

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Northwestern vs FAU

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Brooklyn, New York, USA

Barclays Center

FAU Owls

Coach Dusty May

Johnell Davis

Alijah Martin

Nick Boyd

Media Conference



better team?

JOHNELL DAVIS: Last year, I say we were hunting people and now people are coming at us, and we just have to surpass the energy and be better.

ALIJAH MARTIN: Comparing the last two years of the regular season, it was more about us. And this year was more so about us, but we knew that team was coming for us. And sometimes we'll try to match their energy, but like he said, we have to surpass their energy and be all about us.

NICK BOYD: A lot of ups and downs this year. Man, everybody's after us, after what we did last year. I mean, but it's going to make the story even more special. We're just looking forward to, you know, proving ourselves once again under these bright lights.

Q. For all of you, Coach May is someone that got on everybody's radar with the run last year and he's on all these lists about rising stars. What makes him such a great coach in your experiences?

NICK BOYD: I'd say he's just a regular human being. I'd say that's what makes him so special. I've been fortunate enough to be around coaches my whole life just with my family background and just see the ins and outs of the business. And Coach is regular. He don't have much of an ego.

Not a lot of times you see head coaches working out with their players after practice or before practice or whenever you shoot them a message and say, Coach, can I work on this? He'll be out there on the court. He's very hands on and he's a regular human being.

ALIJAH MARTIN: To add to that, he's a player's coach. Nick said everything I was going to say, only he's just a great guy and everything you want in a coach.

JOHNELL DAVIS: Everything they said and he keeps it a hundred with you no matter what the situation is.

ALIJAH MARTIN: Always wants the best for us, as well.

Q. For all of you guys, obviously you're used to these bright lights from going to the Final Four last year, but how personal is this day? How meaningful and valuable is going out there for the shootaround with your team, kind of earning this day, and what do you guys do to kind of take full advantage of it? What's the plan, being out there and enjoying it, and also I guess soaking in the surroundings and getting used to it?

JOHNELL DAVIS: We just kind of just pay attention to all the details so we can be focused for the game tomorrow.

ALIJAH MARTIN: Definitely want to soak in the moment, but also like you said, to put that switch in and lock in to get the win.

NICK BOYD: Yeah, kind of like leading up to this moment, getting into the tournament, we are excited. But after that, we just really focused on walking in that locker room, get little chills, you know you're ready to go and play hard.

Q. (Off microphone)

JOHNELL DAVIS: Definitely, we had a lot of adversity this year and to be here is just a blessing.

Q. To all three of you guys, what was the difference in the regular season for you guys this year compared to last year? Obviously you went to a new conference. But what was the difference in feeling and like in terms of how you got through this season compared to the last regular season, and do you think it's made you a



NICK BOYD: Yes, sir.

Q. Playing off that, there's been so much chatter about what his future might be. You guys are online, because you're young guys, do you block that out or ignore it or ask him about, hey, what's this deal with you being mentioned for this job and that job?

NICK BOYD: To piggyback off what Johnell said, Coach keeps it a hundred at all times. So if you have a question or really believe what the internet is saying, you could always ask him, Coach, what's going on with this?

If you really know Coach, you don't really pay too much attention to the articles online. I mean, if it's his last game or whatever, we just want to make it special, so who cares.

Q. I know you grew up in New Jersey. What's it like being back around this area, and do you have a lot of family and friends coming to the games, and how is it different, I guess, for you this year after everything you guys went through last year?

NICK BOYD: It's great. I have a lot of family and friends coming. A blessing to be in the tri-state area again and try to do something special with a great group of guys.

I mean, compared to last year, I think we are a little more hungry this year. We didn't win the regular season. We didn't win the postseason. So we definitely got something to prove and we got a chip on our shoulder.

Q. (Off microphone) given everything you guys went through last year?

NICK BOYD: We're all seasoned veterans here. We all been under the bright light, even this year, everything going on, the ups and downs. I think it's written for us to do something special.

Q. Speaking of, you guys brought the whole group back, basically, 14 out of 15, nobody went to the portal which is super rare these days. What's it been like to bring that whole group back, play a very different season with the adversity, but also the great moments, and now be back here where you really put yourselves on the map?

ALIJAH MARTIN: It's definitely a challenge dealing with the adversity, and like the ups and downs, like you said. But you know, we are a resilient group. We are a veteran group. We trust each other and love each other and always refer back to that. What happens at the end of the day, we refer back to that, back to the work.

Q. When you guys made the Final Four last year, you did it coming through New York City at the Garden. Different arena but, back in New York City. What was the feeling or the reaction when you saw where you guys were placed in the bracket and coming back to New York? Did that feel like a good omen for you guys and an exciting feeling?

NICK BOYD: When we see our name called, we were ecstatic, very excited to be back in New York. Feel like New York has a special place for all of us. I'm from here but, you know, the things we did as a team here has been special. So yeah, we're looking forward to keep going.

ALIJAH MARTIN: Can you repeat your question, please? I'm just happy to be here, man.

Q. I was just asking about the fact that last year, when you guys made the Final Four, it was out of New York City, you played in the regional here at the Garden. Different arena, but same city. Did that feel like a good omen when you got placed in the bracket this year again?

ALIJAH MARTIN: We're definitely grateful and happy to be in the great City of Brooklyn, New York, with the guys we've been through the fight with. We trust our tournament setting. We just excited to play.

JOHNELL DAVIS: I was just happy to get our name called.

Q. You guys talked about just you winning this Final Four and obviously last year a lot of you guys have come back. How do you guys keep yourselves from looking forward? What are you doing mentally or in practice or as a team to stay locked in on the moment and not look too far ahead?

JOHNELL DAVIS: We give Coach all the credit because he tells us to be level headed in practice and not worry about the future. We only worry about what we can fix today and just get better each day.

ALIJAH MARTIN: Definitely our leadership, coming from our coaching staff. But me personally, I just think about the keys to the game. That helps me stay focused and in the moment.

NICK BOYD: To piggyback what they said, Coach's emphasis on staying in the moment and enjoying what's going on right now.

Q. For all three of you or whoever has thoughts, I guess, on the topic of staying together and the core

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

staying together after last year, I know the community really rallied from an NIL perspective to support you guys and make it so you were not foregoing a lot of earning potential by staying on campus. What was it like to get that support and was there anything last spring that you got to do from that perspective that really stands out as a memory or an experience?

NICK BOYD: The community of Boca Raton has been a huge blessing. They definitely bought in on what we have going on and our mission and just making it a memorable season each and every year.

In terms of the NIL and stuff like that, they did a tremendous job helping us out. Every single player on the roster had an opportunity to make name image and likeness, which is a blessing, and you don't see that much in programs. What stands out to me, we pretty much did everything as a team last year, but I think it was the parade, the celebration down in Mizner Park in Boca Raton, one of the beautiful places in the country, so yeah.

ALIJAH MARTIN: We just want to express our gratitude to Boca Raton and the community and making sure we are taken care of in multiple ways.

JOHNELL DAVIS: Yeah, they did a good job though. Even without the NIL, we wouldn't really care. Just them being at the games is important to us and what really matters.

NICK BOYD: For sure.

DUSTY MAY: We are extremely excited to bring our group back up to New York where we have a lot of fond memories, and especially being in Brooklyn, New York City, the mecca of college basketball, this is going to be a great environment and another memorable experience for our players.

Q. Your team, it seems like this year, they got up for the really big games, played well, played the best in the biggest of games and struggled a little bit with some lesser competition. Was that frustrating for you or do you look at it positively in terms of, we can play anybody? How do you feel about that?

DUSTY MAY: I tend to look at everything, the glass is half-full, but there have been times when we've been frustrated at our attention to detail when we played teams that we were supposed to beat or maybe we were the prohibitive favorite. So we are battling human nature most of the season.

But overall, the big moments, the body of work, certainly overshadows those bumps in the road, and those are part of our experiences which makes us, us. And we are very, very excited to be where we are. To earn an at-large bid is extremely difficult and for us to play the schedule and games we play. So a testament and tribute to our guys' longevity and consistency. It's been a longer season than last, at least it seems.

Q. There's so much chatter about you and what is next for you. How do you handle that coming into your biggest games of the season? Do you tell your agent, hey, just keep that away from me? Do you address it with your team because you have kids who are online and they see this stuff? How do you handle all the speculation and chatter that doesn't have anything to do with this game?

DUSTY MAY: First and foremost, this is typical. I think a lot of coaches face this. It's not out of the ordinary. It's just happening over a longer period now because jobs come open during the season.

So this began probably a month or so ago. It happened last year earlier in the season. As soon as we had success, our players were coming to me saying, Coach said you're not going to be here next year, my mom said she heard this from the neighbors, from the mailman's neighbor that you're going to be coaching here. And every time, you know, we just kind of had a laugh about it and said let's focus on what's important.

It's the same thing. I try not to get caught up in it. But as a college basketball coach, I talk to a lot of people. I talk to coaches, I talk to recruit, I talk to our signees, so it comes up a lot. It is distracting, but our job is compartmentalize what we are supposed to be doing.

But also add on that Instagram is distracting. Twitter is distracting. Having your kids with you watching movies while you are trying to watch film is distracting. We all have a lot of distractions and we all have a job to do and that is to prepare to play our best against Northwestern.

Q. Nick Boyd has got local connections. Can you talk about what he brought to the team and in this transfer portal era, how unique and rare that he and the other guys all stayed and came back? I'm sure there were other teams trying to poach them.

DUSTY MAY: Yeah, it's obviously unique for a group to stay together like ours did. And a big reason why is because of their love for each other. We built something special together, and they all are major stakeholders in FAU Basketball now.

Nick has brought a lot to the table from a tangible and more importantly intangible standpoint. His energy is infectious. He brings a love of the game and works every single day, 365 days a year. I wish he didn't work quite as much. Sometimes we encourage him not to come to the gym three times a day.

But his determination has been a model for a lot of our young players in our program. And like everyone else in our roster, he has given up a lot for the group. You know, that's not always common. I said it a lot last year. And he continues to sacrifice. But his value to our team is even bigger than his numbers and minutes played and whatnot.

We've always been open and honest with that stuff. This isn't new anymore. Last year it was new, so when it came up it felt like it was something that needed to be addressed.

This year, it's the same chatter that we've had for really over a year now. It's not just us. It's everyone. We are all dealing with the same things, you know. But our guys handle it well. They have been up for many, many games, and I think they have been real professionals about all that stuff.

Q. Looking at the game tomorrow itself and some of the strategy. Last year in your game against Temple, specifically in the zone defense, the perimeter shooting was not defended probably as well as you would have liked. How does your strategy change tomorrow against a Northwestern team that spreads the floor and plays on the perimeter, especially with a guy like Boo Buie who can pull up from so deep?

DUSTY MAY: We have been surprised this year at how porous our defense has been at times. Lately we have not shot the ball well and we have given up a high percent from the free throw line while also still being in those games till the last possession.

One side, as I said earlier, I look at the positive first. Our upside is still extremely high. But we have to find ways that when we are not shooting well, to maintain the same defensive edge. And to be honest, our two games in Fort Worth for the conference tournament at North Texas, for example, for 15 to 18 minutes, we looked like we were when we were at our best defensively. And for whatever reason, we were not able to sustain that ^ effort and hunger or whatever the case.

I'm optimistic in this environment, we understand the ramifications of taking one possession off, especially when you're looking at the other team and they have a player like

Boo Buie. And if he crosses halfcourt and he's got space, then he has a great chance of making it, and if you try to defend him with one player, he has a great chance of making it.

Obviously we have to make shots to be at our best and clean up a few things and not let these teams get comfortable looks early and get a rhythm, and then the tougher shots start going in. And that's what's happened lately. If you look at the Temple game, their first two threes were off of our turnovers that led to wide open shots and, therefore, then they get going and find their groove.

Q. Seemed like last spring to keep your group together there was a lot of community support from an NIL perspective. How tough can it be to ask for that kind of sort of rush of support spring after spring, and do you worry about fatigue with donors and folks that support your players because the way the NIL market works now, asking fans to foot the bill to some degree?

DUSTY MAY: I think everyone is concerned with donor fatigue and whatnot. We approach everything with the idea that we have to be working continuously for something that's down the line and me by nature, I'm a big security person. We have been working since this team came back for next year to keep people engaged, to give access to find different revenue streams to help our current players.

And so do we worry? Yes. Should we spend time worrying? Probably not. Because we are going to work hard and we're going to continue to make our community, even those who did not attend FAU, feel like a part of our program, and like I said, with our players to be stakeholders in it. We like the fact that we have a big, big upside in that facet, but there's going to be work to do after this season, as well.

Q. You mentioned that North Texas game. You played them three times and you won every time. They are a slow-paced team. What have you learned about playing your game even if the pace is slow and playing your game on offense and defense?

DUSTY MAY: That's the first thing that we said to the team is just think North Texas. When we're getting ready to play a team that is just a different version of the Mean Green, and they do a lot of the same things. They have dangerous guards who can make shots from different spots and angles. They have very good one-on-one players.

I don't think you would have to look too much further than Ken Pom to see that our Achilles' heel defensively is we

play one-on-one a lot, we don't over-help. And, therefore, we've had to make some adjustments with teams like North Texas. We have a lot of different curveballs we can throw. It's just a matter of not throwing too many hanging curves or I guess having a calculated risk in what we want to do.

But we are going to have to give those guys different looks. And like I said, if you have two or three elite one-on-one players in your starting five, then you're a tough cover.

Q. Looking at the smaller schools, you changed conferences before the season -- but looking at Loyola, George Mason, none of them were able to make the tournament the following year. Why do you think you've been an exception, small school, had a deep run and able to run it back the following year?

DUSTY MAY: Because of our upside. When we are at our best, we are capable of beating anyone in the country. And over the course of 30 games or whatever, you're going to have nights when you're not at your best.

Last year we found ways to win those games when we were not at our best. But the other teams didn't have the same edge to them on those nights because they didn't have as many fans. They didn't have the attention going into the game. They didn't have a circle.

I do think those moments mattered this year. And another thing, because of the way our guys play, I do think they are fun to watch, and they play a style that's easy on the eyes. Therefore, we were able to get those games because of the television networks. They were able to get great matchups, get neutral site games against Power Fives, and we took advantage of those.

So I think that's probably the biggest reason. But we talked with our group, every time we lost a game, it was as if we had a letdown or our season was ruined, and we constantly reminded them of those teams. And there's a reason we are still talking about the back-to-back Gators and the New England Patriots because it's that rare to duplicate the success that you had the year prior.

Q. Different kinds of players, but has it been constructive to look at Northwestern how they handled Purdue's ball screen game to get an idea what you can expect tomorrow?

DUSTY MAY: We are built different than Purdue. Absolutely we watched that game and took a few nuggets from it. The hardest part, the most difficult part of the NCAA Tournament is finding ways to take advantage of your matchups or whatnot and not straying away from what you do. We watched that and we watched several games

trying to guess what they are going to do.

Purdue did some unique things against them, but it's hard for us because Goldin, he's tall like Edey. But they have very different games and we have very different styles of play.

Q. When we watched the Selection Sunday video in the locker room, I couldn't help but notice, you were the biggest kid of the bunch almost, jumping up with excitement. I was just talking to the players, they see you as a wise owl combined with being someone they can relate to and that helps them stay where they need to be heading into games. Your relationship with them, can you describe it for me? That's how they described it.

DUSTY MAY: That's a tricky question. These guys, man, they -- last year was the best group I've ever been a part of, and this year, we've had a lot of bumps in the road, and it's the second best group I've ever been a part of.

When you sit there and watch Selection Sunday, you think of, you're on a 29-win team, Louisiana Tech, you just won a regular season Conference Championship, you get tripped up, and some years you don't even watch the tournament because you feel hopeless.

And to see those guys get knocked out against Temple and to hear their name called as an at-large and you think back to all those years. You had our UAB teams that were good and went to NIT Championship and whatnot and you sit there and think. And you always leave and you're so disappointed because you want the players to experience March Madness, and you realize you could go five years in a row and coach another 20 and never go. It's that difficult. It's that exclusive.

So it was a moment for me. There's certain moments of each year that I remember like it's yesterday, the feeling that you had. And that moment in the locker room where I personally looked at that group of people and said, you know, you guys did something bigger than you even realize. Because of how many years I've been doing this, and was just left out so many times because of whatever -- because we didn't get an opportunity to play the games that this team got a chance to play.

And fortunately for us, our guys took advantage of those games and we played our best at the most important times. And so yeah, that was -- I don't get excited very often and I didn't know that that was going to be on CBS and the local news and all that.

But it was a moment for me. And also, I had woke up

Sunday morning sleep-deprived and it seemed we were sliding despite no games being played, and I thought maybe there's a software update that's reconfigured all these metrics and dropping us back. I did get a little paranoid when I saw us sliding without games being played. That's always a concern.

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