

DWHoops 2012 ACC Tournament Preview

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DWHoops presents our 2012 ACC Tournament preview, in which we go team by team with players to watch, what to watch for, and what to expect. We will once again travel to Greensboro to cover all 11 games, including tagged photos of players from every team. So don't forget to check out our coverage each day at DWHoops.com - and next fall look for our 2013 ACC Women's Basketball Preview.

#11 Boston College: 7-22, 2-14 ACC; Thursday 8 PM vs. #6 Virginia

Players To Watch: Versatile inside-outside post player Katie Zenevitch (#45); multitasking forward Kristin Doherty (#21) and long-range bomber Kerri Shields (#10)

What To Watch For: The Eagles love to shoot the three, as six players have thirty or more three point attempts. They're not all that good at it, however, as the team shoots just 30% from long range. Zenevitch is the team's only real post scoring threat, though watch out for frosh Joy Caracciolo, one of their few first-year players who has contributed in a significant way this season. The Eagles go nine deep, but if their big three isn't putting up points, don't expect their bench to help too much in that regard.

What To Expect: Picked to finish ninth, the Eagles failed to live up to even those modest expectations as they lost their first twelve league games before rallying a bit late in the year. Any team that predicates their offense on the three always has a puncher's chance to win, and that will certainly be true in their first round matchup. Even if they somehow pull off a miracle in the first game, they'll come crashing back to earth when they go up against one of the ACC's heavyweights.

#12 Clemson: 6-21, 2-14 ACC; Thursday 11 AM vs. #5 UNC

Players To Watch: Do-it-all rookie guard Nikki Dixon (#21); tough rebounding forward Quinyotta Pettaway (#12); shot-blocking center Lindsey Mason (#31).

What To Watch For: The Tigers are a painfully young team with a young coach who is trying to instill discipline, toughness and competitiveness into her callow charges. Given that the team's older players (just two seniors) have no experience with winning, this has been a difficult, top-down task as coach Itoro Coleman must simply wait for more talent to arrive. In the meantime, she tells her frosh and sophs to go out and play aggressive defense and try to attack the basket. Since the Tigers are a terrible shooting team, most opponents tend to play them for the jump shot, which has resulted in some lopsided losses. Keep a close eye on Dixon and Pettaway, who will likely make a handful of exciting individual plays on their own but also commit some errors.

What To Expect: The Tigers did beat UNC on the road earlier in the season, a win punctuated by toughness and togetherness but also by a lack of urgency on the part of the Heels. Given Clemson's youth and the impetus of many teams who are playing to beef up their NCAA tournament resumes, Clemson will likely put up a fight for up to a half and then succumb to a big second-half run. It is interesting that they will once again be playing the Heels after their earlier encounter this season.

#1 Duke: 24-4, 15-1 ACC, Friday 3 PM vs. FSU/NCSU winner

Players To Watch: Creative point guard Chelsea Gray (#12), dominant young center Elizabeth Williams (#1), versatile and sweet-shooting forward Haley Peters (#33).

What To Watch For: The regular-season champs have been forced to use a tight 7-woman rotation thanks to injuries, but it's one that is now fairly experienced. They have four deadly three point shooters, a dominant post scorer, rebounder and shot-blocker in Williams, a handy utility player in Peters, and several players who can do a variety of things on the floor. Duke will use a variety of zones and man defenses, varying pressure depending upon the opponent and situation. Gray is their catalyst and a player who can dominate games with her passing as well as her ability to drive and shoot. Williams is hard to stop because of her quickness, aggressiveness and athleticism. Duke is susceptible to pressure and their youth does still occasionally emerge at times.

What To Expect: Duke's depth will be sorely tested as they try to win three games in three days. Even if they blow out their first opponent (and that is no sure thing), they'll still likely have to give their best players big minutes. Duke is in good, but not great, cardio shape, and teams would be well advised to make them run as much as possible. That said, Gray and Williams give them a huge leg up on most teams, and they tend to get enough scoring from others to close out opponents. Duke is still very young, but chances are that they will make it all the way to the finals unless their offense completely abandons them in the first two rounds of the tournament.

#8 Florida State: 14-16, 6-10 ACC; Thursday 3 PM vs. #9 NCSU

Players To Watch: Physically imposing center Cierra Bravard (#54), versatile guard Alexa Deluzio (#3), and smooth forward Natasha Howard (#33).

What To Watch For: The Seminoles have been the most puzzling team in the ACC this season. After graduating both the starting point guard and the team's perimeter defensive stopper, FSU wasn't ready with true replacements for either. As a result, the team's chemistry has been a wreck. Senior star Bravard is now coming off the bench, though Howard has elevated her game both as a scorer and rebounder. Deluzio has been a steady presence as a shooter and ballhandler, but her heavy workload has made her a less efficient player. The Noles are still trying to integrate recently eligible point guard Morgan Toles into the mix as they strive to create a new identity as a running, pressing team. They don't get a lot of offense from their bench and their defense is frequently erratic. When the parts fit together correctly, this team has as much talent at the top as any in the ACC.

What To Expect: It's hard to say, given the team's unpredictability. Right now, they are fighting just to get into the WNIT. They have the raw talent to win the whole ACC tournament, and could also go down meekly to a more motivated opponent. How well they play will depend entirely on the team's psychological makeup at the time of their game. Does this team still want to play more games together? Their first-round matchup should make the answer to that question abundantly clear. With Bravard coming off the bench, look for FSU to push tempo, force some turnovers and the team's energy up with some transition baskets. If Bravard can come in and avoid foul trouble, then she provides a bracing change of pace for an opponent thanks to her ability to score in a variety of ways around the basket. It's probable that they won't make it out of the first round, but if they play well enough to do so then nothing else they do would surprise me.

#4 Georgia Tech: 22-7, 12-4 ACC; Friday 11 AM vs. #5 UNC/#12 CU winner

Players To Watch: Physical guard Ty Marshall (#15), powerful but agile center Sasha Goodlett (#45) and experienced combo guard Metra Walthour (#5).

What To Watch For: Tech loves to run and press, but they also have plenty of size (and fouls) to throw at opponents. Marshall is a deadly penetrator and mid-range jump-shooter. Walthour controls tempo and can hit the three. Goodlett has been a beast in the post this year, trying to dominate every opponent at both ends. The Jackets play up to 11 players and can give them real minutes, so they're built for a long tourney run in that regard. They are not a great rebounding club and can also go cold when good teams zone them.

What To Expect: The Jackets will have a tough first round match-up but will at least receive the benefit of having a bye. When you add that to their already overwhelming bench depth, it should be enough to assure them of a win. That's probably as far as they go, however, as they don't have the versatility to beat the top three teams in the league or the total scoring punch. Still, if everything breaks their way and multiple shooters get hot, they have the potential to score a lot of points on anyone and pull an upset. They almost did that to Maryland in the regular season and it wouldn't shock me if something similar happened in Greensboro.

#3 Maryland: 25-4, 12-4 ACC; Friday 8 PM vs. #6 UVA/#11 BC winner

Players To Watch: High-scoring, versatile forward Alyssa Thomas (#25), quick shooting guard Laurin Mincy (#1), rebounding savant Tianna Hawkins (#21)

What To Watch For: The Terps are best known for their tremendous rebounding prowess. If they miss a shot, then Hawkins or back-up center Lynetta Kizer will likely get a stickback. Thomas can score from anywhere on the floor, while Mincy can take opponents off the dribble or hit the three. They're one of the great offensive machines in college basketball. What they don't do is play great defense. Hot shooters tend to stay hot against them, and the Terps don't get extra possessions with their defense. Maryland only really plays about seven, which could be an issue in a three day tournament setting.

What To Expect: Maryland puts pressure on opponents with their offense. To beat them, you have to have a similar amount of firepower or else hope that the Terps encounter serious foul trouble. Thomas is on a serious roll again after adjusting to a hand injury and seems ready to dominate her opposition once again. Maryland will likely have a fairly challenging first round game and then probably go up against a team that beat them twice in Miami. One gets the sense that if they really dominate the boards, they could go all the way to the finals.

#2 Miami: 25-4, 14-2 ACC; Friday 6 PM vs. #7 WF/#10 VT winner

Players To Watch: Ultra-versatile player Shenise Johnson (#42), scoring machine guard Riquna Williams (#1), steady shooter Stefanie Yderstrom (#3)

What To Watch For: The Canes love to go up-tempo and generate offense from their devastating press. They force 25 turnovers a game and get lots of easy points that way. Johnson will likely repeat as ACC player of the year and deservedly so, as she's had to adjust to her team losing star forward Morgan Stroman midway through the season. She's a great scorer, passer, rebounder, defender, shooter and leader. Williams can be streaky, but if she gets hot, she can drop 30+ points on any opponent. Yderstrom can handle the ball and defend in addition to shooting. Miami is not a great rebounding team and they can be stagnant in a half court setting, as their post play is nowhere near as strong as their perimeter play. 6-6 center Pepper Wilson must be a presence at both ends for the Canes to succeed in Greensboro.

What To Expect: Miami will easily crush their first round opponent and get their stars a lot of rest. That will help in

the semifinals, because they'll need their big three to be at their best if they wind up playing Maryland for a third time. The Hurricanes have never played all that well in Greensboro and that could be a factor against opponents who bring a lot of their fans. For their seniors, there's a lot at stake, because a victory in the tournament could further enhance their NCAA seeding. If Miami does win the tournament, it will be because their role players and bench play a significant role. If Shenise and Riquana have to do everything, they won't make it to the finals.

#5 North Carolina: 19-10, 9-7 ACC; Thursday 11 AM vs. #12 Clemson

Players To Watch: Skilled low-post dominator Chay Shegog (#20), jumping-jack forward Laura Broomfield (#33), sweet-shooting guard Brittany Rountree (#11)

What To Watch For: In a weird year in the ACC, the Heels have been the weirdest of teams. There is talent, depth and experience on this team, but there's been so little continuity or chemistry that they haven't been able to beat a ranked team since early January. They were good enough to beat #2 seed Miami but bad enough to lose to #12 seed Clemson. The Heels don't quite have the firepower on offense that they do in most years, though Rountree can fill it up if given room and Shegog's soft touch makes her tough to stop when she's aggressive. Broomfield is incredibly active on the boards and has to be blocked out. The Heels often go through long scoring droughts where they're coughing up the ball because of poor decisions or just jacking up bad shots. Still, this team has size and has a puncher's chance against anyone if they are motivated and together.

What To Expect: Clemson certainly got their attention in Chapel Hill, and I don't anticipate the Heels having any trouble with them. UNC always tends to play better in Greensboro than during the regular season, and getting that first win under their belt could give them confidence. Going up against a rested and deep Georgia Tech squad in the second round could be trouble, but the Heels have the size, depth and athletes to match up with the Jackets. Don't be surprised if they make it to the semifinals, and if they make it that far, their improved confidence could take them even farther. Don't be surprised, however, to see them look disorganized and inefficient against a highly motivated Georgia Tech team, either. One last thing -- depending on what happens around the country, the Heels might still be fighting for their NCAA tournament lives.

#9 North Carolina State: 16-14, 5-11 ACC; Thursday 3 PM vs. #8 FSU

Players To Watch: Undersized post warrior Bonae Holston (#22), tough-as-nails combo guard Marissa Kastanek (#23), and talented but enigmatic post Kody Burke (#44).

What To Watch For: Holston will attack opponents inside and outwork bigger players for rebounds. Kastanek will run around the floor like a lunatic, running defenders into screens until she gets a look that she wants. Burke may or may not be focused and engaged at any given moment during a game. This is pretty much State's season in microcosm, as Holston & Kastanek have had to do an incredible amount of heavy lifting just to keep State competitive. NC State is not particularly good or bad at anything, and as a result never gets anything easy. At the same time, they have a puncher's chance of beating anyone because of their two best players and the occasionally dominant play of soph point guard Myisha Goodwin-Coleman. Everyone else is strictly a role player.

What To Expect: State has made big runs in the tournament in the last five years, twice making it to the finals as a big underdog. As such, they aren't a team to overlook. On the other hand, it will take more than a three game run to put them in the NCAA tournament: it will require winning the automatic bid. This is a team bound for the WNIT, and what they do in the tournament won't matter all that much. That said, coach Kellie Harper stresses pride and effort above all else, so anyone who plays them in the ACC tourney will get State's best effort. In fact, I expect them to win their first round matchup and give their second round matchup a tussle before ultimately running out of gas.

#6 Virginia: 21-9, 9-7 ACC; Thursday 8 PM vs. #11 Boston College

Players To Watch: Tough combo guard Ariana Moorer (#15), sweet-shooting and efficient forward Ataira Franklin (#23), and defensive-minded guard Lexie Gerson (#14).

What To Watch For: Under new coach Joanne Boyle, the Cavs have been reborn as one of the best defensive teams in the ACC, but with a limited roster. After losing starting point guard China Crosby to an ACL tear, Moorer has had to handle the ball, score the ball and defend the ball. When she can do all three efficiently, Virginia usually wins because of their sticky defense. The constant pressure of Gerson is usually enough to take one of the opponent's best perimeter scorers out of the game. Franklin is a fine shooter and a surprisingly tenacious rebounder for her size. There's nothing exciting or aesthetically pleasing about Virginia's style of play, but their ability to grind things out to the bitter end makes them a less-than-pleasant matchup for any opponent.

What To Expect: The Hoos should be able to win their first game without too much trouble, but they don't tend to blow out many opponents. Any team that is perimeter-oriented will have a hard time getting shots off against them. On offense, Virginia may not be exciting, but they take care of the ball and get good looks at the basket. Any offense the Hoos get out of their post players is a bonus. If Moorer gets hot, their best players stay out of foul trouble and they force some turnovers, the Hoos are fully capable of winning two games in the ACC tournament, pulling off an upset in the second round. Otherwise, expect to see them put up a valiant effort but ultimately fall just a bit short.

#10 Virginia Tech: 7-22, 3-13 ACC; Thursday 6 PM vs. #7 Wake Forest

Players To Watch: Smooth wing Monet Tellier (#31), streaky-shooting point guard Aerial Wilson (#3), slender jump-shooting forward Alyssa Fenyn (#13)

What To Watch For: The Hokies have limited talent and depth, but they play hard on every possession. With their top three scorers, they have a puncher's chance in every game to stay competitive if they are hitting jump shots. Tellier likes attacking the basket and getting to the foul line, while Wilson is more of a scoring point guard. Fenyn can do some work inside but is best spotting up for shots. They play a lot of man-to-man, pressure defense, to the point of exhaustion and beyond. If they can avoid foul trouble, their top three players will play forty minutes. Their post players work hard, are interchangeable and mostly nondescript. Their bench is strictly there to provide warm bodies and only goes two deep.

What To Expect: This is Virginia Tech's equivalent of the NCAA tournament. Far from a battered team just happy to see its season end, I sense that the ACC tournament will be a new lease on life for this spirited group. Whomever winds up matched with them had best prepare for a ferocious battle and must be prepared to meet their passion and toughness. They probably won't win, but there won't be any bullets left in their metaphorical guns, either. Look for their opponent to try to force them into turnovers and pound them on the boards. Once VT starts succumbing to foul trouble, the game will be over.

#7 Wake Forest: 17-11, 7-9 ACC; Thursday 6 PM vs. #10 Virginia Tech

Players To Watch: Streaky-shooting guard Lakevia Boykin (#22), playmaker/shooter Chelsea Douglas (#5), erratic but talented center Sandra Garcia (#21)

What To Watch For: The Deacs like to use a lot of players; while their standard rotation is eight deep, they all get at least sixteen minutes a game. As such, Wake likes to run and press as much as possible, generating points off turnovers (they force 24 a game). The Deacs won't wow you with dominant scorers or rebounders, instead depending on team speed and versatility to get their wins. Another player to watch is speedy point guard Brooke Thomas, who isn't much of a scorer but not only fuels the team's transition attack with her passing, she also generates many of its steals. Boykin and Douglas can get hot from long range at any time, while Garcia is more of a game-to-game sort of player -- if she starts off poorly, she usually doesn't alter that over the course of a game. But if she's aggressive, her ability to score inside, rebound, defend and hit the three make her an interesting match-up.

What To Expect: The Deacs have the depth and style of play to win a couple of games if they get the right matchups and their perimeter shots are falling. They are susceptible to long scoring droughts, especially if their games become bogged-down, half-court affairs. While an NCAA bid is all but out of the question for them, they're hoping to be a seeded WNIT team so getting up to 18 or 19 wins is a priority for them. They have typically been known to play at least one really good game in the ACC tourney, so I expect them to advance at least to the second round.
