

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

Thursday, March 19, 2026

Portland, Oregon, USA

Moda Center

Kennesaw State Owls Coach Antoine Pettway

RJ Johnson

Amir Taylor

Media Conference

Gonzaga 73, Kennesaw State 64

THE MODERATOR: Coach, start with your opening statement, then take questions.

ANTOINE PETTWAY: First and foremost, God is good, God is great. We serve Him always, in victory and defeat.

We had a hard-fought game versus a really, really well-coached, really talented Gonzaga team tonight. Super proud of my guys. They never wavered all season. Unwavering belief, unwavering commitment. That's all these dudes gave me all year.

I knew tonight would be no different. I knew we were going to come out and battle. I think it was a one-possession game, two minutes to go, we just didn't finish the way we wanted to.

Man, these guys gave me all they had all year. I'm super proud of my dudes, man. They represented our university in a first-class manner. They represented themselves, their families, and our whole community. I got no regrets.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Coach, you go down double-digits a couple times in the second half. It felt like there were moments you could have just laid down. You didn't, you rallied. How did that reflect the battle through adversity you went through this season?

ANTOINE PETTWAY: Been all year. These dudes fight and believe. I tell them, you know, just continue to fight



and believe and things are going to shake our way. Tonight we made a run. We got it close, five or to four points. Just couldn't get over that hump.

That's a really, really good team. Coach Few does a tremendous job. That dude Graham is a handful. I thought our guys battled. We guarded. We stuck to the game plan.

We'll be back. We'll be back. It was a great taste, great taste. I'm so proud of how my guys represented themselves, the university, and their families. I can't say that enough.

Q. RJ, you left the game in the last minute. Is your leg doing okay?

RJ JOHNSON: Yeah, I'm all good. My body just started locking up. Every time I play, I try to give everything I got. I could have did better hydrating, but I just ran out a fuel. That's what happens.

Q. Coach, this was obviously going to be a very pro-Gonzaga crowd. Early in the game it felt like you almost took them out immediately, you really controlled it. How were you able to early on control the game, make Gonzaga play your type of style?

ANTOINE PETTWAY: Yeah, no, I messaged to our guys, we don't tiptoe on anything. We kicking the door down. We didn't want to hit back or get hit and then fight back; we wanted to start the fight. We felt we got off to a good start.

We knew we were only five hours away from Gonzaga and they were going to have a big-time following here. But I think Owl Nation came out. Our band and then some of the people that traveled with us, they were as loud as they could be over there.

We made a big emphasis on getting off to a great start, defending well, controlling the glass, attacking them instead of being on the defense.

Q. Amir, you're a freshman. How valuable of an experience was this for you? Does it set the standard in your mind?



AMIR TAYLOR: For sure. Me being a freshman, I feel like it's a lot that I learned just coming down here. I feel like this to be, like, the least farthest I go type. I want this to be the bottom of where I'm at.

Every year come around, I want to go to March Madness, keep getting close to that national championship.

Q. RJ, Coach Few had some nice things to say about you. Can you talk about what it meant for you to be able to play against this team.

RJ JOHNSON: I mean, it meant a lot just to go out and be able to compete with my guys, especially after the year we had. We kept telling each other, once you think about it, we even weren't supposed to be here, but at the same time I feel like we were supposed to be here. We worked hard, we grinded for this.

To go out and put on a good performance, it felt good. At the end of the day I really wanted to win with my guys, celebrate in the locker room. But now I got guys like E.J., Perry I got to look at and tell them I'm sorry. I told them we was going to get the win, but I feel like I let them down.

It kind of hurts, but we just got to keep going.

Q. Amir, there were a bunch of different bodies down low. Describe the physical nature of the game.

AMIR TAYLOR: I feel like that's part of basketball. Physicality always going to be there. I feel like me and him going down there banging, just people coming around, I feel like it was a dogfight. Just happy we came out on top.

Q. Kaden Rickard, seven points right off the bench. What got into him early on?

ANTOINE PETTWAY: He's gotten better throughout the season. I told him in there how much I love him, how well he takes coaching, how hard he works. He really grew up throughout the season.

It was just so great to see. The stage wasn't too big for him, the lights weren't too bright. The reason he plays so much as a freshman, the reason Amir, I trust their effort, I trust their will to win.

Kaden is out there throwing his body around, getting rebounds. He is going to do whatever it takes for Kennesaw to finish on top. He don't care about stats. None of these dudes do.

We talked about it in March, playing meaningful basketball, stats don't matter. All that matters is finding a way to make

winning plays and make sure Kennesaw State wins. Kaden Rickard is a prime example of that.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you very much.

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