

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - USF vs Louisville

Wednesday, March 18, 2026

Buffalo, New York, USA

KeyBank Center

**USF Bulls**

**Coach Bryan Hodgson**

**Wes Enis**

**Izaiyah Nelson**

**Joseph Pinion**

Media Conference

**Q. Izaiyah and Joseph, I believe you began at Arkansas State with Coach Hodgson. What made you decide to come with him to South Florida?**

JOSEPH PINION: Whenever I first entered the portal from Arkansas, he was the guy that really recruited me really hard, someone who really believed in me. So that made me go to A State with him. And then he got the new job at South Florida, and I knew it was a no-brainer to go with him.

IZAIYAH NELSON: Same with me. I started my second career at Arkansas State with Bryan Hodgson, so being there two years and the development that my game changed, I decided to follow him when he came to USF.

**Q. Joseph, piggybacking on the whole Bryan Hodgson story, what is it about him that makes him a winner, and do you know his backstory? And how excited has he been maybe bouncing off the walls to be back in Buffalo?**

JOSEPH PINION: He's a really energetic guy. He's a guy that coaches you really hard, and sometimes he'll bring you down but he'll bring you right back up after. He's been excited to get back home. We're going to have a lot of support here. It's going to be almost like a home game, so he's really excited and we're really excited to be playing in Buffalo.

**Q. Guys, you have been over the last month of the season one of the top 10 teams defensively in the**



country and in points per possession allowed. What changed from November until February to have you guys step up defensively the way you have? Wes, the way you guys guarded in Birmingham really kind of isolated the best players on the other team. What's the difference now than at the beginning of the season?

WES ENIS: Yeah, I think after we lost that game to Temple, I think we all came together and knew we needed a better effort defensively. I thought we got punked out of that game. So we all came together and tried to do the T & T stuff a little better, and it's been working out so far.

**Q. Wes, what were the initial discussions with Bryan like once the bracket was revealed on Sunday night? Was it kind of about the matchup or about returning home or both?**

WES ENIS: Yeah, it was just about the matchup with Louisville. They're a great team. They've got great coaches, great players. But we're really excited to be here. We're going to come up with a great game plan that we've been working on. We're excited to get out there and execute it.

**Q. Give me one word to describe Bryan Hodgson and why.**

WES ENIS: Competitor. He wants to win everything at all times. Looking to win at anything he does.

JOSEPH PINION: I would say competitor, too. He's someone that wants to win. He's going to go 100 percent at everything he does, and he's trying to win everything.

IZAIYAH NELSON: I would say he's a dawg. He doesn't like the soft stuff, so he's a dawg.

**Q. What is it that has made Bryan such a good recruiter over the years? He's become known for that. What is it that he does to get you guys in the house?**

JOSEPH PINION: He has a persistent effort. He's always texting you, telling you how he can make you better, how you can come here and you can elevate your game. So I feel like that's one thing that really makes him different from a lot of places. He just shows you how you can get



better, what you're bad at right now, how they're going to fix it when you get here. And I think that's one thing that really helps his recruiting.

**Q. He's sort of been recruited -- I don't know how much you guys pay attention to that -- with other schools looking at him as a coach. Has he referenced that? What do you guys think when you hear that, or do you pay any attention to other schools trying to get him?**

IZAIYAH NELSON: Does it look like we pay attention to any of that? We're out here playing basketball. We don't get into those kind of things. We come out here every day, grinding, working hard, and just keeping our head down, worrying about the next game.

**Q. Has he ever addressed it with you guys? Does he talk about it?**

IZAIYAH NELSON: No, when it comes to situations like these, we try to stay away from social media because everything is fake. Everybody goes on social media and says anything, and it's been happening for the last couple years. It's the same ol' things every year. When a coach is having a great career, schools tend to just make up false information and things like that.

We just try to not pay attention to it and focus on basketball and the games ahead.

**Q. What's it mean to have South Florida in the tournament for the first time in, I believe, it's like 14 years? What's it meant to you guys to be part of this class?**

WES ENIS: Yeah, it means a lot to us and a lot to our fan base. But yeah, all the hard work we did in June, July, it all pays off to now, so we're super, super grateful for this opportunity. It means a lot to all of us. We all came together and this was one of our goals, so we're able to check that off the list.

**Q. For the people who may be tuning in this week and watching you guys for the first time, how would you guys describe the way you guys play as a team and how much that is sort of an embodiment of the personality Bryan has put into this team?**

IZAIYAH NELSON: We play fast, and we like to have fun. We like to put on a show every time.

If you see how he coaches on the court, if you've seen the last couple games, you see he brings a lot of energy. When he brings energy, it just brings another fire into us

because we know he's got our backs and he knows we've got his. So anything he does, we're going to do it 10 times better.

**Q. For Wes, you mentioned the goals you guys had at the beginning of the season. What else was on that list?**

WES ENIS: Yeah, of course win the regular season conference tournament, but just come together as a team and making runs. Hopefully we can make a little run here in March Madness. That's definitely one of our goals. Just kind of win the regular season conference tournament and doing all those things to get us to this place that we are now.

**Q. Can y'all describe your conference tournament experience? How was practice? How locked in were you guys? How well did you guys perform?**

IZAIYAH NELSON: We came out to be here, so our performance, it shows. And locked in, we've been locked since day one getting into Tampa and coming to USF. It's nothing new. When all 15 guys committed to USF, we all had the same goal and the same plan. So we showed.

**Q. Coach, if you want to open up with a statement and then we'll take questions.**

BRYAN HODGSON: Yeah, first and foremost, God is good. Very fortunate to be back home in western New York, see a lot of familiar faces. I'm going to have 38 family members at the game. It's amazing. This is home. So embracing being back here and preparing the guys for the weather a little bit. We're eating some good local food.

But most importantly, just honored to have the opportunity to coach in the NCAA Tournament and give these young men in my locker room a chance to experience something that I've been able to experience as an assistant. It's obviously the best sporting event in the world, and they deserve that opportunity.

Just icing on the cake to be able to do that back here at home in western New York in front of friends and family, and really looking forward to the opportunity of playing against a very good Louisville team.

**Q. Can you put your journey into perspective, just where you began, to be adopted, to be at UB, to be an assistant coach, and now with your family and your dad being able to see you for the first time as a head coach here in Buffalo?**

BRYAN HODGSON: Yeah, all I can do is thank God. I



mean, I'm a believer, was raised in a Christian home, and raised by phenomenal parents who enabled me to chase my dreams. Going through what I went through as a child -- I tell our players all the time, in life we all have experiences, positive and negative, and we have the opportunity to determine whether we want to use those negative experiences in one of two ways. That's as a crutch or as a ladder.

The people that use those experiences as a crutch to make excuses for their shortcomings, quite frankly, the world doesn't care. If you use those negative experiences to grow and better yourself, use them as a ladder, you're going to be successful.

Did I have the worst childhood in the world? No, no. I had some traumatic experiences, but I had people around me that were there to catch me. The Hodgson family are the center of that.

Taken into foster care as a two-year-old, it's kind of hit me more now as an adult than it ever did in my life because I have a two-year-old son. So when I pick him up and I hold him, I just think about what happened to me and what kind of person it takes to do that. I was set on a burning wood stove in Olean, New York, at two year olds as punishment for wetting my diaper and left with burns down my entire leg.

It's also a memory. I still have those scars on my legs. I've got one on each leg, and they used to take up my entire back thigh, and now they're about the size of a 50-cent piece. It serves as a reminder of where I come from and the people in my life that have provided me this opportunity. Because that's what life is about is our support system and the people that believe in us.

I often joke with my parents -- people talk about my recruiting. I said my mom and dad are the best recruiters in the country because they signed me. That's obviously a joke, but they've always supported me no matter what.

Quite frankly, if you see my family, we don't look alike. They're all normal-sized humans. My sisters, they played sports, they played softball, and nobody in the family played basketball. My brother was valedictorian of his class. He went to St. Bonaventure on a full academic scholarship. Just trying to be a good big brother with the huge age difference between the two of us, he would pick me up on Saturday mornings to St. Bonaventure basketball games.

That's where I fell in love with the game. I'd go to my home where sometimes there were 10 foster children plus my parents' own children, and the basketball court behind our

house was kind of my place of peace. I fell in love with the game.

So just to see it come full circle, I give all the thanks in the world to my Lord and savior Jesus Christ and my parents because without what they did for me, I wouldn't be here talking to you.

**Q. You spoke about it a little bit there and of course on Selection Sunday, but just talk to me about the odds, obviously, of making the tournament, having it here in Buffalo, and again, the emotions of being able to see your dad in the crowd?**

BRYAN HODGSON: Yeah, it's unbelievable. But again, I'm a believer, and there was something -- I'll tell you this: A good, good friend of mine called me -- one of the few people that I'd pick up the phone for the night before our conference championship game. And he called me, and he said, I'm just telling you right now, you're going to win this thing tomorrow and you're going to play in Buffalo, New York. I'm like, man, that would be amazing. That would be the icing on the cake.

We win the conference tournament, and the way the American Conference tournament is set up, we win the game and we literally go straight from the game to, like, they turn on the selection show on the Jumbotron and that's where we watch it. We didn't have a selection show party or anything. But you're watching it in the arena.

I literally got back to the locker room -- after greeting people and doing a couple media interviews, got back to the locker room just in time to grab my phone and put on my Love Wins hoodie to honor Coach Amir. I turn the corner to come out and sit down with my players to look up at the Jumbotron, and immediately, the second I sat down, they announced South Florida playing Louisville in Buffalo, and my heart just dropped, in a very positive way.

It's unbelievably full circle moment for me, as far as the odds to -- I know I'm giving you a long answer to a short question, but I'm guessing very low odds for this to happen.

But I think it's all part of God's plan, to be honest with you.

**Q. What do you think about the fact that you are the first coach from western New York to start your tournament here since Jim Boeheim in 2014?**

BRYAN HODGSON: I haven't thought about that. I think I'm pretty lucky. There's some really good basketball coaches out of western New York. We're all in a group chat together. Carlin Hartman, associate head coach and a great Florida Gators team. Adam Cohen, Buffalo, New



York, guy, picked up a win last night as an assistant at Texas. Kevin Kuwik, the list goes on. Rob Lanier is in our league.

We're all in a group chat together. We're all Bills fans, we talk about missing the food back home sometimes. It's been special. I've heard from each of them.

But it's obviously a pretty cool opportunity.

**Q. Over the last month of the season, you've been one of the top 10 teams in the country defensively by the metrics. What changed from the beginning of the season and how has this team defensively improved so much while you're flying the plane in the air with a whole new roster and everything as the season has gone on?**

BRYAN HODGSON: Yeah, I'm just a firm believer that's just what good teams do. They get better and they play their best basketball in February and March. I said it in my press conference. I said it after some losses early on in the non-conference. We don't want to lose. We're not volunteering to take an L in any games. But if you can learn from them and become better, you truly want to play your best basketball in February and March.

We obviously got the fourth-longest active winning streak in college basketball, and it's not by coincidence. Our guys have been locked in. They're very process driven. They're extremely selfless, and they wake up every morning with an intent to get better. That's really showed on the court.

**Q. Coach, when you do well, sometimes your name comes up for other jobs. It's certainly not a good time of the year for that to happen. How have you dealt with that? Have you had to deal with any schools reaching out to you? Do you even address it with the team a little bit just to say, hey, don't worry about it?**

BRYAN HODGSON: Yeah, I'll say this: Time of the year doesn't matter. It's part of it, right? That just comes with it. It's a blessing to be wanted.

What I'll tell you is that I'm the head coach of the University of South Florida, and this university, this athletic department and those young men are going to get every ounce of energy and attention that I have.

I understand that you have to ask that question, and I get it. But I can promise you one thing, that there is no distraction, there's no noise. This is the most focus and locked-in group I've ever been around.

I had somebody ask me a similar question the other day at

my press conference when we returned home from the conference tournament championship. My answer to them was, did we look distracted on Saturday and Sunday in those games? We obviously did not, and neither am I.

It's a blessing to be wanted. I can tell you right now that my sole focus is on winning basketball games and enjoying every single second with this group of young men I have right now. Because where we're at in college athletics is just, period, I'll never coach this team again after this year. You're going to lose guys every year; that's college basketball. So they're going to get everything I have, and that's the bottom line.

**Q. Coaching Love, Inc., I first learned about this during the TBT a few years ago. Can you explain the mission and what you're most proud of accomplishing with that, and also Joseph and Izaiyah, what made you bring them from Arkansas State to USF with you?**

BRYAN HODGSON: Yeah, first with Coaching Love, I found myself once -- growing up in Jamestown, New York, Scott Kindberg is a local sportswriter there for the Post Journal, and Scott asked me to do an article to talk about my childhood around the holidays.

I had never really talked about my childhood before because, quite frankly, it was just something that I didn't want to talk about. At first, I told Scott that I probably didn't want to do it then, either.

Then Scott kind of said something that hit home, and he said, Coach, Jamestown is going through a tough time right now, it's a tough city. I think there's some people here, especially some youth, that could really find some value and some hope in your story.

So he wrote the article and it was titled A Gift of Hope, and it talked about my parents adopting me and the gift that they gave me. He released it around Christmas.

From that story, I ended up getting asked to do a bunch of media regarding my childhood and experience as a foster child and adoption. It kind of started to hit home, what I mentioned earlier about how we use our experiences. I had made a decision that I'm going to use my childhood experience to help others.

Foster care is brutal. Oftentimes foster children are left going home to home with nothing but the clothes on their back and hopefully a pillow and a few outfits. Really when you're talking about athletics, my big thing is, and I'll say Greg Byrne, athletic director at the University of Alabama said this best, he has a picture in his office that he would always share with recruits, and it was a real picture and it



was a building on fire. I'm sorry I don't remember the name of the college, but this was way back in the day.

But there was a building on fire behind a crowd of people watching a football game. Nobody was turned around looking at the fire.

What he always talks about look at this picture. Nobody is worried about what's going on behind them, they're watching the game. He said, this is the one thing in our country right now that brings people together. It doesn't divide people.

I talked about USA hockey, the win a couple weeks ago. People were in bars watching that game, they weren't asking each other about race, religious belief, political affiliation. They were all cheering on USA.

Sports is such a big deal and a good way to unite people and let people feel a part of something. I wanted to try to find a way to help foster children. Because, to be honest with you, foster parents can't afford to provide opportunities in sport, individual lessons, cleats, baseball bat, gloves. That's not an option. I didn't have that as a child. I took the stuff that was free, and we were very fortunate to have people help us.

Founded Coaching Love in an effort to try to bridge that gap. I haven't done a good enough job of it. I've moved three times in the last five years, and so I'm really going to put my best foot forward on that moving forward to try to even bridge that gap even more.

We've done some camps and clinics and provided some sports equipment, but there's so much more that I can do and we can do as an organization. Two of my assistants are on my board. They're full believers in what we're doing.

My proudest moment was the TBT that you mentioned. Originally Coaching Love was brought up to help kids in foster care, but Buffalo was going through a really tough time. We had that horrible, horrible shooting at Tops market. I didn't live here. Obviously I'm from western New York, but I was in Alabama and it just hurt because A, that wasn't Buffalo. Obviously that person was not from here.

Buffalo had this horrible image around it, and it was a tragedy. I got with our players that played for us at the University of Buffalo, and we were playing in the TBT and we just wanted to make it about something bigger than us.

Combined with Coaching Love, that TBT team, Blue Collar U, we wore the names of the victims on the back of our jerseys and we honored them in every game we played

nationally televised in that event. We won the event. And then following the event, myself and my assistant, Jamie Quarles, who was an assistant at the University of Buffalo went to each individual's family home and sat down with them and presented them with that jersey.

It was a very, very sad time, obviously hearing those stories, but also, just being able to see a smile on their face and present them with that framed jersey and share some memories with them, it was something that I'll remember for the rest of my life.

**Q. What do you recall from 2018 with Buffalo winning that game as a lower seed and maybe how being in that position is different than the next year with Buffalo, some of your times at Alabama. And similar to that, navigating through that TBT tournament, winning that single elimination style tournament, what can you bring from those experiences into coaching your team tomorrow?**

BRYAN HODGSON: Yeah, you come in with a chip on your shoulder and an edge. When we beat Arizona, our guys got on that plane from the Buffalo airport full heartedly believing we were going to go in there to win that game.

My guys in that locker room right now feel the same way. We know that we're here because of the work we've put in. There's no luck. I've got a great group of young men that believe in their abilities. They're confident in their abilities because, quite frankly, they work, and for us confidence comes from work.

Louisville is a great basketball team, but I've got the best assistant coaches in the country, and I've got a great group of young men in that locker room that believe in themselves and believe in the University of South Florida basketball team. They'll be ready to go tomorrow at 1:30.

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