

NCAA Men's Frozen Four: Quinnipiac vs Minnesota

Friday, April 7, 2023

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Quinnipiac Bobcats

Coach Jay Pecknold

TJ Friedmann

Collin Graf

Finals Pregame Media Conference



that, obviously it's a lot of excitement getting to the national championship game, but we know that we didn't come down here just to win one. We're down here to leave with that trophy. So come Saturday, that's the game plan.

Q. Can you introduce us a little bit to Bobcat culture and what it means for you guys to be playing for Quinnipiac ?

TJ FRIEDMANN: Obviously I'm in my fifth year here. So the culture has been instilled in me since I stepped foot on campus. Obviously this program, from where it started to where it's at now, is a massive difference. And that can kind of speak to Rand's identity and the culture he's built.

You look back at the alums that were here before us, they've been stepping stones every year and we keep building on that and keep pushing forward to that end goal of a national championship.

COLLIN GRAF: Coming in as a transfer, having a lot of seniors and fifth-years helped me showed me the way, especially Ethan de Jong, the other right winger, showing me what skills I can work on, the D zone and O zone and the power play.

Q. You guys are the number two team in the country, but just about everybody is calling you an underdog. Do you feel like an underdog?

COLLIN GRAF: I think that maybe we're a little bit underdog just because we're the 2 seed, but we're confident in our group. I think we proved these last couple of weeks that we can play with anyone, beat anyone. I think we're confident going into the game.

TJ FRIEDMANN: Obviously, like he said, being the No. 2 seed, we are technically the underdog. But we've worked throughout the year to get to where we are. And when we're playing our game we're just as good as any other team in the country if not better. So I think if we just stick to our game plan we'll get the result we're looking for on Saturday.

Q. How was it winding down last night? What time did

Q. Collin, you transferred in this year from Union. Could you put into perspective your journey to tomorrow night? You'll be playing in a national championship.

COLLIN GRAF: I think it's a full 360. I remember last year watching the national championship game thinking this is where I want to be. Now a year later this is where we are. So I think it's a dream come true.

Q. You guys talked a lot about culture yesterday. Can you define what that means?

TJ FRIEDMANN: I mean, obviously that's a big part of the success of this program is our identity and our culture. With culture, that just means doing all the little things right. Obviously buying in to the plan we have each game. The coaches do a good job of getting us prepared with video sessions and everything.

So I think basically that's just bottom line the culture is just kind of understanding what needs to be done, whether it be the little things, backchecks, forechecks, moving our feet in the O zone, making plays that can be made. And then obviously if you don't have a play to be made, just chip it in and get on the forecheck.

Q. What's the feeling like in the locker room right now? What's the feeling like around the team?

COLLIN GRAF: I think we're confident. You know, we've been playing really well these last couple of weeks. And I think we can play and beat anyone in the country. So I think that's what we're going to try to prove tomorrow.

TJ FRIEDMANN: Obviously kind of piggybacking off of

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you shut it down?

TJ FRIEDMANN: It was a little tough, the adrenaline is high after the game but you do what you can to get your rest. That's what we did. I don't know the exact time.

Q. What are your impressions of Minnesota that you've seen from them so far?

COLLIN GRAF: They're a really good team. Obviously they're the No. 1 team in the country for a reason. I think they have a lot of skilled forwards. They're very similar to Michigan the way they like to play up and down the ice, but they have a lot of structure, too. It's going to be a fun game.

TJ FRIEDMANN: Kind of the same thing. I see a lot of similarities between them and Michigan. They've got some high-end talent over there. They're a fast team, run-and-gun with good structure, good detail. I think coming down to it, it should be a pretty good game on Saturday.

Q. Your last two games have been against Big Ten teams, Ohio State and Michigan. Playing against Big Ten competition, how different is that compared to the other opponents you've faced?

TJ FRIEDMANN: Coming down to the end of it, it's still a hockey game. Obviously there's some differences you could pick out. Ohio State and Michigan, they were a little bit faster, kind of pushed the pace.

And sometimes playing the ECAC, there's some teams they want to slow it down not let us use our speed and everything. I think that's been the biggest difference, is they like to push pace whenever they can, which is kind of how we like to play as well.

COLLIN GRAF: I completely agree. I think they're both offensive teams. And they've been giving us good idea of what it's going to be like tomorrow.

Q. I was wondering if you could talk about your decision to transfer, how you chose Quinnipiac, and just how you thought -- what you anticipated making the transition to a new program and how you've flourished this season?

COLLIN GRAF: When I committed to Union, Rick Bennett was the head coach. And unfortunately he had to step down in the middle of the year last year. And there was a lot of uncertainty going into the end of the year and into the offseason last year.

I thought it was best for me to go into the portal. And Coach Dumais reached out, and it's been great ever since. They had a lot of confidence in me and they've really helped my game get a lot better as a player.

Q. What kind of practice do you think you'll have today? What are you expecting on the last day you can practice?

TJ FRIEDMANN: Expecting a lot of excitement, high energy from all the guys. Just kind of get in there. Get a good sweat and work on some things and that should be it. Whatever he tells us to do, that's the kind of practice we're having.

COACH PECKNOLD: That's how it's going to go.

Q. I've never been to Connecticut, but I always hear about sports there caught between the Red Sox and the Yankees. But last, what was it, Monday, UConn won a national title in basketball. As Connecticut's biggest hockey team, what would it mean for the state to have this opportunity to win a national title, for any of you?

TJ FRIEDMANN: Obviously it would be awesome. As you said, UConn ended up winning the Final Four for basketball. That was a big accomplishment for them. And coming into Saturday that's the end goal for us to bring another title back to Connecticut.

COACH PECKNOLD: I think it's great for Quinnipiac University and our fan base for Bobcat nation. I think it's great for the state of Connecticut. Certainly in the end we're trying to win it for Quinnipiac and our players.

But I think we have our Connecticut Ice Tournament with the four Connecticut teams. It's great. We actually played UConn in the final, beat them in the final. That's been a good way to promote hockey in our state. We're in the early stages of having it.

But it will be huge, huge for our area. You really can't put a value on it.

Q. What are some things you learned from your last trips to the national championship final?

COACH PECKNOLD: I think it's the same thing that any coach knows when you get in Game 7s, that's really what it is. It's goaltending. It's special teams and a bounce here or there. You've got to get lucky with a good bounce or avoid the bad bounce. It's no different than Game 7s.

Q. I've watched that neutral zone you got going last

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night. Really slowed down Michigan. After watching Minnesota, do you even feel you can execute that exact same -- I know it's what you do most of the time, that 1-3-1, but is it something you have to change at all or do you just keep sticking to the game plan?

COACH PECKNOLD: We've done it 40 games in a row for 13, 14 years. We're good at it. We do a good job with it.

I actually call it a 1-1-3. It's just verbiage. But I think we're really good at it. We have discipline with it. Causes teams a lot of frustration and problems. Not a lot of the teams run it in hockey. That helps us.

I think in the NHL, it depends on the year, it's usually between nine, 10, 11 teams run that, and everyone else runs the 1-2-2. But it's certainly something that we do well. And we will have to do it well tomorrow night.

Q. Your players Christophe and Cristophe, you look back at their background, obviously, looks almost like they're twin brothers. They certainly have a unique bond and they continue to have it today. Could you speak to that bond and what that has added to your program for you guys?

COACH PECKNOLD: First of all, they're great kids. They're characters. They're funny in the locker room. We actually have four kids from Quebec. They're always speaking French.

I haven't had a lot of kids from Quebec over the years. So it adds a little different dynamic. But the two Christophes, I believe they have the same middle name, too, believe it or not. They've grown up their whole lives together playing. And they have this little knack of finding each other. And you can't really teach that type of thing.

But I thought they were great last night. They played really well. They were a big part of our win.

Q. Introduce our pregame audience first of all to the culture you built at Quinnipiac. And, also, when the Bobcats are playing the game at their best, what does it look like?

COACH PECKNOLD: First of all, the culture -- culture is hard to explain. I could spend three hours up here talking about everything that goes into culture.

Probably the easiest and simplest way is culture is, it's buy-in. It's just buy-in. It's unconditional. This is what we do to win hockey games and you need to be selfless and you've got to buy in.

And it's hard to get college-aged players to do that. They've grown up their whole lives. They've probably been a very selfish player is why they're good. They've kept the puck at 8, 9, 10 years old. I've got a 10-year-old right now. The best players at age 10 are the selfish kids. They don't pass it to anyone. They go end to end, and they get better and better. The other kids are looking around: When am I going to touch the puck?

You need those kids. You need high character kids and you need to get them -- you need to make sacrifices so we can win. And I think that's probably the best way for us with culture.

The second part of the question, it wasn't our best game of the year last night. But we were pretty good. That's a good example of how we need to play. And probably best game is we beat North Dakota 6-2 at NoDak. That was probably our best game. We were really good. I don't know if that answers your question.

Q. You were really doing what in those games?

COACH PECKNOLD: Playing to our identity. Again, I'm not going to go through our identity. It could take me an hour. We play to our identity and we get rewarded. I thought we did that against Michigan.

Q. You talked a lot about the identity and the buy-in. Was there a team, like, over the course of this journey here, was there a team maybe in a prior year or a class where you felt like this was the group that got it established? Because it seems like there was a point where it was established and it sustained itself from there.

COACH PECKNOLD: Absolutely. That's a great question. My 2006 class, which was Ty Deinema, John Kelly, Michael Bordieri, Joe Dumais, who is on my staff right now -- couple other guys. But that class changed everything for us. I think in my early years, we were going Division I from D-III and nobody knew what Quinnip -- you couldn't spell the name. We didn't have a rink. It was, like, how do we get players?

And we just took the most talented kids we could get. And we would have great seasons and great seasons. Then we'd struggle a bit in the playoffs. Then we made a decision as a staff, back then, that we want talent. But we can't take anything except a high character kid.

Now, we definitely take chances once in a while on a kid. I'm not going to say we're perfect on that. We make a mistake once in a while. But we win because we have high character, high hockey IQ kids. Those two things, those

two ingredients is what we have to have. And that's why we have success against the teams with 18 draft picks.

Q. A little bit of a different question but it ties into culture. You mentioned you have this small group of players from Quebec. As a coach, how do you balance the idea of having them integrated with the team but still being able to respect and keep their identity and their culture?

COACH PECKNOLD: Really good question. I thought a couple times telling them they're not allowed to speak French in the room. But it's fine. The guys love them. They're integrated. They're great. All four of them are very popular in different ways.

Yaniv is extremely popular on our team, obviously because he's our best player. He's a character in a different way than the Christophes. And Charles is the freshman still coming up.

But I've actually thought about it because I'm like, but nobody seems to care and it's good and a little bit of diversity in the room is good.

Q. (Off microphone)?

COACH PECKNOLD: No, but I talk to Iivari Rasanen, I talk to him a lot about Finland. I do research so I can have conversations with him, because with NATO -- he's nervous about Russia, Ukraine, everything.

So I do do research on that. And I'm going to try this summer to maybe learn, maybe three or four words in Finnish. And, surprise, don't tell him that. I haven't started that yet. I've got to get Babble or Rosetta Stone. I've got to work on that.

But I do that with him. And we do chat a lot about what's going on in Finland. And it is rated one of the most happy places in the world to live. I don't know if you knew that or not.

Q. You mentioned North Dakota, obviously brings you back to 2016 the last time you went this far. Here's my question. What is your level of superstition? Are you taking a different route to the rink? Are you switching up team meal? Because you're back in this building in this game again.

COACH PECKNOLD: I'm fairly superstitious. But honestly, I can't remember some of the stuff I did. It was seven years ago. I don't know what we did. So I can't really change it up.

But for us, I just think with our guys, today, we need to -- obviously I have that experience. But for us, like, we've got to block out the noise. There's a lot of noise with parents and girlfriends and grandparents, and everybody wants a piece of you.

We've got to block that out and stay confident and realize, respect -- we're obviously playing a phenomenal hockey team, really well-coached. Motz is a great coach, he does a great job.

But we have to play our game. We have to play to our identity. We did that against Michigan and Ohio State and Merrimac. We've gotten rewarded so we have to stay the course. And honestly, we've probably got to get a bounce or two.

Q. You met with Bob Motzko in the 2013 Frozen Four back when he was at St. Cloud. What makes it so hard to coach against his team?

COACH PECKNOLD: I really like Motz. He's a great person, great coach. I don't talk to him every day but I like him a lot. And we've had series with him over the years when he was at St. Cloud. I have a pretty good relationship with him.

I think he's an excellent offensive coach. He's a fantastic power play coach. I love his team right now. And I don't say this in a bad way, they're simple but they're great at it. They don't try to overdo things. He lets his players play. They keep it simple and easy. Great D corps. High-end players up front. Great depth. Goalies making saves. It's a really well-coached team.

They're organized in a lot of facets, which is similar to his St. Cloud teams and they play offense. His St. Cloud teams were great offensively. And there's no difference here.

Q. You talked a lot about Motzko, your (indiscernible) relationship with him back in 2013 when you met him in the Frozen Four. Is your plan of attack similar to how it was against St. Cloud or are you going to mix it up a little bit?

COACH PECKNOLD: We're going to have the same plan of attack game 40, 41, as we've had every single game this year. Certainly have you to adapt to your opponent. Same thing we did against Michigan we need to do against Minnesota.

Q. You've had big-game experience at the World Juniors, as has Bob. Do you take anything from that experience to a stage like this?

COACH PECKNOLD: Yeah, absolutely. I think you take experiences from everything you do -- everything you do in life, every game you play. You're always learning, always learning.

Q. Can you maybe just talk about what the message will be concerning discipline? Obviously their power play, 3 through 7 yesterday, it looked like that was really the catalyst to their offense. How do you discuss that?

COACH PECKNOLD: So we talk a lot about buy-in. And we need to do this. We need to have an F3, all these things we need to buy into. And we talk a lot about not taking penalties, not-necessary penalties. You know it's going to happen once in a while. You're going for a puck, you hit a skate. That's what Lombo's was last night.

But it's the same thing, it's buy-in. I think we're the second least penalized team in the country. Minnesota, they won -- we're both up there. We're very disciplined. We've been great with that. I think we took only one major the whole year. We're good with that.

The guys understand that's part of how we want to win. We don't preach a lot of over-physicality, meaning let's go and take someone's head off and hit 'em. But we want to compete. We preach winning battles and winning races and being physical in that nature.

But we don't want to put ourselves in a bad spot because you step up and you lay a big hit, but then it's a 3-on-1 going the other way. That's not how we want to play. But I think it's a big part of the game tomorrow for sure. We can't be in the box. Michigan's power play was great. Minnesota's is just as good.

Q. Your accomplishments in the program, accomplishments over the last few years speak for themselves and now you face one game for a national title. Whether you win or lose this game it doesn't change what you've accomplished. But if you win it, do you think things change, and maybe not "credibility" is the right word, but does your program change? Does the way your program is perceived change if you win this game?

COACH PECKNOLD: That's a great question. I would probably just not answer it and let you guys figure it out. That's for the media. It's a really good question, but to me I just need to stay in the moment.

Certainly it would be, I think for our university, for Quinnipiac University, you can't put a value on it if we win

that game. You can't put a value on it how great it would be just for galvanizing even at another level from where we already are.

But, again, as a coach, I've got to stay in the moment. I've got to worry about practice right now and how we're going to be good today and how I'll handle the kids in the afternoon and what we're going to do tomorrow.

Q. You mentioned just getting through the next, we'll say, 30 hours. How do you manage that? You've been here before, as Dave just mentioned, but your players haven't. How do you make sure that they're kind of staying even keeled and not getting too caught up in the moment in the idea of the possibility of winning a national championship?

COACH PECKNOLD: It's hard because they're going to think about it, for sure. Like we've already started the process. I started it last night. And I'm sure some of the parents were mad at me that I shut the boys down early because they all wanted to go out and let's celebrate.

I think there was a bunch of Quinnipiac girls running around looking for the boys. We had to kick them out of the hotel, too. But again we're down here to play hockey games. It's not a vacation. So I need to keep reiterating that to them. My captains will do that. My older guys will do that.

But there's a lot of noise outside that's coming in. And they have to -- in the end, they have to block it out themselves. I can remind them to do that, but they need to handle that well themselves.

Q. It's been 23 years since the last time you faced Minnesota. Do you remember anything from that game?

COACH PECKNOLD: I do. I do. We got pounded. Opening faceoff, Justin Eddy was my goalie. He's my goalie coach. Opening faceoff, they went -- they go D to D. The kid gains the red. He goes to dump it in and it's going to go 40 feet wide of the net. It hits Mike LaRocca's shaft and goes back this way, knocks the water bottle off. We were down 1-0 late, and I was like you've got to be kidding me.

We were a brand-new program. Probably our second or third year D-I. I don't know if we even had six scholarships then. We didn't have a lot.

And Eddy was a great goaltender for me. But that obviously didn't help the day. That's what I remember. I'll never forget that. It was unbelievable. It going 40 feet

wide and it knocked the water bottle off. Billion-to-one shot.

Q. You talked about this being a business trip. How special is it for you to be able to share this moment with your family?

COACH PECKNOLD: It's been great. My 10-year-old was supposed to go back. He's got this big tryout for a spring/summer hockey league team. My wife was going to go back with them. We nixed that. So they're going to stay. Hopefully he still makes the team.

It's great to have them here. They come to all my games and stuff like that. My wife has been more than supportive. She gave up her career on Wall Street for me to pursue this. So appreciative that.

Q. You're going to do practice. What are you going to do today?

COACH PECKNOLD: It's open to the media. You can come watch.

Q. Not in practice. After that, are you going to go for a stroll? What are you going to do?

COACH PECKNOLD: I'm not going out on the pirate ship, I'll tell you that. I don't know. I haven't got there yet. I'm trying to get through this and get through practice, and we're going to take it an hour at a time right now.

Q. Because someone brought it up, 23 years ago, as a brand-new D-I program in Connecticut, how did you get Minnesota -- how did you get them to agree to schedule you? What was that process like?

COACH PECKNOLD: It was real easy. They paid us to come out. They were looking for wins. That's the basketball/football model; you bring in cannon fodder and you pound them and send them home.

I don't think they gave me enough money either. I should have asked for more. I wasn't smart enough my early years, I should have asked for a bigger guarantee.

Now we never go. If you don't reciprocate the games, we don't -- obviously we went to North Dakota. They came the year before. I know that still happens. I get that. I understand why teams do that. But we won't go anywhere unless they're going to come back to us.

Q. Seemed like the big story after the first round was the success of the Big Ten teams. Do your victories over Ohio State and Michigan give you guys even

more confidence going into tomorrow night's game?

COACH PECKNOLD: I think we just have confidence in general. I don't know if my guys are focused on it's Big Ten-Big Ten.

Actually, I did an interview with Motz before for ESPN with John Buccigross, and he brought up we had just beaten two Big Ten teams.

I didn't do the math. I just thought we beat Ohio State and we beat Michigan. Obviously he's from that league.

But to me, they're great teams. And now we've got another great one in front of us. I knew going into this tournament, we've got to go 4-0 to win it all. It's going to be four really hard games, and we have to embrace the grind. And as you go along, they're going to get better and better, which is exactly what's happened. And now we're playing the best team in the country.

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