

National Invitation Tournament: Utah Valley vs UAB

Monday, March 27, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Orleans Arena

Alabama at Birmingham Blazers

Andy Kennedy

Jordan Walker

Trey Jemison

Semi Finals Pregame Press Conference

ANDY KENNEDY: We're excited to be here. We're glad to be playing; one of only eight teams still in college basketball to have an opportunity to continue to play. Our guys have earned that. Had a tremendous season, school record 28 wins. We've won 15 of our last 17. We're looking forward to doing one thing that has never within done in the storied history of UAB basketball and that is capturing an NIT Championship.

Q. So you have made the NIT Final Four twice before when you were at Mississippi. What are you doing differently this time to prepare to bring home the crown?

ANDY KENNEDY: Yeah, it seems like a long time ago. I went in 2008 and then again I think it was in 2010. Venue's different. Kind of like Vegas. No disrespect to MSG but I think we made a good choice here.

Different group. This group still wants to play. We had a terrific year, and we were closing the season very strong in our conference tournament. We knew our path. We knew we were going to have to win the conference tournament championship to get back to the NCAA Tournament, and we didn't play well, and the team on the other side of us did play. And I think you may have heard of them, FAU. Are you familiar? They have got a pretty good program and they have done a tremendous job.

So our guys were disappointed, justifiably so. We had a lot of high expectations externally and more importantly internally. But once we got over that, and it wasn't easy to do, but once we got over that, we got excited about playing again.



We won our first-round game at home, and we got an opportunity to host a second-round game, once more, upset the No. 1 seed in our region in Clemson, and we responded in kind there protecting the standard of Bartow Arena.

Then we had an opportunity that I knew they would be excited about, going and playing an SEC opponent on the road which we don't get an opportunity to do very much, and our guys really took advantage of that opportunity.

So I know we are excited. We are prepared, as prepared as you can be for somebody that you don't -- you've never played before. I did find out that UAB did play Utah Valley a few years before I got there.

Great respect for what Mark has done, and man, they are really good. And not to make this about FAU, I think they have gotten enough print, and justifiably so over the last few weeks.

But when I watched the tape, the team that I can most equate to the play we way to that we are familiar with is FAU: They spread you, they play fast, they have multiple guys that can beat you off the bounce, they have got rim protection and they have got depth, and again Mark does a great job.

Q. So you mentioned FAU a few times. I know with University of Alabama Tuscaloosa going down this weekend, you are the last University of Alabama playing. Who does UAB view as the measuring stick right now? Is it in-state schools like Alabama and Auburn? Who are you chasing at this point in UAB's trajectory?

ANDY KENNEDY: We have a saying internally: "Best version of self." We are trying to be the best version of us. Again, this program, UAB is 45 years old. I had the good fortune of playing in the first NIT Final Four in Madison Square Garden that UAB had went to in 1989. The job that Gene Bartow did in starting UAB from scratch in 1978; took it to the Elite 8 in three years, went to seven straight NCAA



Tournaments, pretty remarkable.

These guys are building upon that legacy, and the one thing that is not in the trophy case is an NIT Championship and that is our goal right now. We are just trying to be best versions of selves.

Q. When you look at FAU's success, your success --

ANDY KENNEDY: North Texas. Charlotte won the CBI.

Q. San Diego State is still alive. There's only three power conference teams left of the eight that are still playing. Do you think that will make any impact in seeding and at-large selection come next March? Do you think that's going to play a role at all?

ANDY KENNEDY: Yeah, I think it should but I don't know if it will. I think, and again I was a guy that coached in a power league first at Cincinnati which was in the BIG EAST at the time, quote, unquote a power six league, and then I was in the SEC for 12.

The way that the net formula is set up now, so much emphasis on quad ones, quad twos, it's very difficult for quote, unquote, mids, because just you don't have the opportunities to play as many. I think it shows, man, we are in a different world now.

I played for the late, great Jimmy V. And he always said there's no such things as levels of programs; there's level of players. If you get good players, then you have got an opportunity to play meaningful football in the month of March and I think we are seeing that with the transfer portal, with the volatility of roster management. I think it's going to be more the norm moving forward.

Q. Talk about the exposure this program will get tomorrow night and how significant it is that you're the last team at Alabama standing, as it would be?

TREY JEMISON: It's been huge for us to come and play this Final Four NIT is big-time. Coach talked about all the time that, hey, each game is an opportunity and with the opportunity you get to show how good you really are as a player, and we are just blessed to have that opportunity once again.

JORDAN WALKER: I'm definitely going to piggyback on what Trey said. Definitely being able to be one of eight teams still playing this late in the year, is an absolute blessing.

But the less amount of teams that are playing, the more eyes that are on you. And obviously like a bunch of us, we

have six seniors on our team and we know that basketball at college is coming to an end, and a lot of our goals is try to play professional at the next level.

So having an opportunity where everyone can see us play and see our ability and see how great of a team we are, and individually how great of players we are; so I think it definitely is amazing that we're still able to play right now.

ANDY KENNEDY: We have won 28 games and going into our 30th game. It has been a long journey and one that has certainly been full of peaks and valleys, like life. Again I'm just proud that these guys got up off the mat, continued to move forward. Understanding the most valuable lesson that I think I can impart to them as a coach is persevere is valuable, very valuable. Continue to persevere and continue to stay the course.

Again we are pursuing something that hasn't happened at UAB before, and that's an opportunity to capture an NIT Championship and that's where our focus is.

Q. What are your thoughts on having the NIT Championship here in Las Vegas after so many years in Madison Square Garden in New York City?

JORDAN WALKER: Well, me being from New York, I wish it was in Madison Square Garden. I mean, having to end my college career in New York around family and friends, I feel like the would have been the best thing in the world and the only thing I can dream of.

But as AK said, Vegas is Vegas and being from New York and being from a city like that and then coming to Vegas, I mean, it's beautiful out here and I love it. We played in this arena last year, so I mean, I don't mind it being here at all.

TREY JEMISON: Going off what Jelly said, I'm from Alabama. Doesn't really matter to me to be honest. I'm happy to play basketball this late in the season. It's late March and to be able to play with basketball and compete with my boys one more time is a blessing, so I'm just glad to be out here, man.

ANDY KENNEDY: We love Vegas. It's a destination city. There's going to be a lot of eyes on the platform which the NIT presents tomorrow and we'll be the only game playing in the country as it relates to college basketball.

So our guys are excited about that. They know the opportunity in front of them. They know the challenge. We have completely engrossed ourselves in Utah valley and know the challenge they present but we're looking forward to it.



Q. How cool of a going away present is it for Conference USA that the success that FAU is having in the Big Dance, and you guys and North Texas in the NIT, Charlotte winning the CBI, and also how great of a launching pad is that going into the new conference next year?

ANDY KENNEDY: Well, you know, basketball, we've been talking about it all year, locally, was the most underrated league in the country and that doesn't come to fruition until you get no postseason play and you start stacking wins.

I think C-USA is 15-1 in the postseason to this point. Three of the teams in the NIT that are still playing. FAU, the story, I mean, Spielberg couldn't have written it better. This is a made-for-TV movie in the making. Incredible job with what they have done, and I don't think they are done yet. I've actually talked to Dusty and Todd on their staff recently, and they still feel like there's more basketball to be played for them.

So I think it's been a great testament, the three teams that are still playing of eight: Us, North Texas who is here on the other side, along with FAU are all transitioning to the American Conference.

But I'm sure Conference USA is not mad because FAU has earned a lot of money for C-USA, that money stays in the coffers. FAU doesn't see a dime of that, I don't know if you guys know that. Neither does UAB, by the way.

But when Houston leaves and goes to the Big 12, and Houston has had a pretty good run too; that money stays in the American Conference. So what's good for one is good for all, I suppose.

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