

Audi Crooks latest in mass exodus for Iowa State team

BY ERIC OLSON
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Iowa State star Audi Crooks announced Thursday she is entering the transfer portal, making her the fourth starter and 10th Cyclones player overall to say they will move on after a disappointing second half of the season following a start that matched the best in program history.

Crooks, one of the most popular players in the women's game, averaged 25.8 points per game this season to rank second in the nation. She averaged 22.8 points over 99 games in her three seasons since the Cyclones signed her out of Algona, Iowa.

"I still believe the grass is greener where you water it, and I've done that here," Crooks said in a social media post. "It's why I want you to hear from me directly that I have decided to enter the portal and explore what it means to take root again in new ground."

Crooks follows starters Addy Brown, Mackenzie Hare and Jada Williams into the portal in addition to six reserves.

Arianna Jackson is the only starter to announce she would return next season.

Coach Bill Fennelly did not return a message seeking comment on the departures.

Athletic director Jamie Pollard, in a video released by the school Thursday, said Fennelly, who turns 69 next month, would return for a 32nd season. Pollard attributed the mass exodus to the state of college athletics and noted other women's basketball programs are going through similar upheaval.

"In today's world, student-



JESSICA HILL/Associated Press

Iowa State center Audi Crooks (55) has announced that she will be transferring. Ten members of the women's team plan to enter the NCAA portal.

athletes transfer for a lot of different reasons," Pollard said. "Some leave because they're searching for more playing time. Some leave because they're homesick. Some leave because they're disgruntled. And now some leave because they just want the opportunity to maximize their ability to receive revenue from the school they're at."

"Know this," he added, "regardless of why a student-athlete leaves Iowa State, we'll always wish them well and thank them for their time as a Cyclone."

The two-week portal window for women's basketball begins Monday, and Pollard said the Cyclones' fan support, history and coaching staff will make Iowa State an attractive destination.

"And know this," Pollard said, "our coaches will have more than enough revenue-share dollars to be able to attract some of the best student-athletes possible."

The Cyclones were picked second in the Big 12 preseason coaches' poll, started 14-0 to match the 2013-14 team for the best start and were ranked No. 10 for five straight weeks. They then dropped five straight games and went on to tie for seventh in the conference at 10-8. They were a No. 8 seed in the NCAA Tournament and lost their opener to No. 9 seed Syracuse 72-63.

Crooks is the biggest name in the portal so far. She is a three-time All-Big 12 first-team pick and has scored in double figures in 98 straight games, the nation's longest active

streak.

She caught the nation's attention as a freshman when she scored 40 points in an NCAA Tournament win over Maryland. Nearly unstoppable in the low post, she scored at least 30 points in 17 games in three seasons and went over 40 five times this season on her way to making the Associated Press All-America second-team.

Off the court, Crooks attracted crowds for her willingness to engage with fans. She landed name, image and likeness deals with the Iowa Pork Producers, US Cellular and a number of other sponsors and used some of her earnings to buy new uniforms for her high school, Bishop Garrigan in Algona, and support other local causes.

Pirates call up teen shortstop for home opener

BY WILL GRAVES
ASSOCIATED PRESS

PITTSBURGH — The Konnor Griffin Era may begin on Friday in Pittsburgh.

The Pirates are calling up the 19-year-old shortstop, the consensus choice as the top prospect in baseball, in time for today's home opener against the Baltimore Orioles.

The question when the season started last week wasn't if Griffin would make his big-league debut this year, but when. The wait wasn't long as Griffin hit .438 (7 for 16) with three doubles, an RBI and three stolen bases at Triple-A Indianapolis.

The 6-foot-3 Griffin, taken with the ninth overall pick in the 2024 first-year player draft, has rocketed through Pittsburgh's farm system. He batted .333 with 21 home runs, 94 RBIs and 65 stolen bases in 122 combined games between Single-A and Double-A in 2025.

Griffin earned an invitation to Pittsburgh's big-league camp and was among the last cuts before the opening day roster was set. While he showcased his power by smashing three home runs during Grapefruit League play — the most by a teenager in spring training in at least two decades — he also struck out more than a dozen times.

The Pirates broke camp with Jared Triolo at shortstop and Nick Gonzales at third base. The addition of Griffin likely means Triolo — a Gold Glove winner as a utility player — will be shifted to third.

While Pittsburgh has been in talks with Griffin about a lengthy contract extension that would in essence buy out his arbitration years in advance, a source told the AP the decision to call him up was not dependent on an agreement being reached.

Griffin will be joining a team off to a 3-3 start after taking two of three in Cincinnati. The Pirates are anchored by one of the best young starting rotations in the majors, led by reigning Cy Young winner Paul Skenes, who picked up his first victory of the season on Wednesday.

Pittsburgh upgraded its offense in the offseason, trading for All-Star second baseman Brandon Lowe and signing first baseman/outfielder Ryan O'Hearn and designated hitter Marcell Ozuna in free agency.

Lowe already has three homers this season for the Pirates, whose 10 home runs through six games are tied with the Los Angeles Angels for most in the majors. Pittsburgh finished dead last in homers by a wide margin last season.



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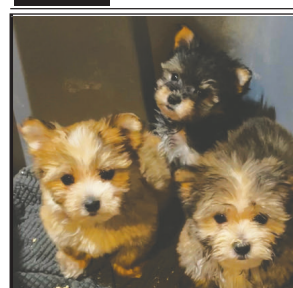


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