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## Big West ShootAround: Can Cal State Fullerton repeat?

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Cal State Northridge will rely on space eater Tremaine Townsend this season.

### Snubbed by the NIT, Matadors ready for special season

**By Kyle Whelliston**  
ESPN.com

The way Cal State Northridge coach Bobby Braswell sees it, it was a matter of heads or tails, not wins or losses.

Three teams finished the 2007-08 regular season tied with identical 12-4 records and were named Big West tri-champions. After tiebreakers were applied, Northridge was the No. 2 seed going into the Anaheim-based tourney. But when both Braswell's Matadors and No. 1 seed UC Santa Barbara were upset in the semifinals, the NIT passed over Northridge, instead picking UCSB.

"I was led to believe that regular-season champions are invited to the NIT, but they ended up choosing the team with the higher seed," said Braswell. "We split with [UCSB] during the year, and we led the conference from beginning to end. To me, it amounts to a coin flip."

That metaphorical coin put Northridge's season in covered shadow, one of the great forgotten breakthroughs of last season. It was the first 20-win season for the Matadors in seven Big West seasons, and the 20-10 mark represented only their second winning record during that span. Before Northridge's semifinal exit at the hands of Fullerton, the team won its first seven Big West games, scored 78 points per contest and led the league in rebounds, steals, and defensive field goal percentage.

“

**Last year was a real disappointment for all of us. But now there's the sense that we're on the verge of something special.”**

--Bobby Braswell, Cal State Northridge coach

For a school that picked its nickname back in 1958 -- long before the term "matador defense" was used to describe teams that prance out of the way of bullish offenses -- these Matadors offer plenty of false advertising. With an average 18.2 forced turnovers, only nine teams in all the country caused more coughups per game than Northridge and its relentless pressure.

"When we start our workouts at the beginning of the year, we don't let them touch a basketball," said Braswell. "It's all defense until they work up the right amount of hunger. Everything we do is about putting pressure on our opponents, on the defensive end as well as the offensive end. We want to press, harass and attack."

Last season, they were able to produce all that nastiness with the second-smallest athletic budget (\$8.3 million) in the nine-team Big West, a distinction that had kept the Matadors languishing in the standings for years. It just made them hungrier.

"In our position, we have to go out and play a lot of guarantee games in the first couple months," said Braswell, whose team took road thumpings at Gonzaga and Washington. "To still win 20 games with the type of schedule that we have to play says a lot about the commitment and resilience our guys showed last year."

This season, the team will need a whole lot of both those virtues. The Matadors' nonconference schedule for 2008-09 features San Diego State, Stanford and New Mexico. And then, most notably, a date with UCLA, veterans of three consecutive Final Fours. It'll be the first meeting since a shocking 78-74 Northridge win in November of 2000.

"Yeah, talk about a guarantee game," said the 12th-year CSUN coach, emitting a nervous laugh. "It took a real long time to get those guys back on the schedule. And putting together a schedule now is a lot harder. ... After the kind of season we had last year, nobody wants to play us at home. We might still be a secret to the country at large, but you can bet that coaches know about what we've accomplished."

## **Five Things To Watch in 2008-09**

**By Kyle Whelliston**  
ESPN.com

### **• Pacific's rocky offseason**

In July, Pacific officials revealed that three unnamed men's basketball players were involved in a school

investigation into an on-campus sexual assault in May, an event that shook the cozy Stockton, Calif., campus. Pacific quarantined its men's basketball roster for as long as it could, but a recently released version is short three names from last season's squad. One of the disappearances is leading scorer and all-Big West first-teamer [Steffan Johnson](#), who contributed 14.5 ppg as a junior.

Johnson has left Pacific for Idaho and is reportedly planning a lawsuit against his former school. But [Michael Nunnally](#) and [Michael Kirby](#), the other two players in question, will take time off before returning to the team.

The Tigers' hopes for a conference championship in 2009 might be damaged and diminished but not dead. Pacific maintains its post presence with 6-7 [Anthony Brown](#), who scored 10.7 ppg and grabbed 7.2 rpg last season. [Chad Troyer](#), a 6-4 wing, was the team's second-leading scorer at 12.8 ppg.

#### • Power matchups

The Big West held its own in November and December, winning 47 percent of its nonconference games and 54 victories in total. But a Big West team hasn't beaten a Pac-10 school since Nov. 20, 2005 (Northridge's upset of USC).

In 2008-09, a number Big West teams will take on some of Division I's big boys at home. Oregon invades UC Irvine's Bren Center on Nov. 21. The power-conference scheduling coup of the year belongs to UC Santa Barbara, which will bring preseason poll darling North Carolina to the Thunderdome the same day that UCI takes on the Pac-10's Ducks.

#### • Sudden power

Cal State Fullerton has plenty of baseball tradition, with four College World Series championships and more than 40 alumni who have seen time in the majors. The men's basketball team hasn't been nearly as fortunate, but three decades of mediocrity and NCAA violations came to an end this past March when the Titans won 24 games and earned their first Dance ticket since 1978.

What's perhaps most remarkable about Fullerton's NCAA run last season is that the team's rotation topped out at around 6-foot-5. One of those midsize bigs was outgoing senior [Scott Cutley](#), who led the team in rebounds with 7.4 rpg and earned the conference's co-MVP honors with UCSB's [Alex Harris](#).

Leading scorer [Josh Akognon](#) (20.2 ppg, pronounced uh-KOY-un) came in from Washington State and lit up the league in his first season.

As if that wasn't enough, 2007 Fullerton alum Bobby Brown signed a two-year guaranteed contract with the Sacramento Kings, and he'll join San Antonio guard Bruce Bowen as proud former Titans in the NBA.

Back on campus, Akognon will return as a senior and lead nine new players into Fullerton's title defense. The 2008-09 Titans should get a good early idea of where they stand, as they'll open the Anaheim Classic in November with Wake Forest, an expected NCAA tourney team this season, and could possibly face NCAA participants Baylor and Saint Mary's.

#### • It can't get worse, right?

UC Davis spent three seasons from 2004 to 2007 playing full Big West schedules, waiting for its chance to become eligible for the conference and national postseason. In its first year as a full-fledged member, however, UC Davis didn't get to join the rest of the league in Anaheim. After beating every BWC team but Pacific during the school's transition from Division II to I, UC Davis won just two Big West tilts in

2007-08. With a 2-14 record, the Aggies missed out on the nine-team league's eight-team conference tournament.

The three "ins" (injuries, ineligibilities and inexperience) contributed to the collapse. Three players went down with season-ending ailments. By the end of the season, there were only eight players in uniform, and the 13 losses in the final 14 games was a profile more of courage than that of a basketball team. The Aggies will activate Hawaii transfer Todd Lowenthal and former Notre Dame forward Joe Harden for 2008-09, so it's bound to get better.

"Our talent and depth are now better than they've ever been," said UC Davis coach Gary Stewart. "I can say without reservation that our best days are in front of us. We're looking not to just visit the neighborhood, but take our rightful place and live there."

#### • Calculated risks

Signing junior college players is usually a calculated risk for Division I coaches. Two-year transfers aren't around long enough to become part of a program's chemistry, and most end up being stopgaps or bench players. Very few pan out or contribute much at all.

That's not always the case in the Big West, though. Pacific's championship teams had a strong juco influence, which gave them the depth necessary to beat the big boys in March. Two of Cal State Northridge's best players last season were former jucos, senior-to-be [Tremaine Townsend](#) (10.1 ppg, 9.8 rpg) and recently graduated shooting guard [Deon Tresvant](#) (13.9 ppg). Cal Poly's [Lorenzo Keeler](#) (10.3 ppg, 88.2 percent from the free-throw line) spent a year at Mt. San Jacinto College before becoming a Mustang.

Another wave of juco players, at least 11 of them, will descend on the Big West for 2008-09. In order to ease a transition following a large outgoing class, league champions Cal State Fullerton signed five juco players. Pacific has a pair coming in, and Northridge will import three.

### 2008-09 Team Capsules



#### Cal Poly

After coming within 40 minutes of the NCAA tournament in 2007, the Mustangs slid back seven games in the win column instead of taking the next step. Injuries were a major factor, and Poly's depleted offense scored 12 fewer points than it had the previous season. Whether or not the program can get back in the hunt in the increasingly competitive Big West will depend on two guards who emerged as scoring options late in the year, 5-11 senior [Trae Clark](#) and junior shooter [Lorenzo Keeler](#), both of whom averaged 10.3 ppg last season.



#### Cal State Fullerton

The Titans will instantly become more, well, titanic with the addition of [Bernard Kamwa](#) and [Papa Guisse](#). Kamwa is a Cameroonian prep import listed at 6-8 and 235 pounds, and he is three inches taller than the biggest player from last season's NCAA squad. Coach Bob Burton went the juco route to obtain the 6-8 Guisse, who played at Salt Lake Community College last year. With six players lost to graduation, Fullerton should plug both into the regular rotation.



#### Cal State Northridge

The Matadors, successful in the junior college market in building their first 20-win team as Big West members, will add [Xavier Crawford](#) from Yuba (Calif.) College. He'll become the

program's first 7-footer. More frontcourt help is coming via Division I transfer [Willie Galick](#), a 6-8 junior-to-be who averaged 6.5 ppg and shot 54.6 percent at Pepperdine two seasons ago. Along with returning 6-9 senior [Tremaine Townsend](#), who led the conference with 9.8 rpg and 1.2 blocks, CSUN looks strong up front.



### Long Beach State

The gap between the NCAA qualifiers in 2007 and the 6-25 team that set a school record for losses last season is wide indeed ... but wider still is the distance between the current program and the recruiting shenanigans of the previous regime. Dan Monson won't likely deal with as much diversity in his second year, thanks to a player influx that includes 6-2 former Colorado State Ram [Stephan Gilling](#). From the prep ranks come 6-6 power forward [Eugene Phelps](#) and speedy point guard [Caspar Ware](#), both highly rated by Scouts Inc.



### Pacific

The Tigers might still be building back up to national prominence, but the 2007-08 Pacific squad displayed the same type of fundamentals as did the teams that scared high seeds at the NAAs: namely, hot shooting. Last season's 21-10 Tigers put up huge numbers in every shooting-related category, shooting 49.2 percent from the floor (fifth-best in Division I) and connecting on 40.3 percent of their 3s (ninth). Among the players who will return for 2008-09, five made at least 50 percent of their field goals.



### UC Davis

The three "ins" (injuries, ineligibility and inexperience) led to a 2-14 conference record in the Aggies' first season as full-fledged Big West members. As the ninth-place team in a league with an eight-team tournament, UC Davis didn't get to join the March festivities in Anaheim. With a full roster (only eight players suited up down the stretch), it's not a situation likely to repeat itself. [Mark Payne](#) was a revelation in his first season, a 6-7 stat-stuffer who led the Ags in rebounding, steals, assists and minutes. He won the conference's top freshman award.



### UC Irvine

The Anteaters were one win away from their first NCAA appearance, before losing to Fullerton 81-66 in the Big West final. To say UCI caught on fire in March is an understatement: The three neutral-site tournament wins were as many as the squad won on the road all season. Three outgoing seniors (averaging a combined 36.8 ppg) and three transfer defections mean the road will be tougher in 2008-09. [Michael Hunter](#), a 5-10 junior, is the team's returning leading scorer, with 8.8 ppg.



### UC Riverside

An embarrassing 4-12 league record was somewhat redeemed in March when the team upset No. 6 seed Cal Poly 62-54 in the opening round of the conference tournament. It was Riverside's first win at the Anaheim-based event since 2004. The Highlanders will return a raft of seniors, including leading rebounder [Aaron Scott](#) (6.8 rpg). The 6-4 California native scored 12 points (on 6-for-7 shooting) in UCR's ultimately failed quarterfinal upset bid against the eventual champions from Fullerton.



### UC Santa Barbara

A shocking semifinal loss to UC Irvine sent the Gauchos to Ole Miss and a 15-point NIT loss. And even though all-everything [Alex Harris](#) and his 20.2 ppg are beyond the Thunderdome, UCSB will return inside-outside duo [Chris Devine](#) and [James Powell](#) (12.3 ppg each) in its defense of the regular-season title. Add a promising Californian incoming class featuring SF [James Nunnally](#) and PF [Jaime Serna](#), and the Gauchos should have some talent on display when presumptive national No. 1 North Carolina comes calling on Nov. 21.

**2007-08 Big West Standings**

	Overall record	Big West record
Cal State Fullerton*	24-9	12-4
UC Santa Barbara^	23-9	12-4
Cal State Northridge	20-10	12-4
Pacific	21-10	11-5
UC Irvine	18-16	9-7
Cal Poly	12-18	7-9
UC Riverside	9-21	4-12
Long Beach	6-25	3-13
UC Davis	9-22	2-14

\*NCAA tournament

^NIT berth

For all the Big West news and notes, check out the [league page](#).

**Top Returning Scorers**

Player	PPG
<a href="#">Donovan Morris</a> , Long Beach, Sr.	21.2
<a href="#">Josh Akognon</a> , Cal State Fullerton, Sr.	20.2
<a href="#">Deon Tresvant</a> , Cal State Northridge, Sr.	13.9
<a href="#">Chad Troyer</a> , Pacific, Sr.	12.8
<a href="#">Chris Devine</a> , UC Santa Barbara, Sr.	12.3
<a href="#">James Powell</a> , UC Santa Barbara, Jr.	12.3

**Top Returning Rebounders**

Player	RPG
<a href="#">Tremaine Townsend</a> , Cal State Northridge, Sr.	9.8
<a href="#">Anthony Brown</a> , Pacific, Sr.	7.2
<a href="#">Aaron Scott</a> , UC Riverside, Sr.	5.7
<a href="#">Kevin Bland</a> , UC Irvine, Sr.	5.4
<a href="#">Chris Devine</a> , UC Santa Barbara, Sr.	5.4

**If I were the Big West commish ...**

*Andy Katz*  
*ESPN.com*

Somehow, someway the Big West has got to get a better television package. The league has become an all-California conference. That's great for travel. But the Big West has naturally been hurt since the defections of UNLV, Nevada and Utah State. I know it's easier said than done, but the Big West must try to create some sort of identity. The Big West has been surpassed by the West Coast Conference, a collection of religious-based schools that are considerably smaller. All the Big West schools but Pacific are state schools within California. They have larger student bodies. It would certainly help if one of the schools became a dominant team.

### Final Shots

- Which Big West team ranks the highest since the start of the 1984-85 season? [Prestige Rankings](#)
- Cal State Fullerton, UC Santa Barbara and Cal State Northridge all tied for the regular-season title. Fullerton got the edge in the tourney. Who will win in 2008-09? [Bracketology](#)
- Missed the other conference breakdowns? Click [here](#) to check out the ShootArounds archive.

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