

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Northwestern vs UConn

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Brooklyn, New York, USA

Barclays Center

**UConn Huskies**

**Coach Dan Hurley**

**Cam Spencer**

**Alex Karaban**

**Tristen Newton**

**Donovan Clingan**

**Stephon Castle**

Media Conference

**Q. All of the above, how does Coach Hurley impress upon you guys not -- how does he get rid of complacency? What does he say and what does he do?**

CAM SPENCER: Yeah, I would say a lot through film study and stuff. He talks a lot about holding ourselves to a standard and playing a full 40 minutes, and we're never perfect in a basketball game. There's always ways to get better. I think just going through all those little things that we can do to be at our best is the way to fight that.

ALEX KARABAN: Yeah, what Cam said. I think Coach Hurley always holds us to the UConn standard that's established here throughout the years. It's important for us to get better, every day. Every practice we have to get to get better and every game we have to get better. If we are not living up to the expectation that he holds us to, he'll let us know. We're really just continuing to get better every day is what is important to him.

TRISTEN NEWTON: Like they said, getting better and holding us to a standard. Everybody is trying to win, and we haven't done much yet. The ultimate goal of this tournament is to win the whole thing. And, you know, the Big East, it was cool and all, but you can't get complacent when you're trying to go for an historic thing. If we are complacent, that's not going to help us achieve what we



want to achieve.

**Q. You squared off with Northwestern twice last year. What have you seen from the Cats when you played them and on tape and what can you bring to your team to learn for this game tomorrow?**

CAM SPENCER: Yeah, I think obviously a different team from last year, but they bring back a lot of the big pieces that they had. I think they are a physical team. They take pride in their defense and how hard they play. Obviously we'll have to bring our A Game and we'll be ready.

**Q. What was last night like for you guys in terms of preparation? What did you do when you went back to the hotel and everything and what are your first impressions on this Northwestern team?**

ALEX KARABAN: When we got back to the hotel, we started doing recovery right away and just recovered our bodies, rested, ate and went straight into film. We started watching Northwestern film and then we started watching film from the Stetson game and what we could have done better and what we did right during that game.

Northwestern, they are a really good team. Their guards are unbelievable and their surrounding pieces are unbelievable and their defense is really good. We have to be ready to play because they have an All-American point guard in Boo Buie and Langborg who played well last night, too. They are a really good team.

**Q. This tournament, how does it feel different from last year? Once you go through that experience of winning a National Championship and going back into the tournament, how does it feel different?**

ALEX KARABAN: The returning guys, especially, we know what this tournament is and we know what's expected from this tournament. We went through the experience of the tournament run last year and we are just trying to pass on our knowledge to the new guys this year. More important, we are just trying to do this whole run again with new guys, and we know how it felt winning it last year and we just want to experience that again.



But we know we've just got to take it day-by-day and just stay with the process. But it's always an exciting tournament. It's the best tournament in the country and it's the best tournament all year, so we are just super excited about it.

**Q. Donovan, you grew up in Bristol. I know you're entirely focused on what you're doing, but Yale is having a nice run, also, obviously. They had an exciting win in the Ivy League and had a big win yesterday. Did you follow Yale much growing up, and do you have anything interesting for folks back home, pulling for both teams -- not asking you to get ahead of yourself, but the prospect of playing each other in the next round?**

DONOVAN CLINGAN: I was always a UConn fan growing up. I've watched Yale, just growing up, they are a good program and stuff. But really, just growing up as a UConn fan and watching UConn, and it's cool to see another school from the area do well?

**Q. You've been putting up numbers and playing really well for two years now. Even your coach says you still fly under the radar. Why do you think you're a little underrated?**

TRISTEN NEWTON: I mean, I guess the guys around me. It's not like I'm the only player on the team. Everybody else, we got two lottery picks and two other NBA prospects on the team, so I'm not the only one on the team. The whole team is getting the recognition it deserves. We're the No. 1 team in the nation. And a lot of people, including ourselves thinks we're the best team in the nation.

And that's the important thing about basketball is the team success. So I'm not really worried about, you know, what others think about myself in particular. As long as we go out there and play well and win games, that's really the important thing to me right now.

**Q. Northwestern is down to two big men. Is there an emphasis to run the offense through you and take advantage of the size advantage throughout this game?**

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Obviously like you said, their big is hurt so I have to do my best to dominate my opponent and my matchup. We really didn't talk about running the offense to me. We are just going to play our game like we usually do and run our offense like we do.

Coach is going to put us in the right and best positions to succeed at a high level, and we are just going to let the

game flow. I know going into this game, my team needs me to dominate my matchup.

**Q. You guys have gone 38-3 in your last 41 games. What does that number mean to you, only three losses, and what do you think has been the key to avoiding upsets especially in a tournament like this?**

ALEX KARABAN: I think it's been an impressive record so far and we are proud of the record, going 38-3 right now, but we have so much more. We have learned a lot throughout those three losses, and those losses really helped shape us into the team we are today, and just looking back on those experiences helped us become a better team.

So really, we wouldn't be where we are without those losses. And, you know, we know what to do if we want to avoid those losses.

TRISTEN NEWTON: Yeah, I agree. Even wins and losses, we learn something new about ourselves and we know what to do and what to build on to get more wins. Those wins really helped us and those losses really helped us, and we are just trying to improve on our record and take it a little farther.

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Yeah, we learned a lot throughout this streak. Different type of games to play, different type of atmospheres. But really it's sticking to the script, focus on the next game, don't get too far ahead of yourselves. Don't be complacent where you're at and just keep focusing on your next opponent.

**Q. Steph, you've guarded some tough guards and Northwestern obviously had a tough guard. What's been your mindset as far as defensively this season?**

STEPHON CASTLE: Just buying into what the coach asked me to do, knowing what my abilities are and that I'm capable of it. And so just trying to lock into it and just really getting the confidence from my teammates. They really believe in me with the assignment, so I'm just trying to embrace it.

**Q. What enables you to be as hungry now as a year ago?**

ALEX KARABAN: We want to experience winning again and we want to experience with the new guys, too, because they haven't felt what it feels like to win a National Championship. ^ Just doing the journey with the new guys is special and that's what continues to get us going every day and continue to add to UConn's history of possibly winning No. 6 for the program is something special.

TRISTEN NEWTON: Yeah, I would agree, like he said, we're trying to make history and the feeling of winning is the best feeling that we could get as a team. And like he said, the new guys, their first year into the program, they have not experienced what the National Championship is like. We want them to experience that because it's an unbelievable feeling that you'll never forget and we want to experience that with this group.

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Yeah, they said most of it, but if you want to be great, if you want to make it to the highest level, you want to keep wanting success. Winning is the best feeling that you can experience in this sport. Like they said, with all these new guys, the young guys, just trying to have them be a part of history and get them to feel that championship feeling.

**Q. Steph, what was your mentality, what allowed you to just fit in when a lot of five stars want to make a name for themselves right away, don't have the patience. Was it your personality or the coach or the team that helped you embrace that?**

STEPHON CASTLE: I would say definitely my teammates, just being around them since day one. You can kind of sense the culture. It's not really a selfish culture. So it really wasn't for me to come in and really think about my own stats or think about how well I played. It was just doing whatever I can to come in and help the team win, and I feel like everybody else had the same kind of approach. So I mean, if you stand out and try to be selfish, you'll stand out for the wrong reason.

**Q. Your brother played his lone college basketball season at Northwestern. Have you had any conversations with him leading up to this game and did he tell you where his allegiances lie for tomorrow's matchup?**

CAM SPENCER: I have talked to him. We have not talked too much about Northwestern, but obviously it's coming full circle to play them in the tournament. We really are appreciative of his one year at Northwestern, and I know he'll be watching from California. But, yeah, I think he's rooting for UConn tomorrow.

**Q. Coming in as a freshman, can you touch on the impact that Coach has had on you looking towards next level and you starting?**

STEPHON CASTLE: It's had a big impact on my confidence. Just, you know, knowing that he believes in me to make an impact for our team and the assignments and roles he's asked me to play. I feel like as a freshman,

that's big time and gives you a lot of confidence going into games like this.

**Q. A lot of people compare the fire in your game to Coach Hurley. Can you talk about what kind of mentor he's been to you this year?**

CAM SPENCER: He's been the best. We are very similar people, very like-minded. I think a lot of that is how we were raised with older brothers and dads who pushed us to be at our best. But you know, I can't say enough great things about him. I'd go to war for him any day of the week, and I think we all would. We really just appreciate him as the coach.

**Q. For the players, how great is it to have the neighboring state of Connecticut, to have the fans come down to New York and Brooklyn and to cheer on the Husky program?**

CAM SPENCER: I think it's huge. One of our goals is to get the 1 seed and to be in Brooklyn because we knew that would be a competitive advantage for us to have our fans be able to come to the neighboring state. I think they have been great for us all year, and I think that's just a big advantage that we have in this tournament.

ALEX KARABAN: Like Cam said, it's a huge advantage for us. We definitely need their support tomorrow. Northwestern, they had a great crowd yesterday and they have a great fan base, as well. It will definitely be a huge advantage for us, and we look forward to hearing the UConn chants tomorrow.

TRISTEN NEWTON: Yeah, I mean, UConn Nation, they always travel well. They give us a good boost of energy that we need to go out there and compete for the games that we play in. So it's a good advantage, and we're going to need them tomorrow night.

DAN HURLEY: Obviously excited to advance and get a chance to play an outstanding Northwestern team. Great coach in Chris, so I've got as much respect for him as anyone in our profession.

So excited to get in here tomorrow night. Maybe have a great UConn -- hopefully a big UConn crowd in here tomorrow night but excited to advance and play.

**Q. How did your father address complacency, and have you studied other great coaches as to how they handled complacency?**

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, my dad, obviously he handled complacency with a constant intensity and a consistent

intensity, and he modelled just a work ethic and a commitment of just pouring everything that he had of himself into his job or into his lifestyle as a coach. I think what you see from every coach, or at least the best ones, is that you can tell that they are -- emotionally, physically, mentally, they pour everything they have into their team, their preparation, rooting out any types of behaviors or habits they believe could potentially undermine the success of an organization or the championship success of an organization.

I read. I'm constantly listening to Podcasts and reading about great leaders. You know, the Nick Sabans, the greatest coaches, the John Woodens, the Bill Parcells, Bill Belichick, anything that I can read or listen to or go and visit and watch. Yes, I'm superstitious; I need my lucky hat. Good hustle, Chris.

**Q. Hassan was obviously a big recruit coming out of high school, and didn't quite live up to the expectations at A&M. What did you guys see out of him that made you think he would be good for you and what has he kind of meant to you this year?**

DAN HURLEY: I think we were torn. We had a lot of guards when he was coming out of high school, but we kind of felt like we might have been making a mistake by not recruiting him.

When he went in the portal and we looked at the end of his sophomore year there, he had a great stretch in the NIT Championship. So he played his best basketball late, and we just felt like Big East guard-wise, he hit the mold: Junkyard dog defensively, a guy with a lot of guts and a lot of heart and a lot of swagger.

He was a guy that performed at a high level in grass roots throughout so the pedigree was there. I just think it takes a special type of guy to play or coach at UConn because there's pressure all the time. We knew we had a guy with the stomach for it.

**Q. His role has obviously expanded this year. What has he meant to you guys this year and what does it say about a guy who was such a big recruit that he's able to play that role?**

DAN HURLEY: That was the biggest question mark about this team coming in. You could see what the starters looked like. That wasn't too hard to project. But the unknown would be the depth part, and could we get to eight deep, nine deep, with quality, you know, to keep us bulletproof.

And we wouldn't be where we are without how he's played

for us, without Samson Johnson, without the emergence of Stewart and what Solomon Ball has done for us throughout the year.

To be able to go eight or nine deep with quality, you're able to survive a bad night from some of your better players because of that depth.

**Q. Northwestern is missing its starting center. Is there an added emphasis in your game plan to get the ball down low to Donovan and using the size advantage?**

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, obviously that's something that in some way, you hope you can take advantage of. They do a great job of scheming from a defensive standpoint with their post traps. You know, the way that they rally to the ball in the paint, they are a tremendous help team. They are very, very physical.

You know, Chris is one of the best, pure tactical coaches in the game. Chris and his staff at both ends of the court. You know, a lot of those things, we may both go into the game feeling like it's an advantage. Obviously they are going to be prepared for us to try to go inside with the basketball.

**Q. Northwestern has beaten the No. 1 team in Purdue in back-to-back seasons. What, if anything, have you taken from those games as you're preparing for the same team tomorrow?**

DAN HURLEY: Just the level that Chris has got his program at, you know, where they could beat the best teams in the country at Northwestern, a program that I guess had not been to the NCAA Tournament in an incredibly long time. And now they are as dangerous an opponent as you can face at this point in the tournament because they have shown the ability to beat the high-end teams.

With what they have on the perimeter, Boo Buie, one of the best guards in the country, All-American caliber player, would be an easy Big Ten Player of the Year if it wasn't for Zach Edey. Obviously Langborg who lit it up last March, and his performance yesterday was tremendous. You know, and then Barnhizer, you know, is a tremendous player. They have got three guys that can go for 20 plus. You win this tournament with tremendous perimeter play.

**Q. About Tristen, and you've mentioned a bunch of times you can't believe how underrated he is. He's gotten some college basketball accolades. You don't see him on draft boards. Wondering why you think he's underrated and do you think real NBA guys know**





**so that when that time comes, he'll have that career?**

DAN HURLEY: Bill Rhoden is the best.

Tristen, I think -- a lot of mock drafts right now, in particular, I think a lot of those are manipulated, a lot of those will change by the time we get closer. And the actual draft will look different because there are a lot of agents jockeying for their clients so they don't lose clients right now because they are not showing up in the mock drafts. They put a lot of pressure on the folks that put those out there.

The analytics people, when you look at most efficient players in the country, I think Tristen ends up somewhere top five in a lot of things in terms of his impact. These front offices, a lot of it is analytics based. A lot of teams value him a lot more than these mock drafts do. He's a first team All-American. He's a guy that obviously was up for Big East Player of the Year and didn't get it, or at least didn't get it from the coaches. Got it from AP.

But yeah, he's 6-5. He rebounds. He facilitates, play makes, and shoots NBA threes with pretty good efficiency, and he's a champion. I think he's going to play in the NBA for 12 to 15 years.

**Q. Your bench was such a key factor in postseason last year. In the last three games, Jaylin Stewart has emerged. Can you talk about how deep your bench has become and the confidence he's gotten in these last three games?**

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, just getting to eight deep and all three guys bringing quality, offensive impact, defensive impact. With Jaylin, he brings 6-7 athleticism and length, multi-positional versatility. For him, he's come on late and added to that big wing, 3-4 matchup problem spot which is what everyone is looking for in the sport. He's a guy that obviously he's going to help us down the stretch here, and big future.

**Q. You and your family have been Connecticut residents for a while. How much have you paid attention to what Yale has done getting through the Ivy League and their win yesterday, and just any fun stories, people back home paying attention to both. And not asking to you get ahead of yourself, but the prospect of you guys playing each other in the next round back in New England?**

DAN HURLEY: That last part is something that hasn't registered. Me and James have been texting since a couple weeks ago. His win in the conference tournament there, incredible. His leadership, his coaching. He's one of

the best out there. One of the most underrated coaches in the country. You know, just a total beast.

And it's just great. It's great for Connecticut. It's great for the state. You know, I know we say Storrs, Connecticut, is the basketball capital of the world, and we don't run from that. But maybe just the State of Connecticut kind of feels like the basketball capital of the world and we add Storrs to New Haven. Maybe we stretch that a little bit right now.

**Q. Northwestern has lost only one game all year by double-digits and came back down two late against FAU. What does it say about the caliber of the team?**

DAN HURLEY: They play in the Big Ten which is one of the best leagues. It's a brutally physical league. I think it speaks to Chris and the class and the pedigree and the culture, and what he's built there is amazing. It's one of the best program-building jobs that we've seen in the last 10, 15 years in our sport. They have got obviously tremendous talent.

But they got the right type of talent, the right type of players. You know, it's just -- I say this about Marquette. I say this about certain people that we get a chance to play. Sometimes when you play against programs that you know, it's a house of cards and just based on having good players and talent, but you know their whole program is a house of card.

You play against a Northwestern or a Marquette, in some ways you feel it's a privilege when you take the court at a program that's got great players and culture and coaching because it's going to be an honorable matchup.

**Q. Northwestern is a slow-paced team, doesn't turn the ball over a lot. The Big East is unique because you play a bunch of teams at different speeds. What have you learned from the slow-paced games in terms of how you run your motion offense and maintain that speed in the halfcourt?**

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I think we are pretty versatile, obviously on stops and off turnovers, and Northwestern is hard to turn over. We feel like we can play any type of game. I don't know that necessarily we prefer, just like a halfcourt -- exclusive halfcourt battle, but we're comfortable in that type of game as well.

We feel like we are efficient enough offensively as the No. 1 offense in the country that we can beat you in a possession game. We feel like bringing in a Top-10 defense, that we can guard people in the halfcourt, and we've excelled in the rebounding game. Not at times yesterday and not versus St. John's at MSG. That was

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

disappointing. Not that I'm still thinking about that, but we feel like we are well-rounded enough that we can win a lot of different types of games.

**Q. Stephon Castle, we've talked about this before, too, but the five-star, comes in to a ready-made team. When you were recruiting him, did you know what you were getting in terms of mentality-wise, that he was not a diva and that he would be able to fit in is, or is that something that you had to cultivate?**

DAN HURLEY: No, I saw his parents, I saw them rip his you know what, multiple times. His parents aren't fans. They hold him accountable and responsible to have an elite work ethic and be coachable and not thinking that the world spins around him at 17, 18 years old.

We knew what we were getting, and NBA teams, you know they salivate over him. We're a balanced team and he doesn't get to show everything in his bag. That's why the NBA teams, when summer starts, they come and watch practices and watch practices throughout the year where he gets a chance to showcase more what he can do.

Game night, you know, because he's on a team that's really high level, obviously he doesn't get a chance to show everything. But he's got the parents, man, and when you've got great parents, it makes our job really, really easy.

**Q. You guys only lost to one non-conference opponent in the last two seasons. Why have you been so successful in that situation?**

DAN HURLEY: I think our uniqueness from an offensive standpoint, I think the lack of familiarity with just the different aspects of what we do from an offensive standpoint, the inside, the outside, the movement, the ball screen game. I think we can come at you in a lot of different ways. So we're tough preparation on short prep time.

I think the biggest thing that makes you bulletproof in tournaments is, you know, if you play elite defense, if you play elite offense, if you're a really, really strong rebounding team, if you play really, really hard, if you share the ball, if you're not reliant on one or two players to carry you, you know, if you've got Young and Murray that prepare these team for opponents as good as most head coaches prepare their teams for opponents, it puts you in a position where you're not too vulnerable.

**Q. Now that we know that you have a lucky hat, can you share with us some of the other things that the national champion coach is superstitious about?**

DAN HURLEY: I mean, you know about the drawers, right. The drawers, the underwear. My wife, she was churning the hand washer last night, and when I left this morning, they were hanging. They looked droopy. But they had the hair dryer on hot and she had a concoction set up to dry them. The socks got holes in them because I'm running the same socks.

And then I got -- I've been running back with the same suit. See, because the problem -- here's why we lost to New Mexico State. Throughout COVID NCAA tournament, that whole thing, that Maryland loss -- the New Mexico State game, I got cute and I tried to wear like a nice blazer and some really like nice shoes, and I didn't wear the same blue suits that I was wearing at Rhode Island.

And when we beat Creighton and played Oregon in that great game and ^ then beat Trae Young at Oklahoma, and then lost that Duke game -- when I was having success in the tournament, I was just wearing that plain blue suit and same dress shirt. I broke it back out last March. I think it's at the dry cleaner. I'm going to wear that until somebody takes me out.

Brutal shoes. Brutal shoes. Brown shoes. Barely have a sole left.

**Q. Have you always carried the superstitions through your career?**

DAN HURLEY: In the coaching. As a player you get out there and just go hoop. But sometimes you're just in the back of the locker room by yourself a lot, everyone else is out there, and it's just you and your thoughts. And you know, you are not going to turn the TV on, so now like your mind is racing.

A lot of the superstition things, the M&Ms and the clothes, it's almost like you're putting on armor. It's almost like watching Rafa Nadal before he serves. He goes through this weird process of things that settles him before he serves the ball. It just kind of takes my mind away from thinking about all the bad things that could happen over the course of the next couple hours.

**Q. Coach Collins talked about knowing your family. Was there a moment you knew he was going to take the Wildcats and reach back-to-back NCAA tournaments?^**

DAN HURLEY: He played like a coach, and anyone that maxes out their playing career the way Chris did -- and we obviously have fathers in common. I don't think there's a coach that I probably could relate to more in our game than



Chris, especially the way our two dads coached.

I mean, our two dads poured every part of themselves and coached with such incredible emotion, passion, intensity. Watching his dad at games get so emotional and knowing how my dad feels at my games, I just think that there's probably not a coach besides my brother that I can relate to in our profession than Chris.

I think we're so similar in so many ways, it feels like you're kind of looking in the mirror.

**Q. Were you a fan of Chris Collins Finnish basketball career?**

DAN HURLEY: I didn't know about that. I thought Duke -- I was talking about when he got to the Final Four. My brother dragged me out there to see Duke -- I don't want the UConn fans hear me talking good about Duke. Yeah, I was a fan in Charlotte when he was in the Final Four playing Arkansas on those teams. Always been a fan of Chris. And Chris recruited my players at St. Benedict's when I was a high school coach. I'm really happy for his success. He's one of the great guys in our business.

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