
March Madness is upon us 🏀

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200,000+

The number of people who registered for the [New York Marathon](#) this year. Only 2–3% of them will get in. The number is the most ever for the race, and increased nearly 22% from last year, when 165,000 people signed up.

Three big stories to know this week in women's sports

1. March Madness starts NEXT WEEK 🙄🏀

The [Power 4 conferences](#) crowned tournament champions 🏆 this weekend, as the start of NCAA March Madness approaches. UCLA won the Big Ten championship, Duke took the ACC, South Carolina won the SEC, and TCU took the Big 12 title.

With Selection Sunday less than a week away, this year's NCAA tournament brackets are close to being finalized—but the race isn't over yet. There hasn't been a dominant team so far this season, which means that the competition for the top spot is especially interesting. UCLA, Texas, USC, and South Carolina all have strong cases. **UCLA** won the Big Ten championship over the weekend, besting rival **USC** and jumping to No. 1 overall [in yesterday's AP poll](#).

USC dropped two spots to a No. 4 ranking, and [JuJu Watkins revealed she's grateful for UCLA rivalry](#) following the loss. **Texas** fell to No. 5 overall after losing Sunday's SEC championship to **South Carolina**. South Carolina moved up to No. 2 in the latest poll, and with their ninth SEC title under their belt as well as 22 wins against the top-100 teams (more than any other team in the league), they've more than likely locked in a No. 1 seed for the tournament.

The final brackets will be announced Sunday, March 16, with the First Four single-elimination games on March 18–19.



(Belinda Bencic is one of many to return to tennis after giving birth, credit: Sky Sports)

2. Women's pro tennis players get paid maternity leave



The [Women's Tennis Association](#) announced that it will now grant players up to 12 months of paid maternity leave, while players who become parents via surrogacy, adoption, or partner pregnancy can get two months off without pay. The program also includes grants for fertility treatments, such as egg freezing and IVF. About 300 players currently eligible.

The WTA Players' Council was instrumental in pushing for the change, and it's about time— tennis is one of the last professional sports to provide these benefits. Players hope that this change will allow all athletes, but especially lower-earning players, to take as much time off as they need without worrying about lost income from not entering tournaments. "That's certainly one of the aims of the program: to provide the financial resources, the flexibility, the support, so that these athletes, regardless of where they're ranked, but particularly those who earn less, will have that agency ... to decide when and how they want to start their families," WTA CEO Portia Archer said.

The program is sponsored by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, which is WTA's current global partner.

3. Demi Vollering climbs to victory at Strade Bianche for the second time

In a spectacularly hard-fought finish, [Demi Vollering \(FDJ-Suez\)](#) outclimbed her former coach and directeur sportif **Anna van der Breggen** on the dusty roads of Italy to win the 2025 edition of Strade Bianche. It marks Vollering's second win at the race (her first was in 2023), and her first WorldTour win with her current team.

The race stayed mostly together through the opening gravel sections. The first major move came at 40km to go, when a breakaway led by **Pauline Ferrand-Prevot** gained over a minute on the peloton. At 20km to go, the FDJ-Suez team put in a huge effort (led by **Juliette Labous**) to close the gap and deliver Vollering to the front of the pack. Despite some dramatic setbacks (a flat tire! A dropped chain!) she ended up in perfect position to counter van der Breggen's attack on the final gravel descent. The final 400 meters of the race proved to be the deciding moment. Vollering put in her last powerful attack, crossing the line in Siena a decisive 18 seconds ahead of her fellow Dutchwoman. 🏆

Tip of the week

#*& yeah!



A [2024 review](#) shows that swearing can improve performance during short, intense tasks. The review examined a few different studies that tested swearing during physical activity and had some impressive results: It improved grip strength by 9%, wall sit time to exhaustion by 22%, push-ups to fatigue by 15%, plank time to exhaustion by 12%, and peak and average power on a Wingate Anaerobic Power Test by 4.5%.

While each study took a slightly different approach to utilizing the swear words (in one, participants repeated their word for 10 seconds prior to beginning the task, and in others, they said it every 3–5 seconds during the activity), the effect is fairly impressive across the board. As for which word was most powerful, the studies allowed participants to choose their favorite (with instructions to think of what you'd say if you stubbed your toe)—but the review notes that the f-bomb reigned supreme by a wide margin. 🏆

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The highlight reel

- Gravel racer Iz King 🚴 finished the Belgian Waffle Ride: Arizona in 9th place—and four months pregnant. She revealed her pregnancy the day after the event, and [posted on Instagram](#) about the experience. The rundown? "TLDR: Evolutionary primal instincts are real. Extra blood volume helps. Bodies are cool."
- [American Heather MacLean](#) broke the national 1500m record—and didn't know it until the next day. She ran a 3:59.60 split during her mile race, which took down the standing record of 3:59.98, run by Regina Jacobs in 2003.
- [Seattle Storm player Nika Mühl](#) walked the runway at Paris Fashion Week in a gown designed by her former UConn teammate (and current Shanxi Flame player) [Olivia Nelson-Ododa](#). 👗
- With a week to go before playoffs start, [Sabrina Ionescu](#) bowed out of her Unrivaled 3x3 season, citing commitments made before she joined the offseason league. Her team, Phantom BC, is currently in last place in the standings. Minnesota Lynx guard and Laces BC player Natisha

Hiedeman has been reassigned to Phantom to take Ionescu's place for the remaining games.

- [The ACC, Clemson, and Florida State](#) ended 14 months of litigation after agreeing to a settlement that updates the conference's revenue distribution model. The new model distributes 40% of money earned from television evenly through the 14 longstanding ACC members (including Florida State and Clemson) with 60% of the revenue distributed on a ratings-based formula from the past five years—a win for programs with high viewership (such as... Florida State and Clemson).
- Two [Northeastern University runners](#) were disqualified for wearing Nike Streakfly 2s during the 5,000m race at the CAA championships in Virginia. The shoe has a carbon plate and a 27mm stack height, which exceeds the 25mm limit set by the NCAA for track events. There was a lot of confusion on the track, as both athletes had their shoes checked *before the race* and were still allowed to compete. 🤔 They were only notified of their DQs after finishing in 5th and 13th places.
- Team USA Olympic and Paralympic athletes will be able to receive [\\$200k in post-retirement benefits](#), thanks to a \$100 million donation by philanthropist Ross Stevens. Eligible athletes will be able to access the money 20 years after their qualifying Games or when they turn 45 years old, whichever is later. The benefits multiply with each additional Games an athlete participates in —so, a two-time Olympian could receive \$400,000.
- The Washington Spirit took the win over the Orlando Pride in the single-match [NWSL Challenge Cup](#). 🏆 The game was *close*, with a nail-biting finish: The teams each scored one goal during regulation play, with the Spirit coming out ahead in a 4–2 penalty shootout.
- [Katherine Legge](#) became the first woman in seven years to race a NASCAR Cup Series. It was a bumpy ride—she battled an unstable car and spun out twice, finishing 30th overall, ahead of seven other drivers eliminated in mid-race crashes.
- Dutch athlete [Maureen Koster](#) was knocked unconscious during the 3,000m race at the European Athletics Indoor Championship. In a scary scene, Koster collided with British runner **Hannah Nuttall** during the ninth lap, causing her to fall and hit her head on the track. Officials brought her to the infield, and she was then transported to the hospital. About 20 minutes later, the Dutch team tweeted that she was “conscious and responsive.”
- [Mikaela Shiffrin](#) finished third in the slalom at Åre, Sweden—her 156th World Cup podium. This resets her record for the most World Cup podiums ever. 🐾

Your Feisty recommendations

📺 What to watch: [What if male athletes were asked the same questions as female athletes?](#)

 **What to read:** Jordan Chiles's new memoir, ["I'm That Girl: Living in the Power of My Dreams,"](#) examines the challenges she's experienced, including racism, an eating disorder, injuries, and more.

 **What to listen to:** [How many carbs do you *really* need for endurance cycling events?](#)

 <> **What got us stoked:** ["I don't know why everybody keeps saying that I'm the first world champion to win here, because if I remember correctly, last year Lotte \[Kopecky\] wins, no?"](#) — Tadej Pogacar, after his finish at Strade Bianche

MORE ON WOMEN'S PERFORMANCE

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