

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Colorado State vs Texas

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Spectrum Center

Colorado State Rams

Niko Medved

Isaiah Stevens

Joel Scott

Nique Clifford

Media Conference



NIQUE CLIFFORD: I agree with what Joel said. It's definitely a good thing, again, to get all the jitters out. Everybody's now played a game in the tournament, so we feel good going into this next one against a high-level opponent.

ISAIAH STEVENS: I think it definitely could play to our advantage a little bit. Obviously the traveling stuff can be tough, but at this point, man, nobody's tired. The adrenaline is high. Guys are ready to go. It's going to be fun.

Q. This might be somewhat unfair for Nique, but you guys made the first statement for the Mountain West considering how everybody felt where you guys were seeded. Do you guys now become fans of the teams you just spent the last two months battling with?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: Yeah, you want to see -- I said this before, but you want to see the Mountain West teams do good. It helps your status and your résumé and just proves what we've done this year, you know what I'm saying?

We definitely want to see those guys do well. For me it's a little different. It's my homeys that I played with over there that they're playing against too. So that one is up in the air for me. I definitely want to see the Mountain West teams do well and just prove what our league is about.

ISAIAH STEVENS: Similar to what Nique said, the Mountain West was a bear this year top to bottom. No easy games. Just such high-level basketball was being played. You want to see teams come into this tournament and really almost prove themselves even further because I personally have been in the league for a long time, so I know what it looks like. But to do it on the national stage would be good for the league.

JOEL SCOTT: They kind of both nailed it, but it's exciting to see them go out there, play against a tough opponent like Colorado, but to see the Mountain West succeed would be super exciting for everyone and for us. It has been a challenge, and the Mountain West is a really good league.

THE MODERATOR: We are ready to start with the student-athletes from Colorado State.

Q. Isaiah, you and Max have a lot of history throughout your careers. One, how would you describe him as a player? Two, how would you put into words meeting him again on this stage?

ISAIAH STEVENS: Yeah, me and Max go way back. We played against each other in AAU as kids. Our high schools are in the same conference, so we had a lot of matchups, even worked out with each other in the summertime over the past few years.

He's an electric player. He's been that way since he was young. Can score at all three levels, makes plays for others, super quick and dynamic that way. It's going to be really cool just seeing him out here at this stage, at this level, and just kind of seeing how our journeys have crossed paths again. It's going to be really cool.

Q. This is for all of you. Do you feel like it's an advantage or a disadvantage having played a game and kind of gotten the jitters out and coming in and having a game under your belt?

JOEL SCOTT: I think we're kind of looking at it as a little bit of a good thing. We kind of got our feet wet in the tournament already, so I think we're just ready to go. Kind of got that first little nervousness out, and I think we're just excited to be here and ready to go.



Q. This is for Isaiah, but if either of you two guys have thoughts on this as well, I'm curious your opinion. Your team is kind of well traveled. You've been around college basketball for a long time. You bring in Nique from a high major, Joel from a D-II, Joe Palmer from D-III, Cartier from D-II. Guys have been through a lot of college basketball games. How have you molded those personalities together into a winning unit? Especially early in the year. I think a lot of teams struggle when they're piecing in new faces. You guys did so much work in the nonconference.

ISIAH STEVENS: I think our experience really has been one of our super powers, the maturity level of our group. Obviously we're still young and figuring things out, but for the most part, we've been very solid, steady, connected, and I think that's going to help us win a lot of games, and it has so far this year. So hopefully we continue that.

Also guys bringing in different experiences, like Joel played in a D-II Elite Eight, Final Four. Pat Cartier has played in some big time games where he was. Nique has played in the NCAA Tournament in his own right and me as well.

We're all just merging these experiences together, understanding that we've all seen different things, and hopefully that leads to some execution on the floor as well.

JOEL SCOTT: It was really just the chemistry right out of the gate. It was super evident right when we got here in June. So I think that really molded kind of what we had going on. I think everyone had the same mindset going into the year. Everyone wanted to win.

Again, I think we were a very mature group, and that led to our advantage.

Q. As you guys go ahead in the second game, it's an extremity of styles from one game to the next. But do you feel really confident with what you did in that by sticking to your guns, that it will still lead to success?

ISIAH STEVENS: It's going to be a tough game no matter what. Obviously at this stage, we know what we do really well, and you don't want to start straying too far away from that. But we also do a really good job of adjusting to our opponents as well.

Texas does some things very unique that we're going to have to be ready for. They're a very athletic, tough, disciplined, scrappy group, and that changes some things about how we want to attack them, but at the same time, we also do some things really well that, if we stick to our guns, we can have success as well.

THE MODERATOR: Guys, nice job. See you tomorrow.

We're ready to start with Coach Medved.

NIKO MEDVED: Exciting to be here. It's been quite the journey the last week to get here to Charlotte. It's been a great journey this season, but after a great performance from our guys last night, we're excited to be here and have the opportunity to play Texas tomorrow night.

Q. Niko, your first two games are going to be quite a contrast in styles in the opponent, but do you feel like what you do best played well no matter who you play?

NIKO MEDVED: I think every team would say that is that you get to this point in the year and you don't have a ton of time to prepare, you've just got to do the -- I explained to our team last night, about 9 percent of the teams in college basketball get an opportunity to be an at-large team. So you're among the best of the best, and you did that by doing certain things well throughout the season.

Now is not the time to get away from those things. Now is the time to double down and embrace those things.

Yes, we have to do that. Just like our opponent would say the same thing. The things that allow them to get to this point right here are the things you want to rely on.

Yes, your opponent presents all kinds of challenges, Texas does, but we have to go out there tomorrow night and do the things we've done at a high level to be successful.

Q. It's been a really good year for the Mountain West obviously, both on the basketball side and the football side. When you look at kind of the structure of college sports on the West Coast right now, how do you feel the Mountain West fits into that, and where do you think this league is going moving forward?

NIKO MEDVED: I'll talk from a basketball perspective. I think we're uniquely positioned with the current Pac-12 dissolving. The Mountain West is in the third year of getting multiple teams in the tournament. This year we had a record six in the NCAA Tournament.

I feel like the long-term vision for our league from a basketball standpoint is to try to be a Big East version of the West Coast. We've got a lot of great coaches, great programs that really care about basketball, tremendous venues, great players, all those things.

Unfortunately, sometimes I think a lot of people don't stay up to watch the Mountain West after dark, and I don't know

how many people maybe watched us play. They maybe heard, oh, your league's really, really good this year, but it was. I've been in this league as an assistant now and a head coach for a long time, and this is as good as I've ever seen it.

I think we deserve six teams. We can talk about the seeding if you want, but it is what it is, and we're here. I think our league's in a great position here moving forward.

Q. A lot of people are talking about the seeding, and last night you guys got to make the first statement for the league. Do you now become a fan of all the teams you battled with the last couple of months?

NIKO MEDVED: Oh, absolutely. You'd like to see your league do well this time of year. You don't like playing against those guys because they're all so good and well coached and all those kinds of things, but, yeah, once we get to this time of year, we're pulling hard for all the other teams in the league.

Last night some of the first texts I got were from the head coaches of the other teams in our league. That's kind of how it goes. It will be the same thing. We'll be tuned in cheering for them, and we want them to have success because that's good for all of us.

Respect the heck out of those guys. Glad we could get a win, first of all, for our program, but it's great to represent the Mountain West as well.

Q. The guys that you added some spring and also last year with Joe Palmer and Cartier, there's so many old dudes that have played in a lot of big games, whether NCAA Tournaments at lower levels or conference championship games or whatever. Curious how much you think that preparation and that experience has helped you in March so far, and how important was that in the recruiting process of wanting guys that have been through those types of games?

NIKO MEDVED: First, I'm glad to see you again. I know in Vegas you were like, maybe we'll see you in Charlotte. Sure as heck, we're here.

I think that definitely plays a factor. The other factor for us is I think the regular season really weighed on us down the stretch of -- you can say whatever you want, but the elephant in the room, hey, we want to make the NCAA Tournament.

I felt we kind of got to March, and we felt like, well, we're in now. I think some of those guys can kind of just let loose and play again.

Number one, those guys, they're so appreciative, right? They come from lower levels. They've had a lot of success. They're so appreciative of being on this stage. Patrick Cartier, the night before the game, he's just, man, Coach, this is awesome. And it is awesome. So I'm so thankful that those guys get to appreciate that.

But at the same point in time, they've played a lot of basketball. They believe in themselves. They believe in what we do, and they are older guys.

I thought we played a really tough schedule, out of conference, in conference. Those guys are battle tested, and they're older, and yeah, I think they're ready to compete on the big stage. I think we saw at least the first step of that last night.

Q. Rodney Terry was talking about this point guard matchup and said, I don't think there's a better one in the country right now in this tournament than what you're going to see tomorrow. I wonder if you could speak to that as well.

NIKO MEDVED: Absolutely. Max Abmas is a guy I know Isaiah's really -- they know each other forever, right, as kids. They played against him at Oral Roberts. He came to Moby several years back.

He's a terrific player. When he gets over half-court, it's on. He's like a Steph Curry in college basketball. Great young man, great leader, just like Isaiah.

They're obviously a little bit different players that way. Isaiah is maybe a little bit more of a passer, but they both can do everything at an elite level. I agree, it should be a treat for the fans. This could be one of the best guard matchups you'll see here in the NCAA Tournament. I know it's two just outstanding young men too who do it the right way. So it's going to be fun.

Q. You mentioned seeding and obviously all the Mountain West teams that got in this year, but looking at the tournament, I know there's a lot of discussion about expanding it, changing it, things like that. I'm curious where you fall on that front and what you think what the tournament might look like moving forward or should look like moving forward.

NIKO MEDVED: I don't know that my opinion matters so much. I think it's really a formality that it will expand at some point. I think everybody can read the tea leaves as far as what's going on. I just hope that, when that happens -- I'm not even going to say if because I believe that it will, I hope they do it in a real thoughtful manner that we figured

out how we're going to do that. They don't try to make it too big.

And I also hope that they continue to find a way to allow access because I think that's really what makes it special, and I understand what drives this stuff better than anybody, but this is the greatest tournament in the world. It's truly an American sports experience, and I think that's what makes it beautiful.

So I hope we can find a way when we expand it to do it but still keep the integrity of what we have because it's just the coolest thing in American sports.

Q. Just wondering timing. This summer, Zay was going through the draft thing and you guys are roster building. Was his return impact at all on Joel and Nique and their interest in joining this program and obviously how they can combine with Zay?

NIKO MEDVED: It's a pretty easy sell. There isn't anybody that wouldn't want to play with Isaiah Stevens. You look at him and the kind of person he is and he makes everybody around him better, makes their life easier. So that's an easy sell.

Really in their case, they made the decision to come here before Isaiah had officially, so they were all in before that. I think they all felt -- they knew that Isaiah was either going to come back to play for us or decide to go professionally.

Like all players like that, they wish the other guy the best, but they had already -- they were all in no matter what. But when that became official he was coming back, it's like, man, we've really got a chance to do something this year.

Q. You mentioned it was pro or stay with Isaiah. There was no consideration really of the portal. I guess what does that say about him in this day and age? Kind of off of that, what does it mean to you to be able to reward him with a trip to the NCAA Tournament for his last college experience.

NIKO MEDVED: Man, it's so cool because he's a unicorn. You look back, we had another young man David Roddy, who ended up going in the first round. It was the same thing, he was not entertaining transferring. He was going to come back.

I love that players love being in our program and feel like they're getting better and they're being successful. For Isaiah to bet on, I'm going to come back here. I love it here, and I believe we can win. I think he really had a chip on his shoulder because he's won everywhere at a high level, state champion in high school. Two years ago was

kind of an outlier, and it didn't go the way we wanted it to for a lot of reasons.

For him to now come back and have an opportunity again to win at a high level, go to the NCAA Tournament, and now already get a win and start to advance, it's just awesome for him. I love to see young people rewarded for doing that and not being afraid to be different.

He's just truly a special young man. Glad he's playing for me, us.

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