

# Trouble in Boca Raton

The recent struggles of last year's Final Four surprise: The Florida Atlantic Owls

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## Introduction

After a magical run to the Final Four in 2023, the current iteration of the Florida Atlantic Owls have not displayed the same dominance. For some context, FAU is sporting a 14-4 record in 2024; in 2023, the Owls did not lose their fourth game until the heartbreaker against San Diego State in the Final Four. They have the same head coach and most of the core from last year (90% of minutes and scoring returned from the 2022-23 roster[1]). If this is the same team on paper, then what is the issue? Between lackluster defense, individual slumps and players coming down to Earth, FAU is learning that the sequel is rarely on par with the original.

## 1 Is There a Problem?

In FAU's third game of the year, they scored 52 points in an ugly loss against the Bryant Bulldogs. They shot 26%, and somehow only lost by nine points. That was a shock, and they dropped from #10 to #19 in the Top-25 rankings, but quickly got back on track. The Owls beat Butler, and then they took down #12 Texas A&M. They won eight of nine and capped off this stretch with a one-point double-overtime win against the Arizona Wildcats.

After the thriller against U of A, FAU was ranked #7 in the country. They looked like a team bound to return to March and make some noise. Despite winning four of their next six games, the Owls' poll ranking has decreased:

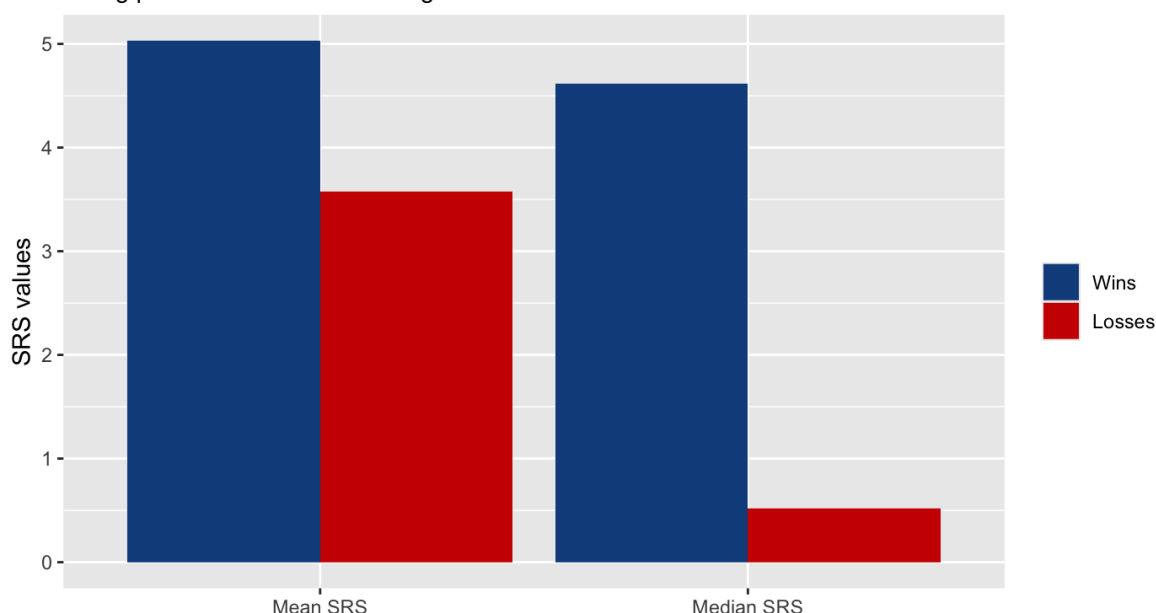
Date	12/26	1/1	1/8	1/15
Ranking	7	17	24	23

Table 1: FAU's decline in the AP Poll

Falling sixteen spots in the rankings appears harsh, given that FAU won four out of six games. However, it makes sense given the nature of the six games. They lost to Florida Gulf Coast and Charlotte, they escaped Tulane with a one-point victory, and a double-digit comeback was required to beat Wichita State. The Owls are posting great wins against strong teams and then ugly losses against inferior competition. Using Basketball-Reference's SRS statistic, they are losing to worse teams on average:

### Average SRS of FAU's wins and losses through 18 games

SRS is Basketball-Reference rating statistic that assigns a team's rating using point differential and strength of schedule



The mean SRS of the teams that beat the Owls is higher than the median due to FAU's loss to ranked Illinois. It would appear that the Owls have an issue playing down to competition. This issue became more glaring during the most recent six-game stretch:

	Record	Median SRS	Point Differential	Net Rating <sup>1</sup>
First 12 Games	10-2	6.67	+14.17	+19.44
Last 6 Games	4-2	2.84	+5.33	+7.78

Table 2: FAU's struggles against statistically weaker competition

This is an Owls team that coasted through conference play last year, going 18-2, and now they're engaged in dogfights on a nightly basis. First, the obvious needs to be acknowledged: FAU now plays in the AAC. This conference contains more real competition: Memphis, SMU, North Texas. UAB, Charlotte and South Florida are not to be taken lightly; the latter just took down Memphis on the road! Five other C-USA teams – Rice, UTSA, and the previously mentioned North Texas, UAB, Charlotte – followed FAU to the AAC. The latter four teams made up the top four of the 2023 C-USA, and now these three teams are going to make life difficult for the Owls in the AAC. The C-USA was top heavy, but the AAC is much deeper:

Conference	Median SRS	SRS Std
2022-23 C-USA	0.10	6.70
2023-24 AAC	3.90	5.543

Table 3: The noticeable change in consistent quality from the C-USA to the new-look AAC

This year, FAU now faces a conference that includes the three best teams from

their previous conference, and the night-to-night competition is going to be tougher. Conference play is a difficult time for any talented team, and FAU is no exception.

Second, an interesting note is that the Owls did not have a road game during the first twelve games of the season. They were home games or games played in a neutral venue. The first road game was the loss against FGCU, and the second was the loss to Charlotte, leaving the Owls at 1-2 in road games this year. It is strange, and likely minor, but notable.

Third, this is not the same Owls team from a year ago, on either end of the court:

	ORtg	DRtg	3P/g	3PA/g	3P%
Last year	112.8	94.7	9.6	26.3	36.6%
Ranks	15th	<b>28th</b>	15th	22nd	53rd
This year	117.5	101.3	8.6	23.7	36.2%
Ranks	16th	<b>165th</b>	73rd	124th	75th

Table 4: Some FAU metrics from last season vs this season

The offense is still incredible; they are not as heavy in three-point volume<sup>2</sup> as they were a year ago. The Owls' defense has suffered tremendously, and this is a huge part of their recent difficulties:

<b>Getting Defensive</b>	DRtg	FG%	3P%	eFG%	FTr	TOV%
First 12 Games	96.5	41.7%	33.1%	47.8%	.270	16.2%
Last 6 Games	107.0	47.1%	35.5%	53.2%	.227	12.9%

Table 5: FAU's defensive rating and opponents' shooting and turnover rates

Florida Atlantic's defense is swooning in January; their opponents are shooting at a higher clip, and the Owls are failing to turn them over at the rate they once were. The opponent free-throw rate statistic does not match the movement, but it indicates that FAU is actually fouling less than they were before, meaning less of the opponents' scoring is attributed to reaching the free-throw line.

Combining The Owls' defense is regressing against worse competition. It is painfully cliché, but this is not the behavior of good teams; competing teams do not "turn it on" against great teams while simultaneously playing down to lesser competition. They show up night after night, take care of business, and maintain good habits and standards that will lead to results in March. Great teams will always have off-nights and get challenged by worse teams, but this is not an off night; this is a trend.

FAU's defense has taken two steps back, and now the Owls appear very vulnerable and not nearly as intimidating as they were last year. The only rotational piece that did not return from last year's team is Michael Forrest, a guard off the bench who averaged 8.2 points on 34% from three on 20.8 minutes per game. If this is largely the same team as last year, why has there been such a significant dip in performance? Who is responsible?

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<sup>2</sup>Note: FAU's pace this year is nearly equal to last year's so this three-point rate does not necessarily need to be possession-adjusted

## 2 Finger Pointing

### 2.1 The First Suspects: The Stars - Johnell Davis, Vlad Goldin, Alijah Martin



Let us keep it short: Johnell Davis and Vlad Goldin are not responsible: Davis has

<b>Johnell Davis</b>	PTS/g	Shooting Splits <sup>3</sup>	FGA/g	Ftr	AST/TO
First 12 games	16.3	.490/.447/.780	12.1	28.3%	0.79
Last 6 games	20.0	.526/.520/.962	13.0	33.3%	1.77

Table 6: Johnell Davis's stats across the two periods of time

<b>Vlad Goldin</b>	PTS/g	FGA/g	FG%	FT%	REB/g	BLK/g
First 12 games	14.4	7.4	74.2%	66.1%	6.7 (2.0 OREB)	1.8
Last 6 games	15.3	9.5	64.9%	66.7%	7.8 (3.2 OREB)	1.2

Table 7: Vlad Goldin's stats

been incredibly efficient all season, scoring nearly twenty points a night on remarkable shooting splits. Goldin's field goal percentage dropped from unbelievable to elite, but it makes sense given the extra shots and responsibility he has assuming. His blocks per game might look pedestrian considering that Goldin is 7'1", but he is among the AAC leaders in block percentage and the block leader on the Owls.

Alijah Martin's season leaves a lot to be desired: Martin has been struggling all

<b>Alijah Martin</b>	PTS/g	Shooting Splits	FGA/g	Ftr	AST/TO	REB/g	STL/g
First 12 games	12.8	.389/.338/.813	10.9	24.4%	0.71	4.5 (1.0 OREB)	1.8
Last 6 games	12.7	.380/.385/.500	11.8	19.7%	2.00	6.8 (2.8 OREB)	1.5

Table 8: The slumping Alijah Martin

season, but that is the key: this has been happening all season. He's had several stinkers this season, but he did play a great game against Wichita State. Martin needs to play better for the Owls to make serious noise, but his play did not experience a dip in the last six games, aside from his free throw shooting.

If the three Owls' stars are not showing sharp declines in play, then we must turn the lens towards the role players.

	First 12 games				Last 6 games			
Name	FG%	3PA/g	3P%	PPG	FG%	3PA/g	3P%	PPG
Bryan Greenlee	45.0%	3.3	37.5%	8.1	31.6%	4.3	26.9%	5.3
Jalen Gaffney	50.8%	1.9	56.5%	8.0	41.7%	1.3	12.5%	4.5
Brandon Weatherspoon	49.2%	3.4	39.0%	7.1	26.9%	2.8	17.6%	2.8

Table 9: The struggles for the Owls' shooters

## 2.2 The Second Suspects: The Shooters - Bryan Greenlee, Jalen Gaffney, Brandon Weatherspoon

There is a significant drop across the board. Greenlee in particular has really struggled with a higher volume, and Weatherspoon and Gaffney are, to be blunt, killing the Owls.

## 2.3 The Wild Cards - Nick Boyd & Tre Carroll

FAU's two wild cards right now are Nick Boyd and Tre Carroll.

Boyd has only played 11 games this year and has started the last three. He hasn't been great this year, especially from behind the three-point line (31.6% on 5.2 attempts per game), but considering the production the Owls are receiving from the role players, they could use consistent, strong play from Boyd.

The latter wild card, Tre Carroll, made a huge appearance in the Wichita State game (10 points, 4 rebounds, 2 blocks, 1 steal). In FAU's first 16 games, Carroll averaged only six minutes per game. In his last two, he's scoring 9.5 points a game at 61% from the field. FAU lacks frontcourt depth, especially with Giancarlo Rosado getting injured, so any production Carroll gives the Owls is greatly appreciated.

FAU is still one of the elite teams in the country, despite their struggles with defense and the recent scourge of bricks from their role players.

## References

- [1] "2023-24 Florida Atlantic Owls Men's Roster and Stats," *Basketball-Reference*, [link](#).
- [2] "2023-24 Florida Atlantic Owls Men's Schedule and Results," *Basketball-Reference*, [link](#).
- [3] Photograph of Johnell Davis and Alijah Martin, "Johnell Davis, Alijah Martin to withdraw from draft, return to FAU" by Adrian Wojnarowski, 31 May 2023, *ESPN*, [link](#).
- [4] Photograph of Vlad Goldin, "Florida Atlantic center Vlad Goldin surprised by pregame handshake snub from K-State" by Kellis Robinett, 26 March 2023, *The Wichita Eagle*, [link](#).
- [5] Data manipulation and aggregation done using R and Excel. All data is taken from College Basketball Reference.