

Headline: Pitt men's basketball prepares for closing stretch over spring break

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Social: After a promising start, Pitt men's basketball season quickly nose-dived over recent weeks. Despite the ever-slimming chances of March Madness play, finishing the regular season strong remains important for the long-term success of the program, indicative of its culture.

Pitt men's basketball's (16-12, 7-10 ACC) season remains on life support. Without an improbable ACC tournament run, the Panthers will watch March from their couches once again. Fans may question the point of these final games with a seemingly inevitable postseason outcome.

In actuality, these games become far more important for different reasons — the future health of the program depends on them. If the team “quits” over these last few games, why would any transfer buy into the program? For the high-end talent that remains, why not entertain a trip to the transfer portal?

The squad's struggles remain undisputed. Since beginning the season 12-2, Pitt went 4-10 over the last 14 games. The team has preached about overcoming these struggles and stringing together some wins. But as Pitt's slump gets longer it then becomes the Panthers' identity. The team has undisputed star players. Sophomore guard Jaland Lowe still [draws NBA scouts to games](#). Senior guard Ishmael Leggett provides efficient shooting and ball-handling prowess. Redshirt senior forward Zack Austin electrifies the crowds with high-flying dunks and blocks. Pitt men's basketball has the talent to win at least two of the remaining three games entering the ACC tournament. It all comes down to whether or not they're still bought in.

Louisville

By far, the toughest challenge left on the Panthers' schedule is No. 19 Louisville (22-6, 15-2 ACC).

Before this season, Pitt rode a hot streak against the Cardinals, winning the last five matches. Make no mistake, this iteration of Louisville basketball has made a complete 180. Earlier this season, the revamped Cardinals defeated Pitt in an [82-78](#) nailbiter.

In his inaugural season as head coach, Pat Kelsey already made a program-best 14-win improvement from the 2023-2024 season, putting him squarely in the coach of the year conversation. His modernized offense, based around three-point shooting, took the ACC by storm as the Cardinals lead the conference in three-point attempts and are second in makes. For the Panthers to take down Louisville, they must defend the arc. Pitt fans have become accustomed to seemingly random opposing players [becoming Steph Curry](#) against them. This time around, the Panthers play the [Power Four leader in three-pointers made](#) — senior guard Reyne Smith. Last time around, Smith torched the Panthers for seven three-pointers. Pitt cannot have one of its signature cold starts or fail to defend the three-point arc, or Pitt will easily lose to Louisville.

NC State

On Wednesday, March 5, Pitt travels to Raleigh, North Carolina, to take on the Wolfpack (11-17, 4-13 ACC). A loss here would mark a new low for the Panthers. The Wolfpack have become unrecognizable from the beloved Cinderella story squad of last March, fighting even to make the ACC tournament.

But the Panthers must not overlook an opponent again. Despite its record, NC State consistently keeps games close. Of its 13 ACC losses, seven ended in one-score contests. Expect the Wolfpack to take this game down to the wire against another middle-of-the-pack ACC team.

The [underlying numbers](#) also fail to match NC State's abysmal record. The Wolfpack rank top six in total defense and lead the conference in turnover margin, averaging +3.18. Most notably, NC State's offense stands out as the team's biggest weakness, placing 16th in scoring. If Lowe and Leggett can care for the ball, the Panthers should leave with a win. Additionally, NC State places last in ACC play in rebounding margin, allowing the Panthers a rare opportunity to win the battles on the glass.

Boston College

In a strange end to the Panthers' season, they face Boston College (12-16, 4-13 ACC) on Saturday, March 8. The odd environment of the spring break Oakland Zoo, half-filled with buddy passes on senior night, presents a fittingly weird end to an equally weird season.

All eyes are on Leggett to take over the game. As the Panther is definitively out of eligibility after this season, the night will focus on giving him well-deserved recognition. Leggett places second in scoring, only six points behind Lowe, and leads the team in steals. As of late, he's found his stroke from the three-point line, going 11-23 over the last four games. He's also shot an efficient 46% from the field, proving crucial to every Panther win.

The Eagles, another ACC bottom-feeder, rank bottom five in turnovers, scoring offense and scoring defense. Boston College also owns the second-to-worst scoring margin at -4.3. Like NC State, the Eagles recently developed a knack for playing in close games, sending three of their last six ACC losses to overtime. Two of the regulation losses came against ACC Top Dogs Louisville and Duke.

Depending on the Panthers' final seeding, they will compete in the ACC tournament, which begins Tuesday, March 11.