

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Texas Tech vs Alabama

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Benchmark International Arena

Texas Tech Red Raiders

Grant McCasland

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Luke Bamgboye

Media Conference



It's been difficult, obviously, without JT rebounding and him on defense in general. But yeah, we all have to come together and step up for each other.

Q. What do you see from the Alabama matchup, issues that they can present? How do you plan to go into this one?

LeJUAN WATTS: Watching the Hofstra game, I think that the 5 man has gotten like nine offensive rebounds. So knowing we have to hit him and be super physical and rebounding, like you said, is going to be one of our goals.

Q. You look at this matchup between Labaron and Christian, it's gotten such national hype. A lot of people are excited to see these two future NBA guards go head to head. What have the conversations with Anderson been like? What's he been saying heading into this matchup and what do you expect from him in this big-time showdown?

LeJUAN WATTS: Christian is going to do what Christian does, be a leader, be a point guard for us. It's not about matchups on him versus Philon. I think it's just Alabama versus Texas Tech at this point. I think that we're going to be the better team. So it's not one-on-one.

Q. I wonder if you can give us your thoughts on Labaron Philon and what you see in him and how does he compare with other elite guards that you have played this season?

GRANT McCASLAND: Yeah, really impressed. It's fun, you watch him play a lot, because we're not scouting him for our league or for the purposes of playing, I've just watched him play and had it on in the background of watching other teams we've played.

You know, I tried to dissect some of it last night and then again this morning to try to get a feel for him, and I kept thinking, like, what can you take away -- what can he not do? Every time I think I have a beat on it, it's something else that he shows. Man, he can score at all the levels, passes so well, he's competitive. His motor runs non-stop. Just really impressed with his ability to orchestrate wins and figure out a way in different possessions to create advantages at all times.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Texas Tech.

Q. For all three of you, this is your first year here at Texas Tech. From the moment you got on campus until now, what's been the big thing that's stood out to you about this whole process?

TYEREE BRYAN: Just the culture around the place, like how everybody in Lubbock loves Lubbock and there's an expectation to win and do good in your program, and the support from the community, every time you go somewhere, it's like, "Hey, you're on the basketball team," or "Hey, do good this year." Just a lot of love and support from the locals.

LUKE BAMGBOYE: I second that. I think from the moment of my visit, I was in the airport, someone recognized me, saying, "We really want you to come here." I think all of that love kind of drives this fan base. Just keeps us going, makes us want to win more games.

Q. Rebounding has been very up and down this year. I want to get your takes on the differences in rebounding with and without JT and how have you adapted on the glass since his injury this year?

LeJUAN WATTS: Yeah, I think that the guards since JT has been injured have stepped up for us. Jaylen Petty, Don, Christian stepping up for us, and obviously now me, Luke and Joe have to take an even bigger step with Alabama.

And he can do it off the bounce, he can do it with his decision making off the ball, he can get into ball screens and short roll. Pretty remarkable all the things he can do to put pressure on people.

Really, I don't know if there's a comparison just because he's got size and can do it in a lot of different ways. But definitely impressed with his ability to win.

Q. How do you evaluate your team's performance and strategy on the glass since Toppin's injury, and how has he evolved over that time?

GRANT McCASLAND: Well, I'd say it hasn't been great. We're not a great rebounding team right now. We've improved. I think Luke Bamgboye being a big part of that. The better he gets, the better we get. Guard rebounding is huge for us. When we play our best, our guards are five rebounds-plus each, and that's where it feels like we need to create advantages.

Josiah Moseley has made a jump for us in that regard, his nose for the ball, his ability to be physical early. But if I had to give one area that's got to improve the most as we progress in this tournament, it's rebounding. It's on both ends. Just the physicality required and then the nose for it, and we really miss JT in that regard.

Q. I'm curious, there's been a lot of talk the last couple days about lack of upsets in the Tournament. As someone who worked at the mid-major level, has seen kind of the evolution with the portal and NIL, is it as simple as the big boys have too much money and too much talent now, or what do you attribute maybe the lack of madness so far, if you will?

GRANT McCASLAND: Well, I don't think it's that hard, man. You know the answer to this, so I don't know what sound bite you want from me on it. The transfer rules that you can leave every year, it's hard to keep someone because there was a part of this where if you got a bounce-back from a high major school, if you will, and you were at a mid-major, then they had their one year of transfer, then if they transferred again, they'd have to -- you just had multiple -- people wouldn't do it.

Now that you can transfer every year and there's the opportunity for -- it's just, I don't know how anyone stays long enough to where there's continuity.

That's why I respect Akron so much and that team we played. I loved watching them play, and I wasn't able to even say it enough, just they had so many guys return and stay. To me, that's the X-factor in winning at the highest

level with these teams is, who can you have continuity with so you can beat people because of your togetherness.

These teams that don't have the resources, it's just hard to keep anyone longer than one year if you're great. It's like, you're a Catch 22; if you play great, you're gone because there's people with more resources to -- and you can't blame anybody for leaving. You almost have to celebrate just the process, and as you know, when you get into the Tournament, man, there's just only so many teams that have the best players, and the best players are usually on the teams with the most money.

Q. Such a massive disparity between Alabama's pace and your team's pace. How important is it for you guys to control the tempo? How do you go about doing that, and how important is Christian's role in that for the team?

GRANT McCASLAND: I've said this all along, Christian Anderson is the leader of our team, and offensively, defensively, he's got such a great -- you look at our roster he's the one guy that's played in our program that's playing right now, that was on our team last year, that was a part of a team that was in the Elite Eight with a chance to go to the Final Four.

His experience, his composure, he's just so steady every day. We play those guys a lot of minutes.

So we don't mind the up-tempo pace. That's not really the issue. It's more can we keep that up over the course of 40 minutes and how do we make sure that we keep our best players on the floor?

That's where Alabama, obviously they've got a little more depth and pace in the way that we play. We've got to be opportunistic with how we push the ball, but then ultimately it's how do we get great shots and how do we set our defense. That's going to be the key to this one.

Respect Coach Oats. Obviously I got to work with him this last summer with USA Basketball. We were both part of the U-19 process, and watched his teams. Nations of Coaches is a great organization. We both were at an event earlier this fall. I just really respect the competitiveness they play with.

It's one thing to play fast, it's another thing to compete and play fast, I just think their play their tails off and it's impressive watching them on film how hard they play, as fast as they play.

Q. Going back to Labaron, Christian said he played Labaron in high school and said it was a good

matchup, they lost a close game, but said that Labaron was very chirpy in the game, talking a lot in the game. I know we saw Alabama get into it with Hofstra late in the game a little bit, as well. How do you think your team will deal with the intensity of the environment, obviously Sweet 16 on the line is enough, but the intensity and maybe some trash talk that might come along with the game?

GRANT McCASLAND: Well, they play in a great league, obviously, and we play in, I think, the best league in college basketball. I don't think there's a problem with the competitiveness of either team. I think we've seen enough environments and we've played against enough great players, Labaron being obviously a fantastic player.

And that's part of the fun of this, man. If you don't enjoy the competition and someone communicating with you during the game, then don't play this game; that's what I'll tell you. There's other things you can go do that -- so we just won't shy away from the opportunity to compete, and I know they won't either.

Q. Following up on the Cinderella question a couple minutes ago, you guys are the beneficiary when people -- when players transfer up. What are the keys to balancing and making things gel when you do have new faces coming in like that?

GRANT McCASLAND: Yeah, well, I can only tell you because I've messed it up a lot. I got the opportunity to be a head coach at Midland Junior College, a guy by the name of Ron Jones, I worked for Shannon Hayes. He left to be a Division I associate head coach, and I was a 26-year-old assistant coach that was making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and getting the bus keys and making sure we were meeting tutoring appointments at the time.

The AD at the time Ron Jones, who was the women's coach, ended up giving me the opportunity because I was up there with him all the time. He was like, look, this guy, at least I can count on him and I know him. I think he was sick of hiring coaches.

Just learning and messing it up a lot gives you an opportunity to have the experience of how do you turn a roster over and what is it that you value. You know, in junior college, for example, you had the opportunity to even bring people in at semester, whether it was a GED or something random. That never worked out for us, so I don't even want to do that anymore.

So just learning how do you put together offensive talent and character and competitiveness and what fits us. Man, I'm just so thankful for all those teams I got to be a part of

that let us coach them and let us learn.

We started a few seasons out where we didn't win very many games early and every team always finished well because we just had the right mix.

I'll tell you, I've messed it up more than I've gotten it right, but over the course of time, you can't undervalue, I think, guys that love basketball and guys that love being on a team. I think those two are vital in having success in putting a roster together, because the season is too long and you spend too much time together to not love being a part of winning, and how is that a priority when you communicate with people and how honest can you be? Because I've tried to tell people things that were real positive but didn't work out, and it actually hurt us in the end.

So just being honest in the process, finding people that love being on teams that win, and finding people that love basketball, and I think those ingredients end up helping you put a roster together that can win at the highest level.

Q. (On the peanut butter).

GRANT McCASLAND: We did all of it. You got to know if it's crunchy or creamy. They're not getting NIL, so peanut butter and jelly may be the best thing they got. So you got to make sure you cater to them.

I think the biggest thing was the chips that were in the bags. Nobody wants Lay's. No offense to Lay's, it's not a sponsor of ours. Usually Cheetos was a big one. That was before the hot stuff hit. That was back when it was pretty basic. But Cheetos and Doritos were a pretty safe bet in the JuCo world.

Q. Last season Christian was a freshman, he was playing with some really good veteran guards. What do you think he took away from playing with Chance and Elijah?

GRANT McCASLAND: Oh, man, the daily practice that Christian went through in preparation, having Elijah -- what's awesome about Christian is he set the record now for the most assists in a season, and Elijah broke it last year. Isn't that awesome? Back-to-back years. Shout-out to Coach Linder and Chris Nottingham on that.

But just the ability to see the game from not only how do you just play it but how do you win? I can tell you, his international experience was just as important, playing for Germany and playing at the U-18 European championships, to play in the world championships.

He had so much experience playing against high-level players and then playing with the national team and playing against Luka. He's got a ton of great experience, not just playing with the former guards that we had.

But playing in the Big 12 a whole season and seeing how you've got to play against all these different defenses and how aggressive people can be. Man, I can tell you, I think Chance McMillian was probably as significant as anybody. Why, because of his leadership, because of the way he approached it every day, and I've seen Christian take on his ability to stay steady and every day show up. If there's anybody that's been consistent in our practices and showing up every day ready to compete with a smile on his face, it's Christian Anderson. And that's what I think separates him at this level, and I think it's what separates him at the next level.

He really loves this, and he loves winning, and he loves being a part of a team, and he makes people better every day. That's what Chance McMillian showed him, and that's who he is.

Q. You got the late game tomorrow night. Talking to guys in the locker room, they said they can rest, recover, maybe lock in. Your thoughts on playing at least at 9:45 Eastern time?

GRANT McCASLAND: You know, that tip for us, because we play guards so many minutes, I think it's advantageous that we get more time. I don't think anybody in Lubbock wants us playing at 9:45, but we obviously don't choose the time, but we love to play, and I think the more time we get for us in preparation, the better.

We'll play anytime, anywhere, but the later tip doesn't bother us.

Q. You were talking about how you've gotten roster construction right and you've gotten it wrong. I was curious, is that something that you know right away, that you've gotten it one way or the other, or is it something that takes time? And when did you find out this year that this is the roster that you got right, or has that moment not happened yet?

GRANT McCASLAND: Great question. You know, we've had quite a few injuries to start the season. I mean, we've got a guy LaTrell Hoover on our team that we literally signed a week before school started. Why? Because I got back from USA Basketball, and winning gold with Tommy Lloyd and Micah Shrewsbury and walked into the gym, and we had just had a few guys -- we had literally only six guys that could practice and nobody to go against JT, because all of our size was hurt. I went to Kellen

Buffington, I was like, we need some players to practice with. We had them in boots and knees, I was like this isn't going to work.

We had delayed our practice times until later, but just unusual tough circumstances. We had some guys get injured early.

But ultimately, I think with this team specifically, what we got right was our character and their love for this is a 10. This team can improve, and what you want, I think, with teams more than ever is a passion to get better. Like, who really wants to get better and who really cares about winning. We've got a group that I know we've got that right with.

Now, have we reached our full potential? I don't even think we're close. That's the only sad about playing in these elimination tournaments this time of year is I don't think we've gotten the ample time that we need in practice and experience-wise for Josiah Moseley and Luke Bamgboye to get where we need to get, and we thought those guys would be key components to this team.

But Luke has missed a ton of time because of injury and Josiah didn't start practice until January 28th.

I love this roster and I think it's been constructed in a way that gives us the best chance to win. It's just I don't know if we'll have the time to reach our full potential because of lack of availability.

Q. Just seems like Christian is so surgical almost off screens for your team in these half-court sets. What is it that makes him so special working off screens?

GRANT McCASLAND: Well, one, you've got to start with his experience. His father, his family, they've really put him in, I think, as a young player some really tough environments where he's had to figure it out playing against bigger players and older players. That's one.

Then, two, I do think that our staff does a tremendous job of drilling the skill required, and he's already done this at the highest level. I had to face him, unfortunately. I've been an opponent. It's one thing if you're on the same sideline. He won gold on the U-18 Euros and he had signed with us, the Euro Cup, and I FaceTimed him right after they won gold, and he gets on, and he knew I was working with USA Basketball at the time, and he gets on FaceTime, and I'm like, Congrats. He's got like confetti in his hair and he's got a medal around his neck and I'm like, this is so awesome.

He's like, Coach, we're beating all next summer for the

worlds. I was like, hold on a second. We're going to be on the same team before that happens. So let's just be Red Raiders for now.

Man, his competitiveness and his ability to be in all these situations and learn to adapt with different rosters on that team from Germany, and then to play with us last year, he played off the ball predominantly, but I do think his development, playing with JT and playing with such good players and learning how to pass to them in different locations, the way he can pass to the weak side, the way he can make that third-level read, he can score it in every scenario, he's special, man, and he puts in the work, and he does not shy away from the work.

Whatever we've put in front of him, he's just inhaled it and believed it and worked at it, and he's done that all his life, and I think our staff has done a tremendous job of just enhancing that from what he's already built from his career.

Q. You talked about your experience with Coach Oats at the U-19s. Coaches are often borrowing from each other and learning from each other. Is there anything that you took from Coach Oats from that experience that you've tried to implement in your program?

GRANT McCASLAND: Well, I think you can look at a lot of things. Looking at the numbers and how they analyze the game from a numbers perspective. I really respect it. I know how they play, I see their pace, but one thing I got from being around him he doesn't shy away from conflict. That's awesome. I respect it. You know I've got problems.

So I'm telling you something that just -- I thought his approach and how competitive he is and how honest he is, but how he believes in people was real, and I really respected that about him. I mean, he didn't shy away from a tough conversation, but he did it with belief and he did it with a purpose that I think builds people up, and that's rare these days, to find someone that has that competitiveness but can get people to believe, and really a ton of respect for the way he has his teams playing as hard as they play and as together as they play with the talent that we have.

More than anything, he just didn't shy away from tough conversations with really good players when people are trying to be nice to people. I think he was obviously doing it in the right way, but competitively trying to help people get better, and I respect people that hold people accountable, and he does that at a really high level.

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