

ACC Preview: How will Pitt fare in America's toughest conference?

By [Chris Mueller](#) December 27, 2017

A gutsy 63-59 win over Towson last weekend marked both the end of Pitt's non-conference schedule and the beginning of an eight-week span unlike anything its nine first-time Division I players have experienced before.

Montana, Mount St. Mary's and McNeese State aren't walking through that door anymore. It's finally time for ACC basketball. Welcome to the big leagues.

With an 8-5 mark entering ACC play, one of the youngest teams in Division I basketball made it through 13 games relatively unscathed – aside from an injury to **Ryan Luther** – through a series of common highs and lows. On a positive note, Pitt has won seven of its last eight games since a 1-4 start with several players displaying clear signs of progression along the way.

Some have appeared more ready than others, but, if anything, it's pretty obvious that Stallings has a group that plays hard on a nightly basis with a rooted desire to learn. Last season, that wasn't always the case.

Marcus Carr and **Shamiel Stevenson** have already shown star potential as [two clear foundational blocks](#) to the program's rebuild. [Khameron Davis](#) and [Parker Stewart](#) are two complimentary pieces with high ceilings beyond their current roles. **Jared Wilson-Frame** has proven his ability to score at a high rate. Even **Terrell Brown** took [a step forward against Towson](#) the other night.

With the addition of St. John's transfer **Malik Ellison** and a few more to-be-determined recruits next season, the young core of this team has the makings to be pretty good in a few years down the line. Now, that doesn't necessarily

guarantee Stallings will still be around by then.

But for all of the promise we've seen, the downs have still exceeded the ups during the team's seemingly ongoing adjustment process in 'a season of firsts.' For one, the Panthers can be highly inconsistent in every aspect of basketball – whether it be on a game-by-game, half-by-half or even possession-by-possession basis.

A Delaware State team ranked last (351st) among all of Division I basketball in RPI – with a previous 49-point loss to Duquesne – climbed back from a 25-point first-half deficit to fall to Pitt by just six points, 64-58, at the Petersen Events Center on December 19. With a general lack of focus, poise and offensive efficiency, it was hard to believe we were watching the same team that took No. 7 West Virginia down to the wire nearly 10 days prior. I asked Stallings after the game if he viewed a close win over the lowly Hornets as a concern. He quipped back, citing a team rule where they'll never treat a win like a loss and vice-versa.

But in a much more relaxed setting a few days removed from the game – only two of us were present at the media availability – Stallings expanded on what he meant in a lighter, but similar sentiment.

“It wasn't that we only won the game by six points,” he said. “I'm not going to apologize for winning. I've got one of the youngest teams in college basketball. There are no apologies for winning a game, but we missed a chance to get better. ...Especially my team, if we're not really locked-in we can go south in a hurry. Somebody gets on a roll against us – we saw it against Mount St. Mary's – we have to be and stay really locked-in in order to be our best, and to continue to improve in order to give ourselves a chance as this season and the rest of our schedule unfolds.”

Understandably, gradual improvement is Stallings' primary focus right now. It probably pains proud Pitt fans to hear this, but the team's overall record this season – while still important – isn't going to change the program's

situation. If anything, 10 wins was considered a stretch for this team back in September. It's now within reach, but year one of the rebuild is more about Stallings finding out what pieces he has, what areas he needs to recruit and – most importantly – further prove that he can coach, attract and develop young talent. Those are three of the make-or-break job security pillars that will likely decide his short-term fate.

Now in the grand scheme of things, wins obviously still matter. Although it's considered highly unlikely, the prospects of Pitt upsetting a high-end ACC opponent this season would easily bolster Stallings' resumé and prospects for keeping his job beyond 2018. Just look at **Pat Narduzzi's** situation after just signing a new seven-year contract earlier this month. What if his wins over No. 2 Clemson and No. 2 Miami never occurred? Would he still be viewed in a similar light?

However unlike Narduzzi, Stallings hasn't been able to garner high approval ratings from fans, alumni or donors about the men's basketball program's overall direction. If you attended the Petersen Events Center for a non-conference game this season, albeit by attendance numbers most of you probably didn't, the once-storied arena that now resembles a ghost town only further signifies the clear lack of belief in Stallings' vision for the future. And he's often the first to admit it.

“I can't say that I feel like I've accomplished that yet,” Stallings said after the Towson win. “It was nice to have that energy in the building tonight. ...As I said earlier in the year, these kids deserve to be supported. They play the right way, they play hard, they grind. They're good kids, but we're just going to keep doing what we're trying to do and hope that it's good enough.”

The road that now awaits Pitt will serve as a baptism by fire unlike anything it has experienced thus far. The ACC is undoubtedly the deepest, most treacherous conference top-to-bottom in all of college basketball, and the Panthers' first four games will come against No. 15 Miami, Louisville, Virginia Tech and No. 4 Duke – all of whom were picked to finish in the top half of the

league. **Ryan Luther** potentially missing that entire stretch with a stress reaction in his right foot certainly wouldn't help, either.



Ryan Luther – MATT SUNDAY / DKPS

Pitt was tabbed last (15 out of 15) in the ACC preseason polls, and it very well could shake out that way at the season's end. But don't rule out the possibility of this team *slightly* exceeding expectations. Slightly, as in stealing a game or two that it shouldn't win on paper. As of Tuesday, only three unbeaten teams remain in Division I basketball: No. 1 Villanova (12-0), No. 3 Arizona State (12-0) and **Jamie Dixon's** No. 10 TCU squad (12-0). For the rest of the AP top-15, a blemish or two exists on every record.

From an ACC standpoint, No. 15 Miami just fell to New Mexico State, 63-54, on December 23. Wofford shocked the entire college basketball landscape when it upset No. 13 North Carolina, 79-75, on December 20 at the Dean Smith Center. On December 5, Notre Dame – ranked No. 6 at the time – was

upended by Ball State, 80-77, at home as well. Although Boston College appears to have turned a corner this season, the Eagles still knocked off then No. 1 Duke, 89-84, on December 9.

Needless to say, it's happening everywhere. It just goes to show that no team is safe on any given night. Sure, the Panthers are going to be the less talented group on the floor in each and every one of their remaining 19 games. That isn't *always* the deciding factor, though.

“Since our game the other night, there's just been a crazy number of games that you wouldn't think would be close on the scoreboard where the final scores were unbelievably close,” Stallings said. “As I told our players before the Delaware State game, we have the best team but the best team in college basketball doesn't always win. I'm pretty sure North Carolina is better than Wofford, but that's not who won last night. I think that's a valuable lesson.

“You look around at these scores. Furman is leading Tennessee with a minute to go last night, and I think Tennessee is a doggone good team. Now, Tennessee pulled it out, but it's happening all over.”

ACC SCHEDULE

December 30: No. 15 Miami

January 2: at Louisville

January 6: at Virginia Tech

January 10: No. 4 Duke

January 13: Georgia Tech

January 16: at Syracuse

January 20: at Duke

January 24: N.C. State

January 27: Syracuse

January 31: at No. 15 Miami

February 3: at No. 13 North Carolina

February 8: at Clemson

February 11: Louisville

February 13: Boston College

February 18: at No. 24 Florida State

February 21: Wake Forest

February 24: No. 9 Virginia

February 27: at Notre Dame

Prediction: 3-15 (Finish 14th out of 15)

With a clear disparity in talent, Pitt will have a tough time beating anyone on the above schedule. Below, I offered five outings where the Panthers could *potentially* emerge victorious.

FIVE BEST CHANCES AT A WIN

- *January 13 against Georgia Tech* – Georgia Tech (5-6) has surprisingly lost five of its last six games against the likes of Wright State, Grambling State and Wofford. After posting 24 points and 10 rebounds in the season opener against UCLA, senior center **Ben Lammers** hasn't played to the level that earned him all-conference recognition last season. The Yellow Jackets are the only team in the ACC below Pitt in scoring average (66.4 ppg).
- *February 21 against Wake Forest* – Above all else, Wake Forest (7-5) is often plagued by defense and ball care. Sound familiar? The Deacons have given up 75 or more points in eight of 12 outings to rank 14th among the ACC in scoring defense while allowing opponents to shoot nearly 40 percent from beyond the arc. On average, they commit nearly 14 turnovers-per-game. By this point in the season, Pitt's youth should have enough experience to where it can offensively exploit some of Wake's deficiencies.
- *February 13 against Boston College* – Boston College (10-3) has posted last-place finishes in the ACC in each of the last two seasons, but it appears poised for a better finish this time around. KenPom.com ranks the Eagles 86th overall with a 52.6 effective field goal percentage. Though other

than Duke, they haven't really beaten anyone of real significance. Their frontcourt depth took a serious blow after 6-foot-8 forward **Deontae Hawkins** was lost for the rest of the season with a knee injury on December 3, but – impressively – the Eagles still rank fourth in the conference in total rebounding margin. Pitt would *need* to control the glass, but I don't think a win here would be a major surprise with a healthy Luther at home.

- *January 24 against N.C. State* – N.C. State (10-3) has proven to be two different teams with and without sophomore point guard **Markell Johnson**. Johnson has missed the last three games while suspended indefinitely due to a violation of the school's student-athlete code of conduct. Without Johnson, the Wolfpack lost to UNC Greensboro, 81-76, and then trailed Robert Morris at home in the second half last week. Assuming Johnson will be back by then, a matchup with **Marcus Carr** will be fun a one to watch. N.C. State – ranked 11th in the ACC in scoring defense and last in defensive FG percentage – relies heavily on outshooting its opponents under new coach **Kevin Keatts**. The Panthers will be coming off a matchup with Duke four days prior, which will serve as a much taller task defensively than anything the Wolfpack will throw at them. I can see a high-scoring win at the Pete.

- *January 27 against Syracuse* – If there's any opportunity on the schedule where Pitt could string together two straight conference wins, it would be here. Syracuse guard **Tyus Battle** is ranked third in the ACC in scoring (19 ppg), but the Orange (10-2) live and die by him. In a 60-57 overtime loss to St. Bonaventure, Battle shot 3 of 18 with a season-low in points as the Orange sputtered offensively. And collectively, the Orange have only eclipsed 80 points twice this season. A win here should still be considered highly unlikely, but I felt it was still important to include a team among the top half of the conference in this list. The Panthers are just too overmatched to beat Duke, North Carolina, Virginia or even Miami, but a low-scoring team like Syracuse is one they'd have a chance against.



Marcus Carr – MATT SUNDAY / DKPS

PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Marvin Bagley III, Duke – Bagley, a 6-foot-11 freshman, is averaging 21.1 points and 10.9 rebounds per game with a 61.7 field goal percentage that ranks fourth among the ACC. On the surface, those are stellar statistics exceeding that of any freshman, but perhaps what's most impressive is that Bagley is typically the Blue Devils' No. 2 scoring option behind senior **Grayson Allen**. His raw talent was on display in a 34-point coming-out-party performance against Texas on November 27. After Allen fouled out with a minute remaining, Bagley totaled eight of his team's 10 overtime points to help the Blue Devils squeak away with an 85-78 win after trailing for the first 37 minutes of the game. Bagley has the size and length of an NBA center but the athleticism and touch around the rim of a slashing wing. He's already a projected top-5 NBA lottery pick.

Runner ups: **Bonzie Colson** (Notre Dame), **Tyus Battle** (Syracuse)

COACH OF THE YEAR

Tony Bennett, *Virginia* – It would be easy to slot **Roy Williams** or **Mike Krzyzewski** as coach of the year candidates, but both are working with two of the best recruiting classes in college basketball. So, for argument's sake I'm going to roll with Bennett in terms of a coach doing more with less. After beginning the season outside of the AP top-25 poll, Bennett has the Cavaliers defying preseason projections thus far with an 11-1 record led by stymieing defense and a backcourt combo of 6-foot-5 senior **Devon Hall** and 6-foot-2 sophomore **Kyle Guy**. KenPom.com ranks the 'Hoos No. 1 overall in adjusted defense, which isn't an uncharacteristic trait to Bennett-coached teams. Among the ACC, the Cavaliers are first in scoring defense (52.3 ppg) while holding opponents to a league-best 29 rebounds-per-game. If Virginia can finally get over the hump and finally surpass North Carolina and Duke, Bennett will deserve a lot of credit.

Now, Krzyzewski and Williams are certainly making their cases as well. Duke is consistently playing at a high level with a starting lineup of four freshmen, which isn't easy regardless of talent level. Williams has done well with a roster of uncertainty. **Joel Berry II** was North Carolina's lone proven scorer returning from last season's NCAA championship team, but junior forward **Luke Maye** has come out of nowhere to average 18 points and 10 rebounds-per-game.

Runners up: **Mike Krzyzewski** (Duke), **Roy Williams** (North Carolina)

PROJECTED END OF SEASON STANDINGS

1. Duke
2. Virginia
3. North Carolina
4. Notre Dame

5. Miami
6. Virginia Tech
7. Clemson
8. Florida State
9. Louisville
10. Syracuse
11. Boston College
12. N.C. State
13. Wake Forest
14. Pitt
15. Georgia Tech