

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Hofstra vs Alabama

Thursday, March 19, 2026

Tampa, Florida, USA

Benchmark International Arena

Alabama Crimson Tide

Coach Nate Oats

Labaron Philon Jr.

Houston Mallette

Latrell Wrightsell Jr.

Media Conference



think everybody is locked in and we're ready to go.

Tomorrow is going to be a great feeling for all the young guys that haven't experienced the NCAA Tournament yet, and it's the biggest thing on the planet when it comes to college basketball so everybody is going to be watching. So we're just ready to get out there and we're ready to play.

Q. For any of the three of you up there, what did you take away from the SEC tournament and kind of the lessons that you learned as you get into these first and second round games here?

LATRELL WRIGHTSELL JR.: I would probably say just our readiness to start the games. We've been talking about that for a little minute. But with the sense of urgency that we play with, if we play with it, we're one of the best teams in the country. If we don't bring it every night, then you can have a toss-up with us and we can lose games like that.

If we come out with a sense of urgency and play to our strengths and play defense and actually guard and communicate and actually move the ball, then I feel like we can play with anybody. Just a sense of urgency to start the game, because when we do that, we always have great success at the end.

HOUSTON MALLETTE: Yeah, to piggyback off that, I would agree with Trely on what he said. Just our sense of urgency to be ready to go from the start. I think we struggled with it in that game. I don't think we really got going until about 12 or so minutes left when we were down 13, and by that time it's hard to make a run like that.

But I think we had a great week of practice. Our practice days this week, we got after it. We played really hard. I just think our preparation going into it, just being the most prepared team and being ready to go out there and play.

LABARON PHILON JR.: I would reflect on that Ole Miss game in the tournament. It was a great feeling just to be able to play in that game, have a great enough seeding to where we got the byes and stuff like that. But I would say just to pick up what Houston said, I think we wasn't ready. But like he said, we had a great week of practice. We went

Q. Labaron, your progression in your sophomore year, what has been the biggest leap for you and what do you attribute to getting that, and how much pride do you take in leading this team into the NCAA Tournament this year?

LABARON PHILON JR.: I would say it means everything, just coming back for a second year, playing with these two guys. It's been a wonderful feeling. You know, we've got, I think, one of the best teams in the country, and I'm ready to make a run. I would say just playing with these guys and playing with my other teammates has been just a grateful feeling and thing to do all season long. And I'm looking to, like I said, make a run and just lead these guys as far as we can.

I think these two guys do a great job of helping me lead as well. Just thankful that I get to share the court with these guys.

Q. Labaron, where do you feel like you've grown the most from this time last year to when you were debating going to the NBA and eventually ended up coming back? Where do you feel like your game has progressed the most and made you more NBA ready?

LABARON PHILON JR.: I would just say the experience, knowing what it takes to win a game. Hofstra is a great team. They've got two of the best guards in their conference. I think those guys do a great job of getting in the paint and stuff like that. Just focus on what we've got to focus on and keeping the main thing the main thing. I



at each other. Coach Oats designed practices to be a little bit more player versus player, and we just got after it.

I think once you do that late in the season, it's really just iron sharpens iron time, and everybody is getting ready to put on their best performances.

We're just ready to see what our guys have left in the tank to just pour it all in for this last run. So that's a great thing to see.

Q. Houston and Latrell, both if you guys didn't play the NCAA Tournament last year because of injury. This is it for both of you guys from an eligibility standpoint. You're both seniors. What are your emotions like because of what you dealt with last year, this being it, going into the NCAA Tournament?

LATRELL WRIGHTSELL JR.: I'm pretty excited about it. I know that I didn't get to play last year, but I actually got to play the year before. To experience what I did in that year, to make a Final Four run, like, obviously I don't want to not stop there. I want to go there and actually win the whole thing.

It's just a surreal moment. It's a blessing to be able to play again and just be out here with my brothers. Like Baron said, we go to war every day, and to obviously reap our rewards and reap our harvest from what we've done in this whole season is going to be really fun to actually see it play out in this March Madness run.

HOUSTON MALLETTTE: Yeah, I'm incredibly grateful. Obviously all three of us, you dream of this as a kid. I remember watching March Madness growing up, the Luther Vandross, the song, all of it, it's an incredible experience. Last year was a ton of fun, but this year obviously I'll be playing in this -- Trely, we'll both be playing in it.

I don't know, man, I'm just grateful. We have a verse, Galatians 6:9: Therefore, do not grow weary in doing good, for at the proper time you'll reap the harvest if you don't give up. That's been our mantra this whole year. This team has handled a lot of adversity with injuries. We've had 13 different starting lineups throughout the year.

I think we're well equipped to make a run here, and I am just incredibly grateful and incredibly excited to go out there and play. You dream of it as a kid, and it's kind of surreal to be in this position.

LABARON PHILON JR.: Like they said, just dreaming as a kid, you watch all the games and you see all the stuff that's happening, all the crazy buzzer beaters. March is just

different when it comes to basketball. Just to be able to put on that crimson jersey, it means everything to me to wear the A on my chest every day, every game. Just taking that as a surreal feeling and just taking it in as a real moment, it means everything.

Q. For Houston and Latrell, what are your general impressions of Hofstra after watching them on film?

LATRELL WRIGHTSELL JR.: I believe they're really talented. They have really good guards. Well, I played with one of their guards, Aaron Estrada, and that year we went to the Final Four. So I know they always produce really good guards and stuff like that.

Just having to focus in on their play style, they score really well, they're coached really well, they play really hard. I think they've won the last 11 out of their last 12 games, so they're really on a heater right now. We respect them with the utmost respect because we know that their guards can play in this league as well. Obviously they've done it with one guy, and he's made history at this program.

Just respect them, and obviously give them a ton of credit for what they've done and what they've won.

HOUSTON MALLETTTE: Yeah, all the respect in the world to Hofstra and their program. Like Trely said, they've won 11 of their last 12. Their guards are really dynamic, and they have guys that kind of fill in those spots really well around them. They're really well equipped.

I think it's just an incredible experience. Obviously I think we have really good guards, as well, and we're excited to go out there and compete with them. But yeah, preparation is big. We know how it gets in March. We know teams go on runs during this time.

But yeah, like Aaron's practiced with us before over the summer and whatnot, and he's one of the most talented guys I've seen play. I know what these guys are bringing. We're just excited to go out there and compete.

Q. You guys mentioned you've overcome adversity throughout this season. Whether Aden is here or not, having to pick up the slack for a good scorer, what's your approach to being down a man?

LABARON PHILON JR.: I would say you've got to step up. Guys got to be aggressive and we've just got to play like we were shot out of a cannon. We've been pressing really hard getting up and down a bit, but we're going to have our legs and we're going to be ready. Our style is just to run and gun, push it as fast as we can, and get buckets early in the shot clock.

I think we've still got guys that can do that at a high rate. We've just got to mix it up a little bit. And I'm pretty sure Coach Oats will have everything ready. He's been ready to play ever since we got here.

Tampa is a great city, so being here and practicing, just been going up and down a little bit, having a little fun. So just being ready for tomorrow, it's going to be a fast paced game for us.

HOUSTON MALLETT: Yeah, I think our team is really well equipped to handle adversity. We started the league off pretty slow. I think we started 4-4 and we went on a run to finish off the league. Like I said earlier, we've had 13 different starting lineups. We've seen guys step up.

I think Taylor Bol Bowen has been playing like his best basketball recently. Obviously the addition of Noah Williamson, he played a lot of minutes against Ole Miss, and he was incredible.

I think we have multiple guys equipped to step up. Jalil Bethea, he's special. The way he's handled adversity throughout this year, he was hurt to start the year. For the first pretty much half of the year, he was out with injury. And his approach in practice every day, he's gotten a whole lot better, and he makes us better. And I think a guy like that is primed for a huge March Madness run, as well.

I think our team, like we all love each other. There's real genuine love here. Like selfless love is one of our core values, and we're just excited for each other. The word Mudita comes up as well. Coach Murphy from softball came and talked to us about that word right after we had lost to Florida, and it's just like having vicarious joy for your teammates.

I have vicarious joy for Baron, and when Baron scores 20, it feels like I score 20. When Trelly hits eight threes, I feel like I hit eight threes. That's the mentality our team has, and I'm excited for it to take off here soon.

Q. Cruz has had some big performances this year against a couple of ACC teams he's played. What have you seen from him scout-wise?

LABARON PHILON JR.: You know, it's a big matchup. I look at every matchup as a big matchup. We can't just go out there and just doubt these guys. He's a great guard, and the other guard he has is a great guard, too. We have to be ready for both of them. They take most of the shots on their team.

Just being able to just key in on those guys and just control

those guys and the pace of the game.

Q. We just talked to Speedy Claxton and he talked about his team's rebounding and he thinks they're better equipped to play inside against a team like Alabama. Obviously pretty strong knowledge of the game. What have you seen from the way that team attacks the glass?

HOUSTON MALLETT: Yeah, they attack the glass pretty hard. I think they're two forwards, center, they had like 11 offensive rebounds in their last game. They're big. They're well equipped to do that. I think we've prepared really well this week. I think our mindset is -- for Trelly and I, it could be our last time playing basketball in college, and we just want to give everything we have. We want to empty the tank.

I think we've seen her of late guys step up, like Taylor Bol Bowen has really stepped up. You should see the way he practices. Noah Williamson has stepped up. You should see the way he practices. Same with Jalil. We have a team fully equipped to handle the rebound, and we're just excited to get out there tomorrow and play.

Q. Nate, obviously you addressed the Aden situation on the radio, but if he goes back next week and gets his student conduct appeal won, is there a chance we see him later in the tournament?

NATE OATS: You know what, I'm not sure where that's all going to go. We'll kind of address things as they come up. But for right now, the team is just preparing to play with who's at practice, and he's obviously not there.

We'll prepare to play without him and address that matter if it comes up.

Q. You kind of dovetailed into my question. How has practice gone without Aden? Can you discuss some of the adjustments you've had to make or how they've looked?

NATE OATS: I'll say this: As good as Aden is for us -- and he's been great for us, he's shot the ball well and done a lot of things -- we were best equipped to lose somebody in the backcourt more than anywhere else with this team. Again, you've got Wrightsell who's playing the best basketball of his career. Shoot, he was SEC player of the week I think the second to last week of the season.

Philon is obviously getting as healthy as he can be. Houston Mallette is playing well, Amari Allen is playing well. Like Houston was just talking about, I think Taylor and Noah are playing as good as they've played all year.

Now you've got a little bit more where you don't have to play Amari down in the front court, you can play Amari exclusively in the backcourt.

Jalil has done a great job prepping, keeping his head to where it needs to be, super talented.

I'm excited to see what some of these guys have. We've done a good job in practice, I think, prepping for these -- Hofstra has got two very good guards. Cruz Davis and Preston Edmead, as good a combination of backcourt as any -- they're better than most high major back courts when you put the two of them together.

I think we've done a good job, and I think we've still got plenty of depth. That's the good thing with making sure -- with the way we play, we want to play fast. We usually have pretty good depth. We had great depth in the backcourt, and I think we've had 13 different starting lineups, the reason being mainly injuries throughout the course of the year.

Whether it's the guys out with an injury or whatever reason he's out for, I think this team is more equipped to handle somebody being out. We've had more game time decisions, night-before decisions than any team I've ever been associated with.

Q. Speedy Claxton sat up there and talked about how he thinks his bigs and their offensive rebounding almost translates better against a high major opponent. You look at this Hofstra team, the success they've had inside, the success they've had attacking the glass, what's your evaluation of that, and what do you do to try to limit it?

NATE OATS: They're good. They've got real size. Sunday is a big shot blocker, rim protector, rebounder. I've been at that level. I was at Buffalo for six years before I was a head coach, and having legitimate size inside is something maybe you don't always have at that level. They have it. But Sunday.

And then -- I don't want to pronounce his name wrong, No. 6, Victory Onuetu -- between Sunday and Onuetu, they had 11 O-boards just between the two of them in their last game they played.

Our guys are fully aware. We have had an issue rebounding the ball too many times this year. If we don't make a concerted effort to go to the glass, box out, it's going to be a problem. Because if you keep giving their backcourt multiple chances -- they make tough shots, so you get them to miss one, great, you did a good job on defense. You have to get the rebound.

And we want to run. Our depth is still there. Our style of play is that we want to play fast. They're a very slow team that they're comfortable playing deep into the shot clock. We'd like to get the pace up.

It's hard to get the pace up and run if you don't defensive rebound the basketball. So we really got to make sure we're focused on rebounding the ball.

Q. You touched on Hofstra's guards a minute ago. Could you elaborate what makes them so effective?

NATE OATS: You know, so Cruz is a lefty -- and now I'm thinking both go either way. But Cruz is a lefty and Edmead is a righty. I don't know which one you call one, which one you call a two, but they both can handle it, shoot it, pass it.

I saw a stat in Edmead, he's come on really strong at the end of the year. He's been good for them all year, but they had a stat, he's the first player in the last 25 years NCAA to do whatever he's done. They can both shoot it, drive in the paint and pass it.

If you want to kind of double one, trap one, blitz one, you're leaving the other one playing off a close-out in a rotation.

If a team has one guard that's great and elite and everybody else plays off him, it's a lot easier to trap in ball screens, double him. Okay. So all of a sudden you want to trap Cruz, now you're pulling in Edmead's man to help on the roll. I'm not so sure how smart that is because now all of a sudden, you've got to play him on a long close-out and him attacking a long close-out is an issue.

The fact that they have two of them together makes them both better. The fact that they're both -- Aaron Estrada led our team to a Final Four. He was Player of the Year in that conference for Hofstra, and Cruz' numbers are better than what Estrada's numbers were there. I'm not saying he's better. Speedy would be a lot better answer for who was a better player. But they're both lefties, and I was fortunate enough to coach Estrada here for a year and we went to the Final Four that year.

But if you just look at the numbers, Cruz has had a better year, and, man, Estrada played really well at this high major level for the year he was with us.

Their guards are good, but this is our sixth NCAA Tournament in a row. You don't make the NCAA Tournament and play a bad team. If they're in the NCAA Tournament, they're going to be good. That's why there's not that many teams in the tournament.

They're very good, and we're fully aware of how good their backcourt is. And we're going to have to do a great job one-on-one defense, our help is going to have to be good. And we're going to have to have different packages to guard them because I don't think you can just do one thing against these great guards the entire game.

Q. On the Aden front, you mentioned earlier in the week that you wanted to support him, obviously, in spite of everything that's happening right now. Can you speak to any contact you've had with him since maybe the initial moments after the arrest and where that stands?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I've met with him in person, talked to him on the phone multiple times. Look, I'm an adult. I've made mistakes. We all have things we'd like to do differently.

Now is not the time to ignore a kid that you've built a real relationship with. Now is the time he needs more love from the adults in his life than at any point.

When I got into coaching, way back when I first got out of college and I was a Division III assistant making no money and then I went to a high school job in the Detroit area for 11 years, I really -- to basically coach for no money for 16 years, you'd better be doing it for the right reasons because you're losing an awful lot of money spending all the hours, money, time traveling to kids for official visits.

I've got to remind myself I'm a high school coach that's caught some breaks up here. But I don't want to lose why I got into this thing in the first place.

You get into it to help impact young men's lives. Well, if you disappear when they make a mistake, I'm not so sure that's a genuine relationship you've built.

I've got three daughters. They've made mistakes. You don't disappear on them when they need your help. I won't be disappearing on him. I talked to him yesterday morning on the phone. I talked to him the night before that. I've talked to him every day so far.

I'm going to continue to talk to him, love him, help him through this, and we'll see where it all takes us.

Q. What kind of progress have you seen from Jalil this season, and how much are you going to lean on him a little more with Aden out?

NATE OATS: Yeah, obviously Aden is playing about 30 minutes. There's 30 minutes to distribute differently in this

game. Jalil has been playing well. The one thing I'll say about Jalil is he's super talented. He had the broken foot that he missed so many reps in the off-season. He missed half our off-season.

With the way we play, it's a lot different than the way most college teams play at least. There's a lot to be learned in the off-season with playing fast, making the right reads and the paint reads, the rim reads, pick-and-roll reads, close-out reads, all of it that he missed. And he was frustrated as a talented kid like him would naturally be that he wasn't able to contribute as much as everybody would have liked for him to initially.

But I think he's done an unbelievable job keeping his attitude right where it needs to be. I love him. He comes in, plays hard, great teammate. I really hope he goes in and plays well -- playing well doesn't necessarily mean just making shots, making highlight plays, which he's more than capable of, but it's being locked into the defensive end, impacting winning. That's the one thing you've got to keep emphasizing to these guys that come either out of high school or maybe places they haven't won at the level we've won is what can you do to impact winning.

It's not all scoring. It's why we chart as many things as we chart.

I think he's starting to figure that out. I would love for him to take advantage of this opportunity he's got in front of him and really play well here this weekend.

Q. How has Amari developed as a player and as a person throughout his freshman season?

NATE OATS: So Amari comes in as a freshman that maybe isn't as highly ranked as some other kids we've brought in. We all knew he had a chance to be really good. Like, I loved him. A guard with size, toughness, competitiveness. He came in right away in the summer and established the fact that he's not backing down from anybody, that he's going to compete with everybody, and there was days during the summer he was our best player.

I think you've seen that. He hasn't been elite in every game, but he's competed at an elite level every game, and he's fought with some injuries and had to come around.

But with his size, skill, athleticism, competitiveness, toughness, IQ, you combine it all, there's not many all-around players that can play as many positions as him in the country. I think you're seeing that by where he's showing up on draft boards and the amount of interest all the NBA teams are giving him, asking about him.

He's been a joy to coach. He's a tough kid from Green Bay, Wisconsin. There hasn't been too many big-time basketball players come out of Green Bay. So it would be pretty cool to see him succeed, and I think it's been pretty cool to watch him his freshman year come along the way he's come along.

Q. What's the biggest difference stylistically in the offense pace-wise without Aden, and have you noticed any difference in the way Labaron affects and plays basketball without Aden on the perimeter?

NATE OATS: Aden didn't miss too many games, so go back to when he missed and it wasn't many. We don't really have to change the way we play. We had all the injuries all year, and there wasn't one time when we walked into a game and said, oh, we're going to try to play a little slower this game, or we're going to really concentrate on throwing it inside this game because we're missing Wrightsell or Philon or Holloway or -- no, we're going to play the way we play.

Now, different teams have different coverages in the pick-and-roll and different teams have different strengths. To me, we're not changing the way we play based on who we have or don't have. We're going to change how we attack different coverages based on the way the team we're playing. What does Hofstra do in pick-and-roll? Where are Hofstra's better defenders at? Where are Hofstra's strengths and weaknesses at? There hasn't been any change at all, to be honest with you, other than we just have one less guy out there in practice.

We're going to play the way we play and we're going to attack the way we attack. I think it's been pretty good for us most of the year.

Q. This is a little off topic and a little lighthearted, but what have you thought of the way Brady has handled the challenges this season?

NATE OATS: Yeah, Brady Goka started with us as a manager, was really good -- we've got an army of managers, a bunch of kids willing to serve the program, and it's great having them in. Some are just there to be a part of the basketball program. Some are there to find their way up in the coaching world.

He was one that we knew, came back from my connections in Michigan, and he's from Michigan, close to Saginaw. Him and Preston have a little debate. Brady claims Saginaw, but it's really not Saginaw, it's out in the country by Saginaw. But he came from my connections in Michigan. He came down, was a manager, then he became a grad assistant. Kind of migrated towards the

video room, really got into the coaching part.

This is the first year you've got replays in college, so we gave it to our video coordinator. He should be good with video, that's why he's the video coordinator.

He's been pretty good. Honestly, I think Brady has been good. I think it's been more everybody in college basketball figuring out appeals, challenges. Because we appealed some plays that one game, you'd win that appeal and the next game, it's a more egregious flagrant one than this one and you don't win it. And then all of a sudden, you turn the TV on and it's -- I can't figure out what should have been a flagrant one and what's not.

I think in light of everybody being new and figuring it out and everybody is trying to work through it, the referees, people in charge of it all, I think he's done a pretty good job.

Look, the guy that's in that role, like, you'd better have some thick skin because if you screw one up, especially -- now, the appeals are different. You can screw up an appeal, you just lose the time-out. You can get multiple unlimited appeals. I guess if you run out of time-outs, you can still appeal, you just get a T for calling a time-out you don't have. You'll never run out of appeals.

Now, the challenges you only have two, so if you screw up a challenge play -- again, the referees are figuring out the rules, too. Because we challenged at Auburn, lost it, lost our challenge for the rest of the game. They called a goal tend against us that was incorrectly called in the last two minutes. And I need to be better aware of the rules, as do the referees, but the refs are supposed to go review that in the last two minutes. And I was about ready to kill Brady because we didn't have our challenge left, and I couldn't review it. It actually was supposed to be the referees that review it in the last two minutes.

Look, Brady has been great with it. He's quick. He's smart. He gets a little help from Adam Bauman over there. Brian Adams, our one assistant that runs the defense sent out a -- we've got a coaches' and GAs kind of group chat. There was another program that their challenge drew behind had some -- I think Brian Adams' direct term was Thorkapalooza over there with all these cool handshakes.

I said, Brady, are we going to get like this with our cool handshake. Just don't try to do no Thorkapalooza handshake with me after we win an appeal.

We'll try to win the appeals. We'll try to use it correctly. We'll use it to our advantage when we can. I think Brady and Adam and our whole video crew has done a good job

with it, but we're still all trying to figure it out this year.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.

