

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

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KeyBank Center

Michigan Wolverines Coach Dusty May Morez Johnson Jr. Yaxel Lendeborg Aday Mara

Media Conference

Q. Going into a game like this, and not kind of the coach's answer of what you're prepped to say, but when you're huge favorites, how difficult is it to stay mentally prepared? Everybody is a threat at this point, right? Everybody is in the tournament and everybody is hungry, especially teams that might not have the experience and have had the season that you guys have. Mentally, personally, how do you stay zoned in 100 percent like we need to go attack and treat this like any other game?

MOREZ JOHNSON JR.: I know like if we lose this game, it could be the end, and I'm not ready for the season to be over with yet. I'm just making sure I do my best, come here and do what I do every game.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: I would go with what you said. Everybody is a threat. For them to get here, they have to win the championship. I've been in that predicament before when I was a mid major. We're going to go in there with nothing to lose so we're going to play our hearts out. And no matter what happens, we're happy we made it.

Being on this side now, it's the same thing Rez said, I don't want to lose and this is going to be my last college game ever, so I want to continue my streak.

ADAY MARA: As they said, if you're playing this tournament, it's because you earned it. Every team is good here, so we are not thinking about the favorites to win the game. We are just thinking about if you lose the game, you go home. As he said, we want to keep going and keep



playing. We're going to treat everyone the same.

Q. Yaxel, you came up limping on Sunday. Everything good?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: Yeah, I'm fine. I started moving, running around yesterday. I had a little bit of issues cutting a little bit, but today I think I'm going to feel a lot better.

When I get into the game mindset, I think I'll be all right.

Q. What did you guys learn from yourselves from losing on Sunday, and what do you carry over from that game into the tournament?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: I would say we have to dictate tempo. All season long we've been struggling with coming out in the second half strong. And Purdue took advantage of that, and that really gave them a lot of momentum in a game where it wasn't going too good for us.

Then we started playing with our backs against the wall. I feel like we got a little jittery, started losing our composure a little bit. I would just say in this tournament especially, there's not going to be too many blowouts. So we've got to maintain our composure, stay together like we have been all year, and do whatever we can to make sure that we all play together.

Q. We've spoken about this before, they say guards win in March. You guys have won so frequently through the three of you, what importance do you think specifically Elliott and Trey have on the success you guys may have in this run?

MOREZ JOHNSON JR.: Elliott and Trey, they're both very important to the team. Elliott runs the show, Trey having to step out because LJ is out right now. When Elliott goes out of the game, Trey comes in and runs the show for us.

They've been helpful for us, getting us in spaces where we want the ball and everything like that, control everything, very important for us.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: I would say the same thing. For a lot of our games when it came down to the wire or when the team starts making a run or we lose our composure a



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little bit, Elliott has always been the guy to provide instant offense. His impact during this tournament is going to be especially needed because he's not going to get many breaks like he did when LJ was around.

Also for Trey he's been doing a pretty good job handling that secondary ball handler role. If he continues to stay confident, continues to play within the team, we're going to be great.

ADAY MARA: Same as he said. Also their defense is super important, too, like them pressuring the ball and making our job easier is one of the keys. That's why we are number one defense in the country.

Q. Guys, each of you, give me one word to describe Coach May.

MOREZ JOHNSON JR.: I'm just trying to think.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: That's a good one.

MOREZ JOHNSON JR.: Coach May is unique. He's a different coach. That's the best way I can put it.

ADAY MARA: I would say the best.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: Yeah, I'm going to go like cool uncle. He's that kind of guy.

Q. One of the best things Michigan has is size. You're really good at crashing the glass defensively, really controlling that interior. Talk about you guys' mentality when it comes to controlling the paint down low, the second-chance efforts and getting what you want down low?

MOREZ JOHNSON JR.: We know we have Aday and Yax behind us. If somebody do get it off the dribble, our teammates got our back, so they give us enough confidence to get up in the ball handler, pressure the ball. Yeah.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: Yeah, I'm going to second what he said. It's Aday and Rez down there that are pretty much providing extra help for us. There have been so many times this year where, like he said, we've been not afraid to be more aggressive than we normally are because of the shot blocking that we have down there. It's key to our defense and pretty much how we flow into every game, pretty much every position. Aday has been doing a really good job of maintaining all the finishes down low. Whenever teams can't finish the way we usually do, that really bogs them down. That's been helping us out tremendously.

ADAY MARA: I would also say that since we came together, the staff was giving us what we had to do, how we were going to play defense. So just by knowing what we have to do every game and what kind of shots we want and we don't want them to take, like, that's very helpful for when you are playing basketball too, when you're playing defense.

Q. Dusty has talked about this specifically, and he's taken exception to the mercenary idea that you guys have heard floating around. Now that you've had the season you've had, you're here representing Michigan, what do you all, since you three are three of the four that that's referencing, what do you have to say about that or think about that?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: It's the modern day of basketball now. I think the transfer portal helps out a lot of kids, especially me. I felt like last year I had a pretty good year, I went under the radar a little bit because my team wasn't that good, I was mid major. We didn't get that much spotlight.

Now being in this situation, I've had the best year of my life like I've already stated. I'm in the spotlight, getting coached by a new coach that came from mid major, so he knows how everything works. And, man, we're really not bad kids. He did a good job recruiting guys that care for each other and put the team above themselves. If that's what they want to call mercenary, I would love to be a mercenary. That's cool with me.

MOREZ JOHNSON JR.: I agree with what Yax said. The transfer portal helps out a lot of people, especially me, coming from a program where I didn't play that much at and I felt restricted. Coming here with Coach May, I started to love basketball again. It was fun. Getting to play with -- yeah, I don't know. I agree with Yax.

ADAY MARA: For me, I would say that after those two years, it was great to come here and create this, like, new family in basketball. So that helped me, too. Yeah, that was good.

DUSTY MAY: We're incredibly excited to be here in Buffalo and have the opportunity to compete against a very well-coached Howard team that's performed extremely well down the stretch, and so we're just ready to get back on the court.

Q. If I read your bio correctly, you've been here before.

DUSTY MAY: It's been a few moons, but yes.



Q. It was 2000.

DUSTY MAY: Correct.

Q. It was a memorable game, or immemorable?

DUSTY MAY: It was.

Q. As you are now, the No. 1 seed, and knowing what happened back then and knowing the fickleness of basketball, did that help form or shape your philosophy going in any way being a top-seeded team and facing a lower opponent in that sense?

DUSTY MAY: I don't think that game did that. I mean, we all know how dangerous the NCAA Tournament is. Every team here is here for a reason. They're really good, and it's daunting to even look at the brackets.

First of all, the seeding could be the result of an injury, maybe a down stretch during the course of a year. And our season is so long, you could be a completely -- even now, I went back and I was watching our St. John's exhibition and I was watching McNeese and a couple teams that pressed us just to see what all we did against it. And we've become a different team over the course of a season.

No, anyone that's followed the game like we have, we're very well-versed and upsets can happen any time, anywhere, especially when you're playing a team that's as capable as Howard.

Q. What did you take out of that moment --

DUSTY MAY: Is that the Pepperdine game?

Q. Yes.

DUSTY MAY: Yeah, the thing that jumps out now is you'd better have a playmaker in the middle of the zone, high post. Pepperdine zoned us. We had Lynn Washington play primarily in the high post, he struggled. We couldn't get any rhythm shots so I just remember thinking, you need to have a versatile playmaker that can get in the middle of the zone, shoot, drive, pass, whatever the case.

Yeah, certain things stick with you, obviously, for a long time, and that's one of those things.

Q. Aday just told us he wasn't even talking about money with you during the recruiting process. He just wanted to play basketball in the right spot. Was that one of the things that drew you to him?

DUSTY MAY: Yeah, just obviously, you watch him and we went back and looked at Synergy, his national team stuff. When we zero in on someone, it's like a 24-hour, just all in on trying to gather as much information and just see them at their best, see them at their worst, and just try to get a clear picture of who they are.

The recruiting process was a couple weeks. Once we started talking to him, I fell in love with him as a person, literally. We recruited a handful of guys, there was probably five guys we were recruiting for that one spot, and it was just the way he makes people feel when he's around them. It's impossible not to feel better about yourself because of how engaging he is, how warm he is. And he really, really cares about other people.

Even his passing -- I love the comment that he made, the assist makes two people happy. It was more that than anything else. He had talent; everyone for the last 10 years has known he's had talent, but how do you unlock that talent? We weren't sure we could. We did feel like we had the system in place where we could maximize what he does well.

But yeah, to be honest, I was talking to his agent recently and I didn't know how much he made. I knew the range because that was never -- it was one of those things where it's like, okay, let's just figure out a way to make this work for both parties, so we did.

Q. What do you think it means to little kids growing up in the area to see Roddy playing here in the NCAA Tournament?

DUSTY MAY: Yeah, really cool. I'm sure they saw Moose Johnston growing up, from Roddy's high school, playing football. But it's really cool to have a local story like Roddy's. Just like Aday, just such a warm hearted guy. He's always giving back. He's trying to get home as much as he can.

That's the beautiful thing about the NCAA; there's so many of these stories that if you don't make the tournament are never out in the world. Even Okojie, you just listen to his interview last night, if they don't make the tournament, we're not familiar with what a seemingly amazing human being he is. That's how I feel about our guys. If we don't have the success that we've had, the world doesn't get a chance to see who they are as people.

Q. Elliott was saying the sequencing against Wisconsin where he missed a three, Yax got the rebound and went back to him and he made the next one kind of showed how far he's come in terms of rewiring himself to be confident in his jumper. How



have you seen that confidence grow and what did you tell him when he got there about you have the green light to shoot these?

DUSTY MAY: Well, I think everyone knows, the green light is earned in our program. I've seen the work that he's put in. When we signed him, it's the same thing, we did a deep dive and really analyzed -- we heard the stories and whatever the case. I didn't see him much in high school or AAU. I probably saw him twice in all the prep time. I didn't watch Carolina much. I watched him play in Dayton last year on Tuesday or Wednesday. So I hadn't watched him a lot.

Went back to Synergy and when we watched his shots, I felt like just on film, he had a good shot. Sometimes certain things kept him from taking the highest quality shots, and that's the part I didn't know. So when we met with him, it was more or less that this is our shot diet, our shot profile, and if you'll buy into this, you'll be an efficient shooter and scorer. We don't want anyone on the roster that you don't have to guard.

But when you see him hit that shot, first thing I could think about is all the work he's put in. He's been fairly consistent before, practice after practice, working on the shots he's going to get. I didn't realize it, but when the ball got kicked back to him, one of the assistants said something along the lines of why haven't you shot it yet? What are you thinking about? Just shoot it again.

Fortunately he had the confidence and the belief in himself to step up and knock down that big shot.

Q. You talked about evolutions of programs. I think a lot of people would look at yours and thought you've been pretty consistent all through. How have you evolved, gotten better as the season has progressed?

DUSTY MAY: Well, we weren't very good early. We found a way to win. That's kind of how our season was the majority of last year, where we weren't near as good as our record. But the last four or five minutes of games, our guys could turn into these superhuman rebounders and playmakers and we could generate dunks and lay-ups. We kind of had a secret weapon where if we knew we were close we could find a way to win.

This year we had so many blowouts. We weren't in very many close games so we didn't get to learn as much about ourselves as we did in the Big Ten Tournament.

Obviously we're still doing deep dives into when we've played well and when we haven't and what's been the difference. I think we've been getting 10 to 20 possessions

less over the last month of the season than we got before that. So teams have slowed down tempo, teams have tried to restrict our freedom of movement, they've tried to get more physical with us.

So we haven't adjusted to that rugged play as well as we need to if we're going to be as good as anybody in the country. But I think our consistency is just the number of capable players we have. We always talk about it, that no one plays great every game. You're going to have a bad night, I'm going to have a bad night. But our team has been deep enough where if someone has had an off night, someone else has been more than capable of coming in and carrying the load.

And those guys are more than capable. Don't get an opportunity to do it as often as they probably deserve. But any time you turn on TV and watch any really good team, that's the case. That sacrifice, that ability to stay ready when it's not going well for you, I think, are probably the biggest things.

Q. Coach May, with everything going on in college basketball landscape, whether it's the transfer portal, NIL, the coaching transfer portal, carousel, whatever you want to call it, how do you keep the main thing the main thing?

DUSTY MAY: It's a great question. It's not easy. But I think if you do it every day of the year and you just focus on what impacts winning and what impacts people, I think you probably continue to keep your compass pointed in the right direction.

Justin Joyner is in that transition for us. He wasn't officially in the coaches' portal, but they came and got him and they got a superstar in the making.

But it's not easy. That's probably our biggest fight every day is not thinking about what happens the day you lose. Because when you lose in college basketball, your last game, the next 24 to 48 hours is a tsunami. You don't know what direction coming, you don't know what direction it's going, but you know there are a lot of people counting on you to make quick, decisive decisions that impact their futures and you're counting on them to make quick decisive decisions that impact your future and your time and everything else.

That's probably the most difficult part. But we just take a lot of pride in staying fluid and not being too emotional, not making rash decisions, thinking things out. And then obviously having a strong belief in what we do that we'll find the right guys that want to do it how we believe is the best way.



Q. The Big Ten drought is very long for a National Championship. I know you've been in a lot of different conferences, but you started your career in this one. What is the pride you take in trying to win one for this conference?

DUSTY MAY: A lot more pride in winning one for the University of Michigan and all the people that have helped our staff, our players along this journey.

Winning one for the Big Ten is obviously incredibly important because we represent this historical conference. To be honest now we're in the tournament, it's all -- the first possession, it's Howard, then we get to the next possession.

It would be really cool to win one for Michigan and the Big Ten.

Q. You were talking about not being in enough close games. Yaxel talked about feeling maybe jitters in the second half against Purdue on Sunday that maybe had you on your heels in some ways. What did you learn or take away out of that loss going into the tournament?

DUSTY MAY: Well, I didn't notice Yax being on -- the jitters helped. He was incredibly aggressive and performed really well in the second half, and at times was on the verge of willing us back into position to win the game.

We learned a lot. It was more about how they attacked us, what we didn't do well, where we had some game slippage, and obviously Purdue was incredibly determined.

I think when you're No. 1 in the country going into the year and you have two first-team All-Americans, two players in the top five of all of college basketball, and then you come into the Big Ten Tournament as a 7 seed, you probably want to salvage something. So I think their want-to was greater than ours on that day.

Q. How have you seen Roddy kind of mentally respond to the fact that he hasn't been starting this season?

DUSTY MAY: He didn't start last year about two-thirds through the season, and he adapted well. It's the same thing within our program; our guys, everyone wants to start. When you coach baseball, everyone wants to pitch and play shortstop. And when you coach football, everyone wants to play quarterback and running back and wide receiver. Roddy is a great teammate, and from day one, he's been whatever you need me to do.

There's never been any bad body language for what the team needed him to do. We've had guys who are second or third in minutes coming off the bench because maybe that balances -- our Final Four, Michael Forrest, was a four-year starter, and in his fifth year came off the bench because that balanced our rotations better.

If you're going to be in position like we are and we have been, then you have guys that are willing to do and play whatever role is necessary for the team, and Roddy is that guy.

Q. I'm sure the resumes are coming in for that assistant coaching job. What are you looking for and can you talk about how the guys have set the bar for your expectations for that position?

DUSTY MAY: Yeah, to be honest, we could promote from within. We could hire an older established coach. We're going to put a lot of thought into what this group needs. To be honest, I really want to wait until after the coaching carousel calms down so I can see the full picture and then analyze what the team needs.

And then also it's just like the players. Coaches get up and say somebody got out-bid them for this player, whatever the case. We all have a choice to use our resources how we do. Just to see what the resources look like, to see what the staff needs, to see where we are and then make those decisions or decision.

But yeah, just casting a big net right now, but I'm not spending any time on that at this moment because we have a very capable group -- and he's still with us -- but we have a group that everyone is going to pick up the slack a little bit more. Because he's obviously going to be taking calls to fill his staff and things like that. He's going to be preoccupied at times.

But I'm not sure yet. I definitely want to hire someone that's going to make us better coaches.

Q. I want to base this off your experience of making the jump to Michigan and having the success you've had. What does a coach need to have in place in order to hit the ground running and be competitive in terms of NIL, other financials? What does a coach need to take over right away?

DUSTY MAY: You know, it's like everything else, there's no right or wrong. There's no number. You see astronomical numbers out there that those guys aren't playing.



I think it's more of a skill set by the coach. I think evaluation is more important than ever, and that's even evaluating who you're going to pay as your max players, as your mid-level players, and whatnot. And also evaluate guys that can impact winning in the future that maybe don't have great expectations. And then also the ability to develop players quickly and efficiently. And then also how do you get players that can adapt to different systems and plug in different plays.

But I don't think you can say that it's going to take this number. Obviously that number can change. Our number has never been flat. Even in our first year, we had, I think, one of the lowest NIL budgets in the country. I know we did. And then we were able to use what we had to get two or three really good players at about 25 percent market rate.

And then once you can start raising some more, okay, you guys were able to get that with X number of dollars, okay, we can find some more, just keep recruiting, as long as you can do it like this. I think it changes, and every situation is different, every scenario is different.

But there is value in a coaching staff and group that can win with less by getting great value.

I can't answer that question because you could have guys with the largest budgets losing and you could have guys with small budgets that found the right formula and are winning. But you need a staff that can evaluate and develop and put the right pieces together, I think.

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