

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Howard vs Michigan

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Buffalo, New York, USA

KeyBank Center

Howard Bison

Coach Kenny Blakeney

Bryce Harris

Ose Okojie

Cedric Taylor III

Media Conference



Q. How are you guys doing? This has been a bit of a whirlwind, travel, rest, things along those lines, how are you feeling basically?

BRYCE HARRIS: Honestly, we said this in the last interview we did when we were in Dayton, our bodies are kind of conditioned to kind of get after it day after games. Not only our bodies but our minds. I talk about our callus built for times like this in the season. We really don't need too much of a rest period. We're really not banged up at all, but if there's any fatigue, we can mentally and physically push through it because we do that type of stuff in practice all the time.

There's been times where days after games we practice as hard as I don't know what. Yeah, our minds and our bodies are very much so prepared for what is to come.

OSE OKOJIE: To harp on what Bryce said, I think overall team morale, we feel really blessed and honored that we made history last night, but also ready to compete again. That's probably the biggest thing, ready to compete again. We have a team, 1 to 16, no matter who it is that compete every day at practice and compete hard 7:00 a.m.

Like Bryce said, we're conditioned for quick travel. The MEAC is Saturday-Monday games, so we're always pushing ourselves to a new limit, and Coach has always built that callus for us to be strong mentally and physically no matter what. So we're ready to compete, but we're really feeling good.

CEDRIC TAYLOR III: Yeah, we're ecstatic, of course, making Howard history last night. But a big characteristic we hang our hat on is adjustability. Our schedule has been crazy these last couple days, but our ability to be able to adjust to it is what's kept us sane. We're going to be ready to go tomorrow.

Q. Growing up and watching and playing the game, are there any March Madness legends you look up to or help inspire your play style that can help win you the tournament?

BRYCE HARRIS: I'm going to need time to think.

CEDRIC TAYLOR III: Right now I've been looking up the FDU recently, just because we're kind of in that situation. 1-16, it doesn't happen a lot, so we're trying to make history.

OSE OKOJIE: I said it in the last interview, too, but I remember St. Peters versus Purdue, just the run they had. Players, vivid memory of Carson Edwards, like his run. I remember I was watching that as a kid. That was amazing. I was a big Lonzo Ball fan and the run he had at UCLA.

Yeah, those guys really -- yeah.

BRYCE HARRIS: I'd probably go with -- the irony of it, but I'm going to go with UMBC versus Virginia. I watched that game a little bit -- actually watched it before we played UMBC.

Then also another player that obviously comes to mind is Ja Morant. Not saying they were a 16 seed, but they were definitely the underdog coming into the game. Just the freedom and the looseness, but also the confidence that they played with, it was inspiring. Like they didn't really change much of their game plan. They didn't really change much of who they were just because of who they were playing.

Most people coming into that game probably thought, okay, how is Murray State going to adjust? And it actually ended up being the other way around. Talking about Murray State versus Marquette. That's what I was talking about.



Q. Last night what was the discussion with your coach being a former Duke player, winning National Championships? What was the emotions like? What were your thoughts and feelings, and how can you relate that to tomorrow's game against Michigan?

BRYCE HARRIS: I'll answer that. To be honest with you, I think it's just staying composed. Aside from our coach's extensive experience in the NCAA Tournament, I've actually been in this position before. We played Kansas my sophomore year as a 16 seed in Des Moines, Iowa, and one of the biggest things coming into the game, looking at the older guys, was just how composed they were.

We talk about the lights kind of being a distraction, understanding you're playing in the NCAA Tournament. It's like, yeah, but it's still a basketball game. You know what I mean? Rather than shying away from the energy and the hypeness around the game, you should embrace it. Embrace it, understand that you're prepared for the moment.

That helps me a lot because I work my butt off, so I know that whatever the result is, I'm prepared for it.

OSE OKOJIE: Yeah, kind of to what Bryce said, just being who we are. That's what we preach about and what we echo in the locker room. Like Bryce said, it's a basketball game. We've been playing this game since we were kids. Obviously the competitiveness and the level is obviously increased, but it's still playing the game that you love and under bright lights.

That's not a time to shy away. What I always say to myself is don't let fear consume you. Because I'm a big believer in God, because fear is not from the Lord. So to go out there and attack everything with my whole heart and my whole energy and knowing that I'm not out there alone. I have brothers 1 to 16 that are counting on me, relying on me, and I can count on them or rely on them when I'm down, so on, so forth.

CEDRIC TAYLOR III: Yeah, a big thing Coach has been preaching recently that's stuck with me is just staying in the moment, staying in the present, taking it all in. We're on the biggest stage right now. What everybody keeps telling me is a lot of people don't get to do this. We are the minority. So just staying in the present, taking it in.

On the court-wise, just like what Ose said, playing to our standard. We have a standard that we uphold every day, so when stuff gets tough like he talked about the last couple minutes of the UMBC game, we're built for it. Like Bryce said, hold our composure, we're taught to be

composed in those situations and just play our brand of basketball.

Q. Each of you guys, what has been your favorite thing or probably your biggest memory so far this week?

BRYCE HARRIS: Just from this week? I'd probably just say seeing the buzzer go off when we were at Dayton. The first person I looked at was my coach because I knew how much that first NCAA Tournament win really meant to him. Looking at my mom, looking at the crowd and seeing how proud everybody was.

They was already proud regardless of the result, but like understanding that -- when we talk about what the standard is, the standard was no longer to make it to the NCAA Tournament. The standard was, okay, now we've got to win some games.

Especially at this level, some people would be like, oh, we were considered the underdog in that game. As a team, we strongly disbelieved that that was the case. Coming into the game and winning it, it was huge. It was huge, especially considering that that was the first NCAA Tournament win in Howard history. Yeah, that's probably the most fondest moment.

I still don't understand the magnitude of it yet, but I'm sure 20, 30 years from now, I will.

OSE OKOJIE: I would say my favorite moment, like Bryce said, when the buzzer went off, but looking at the younger guys and seeing their joy and their happiness, that gave me a lot of joy, too. My family was there. My little brother and my little sister. So seeing them looking, at them after the game, I almost got a little emotional because they were watching me.

I always try to be a role model towards them and towards the younger guys on our team, so seeing my little sister -- she's turning 11 -- and she was like, you're playing in March Madness. When I'm 18 I'm going to play in March Madness. I'm like, yes, you are. That's what I hope you dream of.

My brother gave me the biggest hug and he started crying, he was just like, you did it. All the stuff we've been through, everything that you went through, all the ups, downs, tribulations, injuries. I've had five concussions in the last four years and two last year that took away my season. Kind of got emotional at the end of the game embracing him like, man, you did it.

To see his joy and my family's joy and the younger guys, to



give them the experience that I never had when I was younger, but to also give them this new experience that, like, Bryce said 30, 40 years from now they can tell their kids about this, that meant the world to me, truly.

CEDRIC TAYLOR III: Yeah, definitely being able to get that historic win over UMBC, making Howard history. But I think when it really sunk in to me was when we got on the bus and I saw Kamala Harris reposted us. Just to think that the former vice president of this country recognized me in some form or extent, it made me realize -- of course, we go in every day fighting for 1 through 16 and our coaching staff and our training staff and our weight room staff, everything.

But it made me realize during this tournament, we're fighting for -- it's bigger than us. We're fighting for the alumni that's watching all over the country. We've got a lot of people on our backs right now, and we're just trying to do everything we can to make them proud.

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

KENNY BLAKENEY: Good morning, everyone. So grateful to be here. I know our university is proud to be represented at this tournament.

This means a lot to so many people, and we are honored to be here and have our brand associated and next to some of the most fabulous brands in intercollegiate athletics and higher education. So thank you so much.

Q. You guys are kind of in a unique position in that you played in Dayton last night. You have to travel up here and prepare for one of the premier teams in the country tomorrow. What goes into that preparation on such a short amount of time?

KENNY BLAKENEY: The lack of sleep.

For us, we're kind of used to playing every other day, so our rhythm is pretty consistent with how we do things, and this works out perfect with the rhythm of how we do things. In our league, in the MEAC, we play Saturday and Monday. So for me, my preparation goes all in on the team that we're playing on Saturday. I don't even really tune into who we're playing on Monday until after the game on Saturday.

You'll see us practice today. It'll be really consistent with how we play and our schedule kind of is aligned during our normal traditional regular season.

This is a very normal kind of process for us, and our guys

have a rhythm and a feel for playing every other game.

Q. You obviously played at Duke. You've coached at obviously high levels. How does this win compare to others you have played or coached in?

KENNY BLAKENEY: I think it's really unique with this win because, like, my basketball days are so far over that this is more meaningful, certainly for me and our players, but this is really meaningful for the Howard community. Our community means so much to the culture and the fibers and the DNA of this country. To have our brand represented and celebrated in that kind of way is, I think, a tip of the cap to everything, all the hard work and all the commitment that our community at Howard has made to our country and to the world in general.

Q. We've had Coach Rob Jones on the show Oregon State. What's the biggest misconception of MEAC basketball?

KENNY BLAKENEY: It's a great question. Thank you for asking. MEAC basketball is excellent. We have some fabulous coaches in that league. You mentioned Coach Rob Jones is one of the best coaches in the country, Kevin Broadus, you look at LaVelle Moton. When you talk about those three guys, and certainly Erik Martin at South Carolina State who's done a wonderful job done there, won the league last year. You look at Stan Waterman, Stan has been a USA Basketball coach for a number of years, Larry Stewart down at Coppin has done a wonderful job.

Some of those coaches, we have to really game plan for so differently because they're so good, so damned good offensively. LaVelle Moton, Rob Jones offensively, they have answers to everything. Game planning for those guys, it's very, very challenging. Coach Kevin Broadus, he runs the Princeton system that he learned under John Thompson that was part of a program that went to the Final Four. Hell of a coach. Was Coach of the Year in our league. Larry Stewart played for the Washington Bullets. You can go down the list. Like I said, Stan Waterman.

Our league gets really, I think, a hit because our teams have to play so many bye games, and by the time they are deep in the schedule or starting the regular conference schedule, some of those teams have lost 10, 11, 12, 13 games. It adds up when you look at NET and you look at Ken Pom numbers and things like that.

But there's a lot of teams in the country that won't schedule games against Norfolk State or they won't schedule a game against North Carolina Central or they won't schedule against us.



I think that our league definitely is a really great league. It's physical as hell, it's athletic as hell, and it's really well-coached. So thank you for that question.

Q. Your players mentioned -- I think Bryce said it -- I checked out the Maryland Baltimore County upset of UVA, and I think O mentioned St. Peters. Did you mention those types of upsets to them? They clearly sought them out on their own, but I wonder if you used that in any way to inspire, and maybe why not, if that's the case? I see you shaking your head.

KENNY BLAKENEY: Honestly, I woke up this morning and I started to immediately watch Michigan. The next thing I look up and our players are sitting down behind me having breakfast. It was like, at that point in time, time to have breakfast. We got on the bus and came over here, and we haven't even had a chance to gather and discuss any of those things like that.

The big thing is that we have to trust our work, and we have to be us. I look at Coach Dusty May, he cut his teeth in the NCAA Tournament at a university that isn't that much similar to ours. We always talk about the Magic of March, and for you to be able to excel in the Magic of March and advance, there is a spirit that March rewards. There's a joy and a passion that March rewards. That's what I want our guys to understand.

Like great, St. Peters and UMBC. But it's that spirit, it's that passion, it's that joy, it's that connection that really can give a team the adrenaline and the togetherness that they needed to have to win games like that.

Q. Maybe in a bit of a similar realm, what do you know about Michigan?

KENNY BLAKENEY: So funny thing is I watched Michigan in D.C. when they played Duke. We had a game earlier that day against North Carolina Central we were fortunate to win. I went home, I showered, and I went to meet our two largest donors at a cigar bar. I had a couple cigars, a couple tequilas, and from there, met my wife, had another tequila, and my wife and my daughter and I walked over to the game.

Instead of looking at the game like a coach, I wanted to just veg out and look at the game like a Cameron crazy. So I was there as a fan cheering my brains out, enjoying my day, and just kind of taking it all in to be a fan.

I saw they were big as hell. I was really impressed how fast they were in transition. Not really seeing them this year, I'm seeing 6'9", 6'10" guys sprint to the three-point line, and then seeing them knock down threes. That was

as high a level a game as I've seen in person in a very long time, just as a fan and as a spectator.

I know they're extremely well-coached. Coach Dusty May does an unbelievable job. Their length is certainly something defensively where they're switching 1 through 4 that I know has bothered people. They can engulf teams defensively.

For us, it's going to be certainly a challenge, but I think we'll have fun trying to figure out the puzzle.

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