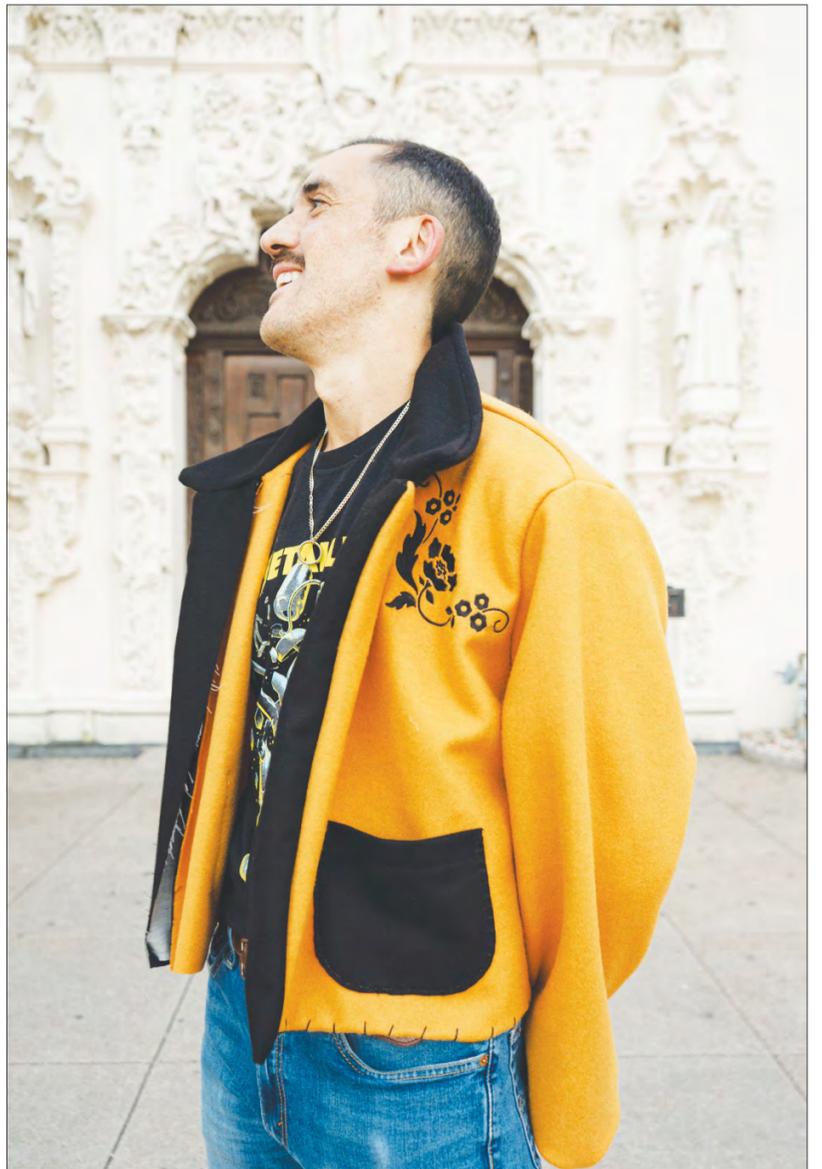


Photo courtesy of Jacob Davis

SEWING SENSATION Baylor alum Jacob Davis prioritizes community, creativity for his self-taught clothing design company.

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