

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Kennesaw State vs Gonzaga

Wednesday, March 18, 2026

Portland, Oregon, USA

Moda Center

Kennesaw State Owls Coach Antoine Pettway Frankquon Sherman RJ Johnson

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Kennesaw State student-athletes. At this time we'll open it up to questions.

Q. Tell us a little bit more about the experience in Portland so far. How has practice been? What has it been like coming across the country?

FRANKQUON SHERMAN: It was real good getting to travel across the country. I never got a chance to come to Oregon.

Also, practice has been going pretty smooth. Again, just due to the time difference, we got to come early yesterday. We were just getting adjusted to that time. Be ready to get that win tomorrow.

RJ JOHNSON: Like 'Quon said, I never really got to travel the country, you could say. So coming over here to Oregon, it's been a lot different, especially because of the time and the weather.

As soon as we got here, we saw something strange when we was on the bus. We saw a man walking. It was just something to see. You don't see that where we're at.

Just being able to adjust to things like that, then being able to practice with your brothers, knowing the common goal is what we're here for. It feels good.

Q. What was it like after coming back to Kennesaw with the celebration and Selection Sunday?

FRANKQUON SHERMAN: It was a real crazy emotion. We got to come in together. To be able to get that ring this



year was something special, because last year he didn't get to play with me. It was like I was missing my brother. We come back the next year and win it all.

RJ JOHNSON: Yeah, like 'Quon said, not being able to play last year, trusting in Mike and my doctors to get me back ready to play this year. I came here with a goal to help my team in places that we didn't have good, I could say, good times last year. I just came in and stepped up in those roles. Now it felt good to come back to our hometown, see everybody was excited to see us bring home the hardware.

Q. What was it that got y'all focused and got you reset after that road swing to go win three in a row?

FRANKQUON SHERMAN: We knew it was going to be hard to win three in a row, but we all had that mindset we're going to do whatever it takes to get the job done. We knew it was going to take the defensive end 'cause our offense was going to be able to come. Really having that mindset of being the toughest team out there.

RJ JOHNSON: We really focused on our defensive rebounding, trying to get stops. Stops was going to win championships. That's why we came out on top, because we all came together and we all chose to fight hard. Three games in three days, of course your body is going to be tired. But at the end of the day it's about mental toughness. So I feel like we had the most at that time.

Q. What do you feel is important in tomorrow's matchup?

FRANKQUON SHERMAN: I feel like we're going to have to be the tougher team and have that mindset of doing whatever it takes to get that win.

RJ JOHNSON: I feel we have to come out and be us, not try to change anything, not be different. Don't shy away from the moment. Just be the dogs we've been all year. We've been doubted the whole season. Now is nothing different for us. We're just going to keep going the same mindset, going ready to kill.

Q. Being from the south, how much of Gonzaga have you seen? What are you looking forward to playing



against them?

RJ JOHNSON: Well, we got to watch film on 'em the past two days. They got a really good big man, he's an All-American. They got good guard play. They like to cut a lot. They play hard. I think they got one of the top defenses in the country.

I mean, I feel like we can play with anybody, you know. Gonzaga is a good team, of course. I'll give credit to them. They put in their footsteps. They have milestones. But I feel like it's time for us to be able to show what we can do and not solely focus on just Gonzaga. Kennesaw State is here, too.

FRANKQUON SHERMAN: Like RJ said, Gonzaga is a good brand, a good team. I feel like at the end of the day we're not going to look at 'em any different as an opponent. We're going to look at them as the same.

Q. What's the one thing that you guys want to leave behind as a legacy as you go through this tournament coming from being Conference USA champions?

RJ JOHNSON: Just heart. I just want everybody to notice the heart we play with, the toughness we have and the grit. I just want teams to see we come from Conference USA but we feel like we're up there with the top conferences. We just got to show our heart. We want to leave our heart behind.

FRANKQUON SHERMAN: The other thing also is just our character. A lot of our guys, we have great character. Just put that on display.

Q. Is there one thing that Coach Pettway is resonating throughout or there's a mantra that you are living by right now?

RJ JOHNSON: Yeah, just rock solid, be about your brother, play for your brother beside you, don't let your brother down.

'Rock solid' means serve your brothers, be there for your guys at the end of the day. Be about your brother. Don't try to win games by yourself because that's not how we got here. Our whole team works together. We're like a family. We're a real brotherhood. We got a great community behind us and we're going to show that every night we play.

FRANKQUON SHERMAN: Like RJ said, the brotherhood we have is unbelievable. A lot of locker rooms don't have the brotherhood we got.

Q. Coach Pettway said 'love on your brother.' What does he say?

FRANKQUON SHERMAN: Just having your brother's back, doing whatever your brother needs at that moment in time.

RJ JOHNSON: Yeah, just being there for your brother.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you very much. Best of luck tomorrow.

We are joined by Kennesaw State head coach Antoine Pettway. Coach, we'll begin with an opening statement.

ANTOINE PETTWAY: God is good. So blessed to be in the NCAA tournament, get a chance to coach some amazing young men in that locker room. A bunch of high-character guys. It's been well-documented some of the adversity my guys went through this season. All they did was just run right through it.

Super blessed to coach those dudes. Super blessed to be the head coach of a wonderful university. We're here to try to make some noise.

THE MODERATOR: If you have a question...

Q. You've been here as a player.

ANTOINE PETTWAY: Oh, yeah.

Q. You've also been here as an assistant coach. Now you're here as a head coach. What truly resonates with you up there?

ANTOINE PETTWAY: It's an amazing feeling. The journey was well worth it. Like you said, played in the NCAA tournament. Coached at the University of Alabama. Now I'm bringing my own team here, man. It's nothing like this, like this tournament. This is the best time of the year.

So I'm super excited, super blessed. Just feel amazing. Just feel super blessed.

Q. Is there a mantra that you all are using for this particular NCAA tournament? Did you have one for Conference USA tournament? Is it the same or something different?

ANTOINE PETTWAY: Same, same, same. Love and serve your brother. Lose yourself in the game. Love and serve that guy next to you.

It's March. We're playing meaningful basketball in March.



Best time of the year. So our mantra, our rallying cry has been: Love and serve your brother. It's been all year. Have each other's back. Every time you get challenged, answer the bell.

Q. Both you and Alabama have both played Gonzaga this year. Did you get a chance to talk to Coach Oats at all?

ANTOINE PETTWAY: Yeah, I did. I talked to him. We got the matchup, he's been through this. That's one of my biggest mentor, him and Anthony Grant from Dayton. He talked to me about the first meeting he had with his Buffalo team when they got picked to go to the NCAA. You have to make sure the guys know they need to believe, they have a chance to win. We talked about that.

Then the team was kind of different when they played them. They had the big kid Huff. It was kind of a different team or whatnot. Him and Mark Few are really good friends. Everybody knows Coach Few is a legend in this coaching business.

He talked about how good of a team they were and it would be a great challenge. Great opportunity, as well.

Q. I guess when you look at this Gonzaga team and kind of the defense they've been playing, they're not usually known for that. What kind of sticks out from their wings?

ANTOINE PETTWAY: No, we got to take care of the ball. They're one of the best team of capitalizing off the other team's turnover, getting out in transition. They got a great amount of lift on the wings. Then they got rim protection at the rim.

It's a really good team. But you expect nothing else with a Mark Few-coached team. We know it's a tremendous challenge, but we got to do a great job of taking care of the ball, keeping those guys out of transition, because they're very dynamic.

Q. You guys obviously have an all-conference level defender in Braedan Lue. What are his strengths?

ANTOINE PETTWAY: Braedan Lue has been great for us all year. Our defense as a whole has really been good. I think that's why we kind of made that big step in the conference tournament.

His shot blocking ability, his athleticism at 6'9", his motor. We've done a great job all year rebounding the basketball. There's got to be a staple of our team going forward if you want to survive.

When that ball is shot, we do a great job of offensive rebounding and having a motor on the backboard. Defense and rebounding is what travels in March. We got to bring that to the table.

Q. Gonzaga is very efficient offensively. Field goal percentage. What do you plan on doing in reference to defending them? Dealing with Ike in the post.

ANTOINE PETTWAY: Praying a lot (laughter).

He's so dynamic. They do a great job of getting the ball in great spots, as well. We got to give 'em a bunch of different looks.

But he's a guy that he works his way into 20 points a game. I think he was the lead scoring in their conference, All-American. We just got to make everything he does and every shot he takes highly contested and tough on him.

I don't think you can stop a kid of his caliber. He's just a dynamic, really dynamic, player. It's going to take a team effort to guard these guys. We have to make sure we contest them, keep them out of the paint. They do a great job of scoring around the rim. He's the main corporal for them. We have to make everything he does tough.

Q. Apples and oranges. Both of you guys have strengths. What are you going to rely on your team, impede upon this team?

ANTOINE PETTWAY: Hope we make 25 threes tomorrow (laughter).

No, I think they play a good pace, especially in transition. That's something we try to do. We're one of the faster playing teams in the country. If we can kind of get stops, we want to get out there in transition, be in attack mode as well.

We hope our three-point shot. If we can get 'Quon some looks from three, I got confidence in my guys that we going to take 'em and make 'em. We going to play our style of basketball. We got to be us. This is a tremendous opponent, tremendous challenge. We can't change what got us here: our rebounding, quality defense. That's us playing our style of play.

We're not changing.

Q. You referenced the adversity before. Talk about the job that RJ Johnson has done stepping into the starting lineup.



ANTOINE PETTWAY: He's been tremendous. That's the reason you get in coaching, to see growth in young men like what I've seen in RJ Johnson. This is a kid I've been knowing since he was 15 years old. Signed with me at the University of Alabama. When I got the job at Kennesaw State, he decided to come over with me. Didn't play last season because of a shoulder injury.

This year from day one, since the first day he stepped on campus, he worked out to get his body together. He just stayed in the gym constantly perfecting his shot. Now he's reaping his harvest right now. Super proud of him.

I constantly talked to him about you can be the separator for us going forward. We win the conference, it's going to be because of you separating us from the pack. He's got to be the most coachable dude on our team and one of the hardest workers on our team. I can't say enough how proud I am of RJ Johnson.

Q. How is the time adjustment going out to the West Coast? How have you gone about budgeting your practice time?

ANTOINE PETTWAY: It's been good. I hope the players are doing better with it than me. I was up at 3:30 this morning dealing with the time change.

No, it's been good. We're in the NCAA tournament. Time change, whatever, flying from Atlanta to Portland, let's do it. We came here to make some noise. Whatever we got to do to do it, let's do it. That's our mindset.

Q. In this new landscape of college basketball, we see transfers in the transfer portal. In your Conference USA championship, you had three freshmen out on the court, two sophomores. That's unusual in today's college basketball. You're going up against a team that's going to see a lot of graduates, seniors. Tell us about your philosophy in recruiting, developing and maintaining those younger players and going up against and being successful against older teams.

ANTOINE PETTWAY: Great question.

I really value relationships. I think we're one of the only teams that start five guys that's been with us from day one. No transfers.

We start Amir Taylor, Trey Simpson, which are two of the freshmen you referred to. Braedan Lue, Frankquon Sherman, then RJ Johnson, guys we all recruited from day one at Kennesaw State.

My philosophy is like I love going and recruiting these guys

and getting a chance to know them, know their circle, know what makes them go. That helps me coach them better.

Then I believe that if you get 'em there, you mold 'em, show 'em your standard, somehow you do things. Not ways that they've already been taught somewhere else, but bring them in and show them exactly what you want. They can relay that to the next class. That's what I've been blessed to have at Kennesaw State so far.

RJ Johnson and Frankquon Sherman, one of my first two signees when I got the job. They relayed our standard to Braedan Lue. Braedan Lue in turn is teaching that standard to Amir Taylor. We've had success doing that.

When we have gone to the portal, which you have to do in this landscape to be successful, we struck gold with Perry Smith Jr. He's a winner, a fighter, a dog who I identify with.

Then Jaden Harris, a local kid from Norcross, Georgia, that was playing in our league, was the lead scorer in our championship game.

So when we had went to the portal, it's been guys we knew beforehand that we got a meaningful relationship. I guess I'm kind of old school. I love the relationship part of college basketball still. I don't want it to be transactional.

We've been lucky to be successful doing that.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time. Best of luck tomorrow.

ANTOINE PETTWAY: Thank you.

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