

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

Friday, March 20, 2026

Buffalo, New York, USA

KeyBank Center

Michigan State Spartans

Coach Tom Izzo

Coen Carr

Carson Cooper

Jeremy Fears Jr.

Jaxon Kohler

Media Conference



So those little things, whether it's team meals or being on the bus or getting ready for a game, they're special moments. Obviously when you're getting ready for a game, it's easy to overlook those things. But sometimes taking a moment to appreciate those moments is something that I feel like is really needed because they're not going to be there at a certain point.

Q. This can be for all of you. You guys have been talking about it all week, the experience and chemistry you guys have. And with Michigan State you guys have been here for multiple years, been with multiple March Madness tournaments. How important do you think that is when it comes to this time of year when you guys have played with each other for so long and when you get to tournament time you're experienced and you know what to expect?

JEREMY FEARS JR.: I think it's huge overall. You know, us four know how to play with each other, but the more we play with our younger guys or transfers, just being able to fit in and how you really have a set in stone understanding of everyone's game. Just obviously keep building and growing. But us four, it's great to have experience and being able to have been through this a couple times.

Q. Back in October at media day, each one of you said you wanted to be leaders for all the newcomers, all the freshmen that are now on the team. I'm curious how you reflect on this long season of leadership that you've had.

CARSON COOPER: Yeah, I think it's been productive. I just think for our big position with me and Jaxon in charge of Jesse and the twins and Cam and how they've been able to progress, I think it's kind of a testament to the strides they've made in the year, and just staying on them and holding them to higher standard.

Because when I was a freshman, I wish I was held to a higher standard. I think we've done a great job with those guys, making them feel at home, making them feel like we're not picking on them, that we actually care about their development, care about getting better. And it's good that they're starting to continue to play better.

Q. Last night you guys played a really complete game.

Q. Wondering about as seniors, taking a step back maybe from the basketball for a second, but just as humans and as the young adults that you guys are, I guess do you get any moments to appreciate the little things, it being your senior year especially with March Madness? Just whether it might be anything that might remind you of something or something you think is cool? You guys are so focused on this goal at hand. Do you also get time to appreciate the task at hand and the journey of it?

CARSON COOPER: Yeah, it's tough not to think about the basketball aspect of things. But I kind of go back to just how we are right now, even in like our meals in the hotel rooms and just hanging out with the guys. I think that's something that we're all going to take for granted at some point.

When we graduate, wherever the next step takes us, we're going to think back and wish that we were back there, being able to hang out with the guys and just kind of BS with one another and just enjoy that fellowship.

JAXON KOHLER: Like Coop said, we've got a special group of guys. The chemistry we have and everything we've been through has just built to the relationship that we have with one another. No matter where life takes us after this, it's never going to be the same. It's a special group of guys.



Izzo talked about it afterwards. What do you think came together yesterday or what caused it to come together?

COEN CARR: I would say our defense. We were guarding way better than we have been these past couple games. I feel like once our defense is there and we're playing the way we need to on that end of the floor, the offense comes with it. The running, the sharing the ball, our unselfishness yesterday was what was great. So yeah.

A. Jeremy, you guys are facing a team that's lost its primary ball handler, so you're facing a team that's different than some of the film you would have on them. When you face a team that's dealing with a new challenge and then you see a game like they had yesterday, is your scout trying to take advantage? I'm not asking for the specifics of what you're going to do, but is your scout trying to take advantage of what you see is their deficiencies in this new form that they are.

JEREMY FEARS JR.: No, they've kind of shown -- they played a couple games with him and without him, so you kind of use the games that they played without him. Overall they've still got a lot of talented guards and some talented bigs overall. They kind of don't really change. They still have plays. It's maybe getting more shots off the ball, more shots on the ball. You've got to know who's guarding who at what position.

But at the end of the day, it comes down to us trying to execute what our game plan is, and they're going to do what they're going to do regardless. Just trying to be us.

Q. Jeremy, going up against this Louisville squad, they're very good at scoring, but they also play very physical defensively. We saw it in the game against USF. Jeremy, when you're going up against that backcourt in Louisville, how do you attempt to maintain the tempo for the offense, get to your spots, and try to finesse your way around that? And for the bigs, you're going up against a very tall Louisville squad, big, tall team, very physical. How do you prepare for matchups like that?

JEREMY FEARS JR.: I would say just understanding our goal and what we're trying to do at the end of the day. There's teams that's really aggressive that don't press at all, teams that play zone, teams that play man. We have kind of seen it all, and it really starts with us four being able to control and help the guys and get off to a good start.

But overall just being able to do what we do, run our plays, run our sets, execute, and play how we did last game. Everybody got shots, everybody got the ball, and I think

that's the thing that makes us dangerous.

JAXON KOHLER: Kind of to what Fears was saying, we've kind of seen a big variety of different styles of teams, different sizes and different types of physicality. It's mostly just making sure that we come ready to play and focusing on our game and imposing our will on the other team.

Honestly, we've been playing people over seven feet. Sometimes we play against small ball teams. But if we focus on bringing our game plan and focusing on what we have to do right and what we have to take away from the other team and coming out, being ready to throw the first punch, that just serves to our benefit.

TOM IZZO: You know, I'm excited every time we move on to a game in the NCAA Tournament. I understand that some teams went down, another team almost went down, looks like they're going to pull it off. But you do watch all those games because you realize how delicate it is, winning and losing.

I thought we played one of our better games yesterday. I think the one thing I was proudest of is 26 assists on 32 baskets means a lot of people are sharing the ball, not just Jeremy. And that was impressive.

Another day with another tough prep. Pat does a great job with Louisville. They've got a couple guys that can shoot it from right here and have pretty good depth. It'll be a big challenge for us.

Q. If you can reflect back -- it's two different teams, obviously, but you're the constant. But if you look back to the Elite Eight matchup against Louisville, the overtime game, Louisville and Michigan State, it had a lot of prominence back then. What's it like to be seeing a Louisville team that's had its downs and may be on the rise again?

TOM IZZO: Yeah, we had a couple with them. '09, '19. We've played them in Elite Eight games. One of my first games was against Louisville when Denny Crum was there. They were celebrating the 75th anniversary of their championship and I think might have beat us by 100. It might have been a little less.

I always like when newcomers come up. But it is good to see the teams that have been successful over a period of time remain successful. I think some of that is good in sports in general.

Louisville has bounced back. Had a couple of rough years. I think Pat has done a really good job with the program. And it's got everything you want, where it's at, facilities, all



that, and I see that program not dipping much in the years to come.

Q. Maybe a similar question to that. What do you remember from that game?

TOM IZZO: Which one? I've got two big games -- they were 1 in the country, I think, when we beat them in '09. I remember 30,000 people in Indianapolis, and that sent us to the Final Four in Detroit, so that was a big game.

In '19 we beat them, I think, in Syracuse. Is that where it was? That was a big game, too.

What I remember is it's always good to go against some of the best. That's what Elite Eights are supposed to be. Upsets aren't supposed to happen by then.

So we played a very, very good Louisville team. Rick had it, and I thought there was no better coach than him. Our guys played good. I didn't win the game, they did, but it was fun to be along for the ride.

Q. I want to look at this Louisville team now. Ryan Conwell and Isaac McKneely really did their thing against USF yesterday. When you head into this matchup against them today, how do you attempt to slow down the guards for Louisville?

TOM IZZO: Tackle them. You know, we've got to do something. You're right; they've had their way against a lot of people. That's why they average what they average. McKneely can shoot it from everywhere. And Conwell started out with my former assistant Brian Gregory at South Florida, but we played him when he was at Indiana State at our place a couple years ago. He was very good then.

They can beat you in a lot of different ways. McKneely mostly from long, long range. But Conwell can get you in three different facets. He can get to the rack, he can get you in the mid-range, and he can get you with a three.

They're maybe as impressive of two guards as you need to have to be successful. They say guards win championships or advances you in the NCAA Tournament.

So there's no question we're not going to stop them, but we have to contain them somewhat. If you want the game plan for that, I won't give it to you.

Q. The win yesterday really took everyone, and someone -- not everybody would agree to be a backup point guard like Denham Wojcik, and he finally got some of his flowers I saw yesterday. I was wondering if you could speak on his character and, for some of

the haters out there, what his purpose is on this team and why he belongs there.

TOM IZZO: That's a good word. That's how screwed up our society is, haters. I got a lot of that during the year on who's your backup. Denham has done exactly what I asked him to do. He didn't come here because of his dad. He came here because he grew up -- he was two and three years old with my son when Doug was here the first time.

I've been so impressed with what he's done, going to Harvard, graduating from Harvard, come here, he's played through a million injuries.

But people don't understand -- they just look at certain things. That's why I'm not much into all the statistical categories, the analytics, as some guys are because I never can analyze a heart. At least I'm not capable of doing that.

But the kid has got great heart. He's as good a defender as we've got on our team. He made some good plays. He's not everybody's All-American in a lot of ways, but for me, without Doug, I'm yelling at Doug a couple times to put him in.

It's very hard when you coach your son. It's challenging because you take enough abuse as a coach, right? And now you've got your son playing. So you take abuse because of how your son played and you take abuse because of how you coached. I told him sometimes I'm just going to take over that substitution pattern.

But I've been really pleased, proud, and happy for him because never said a word, as you said, never complained about anything. People are so -- bad choice of words -- dumb, because they think they see and know everything and they're never at a practice. They're never in a locker room. They're never in a hotel.

This kid brings it in every way, and then he's a 3.9 student besides. I'd take another Denham Wojcik anytime I could get one. But I appreciate you at least seeing that. You're way ahead of most of the other people.

Q. A couple things real quick. Did you get a chance to pat Denham on the back and congratulate him on a great moment yesterday or do you keep him locked in? On a personal level, do you say, hey, man, you did --

TOM IZZO: 100 percent. He was kind of a walk-on here sorta, the way he did it. I've been that myself. Of course I did, because I do appreciate what he brings.



You know what else? You can get on him. You can get on him, and he doesn't shrivel up and die. What a great concept that is. You can tell him you did something wrong, and he doesn't look at you like you have three eyes.

Like I said, the Denham Wojciks of the world maybe don't win you every game, but they help you win a lot more than people know.

Q. J'Vonne Hadley for Louisville, can you talk about some of the matchup difficulties he might present in their lineup?

TOM IZZO: Yeah, we recruited J'Vonne Hadley when he left Colorado. We recruited him a little bit. A very good player. I think he's improved, too. I think he shoots the ball a lot better than he shot it back then. He's made some progress.

At 6'6", 6'7", he does create some matchup problems, but maybe we create some matchup problems for them, too. It always works both ways when you look at that.

We feel that we've got a couple guys that can guard him and we're going to have to guard him. Now that he's shooting better from the three than I think he was, he's just kind of a do-it-all guy. He can switch. He can play multiple positions. He can be an inside guy and a perimeter guy. He's one of those guys who's a utility guy you love having on your team, and he's done a hell of a job for them this year.

Q. We've talked a lot about this year and the razor-thin margin of error. I'm curious how you're balancing that and the rotation this late into the year.

TOM IZZO: Yeah, the injuries have hurt us a little bit with Kaleb Glenn being out for the whole year, and I thought he was one of our top -- in fact, I thought he was our top transfer. Then Divine went down halfway through the Big Ten season. He was just starting to come along. To be very honest with you, it does take a lot of transfers some time to fit in.

So we've had to adjust. The one guy that stepped up a lot yesterday was Trey, and it's probably been a disappointing year for him. I think expectations and what he thought was going to be, and us too a little bit. But another character-building moment for him as he didn't hang his head, he didn't get down on himself, he didn't quit the team, he didn't transfer at semester, all the things that you can do now. He just kept grinding away. He's really liked by the players.

So our rotation is a little different. Last year we were

strength in numbers. We had nine deep and we played nine guys anywhere from 16 to 28 minutes. And now we've got some 29, 30-minute guys and we've got some 10 and 12-minute guys, but those guys are just as important.

So it's a little different, but it's still pretty similar. Usually when you get to the tournament, you shrink your playing group a little bit. Ours is actually extended a little bit yesterday, with minutes anyway.

Q. Coach, Pat Kelsey referenced the first time meeting you in 2003 when he was an assistant at Wake Forest regarding video and the digital era and how Michigan State was forward thinking. Do you remember any of that interaction, and what do you remember for your first meeting with him?

TOM IZZO: You know, I do remember meeting Pat back then, and I was big on the video back then. I had just come off the Goodwill Games when I went over -- Doc Rivers actually helped me out. And they had a real sophisticated system in Orlando at the time. I was just always into the video.

I think my football background, all my friends were in football, and they just live, eat and sleep watching film.

I did talk to Pat back then. Didn't know him as well and everything. But, boy, he sure has taken off in his career, and like I said, has done a great job. He's got energy and enthusiasm. I like that about him. He's got a lot of years ahead of him to have an incredible career.

Q. I wanted to ask you how much you got to look through the start to finish game yesterday of Louisville and South Florida, how physical you felt that was. And at this time of the year when guys are dealing with a lot of bumps and bruises, in the tournament is it good to have a game like that for muscle memory, or does that kind of wear teams out?

TOM IZZO: You know, at this time of year you have bumps and bruises, but you do get rejuvenated. If you're playing -- everybody is playing hurt. As Magic Johnson once told me a week into the NBA season, you're always playing hurt. You shouldn't play injured, but you have to play hurt. Nowadays we've got too many people that don't even want to play hurt.

I don't talk to my players about being hurt. I don't worry about today's practice. We're going to get after it a little bit. That's what we do. You've got to do what you do.

I think yesterday was -- I did watch it on film. My assistants watched it in person. South Florida is extremely athletic,



and it was a crazy game in some ways, almost two different games.

But we're going to still play like we play and try to adjust to what they do. I don't know how to answer that any better. I don't know if muscle memory is anything. We try to play the same way for a lot of years, and that's the way we're going to play tomorrow.

Q. We've had coach Frank Martin on the show, which probably is not a good first reference to ask this question --

TOM IZZO: I love Frank!

Q. So do I. But you probably know where I'm going with this one. You played my alma mater, played at the Pavilion in the 90s, you played UIC --

TOM IZZO: That almost got me fired, I want you to know.

Q. We did win that game.

TOM IZZO: I was there.

Q. I've always respected your non-conference scheduling. You've always maintained consistency. Do you feel like there's a disparity amongst some of your colleagues about at the Power Four, scheduling the mid majors, because obviously mid majors is good for basketball.

TOM IZZO: Mid majors is great for basketball. You're referencing it was my third year, we had gotten beat by University of Detroit, and then went over to Illinois Chicago, got beat. And then those smart people that you were talking about with Denham, they weren't predicting if I was going to get fired, it was when I was going to get fired.

I don't like you for that reason. I don't know why in the hell I'm going to answer this question the way I'm going to answer it.

But I got beat by Wright State the year we won the National Championship at Wright State. So I've done some dumb things in my career. But coming from a Division II school like I did, I remember what a thrill it was to play at Michigan State or Michigan. We played Al McGuire in Marquette, we played Minnesota when they were ranked 1 in the country. Like I'd never want to take that away from mid majors or low majors, and then I started realizing these mid majors are really good, too.

We have some really good mid majors right now because basketball has spread out so much. I think it benefits to

play the big games. But I play Kampe every year, and the damn guy can coach. He golfs all summer, but he can coach his tail off, and I have incredible respect for that.

I always feel like I get something from that game. And sometimes those games help you in the NCAA Tournament, as you say, because if you're a high enough seed you're going to play one of those kinds of teams.

So scheduling for me, I learned it from John Thompson. I'll schedule anybody, anyplace, anywhere, and eventually it'll benefit you -- not John Thompson, John Chaney at Temple. He was the first guy to really hit me with that. I agreed to play him twice, and they beat us once by two and once at the buzzer when Pepe Sánchez hit a basket with a second left.

Do you notice you always remember the losses? I couldn't tell you the games we won, but I always remember the losses. You brought up Illinois Chicago, so thank you.

Q. You've mentioned to us many times this season about Coop's mentorship of Cam. What do you appreciate about that relationship and what makes them a good relationship when we know Coop came from where he came from and Cam was very different in terms of being State's leading scorer and high profile guy coming in?

TOM IZZO: That's where humbleness and humility rears its head, and it's a good head that it rears. Coop took Cam under his wing early and Cam went under his wing early. That's a two-way street. You can have somebody willing to mentor you, but you have to be willing to be mentored. With the egos and the entitlement that so many kids have now coming in, that doesn't always happen.

Thank God his dad was his coach, his mom is athletic director. She also coaches the women's team. He came from great stock, and he appreciates Jaxon and Coop for helping him learn things easier.

It's been a little more of a learning curve than he thought it would be, but he has maintained his humility. And sometimes get down on himself, but I'll guarantee you, those guys will remain friends of his when they leave. And he's still here because he appreciates and understands -- and I think Cam will be better for next year's freshmen and hopefully the year after.

That's what happens when you have a program, not just a team. Those players help you coach and help you mentor the young guys. And people are lucky to be in programs where the young guys get mentored because otherwise it's just what the coach says all the time. And the coach only



-- if we spend more than 20 hours a week, we get our hands slapped.

It's nice to be around other players that they can spend 500 hours a week. They can do whatever they want with them.

I take my hat off to Carson because he came up the exact opposite. It's a great way to put it. He wasn't recruited by anybody, and he's making himself a hell of a player, where Cam was recruited by a lot of people, and he too will end up a hell of a player. It's kind of cool that the two have met from different worlds and have helped each other.

Q. That experience has been such a huge factor for Michigan State in recent years, especially when it comes to March Madness. And when talking with Coen, Cooper, Jeremy and Jaxon, they talk about the experience they have with each other playing for so many years. It's like natural on the court when they're playing with each other. They talk about getting into that leadership role as well. We saw that in full effect against North Dakota State yesterday. When you have those guys as leaders, very experienced, and natural on the court with each other, does that kind of give you maybe a little bit of a weight off your shoulders when it comes to this time of the year, or does that really not matter?

TOM IZZO: I don't know if a coach ever has weight off his shoulders because it's always the coach's fault sorta, but that's part of the deal.

Do I feel more comfortable knowing I have those four guys? 100 percent. I can go to them. I've had meetings in the last two weeks -- I've had a lot of meetings just me and those four guys and just talking about how we've got to deal with this, how we've got to deal with that, how we've got to keep the distractions away, focus in.

I also talk to them about what it's like to be a senior. That's a scary moment if you're not sure what you're going to do. If you're a senior in high school, 90 percent of the people already know where they're going. When you're a senior in college, you have no clue. Hopefully you're an NBA player, you want to play in Europe, but it's not as easy. You don't know before you're done.

So I talk to them about a lot of those things, and I think they passed it on. When I had a little meeting the other day, I heard them say, we don't have another time to come back. They kind of say some of the things I say. That's flattering. That's exciting.

But that's being in the same place and being around the same people, and it's pretty cool. I'm the one that's lucky

on that.

Q. Obviously a lot has changed in the past couple years. In what ways are you adaptable, and in what ways are you uncompromising with adapting to the last -- well, everything that's gone on over the last five years?

TOM IZZO: Yeah, well, you know, they say as you get older, you go old school and I'm still going to continue to say, I want right school. I want to continue to do what's right. What's right. As we always do in our country, we're always one side or the other side and there's never a happy medium. Now we've taken something that got botched up and we've taken it to a new level the other way, where I don't think it's right, either. I've been pretty vocal about that.

I'm adjusting. I'm adapting the best I can. But I'm not going to change the principles. I'm not going to be afraid to coach a guy because he can transfer this week. I'm not going to be afraid of that. I'm going to do what I think is best, whether anybody believes this or not, for my guys.

When you end up coaching and you have guys for three and four years, they do become like your own kids. In fact, I spent more time with some of my players than I did my own kids as they were growing up. I'm not really proud of that, just the fact of life. That's the way it is.

We have some serious things to address, and you've seen coaches come out, a lot of them that are already getting out of it, talking about it. I've got friends in football and basketball, and until they address them, I'm just going to keep adjusting a little bit but not changing who or what I believe in.

I say it to our kids, I say it to our parents, and I say it to the media because there's no question that we need to reset, and hopefully we get one.

Q. Kind of off of that, there's, I think, a presumption heading into this year based on money that maybe mid majors upsets would be difficult to come by because there's such a gap. But we're seeing it happen, we're seeing teams hang close. What is the equalizer? Why is it still competitive?

TOM IZZO: Yeah, I think it's an easy equalizer. A lot of those mid majors are playing for the love of the game, and I think they're playing with something to prove, and I think they're playing with a chip on their shoulder. I love those guys for that. I hope my team plays with a chip on its shoulder even though I'm not a mid major. But I do think there's some of that that goes on.



You've got the entitled and the non-entitled, whether we think so or not. I've always been a fan that players should get some money, but when it gets to be the amounts that it's going on or that you're hearing about, it changes you. It changes your grit. It changes who you are. It changes what you have to prove.

I don't care who you are. That includes the coaches.

I give the mid majors credit. I think there are some teams because of all the melting pot, some are really doing well and some are more dysfunctional. I think if you can keep mid major teams -- although people are stealing their players, too. It's difficult. I believe they're not as entitled. I believe they're playing more for the name on the front of the jersey. I think they're playing because of the total love of the game. And they're not making decisions that are money decisions, they're making decisions where they want to be and what they want to do. I absolutely love, cherish and respect that totally.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

