

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

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Buffalo, New York, USA

KeyBank Center

Louisville Cardinals
Coach Pat Kelsey
Ryan Conwell
J'Vonne Hadley
Isaac McKneely
Adrian Wooley

Media Conference

Q. You guys, all four of you, are great scorers, but this team can really score all around. Talk about what it means to have so many people at this team that can score so well at any level.

RYAN CONWELL: I mean, I would say I think it just makes it easier on all of us. Just being such a diverse team, being able to score in a multitude of ways, I think it just allows all of us just to get more open looks. As long as we continue to trust each other and play off one another, we'll continue to be effective out there on the floor.

Q. J'Vonne, last year in this situation you guys lost in the first round to Creighton. What are you looking to do this year? What's the mentality for this one?

J'VONNE HADLEY: Yeah, I would say first and foremost, thank you to God for being here. None of us would be here without him. He's just making all this possible, so we're extremely grateful for that.

Like you touched on, last year we lost in the first round to Creighton. Creighton was a really good team. South Florida is a really good team. Expect another really good matchup. Just continue to worry about us, continuing to stay healthy, be mentally and physically prepared for what the game is about to be, and we'll be ready.

Q. That ACC Tournament you guys were just in, you've lost to Miami in the quarterfinals, but how do



you feel like that game helped you in the ACC Tournament overall and just conference play helped you get prepared for March Madness this year.

ISAAC McKNEELY: Miami is a really good team. Obviously we wanted to win the ACC championship, but you've always got to have a positive lens on everything. I think it could have been a blessing in disguise, gave us a little more rest coming into the tournament. Obviously March Madness is the big thing. You want to win the ACC, but this is the big deal that you want to get prepared for.

Coach Kelsey and everybody scheduled a tough schedule all season long to prepare us for this moment. We've been working really hard. Since June 5th, when we walked on campus, we've been working really, really hard for this moment. So we're prepared, we're ready to go, and can't wait to play.

Q. You just talked about it, Coach Kelsey, a veteran head coach, talk about playing under him this year and how he's been as a coach.

ADRIAN WOOLEY: It's been amazing, just learning from him, with all the experience that he has. Due to me coming from a mid major, getting coached by a high major coach is very special, just learning as I go.

Q. I'm curious to know, is there any professional players in other sports besides basketball that kind of influence your game or help you, motivate you to get a good win?

ADRIAN WOOLEY: I ain't got nobody in another sport. I would say Kobe Bryant in my sport because I don't really watch any other sports. But Kobe Bryant because it's a mentality.

J'VONNE HADLEY: That was a good question. I haven't heard that one before. But no, I don't have one, by the way.

ISAAC McKNEELY: I can't think of one off the top of my head.

Q. Maybe an NBA player or a March Madness legend that you guys look up to, inspired to maybe have a



good run in the tournament?

J'VONNE HADLEY: I would say shout out to my dawg, KJ Simpson. He's one of my old Colorado teammates, he's in the NBA, shout out to him. He inspires me. We're old teammates, so I talk to him often. But being able to talk to someone at the next level, obviously that's where you want to get to, so I'm inspired by him.

Q. What's one word to describe Coach Kelsey?

ISAAC MCKNEELY: Energetic.

J'VONNE HADLEY: Upbeat.

RYAN CONWELL: I would say passion.

ADRIAN WOOLEY: Yeah, I'll go with energetic.

J'VONNE HADLEY: I'll go with determined, actually.

ADRIAN WOOLEY: Yeah, very determined.

Q. What is a song that best describes Coach Kelsey?

ISAAC MCKNEELY: Probably like some heavy metal rock music. I feel like that's always playing in his head constantly, especially in practice. He's one of a kind for sure.

J'VONNE HADLEY: Yeah.

Q. For Ryan and Isaac, both of you guys are transfers to Louisville this year. Talk about this year for you guys. From the transfer portal to joining Louisville, how has it been getting accustomed throughout the year?

RYAN CONWELL: Man, it's just been nothing but a blessing for me, just to be in this position, just to be playing here at Louisville and just to be playing with a great group of guys. I'm just super thankful.

The transition, they made it easy for me. They just welcomed me in, allowed me to be myself. I just have grown so much, not only as a player, but just as a man throughout the season. I mean, I'm just thankful to just even have made it this far, and we just pray to make it further.

ISAAC MCKNEELY: Yeah, coming out of high school, I committed to Virginia, I played there three years. I never would have dreamed I would have transferred. When I committed to Virginia, I was expecting there to be there four years and graduate from there.

God works in mysterious ways and he challenged me last year with a coaching change, and Coach gets fired at the end of the year, so I'm wondering what I want to do. And decided to enter the transfer portal, and it was probably the best decision I ever could have made.

Coming to Louisville with these guys, with this coaching staff has just been a blessing for sure, and I've had one of the best years of my life, no doubt.

Q. Ryan, obviously you started your career at USF and I know it's been a few years and some coaching changes, but what are your memories of that year? There's been some championships since you left. Do you still follow the team, and is it still something you pay attention to?

RYAN CONWELL: Yeah, actually I do just a little bit. I will catch their game from time to time, just having played there my freshman year. It was a great experience for me. I think I actually just grew up a lot as a man, as well as just being far from home, as I'm from Indianapolis, and going all the way down to Tampa my freshman year.

It was a great experience for me. And I mean, we didn't have the best year, but I'm thankful for everywhere that I've been throughout my whole journey. I feel like it's a huge reason why I'm here today and have made it to this point. Yeah, I keep up with them from time to time, but yeah.

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

PAT KELSEY: Excited to be here. I tell people all the time, recruits, whoever, the national tournament, the NCAA Tournament, March Madness, it's the best spectacle in American sports in my opinion. And to be a part of it once again, we feel very, very fortunate.

Our team is excited. We've had a couple really good days of preparation, and excited about the opportunity tomorrow.

Q. The question that I'm sure you're anticipating: We talked to Mikel in the locker room. He said definitely not Game 1. He sounded like he didn't want to rule out Game 2. What do you think about his status?

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, our people, our medical people handle -- they did everything in their power over the last couple weeks and especially these last several days since the ACC Tournament with the hope of playing this weekend, and we're just not there.

The health and well-being of our players is always first and



foremost. During the recruiting process, this was one of the things Kel talked about all the time is the opportunity to play in March Madness under these really big lights, and he wants to play really bad. He's just not there physically right now.

Q. Could he play this weekend if he needed to?

PAT KELSEY: We're going one day at a time. He is not playing tomorrow. Beyond that, I can't comment right now.

Q. With Mikel and his status, obviously it's been in limbo for the past few weeks. I know you have some senior guards to rely on, but what are the difficulties in practice when it's win or go home and you're not sure if one of your stars is going to be there?

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, the unfortunate thing is those guys in the locker room right now are answering questions about that instead of their experience of playing in the national tournament. Kel is a big part of our team, and he's a beloved member of our team, and he's a beloved teammate. He's got very, very close friends in that locker room. It's just unfortunate he's not able to play.

There's been a big chunk of the season when he wasn't able to play, as well, and I'm really proud of our guys for adjusting and stepping up.

Man, that happens in sports and in life; injuries occur. Those guys never blinked, they never wavered. When someone goes out of the lineup, no matter who it is, everybody on the team has to adjust a little bit. Roles change a little bit. Obviously Kel plays point guard, so Adrian Wooley and Ryan Conwell and Kobe Rodgers, I think, have done a fantastic job of assuming that role of being the quarterback on the floor.

Ryan and Adrian sort of tag team it in our starting lineup. Kobe has done an unbelievable job coming off the bench and being a catalyst for us on both ends of the floor for the entire year.

Look, we have never and we never will make any excuses and give any explanations. The guys that are able to play tomorrow and that are healthy are bright eyed, bushy tailed and they're excited about playing in the national tournament. They've had a couple of phenomenal days of practice.

We know we play a very, very dangerous opponent that's hitting on all cylinders. They won a million games in a row. Very, very well-coached, and our guys are locked in, and we're excited about the opportunity.

Q. Could you speak about tomorrow's game stylistically, how both teams play or want to play, and what you think the matchup is going to be like with those styles?

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, I think it's two teams with very similar philosophies. Both value pace. They play at a fast pace. We play at a fast pace.

Obviously they play on the attack. They attack the basket. Similar to us, they value the three-point shot. They value offensive rebounding. They do all of that very, very well. I think it's two teams that have similar styles and philosophies.

I can tell you this: Both the people that are here in the building and then the people that are watching around the country at home on their television or wherever the heck they're watching it, they're going to be entertained. It's going to be a really, really fun game.

That's the cool thing about the tournament. It's like, I used to talk my mom into, I got a little bit of a cold and a headache this morning, I don't feel well, so I could sit home and watch the games all day. But it's what's so cool about it.

They don't have TVs anymore on the rollers like they did back in the 80s when I went, but they'd always roll the TV into the hallway and everybody would come out and sit and watch the NCAA Tournament, March Madness. I think it's probably one of the least productive business days in America, in corporate America. It's probably one of the least productive days in academia.

That's what makes it so great. The sports mindset in America is locked on this great event. And we play a good team tomorrow. We're a good team, and we're excited.

Q. You've had a lot of success in your first two years at Louisville. I was wondering what a coach needs to have in place when he takes over a program, maybe especially in terms of NIL or other financials, in order to be successful at the Power Four level?

PAT KELSEY: You need to have a commitment from your administration, starting with the president of the university, all the way down, to be successful in Power Four basketball right now. There's no doubt about that.

I'm fortunate to have the best job in the entire country, in my opinion. Basketball, sports, Louisville athletics is the centerpiece, it's the heartbeat of this great American city that sits right on the Ohio River, right over from the state of Indiana. I don't know how else to describe it; it's a glorious



place.

I've lived elsewhere for many, many years throughout my life, grew up not too far from it, coached with a bunch of different places around the country, but I haven't been to a place like Louisville where it stands still when the Cardinals play. It stands still. When we win, it is bright blue skies and sunny; and when we lose, there's a cloud over it. People are in a bad mood walking around town. That's what makes it great. Because of the passion that people have.

I can't tell you, man, how many times since I got the job here people come up to me almost emotionally and talk about they were at the National Championship game in '80 or '86 or 2013 or the first game they went to at Freedom Hall with their grandfather or their uncle or their mom or their dad, whoever. They can with great clarity say exactly where they were when they fell in love with the Cardinals.

Because of all that, to get back to your original question, the university, our athletic department, our administration understand our sports programs being successful is the lifeblood of our city. Now, that weekend in May when the Kentucky Derby is happening, the city stands still and it's all about thoroughbred racing. But the other 364 days of the year, it's about the stinking Cardinals.

I'm blessed to have leadership in Josh Heird, our athletic director; Dr. Bradley, our president; Larry Benz, the chair of the board of trustees and all of the trustees. They want University of Louisville to be great, and for University of Louisville to be great, our athletic department has to be great. And I'm just so fortunate and lucky to be the head coach.

Q. What have you seen from USF's Izaiyah Nelson on tape, especially on the defensive end? What kind of force is he, and how can you avoid him or keep him less impactful in the game?

PAT KELSEY: Terrific player. Terrific player. Extremely decorated. He was unanimous Player of the Year in their conference. He was unanimous Defensive Player of the Year in their conference for a reason, because he's an extremely dangerous, effective player. And we've got to be at our best to deal with him because he's very good.

Q. With everything going on in the college basketball landscape, whether it's the transfer portal, coaching portal now obviously is a new thing, NIL, and what have you, how do you keep the main thing the main thing?

PAT KELSEY: Man, that's a great question. You keep the

main thing the main thing by keeping the main thing the main thing.

I made a commitment to myself that when this landscape changed, I wasn't going to change. You have to adapt, but like, my core beliefs are still -- the head basketball coach at a university, these are college-aged kids. I still believe, and I think many coaches believe this, that we have an opportunity to impact and affect our players' lives in a way that professional level or that age can't.

The late great Skip Prosser, who was my mentor, used to quote Ralph Waldo Emerson and he used to say: Our chief want in life is someone who can make us do what we can.

I've always reminded myself of that quote because Skip always thought that's what the best teachers do.

That's what I think I am. I'm teaching this game of basketball, and you'd better win. If you don't win, not only at the Power Four level, at any level, your kids don't eat and you get fired; I understand that.

But it's on a daily basis, pouring into our players and instilling values that are not only going to make them successful in their professional endeavors or in their passion in the game of basketball, but that's going to help them to be successful in life.

Man, that sounds corny and it sounds like coach-speak, but just because millions of dollars are at play -- and when I'm sitting in the locker room and I'm looking around and guys are making a lot of money, I really don't look at them like millionaires. I still look at them like my students.

They're my players and they're my students, and it's my job to lead them in the best way possible so that when they finish, they go back home and they go back with their parents, wherever they go back to, they're better because of the experience they had with my staff and me.

I'm passionate about that. I get that question all the time. Now that all this money is in play -- no, no. The best coaches are great teachers. That's what I strive to be every day.

Q. I want to go back to last year, you guys lose in the first round to Creighton, and you're an experienced coach, you have an experienced squad. Heading into this year's March Madness, do you look at it as redemption, a chip on your shoulder, or is it a brand-new clean slate, we're just looking at this year?

PAT KELSEY: To be honest with you, I haven't thought of



that specific game, and you mentioned the team we played, at all. It's all about tomorrow's game, tomorrow's opponent, what we need to do to put our players in the best position to beat a really, really good South Florida team tomorrow.

Our whole philosophy is based on the next thing being the most important thing and pouring our whole heart and soul into that next thing, whether it's the shootaround thing we're about to go do, which is a really cool thing, the practice we're going to go to after we're finished, the film session and the walk-through that we're going to have tonight.

The philosophy is built around the process, being elite all the time, and the results take care of themselves. We're excited about the opportunity tomorrow.

Q. You have two players on your roster that had some time at USF, Ryan Conwell and Kasean Pryor. Obviously different coaching staff, different situation. Ryan has had incredible impact on the team, Kasean, maybe some ups and downs with injuries. Could you speak about what both of them have done for your team?

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, Kasean had a very, very unfortunate injury last year, and it was a significant, severe injury. He was playing probably the best basketball of his career down in the Bahamas when he got injured, and it was like a football injury. Usually in basketball it's a pivot. It was like one of those football-type injuries.

Rehabbed his butt off, and by the time he came back, our team was really in rhythm, roles had kind of been established, and he had some setbacks in terms of his recovery. He wasn't cleared to play until at least a month and a half, two months into the season.

But I think he's done a really good job of -- although the role that he has hasn't been ideal from his standpoint, he's kept a good attitude and he's continued to be a good teammate. And he's stayed ready. His name was called in the ACC Tournament when Kel wasn't playing, but then Isaac McKneely had a bunch of staples in his head when he had that collision and went in and played really well for us.

Obviously losing his coach, even though he came here last year and it was a very sad loss for the basketball community, that affected him in a major way, as well. I know in the South Florida area, he's going to be remembered and beloved for a long time.

Ryan, geez-o-Pete, one of the best leaders I've ever been

around. When your best players are your best workers, your most committed, your best teammates, like, you got something. That's how Ryan Conwell is.

He's our leading scorer, but you would never know it. He has this habit -- not this habit -- this tradition of -- Kate the great, our trainer, who I think is one of the best trainers in the country, she has this big tackle box with all of her medical supplies in it. Ryan Conwell everywhere we go, when we load the bus, when we get it off the bus, when we take it to the game, Ryan Conwell carries this big ol' stinking tackle box with tape and Band-Aids and all kind of crap in it because that's just who he is. He serves others. He's about others. He loves his teammates passionately and would do anything for them. That's Ryan Conwell.

I won't coach many like him, as special as Ryan. He's a special, special young man.

Q. Can you speak to how unique a situation this is for Bryan Hodgson, to not only make the NCAA Tournament but to be playing his first game in Buffalo?

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, I have a ton of respect for Bryan. Bryan started in coaching -- he was a junior college coach and grinded and really went about reaching this level and this level of success the hard way. It's not like he landed on second base or something. No. He grinded.

He has the respect of everybody in our profession because going that route is the hard way. I started at the mid major level and worked my way up, but it's even harder to start at the junior college level and work your way up.

The thing I want to tell you is there are amazing level coaches at the junior college level. Amazing. What I hope happens -- and I think it will because of people like Bryan, who started there and then obviously became an unbelievably successful assistant coach and then became the coach at Arkansas State -- that athletic directors and presidents in the country will not be afraid to look at that level for head coaching talent. Because there is a lot there, I can promise you that. But he's done a great job.

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