

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - McNeese vs Vanderbilt

Wednesday, March 18, 2026

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

Paycom Center

Vanderbilt Commodores Coach Mark Byington

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We have Vanderbilt Head Coach Mark Byington with us. We'll start off with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions.

MARK BYINGTON: First thing, it's great to be here. From our first team meeting we talked about, in June, this is where you want to be at this time. This is a reward for doing great things in the regular season and then earning your right here.

We're never going to under-appreciate the fact that this is the best event, this is where you want to be. So there's a sense of appreciation of being here, but also I know I got a hungry team. We've had a great regular season, made a good run in the SEC Tournament, but this is another phase of our season right now.

This is the one that we've been building up for, and so I know we're excited to be here. We got a tremendous opponent in McNeese. They've had a really great year to win 28 games, and Bill Armstrong has done a great job.

So the challenges begin, but that's what we're here for.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. When you look at this McNeese team, what makes them -- people are calling them a sleeper team. What makes them so sneaky?

MARK BYINGTON: Well, we're not sleeping on them, so I could tell you what stands out about them. First thing is they got a talented roster. Guys had different journeys in college basketball right now, but there's three players on their roster that were top-100 players coming out of high school.

You know, they've had success at other college spots or

being there. There's two good players that came back on a team last year that beat Clemson. That's great for continuity.

But when you watch their style of play, you're watching a team that their steal percentage, their turnover percentage is No. 1 in the country. So that jumps out at you on them taking the ball and pressing you and their activity on defense.

Then on offense, they're tough to guard. I mean, they got guys that can make individual plays, but also they'll make plays for their teammates.

They're a team that's unique a little bit in the fact we haven't seen something quite like them. They have some similarities, but I think what I told our guys is, look, this is a really good roster. These are really good players, and so they definitely have our guys' respect.

Q. You have a mix of guys who have experience, don't have experience in the tournament. How have you seen those guys that have been here before step up and take the guys under their wing who this is their first time here?

MARK BYINGTON: Yeah, we actually talked about that in our first team meeting, about who has been in the tournament and what kind of experience they had. I wanted them to even think about that in June.

There is value being here, to understand that. You also got to understand, when you play in a tournament like this, there's a certain type of pressure. I think the teams that embrace it and love it, things are a little bit different. You can try to act like they're not.

I like the fact we try to put pressure on our guys the entire year in certain situations. There were times this year where I told them it was a must win, and they love that scenario.

You're going to have 68 teams in this tournament, and every one of them except for one is going to end with a loss. You got to be good every single game or you're going to be one of those teams that gets sent home.



Q. I was just in the locker room talking to Chandler, and for me the feel I had about him is he's truly happy to be here. How would you assess his performance his first year and his mentality going into this tournament?

MARK BYINGTON: Yes, Chandler has created a huge role on our team. When it started in June -- actually, it started in the recruiting process. I told him, I'm not making any promises to you. You come in, you work hard, and whatever you earn, you're going to get.

So he really just embraced that. He started in a role that was not in the rotation, and then he kind of got some sparing minutes, and now he's a guy we depend on. He's turned into a really good player, versatile, can guard, not scared of the moment, is multi-dimensional.

He's a guy right now on our team that we depend on and we value everything he brings to our team.

Q. With Tyler, obviously a solid freshman year, and he's made this huge jump. Did you anticipate that jump, and what's allowed him to become the player, Tyler Tanner?

MARK BYINGTON: I don't think anybody can anticipate the jump that he made. I mean, it's remarkable. It's probably one of the biggest in the country, if not --

We knew he was going to have a bigger role on this team. You know, whenever times where there was a guy getting hurt or injured or missing something and more was put on his shoulders, he came through more. So he has kind of created this role on this team where a majority of what we need out there is put on his shoulders, and he loves it, and he comes through on it.

Watching him play and then watching him kind of develop and go, it's not surprising knowing his demeanor and his work ethic, but to be able to do what he did this year and first-team All SEC, there might not have been anybody who believed that but him, and that's the one that needed to believe that.

Q. 5-1 in neutral site games, tops in the SEC in that category. How has this team become excited? How do they get up to meet that moment in the neutral site games?

MARK BYINGTON: Sometimes there's a true neutral site game, and other times it's a little swayed one way or the other. I think the neutral site games and the road games we've been good in both of those.

We're kind of anticipating tomorrow walking into a hostile environment. I know McNeese is going to travel well here. Nebraska fans are going to travel well here.

We got to come in and knowing it's just going to be about us. That's all we need, but we've been there before. So we kind of know the style of game and how we need to be in those situations.

Q. Follow-up on Tyler, what's the next step for him as a player? If there's something, the next thing he's going to add, maybe strength perhaps, but what else is out there for him as a player?

MARK BYINGTON: What's exciting with Tyler Tanner is he's one of the best players in the country right now, but there's areas where he can grow, and he wants to. That's the other part of it.

You know, watching where he was last year to this year, his decision-making has been remarkably better. He's been able to be aggressive and still make good decisions. He's able to play fast and still process information quickly.

I think the biggest thing with him would just be more maturity in his game. He's still young. He's 19 years old. He tried out for the under-18 team last year and got cut with them and almost made that, was hoping to make that team.

I think sometimes when these types of things where he's kind of counted against, he's got this inner competitiveness. He's got also an inner confidence that really never sways. Good days, bad days, you can't tell the difference with him.

The best thing about our team this year is we've stayed steady and constant in our approach to kind of keep getting better throughout the year. That's his approach. He leads the way on that.

Q. A little off topic, but what do you think of the NCAA Tournament expansion, Mark?

MARK BYINGTON: You're asking me where I'm sitting in two different chairs. When I was the Head Coach at JMU and Georgia Southern, I know there was some teams deserving in there. It's hard when you're in those leagues and you have a great year and you're a one-bid league, and you gotta win your championship game. You.

Know, just a couple of years ago we were 30-3 and going into the championship game in the Sun Belt, and we got word that we had to win the championship game to get in the NCAA Tournament or we were going to be left out. We

were going to be the first 30-win team to be left out.

When it's a situation like that with those teams, we had Quad 1 wins, and we had some good things. That's hard when it's a team like that in a situation that earns their right.

And there are some at that level. Miami of Ohio made their way in. There are certain metrics that says they shouldn't, but I believe they should have been there.

When you've been at that level, you want that chance, and sometimes you can have a great year and a bad moment and not be there. Now, when you're in the (technical difficulty with audio) -- opportunities for you, there's more chances to win games. And as someone says I do not want this thing to get watered down. I don't think with a smaller expansion this thing is getting watered down. It's still the NCAA Tournament. It's still the best event in the world, but when you're in the SEC, you get a chance really to earn your way in there, and you can kind of have some slip-ups.

I feel bad when you're at the mid-major level and you're on that level, and you can have five-and-a-half good months, but have a bad five minutes and then not get yourself in there.

I kind of -- I'm not going to forget that part of it. I've been there before on that part of it, too.

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