

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

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Buffalo, New York, USA

KeyBank Center

Michigan State Spartans

Coach Tom Izzo

Coen Carr

Carson Cooper

Jeremy Fears Jr.

Jaxon Kohler

Media Conference

Q. Carson and Jaxon, I know Will Tschetter is on another team. But someone who has been in the league as long as you have, is there any mutual respect or conversation between players that have been at the same school their whole career?

CARSON COOPER: Yeah, for sure. I think for the amount of people that have stayed, I think there was a stat that there's 22 or something players that have been there for four years.

I think it's rare to see that nowadays, so there is a mutual level of respect and dedication to their school.

JAXON KOHLER: Yeah, for sure, everything he said. It's rare and it's not an easy thing to do in this day and age with everything that's going on. But there's a lot of respect for people who stay at their school for four years and go through the ups and downs.

Q. Jeremy, you lead the nation in assists. Just kind of talk about your mentality as a point guard, being a playmaker, dishing out assists. To the other, talk about what it is like to have him as a point guard and your teammate receiving those assists?

JEREMY FEARS JR.: I would say that's definitely a goal I had. I think passing is special. Not a lot of people are able to do it or can do it. But credit to my teammates and these



guys up here. They catch the lobs, they make the shots, they do the hard part. I kind of just get them the ball, and they do everything else. Without them, I wouldn't be able to do anything.

COEN CARR: I think on my end, having a guard like that, you know you're always going to have the ball in your hands and always be ready. You've got to be ready to shoot because most of the time when you're going to get it, you're going to be open.

JAXON KOHLER: That's what makes him a special player is he's super unselfish. At any point in the game you have to be ready for him to give you a drop off pass or turn around and find you. Because when he's giving all these assists, then the defense adjusts. And when they adjust, that's when he has a scoring mentality. That's what makes him such a threat. He's so good at giving assists but he's also so good at scoring, so that makes him a really hard scout.

Q. I want to talk to you about this mentality. Michigan State has always been a powerhouse team that always makes it into March Madness. Tom Izzo has the longest-tenured streak to have this going on. What is your mentality when you head into March Madness every year?

JEREMY FEARS JR.: I think Coach Izzo, he kind of sets the tone early. When you first get to campus, it's a mentality that you're going to work from day one. And he's made that set in stone and it just builds your character, your personality, who you are, and you just want to grind, grind, grind, grind.

And then when the season comes, you're still grinding and you slowly start learning how to win. He teaches you how to win and how to be consistent and every day to show up.

CARSON COOPER: I think, too, you get to this point of the year and you realize there's that sense of urgency from Coach. And that allows us to kind of understand that you make it to this many tournaments, it's not a fluke. He knows what he's doing. He knows the blueprint. He knows exactly what it takes to win, to get through all these weekends. There's a level of trust that goes into it, as well, really realizing that we've got to listen to what he's saying



and really try to execute it to the best of our ability.

JAXON KOHLER: For all the older guys that come back from the previous season, there's a sense of urgency, that we're never satisfied of where we left off, especially from last year. Last year was a heartbreaking loss. But having that motivation and that sense of urgency going straight into June, we never lose that sense of urgency, and neither does Coach. That's why we bring it every day.

Q. Carson, what's it like to see a 50-inch vertical jump every day in practice?

CARSON COOPER: I mean, it gets kind of old (laughing). No, it's pretty cool. He's a special player. It's pretty cool to see that every day. We joke about getting bored of it every day. It's pretty cool what athletic ability can do for your team, and when his points are -- when they feel like more than two points, it's an advantage to us.

It is pretty cool even in practice and stuff. It's the same Coen you guys see on the court as it is in practice, so it's special.

Q. The Big Ten is such a tough conference and the tournament always brings up the stakes. In that UCLA game that you guys had, what did you learn that has gotten you guys prepared for March Madness this season?

JEREMY FEARS JR.: I would say definitely that you can be beat by anybody. There's great teams all around the world and everybody is playing in a tournament or made the tournament for a reason. So just understanding that if you don't bring your game, you can be going home.

Obviously it's one-and-done time and it's tournament time, so you want to try to be at your best and bring your best night in and night out.

COEN CARR: I think like he said, having the same mindset going into every game. Not wavering, not going up and down, just having the same mentality going into every game. Play our basketball, too, not go away from what we do. And I think defense is one of our most important things, so we've just got to keep playing defense. That's it.

Q. As a basketball aficionado and a little bit older than you guys, who would you say is the better dunker, Jason Richardson or your current teammate right now?

COEN CARR: I'm answering this? I'm going to say me if I can answer.

JEREMY FEARS JR.: I would say Coen. I don't know what Jason Richardson is doing in practice.

JAXON KOHLER: No disrespect to Jason Richardson, but is that even a question?

JEREMY FEARS JR.: Jason got bounce, but Coen. Sorry.

Q. Jeremy, Michigan State has always been really good at producing point guards. You look at just recently, Jase Richardson being one of them and then Cassius Winston being another, talk about that role and pride you take in being the starting point guard for Michigan State?

JEREMY FEARS JR.: A lot. A lot of point guards usually always come back and a lot of our players that play here come back in the summer for grind week. Just kind of having that understanding of what they did here, their history, what they left behind. A lot of them either got Final Fours or National Championships.

So just coming back, talking to us, knowing their history and what they did and the wins, and just understanding that this is a big role that you have to take on. It's kind of hard, but at the same time, when you've got the coaches and the teammates to support you and help you, they understand and know that I need them and they need me just as equally.

So just understanding that we've got to come in and our job is to win games and win championships.

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

TOM IZZO: I'm excited to be here in Buffalo. I really am. I always followed the Bills and haven't been here to play before, but I had one player when I was first a GA from there.

Teams are good here. Weather is fine for me. No distractions. I don't have to worry about my guys out at the beach or anything. We're just hunkering down and looking forward to an incredible weekend.

Q. I was wondering, all the years you've done this, how have you seen the freshmen adapt in their first NCAA Tournament experience, speaking of Cam and Jordan, and how when the lights come on how they've responded and what are the pitfalls and pluses of that?

TOM IZZO: Well, I think the pitfalls is everybody is



nervous. Everybody is nervous. Hell, I'm nervous. I've been in 28 of them.

But sometimes freshmen are scared. It's okay to be nervous, it's not okay to be scared. It's just something new.

I think that's why we've played the schedule we've played. We try to play a lot of great teams early in the non-conference. The Big Ten is the Big Ten; you're not only playing a tough schedule but you're playing in front of -- there's more people that watch Big Ten basketball than any conference for, I think, 45 years or something.

So they're well-groomed. Now, this is a new experience and we'll talk to them about it, but only time will tell. Everybody handles it differently.

It's all part of the process. It's all part of the journey. It's all part of the growth.

I've got two freshmen that are very smart school-wise, and I think very grounded, and I think they'll adjust just fine. As you say, when the lights go on, the lights go on, and that's the exciting part of it.

Q. About Michigan's Will Tschetter, as a veteran coach, is there any special respect for a player like that who has spent his entire long career at one school?

TOM IZZO: Well, you're talking the right guy in that. I respect everybody that spends an entire career at one school, even if it's from my bitter rival. I really do, and I mean that. Not that I look down upon someone who leaves. When they leave three, four times, I probably do. But for the most part, I have great respect.

I've got Saddi Washington on my staff. I've got Phil Martelli who has told me a lot about him over the last couple years that was an assistant there, and playing against him. Great respect for him and his skills and the fact that he stayed there for four or five years, yes.

Q. South Florida's coach Bryan Hodgson is coaching at home this week. Have you ever coached an NCAA Tournament game in your home, and how special do you think that is for a head coach like him?

TOM IZZO: Well, to me, this is home. I just got 31 inches of snow where I'm from. But where I'm from, there ain't a lot of NCAA games going on up there. It's 11 months of winter, one month of poor sledding. So you might not be able to get in there from TV and radio and news and all that.

But I think it's quite an honor that he gets to coach in his hometown. It would be something that I would be really excited about. Thanks to my old AD and my new AD, we got to go to northern Michigan where I'm from last year and play an exhibition game, and it was one of the thrills of my life.

I can only imagine for him that's a special moment. I want to wish him a lot of luck in the first game and no luck if we get a chance to play them in the second game; how's that?

Q. I was chatting with Kaleb a little bit in your locker room and just wondering how you've seen him navigate this year from -- he arrives and the disappointment of the injury to the -- he said he had never faced a long-term injury like that, how he handled that, and being on the cusp of where he could feasibly play a game for you guys? How has he handled this season for you?

TOM IZZO: You know, Kaleb Glenn was our top transfer of our couple guys. He blew his knee in the first week that he was on campus. Now he's a freak; he's able to practice now. He's coming around a little bit. Not full-full but almost full. There's no question he would have helped us.

But he's handling it pretty well. His dad played football in college, and I think he has that mentality. He's built like Adonis.

He never had an injury. And learning how to deal with one is, again, part of the process of growing up. And I think he's handled it great. I think he'll be a real help next year. Yeah, it's been all good, other than him getting hurt.

Q. Along the lines with the freshmen, the reserves that you have at this point in the year, their importance, does it grow when you get to this time, when you have the short preps for everything? And how critical is it for them to contribute and give longer stretches at this point of the year?

TOM IZZO: Well, people would argue that both ways. They say that one thing about the tournament, you get to the tournament, your playing group shrinks a little bit because TV time-outs are -- I've fallen asleep in one of them once. But they get long, so you get more time to maybe recover.

But there's always foul trouble and there's always things like that. I think your subs are always important. I think it's hurt us a little bit not having Divine for sure. Last year our whole battle cry was strength in numbers, and we had numbers and we kept rotating people in there. It's not been quite the same this year, even though we are utilizing



our subs.

But I think Cam Ward is going to be very, very important. I think Denham is going to be important to help us. I think Kur Teng is really playing better, and if he's making shots, that helps us. And I think Jesse McCulloch, you always need a big man. We've got four guys that we're going to be playing a lot, and what's a lot? I don't know. It depends how the game goes. But I do think they're very important. It's a good question.

Q. You mentioned the Big Ten being the most watched conference for 40, 50 years. How do you explain the 26-year drought for the conference, you guys being the last one to win the title, and what would it take for the Big Ten to end that?

TOM IZZO: I think that I haven't done a good job getting back to six other ones and not winning it, and my fellow coaches are trying to preserve that I was the last one to win it, and they like me. Those are the only two reasons I can come up with.

Watching it doesn't have anything to do with playing in it. Watching it, I think, helps players understand big stages, but it also doesn't -- you've still got to play the game.

I'm disappointed. I've been in it two or three times and we've had two Big Ten teams in it.

So we're knocking on the door. We've got people knocking on the door. It's cyclical. But am I disappointed it's been that long? I am. Even though they always say since Michigan State, and I'm thinking, it's nice to get my name out there but not nice that it was 25 years ago or whatever, 26 years ago.

I'm hoping that we change that this year. Everybody pulls for their league. I know I do. But I don't look at it as a disappointment because after we won it, there's been, as I said, six other times we've been knocking on that door.

Sooner or later, it's going to open. I hope sooner rather than later. You can appreciate that, huh? Me too.

Q. In relation to the state of the game today, how much NIL money does a coach need to be competitive at the Power Four level, and what else needs to be in place in order to be successful?

TOM IZZO: You know, I've answered a lot of questions about the NIL, and what I'm most disappointed in is there's no transparency. So you're asking me a question that I have zero idea. I hear the rumors, you hear the rumors of what some people are paying some people. If those

rumors are true, then we need a lot, a lot, a lot of money and so does everybody else.

But I'm hoping that somehow, some way it's going to get back and it's going to be -- players deserve to make some money, and I'll be happy about that. But fan bases and administrators and universities deserve to be able to have it somewhat at an even keel so that -- and players, too.

I mean, we are forgetting, when players make decisions for money -- I don't know about you, I've had a lot of chances to make decisions for more money -- they're not necessarily great decisions. At 18, I might have done that. Then you have regrets, too.

So money isn't everything. Easy to say when you have it; I know it. People are going to say, it didn't mean anything when I didn't have it. I want to be happy. I want to be at a place I want to be. Going to work a lot of hours, they're going to work a lot of hours.

I just hope that we can get our arms around it and deal with the problems that we have. I don't know what money would solve that. If you get more money, somebody is getting more money than that. It doesn't solve your problem. It's not all what you do.

I know where we're at. I know where some other schools are at. We've had two phenomenal years. It's got to do with the Jimmies and the Joes that you recruit, that you retain, and that you build around. Does it always help to have more money? Sure. But if that's the only thing that matters, I think there will be a lot more of the guys that left that will be leaving, including me, because that's not what it's all about.

I don't have a good answer, but if you or anybody else in here could change one thing for me, it would be we have to have more transparency. The NFL has it. The NBA has it. The NHL has it. Major League Baseball has it. We don't have any transparency.

You asked me a question, if you told me somebody was making \$50 million or \$2 million, I really wouldn't have an honest idea. And coaches lie. We all lie. We're not going to tell you the truth because that's an advantage for somebody because there is none.

So transparency would be my thing. I want the players to make money. I want everybody to be happy, but I'd like transparency so it's more realistic.

Q. What is it about a mid major that can make them somewhat dangerous this time of year?



TOM IZZO: Oh, man. I was a Division II guy. In fact, I was a Division II guy when North Dakota State was a Division II team.

There's something to the David and Goliath thing. I was a Division II player, got to play Al McGuire and Marquette. It was one of the greatest things in the world to have a chance to go up against somebody that everybody is talking about. They're not on TV every day; we are on TV every day. That's got to be some of the motivational talks to their players is you get a chance to prove yourself amongst the best.

By the way, what I've learned in my profession in the last five years, there's a lot of good players at a lot of good places, and North Dakota State is one of them. They've won championships, National Championships in football there. It's a pretty neat place. He seems like a great coach. They've got some good players. They've got some players that could play a lot of us. We had a player from that league, Frankie Fidler a year ago. Purdue has got a damn good player from that league.

What makes them scary is they're well-coached. They've got good players. But I think what makes them scary is this is their Christmas, Fourth of July. They get a chance to pit themselves against the people they watch on TV, and I think that's a strong way to put it.

Q. Two-part question here. What's your favorite Coen Carr dunk and how much are those an X-factor this time of year when they can swing momentum?

TOM IZZO: God, it's like in practice -- I mean, I've had some guys that could dunk, J Rich, Shannon Brown. There's been more than a couple. But this guy, I mean, he just does it on a regular basis, so I see it in practice every day. I find myself taking it for granted, and what a shame that is because he can do it a lot of different ways. Never showboating. I swear to God, he's the most humble kid I've ever met that has the jumping ability that he has.

But you know, when it's a full-court lob and it's a behind-the-back dunk, even I kind of sit up in my chair a little bit more than I should. I still get excited about stuff like that.

Q. 28 consecutive appearances. Of those appearances, when you go into a new season, a new March Madness, are you always looking at it with a new look trying to adapt to it or have you gotten a method to the madness when it comes to 28 straight appearances?

TOM IZZO: No, never got a method to the madness. Just

enjoy the madness. I don't go in thinking this is a rite of passage, that this should just happen. I'm not one of our fans. I'm not one of our 600,000 alums that think it just happens. That's the only hard part about it. I love Selection Sunday, and I love sitting there.

I shared it with my president, my AD, all my managers and players and families. But we're sitting there kind of hidden. Then you see TV going on some of these places, and people are going nuts, and I remember when that was us.

I do miss that a little bit. But there's a privilege to missing it, and that privilege is that you have done it on a consistent basis. If there's one thing whenever I leave that I want to be known for, it's consistency because there hasn't been a lot of highs and lows, hasn't been quite enough high-highs, but it's consistent.

So I go into each season thinking, you know, how can I get this team better by the end of the year. I want to win the league, want to win the league tournament. But once you've been a national champ, once you've gone to the Final Fours, once you see how incredible moving on in March Madness is, there's nothing like March Madness.

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