

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Stetson vs UConn

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Brooklyn, New York, USA

Barclays Center

UConn Huskies

Coach Dan Hurley

Tristen Newton

Cam Spencer

Donovan Clingan

Alex Karaban

Stephon Castle

Media Conference

Q. Coach has mentioned to us a few times over the year how you guys have a chance to do something that very few teams have done, make history. Is that something he's stressing with you guys throughout the season, and did he emphasize that over the past couple days, the potential of what you can do?

ALEX KARABAN: I think that was talked about in the beginning of the season. He really set the expectation of what this group is capable of doing in the June and July summer workouts. But more recently it's focused on Stetson. We have to take it day-by-day, we've got to go game-by-game and we can't look too far ahead or else we're going to get distracted of what we ultimately want to accomplish.

We've been locked in and focused on Friday's game and just taking it day-by-day.

Q. For Tristen, what do you think is a key component to this team that's made you be able to follow up last year, such a dominant run? Sometimes teams get content or they lose that hunger. What is the characteristic of this team that has allowed you guys not to rest on what you did last year?

TRISTEN NEWTON: Our unselfishness, everybody knows their role, and everybody knows what each other are



capable of, so nobody is going to go out there and try to score 30. They are going to stick to the script and play defense, get rebounds and move the ball. So nobody is selfish and everybody just, you know, follows what Coach says and does what they can do to win the game.

Q. Could each of you say something about what Cam has brought to the team this year, how much he is similar to Coach Hurley in personality, and any good stories or anecdotes that stand out about Cam's fiery personality?

TRISTEN NEWTON: Like you say, he has the same personality as Coach, so he brings that fiery edge that we needed. I feel like myself -- well, especially me and Steph are more of the laid-back kind, and Donovan and AK are more so like Coach, but not to that intensity. We needed somebody just like Coach like Andre was last year, so that personality that he brought really helped us out this year.

DONOVAN CLINGAN: He wants to win every game and he never -- he doesn't fear losing and he hates losing. Like Tristen said, he has the same personality as Coach and their personalities match perfect. And they just -- they butt heads sometimes in practice, but game night, they got each other's back and we all got each other's back, and he's really connected this team like how Andre did last year.

ALEX KARABAN: Right. What those guys said. I've been his roommate on road trips and he's talked about Brooklyn and wanting to get to Brooklyn and how excited he is to finally be able to compete in March Madness. And he's been speaking it to fruition now and he's been waiting for this opportunity. And what they said about his competitive fire and stuff is definitely noticeable.

STEPHON CASTLE: He's just a great teammate, brings a lot of shot making, a lot of energy. I feel like he turned down a couple shots to make an extra play for another teammate. He's an underrated teammate and a big part of our team.

Q. You guys are going into the tournament this year a little different than last year, heavy favorite. How do



you deal with the expectations or pressure that comes with that?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: You try not to worry about it. You don't listen to it. You know, you just keep your mind focused on one game and, you know, you just stick together as a team and don't let all the outside noise just interfere with your confidence.

You just really try not to let the pressure get to your head and really just focusing on one game at a time. And you just can't look too far ahead because you know there's just teams out there that are very good. So you've just got to focus on one game at a time and move on from there.

ALEX KARABAN: We've done a great job of blocking out the noise just because we have had a target on our back since June. Ever since we won it last year, everyone has just been wanting to beat us and everyone has been talking about us, repeating and all that stuff. But we've really blocked it out this entire year. And we're just been excited going into tomorrow's game and we are just excited to do this journey with a new team.

Q. Any of the returning guys, to have players on this team like Steph and Cam who have not played in this type of environment before, what has been the message to those guys to prepare them for what to expect?

TRISTEN NEWTON: I wouldn't say there's really no message. You know Cam, he's played in a lot of big games, and Steph is not like any other freshman. They know what to expect. They have been practicing the same way we've been practicing all year. They have not changed or let up. They are just going harder.

No, there's really no message. They know what to do and we are going to go out there and play the same way we've played all year.

DONOVAN CLINGAN: There's not much to really say besides it's just a regular game. Obviously you might feel the pressure because it's a tournament, win-or-go-home. But we have to stick to the script and what we've been doing right all year and don't let the atmosphere and the pressure get to you. It's just one game at a time and if we do what we do, we're good.

ALEX KARABAN: Yeah, they pretty much covered everything I was going to say; so what they said.

DAN HURLEY: Obviously excited to be back in New York. You know, feel like real excited to get on the court. Obviously coming out of the Big East Tournament, you

know, definitely a little drained over the weekend, but now at full energy and fully locked in and really excited to take the court tomorrow.

Q. Throughout the year, you've talked about how you guys can do something that very few other teams have done, and you've mentioned that to us. I don't know if you've mentioned that to the team throughout the season, and how much are you thinking about that now and have you brought it up with the team recently?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I mean, listen, we started in April. I know when Cam Spencer visited and we talked to the returning players that had to make decisions, like Donovan and Alex, Tristen, about returning or foregoing their college eligibility, our visual was Brooklyn to Boston to Phoenix.

You know, we recruited Cam Spencer; this is the type of year we think we can have if you join this program, and this is what we are going for. Obviously it's one step at a time in terms of the quality of teams you play. Everyone is vulnerable in every game in this tournament, so obviously we have got to take care of business on Friday to get to Sunday.

But you know, this road is what we've been manifesting and talking about for a long time. You always have to have your sights set on something you want to achieve.

Q. Obviously you guys have had a target on your back all season long. But has there been any added pressure with the No. 1 overall seed with pretty much everybody picking you guys to win this whole thing, and how have you dealt with that?

DAN HURLEY: I think just playing and coaching at UConn, it prepares you for pressure. We don't have the luxury of playing and coaching under the radar, and you know, anything that you do is surprising, good. When you play at a place with the history and standards and all the success, I think every game you play at UConn is pressurized.

So I think when you get to these moments, Big East Tournament, MSG, NCAA Tournament, lights are super bright, we are used to playing with a big target. We are used to playing with pressure. So we perform well under pressure.

Q. I asked Dusty about coaching while his name is circulating for all these jobs and there's all this speculation. You went through that at Rhode Island. How did you handle it?

DAN HURLEY: I thought, Well, I think -- again, I don't

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

know his situation, but you tell your agent to leave you alone and you coach out your season.

Obviously players have decisions to make once the season is over and coaches have decisions to make once the season is over. If the school wants you badly enough, they will wait for your season to be over and you can deal with the business of basketball then.

Q. The actions of the selection committee have been highly scrutinized since the field was announced, particularly with respect to your conference. Do you believe that the Big East needs a top-to-bottom philosophy about scheduling to avoid what happened this season?

DAN HURLEY: Looking at Dave Benedict.

Hey, listen, there are smart things to do with non-conference scheduling. The first thing you've got to do, though, is you've got to play some big-time non-conference games, and then we've got to win them.

I used to watch P.J. Carlesimo during the non-conference season, like while we were traveling or while we were at a restaurant or somewhere, and he'd be watching other Big East teams play non-conference games and he'd be rooting like heck for the other teams because he knew that winning big non-conference games, not losing bye games, winning non-conference games, is the best thing that you can do for your conference.

I do think that we've got to -- obviously we've got to get together and really figure out what happened. I do think that obviously the moves at DePaul, the moves at Georgetown are going to strengthen those programs. Providence, St. Johns are in great hands. Seton Hall. Butler is in great hands.

I think the league is in a great place.

Q. You've expressed some disdain for the transfer portal. Do you see any fixes or tweaks to it or accept it as it is?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, it shouldn't be open right now. The fact that on Monday of the best week in college basketball that it's open, it's bizarre and it's led to even more chaos.

Listen, for us, my perspective changes. If you are doing things the right way and serving your players great, it probably doesn't impact you as much as it impacts others.

We have been able to hold on to the players that we've been desperate to keep and build around those core

players on a yearly basis.

I just think the timeline of the portal, and I don't know, man, it's like I think it's bad for kids if you end up -- your college that you go to, the staff that you play for, becomes your network for life, like that's the group of people that are going to help create opportunities for you for the entirety of your life, your support system.

If you play in four or five schools in four or five years, like what type of support system? You're just kind of a mercenary at that point, and you have no base in life.

Q. Your players said you have been tougher this year than last year. I was told two weeks after you won it all, you started again. I know you said you've talked to Billy Donovan. Any other people you talked to about what it was like after winning a title? Because usually teams that go on a run like that lose that hunger, and you have a lot of the same guys from last year, and that clearly hasn't happened to you guys.

DAN HURLEY: I talked to Billy, I talked to Jay, I talked to Tom Izzo. In the end, I love being a coach. I love the work. Two weeks after it was over, I wanted to start practicing again because I love to coach and I love to be around my team. That's the best part of the job.

And then you deal with the human nature element from both your program and with the organization, with the individuals, where you just won the Championship, and it's really easy to get seduced into thinking it's going to be easy to do it again, or it's going to be easy to make another run. Especially when we did it in such dominant fashion like we did last year.

Yeah, I've been tougher on the group throughout the season because I've just been trying to like root out any form of complacency or entitlement with this team. They are not entitled to -- you're not entitled to nothing, especially this time of year. And anything we've done this year, we can't trade it in for jack, you know what, at this point. Like the only thing that matters is what happens at 2:30 on Friday.

Q. I think Andrea Cam Spencer is you with blond hair. What do you think about that and any stories about how you think Cam is similar to your intensity and what was your message?

DAN HURLEY: Or I'm a bald him, or balding. Because I've kept this length. This length has stayed for like the last three years, guys and gals.

He's a unique competitor. With Tristen in the backcourt,



you've got fire and ice there. He's the fire, and hunger. I think that's been something for us, too. Like he has not been to the NCAA Tournament. He has not won championships at this level. He has not experienced college basketball at top of sport.

So having a critical player that hasn't experienced this thing has been great for our team because it's instilled a wild ambition with the group because he's got such a big personality, and he's just so damn competitive.

Q. This is a different role for Donovan this season. Last year he was coming off the bench on the Championship run and now he's one of the more dominant faces on this team. How much has this season prepared him for this run and what he's going to face at a higher level?

DAN HURLEY: In a weird way, I think, you know, his injuries in the preseason and then in the start of Big East play, really helped the team develop. It also allowed him to get kind of fully healthy, get his weight down, and then he's gotten himself into great shape.

Now I think he's peaking at the right time. And then you do deep in this tournament, you do damage. You win championships when you just go out and perform at a high level here. We're going to need him to be as good as Sanogo was for us last year. Adama absolutely dominated the tournament last year, and we are going to need a dominant run from Donovan to do what we did last year.

Q. You guys, obviously there's been -- for a long time, no No. 1 seed never went down, it's happened a couple of times now in the last few years including last year. You've talked a lot about, and your players, about how well you've stayed focused this year on the goals at hand. Do you remind them of that, the No. 1 seeds that got toppled the last few years?

DAN HURLEY: I think in every game you play, whether they are early season, November, if we get away from our identity, we have issues. I didn't like how we guarded, obviously, in the St. John's game. Part of it was, you know, we're playing an NCAA-caliber team that had a great night, a team that should have been in with a couple other Big East schools.

And then, you know, like what keeps us bulletproof though, is like, we're No. 1 in the country in offensive efficiency, Top-10 in defense, we generally rebound the ball as good as anyone in the country. We play harder than our opponent, and we are elite with our preparation and we don't care who the hero is on a given night. That's a formula that will keep you bulletproof in a lot of games and

make it really hard for somebody to get you.

We stick to that script. We can come in here with confidence but we respect Stetson. We respect everyone that we play because you know, we know what this tournament is all about.

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