

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Four

Tuesday, March 18, 2025

Dayton, Ohio, USA

UD Arena

American Eagles
Coach Duane Simpkins
Elijah Stephens
Colin Smalls
Matt Rogers
Lincoln Ball
Media Conference



Q. Eli, talk about your excitement of being in March Madness and facing Mount St. Mary's.

ELIJAH STEPHENS: I'm really excited. We worked hard all season. All the work we put in, it's really going to show up Wednesday night.

COLIN SMALLS: For me, it's an exciting feeling. I remember watching March Madness back in high school on a Chromebook computer, the teachers would put it on the projector.

So being a part of it is amazing. Ready to showcase what American basketball has to offer and go out and get a win tomorrow night.

LINCOLN BALL: Yeah, super excited. Just another opportunity to go out and play basketball and do it with some of my best friends and for a coaching staff that we just love playing for.

To be able to go out there and get another game and just enjoy every moment, embrace every moment, it's super exciting.

MATT ROGERS: Yeah, it's been a dream of mine since first or second grade, so being able to play another game with my brothers and being able to showcase for the AU community, the DMV, it's exciting.

Q. Three of your coaches have played in March Madness specifically. Any firsthand experience they

were able to share, words of wisdom from being out on the court themselves?

MATT ROGERS: Yeah, just going out there and playing our same game, being poised, staying disciplined. Nothing different, just the lights are a little bit brighter and just being confident in yourself.

LINCOLN BALL: Yeah, we want to come here and win games, and they've been preaching us to really embrace the moment, celebrate that we're here, celebrate that we have this opportunity.

The job hasn't changed. We're here to win and compete and put on our best showcase of what we do and what we've been doing all season. They've definitely been giving us a really good message leading up to this.

COLIN SMALLS: Yeah, something I took from Coach Jackie Manuel was get lost in the game. He told us in practice lose ourselves in the game. When you do that, you lose focus on whether you're making shots or not, you just focus on getting the win. So that's what we're going to do throughout the rest of the tournament.

ELIJAH STEPHENS: Something they instilled in us a lot was staying confident, staying poised, having a strong mental. These are big games, so being poised, being confident is a big key.

Q. Looking back at you guys' season, was there a specific game or moment that you guys felt that you guys truly came together as one?

ELIJAH STEPHENS: Yeah, I'm not sure what game that would particularly be, in my opinion.

LINCOLN BALL: I think it might have come pretty recently. We lost at home against Navy one of our last regular-season games, and we kind of took that as the rest of the season could go one of two ways, we either band together and play our best basketball, or we kind of just go in a direction we don't want to go in.

We had a lot of conversations as seniors and as a team, because that kind of really brought us together, and we've been playing our best basketball since that game.



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So I would say that was probably one of the bigger turning points for us. There's tons of ups and downs across the season, but I think that's something recently that we really can draw back to.

Q. Colin, talk about the satisfaction of being there for as long as you have. You mentioned your brothers, then this accomplishment here in your last season in American.

COLIN SMALLS: It's really an amazing feeling being here with all the rest of the seniors that's been here for four or five years. I remember we used to have some dogfights, and we used to lose pretty badly when I first started out here.

To be able to win a championship, a Patriot League championship, was truly an amazing feeling to do with my brothers. It feels even more fulfilling.

LINCOLN BALL: Yeah, I think we've seen all kinds of college basketball over four or five years together. I think we bring so much experience, the four or five of us that have been here for four or five years. These guys, we spend so much time together on and off the court, and they're some of my best friends.

Yeah, it's just been such a great ride, and I know there's still some good bit of basketball left for us to play, and just really looking forward to it.

MATT ROGERS: Yeah, it's just exciting to actually fulfill the dream with these guys. We've been talking about it for four or five years. As everybody else has said, we've watched March Madness, we've seen our name not being up there, we've watched all the losses. So it's great to achieve this goal and keep playing.

We're not done yet. We want to compete in all these games that we've been playing, and it's just exciting to do it with these guys.

Q. Matt, Lincoln and Colin, you guys are from the general area. A lot of their guys are from the area, too. Does that add any extra juice to the matchup?

COLIN SMALLS: I'd say it always adds fuel to the fire when you're going against someone from the area. Me personally, I've been playing with and against Xavier Lipscomb on Mount St. Mary's since about fourth, fifth grade. So it's a great feeling that we're both here. Proud of him for sure.

But definitely going to try and get that W tomorrow. Pretty

sure that goes for them, too.

LINCOLN BALL: Yeah, I think you keep track of the teams that are around you, and we've played The Mount three times. Didn't play them this year in the non-conference. But I think it's super exciting. Matt and I grew up half an hour from The Mount. I think it definitely adds another layer. Anytime you talk about the DMV, DMV basketball, DMV guys, it brings a little bit of extra intensity.

MATT ROGERS: I don't have anything else.

Q. Eli, when is American at their best? When are you guys playing your best basketball?

ELIJAH STEPHENS: We're playing our best basketball, I think, when we're out in transition, when we get stops, when we hang our heads on defense.

I think when we do that, we put together a real good offensive end.

COLIN SMALLS: I would kind of say the same thing. When we're locked in on defense, we're a tough team to beat, and when our backs are against the wall, don't count us out because we'll definitely keep swinging.

Q. Lincoln, what makes American unique and sort of the makeup of this team?

LINCOLN BALL: Yeah, I think we have a lot of versatility. I think Eli and Matt run a lot of the show for us in the half court, and I think this guy Matt is very versatile and he's a tough guard for a lot of big men. We're so connected and we've played so many basketball games together. We've played so much basketball together.

I think we have that added, just, love for one another, and I think that kind of carries us and gives us a little extra passion and care about what's going on on the court and kind of carries us a good bit.

Q. Colin, you mentioned growing up and being in school, Firefox, watching the tournament. Do you have a favorite March Madness moment?

COLIN SMALLS: Favorite March Madness moment? Honestly, the UNC-Villanova game when Kris Jenkins hit that crazy shot at the end. That's probably my most memorable moment from March Madness.

ELIJAH STEPHENS: I'd honestly say the same thing. That's the moment I remember more vividly than others.

LINCOLN BALL: I would say I really enjoyed the Florida

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Gulf Coast runs that they had, Dunk City. That was pretty cool as a younger kid to see that, wishing you could dunk, and seeing all that was cool.

MATT ROGERS: I would say the UMBC upset was a pretty cool moment, being from the DMV, just seeing a local team be the first 16 seed to upset somebody. So that was a pretty cool experience to be a part of.

Q. Matt, for those individuals that aren't necessarily familiar with the DMV, what makes basketball in just sort of that space -- just the passion for it, and what we're seeing looking ahead towards tomorrow night, two teams right in that area with a lot of players from that area?

MATT ROGERS: It's just a lot of hard-nosed, gritty basketball from the jump. All the way through your growing up, elementary school days to middle school days, you're playing the same people.

People are always getting better. There's always a good team. It's always going to be a dogfight between whoever you're playing. Just iron sharpens iron, so just going against the greatest guys every day is just what DMV basketball represents.

LINCOLN BALL: Yeah, I think we talk about it all the time, arguing who has the best high school basketball in the area. Eli will argue until he's blue in the face that it's Texas. But we really do believe that the DMV is the best high school basketball and the best area.

It's just been so awesome and such a great experience for myself and playing with Matt and playing with Colin, playing against Colin, whether it's high school or AAU, it was so great. It's made me the player that I am today. So many great things about the DMV, and I think basketball is one of the best.

COLIN SMALLS: Like both of them said, it's gritty. It's a gritty brand of basketball, hard-nosed brand of basketball. Definitely competitive matchups from probably second grade up until now.

As you can see, we play Mount St. Mary's tomorrow. Definitely shaped the way I played and the person I am today. I'm grateful to be a part of it and grateful to represent DMV basketball in the national tournament.

Q. All right, Texas tomorrow night, not only you're out there on the floor but the Longhorns are in the building. Give me your defense of Texas basketball.

ELIJAH STEPHENS: In my opinion, Texas got the best

hoops. Guard-wise, I feel like there's a lot of competition out there, played a lot of competition growing up, especially in AU.

Yeah, I'm always going to root for Texas when we're having those conversations.

Q. You guys are the senior leaders on the team, but you have a couple younger players in the rotation. Any message to them to keep them locked in and focused?

MATT ROGERS: It's just staying poised in the moment, embracing the moment, not getting too high or too low and just keeping a level head. Losing yourself in a game is what we've always said in those moments.

COLIN SMALLS: Piggybacking off what Matt said, we're here on a business trip, not a field trip. We always try to tell them, keep your head down, stay focused and make sure you get the job done. The fun can come later.

Q. Eli, what are you looking forward to most tomorrow night?

ELIJAH STEPHENS: The big lights. As our coaches would say, the softer towels, the more plush seats. (Laughter).

I'm looking forward to it all, though, just the whole entire experience, and just embrace it all.

COLIN SMALLS: Really the same thing. Seeing a good brand of basketball, seeing our AU community, friends and family that made the trip in the stands, and just happy to share this experience with my brothers and our coaching staff.

LINCOLN BALL: Yeah, I think I'm just excited to play another basketball game and to get another opportunity to play, especially with these guys. I don't talk about it a lot, but I just love playing basketball with these guys and playing on one of the biggest stages, and something you think about your whole childhood.

Super excited just for the moment, and hopefully get a win and just embrace every moment.

MATT ROGERS: Yeah, just living in the moment, playing with my brothers, my teammates, my coaching staff, embracing all the fans that are going to be here, all the bright lights. It's going to be fun.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, before we open up the floor, just your opening statement in what is an exciting time for



American.

DUANE SIMPKINS: Yeah, first off, Dayton does it first class. We've only been here 24 hours, but you guys do a tremendous job here. Thank you to all the volunteers who have helped put this on. It's really, really good.

So happy for my guys, in particular the seniors. I got choked up about two months ago, we were post practice and we get in our circle and we try to recap whatever happened that day, and we weren't -- I didn't feel that we were playing with the type of urgency and effort that we needed to win a championship.

I told them how much and how bad I wanted it for them. I know how much they've been through.

So to see them get a chance to experience this, this is priceless for me as a coach. What it means for AU in general, it means a lot any time -- we're going to be one of two games on national TV tomorrow in college basketball, and for millions and millions of people to see American on our jerseys, I hope to have a good performance and obviously win, but make people say, hey, what's this American about and Google it and go to our school web page.

They may talk to their niece and say, I know you're applying for different schools, you may want to look at American, and garner interest from a lot of people because we have a tremendous university. We have a tremendous -- where it's located, Washington, D.C. I'm biased, I'm a DMV guy.

But the people in the community that make up our school is unlike any other that I've been around in college basketball, and I've been around for a while.

I just want everybody to get a chance to experience the greatness of our school, American University.

Q. You hear a lot that the best teams are player driven, and you've got a lot of seniors on the team. How can that help you get these guys ready for a game like this?

DUANE SIMPKINS: Yeah, we've just gotten to that point the last three weeks of the season. I think we've become a player-led program. They're going to need my help a little bit, Jackie Manuel, from the standpoint -- our assistant coaches, from the standpoint that we've been here before. We know what it's like.

I told those guys the lights are going to be brighter, seats are plusher and everything else. I was just telling the guys

on a radio interview this morning, I remember my first game in Wichita, Kansas, where we were playing Saint Louis in a 2:50 game or whatever it was, and it felt like everything was going a thousand miles an hour, and I felt like I couldn't dribble the basketball and nobody could make a shot.

They're going to go through that. I let them know that. If they make some shots and everything, they start off fine, that would be great. But my expectation is that's what it's going to be, and I'm going to be able to tell them that.

It's cool. We've been there. I know what it's like. We'll call a time-out if we have to, settle our nerves. But we'll utilize the fact that we have some institutional knowledge, so to speak, within our coaching staff.

Q. Coach, how has your team grown over the course of the season to get to this point right now?

DUANE SIMPKINS: We understand more now than we did two, three months ago what urgency looks like, what toughness looks like in particular from a spiritual standpoint, an emotional standpoint. It's not just one or two guys, but like collectively.

Then we talked about it briefly, I think we're more of a player-led program versus a coaches-led program. And what I mean by that is I see -- when I call a time-out, there's a TV time-out, when I walk back to the huddle, I see guys engaging, they're talking. They could even be arguing a little bit.

Before I come in at halftime, those guys are actually -- I can hear the voices from the hallway talking about the things that they've got to improve on, challenging one another. That definitely wasn't the case last year, wasn't the case early in the season. But up until the last three or four weeks of the season, I think we've finally gotten to that point.

Q. You talked about the university as a whole and how everybody works together and it's a good place to go to. As far as your community, the university, how is the support since you guys have made it here?

DUANE SIMPKINS: Man, it's nothing like winning. I think our support was there, family, friends, people who are close to the program, have been around the program for years. But what I've seen over the last two weeks, three weeks and what have you, I think we have now grown that base of supporters.

Obviously you've got to continue to win, being but I equate it to when I was at Maryland my freshman year, we got our



tails kicked every game. I think we finished next to last. The following year we came back -- we added a guy named Joe Smith, who ended up being the No. 1 pick in the draft, who wasn't that bad. That helped.

But I remember when my freshman year you could just walk off the street and come into Cole Field House, get a ticket, no matter who we played. It could be Carolina, it could be Duke, it didn't matter.

My senior year we started off, we beat Georgetown on national TV. They were top 10 in the country. We beat them in overtime. And we proceeded to start the ACC season like 4 or 5-0.

I remember we were coming off the road, played at Georgia Tech, we lost on a Saturday, we were coming back home Saturday night, and we were coming up the hill to go to Cole Field House, and to see hundreds of people sitting in tents lined up, that's when it was like -- that's what winning does.

And in my mind that's what I always go back to with the tournaments of like building a program and trying to do it the right way but do it in a way that's going to sustain. That's what excites me.

When I see all these people in Bender Arena that I've seen the past two or three weeks, I go back to that, like man, that's a pretty cool thing. It's really cool.

Q. You already touched on it a little bit being from the DMV. What does this mean to you personally to be able to be home, come to American and get them to this moment to make the tournament?

DUANE SIMPKINS: It means a lot, man, from a professional standpoint. No matter where I was able to accomplish this, getting to the NCAA Tournament, whether it be in Ohio or wherever my school where I was working, wherever it was, it's always great.

But it's even more special, obviously, being from the DMV and being able to do it at home, cousins and aunts and uncles, I've got a big family, my wife has got a big family. She's from the DMV, as well. It makes it extra special. It really does.

My hope and dream is that I'm able to use this platform now to help benefit some other people. We've got our Boys and Girls Clubs in Washington, D.C., are shrinking. I won't go into it, but there's a lot of stuff that's going on in the city that I'm not pleased with. There are certain resources that I was afforded when I was growing up in D.C. that are no longer there. I couldn't tell you where I

would be right now if I was not afforded those opportunities.

I hope to be able to utilize this platform to kind of take the next step and be able to help some other people that are in need in the D.C. area.

Q. Matt Rogers is a really talented player who can put the ball in the bucket. How satisfying was it, and what he was able to showcase, and being named MVP of the Patriot League in your tournament run?

DUANE SIMPKINS: It was cool from the standpoint of there was some voting that occurred in our league that I did not agree with at all. Matt Rogers has been the best player in our league. No disrespect to Noah Williamson, who ended up winning it from Bucknell. But our team was in first place for a good month and a half of the season, and Matt Rogers was at the forefront of that.

For me, I thought it was basketball karma, quite honestly. I thought Greg Jones on our team should have got third team. I thought Eli Stephens, instead of third team, should have got second team.

But at the end of the day, if Matt Rogers is or one of our players is MVP of the Patriot League tournament, that means that we won it, and that's more validation than anything. I would rather go dancing than get a postseason award that doesn't mean a whole hell of a lot right now.

Q. You mentioned the playing experience here in the tournament on your coaching staff, but first time for you here as a head coach. Any message you got from any of the other great coaches you worked for and been around?

DUANE SIMPKINS: No, everybody just pretty much said have fun with it. Gary Williams texted me and told me he's proud of me. Just told me to have fun, get your guys to play hard. No, I don't think there's any special things anybody has given me so far.

Q. You have a very experienced roster, but a lot of those guys have been at American for a few years now. What does it say about your program and your players that you're able to find success with home-grown talent at a time and place when transferring is so prevalent?

DUANE SIMPKINS: Yeah, again, it speaks to the specialness -- a couple things, one, the university. All those guys have established roots at American. They've developed relationships with different deans and professors and the like. Then more importantly, those



guys, they have a genuine love for one another. That was obvious when I got the job. You could tell that there was a connection there with those guys.

Obviously we've even taken it to another level, but they genuinely love one another. I was fortunate, Matt Rogers had some Power Four schools coming around, offering this, offering that. And at the end of the day we talked, and the general thought from myself was don't surrender -- don't take these short-term riches, so to speak. You have a school community that has embraced you. You have a school network that is going to take you well beyond basketball. It's going to be here for the next 30, 40 years. You've got a chance to hang a banner. You have a legitimate chance to hang a banner. He knew what role that he had here.

He also didn't want to disappoint his teammates that he's been here with for four years. All those things combined, man, allowed us to keep Matt Rogers. If Matt Rogers isn't here, quite honestly, I'm probably not here right now.

Q. Selection Sunday you see your name pop up on the board, always a thrill. But then the fact that you're playing Mount St. Mary's, I know you guys didn't play in the regular season, but traditionally you do. Just your thoughts of here we are in Ohio and sort of a backyard brawl?

DUANE SIMPKINS: Yeah, Donny Lind texted me about none on Sunday, and he said, man, I hope we don't have to play each other. I said, we probably are, just from looking at the metrics and everything. It's cool. But yeah, some people say, man, you shouldn't have to play a team that's an hour and a half from you. It doesn't matter. It's just the NCAA Tournament, man.

We're excited to play them. They're a very good team. They're a hot team right now. He's faced some adversity with some injuries, and Donny has done a tremendous job in year one. So no, it really doesn't matter to me, man, whether they're an hour away from us or 10 hours. It doesn't matter.

Q. What's your biggest concern in going up against The Mount?

DUANE SIMPKINS: They play physical. They're going to play tough. They are a very good -- they're going to shoot some threes. I see them, man, those are tough shots, and he makes them. We're going to have to take stock of their three-point shooting.

The good thing is we've done a pretty good job from three-point percentage defensive perspective. I think we're

top 150 in the country right now, allowing six per game in the Patriot League and allowing those shots at 33 percent. It's one of the things that we do well.

Then the other thing is offensive rebounding, they do a really good job of crashing the glass. They'll send three, four, five guys sometimes, and we've got to be sharp. I think we're No. 47 in the country right now in defensive rebounding percentage.

The things that they do well are things that so far we've done real well, and now we've just got to make sure we do it on the big stage.

Q. You mentioned your playing experience. Do you have a favorite March Madness moment?

DUANE SIMPKINS: Probably -- so we played John Calipari's UMass team, which was loaded, Marcus Camby being the most notable name. We played them earlier that year, and they beat us pretty good. Referees were a little shaky (laughter). We played up in Springfield, Mass. So it was a little shaky.

But I remember they were talking big-time trash when they knew the game was over, I mean big-time trash. And when we're at home, we just squeaked into the tournament my sophomore year, and we see our name pop up, and we're in the same bracket with UMass.

To be able to beat Saint Louis and then turn around and we're playing UMass, we're down 18 points or whatever, and to come back and win and to see the look on Calipari's face was priceless for me. He's probably going to say something to me the next time he sees me on the road. But that was priceless because I knew how good they were and how good of a coach he was. He was pissed after the game. That was pretty cool.

Q. Looking at that moment, because there's just so many of those special moments, why is March Madness just so special?

DUANE SIMPKINS: I think a lot of it is the fact that it's almost -- I want to say it's input into you from a young time. When you're young, I don't know about you guys, but my teacher, when I was in elementary school, they would roll the little cart out, and we would stop class and watch NCAA games.

It's always been a part of our DNA, so to speak, always been in the D.C. area, maybe around the country. And then just to know from the DMV, we have so many really good players who have come out who have had success in college and in the pros, so many people that we've looked



up to. And when it comes on, man, it captivates so many people.

You think about it, there's only 68 of these teams out of 360-something teams. It's special. It's really special.

Q. You haven't played since last Wednesday. Any hangover or layoff there that you guys have had to try to work to power through?

DUANE SIMPKINS: Well, we'll see tomorrow night, that's for damn sure. We're practicing. We're trying to be very intentional and intelligent, hopefully, with our practice. We're not going long, but we are simulating that three- or four-minute stretch that we're going to have in games and everything.

I think the biggest thing, man, is just going to be the jitters. It's going to be the jitters, and they're going to be here. Like I tell our guys, the offensive stuff will take care of itself. And the defense, we can control that. We can control our rotations. We can control being efficient with our words and being loud early and often with our verbiage.

All those things are really important. So just controlling the controllables and trusting our preparation, at the end of the day.

Q. What's your favorite thing about this team?

DUANE SIMPKINS: Their resilience. Their resilience to be able to face adversity and when things don't look well, just look it right in the eye and just say, all right, let's go.

We had a number of times -- last year we had nine games that we lost by two possessions or less. I don't know if that's as much of an indictment on my players or myself as a coach, but we all took accountability for it and spent a lot of time in the summertime watching film -- I watched all of those games that we lost two or three times, a number of things that I could have done different, a number of things that I wish had prepared our guys for, whether it be a sideline out-of-bounds with four seconds to go or whatever the case may be.

We were very intentional about doing those things throughout the season, and now I think we've flipped, and I think we're 9-2 in those games and won seven of those games in a row.

The one game that stands out to me is we're playing at home against Lehigh, and we're down seven points with 34 seconds, and they're shooting a free throw. I didn't get a sense from anybody in the huddles or watching on film that anybody felt like the game was over. They played until the

horn blew. Fortunately the horn blew after we got a game-winning basket to win. That doesn't happen. That means you've got a special group of guys.

My hope for them, and I told them, this is well beyond basketball. Life is going to kick you in the mouth, and how are you going to respond to it. Are you going to fight through it? Are you going to take a step back and say, hey, dig in more? I hope that our guys have gotten that lesson more than anything this year.

Q. A lot of the times in coaching, there's just teaching moments. It's one and the same. But for you as the coach, has this team taught you something?

DUANE SIMPKINS: Hmm, that's a good question. Damn, where did you get that one from? I've got to process that one, man. That's a tough one.

I would say just off the top of my head how you're always growing and evolving. Coming into the job last year, my first time as a head coach in college, I felt like, all right, I know I want this, I know I want that.

And some of the experiences that I had off the court with these guys showed me like, no, that's dumb, that's not the smartest thing you need to do. You need to probably look at this and look at that.

These guys, I allow them to -- whenever we have film and everything, I tell them I want them to be interactive. I don't want them to just say, hey, Coach, whatever you tell us to do, that's what we're going to do. I tell those guys, fellas, if this doesn't make sense, say something.

We've gotten to the point where those guys are like, Coach, I thought that we were doing it this way, but the more we do it, can we look at this? And we get together with the staff, and we're like, you know what, that makes sense.

I think they're teaching me how to be a better coach when it comes to things like that, the communication and the teaching on the court.

Q. What's your go-to cheat meal restaurant after all this?

DUANE SIMPKINS: Oh, man. If you want to celebrate, I celebrated the other day with my family, I went to Truluck's. I can't do that that often. I don't make that much. So you've got Truluck's. Anytime you get seafood in the DMV, it's cool.

Once it gets springtime, my family will go out to Annapolis,



a place called Cantler's, and get some good crabs, some blue crabs, and that's it. We're fortunate in the D.C. area we've got a lot of good restaurants, but those are off the top of my head.

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