

Eyes on the Prize: Top-Seed Stony Brook Women's Basketball Earns Conference Honors, Ready for Playoffs

By **Kenneth Fermin** - March 3, 2020



Graduate guard Kaela Hilaire (middle) celebrating with her teammates before the game versus UAibany on Sunday, Feb 29. Hilaire was named to the 2020 America East All-Conference Second Team on Tuesday, March 3rd. Stony Brook is trying to win its first conference title in program history. PHOTO CREDIT: STONY BROOK ATHLETICS

The **Stony Brook Women's Basketball** team isn't satisfied with just finishing as the No.1-seed in the **America East Tournament**. Even after setting a single-season program record at 26-3 and earning six major conference honors, the **Seawolves** want more. Stony Brook wants its 2019-20 season to be defined by hoisting up the **America East Championship**.

Stony Brook is looking to win its first-ever conference title after producing an incredible regular season. The team broke benchmark-after-benchmark during its 22-game winning streak, the longest in the nation at one point this year. The Seawolves picked up big wins over **Power 5** opponent **Pittsburgh**, won both of their first-ever games in **Puerto Rico** and swept the conference in one-go en route to a 14-2 America East record.

The team thrived under the system set by head coach **Caroline McCombs**, who earned the program's first ever **America East Coach of the Year** honor. Stony Brook averaged over 65 points per contest and held opponents to the NCAA's 16th-lowest scoring average at 55.2 points. McCombs became the program's winningest coach and topped her season-high 23 victories set last season, with 26.

The success is even more impressive considering the team's identity was unclear heading into the preseason. Guards **Shania Johnson** and **Jerell Matthews**— the team's top two scorers and 3-point threats— graduated from the program, leaving the pivotal backcourt positions open.

The team filled the vacancies with veteran talent by adding graduate **Kaela Hilaire** and junior **Victoria Johnson**. Hilaire entered the program after three seasons with the **Seton Hall Pirates** while Johnson arrived off the backburner of an incredible sophomore campaign at **Hinds Community College**, ranking ninth in the **NJCAA** with 21.3 points per game. Both performed exceptionally on the court and took home conference honors on Tuesday.

Hilaire excelled as the floor commander by beating defenders inside with her speed and keeping them guessing on if she would drive with, shoot or pass the ball. The guard excelled at getting to the charity stripe and sank a team high 80 free throws at a 74 percent rate. The graduate often delivered the victory score in tight games by knocking down free throws, providing a late-steal or converting a clutch three-pointer— such as in the 58-54 win over **Binghamton** on Feb. 12. That leadership helped Hilaire earn a **Second Team All-Conference** recognition.

Johnson made program history by becoming its first-ever **Sixth Player of the Year** honoree. The junior was the team's 'iron-woman', playing in every game and delivering off the bench. She recorded 10 double-digit scoring games and shot 30 percent on the floor.

The duo complemented a team filled with returnees eager to build on their Semi Finals appearance last postseason.

Sophomore guard **Anastasia Warren** proved why she earned the starting shooting guard role by producing big scoring nights. Warren shined by speeding past her defenders on the wing and led the team with 40 makes from 3-point range. Her production increased by converting Hilaire's passes into points, such as in the sophomore's 24 point performance over Vermont to clinch the top

seed. That also helped her grab a **Third Team All-Conference** mention, one season after making the **All-Rookie** team.

Hailey Zeise made her impact on the floor as the defensive anchor. The junior was often assigned to the opposition's best players— including Player of the Year **Kai Moon**. Zeise led the team with 822 minutes of action and was an all-around threat by sinking 34 3-pointers, grabbing 113 boards and snatching 28 steals.

Junior forward **India Pagan** was the team's only Preseason All-Conference player entering the 2019-20 season and lived up to the hype. The forward converted over 50 percent of her shots inside and grabbed 163 rebounds. The team often turned to the junior for scoring, such as when she scored a career-high 26 points off 13-14 shooting in the win over Maine on Jan. 5. Pagan was a top contender for Player of the Year, earning three weekly player honors across three months. The forward was named to the **First Team All-Conference**.

Cheyenne Clark's status for the 2019-20 season was not clear until just prior to training camp, but the forward did not miss a beat stepping back on the court. The graduate was a relentless rebounder who gifted her team with countless second chances on offense and forced the opposition's best players to miss shots with lockdown defense. The forward arguably topped her **NJCAA Region 3 Player of the Year** recognition after being tabbed to the **America East All-Defensive Team**. Clark ranked 75th in the NCAA with 245 rebounds and led the America East with over four offensive boards per game.

The Stony Brook players weren't afraid of touting that they had the most depth in the conference. The team's bench players backed it up by maintaining the same intensity from the starters on the court. Johnson drained a team leading 80 percent of her free throws while **Jonae Cox** provided valuable minutes in every game this season. McKenzie Bushee and **Oksana Gouchie-Provencher** crashed the boards and drained mid-range baskets during Stony Brook scoring runs. **Gouchie-Provencher** also paced the team with a block per contest and finished fifth in the conference with 30.

That success helped Stony Brook make a name as one of the nation's best all-around threats. It held the 44th best scoring margin in the country at over 10 points per game, the only team in the America East that cracked double-digits. The Seawolves were 33rd overall with 1176 rebounds and 29th by averaging 14 offensive boards a game.

Despite all the recent success, there was no telling how Stony Brook would wrap up its regular season after dropping consecutive games for the first time in 13 months. The nearly-impenetrable Seawolves fell to the No. 2-seed **Maine Black Bears** and the previously-winless **Hartford Hawks**, wrapping up a week-long road trip. The players knew that emotions were running high for 'Senior Day' on Saturday, Feb. 29, playing in front of a hometown crowd and without Pagan.

Stony Brook stepped up to task, picking up the 53-44 victory over the **UAlbany Great Danes** in front of a season-high 1,175 fans at **Island Federal Arena**. The win locked in the 2019-20 America East Standings, setting up a rematch between top-seed Stony Brook and No. 8-seed UAlbany in the conference Quarterfinals.

Five graduates– forwards Cheyenne Clark, **Kyra Dixon**, **Kina Smith**, Hailey Zeise and guard Kaela Hilaire– were honored during a pregame ceremony. All five got time on the court, but it was Hilaire that made the biggest impact.

Hilaire only made two shots out of 17 attempts, but her second basket was a history-maker. The graduate earned her 1000th career point by banking a layup off the glass five seconds before the third quarter buzzer. The score was especially sentimental for the home fans– many donning custom Hilaire t-shirts gifted to the crowd by her father– who rewarded the guard with a standing ovation.

The Seawolves never trailed in the game and set the game tempo by holding the Great Danes to just nine-percent shooting in the first quarter. Stony Brook out rebounded its rival 18-4 on offense and 48-27 overall, also capitalizing from 12 points off turnovers. The Seawolves did much of its damage in the paint and finished with 28 points inside.

The biggest difference maker will be the availability of Pagan, who missed the last two regular season contests due to injury. She is expected to play even though the team has not made an official announcement as of the time of publication.

Pagan would provide Stony Brook with another weapon in the paint against UAlbany center **Alexi Schecter**. The senior led her team with 12 points, nine rebounds and five blocks on Saturday afternoon.

The Stony Brook loss to Hartford reminded everyone that no win is guaranteed. Although Hartford did not qualify for playoffs, the loss still looms over the Stony

Brook player's heads as a reminder that the postseason crown is still up for grabs. Maine will enter as the No. 2-seed and is riding an eight-game winning streak into the playoffs. The Black Bears are looking to win their third straight conference title and will host No. 7-seed **Vermont**. **UMass Lowell** picked up the No. 3-seed with an 11-5 conference record and is looking to build up some momentum with a win over No.6-seed **UMBC**. No. 4-seed **Binghamton** will be led under Player of the Year Kai Moon as she looks to lead the program to the championship in her farewell season, starting with a Quarterfinals match against No. 5-seed **New Hampshire**.

Stony Brook will begin its quest for its first America East title by taking on UAlbany on Wednesday, March 4 at Island Federal Arena. Tip-off is set for 6:30 and the game will broadcast on America East TV and WUSB 90.1.

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