

SPORTS

COLLEGE FOOTBALL ANALYSIS

Choose your quarterback

Eight most intriguing QBI battles heading into fall camp

Austin Curtright USA TODAY NETWORK

We're only weeks away from the start of the 2026 college football season and there are still teams yet to name a starting quarterback. Chief among them are a trio of SEC programs, including Alabama, Tennessee and Florida. The Crimson Tide must replace NFL first round pick Ty Simpson, whereas Tennessee is replacing its starter for the fifth consecutive season after Joey Aguilar exhausted his eligibility. Clemson coach Dabo Swinney has a decision to make after a disappointing 7-6 finish last season and departure of three-year starter Cade Klubnik. Bill Belichick went 4-8 in his first season at North Carolina, and the Tar Heels' reboot at QB includes two transfers and a highly rated freshman. These quarterbacks will only have a few weeks to prove they're ready for the starting gig in 2026. Here's a look at the top battles to know heading into the season:

Alabama

● Austin Mack vs. Keelon Russell

This will be the most talked about QB battle this preseason. The Crimson Tide returned Austin Mack, a redshirt junior who followed Kalen DeBoer from Washington to Alabama after the 2023 season. They also return redshirt freshman Keelon Russell, a former five-star recruit. Mack is more experienced, but Russell boasts upside. "Our quarterbacks do have the belief and trust amongst our entire team," DeBoer said at SEC Media Days. "There are different ways where I've seen that, whether it was in the spring or through the summer. "There are different conversations, different activities that we do where I really can get a good feel of it being genuine, that our team trusts that whoever steps on the football field and takes those snaps is going to be a guy — and I think that's because they believe in both guys." Mack served as the backup at Alabama last season, passing for 228 yards with two touchdowns while rushing for another score in limited action. Russell passed for 143 yards with two scores last season.

Tennessee

● George MacIntyre vs. Faizon Brandon

Tennessee went after a number

of high-profile portal quarterbacks in the offseason, but ultimately missed out on the top names and opted to turn over the offense to an in-house name. Coach Josh Heupel returns redshirt freshman George MacIntyre — a 6-6 former four-star recruit — who will compete with freshman Faizon Brandon, a five-star recruit ranked as the No. 10 player nationally, per 247Sports' Composite ratings. Heupel brought in Ryan Staub, who has starting experience at Colorado but isn't expected to be a huge threat in the Vols' quarterback battle. "Well, we've had it play out a lot of different ways," Heupel said July 20. "The most important thing is that through competition somebody goes out and earns the job, whenever that is during the course of training camp. "You name that guy. You give him those reps. But then he's got to prove it on the field, as well." **Florida** ● Tramell Jones Jr. vs. Aaron Philo New coach Jon Sumrall didn't sugarcoat his quarterback situation at SEC Media Days, noting returner Tramell Jones Jr. and Georgia Tech transfer Aaron Philo's shortcomings. "Do we have a Heisman Trophy candidate? No, but they both have enough arm talent," he said. "They

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FROM TOP: Iowa quarterbacks Hank Brown and Jeremy Hecklinski; Tennessee quarterbacks Faizon Brandon and George MacIntyre
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TENNESSEE ATHLETICS

NCAA closes Vitello case from '22

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The NCAA ruled that San Francisco Giants manager Tony Vitello committed a minor infraction as the University of Tennessee baseball coach in 2022, according to an athletics department document obtained by Knox News through a public records request. It's a belated decision. Vitello left Tennessee to become the Giants manager in October 2025. And the violation was committed during his recruitment of Kansas transfer shortstop Maui Ahuna, who now plays for the Giants' Double-A team in Richmond, Virginia. This was the second violation reported that involved Vitello and Ahuna. The first appeared on a 2022 report, which found that Tennessee booked a flight for Ahuna's recruiting visit before receiving his academic transcript. The combination of the two violations led to Vitello's three-game suspension in the 2023 season and Ahuna missing eight games before he was ruled eligible. In this latest report, the NCAA found that Ahuna called Vitello before his name officially appeared in the transfer portal database. And they met in an airport hotel parking lot on that same day to discuss Ahuna transferring to Tennessee. Ahuna told investigators that in May 2022 he informed the Kansas compliance office that he wanted to enter the transfer portal, and then he called Vitello 20 minutes later. Ahuna's name did not appear in the portal database until the next day. According to the report, Ahuna and Vitello coincidentally were headed to the same airport, which the context suggests was likely in Kansas City. Ahuna was dropping off his girlfriend. Vitello, a St. Louis native, was visiting family in the area and flying to the SEC baseball tournament in Hoover, Alabama. They agreed to meet in a parking lot and talked for no more than 15 minutes. Ahuna transferred to Tennessee in June 2022. ● Why did Vitello case take four years? This new NCAA report closed the book on a joint investigation by Tennessee compliance and the NCAA enforcement staff, according to the internal document obtained by Knox News. A decision was finalized on Jan. 30, 2026. It listed several self-imposed penalties, including Vitello's three-game suspension and minor recruiting cuts

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COLLEGE BASKETBALL COMMENTARY

Kelsey erred thinking he could hide Louisville game

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We just want to see basketball. That's pretty much what we do around Kentucky — watch basketball. And when the games are not being played, we talk about watching basketball next season. And who we think are going to be breakout players. And how the pieces are going to fit together. And what kind of playing style the team may take on. So when Louisville takes a trip to the Bahamas, who cares that it was only for one game? We want to see basketball. Who cares that it was against a clearly overmatched opponent? We want to see basketball. The point is, given the opportunity to get a preview of the new roster — especially one that's being projected as a top-15 team nationally — Louisville fans are never going to be like, "Who cares?" We want to see basketball.



Louisville men's basketball coach Pat Kelsey monitors practice ahead of an NCAA Tournament game at KeyBank Center on March 18 in Buffalo, New York. ISHIKA/SAMANT/GETTY IMAGES

The Cardinals beat a group calling themselves Bahamas Raw Talent 101-52 on Tuesday, July 28, in a glorified ballroom basketball court at the Baha Mar Convention, Arts and Entertainment Center in Nassau. Louisville coach Pat Kelsey made the decision not to have it broadcast or streamed for the fans back home. "I'm well aware that people were upset that we didn't stream it," Kelsey said. "All I can do is, probably, on the back end after we made that decision, is apologize." Had Kelsey been in his first season at Louisville, his apology would be much easier to accept. It could be chalked up to a miscalculation on his part for not fully understanding his fanbase yet. But this is Year 3. Kelsey knows how Louisville gets down. When he took his first team to the Bahamas in 2024, he experienced engagement from fans firsthand, and his new team is, on paper, far more talented than his first. Dana Brown, the Cardinals' assistant director of strategic communications, understood the interest

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