

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - North Dakota State vs Michigan State

Wednesday, March 18, 2026

Buffalo, New York, USA

KeyBank Center

**North Dakota State Bison
Coach David Richman**

Trevian Carson

Noah Feddersen

Andy Stefonowicz

Damari Wheeler-Thomas

Media Conference

Q. Damari and Noah, as seniors, how does it feel to fully be here at the NCAA Tournament?

NOAH FEDDERSEN: Feels really good. Like you said, it's our fourth year and we've been working all these years to get here, so to be here feels really good.

DAMARI WHEELER-THOMAS: I agree with that, exactly what Noah said.

Q. Damari, the big stage, do you have to put that out of your mind?

DAMARI WHEELER-THOMAS: Yeah, it's the same as every other game. We're going to treat it that way, too.

Q. Damari, from redshirting, you had starter minutes the year before, take the year off. What did you learn in that time off heading into the season?

DAMARI WHEELER-THOMAS: Just looked at it as like a mental thing, being able to watch it from a coaching perspective. Pretty much that's all it was to it, and it worked out for us in the end.

Q. Noah and Andy, talk about getting Damari back this year and the difference that made for the season and just you guys having the year that you did with a lot of new bodies and some returners, too.



NOAH FEDDERSEN: Yeah, obviously it was really big for us, both on and off the court. On the court to have someone back that had a lot of experience starting at the head guard position and really helped to lead us; and then off the court we had a lot of new guys come in, being one of the main guys to bring those guys into the team and into the family and show them how we do stuff.

ANDY STEFONOWICZ: Yeah, him taking the year off last year, he was still very involved with the team and just giving advice at practice, kind of always in our ear. Even though he wasn't playing, he still played a big role in that.

Q. Damari, you grew up in Chicagoland area. I'm wondering how much you knew about Jeremy Fears when you guys were coming up. I think you're maybe a year ahead of him. What have you seen on tape about him as a player that can be good and bad for you guys?

DAMARI WHEELER-THOMAS: I'd say they like to push the ball in transition, so we need to make sure we're on top of that. As a team in general, they're big, physical, and we need to match that as much as we can to make it a game for us.

Q. Do you know Jeremy?

DAMARI WHEELER-THOMAS: Not personally. Probably friends of friends, stuff like that.

Q. Trevian, talk a little bit about watching some Michigan State film and what you see on film, what's going to be the challenges for you guys today?

TREVIAN CARSON: Just limit them in transition. Like Damari said, they're a big athletic team, like to push the pace, so just try to contain them as much as we can, do our thing.

Q. We had your coach on last week on one of our shows, and he says he's terrible at this answer, so I'm going to ask you guys. What is the song that best describes him?

TREVIAN CARSON: We've got to start with Damari.



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DAMARI WHEELER-THOMAS: I would probably say some type of country song. Any blue collar stuff like that, all that kind of stuff is him, anything like that.

ANDY STEFONOWICZ: Yeah, I'd say country or maybe Thunderstruck. That's kind of like our school song.

NOAH FEDDERSEN: Yeah I would say that one, too. He loves that song.

Q. Coen Carr, I think, a 51 inch vertical jump, can you imagine such a thing and what kind of challenge does that present?

NOAH FEDDERSEN: Yeah, definitely a different type of athlete than we see in our league. Like TC said, we've got to work to contain that. A lot of that's going to be on the offensive rebounding, got to make sure we make hits on him so he's not getting any putbacks. And in transition building those walls on all of their guys because they really like to push the ball.

Q. Noah, what changed for you when you went from being a starter to coming off the bench and eventually the Sixth Man of the Year in the league? Was there something with you that changed or what happened there?

NOAH FEDDERSEN: Yeah, I think maybe there was a little bit of a shift of a mentality, making that change. I feel like the first half of the year or so I was kind of just surviving. I wasn't really living much, wasn't having a bunch of fun. I think that translated to how I was playing on the court.

Making that switch helped me a lot and kind of found myself to be comfortable in that role, coming in a couple minutes into the game, and it worked for all of us.

Q. Damari, you guys haven't been to the tournament, but do you still have a veteran presence about your team?

DAMARI WHEELER-THOMAS: For sure. I think we've got a really mature group here, and I think that's the biggest thing going for us.

Q. Coach, if you want to open up with a statement.

DAVID RICHMAN: Appreciate everybody being here. We're tremendously excited to be back. Obviously a few things have changed, mostly some of the gray hairs that I have.

But this has been absolutely a special year, program record 27 wins. I think the biggest word that stands out to me is it's been a lot of fun. This is a group that enjoys each other. And I'm not sure they always enjoy me, but for them to be on this stage, I'm tremendously excited.

Q. You haven't been here, your team, in the NCAA Tournament, but do you still feel like you have a veteran presence about you guys?

DAVID RICHMAN: Yeah, obviously we don't have the NCAA Tournament experience, but we have two 24-year-olds, and you saw the guys that kind of -- I don't want to say dominated -- but took control of the Summit League championship in Noah Feddersen, Damari Wheeler-Thomas, just guys that have been there and done it. I would say experience, age. Experience is a premium.

Q. Damari mentioned in the year off that he had, he was able to see the game from a coach's perspective. What have you seen in him this year that has matured him on the court?

DAVID RICHMAN: I think the game, to his point, has slowed down a little bit. Damari is a fierce competitor, they call him a dawg. He's an elite athlete, so explosive. I challenged him to become a better basketball player: What's his defense like off the ball, how is he impacting the game to make others around him better. And that's what he's done. He's always going to fight. He's always going to compete.

I think Noah's shot kind of sums up where Damari is at. He gets feet in the paint, makes the right play to Trevian Carson and Trevian hits Noah, and that's the game. And I would say that's the biggest area where Damari's game has grown.

Q. On Selection Sunday when you see a school like Michigan State pop up, they've been here 28 straight times now, Tom Izzo does this year after year after year, what went through your mind when you saw the matchup?

DAVID RICHMAN: I got that question a lot back in Fargo. We're excited about it. It's March, and we get to match up.

Now, what do they say, our next guest needs no introduction. This is a well-coached program that's been here and done it, and it's going to be a challenge for us. But we love challenges, we embrace the hard, and we're going to get tested by all those things tomorrow afternoon.

Q. What kind of challenge does Fears present to you defensively?



DAVID RICHMAN: All kinds. He's just a fierce competitor. He's an elite athlete. There's some things we aren't going to be able to simulate in practices. Our scout team can't do those things. But he is so fast and he is so dynamic.

The other thing you can really appreciate about that, and I've said this countless times about our team, he's a willing winner. He prioritizes winning. What do I mean by that? He leads the country in assists. And that selfless basketball, when that's coming from your point guard, that sets the tone for who they really are.

Q. When you dug into the film once you found out you were playing Michigan State, what popped off the film for you? What concerns you most as the coach?

DAVID RICHMAN: Yeah, not scared of anything. But I think the beauty of it is, and I say this as a compliment, Michigan State, they don't do a whole bunch, but what they do, they do extremely well.

I would say the biggest things we've prioritized or focused on is how fast they are in transition, making sure we get back and get multiple bodies back, and then the back boards. They're just so strong and physical and athletic and they're relentless to go to the glass. We have got to take great shots, take care of the ball so we can allow ourselves to get as many bodies back as possible, and then we've all got to rebound.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the three-point shot is such a big part of your offense. At this time of the year, how much of an equalizer is that for a lower-seeded team trying to knock off a team with more athleticism?

DAVID RICHMAN: Yeah, it's a great question. And I'm not a huge analytics guy, but we've studied some upsets. And if we can make some threes tomorrow, a bunch of them, hey, tip the cap to us and we would love every bit about it.

But our program is built on defending, valuing the basketball, and finishing possessions. That's how we won the Summit League championship last week or a little over a week ago.

I think as much as it's about shooting, we've got to be on point with those three things. And really, I can't build a game plan that we're going to make shots. That's an uncontrollable. We're not trying to miss those things. But we worked all week on the things we can control. If we can make shots on top of that, that would certainly be great.

Q. This is something I'm sure you can relate to, but

Coen Carr has a 51 inch vertical jump --

DAVID RICHMAN: Are you 51 inches tall?

Q. No, good one. A, have you heard of such a thing, and B, what kind of challenge does that present?

DAVID RICHMAN: Again, these Westwood guys, they didn't help me at all. They talked about the dunk being worth more than two. I have not heard of it, and he is every bit as athletic -- you hear about things, you see clips here and there. I think he led the Big Ten in the country in dunks. He's an absolute freak.

But what I love is that athleticism isn't just in space. He's a tough kid, too. He rebounds. He gets downhill. Yeah, he's going to present some challenges.

Q. I assume your mom and dad are going to be here for the game?

DAVID RICHMAN: Yeah.

Q. They follow you or go to many games -- I think they've been to all the NCAA Tournament games you've been involved with. What does it mean to you to have John and Marsha --

DAVID RICHMAN: Yeah, it means everything. I think I've challenged a lot of people -- anytime I get in microphone in front of me, don't be a friend to your kids, parent your kids. This probably sounds arrogant, but I really appreciate my parents and how they parented me, held me accountable, made me do hard things. And for me to have them by my side, it's just more conviction. Mom takes way too many pictures. But my family is here. My mother- and father-in-law are here, and who am I at the end of the day? I'm family.

Those five women at my house and the extended family with in-laws and my parents and sister and her family and then our Bison basketball family, I try to keep my life pretty simple and keep those two families happy.

Q. I was talking with some of the guys and they mentioned how, yeah, they're very good, but they put the shoes on the same way you guys do. Is that part of the message, that you talk about the concerns you have, but also it's a basketball game at the end of the day?

DAVID RICHMAN: Yeah, with all due respect to Michigan State, we haven't talked about concerns. Who am I today standing up here is because of our guys. Multiple times, Trevian Carson has said, we're not scared. We're going to



go and do us.

Again, we know the challenge that's coming tomorrow afternoon. Make no mistakes. But we're not going to sit here and bow down or cower to it. We talk about it's a fight. We're on a stool in the corner and we're going to keep standing up off that stool. If we can stand up one more time than they can, great.

Q. Does it get better each time you come to these tournaments and what have you? And what are you doing differently this time than maybe the other three?

DAVID RICHMAN: Does it get better? The only reason I hesitate to say it doesn't is because it's like saying which kid do you like better in your house. Every year there's different experiences and I love every single one of those groups.

I would say no. But like, it's still the euphoria that you chase constantly. What have we done different? Tried to just be present each and every moment. I'm not saying that's different. I would say this: The last time we were here, our conference tournament ended on a Tuesday. Now it ended on a Sunday. Because of that, it's allowed us a longer week to prep, and I would say we've been very much more intentional in some of those things, and hopefully allow us to be ready tomorrow afternoon.

Q. You've been there for long enough to be able to answer this question, I think, pretty well. How has the vibe changed from the move up from Division II now 20 years ago to the first NCAA Tournament to now where you guys are on the precipice of going into the FBS and back to the NCAA Tournament? How has NDSU and Fargo changed with that?

DAVID RICHMAN: Yeah, maybe I'm too close to the fire so I don't have necessarily a good answer of how it's changed. I just know growing up around Fargo and NDSU when we made the Roman numeral slash and we went from II to I, there's always been a purpose behind it, and there's always been a standard and expectation behind it.

My boss is in the back room. We're excited that we're in the Summit League, but football is moving to the Mountain West. There's a lot that went into that. I promise you, Tim Polasek and those guys, there's an expectation when we go out. That's what I love. Bison athletics, Bison basketball, it matters.

Has that changed a lot, that vibe? I don't know if it has, to be honest with you. There's different coaches, different administrators, different players, but there's somebody in there that it transcends all things. I love being in a place

where it matters.

Q. Damari two, three years into his career redshirts. In a day and age when he doesn't leave, what's it like to have him back here?

DAVID RICHMAN: It's everything. I think at the end of the day, life is about trust. You're always in these trusting situations, it's probably what the times have done to us. As much as I love Damari and thought he was going to come back, there's always that moment of uncertainty, not based on Damari, but what the times have done to us.

So when he came back and stamped it and the portal closed that day, and then you saw him just kind of lock 110 percent in. And then to embrace him in Sioux Falls on that Sunday night and he gives me a hug, and this is why you do it. This is why we came back.

That's not a like, that's a love relationship right there that I have with that kid, and so appreciative of him.

Q. Your first time here in the portal era, and your first four times you went to this tournament it was guys that you had for three, four, five years. You've got guys that have been Bison for a season. How is that different or does it feel different because of that?

DAVID RICHMAN: Yeah, I would say as we sit here today, no, it doesn't feel a whole bunch of different, but it really feels different in the spring about how you get there. That is the biggest piece.

College basketball has changed. There's still so much great things about it. But extremely proud of our staff for embracing and pivoting and making some changes because one of the first questions I was asked is maybe we don't have NCAA Tournament experience, but we have age, maturity. We have college basketball experience.

Like it or not, the only way you're going to get there right now is through the portal. In a couple weeks when our season is done, we'll be embracing it again.

Q. Can I ask about the flipside of that for the Summit League? We've seen Oscar Cluff at Purdue and Frankie Fidler came to your league last year and you've had a number of guys that departed the league. As a collective, how do you navigate that in this era, and particularly on a stage like this where some of these guys blow up and other people see them?

DAVID RICHMAN: I'll answer this a couple different ways, but I think it speaks to our evaluation, our development. We have guys at Virginia, New Mexico, Omaha, Illinois



State, like we have guys at a lot of places right now that started with us.

I think specifically, to answer your question, it's your happiness. What is your happiness? Your happiness leads to my happiness. I will not beg anybody to stay in our program. If they're chasing a number, if they're chasing something that we don't have, then they need to go.

But I think our process has allowed me the conviction to sit here and tell you then we'll go find somebody that we're going to make happy. If that may be only for nine months or it may be for two years, then that's just where we're at in today's game.

But I wake up every morning with a purpose, like, to do something. As much as things change, whether I like it or not, we're going to keep finding guys that drive our happiness for as long as they want to be with us.

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