

Big West Conference Preview

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The Big West Conference was wide-open midway through the league season, but the second half belong to Long Beach State. LBSU won nine of their final ten games to come back from a 4-2 start to win the league at 12-2. Three teams finished 9-5 (and within three spots of each other in the RPI). No one else finished above .500 in league play. LBSU did not disappoint in the conference tournament, either, winning the title before falling to Virginia in the NCAA Tournament.

However, the 49ers were decimated by graduated, leaving a conference without a clear-cut favorite.

Favorites: In a year where the Big West is wide-open for the most part, **UC Santa Barbara** might be the best—on paper. The Gauchos went 9-5 in the conference last season, and return four starters. Chief among the returnees

is Alex Harris, one of the best wings in the country. He is a terrific scorer and long-range shooter who can also take it to the basket. He is poised to become a national name this year. The other half of the best duo in the conference is Chris Devine. He can finish inside and is a very good rebounder. The other two returning starters are forward Ivan Elliot, a solid defender and rebounder, and Justin Joyner, a solid distributor at the point. The other job will go to James Powell, a very good scorer. The top back-ups will be Weber State transfer Nedim Pajevic and D.J. Posley. **Cal State Fullerton** tied with UCSB last season, and will look to win the league this year. It is led by Scott Cutley, the best big man in the league. He is a double-double threat every night out, and is a dominant force down low. His partner at forward is Frank Robinson, an athletic performer who can score and rebound. Rounding out the frontcourt are JC transfer Eddie Lima and returnee Andrew Green. In the backcourt, Newcomer of the Year Marcus Crenshaw and Ray Reed both return, but Washington State transfer Josh Akognon is likely to step into the starting lineup immediately.

Contenders: **Cal Poly** was another team that tied for second in the conference last season, and will look to leapfrog its way to the top. The Mustangs have a very good trio of guards, led by Dawin Whiten. The all-conference candidate can score and distribute well, and is a solid defender. Trae Clark is very quick and can pass the ball, while Chaz Thomas is athletic and is a good scorer. Up front, Titus Shelton leads the way. He was the conference's defensive player of the year, but can also score and rebound. Dreshawn Vance, Matt Hanson, and Coby Leavitt will fight the other spot. **UC Irvine** has one of the best frontcourt duos in the conference in Darren Fells and Patrick Sanders. Fells is a tough inside player who can score down low, while Patrick Sanders is an inside-outside option. Michael Hunter returns at the point, while Chuma Awaji can score from the wing. Chad DeCasas can shoot the ball, and Kevin Bland will fight for a starting spot.

Sleepers: **Pacific** disappointed last season, dipping below 24 wins for the first time in four seasons, and going only 5-9 in conference play after going 49-3 the three seasons before that. This year, they might bounce back led by big man Anthony Brown, one of the best frontcourt players in the conference. The backcourt is led by Steffan Johnson, a solid scorer and passer, and Solomon Horsechief, the starting point guard. C.J. Morgan and Chad Troyer will fight for a spot on the wing, and Michael Nunnally will possibly start at center. **Cal State Northridge** has a chance to move up in the standings this year, thanks to the forward duo of Jonathan Heard and Calvin Chitwood, both all-conference candidates. Heard is a good scorer and all-around player who is very athletic, while Chitwood is an inside-outside performer. Jayme Miller will round out the frontcourt. In the backcourt, Rob Haynes is a good

shooter, while JC transfer Josh Jenkins will start immediately at the point.

Rounding Out the Pack: Long Beach State, the league's defending champion, lost all five starters and its top nine scorers from last season. Needless to say, the 49ers will be rebuilding this year. Fresno State transfer Donovan Morris will start right away in the backcourt, while returnee Artis Gant will likely flank him on the wing. JC transfers Brandon Johnson and Brian Freeman will likely start down low. **UC Davis** will begin its first year in the Big West with three starters returning from a 5-23 campaign. Vince Oliver leads the way in the backcourt, and will have to carry the Aggies. Also in the backcourt will be returnees David Carter and Shane Hanson, and newcomers Nathan Clark and Ryan Silva. Up front, Kyle Brucculeri, C.J. Portz, Jesse Lopez Low, and Dominic Calegari all return, while freshman Mark Payne could start. **UC Riverside** went only 1-13 in the league last year, and loses two starters from that group. However, the Highlanders return an all-conference candidate in guard Larry Cunningham, a very good all-around player. Chris Johnson is a double-figure scorer, while Chuck Jim-George is a good shooter. JC transfer Cleavon Barlow could start. B.J. Visman will start inside, and he is a good scorer and rebounder. Christian Soto and Benoit Bekono will battle for the other spot.

Prediction: The Big West has several teams with the personnel and talent to win the conference, but it will likely come down to two teams—UC Santa Barbara and Cal State Fullerton. Both teams have terrific starting fives and good inside-outside balance. However, it is tough to bet against Alex Harris, who I think is one of the most underrated wings in the entire country. He can legitimately carry the Gauchos to a win on any given night. It will definitely be a tight race all season, with additional competition coming from Cal Poly and a host of other teams.

Player of the Year: Alex Harris, G/F, UC Santa Barbara

All-Conference Team:

G- Dawin Whiten, Cal Poly
 G/F- Alex Harris, UC Santa Barbara
 F- Scott Cutler, Cal State Fullerton
 F- Chris Devine, UC Santa Barbara
 F- Anthony Brown, Pacific

Second Team:

G- Larry Cunningham, UC Riverside
 F- Calvin Chitwood, Cal State Northridge
 F- Patrick Sanders, UC Irvine

F- Jonathan Heard, Cal State Northridge

C- Darren Fells, UC Irvine

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