

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

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

Vanderbilt Commodores

Mark Byington

Jason Edwards

AJ Hoggard

Chris Manon

Media Conference



Q. For any of you, obviously you're playing in a conference that's generally regarded as the best in the country and you're playing 2,500 miles away from the Bay Area. What do you know about Saint Mary's?

CHRIS MANON: Yeah, they're a big physical team. We're expecting a fight, obviously. It's going to be a battle. They obviously rebound very well. We know we're going to have to fight in the trenches.

AJ HOGGARD: You watch basketball just being a part of things. Saint Mary's is a really good program, been like that for years. Just knowing they're going to fight, come to play, a lot of guys have been in this situation last year, they've been in the tournament, they've got tournament guys. Just know they're going to come ready to play, know what it's like to be out there, and just got to execute our game plan.

JASON EDWARDS: Piggyback being off what Chris said, they're a very physical team, run some bigger lineups, so we know we've been fighting all year long in the SEC so a physical game isn't something that's outside of our norm. But our biggest thing is just staying us. We feel like the last couple games we've had some uncharacteristic moments, so we're going to try to stick to playing Vanderbilt basketball.

Q. Talking about the SEC, you mentioned physicality. How much does that physicality help you guys and season you guys so when you get into games like this where it's one and done, you're ready for it?

JASON EDWARDS: It helps us a lot. We know that playing a team like Saint Mary's is kind of like -- it's going to be a battle of wills throughout the game. I've been watching a lot of March Madness. As you know, it's my first time here, but I kind of noticed that the SEC, we're a really rough league, and sometimes that can come back to bite you when you play games like in tournament settings, so we're going to try to make sure we play without the foul but we're going to play strong, hard-core SEC basketball.

Q. What's it been like seeing the season they've had while you've been doing over there throughout this year?

AJ HOGGARD: It's good to see you, too. I stayed in touch with a lot of the guys. I was there for four years. But just seeing their successes, it's nothing but happy for for me. A lot of those guys that I've been through the wars with, seeing what they went through and for them to be on championships they got this year was definitely an honor for me and sit back and watch. For me, I was just happy with the new opportunity with the guys to my right and my left and just being able to compete and make a new way for Vanderbilt and trying to set a new standard there.

That was definitely a big thing for me.

Q. What would you say your team's identity is?

AJ HOGGARD: I would say we play hard. We're connected. We want to play fast. I think our identity is just relying on our defense and getting out and executing.

Q. You mentioned St. Mary's rebounding. They lead the country in rebounding margin. Beyond size, what makes them a good rebounding team and how big a factor will that be in this game?

CHRIS MANON: I think they have some guards that crash on every play, and I think it's going to be a big emphasis of ours when the shot goes up we have to find a body instead of having them find us.

Q. For any of you three, stacked conference, a team that was predicted to be last in the preseason SEC rankings and yet you guys still defied the odds to get



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here. What do you think was the biggest recipe bringing you guys here for this moment?

JASON EDWARDS: I think that the biggest recipe is just being ourselves, but at the end of the day, we know how we were portrayed at the beginning of the year. One of our quotes that we talk about a lot during practice is we were picked 16th in the conference and a lot of people didn't expect us to be here, but we knew from day one that we had the talent and capability to become a tournament team. We've went on the skids in the season but we know that's not who we are and we know we deserve to be in this tournament and we're going to prove it to everybody tomorrow.

AJ HOGGARD: I would just say we had a chip on our shoulder being picked dead last in a stacked conference with a new team. They had no faith in us but ourselves. We know even being here, being far from Nashville a little bit, it's always us. It's just us, the guys in the locker room, the people that came on the bus with us, the staff. We just know it's us, we've got a chip on our shoulder and we're out there to prove it every night?

CHRIS MANON: I think the gentleman in the back said what's our identity. I think we're underdogs. I think we have a chip on our shoulder and we play that way and you're going to see that tomorrow.

Q. Chris, you had to make the transition from the Ivy League to playing in the SEC. What would you tell people who have watched Saint Mary's what to expect when the Saint Mary's play against an SEC team?

CHRIS MANON: I think we're going to be a physical team and we're obviously a little bit undersized but I don't think that defines who we are. I think we're still going to be physical and we're going to play like it's our last game every play from now on.

MARK BYINGTON: Yeah, we're excited to be a part of the best sporting event in the world. We've had a great year, a challenging year, and our conference was demanding. We feel like everything along the way has put us in this moment to try to play our best against a really good Saint Mary's team. It was our mission right away to try to be at this spot and try to be at this moment and try to prepare for this. So this is a good group. I'm glad to get the opportunity to be able to play in this event, and I'm hoping we're going to be at our best on Friday.

Q. Grant Huffman from Aurora, St. Edward's here. What has he meant to your basketball team, and what was it when he was in the portal that led you to say this is somebody that fits what we want to do here

perfectly?

MARK BYINGTON: Yeah, so a lot of things jump off. He had a successful career at Davidson and he's a big guard. He's 6'4", a point guard, and the things that really jump off about him is he's a winner and his toughness. When you're putting a team together, a lot of times guys just look at scoring or whatever else. He does winning plays. When I met with him on his recruiting trip and figured out what he wanted, I realized he was a perfect fit, and you've seen we haven't been successful when he has not been on the court and we've missed him the last couple games.

I'm excited that he's 100 percent now. He's had really good practices the last week. One of our biggest wins if not the biggest win of the year was at Texas A&M and he was a huge part of that.

Having him on the court is valuable. All I can say is he translates to winning.

Q. Mark, kind of off of that, how special is it for a guy like him to be able to come back here? He said he did it last year, too, but to be able to play in Cleveland on a court that he grew up as a fan watching the Cavaliers play here, how special is it to see a player be able to do that?

MARK BYINGTON: Well, we talk all the time about with this group, the especially the guys with one year left, and he came in as a grad transfer with one year left, and it is making memories. What a memory for him to be in the SEC, to be a part-time starter, really good player on the team, hugely impactful, and then to have a chance to play in Cleveland in front of fans, and that's a dream.

There's a lot of things you make memories along the way. This will be something he never forgets. I know he'll play well, and we're going to depend on him.

But to have this moment in his life, I know he's always going to cherish this.

Q. As you know, Vanderbilt hasn't had much success since the days of Billy McCaffery. How have you done it in year one, and what's the recipe going forward for Vanderbilt basketball?

MARK BYINGTON: Yeah, Billy McCaffery, you put a good name out. You know one thing we didn't get caught up in was whatever happened in the past. We're trying to evolve. College athletics is different. We came into the team and said, let's just maximize, do the best we can with this team, and not worry about what last year's team was or trying to chase history that was 20, 30 years ago.

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It's going to be the same thing with us. It's be in the moment and be our best version of ourselves.

The Vanderbilt community, the alumni, the fans, all that's been tremendous. They've been on a journey with us, and that's what's really been great about this year is kind of getting some people that might have not always been around the last couple years but getting them to believe again and getting them to be a part of it because they were hugely a part of our success this year.

Q. What do you know about Saint Mary? They're obviously one of the best defensive teams in the country year by year. Randy has built this program on defense. What makes them good defensively, and how do you sort of combat that?

MARK BYINGTON: Well, I've been diving deep into them for about a week. The more you watch them, the more you respect them. Not just Coach Bennett, but their team, as well.

Talking about Saint Mary's, I'll start with this: Their rebounding is phenomenal. Their rebounding margin numbers, you look at their last four or five games, and you'll see stats like plus 17, plus 24, plus 19, plus 15. You almost think that's a misprint. Like somebody to out-rebound another Division I team by that much is incredible, and they're doing it against Gonzaga and really good teams.

We'll start there. That's just phenomenal that they do that.

Then you did mention the defense. What makes them good, I think it's No. 11, saxon. I think he challenges stuff around the rim. He's big. He's smart. The guards never get beat off the dribble very often and not in rotations very often. Everything is challenged with them. So there's never just an easy shot.

Q. You mentioned the crazy rebounding margins. Besides size, why? What makes them so good, better than other teams at rebounding?

MARK BYINGTON: Yeah, so the big guys do a great job. What they'll do is they'll wedge you underneath the rim. On the offensive side of it, the ball goes up, they might take a shot that -- it's a good shot or a bad shot, doesn't make a difference, and they're getting you underneath the rim with their size, their weight. No. 33 comes in and crashes every single time. So he's extremely impressive, too.

Then on the other end, they're not out of position, so on the defensive side of it, very rarely are they in rotations. Very

rarely are they compromising, and they keep things in front of you so when the ball goes up, they have rebounding position, they use their size again.

You can tell when a team emphasizes, and when their stats are like that, they're incredible at it. I'm sure it's a major emphasis for them.

Q. Mark, a lot has been made of the SEC -- the physicality in the SEC this year and kind of the way it's officiated one way or the other. For you guys, how beneficial is it just going to be to get away from SEC opponents, at least for this round, and maybe a different whistle than what you guys saw on a fairly consistent basis in the league?

MARK BYINGTON: Yeah, there's things we need to worry about and things that I think will take us away from being successful.

First thing, the physicality. There's not a more physical team in the country than Saint Mary's. So hopefully the SEC has prepared us to play against Saint Mary's because they're really good at it.

But us worrying about whether it's going to be more calls or less calls or whatever else, I think it's going to take us out, and we've got our hands full trying to box out and trying to score and trying to do different things there.

Is it going to be different? It probably will be. But we'll adjust. We'll figure it out along the way. We're a deep team. We've been in foul trouble a good amount, and sometimes we haven't.

It really is kind of just keeping number one, keeping our important things, worrying about us, and then let the referees do their job, too.

Q. How has last year kind of prepared you for this year's tournament?

MARK BYINGTON: I didn't really think about it much until actually the selection show on Sunday night when I got back to the house. Then I did take some time and reflect and look at myself and that team and say, what did I do right and what did I do wrong.

We were able to win the first game, and then we didn't bounce back against Duke last year.

This is a team that I have right now, I think there's only three or four guys on my team that have been to the NCAA Tournament. Now, the staff is experienced. Assistant coaches.



What I want this team to do is to -- the major thing, enjoy this. We put in a lot of work to get to this moment. We've got to be ourselves on the court. We don't have to change anything.

But looking around and enjoying the moments, enjoying the feeling, enjoying the competition. Like I said, there's no better sporting event in the world than this. I mean, this takes over our country. It takes over the world. Being a part of this as a coach is great. I want our players to really enjoy this moment, as well.

Q. One of the reasons Saint Mary's had such good defensive numbers is because the pace of play offensively. I assume you guys normally play a pace than faster than what Saint Mary's likes to do. Is it easier for a slower-paced team to slow down a fast-paced team or a fast-paced team to slow down a team?

MARK BYINGTON: It's easier to slow a team down. We're not going to be able to speed them up. The game is not going to be in the 90s. It's just not going to be the case. They're deliberate on offense. They get to what they want to. They take good shots. They rebound if they miss it.

So it is longer possessions.

And on defense, they're so good that you're not going to break them down in five, six, seven seconds like you can some teams. So they're going to make you kind of grind the possession out. So it's a challenge there.

They are, I think the numbers are saying, like one of the top five slowest teams in the country. We played a couple teams like that this year, and we've got to learn from it. Sometimes we weren't comfortable with it and embraced it even though we were being successful.

We've got to understand this game, that it's going to be a grind game. We've got to embrace their style, their pace, the possessions. We're going to try to score when we can early, middle or at the end of the shot clock, but at the same time, whatever is going on, we've got to realize, stay the course.

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