

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Vermont vs Duke

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Brooklyn, New York, USA

Barclays Center

Vermont Catamounts
Coach John Becker
Shamir Bogues
Aaron Deloney

TJ Long

Media Conference

Q. TJ, everybody wants to play on the big stage, NCAA. What is it like when the big stage turns out to be at home?

TJ LONG: It means kind of everything you could ask for. Been wanting to play in this tournament my whole life. And for it to be this close to home in front of a bunch of friends and family to be here, couldn't really ask for anything more.

Q. Has this season more or less been what you expected when you decided on Vermont?

TJ LONG: Yeah, man, I came here to win and have a chance to play in this. And to finally be able to do it, especially with the group of guys I'm doing it with, couldn't be happier.

Q. For TJ and Shamir, you're the two newest guys on the team joining from the transfer portal in the off-season. This is a very consistent Vermont program, third NCAA Tournament in a row, and under Coach John Becker has been a consistent program. Talk about how you've elevated your game.

TJ LONG: I would say just trying to find each other, find kind of roles. Everyone kind of fit together. You know, since we got here in the summer, everybody has been figuring each other out on and off the court. We're a really tight-knit group and it's been a smooth transition for everyone.

SHAMIR BOGUES: To piggyback off what TJ said, ever



since I came on my visit, we all felt like a family and was super close together. I think that's why we've been winning so many games. We are just so put together, so well-coached and everybody just bought in.

Q. In the greater New York area, you know, when you were high school age, there were a lot of Duke fans. Were you a Duke fan growing up?

TJ LONG: I was not a big Duke fan. I rooted against Duke because most of my friends were Duke fans.

Q. Most of your friends were Duke fans?

TJ LONG: Yeah.

Q. Who was your team growing up?

TJ LONG: From the area, I was a big St. John's fan and a big Kansas fan from middle school age.

Q. When TJ transfers in, he's been a productive scorer. How do you see it when new guys show up and how was he able to fit in with everybody?

AARON DELONEY: I think out of the gate, he was really good. I think just following along, following the lead of kind of some of the older guys, showing them the ropes, showing them the way on and off the court. And then on the court, he just gelled with us really well. Great shooter, great scorer.

He would ask me questions, kind of on the court, where to find his spots at, and I would help him with that all season long. He really just gelled with us and it was a smooth transition for him.

Q. As far as guys who joined the program for this year, was there some sorting out about like what roles guys were going to play on the team at the beginning, or did you guys kind of have it down by the time the season started?

AARON DELONEY: I think when everybody came in the summer, every spot was up for grabs. At the beginning of



... when all is said, we're done.®

every season, nothing is guaranteed. So everybody was fighting for a spot. We had all 16 guys in the summer that had an opportunity. Everybody played well. But once the season kind of started and got going, I think we kind of found our rotation guys and just kind of got it from there.

Q. You've been here a couple of times obviously, with the two guys to your left and to your right being transfers in. How has it been for you preparing for this mentally? Do some of the nerves wear off? Talk about being here before and how much that experience has paid off especially with the couple of guys that transferred and it's their first time.

AARON DELONEY: It's been easy for me. Like you said, I've been here a few times and kind of know what to expect. Anticipation for these games are always exciting. Fans always come out and support. My calmness and just knowing that I've been here before kind of helps the young guys settle in. And when they see me, they can get a sense of relaxation, knowing that if our leader is calm, we can be, too.

JOHN BECKER: Thank you very much. It's great to be here. We're really, really excited about the opportunity to be in New York City here, Barclays Center, and playing an historic program in Duke Friday night on CBS. It doesn't get any better than this, and we're really excited for the opportunity.

Q. I've asked a couple other coaches about this. Dusty May in particular has a lot of chatter, a lot of speculation about what's next for him as he goes into coaching his biggest games of the season. I know you've had situations similar to that. I'm wondering how you've handled that when maybe there's been talk about what other opportunities might come your way while you're still coaching games. And I guess the other part of that is why have you decided -- I know you've been asked this before, but why have you decided to stay with Vermont as long as you have?

JOHN BECKER: Yeah, I mean, honestly, there is no distractions for me as far as other job goes at this point. And so that's been pretty easy to deal with because there's really nothing to deal with.

But as far as staying at Vermont, you know, I love it here. I'm really proud of what we've built this program into. I really care about winning and being able to win with great people and be surrounded by great people in a great community. And, you know, I'm loyal. Vermont gave me an opportunity when they were the only people that would ever have hired me 13 years ago.

And so, you know, the right situation's not come up for me and my family, but that really -- I've said this before. You know, it would have to be a special opportunity to consider leaving.

Q. (Off microphone)

JOHN BECKER: Yeah, I mean, the other years where there might have been some stuff going on, yeah, it's very easy for me. Like I'm very focused on the task at hand and with the group, whatever group I'm with. You know, I expect everyone in my program to be all in and focused on the task at hand, and I expect myself to do the same. So that's really -- you know, you have agents and stuff like that to deal with all that noise, and so that's never, ever been a problem for me.

And I'm just trying like heck to figure out a way for us to win some games in the NCAA Tournament. That's a hard enough task, I guess, to figure that out.

Q. It's a question about TJ. Can you sort of speak to the impactfulness of his arrival for your team this season?

JOHN BECKER: Yeah, TJ Long, yeah, Long Island kid that transferred up from Fairfield University, was sixth man of the year in the MAAC last year. He's been incredible for us. I haven't coached a more clutch player than TJ Long, and you know, he's had at least five game winners this year.

I joke with him all the time; he makes all the ones he's supposed to and he misses all the ones in between, it seems like. We are trying to get him to make the ones in between.

He's unbelievable. He's confident as heck. A lot of people in the room probably saw the Yale game where we made that epic comeback where he hit a four-point play to win it with .8 seconds left. There's been countless games. There's five games, at least, where he's made a three in the last minute of the game to win the game.

You know, he's something else, and you know, just his confidence, his ability to score the ball, he's been a huge, huge part of this year's team and this team is 10-4 in games trailing at half. We have overcome numerous double-digits deficits, and TJ is part of that, a big part of that; that confidence that we have we are never out of the game.

Q. A player comes to a program, transfers in. Is it difficult for somebody to, like, fit in with the group that already was there, and particularly, if it's a guy who is

going to be your scorer, who is going to take the shots?

JOHN BECKER: Yeah, I mean, it can be. The interesting thing with us the last two years is we have eight new players on our team this year. We had seven new players on last year's team. The last couple years, it's been unique in the sense there's more new players than old players.

But we also have a really established culture. We had great leadership. TJ, along with all the new players into our program, four transfer, four freshmen, were all bought in right from the beginning. And the transfers came here, we don't have a -- we don't pay players, we don't have that. So we don't have the fancy facilities. We have a winning pedigree, and they all came here for that, the transfers.

So those guys, all four of those guys, three of them are big parts of this year's team as far as the rotation goes. They are all big parts of the team, but the three guys are playing a lot.

They just wanted to learn and wanted to know, you know, whether it was from me, whether it was from Aaron Deloney, our leader, Nick Firiollo, our leader, and TJ, along with the other three guys. It was really cool this summer while we were doing our workouts, if I was to talk to one of the transfers, the other three would run over immediately and just want to hear whatever the question was and what the answer was.

I had this feeling as soon as that stuff was happening, I had never experienced that before. You know, I'd be talking to one kid and look up, and the other three are over his shoulder wanting to hear. I was like, you know, these kids are going to be awesome and special, and this group's got a chance because of the eagerness they all showed in trying to learn whatever it is that we've done to help us be successful.

Q. People talk about a program that's been in the NCAA Tournament in years past, when you are going to be in a position when you're an underdog, what you can build off that. What exactly does that show up like when you have been here in this game before, but then also when you do have transfers, how do you get them to understand that experience that the program has in these moments?

JOHN BECKER: Yeah, I think that's a great question, and the uniqueness is we won it three years in a row. It doesn't really feel like a three-peat because all three of the teams have been completely different. Because as I mentioned, we have graduated so many guys from each of those teams.

So they have all been -- even though they have been three consecutive, it's not like, you know, the -- we three-peated back with Brennan, and that team was together all three of those years. So it was like very familiar year-to-year.

The last three years for us, the teams have been -- the players have been different for the most part. A few have stretched across all three teams, just a couple guys.

And so I think in this situation, the players are drawing a lot from me and the coaches that have been here and through these championships the past three years, and in Aaron and Nick and Sam are the three players that have been involved. They have provided great leadership.

But in a lot of ways, despite the three-peat, it feels like it's the first time this group has done it. And with so many important and impactful transfers, it will be interesting to see how it rears its head on Friday night. So I'm interested to see that, too.

Q. You talked to us a couple days ago and pretty much said everybody this time of year is kind of banged up. Obviously you guys have been dealing with a couple of big injuries. Do you know anything more on Matt's status? Do you know anything more on TJ Hurley's status and I'm assuming Shamir is good to go because we saw him a few minutes ago.

JOHN BECKER: Yeah, Shamir had a 24-hour bug thing earlier this week, but everyone is good to go and will be available and dressed for the game. That's exciting. We haven't said that in a while.

So everyone is good to go.

Q. Spoke with Ileri in the locker room and he said he doesn't know exactly what the score of this game might be but that it will be extremely physical. How has the team embraced that in practice throughout the week and how does that set up this game?

JOHN BECKER: Yeah, I think that's who we have been all year. You know, I think this is maybe my best defensive team I've had. We have two of the best defenders I've ever coached in Ileri and Shamir and a lot of other really good team defenders. And that's kind of how we play. We're tough and physical, and we're going to make you earn everything.

You know, my expectation is, even though Duke will be bigger and stronger and you know, full of McDonald's All-Americans everywhere, we are going to play hard. We are going to make them hopefully earn it and that's who we

have been and hopefully that's who we are Friday night.

Q. When you saw Duke's name, what did you guys feel on watching it on Selection Sunday, and how have you been preparing to go against Duke as their history and their team this past season?

JOHN BECKER: I thought, "Oh, s--- " was my first reaction.

But it's exciting. You've got to play somebody. As a 13 seed, you've got to play someone really good. And so to play Duke -- you know, we played them in 2014 in a Sunday after Thanksgiving in what was probably one of my greatest experiences as a head coach, even though it was a loss, a one-point loss at Cameron, it was a magical day and there's some people in this room that were there, also.

Yeah, to play Duke, we want to play the best and they are obviously one of the best programs in the country, a blue blood. We have a lot of respect for them and watching the tape, they are really, really good and really well-coached. You've got to beat someone Friday night, Barclays, CBS, why not.

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