

National Invitation Tournament: Indiana State vs Utah

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



Utah Utes

Craig Smith

Branden Carlson

Gabe Madsen

Deivon Smith

Semi Finals Pregame Press Conference

CRAIG SMITH: First of all, thank you. We are really excited to be here in the Final Four of the NIT. Super proud of our team. I want to thank all the people for the NIT, with their hospitality, since we have arrived in Indianapolis. Today was awesome in practice. What an historic venue in Hinkle Fieldhouse. We didn't pull out the tape measure but we did designate our Ali, Brandon Haddock.

What a great place. We have four really good teams that are participating, Georgia, Seton Hall and of course our opponent Indiana State who is 331-6. I want to thank our administration. We have been able to play three home games. So a lot of extra that goes into this thing. So I want to thank our administration and facility people for allowing us to play, participate and put this thing on.

You know, today is April 1st as Deivon told me this morning. April Fool's Day. I don't have any April Fool's jokes but these guys got plenty all the time. At this time of year, there's eight teams playing, right. There's 362 teams in Division I Men's Basketball, and there's eight teams that are still standing.

So we're excited about that. Every team and every individual has to run their own race, and we ran our race. There's ups and downs, and everything in between, as a team, with relationships. There's just a lot that goes through this. And I bring up April 1st because our first practice was September 28. When you do the math and I'm no genius when it comes to that -- my oldest boy, Brandon, is going to be a math teacher so I'm not sure whether he gets that from -- but we started our seventh month, right, of in-season, when it comes to practicing and

playing, just like these other teams have. So there's a lot that goes into it and I'm really proud of our guys. Their sticktoitiveness, the ability to stay connected. It's a very close-knit group, and we're super excited to get out there and compete tomorrow against an excellent Indiana State team.

So I'll get more into that as we go but thank you for your hospitality and we're excited to get rolling.

Q. As seniors what has it meant, I don't know who has eligibility left with the COVID stuff but what has it meant having these extra three weeks together?

BRANDEN CARLSON: For me I'm the only one up here that doesn't have any more eligibility so just being able to continue our season and play these games and more time with these amazing friends and brothers of mine, it's been great. It's been a good experience. We love playing basketball and just being able to have more games and more opportunities to play has been amazing.

GABE MADSEN: Yeah, piggybacking. Every year, you will only have that team and those coaches together. There's going to always be some changes. Just being able to extend the season to where we are now and be able to have more games together, I think it's been a wonderful experience.

DEIVON SMITH: I agree with Gabe and BC. It's been super special for us to stay together, even with guys coming back and just preparing for next year, as well, whoever does have eligibility and stuff like that. But I just think it keeps us connected through the long stretch.

Q. Just wondering, Utah last got to the NIT in 2018. That was the program's last postseason. I know it's your third year here. I'm just curious what you think of the experience of playing in these games, high-calibre, high-octane games and making this run, is that measuring up to what you envisioned?

CRAIG SMITH: Yeah, it's always enjoyable when you win. But you know, I guess in my eyes, there was never a doubt

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we were going to play. Obviously you talk to the guys individually and everyone has kind of their own, but the common theme that was very consistent within the players was just they wanted to play and they wanted to play for their teammates.

A lot of our guys were very much -- like this is the closest team I've been a part of. Now this isn't me talking. This is them talking. It's the closest team that we've been a part of and the most fun that they have had on the floor, off the floor. And so they want to just keep this thing rolling.

Like you said, three months, or three weeks of playing as we get to this point, and just the experience of it. You know, we got a lot of guys that love to play and we got a lot of guys that are gym rats and they just love to hoop.

To be able to go out there and play, those kind of quality opponents, of course it's nice when you're able to play at home, and now you come to this world-class venue. Anybody that knows anything about basketball understands Hinkle Fieldhouse and the tradition that it has.

So it's been awesome to be able to extend our season and to get to this point.

Q. Coach Schertz pointed out, Deivon Smith matched Jason Kidd's triple doubles with four. Any player comp or anyway you can describe his game?

CRAIG SMITH: I don't know if I have a player comp. I think Deivon is very unique in the way that he plays, right. I don't know, these guys probably have something but you know, we -- last year -- at Georgia Tech, I think it was our fourth or fifth game of the year, we played an MTE. So we were preparing to play against him, and he was very unique in our preparation and he was a big part of the scouting report and he's heard this before and so have our guys.

So bringing Deivon in and watching him play, I mean this in a very complementary way, he's a freakazoid. He's so fast and athletic and explosive -- what's your vertical, Deivon?

DEIVON SMITH: 45 or 46.

CRAIG SMITH: Call him out on that -- no -- but it's definitely right up there. Those are hard things to teach. Very, very talented. Does have a nose for the ball. He was able to -- two-time transfer, so when all that went through mid to late December, getting into the mix and going, it's been a learning curve for everybody, right. And now I think he's really finding his groove and playing his best basketball and really finding rhythm to his game.

So with the triple doubles, we're in an historic place and that's quite an accomplishment for him to be able to do those sorts of things, and he'll be the first to credit his teammates, right, because he is doing that. But it takes everybody to be able to go and help that and understand, especially from the assist standpoint, right, of guys being able to make shots.

It's been fun to watch him and fun to watch his growth.

Q. What are your thoughts about being, no matter what, this is going to be the final place where you play your college ball is going to be a storied place like Hinkle?

BRANDEN CARLSON: Yeah, it's super cool. Obviously there's a lot of talk of me finishing my last game in the Huntsman Center but it's cool to know I'm finishing my whole college career in Hinkle Fieldhouse.

It's exciting. Hopefully it goes the way we want. I know we put in a lot of preparation to be here. So, excited to go out and play and make some memories out on this court.

Q. And also, what kind of stands out to you about Robbie Avila? That's obviously somebody that seems a little bit more unique, somebody that you haven't necessarily played against this year.

BRANDEN CARLSON: Yeah, he's a great player. I don't think we have too many five-men in the Pac-12 that does what he does. He's more of a stretch five, very skilled, can do a lot of different things. So we're going to have to be very prepared to guard him, and we're excited to go out and face them.

Q. Coming off that game against VCU, you held them to five three-pointers. This is the team that comes out. They shoot the three very well. How important is it going to be defensively to just be able to shut that down?

GABE MADSEN: Yeah, it's been a big emphasis for us. We kind of talked about, we played a couple teams like this recently like Iowa and you go back further like BYU kind of. So we've had experience against teams like this. Obviously they are their own animal but it's been a big emphasis for us. Our copes get us ready, so it's going to be a fun game.

THE MODERATOR: You've played a number of great teams throughout the years. Is there anyone that you've played that remind new your film study of Indiana State?

BRANDEN CARLSON: Yeah, just I would say BYU. They

shot the three-point well. So that's a lot of emphasis for us and something that we really had to dial into is defending the three.

GABE MADSEN: Yeah, kind of say BYU, too. Just the way they played through their five, really look similar to how Indiana State plays and obviously shoot a lot of threes and play fast in transition. It's pretty identical, I'd say, to BYU.

DEIVON SMITH: I didn't play that game, but I'll also agree with them just how they run their offensive play through their five is similar to that.

Q. I walked in late so I don't think it's been asked. But Indiana State being so close to Indianapolis, they are going to have a big crowd here tomorrow night. Is that something, with some juice in the building and excitement, does that give you a chip on your shoulder almost being like a visiting team here?

BRANDEN CARLSON: Yeah, I think, definitely. It's always fun to play in front of fans when your fans or the opponent's fans. It gives energy in all sorts of ways. We're excited to play in front of a sold-out crowd and have some energy in this building.

GABE MADSEN: I'd say the same thing. This is obviously what we've talked about, an historic arena. So to be able to have it hopefully pretty full. I've heard it was a sellout, so we'll see. It's going to be fun. Obviously road game. I've got like 12 people coming so this should balance it out.

DEIVON SMITH: I agree with Gabe and BC. Just to have a packed-out house to compete for 40 minutes is going to be exciting. We're all playing for a championship. So I think it should be a great memory for all of us.

Q. When you look at a team like Indiana State, they are not on a lot of people's radars, maybe what Utah was in the past, maybe, maybe not, Pac-12, Big 12 for you guys next year. What can you say about being a team that comes on to the scene and maybe isn't on everyone's radar, the spirit of maybe not a powerhouse program?

BRANDEN CARLSON: Yeah, they are a very good team. Obviously I think they are one of the first four out of the NCAA Tournament and obviously over 30 wins is very hard to do no matter what program you are.

So it's just kind of being a program like that. They have a lot of energy and a lot of pride in what they do. They are going to, you know, be ready to go. They come out ready every game. So just a team like that, and something with

-- like, you know, kind of want to earn your respect, you've got to appreciate.

GABE MADSEN: Yeah, I would say obviously they are an historic program. I mean, Larry Bird played there. I'd say a lot of Utah fans probably know or have seen Indiana State play. They played in the Jon M. Huntsman Center against Michigan State in the National Championship. So there's kind of a weird connection there.

But yeah, I mean, not obviously a huge program but an historic one for sure.

DEIVON SMITH: I agree. I feel like we can't overlook any opponent just as if we are playing in our own conference. I feel like we've got to go out and give our best effort every night and let the rest take care of itself.

THE MODERATOR: I know what it's like when you get done with that 20-game grind of conference play and now you've had a chance to study these teams and you go back to your non-conference season. Talk about as coaches, do you see anything with Indiana State that maybe you saw throughout the Pac-12, and how has that been just being able to prepare for new teams here in the last couple of weeks?

CRAIG SMITH: Well, it's awesome. On a personal level, I love it. You play 20 Pac-12 -- 20 games in the regular Pac-12 season and then you have the tournament, and these teams know each other inside out, backwards, and Indiana State will say the same in the Valley. Drake knows these guys inside out, backwards, and they know Drake inside out, backwards, and Northern Iowa and right on down the line.

You know, I think it's exciting for the players because you play someone different, and they don't -- they know you from the perspective of scouting and their coaches are showing them our team and Utah and what we do and how we do it well, and we are showing our guys everything about Indiana State and their personnel, their scheme what they do offensively, what they do defensively, their out-of-bounds plays, etc., etc.

But you don't have a true -- like you don't know what they look like, like measuring them up, so to speak, their physicality, their size, their speed, their first step. When you play in league play, like you pretty much have a really good feel for that. Certainly the second time you go through it but when you have returners coming back, you just have a vibe. Oh, this team we're playing Oregon, and you just know kind of that mantra.

I think in some ways, I don't want to say it's liberating but it



gives you this sense of freedom and excitement. Then as coaches, you do try to compare. You know, these guys are a little bit like this team.

Now, Indiana State is unique. These guys talked about BYU and there's definitely some similarities there but these guys are a very unique team the way they are built. In some ways, they are how -- in some ways, BC played a lot of five his whole life. This year he's playing a little bit of the four and the five but he has some similarities, right, to their big fella. Branden can shoot it. Made the most threes out of any five-man last year in the country.

And so we see some of that. But these guys have it all. I mean, their five can really, really shoot it, elite passer. Their four-man is an amazing cutter. Shoots the ball at a high level. They all shoot the ball at a high level and their guards are very dynamic. They are all three-level scorers, every one of them. They make good decisions. They can put it on the floor. They get to the rim. They get fouled. They have all pull up games although had he don't shoot a lot of pull-up jays. I think they are obviously very analytically driven, and they can all shoot the three. And then they get out and push the pace in transition, we call them EPAs, extra pass aheads. They get that^ defensive rebound, they are out-letting it to guard and they are pitching it up ahead and constantly put pressure on and you then they are selfless. They will drive it. If it not there, they drive two, boom, spraying it out, looking for the next one. So they are a very well-coached team. They do some things unorthodox. They are setting screens to their five-man and double flare screens for their five-man, and he puts that thing on the deck and he can't -- you know, he's such an elite passer.

So they have great synergy. They are a well-oiled machine. They are super connected that way. I think the sneaky -- a lot of people don't talk about how good they are defensively. Like they are a good team defensively. You don't win 31 games, 31-6, I believe, and who knows with the 'Net and how this all works sometimes, but I believe they are the highest net -- height-ranked team according to the 'Net that has not made the NCAA Tournament. That says something. They are a fun team to watch. If I had hair to lose, I would have lost it. But I've lost it a long time ago.

50 percent of their shots are from the three. You guys brought it up. Branden brought it up. 50 percent of their shots are from the three. 41 percent of their shots are from the rim. So they are different than Iowa. They are different than VCU, however, VCU, 42 percent of their shots are from the three. Iowa was around that same boat. In and around our league, we play teams like this, but it's just different how they get them. We have to be on point just

defensively. We have to really know personnel and we have to really understand spacing defensively where we are not in a position to overhelp.

And then when you play a team like this where they just -- obviously they run great quick hitters, but there's a lot of just freedom in how they play just like we try to play. So you have to be -- we have to be elite with our communication because there's so much randomness to what they do and how they play, and I think that's the ultimate compliment to a very good team.

We've got to be smart with that stuff. And then we have to be able to execute on the offensive end and do what we do because we can do some things on our own ground.

Q. When they didn't make the tournament, they said they had something to prove and they played a couple high majors. They have that Mid-major on them. They are trying to -- a lot of people didn't know about them coming into the season. They are not your normal Mid-major. How much do you respect for what the program has accomplished this season?

CRAIG SMITH: On a personal level, I don't judge teams like that because I'm a small school guy. I was a head coach at the NSAA (indiscernible) level. I was at the University of South Dakota and of course Utah State. Been fortunate to coach a lot of really good teams as a head coach and so regardless of what league you're from, you recognize great teams, and these guys certainly are a great team.

I've been following these guys, I mean, relatively closely because they have been so good the last two years, right. You see what they do. I'm originally from the Midwest, so you know, just understanding Northern Iowa, like some of those teams, Drake, so you follow those programs.

These guys are really good and they can beat anybody at any given day just like -- because they put so much pressure on and you the way they go about it.

You can feel their moxy. Like you can just feel their moxy and their winning pedigree. They understand winning. Some teams don't always understand. These guys understand winning and winning at a high level.

Q. There's just eight teams still playing basketball in the men's side right now. Is that a message that you're sharing with your team? Is that something y'all you talking about a lot?

CRAIG SMITH: I don't know about a lot, but we have definitely talked about it quite a few different times because

that's the facts. Like you have 362 teams in Division I Men's Basketball, and you know, some of these teams with some of their leagues, their tournaments were a week earlier than ours. The valley was earlier than ours. Usually the Valley is one of the first leagues to have a conference tournament.

There's a lot of teams have been sitting home for almost a month now. I tell our team all the time, if you do it right -- kind of like I said in the opening, if you do it right, the season is six months, if you do it right. If you don't do it right, it's just over five months.

So you want that. But there's a lot that goes into this thing. We also had a foreign trip to Spain this summer so we had ten more practices this summer plus being in Spain. But it is a tight-knit group. It is something we do talk about because it is a true privilege to be able to still be playing at this time of year, and I think our guys really understand that and have really grabbed a hold of that.

Coming into the year, we don't have a ton of guys on our roster that won on a high level. And so we have I think three guys, really, and so to be able to do this and get to 20 wins, it's the most wins we've had at University of Utah I think for seven or eight years; so it's exciting.

We're building something. I'm really excited the direction this program is going. This team, you know, everybody says this team has been through, not necessarily our team, but their team has been through a lot. It's different for every team. We have had to withstand a lot of different injuries. Most of the year we played with nine and ten scholarship guys. So guys are being thrown into different roles. You're constantly redefining your team in a lot of respects.

So to be able to here we are excited and now we are excited to compete. It's a neutral game, but like you alluded to I think on one of the telecasts I watched, the Cincinnati Ohio State game. Cincinnati was 112 miles to Hinkle and Indiana State was -- not was, is 71 miles from their campus to Hinkle. So we know it's going to be a very difficult environment to play in but like I said, we're excited to go out there and really compete and put our best foot forward and see what happens.

Q. Growing up in tiny town Minnesota, going through the Mid-majors, South Dakota, Utah State, how much of the connection with Hoosiers and the connection with Hinkle Fieldhouse has been going through your mind since you knew that would be coming here for the last week of the season?

CRAIG SMITH: Thanks for the shoutout [sic] to Stephen,

Minnesota. I graduated high school there. I was No. 2 in my class. There were 18 of us, so I still couldn't check that Top-10 percent. But I was ^ salutatorian, so we'll take that.

It's special. I married my wife. She's from Stephen, Minnesota. I follow you, by the way, when I was at South Dakota, we made the NIT and you do a great job, and, of course, this, when I knew we were going to make the tournament.

But you know, not to get too corny or sappy but I'm a history guy, right, history major and I'm a sports junky. I don't care if it's football. I like giving him -- I'm a Minnesota Viking fan and I love the Colts. Got to be good friend with Chris Ballard with the Colts, and so he'll be at the game.

But love sports. Love the history and the tradition of basketball. How cool is it that Gabe said what he said, right. Magic Johnson, my favorite player of all time. For Magic and Bird playing in the Huntsman Center. That's our home court. That's really cool.

And then the long-standing history of excellence of the NIT, it's awesome. And to be able to come together, Indiana, I mean, you think Indiana, everybody thinks, what, basketball. So to be able to play in that state that loves hoops. State of Utah, huge basketball state, huge. One franchise, Utah Jazz. Basketball is humongous in the State of Utah.

To be able to play in this state, against a storied franchise -- and you watch all these Indiana State games and I'm old school. I actually watch the whole game and listen to the commentators; the number of times I've heard it compared to that team, right, and deservedly so, they are very good.

And so it really cool. My kids are here. Not to make this personal, but they are. We have four children of our own. My third boy just committed to North Dakota State this morning. So that was really cool that he made that announcement.

So it's -- I get goosebumps talking about it. It's a family affair for families of coaches. But just with our guys and this team, every season has its own journey, right. And we tell our guys, and everybody has got to run their race, right. Individuals run their own race. Some people are born on third base and they think they hit a triple. Certain teams go through real ups and downs, and this has been a different year in so many respects that I'm incredibly proud of our sticktoitiveness. Our guys really staying together. Because there was some hard times late January and February and we got through it, right. I think that says something.



It's not always how many punches you can throw. It's how many can you take and get back up and go again. I get off subject here, sorry, guys, Branden knows this, our local guys know. You asked the question, like being kind of a personal question, and so it's really exciting to be able to be here and of course the movie Hoosiers, right, everybody knows. When we walked in this morning it was different. This isn't -- I think it was such a blessing for us to be able to practice at 8:00 a.m. Our body clocks are telling us it's 6:00 a.m.. I just learned this term, Circadian rhythm; you get sleep or lack of sleep.

But it was cool and you walk in and guys are kind of looking around because it's such a unique venue. I asked Lawson Lovering, I said, "Hey, you got the tape measure?"

He looked at me, kind of like, "No."

I said, "Lawson, have you seen Hoosiers?"

He was like, "No."

I'm like, "What! How do you not?" Should have shown it, right.

I asked a couple -- you know -- Luka Tarlac from Serbia. I said, "LUKA, do you got the tape measure?"

"No. What are you talking about?"

All right. But Gabe and BC are kind of shaking their they had like, oh, my gosh. I was like guys, you've got to teach these guys a few things. It's your responsibility.

But to be able to play in an historic place, I think really adds to the event and I think there's an extra meaning behind it. Certainly for me, but not just me, with everybody that knows anything about basketball. It's pretty cool.

Q. As a parent, you're feelings about Carson being able to commit to North Dakota State?

CRAIG SMITH: First of all, thank you for asking that. It's pretty cool. I keep saying "cool." Got to stop saying "cool." You know, as the father of four, really proud of all of our kids and who they are and what they stand for and I'm not the son of a coach, so I don't know what they go through with everything. Only they know that.

Fran Fraschilla was out there, and just talking -- I had never met Fran before and his sons are in coaching. We just had some dialogue out there about, you know, they just tend to gravitate together. We talked about Ryan Odom's kid and all that. He puts the time in. That kid, he really works at it.

My son, Brady, plays at Salt Lake Community College. He's looking for a new place to play now, four years to play. But Carson, he's a junky. He loves it. He competes at it. He gets in the weight room. He's supper dedicated with the nutrition, he he's an amazing cook. He gets up every morning, makes six eggs -- yeah, six. Gets into the weight room. Does his nutrition piece. Really stretches all the time and get in the gym.

And so it's fun to see when people work at it, whether it's my son or whomever else, when you dedicate to your craft, I don't care what it is, reporter or writer or teacher or whatever, like it's just fun to see. It's enjoyable to see and he's going to a great place. North Dakota State, I was an assistant there for three years. Growing up in Stephen, Minnesota, it's an hour-and-45-minute drive. There's a familiarity. He loves the cold and it gets really, really cold there. When he decided to commute, he goes, "Dad, now all I need is a snowmobile." You might not know what a snowmobile is, or snow cat as I grew up with it. It's rewarding.

Coach Richman is a great man and a very, very good coach. And now the hard work is really going to begin when he gets on campus this June. He can really thank his mom because as much as I'm gone and busy with things, Mom, when he's a little tyke, running him all over the place to get to this gym and this practice and to get to this place. So Mom is Darcy. So it's been a really enjoyable day to say the least. Very proud.

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