2026 Preseason Power Ranking, Historical Success, and Statistical Methods

XC-SPI: 2026 Preseason Rankings, Assumptions, and Statistical Methods

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Abstract

Purpose. To provide a standalone Week 0 ranking and methodological record for the 2026 NCAA Division I cross country season. The report begins with the 2025 NCAA Championship, reconstructs current ownership of athlete performance after professional departures and transfers, states the assumptions required where public roster information is incomplete, and ranks teams using the XC-SPI Preseason Score.

Scope. Week 0 is a structured empirical prior, not a fully fitted in-season power rating. Historical course, weather, ground, dynamic-fitness, team-day, and condition-variance parameters remain subject to chronological calibration. No current numerical title probability is published before the athlete-level championship model passes historical calibration. The former v2.5 Week 0 scenario board is retained only as a deprecated internal record.

1. Introduction

A preseason cross country ranking has an athletic problem and an evidentiary problem. Last year's NCAA result is the strongest common-field evidence, but the athletes who generated it may not belong to the same team. Programs also publish fall rosters and availability information unevenly. The model therefore begins with athletes, not school names, and makes uncertainty visible rather than converting missing information into certainty.

The 2025 NCAA Championship supplies the Week 0 empirical anchor. Oklahoma State won the men's title with 57 points, New Mexico was second with 82, and Iowa State third with 158. NC State won the women's title with 114, BYU was second with 130, and Oregon third with 153.[1]

Scoring shape matters. Alabama women's first three athletes occupied 1st, 11th and 19th overall, but the team finished 16th; Iowa State women finished 20th despite Betty Kipkore and Mercy Kibet placing 15th and 20th.[1] A model that carries only last year's team place forward misses the leverage in positions four through seven.

2. Why Week 0 Is the Most Uncertain Ranking

There are no current-season XC races yet; fall roster pages can lag eligibility decisions; public injury information is incomplete; and track is informative without being cross country. The evidence cutoff is August 28, 2026. Later information belongs to later weekly editions.

3. Roster and Evidence Assumptions

The preseason model uses Confidence weights rather than literal availability probabilities. Let c_i be the rule-based Confidence weight attached to athlete i's historical contribution:

$$c_i = \begin{cases} 0.99, & \text{verified current roster or verified transfer in,} \\ 0.85, & \text{probable return/program continuity without equally strong fall verification,} \\ 0.70, & \text{materially unresolved,} \\ 0, & \text{professional, transfer out, or verified departure.} \end{cases} \tag{1}$$

These values encode preseason evidence strength; they are not assertions that a runner literally has a 0.85 probability of appearing at the NCAA Championship.

High-impact cases include Habtom Samuel's professional departure from New Mexico, the graduating-senior status of Fouad Messaoudi and Ryan Schoppe at Oklahoma State, Justine Kipkoech and Rosemary Longisa moving to Iowa State, Rachel Forsyth moving to NC State, Nickson Kogei moving to Louisville, Karrie Baloga moving to BYU, and Isca Chelangat moving from Oklahoma State to Arkansas.[2;3;6]

The final source audit also corrected several lower-visibility inputs before publication. Notre Dame's current roster verifies fifth-year Ethan Coleman, Tulane's current roster verifies graduate student Zach Van Houten, Colorado verifies graduate student Ashley Jones, and Wisconsin verifies graduate student Mya Bunke. New Mexico has not posted an equally complete individual fall roster at the evidence cutoff, so Nicola Jansen and Jasmine Wood are retained at the program-continuity weight rather than promoted to the verified weight. A distinct Virginia Tech athlete also named Ethan Coleman is kept separate from Notre Dame's Ethan Coleman and remains materially unresolved for fall-specific XC status.[3;13–16;21]

4. 2026 Week 0 Rankings

4.1. Men

Table 1: Men's roster-audited Week 0 prior.

Rank	Team	Preseason Score	2025 NCAA	2025 score
1	Iowa State	167.3	3	158
2	New Mexico	271.6	2	82
3	Alabama	277.9	6	253
4	Oklahoma State	291.9	1	57
5	Colorado	330.6	10	318
6	BYU	391.0	11	336
7	Wake Forest	424.9	12	407
8	Louisville	481.2	26	584
9	Oregon	482.7	5	239
10	Washington State	513.2	17	491
11	Eastern Kentucky	533.4	9	316
12	Notre Dame	547.3	13	459
13	Michigan State	553.0	23	547
14	Virginia Tech	553.8	14	472
15	Northern Arizona	561.4	8	303
16	Wisconsin	589.2	19	514

Rank	Team	Preseason Score	2025 NCAA	2025 score
17	Tulane	606.5	21	536
18	Ole Miss	611.1	22	538
19	Syracuse	621.8	4	212
20	Arkansas	623.9	18	498
21	Butler	651.6	16	484
22	Oklahoma	706.0	15	480
23	Virginia	719.8	7	303
24	Georgia	772.8	24	562
25	Princeton	797.8	27	598

4.2. Women

Table 2: Women's roster-audited Week 0 prior.

Rank	Team	Preseason Score	2025 NCAA	2025 score
1	NC State	124.4	1	114
2	BYU	234.4	2	130
3	Iowa State	308.7	20	491
4	New Mexico	335.3	4	216
5	West Virginia	350.7	9	280
6	Oregon	395.6	3	153
7	Alabama	396.9	16	460
8	Stanford	442.1	6	268
9	Notre Dame	473.0	7	278
10	Northern Arizona	502.3	8	279
11	Colorado	521.5	13	434
12	South Carolina	539.4	15	456
13	Utah	547.7	17	465
14	Virginia	548.3	24	558
15	Northwestern	554.5	18	469
16	Florida	558.5	5	225
17	North Carolina	598.4	11	413
18	Arkansas	643.2	–	–
19	Villanova	647.1	25	574
20	Wisconsin	650.3	26	600
21	Oklahoma State	661.3	12	432
22	LSU	697.4	23	530
23	Penn State	757.5	10	406
24	Georgetown	765.3	14	454
25	Washington	803.0	19	472

5. XC-SPI Preseason Score

Let X_i be the athlete's preseason performance base. When the athlete competed for a complete team at the 2025 NCAA Championship, X_i is that runner's official NCAA team-scoring value. For a 2025 NCAA individual qualifier who subsequently joins a complete team, X_i is the runner's hypothetical place in the 2025 NCAA team-scoring sequence after non-team scorers are removed, rather than the raw overall finish. A transfer or newcomer without directly comparable 2025 NCAA XC scoring evidence receives the common conservative prior $X_{\text{new}} = 150$; athlete-specific transfer values are not invented. Let $R_0 = 200$ be the conservative replacement value. The adjusted preseason contribution is

$$C_i = c_i X_i + (1 - c_i) R_0. \tag{2}$$

Order team j's candidate values $C_{j(1)} \leq \cdots \leq C_{j(7)}$. The preseason index is

$$PS_j = \sum_{k=1}^{5} C_{j(k)} + \lambda \left[(C_{j(6)} - C_{j(5)})_+ + (C_{j(7)} - C_{j(5)})_+ \right], \qquad \lambda = 0.05. \tag{3}$$

Preseason Score is an index, not a literal forecast of NCAA points. Its constants are stress-tested in Section 8 and are not reused as in-season race coefficients.

6. Team-Level Interpretation

Iowa State men rank first because five NCAA-proven values can be carried into the candidate scoring five under the current roster audit. New Mexico remains second after Samuel's departure because the program reports that the bulk of the runner-up production returns. Alabama's verified distance continuity pulls it to third. Oklahoma State retains an elite front but must replace two named members of the 57-point championship five.[3;4;6;12]

NC State women combine the defending title with exceptional continuity and Rachel Forsyth. BYU remains second behind a deep returning group led by Jane Hedengren and Riley Chamberlain. Iowa State rises sharply because its current athlete pool addresses the back-end scoring cost that drove the 2025 total.[2;4;5;9]

7. Postmodern Era Historical Success

The Power Ranking is intentionally separated from a new historical benchmark. XC-SPI defines the **Postmodern Era (Super-Shoe Era onward)** as 2020 forward.[31] The Historical Success Model uses 2020–2024 NCAA team scoring profiles to estimate how often similar profiles became champions, podium teams (1st–4th), top-10 teams, or top-20 teams one season later in 2021–2025. The 2020 championship profile is flagged because that season was disrupted by COVID-19 and its NCAA final was held in March 2021; the model is rerun without it as a sensitivity test.

The historical model uses four simple profile inputs: Team Score, Front Runner, Fifth Runner, and Depth Gap. A regularized five-outcome logistic model was selected by held-out-season cross-validation. The full four-input profile produced the lowest mean held-out log loss (1.256), but its gain over a score-only model was modest, so the historical layer should be read as a benchmark rather than a claim that every feature carries large independent predictive power.

For 2026, the men's Historical Success order begins Iowa State, New Mexico, Alabama, Oklahoma State, Colorado, Wake Forest, and BYU. The women's order begins NC State, BYU, West Virginia, New Mexico, Oregon, Stanford, Notre Dame, Arkansas, Florida, and Iowa State. Thus the historical layer can diverge from the Preseason Score: Iowa State women remain No. 3 in the Power Ranking but are No. 10 in Historical Success because their current audited profile is much stronger at the front than at scorer five. No Preseason Score is changed by this comparison.

A separate Postmodern Era Historical Success report publishes all 25 teams, title/podium/top-10 rates, model diagnostics, COVID sensitivity, and Top-25-conditional Historical Title Odds. Those historical odds are not the final athlete-level XC-SPI Championship Odds.

8. Weekly XC-SPI Race Model

Once racing begins, Preseason Score becomes the starting information state rather than the weekly score. Athlete ability is dynamic and uncertainty scales with elapsed time:

$$\alpha_{i,t}^{-} = \alpha_{i,t-1} + \eta_{i,t}, \tag{4}$$

$$\eta_{i,t} \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\eta,s(i)}\Delta t_{it}), \tag{5}$$

$$V_{i,t}^{-} = V_{i,t-1} + \sigma^2_{\eta,s(i)}\Delta t_{it}. \tag{6}$$

For athlete i from team j in race r,

$$\log T_{ir} = \mu_s + \alpha^{-}_{i,t(r)} + \delta_s(d_{ir}) + \gamma_{c(r),s} + h_s(w_r) + g_s(q_r) + u_r + v_{jr} + \epsilon_{ir}. \tag{7}$$

Distance uses a centered penalized spline. Persistent course difficulty is partially pooled,

$$\gamma_{k,s} \sim N(x_k^{\top}\beta_{c,s}, \tau^2_{c,s}), \qquad \sum_k \pi_k \gamma_{k,s} = 0, \tag{8}$$

where the centering constraint prevents course effects from drifting into the global intercept. Weather uses penalized smooths. Race-window precipitation and antecedent precipitation use nonoverlapping windows so ground and weather terms do not count the same rainfall twice.[27;28]

Common additive course/weather effects help normalize historical races, but in a future common championship they cancel from pairwise ordering if applied equally to everyone. Version 2.7 therefore allows difficult conditions to change residual spread,

$$\log \sigma_{\epsilon,r,s} = \xi_{0,s} + \xi_s^{\top} z_r, \tag{9}$$

so heat, mud, wind, or technicality can widen the distribution and create more upset risk. Athlete-specific condition slopes are excluded unless repeated historical evidence supports them. The shared team-day term is

$$v_{jr} \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\text{team}}), \tag{10}$$

allowing modest teammate correlation after measured context is removed.

The normalized athlete observation is

$$z_{ir} = \log T_{ir} - \hat{\mu}_s - \hat{\delta}_s(d_{ir}) - \hat{\gamma}_{c(r),s} - \hat{h}_s(w_r) - \hat{g}_s(q_r) - \hat{u}_r - \hat{v}_{jr}. \tag{11}$$

For explanatory sequential updating, observation variance explicitly includes context uncertainty:

$$R_{ir} = \sigma^2_{\epsilon,r,s} + V_{\text{course,ir}} + V_{\text{weather,ir}} + V_{\text{ground,ir}} + V_{\text{race,ir}} + V_{\text{team,ir}} + V_{\text{measurement,ir}}. \tag{12}$$

Then

$$K_{ir} = \frac{V_{i,t}^{-}}{V_{i,t}^{-} + R_{ir}}, \quad \hat{\alpha}_{i,t} = \hat{\alpha}_{i,t}^{-} + K_{ir}(z_{ir} - \hat{\alpha}_{i,t}^{-}), \quad V_{i,t} = (1 - K_{ir})V_{i,t}^{-}. \tag{13}$$

This is a state-space representation; production may fit the equivalent joint hierarchical model. A poorly measured or poorly identified race/team context should move the athlete less.[29]

8.1. Head-to-head layer removed in v2.7

Earlier drafts allowed an optional Bradley–Terry paired-comparison likelihood. Version 2.7 removes that component from production because same-race times already encode finishing order and a second likelihood risks double-counting the same observation. It may return only if preregistered rolling validation demonstrates unique predictive information beyond normalized time.

8.2. Availability and championship selection

Availability and selection are distinct. If historical data eventually support them,

$$p_i^{\text{avail}} = P(A_i = 1 \mid \text{current evidence}), \qquad p_i^{\text{select}} = P(L_i = 1 \mid A_i = 1, \text{current evidence}). \tag{14}$$

Until then, transparent roster gates and rule-based championship-group selection are preferable to false precision.

8.3. Championship projection and NCAA scoring

Selected and available athletes are simulated under one championship reference environment, with uncertainty in athlete state, residual scale, and team-day effects propagated. Let $P_i^{(m)}$ be raw overall finish in draw m. Raw finish is retained for the individual race. Team scoring uses a second variable $Q_i^{(m)}$, the NCAA team-scoring place after applying the cross-country team-scoring filter. In each simulation:

1. identify teams with at least five finishers from their declared championship pool;
2. retain only the first seven finishers from each complete team as scoring/displacement-eligible athletes;
3. remove individual qualifiers, runners from incomplete teams, and runners beyond a team's seventh from the team-scoring place sequence;
4. re-number the retained athletes sequentially to obtain $Q_i^{(m)}$;
5. sum the first five Q values for each complete team; sixth and seventh athletes remain in the sequence and therefore displace opponents; and
6. break tied team scores using the NCAA scorer-by-scorer comparison rule.[22;23]

Thus

$$S_j^{(m)} = \sum_{k=1}^{5} Q_{jk}^{(m)}, \tag{15}$$

$$\bar{S}_j = \frac{1}{M} \sum_{m=1}^{M} S_j^{(m)}, \tag{16}$$

$$\widetilde{S}_j = \text{median}_m \, S_j^{(m)}, \tag{17}$$

$$\overline{RANK}_j = \frac{1}{M} \sum_{m} \text{teamplace}_j^{(m)}. \tag{18}$$

Expected simulated NCAA score is the primary power-ranking target. Median score, expected team place, title probability, and podium probability are separate outputs because the best mean score is not mathematically identical to the highest probability of winning.

9. Monte Carlo Precision

Simulation count is determined by precision, not by a universal fixed minimum. Runs begin with a substantial pilot batch and continue until preregistered tolerances are met. For a published event probability,

$$\mathrm{MCSE}(\hat{p}) = \sqrt{\hat{p}(1-\hat{p})/M}. \tag{19}$$

Common probabilities require a small absolute MCSE; longshots also require acceptable relative precision or a minimum simulated event count. Expected-score MCSE is $s(S_j)/\sqrt{M}$. Seed, draw count, stopping rule, MCSE, and any convergence warning are stored with each release.

10. Sensitivity, Identifiability, and Validation

The preseason constants $R_0 = 200$, $X_{\text{new}} = 150$, $\lambda = 0.05$, and the Confidence weights are not fitted coefficients. The launch audit recomputes all 50 team rankings and stress-tests $R_0 \in \{175, 200, 225\}$, $X_{\text{new}} \in \{125, 150, 175\}$, $\lambda \in \{0, 0.05, 0.10\}$, and a ± 0.05 shift in nonzero Confidence weights. The men's No. 1 is stable across that grid; the women's No. 1 is also stable. Rank-order correlations remain above approximately 0.97 in both divisions, though some middle/lower positions move several places.

In-season estimation uses centered design terms and partial pooling to separate the intercept, course, distance, weather, ground, and race-wide effects. Weather-ground collinearity is controlled by nonoverlapping precipitation definitions, penalization, and ablation. Model families are retained only when rolling-origin validation improves held-out prediction.

The Postmodern Era Historical Success benchmark uses strict 2020-forward profiles and next-season outcomes through 2025. It is evaluated with held-out-season cross-validation and a separate sensitivity run excluding the disrupted 2020 source profile. The future athlete-level race model still requires chronological rolling-origin validation. Full national-title probability calibration should expand beyond the five-year Postmodern benchmark when older data can be reconstructed without contaminating the modern model, because a small number of championship events cannot establish reliability across probability ranges by itself. Metrics include next-race MAE/RMSE on log time, Spearman rank correlation, team-place and NCAA-score error, interval coverage, Brier/log scores, reliability/calibration with bin counts, and variable-family ablation.[26–30]

11. Limitations

Week 0 roster information remains uneven. Course distance can be imprecise, tactical races can be poorly represented by a time model, weather stations do not perfectly describe microclimate, ground evidence is sparse, and injuries are often private. These limitations argue for wider uncertainty and source flags, not undocumented manual corrections.

12. Conclusion

The preseason ranking is an auditable roster-aware prior. The weekly model is a separate athlete-level system that normalizes race context, updates athlete distributions, applies current availability, simulates a common NCAA field, and scores that field with NCAA rules. The distinction prevents Week 0 assumptions from masquerading as fitted race coefficients and makes later ranking movement traceable.

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