

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Louisville vs Michigan State

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## Louisville Cardinals Coach Pat Kelsey Kobe Rodgers Vangelis Zougris

Media Conference

**Q. Kobe, let's go back to the last game. Minute 37 you check into the game and just a few seconds later, you get the biggest rebound of the game. Talk about that moment and what was going through your head to come in and make that play?**

KOBE RODGERS: Just we needed to get some stops. They were cutting down the lead. They were doing a great job in their press. So the biggest thing we can do on a missed shot right now, and they're one of the best offensive rebounding teams in the country, is what can I do to help my team win. And at that point it was just go get that rebound.

**Q. Wondering how the development of Jaxon Kohler's three-point shooting this season, when you guys scout against him, how has that changed maybe the way you look at his game play and able to open up the floor in pick-and-roll situations?**

KOBE RODGERS: It's tough especially when you have a great big that's not own good inside but can really shoot the ball. We have a couple of those, like Aly. So you've just got to adjust, which I think we'll do, and we'll see how it goes tomorrow.

**Q. Vangelis, what does it mean to try to read where this team is at and bring Louisville back to prominence to where it was before these last up-and-down seven years?**

VANGELIS ZOUGRIS: It means the world to us. Like this has been one of the main goals we had from the beginning of the season, just getting here and having good



performances. I think we did a great job yesterday just going in and winning the game.

We had our ups and downs, but this is what happens when you play basketball. The other team plays, too. They had a reaction in the second half, but I think we had our minds in the game. We didn't lose our composure. We had our ups and downs, we did good, and it means a lot to us to get a win that is really important to the program, as well.

It's not just important for us, me, Kobe and the guys. It's for Louisville, the college, and the people and the fans.

**Q. Kobe, I want to go back to that moment again and honestly your whole journey starting off at Charleston with Coach Kelsey, and now you make it back to March Madness and you make a huge play. Talk about your journey and what it's meant to you.**

KOBE RODGERS: That's crazy because I was thinking about that on the bus. I've been blessed to have a great college career, not only here at Louisville, at Charleston, at my first school at Nova Southeastern. I've never missed an NCAA tournament, Division I or Division II. Won three conference titles, tournament and regular season. I got over 100-some wins, I'm walking out of here with two degrees. I'm living life at the end of the day.

So whatever I can do to help this team win. I'm surrounded by great players. I get to play with the freaking top 5 draft pick. I've got guys from Greece, Germany, Egypt, and all that. I'm living one of the best lives anybody could ask for.

Going to get a rebound or going to dive on the floor at any opportunity that I can, then that's just a little sacrifice for all the blessings that I have.

**Q. Last time Louisville actually went up against Michigan State in the March Madness tournament was back in 2015 in the Final Four where Michigan State was able to pull out that victory. I know it was a long time ago, but what would it mean to Louisville to be able to get a win over a prestigious program like Michigan State?**

VANGELIS ZOUGRIS: We don't look at things in that way. This is a different game. This is a different team.



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Obviously maybe for the fans it has a different meaning. For us, it's as important as everything we've ever done before. Personally it might be one of the most important games of my career. Just playing such an important game to get to the Sweet 16 is huge.

Looking back to what happened 10 years ago, I know Final Four was a big thing for the University of Louisville. But where we are at now, we have a huge game to get us to the Sweet 16. Next step is just to win this game, and this is how we have to look at things.

**Q. I want to touch on what you just mentioned. You talk about it being one of the most important games, but how do you as athletes define that line between that game maybe having too much importance in your own heads compared to trying to also have that same level head that it is just another game and you are at the end of the day still playing 40 minutes of basketball?**

KOBE RODGERS: I think we've all been -- if you look at the makeup of our team, we've all been to the tournament, or a majority of us. The international guys barely even know what this tournament is. We've all played big games. It's not like this one is going to be bigger than all the others. I played in a Division II National Championship, and at the time that was the biggest game of my entire career.

I've been on big stages. All these guys have been on big stages in their own sort of way. So I don't think whoever we're playing or what stage we're playing or whatever the court says makes that difference. It's more of how bad do you want it, are you going to go get it or are you just going to let it fall through your hands.

PAT KELSEY: Excited to advance, and fortunate -- got a big challenge on our hands. It was a big win the other night. Guys have done a really good job the last 24 hours or so in preparing. We know the challenge in front of us. Michigan State is one of the great programs in the United States.

Coach Izzo is an institution, not only in coaching, but I think in our country in general. So respected. National Championships, 8 million Final Fours. Everybody knows his teams play with such great tenacity and toughness. That's their brand. We have to be up for that challenge. We're excited about the opportunity, and it can't get here soon enough.

**Q. What's it like and what's the significance of this game for a Louisville program that you want to be back on an upward trajectory? And meeting a team that this**

**school faced back in 2015, long before anybody was here, just what does it mean for Louisville in its run to reestablish itself in this game coming up?**

PAT KELSEY: To be honest with you, as a leader with my team, we're not talking about that. We're well aware of the significance of advancing to the round of 32, and the significance of if we were fortunate enough to win this game, what that means. We don't talk about that and think about that.

If I remove myself from being the head coach at Louisville and I just talk about the city of Louisville -- I mentioned it yesterday in my press conference. Louisville basketball and Louisville athletics, the University of Louisville is the heart and soul of that city. Restoring the pride and restoring the excellence that is Louisville basketball has been something that has been very important to us for the last two years, and this would obviously be another step.

But, man, all we're focussing on is competing against a really, really good, tough, physical Michigan State team with a Hall of Fame coach.

We never look at anything other than just trying to be great at the next thing we do, and that's the practice that we just had for the last 75 minutes. Tonight we'll have a film session. We're going to try to make that the best thing in the history of Louisville basketball. Our belief is if we stay true to that and continue to be great in the process, the results kind of take care of themselves.

If we're fortunate enough to win the game, I'll answer all those questions about what it means and all that, but now is not the time.

**Q. Pat, you talked about Izzo a little bit already, but can you elaborate on maybe things you've seen on tape or even in person that you admire of how he runs his program and maybe even specifically this team?**

PAT KELSEY: I mean, my first kind of interaction with Coach was really, really early in my career. He would never remember this. I was a first year, maybe second year, director of basketball operations at Wake Forest back in 2003 or so. And we had a very antiquated video editing system back then. They were just starting to make kind of the transition into the digital world, and now everything is digital and all that, but very few people had it. But Michigan State was kind of one of the pioneers, if you will, in the new technology of everything.

Got to know one of the assistants there, and I remember them just telling me how forward thinking Coach was or is, still is. And whether it was video editing or being on the



cutting edge of recruiting or whatever that was -- they invited us up there to see this system. It was like NASA or something to me. I didn't know much about it.

When I got up there, I just couldn't believe their organization. I couldn't believe -- it was like Apple or IBM or Microsoft or something. It was so buttoned up. Everything was meticulous. He wasn't there yet. I was at the practice facility for like four or five hours just doing all this video stuff, figuring out if we were going to get it at Wake Forest and all that.

Then I remember, I don't know if you've seen the movie Annie. And Oliver Warbucks, when Grace goes to the orphanage and she's supposed to get a boy, but she gets a girl and comes home and everybody is all excited because they got Annie and stuff. And then there's like a siren that went off, and that signified that Mr. Warbucks was coming. And it was like, people were scrambling, like here comes Coach, and he walked in and it was like the President was walking in, man. It took the air out of the room.

That's just kind of the presence that he has. He was very gracious with his time, and he talked to me and asked me where I was from. I was a little nobody. I'm still a little nobody.

But I just remember thinking what a class act he was. Obviously respect for how he runs his organization. He's won a million games. I'll just never forget that. People do nice stuff for people that can't do -- I couldn't do something for Coach Izzo, but he just took the time to talk to me, asked me about my career, what my aspirations were.

And then I see him on the road, and when he comes into recruiting, he's not there to chum around. A lot of times you go on the road in recruiting and everybody is talking to everybody. Coach Izzo walks in, he's locked into what he's doing, then he walks out. I feel like I want to salute him.

But it's cool to compete against him. It'll be cool to shake his hand before the game, and then boom, you flip the switch and it's just any other game. We've got to coach our guys up.

**Q. What are the differences in only having one day to prepare for this Michigan State team instead of having a three or four run-up until a first-round matchup?**

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, they're really, really talented, first of all. They're like Noah's ark. They've got two of everything. Obviously they're really well-coached.

There's never enough time to get ready for a really, really good team like that. If you had five days, you'd probably

run out of time. You've really got to simplify things in a one-day turnaround and lock in on the core meat and potatoes of what you've got to do to beat them.

I think our guys have been attentive to that. Now we've just got to do our best to go out and execute.

**Q. I want to ask a question that's a bit similar to what was just asked. Anything about Tom Izzo X's and O's wise or coaching drills wise that you picked up early in your career, tapes or clinics or anything like that, that you've adopted into your coaching style?**

PAT KELSEY: I think one of the things that everybody in coaching kind of knows in coaching circle is the old war drill. I don't know if they still do it, but they've always been one of the best offensive rebounding teams in the country. The folklore is, and I don't know if they still do it -- probably in today's day and age, you can't do it as much. But they used to do war drill at shootaround, which is basically five guys on the perimeter, five guys guarding him. They'd put a bubble on the rim and throw a ball up so it couldn't go in, it was going to be a miss, and it was just an absolute avalanche of bodies going to fight for that ball.

I think everybody around the country took kind of some version of the war drill to really lock in on the emphasis of toughness and nastiness on rebounding.

They do the basics brilliantly, which is something that we try to focus on. The beauty is in the simplicity of how he coaches and what he does. It's like, they're so good at what they do. That's just one of the things that I really respect about him.

**Q. Did you ever try to do a war drill at shootaround --**

PAT KELSEY: I'm not brave enough to do it at shootaround. I think I have to win a couple of National Championships before I do that, so no, not yet.

**Q. Just a follow-up to that video system topic, did you get the system?**

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, we did. Yeah, we did. They're going to get mad at me for saying this. God rest Coach Prosser's soul, he's not here. But two great friends of mine, Jeff Battle and Dino Gaudio, both in coaching for a long time, they would even tell you back then, they were like, I'm a dinosaur. I'm comfortable with my deck to deck and I rewind it and I press play on this one, press record on this one.

I'm like, fellows, I'm telling you, this is going to make it easier. It was tough teaching an old dog new tricks. I said,



okay, you keep doing it your way, and I'll do all your cutting on that because that's the way you like it, but I'm going to do it this way, too.

So I started doing it that way with all the digital stuff. And it was like halfway through the season, I was like, this is crazy, I'm doing it that way and this way. And I'm kind of giving it to them, they look at it a little bit. And then finally one day, I was like forget it, I'm just going to do it the old way with the deck to deck.

And then Coach Battle came up to me and he was -- like, the one time I didn't do it -- and I just always believed as a young assistant, everybody thinks you have to serve the head coach, which you do. The key is serving the assistants that are superior to you. Because first of all, when you make yourself irreplaceable to them, they then tell the head coach that we can't lose this guy. So those were my guys I tried to please.

The one time I didn't do all the digital stuff, Coach Battle was like, Kels, I need that digital stuff. So I'm like, oh, my gosh.

Eventually I got them to turn the page, to not be dinosaurs anymore, they got into the 21st century, and they're going to kill me when they watch this interview.

**Q. I want to go back to the game plan and how difficult it is to prepare in one day. One of the guys on their team, Jeremy Fears, one of the best point guards and passers in the nation. And when he has teammates like Cooper, Coen Carr and people he's been with for years, he already knows what spots they're going to be in on that offensive side. How do you game plan for a guy like him along with Michigan State?**

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, I can't give you all the secrets because there's probably a good chance they'll get some of this. Whatever the answer is, it's not easy because you're right, he's one of the best point guards in the country. He's got 300 assists on the year already, which is crazy. That's almost 10 a game. They have great synergy amongst the other guys just because they've played together so long.

We know, obviously, he's very good in transition. He's great in the pick-and-roll. He puts great foul pressure on you. He has elite ability to get to the paint. We've got to do a great job of combatting that.

**Q. Just wondering, I was going to ask about Fears as well, just could you get into more of how he is so effective for them?**

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, I just think the great point guards make people around them better, and that's what he does. I could talk about that one statement for 30 minutes from a coaching standpoint in terms of how he manipulates the game in the pick-and-roll and transition and all that stuff. But at the end of the day, he elevates people around him.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about Ryan. The game yesterday, how physical that was, the way he battled through some things physically with that, with Mikel out. I'm wondering about his toughness in that matchup against Fears, and how much did you guys as a group maybe benefit from the physicality of yesterday's game. Or is it the other way, that it kind of took a little bit out of you?**

PAT KELSEY: Well, look, everybody on every single team that's still playing in college basketball, whether it's the NCAA Tournament or something else, everybody is beat up. Nobody is 100 percent. Nobody. You don't make any excuses or give any explanations. You could go through their roster and I'm sure they've got a bunch of guys with little dings and stuff like that.

When you get out there on that stage and those lights are really bright, all that goes away. We have the best training staff in the country and she's doing an unbelievable job helping our guys recover.

You mentioned Ryan specifically. What a tough, tough, tough kid and a tough competitor. Josh Schertz, who's here in Buffalo, as well, who's a friend of mine at Saint Louis, he had the great fortune of also coaching Ryan Conwell when he was at Indiana State. And when we met yesterday, I walked past Josh, we talked about Ryan. And when we recruited Ryan, I called Josh to ask him about him, and he just gushed with his praise of his character and his work ethic and his toughness.

I remember talking to Sean Miller this summer because Sean coached him at Xavier. Sean goes, he never changes. He has the same attitude every single day. He has no dips. He's a competitor. He's a big game guy. He wants the moment. He's at his best when it matters the most. He's one of those guys you look back at the end of your career and you remember as being really, really fortunate to be around him.

**Q. Staying on that topic about Conwell, wondering offensively, averaging 20 points in the last five games, he's really started to turn it on, but he's been rock steady for you all season long. What's that done for you guys as a whole throughout the year to always be able to go to him and look at him to step up? As a coach, do you know when he has that kind of mode**



**where he flips the switch and turns it on, and what's that relationship like when you know he's going to have one of those type of games?**

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, I mean, he's a great scorer, and great scorers have such belief, such belief in themselves. He always believes he can put the team on his back in big moments, and he does that all the time.

I think all of our guards, everybody, even our bigs, like last night guys stepping up. Sonny Fru had a double-double. We have a three-headed monster at the 5. Aly Khalifa is -- the Egyptian magician is what we call him and he brings a skill element. Vangelis Zougris is a nasty, tough competitor inside. Isaac gets staples in his head, comes back and plays.

Ryan's toughness, I thought Kobe Rodgers was a catalyst for us last night. We don't win that game without Kobe Rodgers. As a defensive substitution, went in, got huge stops for us, big-time rebounds. J'Vonne Hadley, the straw that stirs the drink for us, and usually you say your point guard is that. J'Vonne Hadley is our glue. He is as accountable and reliable of a guy as I've ever coached. You can plug him in at the 1, the 2, the 3, the 4 and the 5. He's playing the best basketball of his career right now.

Those guys off the bench -- I just want to make sure everybody -- you guys asked a question about Ryan and that's fine. I think our team is about the power of the unit. It's the collective units. The guys off the bench like Khani Rooths who just comes in and plays his butt off, doesn't play a ton of minutes, but empties the tank when he comes in the game. Adrian Wooley has really stepped up since Mikel has been out and has been huge for us.

I'm sure I'm forgetting somebody. I could talk about the student managers and trainers if you want me to and somebody's parents. I know I'm going on and on. But we're a team. It's 25 strong, it's not just one guy.

**Q. Obviously to get this program where you want it to be, you're going to have to win games like tomorrow against coaches and programs like Izzo and Michigan State. I was wondering as you have risen career-wise coaching, are there certain wins that you have that kind of stick out in your mind as landmarks where you went from having one kind of a program to setting a new set of expectations to kind of send you on an upward trajectory?**

PAT KELSEY: That's a great question. Not really. I can't really look back on my career and go, that was the win. I always treated my current job like the next job. When I was at Winthrop, yes, I had aspirations to get here. But we

were playing Gardner Webb in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, on a cold Wednesday in January of 2014. That was my stinking Super Bowl. That was my Super Bowl.

I just tried to always have that approach. It wasn't like, hey, we won this game, I've arrived. I haven't arrived. We win this game tomorrow, and I haven't arrived. That's what I feel like makes me good. It's the chip on my shoulder, to a little bit always feel like I have something to prove. There isn't one win that says, aha, I've made it.

I'd like to think if we're lucky enough to raise a banner and win a National Championship at Louisville, I'll still have that chip on my shoulder. It's not the accomplishment, it's not the destination, it's the journey. That's what fires me up. It's the journey and the process of getting to do what I do every day.

I'll let you guys write the narratives about when you're arrived and what you've done and you won this game and you finally won an NCAA Tournament game. Listen, we've won seven of the last 10. One of the seven was the COVID year. We cut down the nets, and it was canceled the next day. We were a 14 seed, a 13 seed, a 14 seed -- when we were finally a 12 seed we played San Diego State. They went to the national final game, we lost by three.

Whatever the things you're going to write, whether you win this game and the next game and the next game, it's the freaking journey to me. And I'm so darn excited about doing what I do every day. I just emptied the tank in that practice session right there. I'm surprised I still have a voice. But if we were playing a non-Division I in November, I would do the exact same freaking thing out there. It's the journey.

**Q. Pat, that game obviously yesterday got a little frenetic, a lot of turnovers going against a team that prides itself on discipline. How much do you use that as motivation but also want your players to have kind of a goldfish's memory so they don't stick to it too much?**

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, we talked about it last night. It's always about the next thing. Obviously we could have handled that situation better. 32 minutes of the game we played probably the best basketball of our season. Bryan did an unbelievable job with that team this year. They had the heart of a champion. I saw it on tape. I could see the heartbeat of their team when I was watching them.

I could see the bravado and the cockiness in their pre-press conferences when they told us they were going to pop us. I respect that. I respect that. I saw that type of



toughness and bravado on tape. So when their backs were against the wall, I knew them cats weren't going to lay down. They were going to come at you. Bryan's teams are always that way. It was an avalanche. It was like there were seven guys out there.

We could have made better decisions and things like that, but we have a very mature team, extremely mature, one of the oldest teams in the country.

I'll just say at the guard position with losing Mikel, people's roles had to change a little bit, but I'm really proud of how the guys have stepped up, assumed different roles, whether it's two guards playing the point -- our guys have done a really good job. And by the time they woke up this morning it was about Michigan State, Michigan State only, and like yesterday never occurred.

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