

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Hawaii vs Arkansas

Wednesday, March 18, 2026

Portland, Oregon, USA

Moda Center

Hawaii Rainbow Warriors

Coach Eran Ganot

Dre Bullock

Harry Rouhliadoff

Isaac Johnson

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Hawaii student-athletes. At this time we will open it up to questions.

Q. The two bigs, you're facing a team that really tries to attack the rim a lot. What is the challenge of going against these two guards?

HARRY ROUHLLIADEFF: Probably just don't give them a lot of comfortability. Be a little bit disruptive. Don't let the bigs get behind your head because they have some good lob threats. We're just trying to force tough twos.

ISAAC JOHNSON: I think point of attack coming off ball screens. Full confidence in the guards that they'll be able to stand them up, stay in front. Worst-case scenario, it's help over, not up. We're going to do our best to make 'em take midrange and not help over and get beat under or over the top with lob threats.

Just do our best to stand up to bigs and not allow easy ones at the rim.

Q. Dre, Darius Acuff the last month has gotten so much national attention. How do you embrace the challenge of trying to slow down what could be the best player in the country?

DRE BULLOCK: It's a great challenge for us. Like you said, our coaches kind of broke it down. He's received a lot of attention. He's a good player.



Honestly, we're not scared of anybody. Anybody we play, we still going to play our same Hawaii basketball. We're going to compete to the very end before or end of the game.

Yeah, should be a good matchup. I'm excited. Everybody's excited to guard him. Got a game plan. We're just going to stick to it, still play our game. Yeah, trust our coaches, trust our players around us to help defend. Yeah, we'll be good.

Q. Coming off last week's emotional high, couple days to settle down in Vegas, landing here in Portland, seeing March Madness all over the place, take us through those emotions. How do you balance that with staying locked in on the game?

HARRY ROUHLLIADEFF: Yeah, it's obviously very exciting. I've been dreaming of this my whole life. We're taking this day to enjoy it obviously with the team, everyone just taking it in.

Obviously after this we'll then lock in towards the game and tomorrow switch gears.

DRE BULLOCK: Yeah, I mean, it's very exciting. Everybody worked hard just to get to this very moment. Definitely, like he said, enjoy it for today. Yeah, once we leave here, just switch gears, focus on our matchup tomorrow. Yeah, we'll be good.

Q. Fish, I just actually got off the phone call with one of the Arkansas reporters. He said the team noticed once you won tournament MVP as a big, they cued into your game footage throughout the whole entire week. Talk about your preparation, what's that going to be like, knowing you have all this weight on your shoulders?

ISAAC JOHNSON: I would say first off, there's not much weight because of the guys around me. Something that Coach Ganot tells us all the time is do what we do. Obviously we're going to adjust to how they play.

But knowing that the guys we have here around us, around me, are the reason we're here, is the biggest relief. So we just get to go and play basketball. We get to just play how



we play and have some passion and love for the game. If they key on me, that's great. Leaves driving lanes open for Dre dunk, open three-point Harry, Hunter to be able to slice and dice.

We'll take what the game gives us. If that's what it takes, heck, yeah.

Q. Dre, Arkansas is not small, but you guys have one of the largest lineups in college basketball. What other advantages do you think you have over them heading into tomorrow?

DRE BULLOCK: Yeah, honestly, I feel like our experience is probably going to be our advantage. Arkansas got a lot of good players, but most of them are freshmen and sophomores, a lot of young guys. Our guys are a lot older, a lot of experience. Everybody came from different programs and stuff like that.

So I just think most of our guys been in this situation before, if not, some. Yeah, we just going to use our knowledge and experience to the best of our ability, just get the job done.

Q. What stands out about Trevon Brazile for them?

HARRY ROUHIADEFF: I would just say like his athleticism and his size. His wingspan, he's got a great length as a wing and a 4 man. Taking away his offensive rebounds as well. Try to take over him that way, be physical, just play our style of basketball, too.

ISAAC JOHNSON: I'd say one of the easiest ways to play vertical is with space. If we are on help side, but don't allow him to have free space and free movement, that helps tie up a lot of vertical contests.

To know where he is on the floor, not let him get free lanes, to be able to just keep somewhat relative proximity, we'll be able to...

I mean, he's an amazing player. He obviously is where he is. He's got some crazy highlights. We're going to do our best to limit that and not get frazzled by his verticality and the type of athlete that he is. Two points is two points at the end of the day, so...

Q. Isaac, what was it like to have a full-circle moment to come back to a place where you started your career, started the season, and also try and erase the memory of the last game you played in this arena?

ISAAC JOHNSON: Last time in this arena was a bit of a bummer. Played here my freshman year. It was cool

because I got to play here against my brother, Oregon versus BYU, so that was fun. Hopefully our outcome is not as drastic as last time I was here.

But it's been amazing to be able to be back here in this state. I was born in Oregon. I lived here in Roseburg fifth and sixth grade. I was a Ducks fan. One of the guys on my Little League team did lumber, they were pretty successful, so they paid for us to play in a little halftime show for little kids one time here.

It's an awesome full-circle moment to be back here for March Madness in potentially what could be my last college game. I am personally excited for just what that means to me. It will be fun to have my family here. This is an awesome experience, so...

Q. What does it mean to bring your home state school to the stage, an event like this?

HARRY ROUHIADEFF: Yeah, it's pretty special. Hawaii hasn't been here in 10 years. For us to bring this school, like, to the big stage in college basketball means everything to us.

We're not going to go out without a fight. We're going to keep playing the same way for 40 minutes. It's the testament of our team. We got a lot of guys that don't quit, really stick it out to our bigger dogs out there.

DRE BULLOCK: I mean, it means a lot. We're coming from an island, so everybody, they know who Hawaii is. Honestly, to make it this far and still playing means a lot to me, my teammates and coaches.

We got a lot of great supporters from back home on the island, a lot of love from the fans. We just can't wait to put on a show for y'all.

Q. You had a great Senior Night at home, said good-bye to those fans. You show up in Vegas and they showed out again. Word on the street, it's going to be the same deal here. A lot of Hawaii people living in this area, flying out from the islands. What does that feel to have the state follow with you?

ISAAC JOHNSON: It's amazing. One thing I say, just being here for this year, the Hawaiian people and the spirit of Hawaii is unmatched. It's amazing the love and support that we get just by wearing the H.

We're so grateful for all the fans, for all of our boosters, for everybody who's allowed us to be in this position. We wouldn't be here without you guys no matter how good of basketball players we were.



We are beyond grateful for every single person, for all the support, for all the little kids that hope to be here someday, as well. We're here for you. Hope you enjoy the product we put out.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you.

We are joined by Hawaii head coach Eran Ganot. Coach, welcome to Portland. We'll begin with an opening statement from you.

ERAN GANOT: Well, obviously we are very excited to be here, very humbled by it, very proud. We will be wearing everything Hawaii in our minds and hearts. Very proud of this group to get to this point. Very proud of our fans, our student-athletes, our administration, our leadership. We take pride obviously in representing our state, our community, our university, our athletics department, all the islands. This is really special.

It was done with a lot of hard work and sacrifice. We talk a lot about how hard it is to get here, how hard it will be to continue to move forward. This is the ultimate to be at this stage celebrating team, basketball, and competitive spirit. Great teams, great coaches, great student-athletes, first-class event.

Just really happy to share this experience with our incredible kids. Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. So much attention lately on Darius Acuff. How special of a talent do you view him as and what kind of challenge is it to slowing him down?

ERAN GANOT: Obviously incredibly special. A lot of challenges for everybody all year, as you can tell as you're trying to break him down.

We're preparing for our journeys, travel, but you're keeping an eye on national stage. Obviously you have a lot of respect for him from afar. As you study him, it just grows.

Not too often, a lot of times you see these point-of-attack guys that score 20-plus points a game. Maybe the play making isn't there or the shooting isn't there. This is a guy scoring 20, 25 a game. Obviously he had some big games. Playing a lot of minutes as a freshman at the most important position. Leading the team to win the SEC, the No. 1 league in the country, by every metric. The way he does it with six, seven assists a game, efficient. The way he shoots it, gets guys involved. Makes big plays.

How can you not respect him from afar? Credit to him, obviously credit to their team.

Q. I wanted to ask you about John Calipari. He surpassed 900 wins. You've been at this about a decade as a head coach. What does that number mean to you? How hard is it to have that kind of longevity in college basketball?

ERAN GANOT: I guess you could do us a favor instead of showing his wins, you could just say the combined wins of these two head coaches, that would be great (laughter).

No, I have incredible respect for this profession, for this game, for team. While you're locked into where you're at, you obviously respect coaches from afar.

In his regard when I was growing up, I think I was in high school, I don't want to show his age, but when I was in high school -- sorry, early years in high school -- he was at UMass, made that run in '95. I was born in Philly, grew up in Jersey. He was the coach of the New Jersey Nets, and you've seen what he's done since. Even 900 wins with an NBA stint, I think he was an assistant in the NBA for a bit, too, so...

Why we do what we do ultimately comes down to for the kids. There's nothing like seeing teams come together and student-athletes grow. Obviously you can talk about the metrics and the numbers and the wins and the national championships and the Final Fours, but probably one of the best things you have to respect is how he loves his kids and fights for his kids.

Obviously we try to do the same with our group.

Q. It's been 10 years, but do you remember the atmosphere in Spokane? Coming off of Vegas last weekend in Henderson, the thousands of fans you had there. You know there's a lot of Hawaii people here in this region. Are you expecting the same kind of show-out you had in Spokane with all the tea leaves and so forth?

ERAN GANOT: Thank you. I certainly hope so. It's an honor to be here in Portland in this facility. I've said at length before and after every game for over 10 years how thankful I am for the power of the Hawaii fan base, how we've traveled, for our team, for other teams. How does that not take you to another level? You can feel that kind of love and support and Aloha, genuine love and support and Aloha. Familiar faces. We've had booster club members and supporters for 50, 60 years.

I talk about the administration and our band and our cheer,



alums. You talk about the '16 team, I think we'll have five or six on a thread the '16 boys making a trip. You saw some of the alums in the crowd the other day.

Obviously it was an incredible atmosphere 10 years ago. Arkansas will travel really well, too. Hope we will, as well. But very grateful for all those things.

Q. Your first trip to this stage happened so fast in your career. How do you feel now a decade into this thing, how you've grown as a coach? What feels different about this time?

ERAN GANOT: Yeah, I mean, I go back to the growth mindset. It's not easy to get here. Even then, there's no different in that regard. I mean, you certainly hope you've grown as a person, as a coach. In terms of your appreciation, gratitude for the opportunity, that's never changed.

My parents are hopefully listening. I'm humbled by the way they raised me. The coaches I've been around, the coaches I've been with, the student-athletes I've been with. I said it all year, it's very humbling, very difficult. There's a lot of people working hard to get here.

I did say back then, obviously we inherited a very unique situation, it was an incredible feeling to navigate the ups and downs and the adversity to get to that point, to do things that hadn't been done. Then we had to deal with some of the repercussions. The next couple years we built it to a winning program. In the last five years, we've taken that up a notch, three semifinals in five years, broke through this year. One of our 22-win teams actually didn't make the semifinals.

So just kind of chipping away. I said back then, as great a feeling as that was, to navigate what is next, to get us back here, will be as good as better. We never wavered, we never lost our faith and conviction. We did it the right way. That's what makes it awesome.

When you get here but you do it the right way with the right kids, right people. Like I said earlier, all the way up to Hawaii, we take great pride in that.

Q. As you study Arkansas, Trevon Brazile, what kind of matchup problems does he pose?

ERAN GANOT: They have a lot of matchup problems. That's why they're good. That's why we have great respect for them. I said maybe earlier in the week, people talk about their talent. It's a little bit of a disservice. They're well-coached. They're talented. They're balanced.

Obviously they have a point of attack threat there. But they have five or six guys averaging double-digits. Metrics don't always tell the whole story. It's a good starting point. They're balanced on both ends.

You have a guy like Brazile, 10 or 11 a game, the lob threat, the offensive rebounding threat, his ability to attack in transition, his length, his athleticism. Underrated part of him is his ability to hit open threes. Against Vanderbilt he hit four big ones.

There's so many different guys that complement each other. That's why they're really good, that's why they're successful. It's not just a talented team; it's a team.

Q. A little is made or maybe much is made of your team's defensive scheme. How have your defensive philosophies evolved?

ERAN GANOT: Great question. I think we take pride, our foundation is defend and rebound. I said earlier, we run our program like a team. You feel it in the way we play offensively. We play inside-out. We share the ball. You feel it in the way we rebound. It's not on one guy; it's our five versus your three and a half, whatever. Everybody does their job.

Defensively it's point of attack and wall. I think we've always been good defensively in three or four years in that stretch. We've been elite. I felt like our defense dropped a little bit prior to the conference tournament. Again, one of the things I'm really proud of, we've lost two impact players for the year and kept humming along, but our defense dropped a little bit.

Challenged them going into the conference tournament. We got that back. That's why we won, defensive rebounding was there. I do appreciate you saying not overhelping. I have a lot of respect for people that have studied our defense. I know there's some things people are sending me. There's a picture of me saying, Don't help, which I've never said in my life.

Look, every profession's hard. Your profession is hard. Coaches, administrators, putting this all together. People put a lot of work into studying what you do. There are obviously some consistencies in what people were saying about our defense.

To answer your question about how it's evolved, we wrinkle it for our personnel, but we won't lose the team aspect. Then we wrinkle it for some of the rules. There's rule changes every year.

Then we wrinkle it for who we're playing at that time. So



our personnel, what gives us the best chance. Obviously we have a handful on Thursday, what gives us the best chance.

We will always defend as a team. For some who said that we don't help, I would prefer to say we don't overhelp. When there is a breakdown, we absolutely help. We take pride in that. We just don't want to be in too much scramble and rotation. We want to limit breakdowns. If they happen, we want to acknowledge them, then get back to our wall again.

Q. When the seedings and draw came out, a lot of people are like, Whoa, Arkansas, obviously a monumental challenge. You've always preached to your team about how to embrace these challenges. Do you think with the maturity of this group that's how they approach it, This is what we want, we want to play the best teams, embracing that challenge?

ERAN GANOT: Absolutely. So much of this is a mindset and a look and an approach, the rest follows suit. If you don't have that mindset, you're cooked. It's with great humility and great respect.

Whatever name popped up, we were going to play a championship-caliber program that's won a lot of games. We don't try to outsmart ourselves. We don't scoreboard watch, who do we want to play, who we don't want to play. It's a bring-it-on mentality, understanding it's going to be difficult. That's kind of been our deal all year.

We traveled more than anyone in the country. You can sit there and whine about it. You can say, Yes, we travel more than anyone in the country. We just lost Tanner Cuff before the first game of the year. All right.

I'll say this for this game, for these games, for our team: The goals will always stay the same. The margin for error may not have, when we lost Cuff, Claytor. But the goals stayed the game. It became next man, every man, in that regard.

In this case, whatever named popped up, it was going to be a really good team. Awesome. It's going to be really challenging. Great. Acuff, the size and the length. Coach Calipari. Obviously awesome things. There's a balance there. The humility to know it will be difficult and the excitement for the opportunity. You live for challenges. If we don't have that mentality, we're cooked.

So I feel like our guys have done a good job with that.

Q. Talk about the value having two senior leaders like Isaac and Hunter has been for your team this year.

ERAN GANOT: Yeah, look, let me start with Harry Rouhliadef. That's the captain of our ship, make no mistake. Four years, all here, ups and downs. I think he's kind of our north star. Obviously very happy for him to have his moment for the right reasons. Gotten better. Played behind good players, Justin McCoy, Kamaka Hepa, Jerome Derosiers, things like that. Just kept bidding his time, having his best year.

This is who I'm really proud of. Obviously this is a new age. You either whine and complain about it or navigate it the best you can for who you are, how you want to run your program, consistent with the values of Hawaii and the university. We brought great guys. Here comes Isaac Johnson, his fourth tournament experience. Falls under the category of he's been on winning programs. Playing 10, 15 minutes a game. Felt there was a fit with Hawaii and our style. Obviously an older guy.

You could see he's had his best year, runner-up probably for Player of the Year, First Team All District, First Team All League. Really big in clutch moments. Check the first box which was playing more minutes, then seeing scouting, kind of broken through.

Hunter Erickson, same deal. Played at Utah. Been there, done that. Nobody's had more of a responsibility with their point guards out than him. Done a really nice job with that. Played a lot of minutes. Just his calmness, his demeanor. Their experience, maturity, character.

Dre Bullock, senior. He's been on good teams, now he wanted to be on a tournament team and play better. He's playing his best basketball on his best team.

Yacine Toumi was a double-figure score at Evansville.

Gytis Nemeiksa, second year with us, transfer from Xavier.

Did I miss someone? I think I hit everybody.

To answer your question, we have a pretty strong senior class, either guys who have been here or guys that have only been here a year and really immersed themselves in the culture.

THE MODERATOR: We are out of time. Thank you, coach.

ERAN GANOT: Appreciate it.

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