

National Invitation Tournament: Indiana State vs Utah

Monday, April 1, 2024
Indianapolis, Indiana, USA
Hinkle Fieldhouse

Indiana State Sycamores

Josh Schertz

Ryan Conwell

Robbie Avila

Semi Finals Pregame Press Conference



blowing up, getting so popular?

ROBBIE AVILA: It kind of started after our Thanksgiving tournament. It started to slowly build up then and there, and as the season's gone on, I started to get more media attention, and it really started to build up in like January and February.

I'm just grateful to get all this attention. It's been a lot of fun but I'm just able to kind of use that to also shine the light on our team. Obviously I think they deserve it just as much as I do because I can't do the things that I do without them. So just being able to enjoy this whole process is what I've been trying to do.

Q. Just wanted to get your thoughts on the matchup with Branden Carlson, when you see out of him.

ROBBIE AVILA: He's obviously a tremendous player. You know. He can do it all. He's seven feet tall. Can shoot it and play in the post. He's definitely going to be a challenge for us to be able to guard.

But it's just exciting at this kind of time. You know you're going to play against high-level competition. So to be able to continue to play at this level is exciting. We're ready to go ahead and prepare to do our best for him and we're just ready to play.

Q. For both players, it's been mentioned you're one of 18 still left playing in college basketball this season, but you're the only Mid-major left. Do you take pride in representing the Mid-major level at this stage?

RYAN CONWELL: I think we do to be honest. I feel like we really don't view it as that. I feel like we view it as we're just a really good team, and I feel like we also just believe in one another. And I feel like that's what's been keeping us, you know, pushing and allowed us to keep playing.

ROBBIE AVILA: Yeah, like Ryan said, we kind of just see ourselves as one of the final eight teams. Obviously there's the high major, Mid-major but just being able to say we are playing college basketball in April has been a

JOSH SCHERTZ: Yeah, obviously excited to be playing in April. What a great opportunity, and certainly even added, too, the opportunity to play here in Hinkle Fieldhouse, one of the iconic venues in all of sports, not just college basketball.

This is one of the true cathedrals in our game, and so been a group all year that's really been connected and together. These guys obviously having -- Robbie and Ryan and their teammates, it's been a really connected, tough group. They love playing together, and I think this time of year that's really what matters is do you really want to continue going because it's been a long season.

But to get the opportunity here to play a final four in April, in this venue, it doesn't get much better. So we are excited for the competition. We know it's going to be incredibly challenging, but this has been a great tournament so far and looking forward to the opportunity to compete against a great Utah team tomorrow night.

Q. Ryan, talk about playing in Hinkle Fieldhouse, your hometown, and now a chance to win a championship. Doesn't get much better, right?

RYAN CONWELL: First and foremost, I want to say all great to God.

I'm just thankful to still be playing in the month of April with my teammates, and you know, of course, it's a great feeling just being back in Indianapolis playing in my hometown and I've actually never played at Hinkle Fieldhouse. So I'm excited to play here, too.

Q. Robbie, you have a cult following online and I think offline, too. When did you realize that you were



blessing and we're just looking forward to continue to play until Thursday.

Q. You've seen all the nicknames out there. Do you have a favorite nickname, and what would that be? And for the three of you, what has this ride been like?

ROBBIE AVILA: My favorite nickname I've always said has been "Rodwave," comes after my favorite rapper. To have a similar name as him has been a lot of fun.

RYAN CONWELL: I feel like the season has been nothing but a blessing to be honest. I feel like just being able to just be surrounded by God, by my teammates and coaches who genuinely love and you support you through whatever, it's been nothing short of a blessing. I'm just glad that we can still play.

JOSH SCHERTZ: This is what you work for all year. It's an opportunity to play the highest stakes games and to be in NIT Final Four to compete for a championship on a great stage.

These guys have poured into it from -- started on June 12th was our first work out in the summer. So you're going on ten months. That's a long time together. This is the kind of team and group that if they extend it another two months, they will be thrilled. You love coming to work with them and you love being around them.

So as you're getting towards the end, it's almost a little bit bittersweet because you know one way or the other, the ride is coming to an end this week. But it's been an amazing journey with an incredible group of guys and staff.

Q. You're a Pike High School guy. Not sure if you played at Butler Fieldhouse/Hinkle Fieldhouse, and maybe some other iconic gyms you've seen being a homegrown Indiana guy?

RYAN CONWELL: Yeah, definitely. I've actually never played here at Hinkle Fieldhouse. I'm really just looking forward to playing in such an historic arena. I've been to some games when I was younger and I've always wanted to play here. So I'm just thankful for the opportunity to play here.

Q. Any other arenas in Indiana that compare to this from the outside or when you step in here today?

RYAN CONWELL: I'm not really sure to be honest. I think every gym Indiana has history and things like that. I feel like Indiana is just a great place just for basketball.

Q. Coach, I don't know if you saw, but they

remeasured the three-point line for the Elite 8 game in the women's basketball tournament. Obviously that's an iconic scene in Hoosiers. You guys bringing out the tape measures and making sure you're measuring everything as well?

JOSH SCHERTZ: I'm going to trust Alex and those guys to make sure that they have it measured here. I think they didn't have the three-point line. I think it was the free throw line and the rim.

No, we're going to trust that they have got that right. The Butler people, they are not going to let that happen with the Butler way here. We'll certainly hit on what makes this place special and all the history that surrounds this place, the magic of Hinkle. We'll certainly talk to our guys about that.

Q. Anything you can see from just this week leading up to coming here to this tournament? Obviously there was a send-off in Terre Haute. Anything you can say in this moment with the game approaching that you're thankful for or something that's been really cool to come out of this whole experience?

JOSH SCHERTZ: I could do the next two hours what I'm thankful for. So much. Thankful for these group of guys that have allowed me to coach them. Thankful for a staff that's unbelievable to work with; a fan base that has managed to turn road games, neutral games into what feels like home games; the support we receive; the send-off. But not just the send-off. You're going back, the three NIT games, the atmosphere for ^ SMU, Minnesota, the atmosphere for Cincinnati, the atmosphere in St. Louis.

To share this -- ^ long story short, the journey is always defined by who you share it with. From players to coaches to our fan base, I don't know that you could share it with a better group of people than what we have been able to after the last, closing in on ten months now.

Q. One thing this team didn't start the season with was publicity that you're getting now, but you've gotten a lot of publicity as the season has gone along. Never seems to faze you guys. When it's time to play you're ready to go. How are you able to tune out the outside noise all season?

ROBBIE AVILA: It's just a testament to the character of the team. I think everybody realized that the main goal is the main goal, and so we try to keep it and just focus on basketball.

Obviously all the attention has been a blast, been a lot of fun. We are enjoying it but just our ability to continue to



just know what's more important, which is, you know, winning basketball games.

So just being able to focus on that. I think everybody has sacrificed a lot, and you know, it kind of shows. You don't win 31 games on accident. So to be able to kind of come together with this team and be able to do this has been a lot of fun.

Q. I just asked him, and you talked about it before. It's inside the four lines, you always talk about. But Indiana State has never gotten the pub since Bird's been there like they have this year; the 18- to 22-year-old kids, that they have been able to stay focused, enjoy it but stay focused on the task at hand.

JOSH SCHERTZ: Yeah, of course, you're amazed because you know, they are young people. I think it's just a testament to the maturity of the group. It's really -- it's got an uncommon maturity about it, an uncommon poise about it. You see it when they play, but you certainly see it with their ability to kind of handle and recognize that, you know, the attention's great.

But what the attention stems from and the attention stems from is winning. The attention stems from the success of the group. That's where all the accolades everything and comes from. They have been able to not change or not let success change them, which is hard, and been able to kind of stay the course in terms of, you know, focused on preparation, keep a high level of humility.

All those things are challenging. Never mind for young people, for adults. It's a special group that way. I think it starts with Robbie, he's got such a great way about him. He doesn't get too high or too low. He's probably the most mature person in the program, myself included. So having him leading the way sets a great tone for the rest of the guys.

Ryan is as level-headed as they come. It's just a uniquely high-character, really talented, grounded group, and they have got great families around them. It's allowed that to kind of keep the noise at bay and just let them focus on what they really need to do to be successful, which has allowed us to continue to have all the accolades and the attention we've been getting.

Q. You talk about you left the shelf open. You got the MVC regular season title. You didn't get to the NCAA Tournament like you wanted. But if you could win two more games and bring home an NIT Championship, what do you believe that would mean for your program?

JOSH SCHERTZ: Well, I think it would be a massive accomplishment. When you look at the road we're going to have to hoe to get there, I mean, we're going to have to go through, certainly, four high majors to do that with another one, SMU, in the ACC.

It's something that I think can be a springboard for a program, when you look at it, coming in and being able to compete for a championship at the highest level. This is great for our guys; the opportunity they are getting to challenge themselves at this level against these high major teams on our home floor now, a neutral floor.

But it would be just phenomenal for Indiana State. We talked about going in to hour preparation that week where we had -- between the Missouri Valley Tournament and the NCAA Selection Show where we didn't know if we were going to be in. We said we were going to be prepared to try to prove the committee right hopefully by being in the tournament and advancing or preparing to prove the committee wrong.

Turns out we had to prepare to prove the committee wrong that we should have been a tournament team. I think we answered those questions. You talk about -- what do the say, the best revenge is success? So it would be great to capstone this season, this journey, with an NIT championship.

But we have two incredibly good teams front of us starting with a Utah team that's probably as good a team as we've played all year.

Q. Ryan played great all season long, but in March Madness, he seemed to take his game to another level and been even better in the NIT. What have you seen from him that wasn't there in the regular season?

JOSH SCHERTZ: Ryan, it's hard to remember, these two guys are sophomores. When you look at Ryan and Robbie, they are just in the beginning of their careers. They are both mature and really request players but they are still growing.

I think Ryan, usually see these guys take big jumps in the system, year one to year two, year two to year three. Same with Julian and Jayson Kent, the other guys, Robbie, from year one to year two.

Ryan has almost that year one to year two jump in year one if that makes sense. He has such confidence in his game. He's figuring out where he can be aggressive, almost a little bit like -- he's obviously got a very different game than Jayson but understanding how to leverage his strengths inside the system and getting to he what does

well. He's playing with a lot of confidence, and he's a guy that I thought all year was underrated.

When you look at two-way players, I don't think there's a better two-way player in the Missouri Valley than Ryan Conwell. I would have said that before March Madness. I just think his ability to score the ball, facilitate. He's a terrific defender at 6-4 and 220 pounds, a great rebounder. But he's taken his game to the next level. I think he's playing as well as almost any guard in the country right now, and it's great to see and certainly in this run here in the postseason, March Madness, to the NIT, doesn't happen without him performing at such an incredibly high level.

Q. On the national stage when Indiana State comes up, it's always about Larry Bird. Have you had any contact with Larry Bird, and do you anticipate him being back in Indianapolis?

JOSH SCHERTZ: You know, I have not. I know he watches games because one of his best friends is certainly in Terre Haute and ^ around the program. They communicate. But no direct contact with Larry.

Don't know if he'll be here. I'd assume not. But I do know he follows along. I think -- I don't think it's a slight at all to Indiana State or anything like that or this team. I think it's just, you know, kind of he's a very private guy and you know, I think that for him is just trying to stay in the background and allow this team to have its own spotlight where he wouldn't detract from it.

But certainly that's the first person, and always will be you think of when you mention Indiana State is Larry Bird, and that's the way it should be and that's the way it's been for the last 40-some years and will be in perpetuity for very good reason.

Q. When we talked last week, you had not really had much of a chance to dive into Utah. Now that you have, what stands out to you about the Utes, and what do you think you'll need to do to give yourselves the best chance tomorrow night?

JOSH SCHERTZ: Diving into them, they are terrific. Unbelievable size. Carlson is I think an NBA player. You talk about a 7-0, 7-1. Madsen, the way he shoots it at 6-7. Smith at the point guard spot just beat Jayson Kidd's record for triple doubles in a season. I think he's got six.

They are good in transition. They are huge. They defend. They are solid. You know, sound defensively. They run good stuff. They play well in transition. They attack mismatches. You know, it's a unique team. They have got

-- they are the biggest team we've played all year. But size itself doesn't scare you. It's the size with the skill that scares you. They have both of those at a very high level. Great size. Great skill. Extremely well-coached. Tremendously sound offensively and defensively.

It's going to take our best game of the season, but that's what this time is about. You know, there's pressure as you get into April to play your best basketball to find your absolute ceiling as a team because every step of the way, the level gets higher. And so when we talk about being your best when it matters most, you know, this is what we're talking about is being at your absolute best when it matters most. That's elimination time.

So we are going to have to play our best game of the season tomorrow night to advance for sure.

Q. Going off of that, back at Lincoln Memorial, you coached a lot of postseason basketball and played a lot of teams from different parts of the country. How different is it preparing for a team that you haven't seen before in March, in April, compared to the teams you're seeing over and over in Missouri Valley play?

JOSH SCHERTZ: It's a unique challenge in good ways and bad. I think when you're playing a team for a third time in the Missouri Valley you have a pretty good feel, but they also know you.

So there's -- it's probably both ways. The scouting is much easier when you're playing that team for the third time, but they also have a great feel for what you're going to do so maybe any advantages you have are negated as well.

When you're playing the team for the first time, we had that happen a lot as we got into the NCAA Tournament, and certainly Elite 8s, Final Fours, there's a bit of the unknown. But what you do know is you're usually facing off against a quality team. You're trying to figure out, just like the early season games, you know, what do they do best; do we have any advantages; how can we maximize those; are there things that we can attack for them and how do we negate their advantages.

With Utah, as you would expect at this time of year, remarkably challenging on both ends of the floor to figure out how we are going to attack them and what we're going to do.

But that's the fun part of this time of year. It's high-level competition. You've got two great teams hooking up, and we've got to figure it out and find a way through, and I'm sure they feel the same way.

Q. You talk a lot about hunting well. So coming into these games, making the right reads, finding the right shots, making the right decisions, a lot of times what these games boil down to, right. There's a lot of in-game adjustments you can may based off what you see from Utah. But for a semifinal like this, anything you feel you need to push and articulate this is how you need to approach the beginning of that game?

JOSH SCHERTZ: You know, we talk a lot about hunt great offensively. I think the better defense you play, and I think Utah is a great defense, you're going to have to really be sound in your spacing. You've got to stretch them the entire 50. You've got to be able to layer your triggers, which means your actions and most. You've got to be able to maintain the integrity of your spacing. You've got to really work to get shots that are in your wheelhouse because they do a good job of trying to get you to shoot shots that are analytically unsound.

So all those things go into the game. They are going to challenge you on both ends of the floor at the highest level to produce your best basketball.

So offense is generally, it's spacing and triggers and reads. We've got to do a great job maintaining integrity of our spacing. Layering our triggers because you're not usually going to get something against them early in the clock.

And then when we create advantages, we have to be able to make the right reads; they are big enough that if you're unsound or not making the right reads, they can certainly punish you, not just on the defensive end, but that can lead to transition offense. So our offense has to help our defense.

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