

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

Thursday, March 19, 2026

Buffalo, New York, USA

KeyBank Center

Michigan State Spartans

Coach Tom Izzo

Jeremy Fears Jr.

Carson Cooper

Media Conference

Michigan State 92, North Dakota State 67

TOM IZZO: We did the job and we got some points off our bench. So when you shoot it well from the field, shoot it well from the three and shoot 89 percent from the line, I don't know what our rebound total was, it wasn't probably physical -- yeah, plus 12, so it was a good win for us.

Q. Jeremy, you assisted on six of the first eight makes for you guys tonight and finished with 11. I wanted to know what your game plan was trying to get your teammates the ball?

JEREMY FEARS JR.: Really just adjusting, seeing how they were guarding our pick-and-roll, how they were guarding me. My guys got open, so just making sure I was able to get them the ball in the right spots. They did the hard part of scoring and finishing.

Overall I trust them, so I know they're going to make the right play, whether I pass to them and they pass to somebody else and we get a lay-up or a bucket, or they score. So at the end of the day, just making sure I'm getting them the ball.

Q. You guys were really running it well with the pick-and-roll today. I'm curious what that connection is like between the two of you.

CARSON COOPER: Yeah, I think it's gotten better, us playing together for three years, it's gotten better every year, and now the fact that we're kind of on our last leg and kind of at the end of our college career, we're hitting our



best strides together.

I think when you start off the summer playing really well together, it's just going to build from there. I think we had a good summer, and that's what sparked it.

JEREMY FEARS JR.: I think this is what happened when you play with players for multiple years and stick with the same group and guys. You build that chemistry, that bond. I know where Coop is going to be, Coop knows where I'm going to be. And I can throw it to Coop with my eyes closed, and I know he'll catch it.

Q. Carson, you've worked a lot with Cam Ward since he's come in, his first NCAA Tournament game. Did you have any words for him prior to the game or as the game was carrying on?

CARSON COOPER: Yeah, Cam played awesome. I think kind of thinking back to my freshman year, I kind of told him, it's okay to be nervous in these situations. You grow up and you watch these games and you dream about playing in this game. For me, I told him before the game, just kind of take in the momentum and take in where you are and accept that and be grateful for where you're at.

I think once he did that, it kind of helped him calm down a little bit, not overthink as much and just play his game.

Q. Carson and Jeremy, talk about the blessing it has to be to play for Coach Izzo?

JEREMY FEARS JR.: I'll say for sure it's special. Not every day that you get a great person, a great leader that comes up, shows up to work and teaches you how to keep getting better, whether it's on the court or off the court. Overall these three years have been special for me, just being able to have someone I can look up to every day.

CARSON COOPER: Yeah, I think we're blessed to have someone who's been through the ringer for 28 years straight in this tournament. It's comfortable for us to kind of look up to him and trust what he's telling us because we know he's been there.

Q. The program hasn't lost in the first round in five years and hasn't lost as a single-digit seed in 10. What



has allowed the program to be as consistent as they have been?

JEREMY FEARS JR.: I think honestly just the schedule we get. Every year we probably have one of the hardest schedules, and Coach sets that up. And day in and day out, it's a grind to keep getting better, and the end goal is to win championships. We want to win games, but championships is the goal.

So that's kind of set from the summer preseason and then at the beginning of the season. So just understanding the grind and what we need to do to be successful.

Without the coaches and their game plan, they're the ones who give us the answer. We just have to go out there and execute.

Q. Jeremy, 49 points from the starting front court, but what does it mean when you have Kur Teng and Trey Fort combine for 30?

JEREMY FEARS JR.: Huge. Those guys that's come in off the bench are special. Just being able to have some different guys step up and make plays, it just makes us so much harder to guard. And we've got Coop and Jax down there, and they're seeing double-teams now. So they're making the right play and making shots and driving.

When we're clicking, I think we're really hard to beat. But overall it's just always special to have guys that can do a little bit of everything.

Q. We've talked over the years about you trying to expand your offensive game in a lot of different ways. You took a jumper from the free-throw line late that you short armed a little bit. I noticed Saddi over there -- was he saying to shoot it?

CARSON COOPER: Yeah, I think I was kind of second-guessing it. It wasn't a great shot in the moment. I think I was kind of more of a floater action, and I think Saddi seen me make the jump shot multiple times, so he was just reminding me in moments like that you've got to trust the jumper. And a one-handed floater from the free-throw line is a lot tougher than a little pull-up.

Q. Carson and Jeremy, first half on defense for you guys, held them to about 33 percent from the floor. They're an explosive three-point shooting team. Can you talk about the first half defensive intensity and how you think you did as a unit and how important that was defensively in the first half, and did it carry over to the second half well enough?

CARSON COOPER: Yeah, that's all we were talking about is getting off to strong defensive starts with the coaches and our player meetings. That's something we've got to continue to work on. For us, that was our -- what we were really stressing probably since the UCLA game. We came out and I think we executed that really well, but that was the big emphasis for us.

JEREMY FEARS JR.: I'd say, yeah, that was something that we talked about. We had a couple games down the stretch towards the end of our season where we gave up a lot of buckets, especially early. That's why teams get going. They make shots, they have a lot of confidence.

We wanted to come in and have the defensive mindset of just trying to make it hard for everybody and just make a bucket -- if they make it, make it hard. Just so they don't have a feel and we can have confidence and try to take theirs.

Q. With Carson and his sort of evolving offensive game and the player he's become there, if somebody had told you two years ago that he was going to be this sort of sure-handed rim runner and player you could play through a little bit, what would you have said? Where have you seen the greatest growth there from him?

TOM IZZO: The greatest growth, I think, has come each year, as they alluded to, when you stay in a program and you get better each year.

I think he went from liking the game to loving the game, and now he's spending more and more and more time. And you usually get what you deserve, you get what you earn, you get what you work for. It's an amazing concept.

Coop has gotten better. He's gotten better -- at one time he couldn't make a free throw, then it was jump hooks. Now he's got a variety of shots, the baseline one, the lobs. Him and Jeremy, remember when he used to not be able to catch the ball? He's a really good athlete for a kid that size.

It's been fun to watch him grow, and now when he's getting his best, he's only 21 years old. I still think his best basketball is ahead of him. I don't know, the way he can do it now, maybe I can petition or get a judge or something to rule and get him back, who knows.

Just kidding.

Q. As a world-class coach and a basketball savant, I asked North Dakota State what would happen if they beat you in the first round, what dividends would it



pay, and they said it would pay big dividends. You've been to 28 of these first-rounders. My question is how do you stay motivated doing this 28 times in a row, knowing that there's a school out there that wants to make you their claim to fame?

TOM IZZO: First of all, you want to be my publicist with all the good things you said? I could use you.

You know what, I'm blessed. I really am. Listen, we've got a bunch of guys that the last couple years have just hung together and worked together. I've been on that Division II -- I used to play North Dakota State when I was in Division II, drove all the way up there 500 miles to scout them from Marquette. I have a great appreciation for what Dave has done there. He's done a hell of a job, too.

If they would have beat me, I would have shaken their hand and walked off because I've learned there's a lot of good players everywhere, and some of the upsets already that happened today, I don't take anything for granted. I've been a part of those upsets, and I've been a part of doing the upsets.

I like when people are shooting at you. That means you're somewhere. To be in the top that we've been, at least right there where it matters if somebody beats you, trust me, that's a good thing. I don't want to be the other thing anymore. I was that early in my career. It's not as much fun.

Q. You said after the Big Ten Tournament that UCLA you thought played desperate and you liked that. You said you hoped your team played desperate to start the tournament. For the first game of the tournament now, did you see that today, that desperation a little bit, and were you happy with it?

TOM IZZO: I really was. I was happy with the practices we had going in. I took the blame because I thought we did not do as good a job defensively, and that's been our forte forever.

When you start making baskets, I think you get fooled that you can win games different ways. You can win them different ways, but to win consistently, where you've got to come in night in, night out, play in different arenas, domes, this arena, pro arenas, you'd better bring your lunch bucket and your defense and your rebounding.

And that's what we've done most of my career. I didn't think at the end of the year we did it as well. I don't know why. But I had to look in the mirror and say I wasn't pushing them as hard maybe.

So we got back, we had meetings. We talked about it. My radio guy said to me, you look like a team that played desperate. That's a great thing, man. That is okay. If we can play desperate on Saturday, I'd be happy as hell.

Q. Great transition offense today, a few lobs to Carr and then Fears finishing on his own in other instances. Talk about how important it is to your game plan setting the tempo?

TOM IZZO: Yeah, our fast break starts with our defense, though. That's what people don't realize. When you defend well, teams don't get into the paint as much. When they don't get into the paint, your cut-outs are easier because your bigs aren't helping. And when your cut-outs are easier and you rebound the ball, Jeremy is electric when you get it out to him.

I didn't even think Coen ran as hard early, and we got on him about that. But I thought the guy that ran well, Coop and Cam. I thought Cam did an unbelievable job getting out over the top and had some great plays.

But it is a big part of our game. Everybody has got something they do really well offensively. And for us, you talk about running plays, I could care less if we run any plays. I'd like to just get our fast break going and make that the biggest part of our offense.

Q. Coach, what do you like most about Jeremy Fears as a passer, and how much of his assists come through the offense versus free-styling?

TOM IZZO: You know what, I give them credit. I think some of it comes through free-styling. I'll give us credit, I think a lot of it comes through the defense. We have the ball in his hands a lot, and I trust him with it. He does a great job with it. I think he trusts me.

But those other guys all play their part. When Coen is running down that left lane, somebody is looking, and then you get Coop down the middle. We struggled a little bit today. We've got to get Kur going a little bit more, we've got to get Jordan going a little bit.

But when the ball is in Jeremy's hand -- and I thought Denham Wojcik came in and did a great job. He had a couple of big baskets, he had a couple big passes.

There weren't many guys that didn't play pretty well. It was probably -- as you asked the question, it was Trey Fort, one of his better games, not just offensively but defensively. And it's amazing when shots go in, you feel a little better about yourself, and I think it helps your defense.



Yeah, our break, Jeremy is running it, like any good quarterback. But I think we both have a part in it, to be honest with you.

Q. How important was it to you in that final minute to get Nick and the twins in there just to get this moment in March Madness?

TOM IZZO: Well, most of you don't know, but I screwed that up on senior night. It's very important to me. I don't like Nick, I love Nick. The other two are younger. But Nick has done a lot for this program. He's been here five years. He's done a lot academically, he's done a lot socially, he's done a lot in the locker room. As I've said 100 times, he went from Barry Sanders' son to Barry is now Nick Sanders' father, and that's pretty cool.

I think Barry likes that, but I know Nick -- if you ever spend any time with him, one of the most humble human beings I've ever met. It was very important. I was mad that he didn't take that shot in the corner, and he's been making shots.

All in all, it was a great game for us. But don't leave thinking that North Dakota, they didn't play as well today. They missed shots. That is a very well-coached, a very good team. I really loved them on film. Put it this way: They had Big Ten prep from us. That's how much respect we had for the coach, the program and the players in it.

We'll try to move on now, and tomorrow I'll talk to you about Louisville.

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