

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Saint Louis vs Georgia

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Buffalo, New York, USA

KeyBank Center

Saint Louis Billikens

Coach Josh Schertz

Robbie Avila

Dion Brown

Paul Otieno

Media Conference



You've got Robbie who is leading us in assists, leading us in scoring as well. When he's able to both score and facilitate at the level he does to get everyone else involved, it's really difficult to not have guys who can get 20 on any given night just because of the unselfishness, starting with him.

Q. Robbie, just your take on this year's Georgia team, what you've seen on film so far, and particularly Somto Cyril who you're going to be seeing a lot of tomorrow night?

ROBBIE AVILA: Yeah, we watched a little bit of film to start. Obviously they're a really good team. They made it here, too. Super athletic. They play really fast just like us. They're probably the only team that plays faster than us that we'll play this year.

It's going to be a difficult game, but I think we're prepared for it. We're going to go out and prepare for it here today. Like I said, we're just excited to be here, and we're ready to compete.

Q. Paul, how do you prepare for a matchup between two teams that can score a lot?

PAUL OTIENO: I'd just say it's all mental for us. Because they're more physical than us, so we've just got to bring the energy tomorrow when we play.

Q. They're more physical?

PAUL OTIENO: They're more physical, bigger than us, so we've just got to bring more energy.

Q. Robbie, is there extra motivation with this matchup being against a high major team for you guys to be able to show that you can compete with anybody as far as that goes?

ROBBIE AVILA: I don't really think so. I think we treat each game the same. It's just high-level competition. We've played a lot of really good teams. VCU is also here in the tournament that we played twice within our conference. I think we treat each game as a new challenge, whether it's a mid major, low major, a high

Q. Robbie, having been around Coach Schertz for a few years. What do you make of this fun ride you've been on?

ROBBIE AVILA: I always kind of talk about it, describe it in one word and that's special. To kind of end my last year with him and just being in college in general with a tournament appearance, it's a blessing. And to be able to do it with the group of guys we've got here it makes it more special. We're just soaking it in, but we're just ready to compete.

Q. For Robbie, is there a little added motivation this year after the 2024 Indiana State team, you guys just missed the tournament?

ROBBIE AVILA: I think internally, yeah, but I think with a new team, it kind of resets every year. Our goal was from the beginning of the year to reach this moment, so we got here, we kind of accomplished that goal. But obviously that 2024 year was just what it was. I'm just excited and blessed to have the opportunity to do it here.

Q. Dion, you look at what you guys have done offensively this year, statistically one of the top offenses, what makes this offense so effective? What allows you to put up points like you guys do?

DION BROWN: Obviously it comes from scoring at all three levels. But when you get a group of guys who are so unselfish and willing to play with each other and for each other, it's hard not to put up a lot of points each got.



major. So I don't think there's really any extra motivation. I think we already had the motivation that we want, just by being in the NCAA Tournament and just wanting to win and play for as long as we can.

Q. Dion, what do you take out of the loss to Dayton and the fact that you did lose twice to Dayton over the past couple of weeks? What do you take out of that loss in the tournament game, and how do you carry that forward into this game?

DION BROWN: I think it just is a testament to who we are as a team. We can play with anyone. We can beat anyone. We can lose to anyone. If we're not where we need to be, whether it's physically, mentally, thinking the game the right way, we're a team that can lose to just about anyone.

But if we're on our money, we do what we're supposed to do -- I think we were minus 13 in the possession game against Dayton, and we lost by one point. If we're able to not even maybe have more possessions but even just be equal, we win that game by a decent amount. If we're able to stay on top of what we need to do, then we can play with anyone.

JOSH SCHERTZ: Just excited to be here. Certainly an unbelievable opportunity to participate in what I think is the best sporting event in the world, and we're honored. It's been a long journey here, but got a group that has competed and worked its tail off for the last nine and a half months to have the opportunity.

We're thrilled to get a chance to compete against a great Georgia team tomorrow night.

Q. With both teams being very capable of scoring, do you welcome a track meet, or what is your philosophy going into this game in that sense?

JOSH SCHERTZ: Yeah, look, both teams have shown high-powered offense. There's great pace. Scoring is usually a byproduct of possessions. I expect it to be a very high-possession game because you're looking at two teams that offensively, I think, are among the top in the country in terms of pace of play.

But I think there's a difference in playing fast and playing frantic. We've got to be able to toggle. We want to play with great pace, but we also want to bring a level of discipline to that pace in terms of shot selection and taking care of the ball that we have when we're at our best offensively. So that's going to be the balance for us.

And then for certain we have to do a great job in transition

because I think Georgia -- they're No. 1 in the country in dunks, and I think they're as good in transition as anybody I've seen, not just this year, but in the last few years. So they're an unbelievable transition team.

Q. In studying Georgia and how they play offensively, what else has caught your attention to them?

JOSH SCHERTZ: I think it starts with how good they are in transition, how good they are on the offensive glass. They do a terrific job of dominating the possession game. Their defense fuels their offense. They turn you over at a really high rate. When they do, they convert that immediately. They force teams to play at a pace that's not comfortable for them. So they speed teams up, get teams to take early bad, early average shots, and then they're able to turn those shooting turnovers and live ball turnovers into transition.

They're terrific downhill. They've got a bunch of guys that can shoot the ball and drive it. They're dynamic. Really, they've got a couple guys that shoot at a really high level, Catchings and a few others. But it's up and down the roster.

They've got a lot of guys that shoot it, drive it. They space the floor really well. They play downhill, and they really put a lot of pressure on the rim, which generates a lot of their catch and shoot threes and offensive rebounding opportunities.

They're going to stress test us in a ton of different ways, and we've got to do a great job as we've done all year in terms of the bookends and point of attack defense and in a variety of areas to have success. They're really well-coached, really talented.

Q. You mentioned Georgia and the dunks. Of course Somto Cyril has been one of the ones responsible for that. What's been your take on him and the challenge he's going to present?

JOSH SCHERTZ: Yeah, he's obviously tremendous size, great athlete, length. He brings a tremendous force on both ends. He does a great job of dominating the rim offensively with all the dunks and then defensively with his shot blocking and his shot deterrence.

He's a load to handle. It's going to be really challenging for us. He's terrific on the offensive glass, and he's a guy that is a roll threat. He puts vertical pressure on the rim. Where Robbie puts more horizontal pressure with his shooting, Cyril puts more vertical pressure with his rolling. He does a great job sprinting the floor in transition.



A lot of their transition, kind of an invisible thing, but how hard he runs the floor and you've got to account for him at the rim, and then it opens up those pitch ahead threes, those pitch ahead drives. And a lot of the stuff that he doesn't get any box score validation for, he does a great job there.

Unbelievable challenge, great player, and we'll have to, from a physicality standpoint, effort standpoint, match what he brings, which is really high level.

Q. With everything going on in basketball, transfer portal, NIL, obviously rumors floating about yourself, the coaching carousel as we like to call it, how do you keep the main thing the main thing?

JOSH SCHERTZ: Yeah, that's a good question. I think we go on these journeys, and at this point of the season, when you have success or even if you don't, there's always speculation who's coming back, who's going where, what's happening with coaches, what's happening with players.

I think one of our program bedrocks is be where your feet are, just to be present. It would be so disappointing to go through this experience and not enjoy it and to not be where your feet are.

For us to play well tomorrow and play well enough to win, we're going to have to be completely fully present inside the competition. We're have to compete present and do it every possession and stack possessions.

That's just a program bedrock. Be where your feet are. We'll worry about the off-season stuff when the off-season hits. Our goal is to try to extend that out as long as we can. At this point, the next loss is the last loss, so everything we can do.

I think this group really cares about each other. I think they feel responsible to each other. I don't think anybody wants to let anybody else down. So from players to coaches, full focus on what's in front of us, and I think we've got the right kind of -- not just competitive character -- but I think we've got really high-character guys in that locker room. So I haven't seen anything where I'd look at it and say, man, this guy is distracted or worried about that or worried about that.

I think everybody, coaches and players are, completely focused on what we've got to do to play our best tomorrow night.

Q. You were on the podcast earlier in the year and talked about how detailed your practices are and how much goes into prepping one practice. What does that

process look like as you prepare to take on Georgia?

JOSH SCHERTZ: Yeah, it would be hard for me to compare to other coaching staffs because I don't get to watch. Generally I watch some practices, I'll exchange with friends of mine, we'll exchange practices. But in general, I think at this point of the year, hay is in the barn in terms of like your foundational stuff. If you're having to teach new stuff or find new talking points, you probably were doing it wrong the last nine and a half months.

It's not really like you have to go reinvent the wheel now. What you have to do is prepare for what you think the opponent is going to give you, and you have to be as thorough as possible but also as efficient as possible. You're not trying to grind these guys down. You've got to do enough to make sure -- we always talk about going into games with fresh legs, clear mind. Can we keep their legs fresh, but are their minds clear in terms of understanding what we're doing game plan-wise, what we need to do to execute and what it's going to take for us on both ends of the floor to have a chance to win tomorrow night.

But how efficiently can we get those things. So that's what it is. I think this time of the year, and really starting in January, most of your practices are geared towards preparing for your opponent. Most of your practices from June on are geared towards how do you prepare your team and build the foundation and build the habits necessary to sustain you throughout the year.

It'll be pretty much like these last few practices January, February, and we'll go hard today but we won't go very long, and then we'll get right to it and be ready to go tomorrow.

Q. You've been to an NCAA Tournament, but this one is a little bit of a different animal. I'm sure part of you would like to enjoy the view and the journey that's gotten you here, but you have a very important task ahead of you. How do you balance those two things as you also try to ready your team?

JOSH SCHERTZ: Yeah, no, it's definitely different than the D-II tournament for sure and the whole deal. There was no bag checks or anything there, so I missed that. Then you had to bus instead of fly.

But no, it's a good question. I think it's hard. You try to just savor moments where you can, enjoy the opportunity. You know how hard you have to work to get here.

As a non-Power Five, I think there was four schools in the country that got at-large bids, I think, if I'm not mistaken, so four of 300ish. So how hard that is to be one of those four.



I think to try to as best I can savor it, but going through it is difficult because you're focused on the task at hand. And you don't want to get so caught up in enjoying it that you forget the part of we came here to try to win a game. And then if you can win one, you try to win another one and just try to play as long as you can.

I'm trying to balance it. I don't know if I'm doing it well. I think it's one of those things where when it's over and you've got a chance to decompress for maybe a couple days and reflect, it'll be like, what a cool experience.

But I'm trying to as much as I can -- like when I walk out to practice, when we walk out tomorrow night, to just take a quick mental pic and make sure I remember -- outside people it's like, oh, we just kind of burst on the scene, but I've been coaching 28 years. So it's not like -- for me, it's -- and I started when I was five, so I'm only 33 now. That's why I look so young.

But I don't want to forget all the time that I spent the first 28 years trying to reach this level, and I want to enjoy it as much as I can.

Q. What did it mean for Robbie to come with you from Indiana State, and what's your favorite nickname for him?

JOSH SCHERTZ: Ooh, it meant a lot. Certainly I've said this many times. My biggest concern this year -- I wanted to get this team to the NCAA Tournament for a lot of reasons, but he was the biggest. There was a lot of people that helped bring me here, but I just never wanted for him to have ended his career not in the tournament, particularly after what happened to our Indiana State team in '24.

Everything he sacrificed, he sacrificed money, he sacrificed playing time. He sets an unbelievable tenor for our whole program, his sense of humor, his humility, his team orientation, the kind of competitor he is, the way he cares about people, his compassion. I could go on for days about what he's meant. His buy-in to how we want to do things has expedited that for all the other players last year and this year.

I've said this before, when you look at the history of the Indiana State basketball, the history of Saint Louis basketball, they all have pockets of success, but he's really changed the trajectory of two mid major programs that aren't household nationally ranked teams on a year-in/year-out basis. And he did the same thing in high school, so I don't think it's coincidental. Everywhere he goes, he takes something and he changes it and he changes the trajectory of something.

Nickname? I'll go Milk Chamberlain or SLU Alcindor. I think those two are probably two of my favorites.

Q. What do you take away from the loss to Dayton and the fact that you're 4-4 over the last eight games? What's the takeaway, and what is the approach going into this knowing that's in the past?

JOSH SCHERTZ: Yeah, I think the Dayton game, what you take away is I loved how we competed. I loved our fight. I thought we really did a lot of things well. I thought that it was a credit to how good our team is. We could be minus 13 in the possession game, and one of their players who had only made a couple threes all year makes four threes, and we lose on kind of a fluke tip at the buzzer. It was a great play by them, not fluke in that, but just a fortunate bounce of the ball off the backboard into the rim. And it took all that for us to lose to a really good Dayton team.

What you take from that is can we have that level of fight, can we have that level of compete, and can we bring some brains and discipline to it so we don't turn the ball over 18 times and not lose the possession game. That's what I explained to the team. That's like taking a game and saying, okay, we're going to give each team 50 possessions and see what the score is, and then, all right, the score is whatever it is. Now Dayton, you get 13 straight possessions and Saint Louis none and then see if you still win. It's hard to do.

I feel as good coming out of Pittsburgh the second half against George Washington and the 40 minutes against Dayton about our team as I have since the beginning of February in terms of where we are from a mentality standpoint, our fight, our compete level. Now we've just got to bring the brains with it and the discipline with it, and if we do that, we'll give ourselves a chance for sure.

Q. Josh, obviously a brutally late start tomorrow night, could be going into Friday morning. Do you have the day laid out at all so you make sure the guys have a balance between active and laying around?

JOSH SCHERTZ: Yeah, we'll do some stuff with Jake and some activation stuff, and we'll get them up in the morning and do something there in the weight room. And we'll obviously have shootaround and pregame. We'll try to keep them not choppy, but certainly not make sure they're sleeping in until 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon.

We'll put some stuff in their schedule to get them up and get going. But it kind of is what it is at this point. We've had to play 11:30 in the morning in Pittsburgh, which was



really 10:30 our time in Central time. Tomorrow night will be like -- is it 9:20 or 10:20? 9:45? Basically a 10:00 tip. It'll be 9:00 our time.

I think you just try to get them up, get them activated, not let them lay around all day, but certainly just don't keep them in and out of there. Make sure everybody feels good. But we'll do some stuff in the morning just to get them up and get them going.

Q. Going off that, correct me if I'm wrong, I don't believe anyone on your roster has experience in the NCAA Tournament --

JOSH SCHERTZ: Right.

Q. Going into that, how do you prepare them and get them ready for a 10:00 tip and a neutral site game in Buffalo in a high stakes, lose and go home game?

JOSH SCHERTZ: Yeah, I think you lean into all the things that you've talked about all year. Again, it goes back to if you're having to give them new info, then the info was bad the previous nine and a half months. So the stuff we would talk about, competing present, not worried about outcomes, trying to focus on winning possessions. You win games by winning possessions. The team that wins the most possessions wins the game.

Can we compete present? Do we compete together? Did we stack a great day today in terms of our practice habits? All the stuff that we lean into culturally, programatically, that's the stuff that has to -- when you get to these games -- everybody reaches this point at some point. Some reach it in their conference tournament. But everybody reaches the elimination stage of their season, and at that point, it's always about, like, do you have those things ingrained in you.

And if you're playing focused on all the stuff that's non-controllable, 10:00 tip, what the consequences are, win or lose, you're not going to have your mind where it needs to be, which is solely on trying to stack the possession in front of you against a great Georgia team.

We'll lean into competing together, competing present, trying to be as resilient and as tough-minded as we can be. And we'll lay it all out there, do it together, and let the chips fall where they may. Hopefully it's enough to get it done, but we know the task at hand, and we have unbelievable respect for how good Georgia is and what it'll take from an across-the-board standpoint to have success tomorrow.

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