

UT Women's Basketball Could Win March Madness. It Wouldn't Be the First Time.

The Longhorns are on the hunt for their second championship, but their first, in 1986, didn't come easily.

By Jessica Luther

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Left to right: Star Longhorns basketball players Annette Smith, Clarissa Davis, and Cara Priddy hoisting their NCAA championship trophy. Courtesy of Texas Athletics

On a chilly afternoon in late February, 11,000 people poured through the open doors of Austin's Moody Center to watch the University of Texas women's basketball team host Mississippi State. UT dominated from the start, heading into halftime with a 32-point lead capped with a buzzer-beating 3-point shot from the team's star forward, Madison Booker. In the end, the Longhorns scored 92 points. Mississippi State managed 42.

That game wasn't a one-off. In 2025, UT **made it to the Final Four** of the NCAA tournament, and many of the players from that team (including Booker, last year's SEC tournament MVP) have returned for this season. There's fifth-year senior point guard Rori Harmon, UT's all-time assist and steals leader; sophomore Jordan Lee, a sharp 3-point shooter; and, among other stars, newcomer Aaliyah Crump, a highly sought-after recruit who scored 174 points during the regular season in just 332 minutes played.

They've spent part of this year ranked as high as number two, though most of it has been spent at number four, and won their first eighteen games, including back-to-back wins in November against then-number-three-ranked UCLA and number two South Carolina. Their only regular-season losses were against top-five SEC opponents on the road, and they finished the season by winning the SEC tournament, again defeating South Carolina, which was seeded number one. Ahead of March Madness—the first round of which begins March 20 and will see the number one Longhorns host their first game in Austin—their record is 31–3. They never lost at home.

There's talk about whether this UT team can win an NCAA trophy. But that February day, a group of women who had already done just that, forty years prior, gathered before the game as part of an annual Texas women's basketball alumni lunch. Legendary former Longhorns Coach Jody Conradt celebrated alongside her 1985–86 team—the only basketball team at UT that's won an NCAA title, the first undefeated women's team to win the NCAA championship, and arguably one of the best basketball teams ever assembled by the school, period. With the current UT women's team about to embark on its own playoff run, the championship squad is proof that winning the biggest title in collegiate hoops takes patience, pain, and something more than talent.

This story starts, literally, at the beginning of basketball. Women have been playing the sport at the University of Texas since 1899, only a handful of years after the invention of the game and more than five years before the men on campus first took it up. It then took more than seven decades, years of pressure from students, and the passage of Title IX for UT to institute a department dedicated to women's intercollegiate athletics, which it did in 1974; Donna Lopiano was named the first women's athletic director in 1975. The following year, Lopiano hired Conradt as the women's basketball and volleyball coach—the first full-time head coach in the department—with the demand that UT become a top-ten program in the country, and soon. Conradt, a native of Goldthwaite (with the accent to match) whom her players describe as a brilliant, demanding, and tough coach, set out to make it so.

By the early eighties, Conradt, who had left volleyball behind after two years, had turned UT into one of the best teams in the country. And in 1985—following two straight regional finals losses at the NCAA tournament—Texas was poised to win it all. That year UT went into the postseason ranked number one overall and seeded first in the tournament, and the Final Four was set to be played in Austin. But before the semifinals, UT had to win its regional game against Western Kentucky. “During that era, there weren't many games on television,” Conradt remembers. “We didn't know much about them,” besides the fact that the team had Lillie Mason, a future All-American forward. With the game tied 90–90 and one second left on the clock, Mason took an inbound and banked in the winning shot at the buzzer. Fran Harris, a senior forward on that year's team—whose shooting was so

good that her teammates nicknamed her Auto—recently said that any of her teammates could still draw up that losing play precisely. “When you lose a game that you’re supposed to win, it stays with you.”

When the Final Four came to Austin the week after the Western Kentucky loss, Conradt made her players watch from the stands as Old Dominion University celebrated victory on their home court. It was heartbreaking—and motivating. During the summer of 1985, Kamie Ethridge, the team’s point guard and court general, showed up in Conradt’s office. “I know how much it hurt you to lose that game,” Conradt says Ethridge told her. “It hurt me the second most.” For Conradt, that set the tone for the entire upcoming season. “To be as driven as you have to be to win a national championship,” Andrea Lloyd, a forward during the championship run, says, “there’s elements of pain and urgency that come with it. The pain of that loss and the fire we felt under our feet the next year were exponential compared to the year before.”



The championship team posing around Conradt, seen wearing a “Don’t mess with the Lady Longhorns” tee.

Courtesy of Texas Athletics

The 1985–86 team was nearly identical to the prior year's, barring two major additions: Annette Smith—then the best small center in the game, who had missed the previous season due to a severe knee injury that had required surgery—and Clarissa Davis, a freshman phenom from San Antonio. Beyond Lloyd and Harris and Davis and Smith, there were Yulonda Wimbish, Cara Priddy, Beverly Williams, and others, a group of women who went on to be Olympians, Women's Basketball Hall of Famers, coaches, and professional athletes. (Smith's 2,523 career points is a UT record, followed closely by Davis's 2,008.)

Texas again entered the season ranked number one. The team's first game of the season was against number ten Ohio State, in Columbus, in front of some 4,281 Buckeye fans. In a narrow win, UT squandered a ten-point lead and committed 27 turnovers. Davis didn't score a point in her debut. Watching the game, Chris Plonsky, then UT's sports information director for women's athletics, got flashbacks to Western Kentucky. "Oh my God," she remembers thinking. "Are we gonna do this again?" Conratt calls the game "an exorcism."

Whatever demons haunted the team were expelled. In the first nine games of the season, the UT women played and beat seven top-twenty teams by an average of fourteen points. The Longhorns generated buzz in the city; players were often recognized when strolling Austin's streets. At a December 10 game in Austin against USC, the 1983 and 1984 NCAA champion—anchored by superstar Cheryl Miller and future legend Cynthia Cooper—11,470 fans showed up, at the time the third-largest crowd in collegiate basketball history.

Texas finished the regular season undefeated, then won the Southwest Conference tournament for the fourth straight time. The Longhorns were seeded number one and played their first three games of the NCAA tournament at home, the first two of which are almost not worth mentioning: They beat Missouri by 41 points on March 14 and days later clobbered Oklahoma 85–59. That set them up to play the regional final that weekend against Ole Miss and its star player, Jennifer Gillom. Pressure built. If UT again lost ahead of the Final Four, "everything's for naught," Ethridge recalls thinking. "Just a waste of time." The regionals had been something of a curse for UT, and that evening, with some 10,000 spectators watching, the players' nerves showed. They finished the half down by 3, Gillom knocking down shot after shot. But Texas had players who could step up and match her. One did. The "MVP of that game was Beverly Williams," Conratt says. With 20 points, the sophomore led the team and UT eked out the win, 66–63.

Regionals behind it, Texas shed a weight it'd carried since the season prior; the players became relaxed, "just hooping," says Harris. Suiting up against them in the Final Four, though, was Western Kentucky. Prior to the revenge game, Longhorns assistant Coach Lynn Pool had each Texas player put a ring of athletic tape around a finger on their left hand: Lillie Mason often drove left into the lane, and the tape was a reminder to prevent her from doing so. It worked. Mason fouled out with more than seven minutes left in the game,

scoring just 15 points. As in the previous year's heartbreaker, the Longhorns scored 90—but they held Western Kentucky to 65.

The final was set for March 30, Easter Sunday, between Texas and USC. The day before the game, “we had practice and they had practice,” Williams says. “And they were talking about they’re going to beat us.” Everyone associated with the Texas team, though, was confident that UT was going to win the game. USC had Miller and Cooper, supreme talents, but UT had a deeper and better bench.



The 1985–86 season was cause for (a lot of) celebration.
Courtesy of Texas Athletics

After tip-off on that crucial evening in Lexington, Kentucky, the refs called an exceptionally tight game, one foul after another. With about eight minutes left in the first half, Conradt received a technical foul for yelling at the officials. “I never got a technical that I didn’t mean to get,” she says. Her penalty was an intentional move to rile up her team, who went into the half with a ten-point lead. Miller then got into foul trouble and was benched early in the second half. UT increased its lead, but Miller checked back in minutes later and brought USC to within 9—until she, like Mason in the previous game, fouled out. Cooper couldn’t handle the Longhorns alone. The game

ended: USC 81, UT 97, with 58 of UT's points coming from its bench. Davis scored 24, and Priddy added 15. "I can count on one hand the games where I was in the zone," Priddy says. That was one of them. "It was a magical night."

The overriding emotion when Conradt and her team reached the greatest height their sports had to offer was relief. When Conradt thinks back on that season—leading the first undefeated NCAA women's basketball team to win the championship, a feat only four other programs have achieved since—she reminds herself first and foremost of "how hard it was to get there." Strong teams in '83 and '84 that faltered at the last moment; a 1985 squad worthy of the trophy yet bounced from the tournament by a buzzer beater. Even the season following the championship, with players like Davis and Lloyd, among others, returning, the team lost in the Final Four.

After winning the championship, the team took a charter flight home. They landed at around 9:45 p.m. at the old Mueller airport, where limousines were waiting to take them to a celebration at the Erwin Center. There, late on that same Sunday, they were met by the university band and 3,300 fans chanting "Thirty-four and O." At one point, Conradt held a sign that read "Miller time is over, we want Lone Star." Former U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, a longtime fan of the team, was succinct. "You are the best there is," she said. "You have taught us what a team is."

It takes at least that much—being the best, playing as a team—to win in March. Ask any player from the 1986 roster how they did it and you'll get a different answer. "We didn't like to lose. We were hungry," guard Audrey Smith says. According to Harris, "We were super competitive. We had that edge from day one in practice, and it never subsided all season long." Even bench players, Ethridge says, "wanted to rip [the starters'] throats out"—and "we were so deep and so talented. We could kind of wear people down." Lloyd, now a television sports analyst, "would put that team up against anybody," and she thinks it deserves more credit as one of the greatest in history.

Does the 2026 UT squad have the stuff—the ambition and skill and everything else it takes—to become the next Texas women's team to raise a banner? While Lloyd believes the team is "elite," she worries that the current lineup has not "ever experienced the pain we did," and she isn't sure the players have the toughness necessary to get them "over the hump." That doesn't mean they won't succeed. The SEC-tournament champions are heading into the postseason with Booker playing her best basketball of the season and the team playing well from top to bottom. UT is seeded number one, with the first two rounds on its home court and regionals up the road in Fort Worth.

"Every team has their own identity," Conradt says. "Every team has their own story." We know how this one started. This March, the 2026 team can write its own ending.