

American Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Sunday, March 15, 2026

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Legacy Arena At The BJCC

USF Bulls

Bryan Hodgson

Wes Enis

Izaiyah Nelson

Postgame Press Conference



South Florida 70, Wichita State 55

THE MODERATOR: All right. We are joined on the podium by South Florida head coach Bryan Hodgson, Wes Enis, who is the MVP of this tournament, and Izaiyah Nelson, who is also on the All-Tournament team.

Coach, why don't we start with some comments from you and we'll open it up for questions.

BRYAN HODGSON: Yeah, man, first and foremost, God is so good. To be in this chair and be able to do this, this was a dream as a child. I was a foster kid in a hectic household. My getaway was to be in the driveway and shoot hoops, and fell in love with this game. Grew up watching this on TV.

Very fortunate to coach an unbelievable group of young men that weren't going to let us lose. They make me look like a lot better coach than I am. I'm out there watching the Selection Show and Buffalo, New York popped up and I'm from western New York.

My father has dementia and I have been a head coach for three years. He's never seen me coach as a head coach in person because it's so hard for him to travel and he's going to get to see me coach this year in the NCAA Tournament which means the world to me.

Thank you for this opportunity. Thank you to these young men and the administration in South Florida for believing in me, and really excited for this group.

Q. Coach, I was just curious, was there a moment or a game specifically this season that you kind of remember the turn and you think kind of built this run

for you guys?

BRYAN HODGSON: You know, I would say there's a couple, but the first one is Utah State at home. We came back from a tough, tough tournament in the Bahamas. We weren't nearly as good as we are now, but our guys are so driven and so selfless and such hard workers that those MTDs are brutal.

You come back from one of those trips and things can go either direction, and they rallied around one another. We knew we had a top 25 team building at home and we led that convincingly and showed our guys what we're capable of.

I think the Wichita State game at Wichita State was another one. Wasn't pretty. 66 of 58, one of our lowest point totals of the year but we gutted out a win and proved who our guys, the staff included, that we can win in several different ways.

But, man, these guys just pounded the stone. Just every single day they took pride in getting better coming closer together as a unit, and that's what ultimately put us in this position.

Q. I don't know if you're able to see, but you guys are going to Buffalo to play Lewisville to play in the first round. What does it mean to you to go back to the area where grew up for your first NCAA Tournament game?

BRYAN HODGSON: I don't know if you were just in here, but I was a foster child taken into a foster home at two years old and was adopted by the Hodgson family.

My dad has dementia and I've been head coach for three years. My dad's never been able to see me coach in person and he's going to get to watch me coach in person this week in Buffalo, New York.

God is so good. I'm so blessed. We're going to have a great crowd there. I'm going to have my dad and mom in atone dance, I couldn't be more thankful.

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Q. For both a Izaiyah and Wes, what do you guys think your team bring to the NCAA Tournament and why do you think you guys can go on a run in March?

WES ENIS: Yeah, I think we run bring a team that's super close and super connect. I don't think any team in the country is as connected as we are. We got a lot of pop, you know what I mean?

We have a whole bunch of dudes that are underdogs with a chip on their shoulder. We're ready to go for this tournament.

IZAIYAH NELSON: Just piggy backing off what Wes said, we have 15 dudes who are all underdogs. Being able to a go to March Madness and play teams that all looked over us, it's a proving point.

Now we have an even bigger chip on our shoulder and we're going to show them why y'all should have recruited us. But now we're here; God's plan.

Q. Coach, over these past two games, great defensively. What did you see over the past two games specifically that helped y'all defensively?

BRYAN HODGSON: Phenomenal. Best coaching staff in the country. They all deserve to be head coaches to be honest with you. I'm hoping they're with me for a long time, but, man, got some guys that really are ready to move over a chair.

Derek Rongstad runs our defense and just relentless, man. His approach, attention to a detail. We have the number one defense in the conference, always known as an offensive team, efficient in South Florida basketball.

We broke the scoring record. Broke the three-point record. Number one defense in the league and our defense night. Izaiyah Nelson, defensive player of the year in the league. Wes Enis really should be right behind him. 1A and 1B, if you watch what Wes Enis did to one of the shut his water off. It was a special, special defensive performance.

Q. And for Izaiyah, over the past two games and tonight, how do you feel you did?

IZAIYAH NELSON: I feel like I did amazing. I do what I have to do. The TNT, like Coach talks about. I do the take no talent stuff. So it's like I know I have 15 guys who can score the ball, and so I'm the guy that's just over there doing all the tough guy stuff, getting on the board, grabbing rebounds, hitting guys.

I think I did amazing and I think I did my job these last two games and I got my guys behind he.

BRYAN HODGSON: Damn right you were amazing.

Q. Coach, congratulations. One of the storylines that people have been talking about is not only did you guys clinch your conference title today, but yesterday it was Kennesaw State and a lot of people are talking about what Amir Abdur-Rahim has meant to both of these programs. You've said that a lot this year. To continue this storyline and you see both of Coach Amir's teams now in March Madness now, What is that like?

BRYAN HODGSON: I wear two bracelets every day, my AR bracelet, our core values, trust, responsibility, unity, toughness and humility. Those are the traits that Coach Amir carried every day.

Want to talk about a man who practiced what he preached and he treated so many people the right way for so long. He built that program at Kennesaw and he built this program here at South Florida.

I wouldn't have taken this job had I not seen what Coach Amir did. I'm going to be transparent: It wasn't easy to step in and follow someone like Coach. He was special. There's no doubt that he had a hand in this and yesterday for Kennesaw.

Coach Pettway is one of my best friends in the world. He's family to me. So happen for him. I made sure I went in the locker room and put on my Coach Amir Love Wins hoodie.

He practiced what he preached. We try to approach every day with him on our mind. Any situation we run into, we kind of, what would Coach Amir do here?

You have an impact that powerful on so many people, that says so much about who was and what he was about.

Q. And in terms of the first half, You go into the locker room with a lead and you have your now tournament MVP Wes Enis who couldn't by a three there in the first half. Seemed like he was playing with house money in the second half. What switched in the second half for you guys?

BRYAN HODGSON: We were able to convert off our offensive rebounds. In the first half we had I belive eight O-boards; only had three points off those O-boards. We didn't do a great job getting sprayouts.

In the second half we did a much better job of that. And I'll



tell you, like, with what he had to do offensively, I played him for 40 minutes. Excuse me, defensively. I played him for 40 minutes. He guarded the most prolific scorer in the conference and literally held him to 2 for 11, 1 for 7 from three, five total points, his lowest output on the year.

That young man is special. So I don't want to take anything. He had an unbelievable season, but Wes took that match-up personally and so to have him see any go in and have even the energy to score the basketball was an added bonus.

Q. Thank you, congrats again.

BRYAN HODGSON: Thank you.

Q. Coach, Wes, Zai, congratulations on the win. I want to ask you about Gavin; 13 minutes, but some big minutes for you guys. What enables a guy like that who may not see as much action as the two guys next to you to play such a big role and kind of righting the ship and leading you to a victory today?

BRYAN HODGSON: Yeah, staying the course. Understanding that he is a freshman on a really good basketball team. We have conversations with those guys all the time about staying ready. When you're a freshman on a team this talented, it's tough to get minutes and a lot of freshmen can go the other way and just have the poor me victim mentality and Gav doesn't have that.

Man, he's full of energy every day. Nobody's got more confidence in Gavin Hightower, these guys will tell you. Really proud of him staying the course and being such an integral part of us pulling this out today.

Q. And Wes and Zai, when things weren't going so good there in the first half and the shots aren't falling, especially with Joe, if the shots aren't falling it doesn't seem to affect you guys. You guys are still out there rebounding and the defensive intensity is high. What is the conversation like on the bench when the shots aren't going down? What's your main focus then?

WES ENIS: I think always man defense. Like I said, we can control defense. Sometimes we are going to get great looks and they're not going to fall, but defensively if we execute our game plan and do what we need to do, We know we're going to come out successful on the defensive side.

IZAIYAH NELSON: Yeah, we know it's defense and adversity. We have been through adversity our whole career this season. It's like we know there's going to be some games that we know shots ain't falling, but what are

we doing when shots don't fall? Are we going to give up or put our heads down and keep pounding and pounding and pounding?

BRYAN HODGSON: Give my guy Joe Henderson a question. He's been there with us all year, every game. I know he's probably not up on the technology, but I want to make sure my guy Joe gets a chance to talk.

Q. I appreciate you, but Jay stole my question. I was going to ask about Gavin.

BRYAN HODGSON: Okay. Don't say I didn't throw you a bone there, Joe.

THE MODERATOR: You don't have another one?

Q. No, I'm good.

Coach, I know it's a quick turnaround. Any initial thoughts on the first-round match-up?

BRYAN HODGSON: I've seen Louisville on film a few times. They've got some familiar faces. They've got two young men on that roster that played at South Florida. Know Pat Kelsey well. I know his assistants well. Great coach, great program and just got to go back and watch the tape and get ready and my staff's probably already all over it, but really excited for the opportunity.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. Good luck.

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