

Stunningly, five of the USA's top senior talents remain uncommitted as this year's star-studded State Farm City of Palms Classic begins.

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Whomever first came up with the idea of allowing the nation's top high school basketball players to "sign on the dotted line" in November of their senior years probably never saw this one coming.

As the first basketball is tossed skyward, marking the tipoff of the 39th annual State Farm City of Palms Classic, the future plans for five of the top 14 seniors in the Class of 2012 (according to Clark Francis' HoopScoop online recruiting service) remain similarly up in the air.

They're all here this week. Tagging along will be their wide-eyed suitors, some of the heaviest hitters in the NCAA Div. I head coaching ranks.

Shabazz Muhammad, the 6-foot-6 shooting guard who brings Las Vegas (Nev.) Bishop Gorman back for an encore effort, hasn't budged from the No. 1 spot in Francis' rankings for three years.

"He's head-and-shoulders the best player, it's not even close," Francis says. "Shabazz is a big-time athlete and a better shooter than people give him credit for."

Francis considers him to be leaning strongly toward UCLA. But Gorman coach Grant Rice's brother is the new coach at UNLV – a nice trump card over Duke, Kentucky, Arizona, Kansas, Memphis, USC and Texas A&M, who all are hanging around, just in case.

That means it will be no surprise to see faces like John Calipari, Mike Krzyzewski or Bill Self in the crowd at this year's City of Palms Classic.

It certainly wouldn't be a first for an event that has showcased 99 McDonald's All-Americans in roughly two decades. Last year's final day drew Krzyzewski, North Carolina's Roy Williams, ESPN's Dick Vitale and Boston Celtics coach Doc Rivers.

Louisville's Rick Pitino, Florida's Billy Donovan and FSU's Leonard Hamilton, Indiana's Tom Crean and Alabama's Anthony Grant have been frequent visitors.

"Every year is different," says ESPN.com recruiting analyst Dave Telep. "The good news is when you have a lot of uncommitted seniors, a great basketball event and an outstanding venue, you're going to have a lot of high-profile coaches in the stands."

All of our "starting five" are ranked in Telep's top 31.

Adds Francis, who will be attending his 19th City of Palms in 21 years: "Sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn't. This year, it seems almost all of the top uncommitted seniors are coming to the City of Palms Classic. Sometimes, you just get lucky."

Besides Muhammad:

- ★ Big man Tony Parker, a frighteningly strong 6-9 senior from Lithonia (Ga.) Miller Grove, is being chased by the likes of Duke, UCLA, Ohio State and Memphis.
- ★ Power forward Amile Jefferson, a 6-7 senior who leads Wynnewood (Pa.) Friends Central into the Signature Series, has schools like Stanford, Kentucky, N.C. State, Villanova, Ohio State, Maryland and Temple on his list.

- ★ Another PF, 6-7 senior Ricardo Gathers of returning Reserve (La.) Riverside Academy, had verbally committed to St. John's in July, but tossed that aside in November. That left the field wide open for the likes of LSU, Syracuse and (believe it or not) St. John's.

“At this point in time it's a re-evaluation thing,” Greg Gathers, Ricardo's brother, told ESPN.com. “With the Big East kind of dismantling and everything he's wondering where the Big East is going to be at.”

A lot of big-time coaches are wondering where our Fab Five are going to be at next fall.

- ★ Explosive 6-6 senior wing Savon Goodman, who played in last year's City of Palms for Academy of the New Church (Pa.), had committed to Villanova, but decided to reopen his recruitment. Now, as he powers Public League favorite Philadelphia (Pa.) Constitution into the City of Palms, his list includes Arizona, UCLA, Kentucky, Louisville, Texas, Kansas and, yes, even Villanova.

None of them signed a national letter-of-intent during the week-long early period, which began Nov. 9. Their next binding opportunity won't come until the spring signing period (April 11-May 16).

Two players who are presumed as being off the board are Cincinnati (Ohio) Taft teammates Adolphus Washington and Dwayne Stanford, who led the Senators to Ohio's Div. III state title. But their future is in a football stadium, not an arena.

Washington, a 6-6 defensive end, has announced he will sign with Ohio State and new head coach Urban Meyer; Stanford, a 6-5 wide receiver, is headed west to Oregon.

The unusual attention paid to the undecided shouldn't overshadow an outstanding-as-usual collection of teams and talent. Top-seeded Santa Ana (Calif.) Mater Dei, who added Elijah Brown (the son of new Lakers' coach Mike Brown) to an already star-studded cast, could be challenged early on by nationally ranked Arlington (Texas) Grace Prep and 7-foot Baylor signee Isaiah Austin.

Waiting in the semifinals could be a familiar face in a new place – Kevin Boyle, who coached Elizabeth (N.J.) St. Patrick in 10 COPs and won last year's, has moved south to Florida's Montverde Academy, where he boasts the state's top backcourt in Florida-bound senior Michael Frazier and junior Kasey Hill.

Bronx (N.Y.) St. Raymond's, a City of Palms finalist in 2000, and Louisville (Ky.) Trinity, the Bluegrass State's preseason No. 1 team, are also in that half of the bracket, along with host Fort Myers Bishop Verot – who has the look of a state champion early in the season with 6-8 sophomore Ricky Doyle – Richmond (Calif.) Salesian, Taft and ultra-athletic Lake Wales.

The Highlanders earned the 16th and final invitation to this year's tournament by winning the inaugural USSSA City of Palms Div. III State Championship in June.

Muhammad and a college-sized front line make Bishop Gorman the favorite in the other half of the bracket. But the Gaels could face Plano (Texas) Prestonwood Christian and 6-9 junior Julius Randle – one of the nation's top juniors – early on. And that's presuming the Gaels survive a first-round upset alert against Pompano Beach Ely, the state's Class 7A favorite.

Parker's Miller Grove Wolverines, the No. 2 team in two national preseason polls, will face either Gathers & Co. or upstart Gladstone (N.J.) Gill St. Bernard's in another quarterfinal.

Signature Series II marks the return of Ulm (Germany) Urspringschule, but the top seed is

New England prep power Tilton School (N.H.), with a pair of blue-chip underclassmen, 6-10 Nerlens Noel and 6-4 Wayne Selden.

Friends Central and Wilbraham (Mass.) & Monson round out the four-team field.

Add two Sunshine Series games – Fort Myers challenges Tallahassee Godby on opening night, then Cape Coral Mariner plays Miami Norland the next afternoon – and there are 36 basketball games to digest over a span of 128 hours.

When you're not stargazing into a crowd of coaching celebrities, that is.