

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - UCF vs UCLA

Thursday, March 19, 2026
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA
Xfinity Mobile Arena

UCF Knights Coach Johnny Dawkins Themus Fulks John Bol Devan Cambridge

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: we are joined by University of Central Florida. they are the 10th seed in the east region. their sixth appearance in the NCAA Tournament. they earned their first ever at-large bid after finishing the season 21-11. their five previous appearances were after winning the Atlantic Sun Championship championship. they are looking for their second win in the NCAA Tournament. their first win came in 2019 defeating VCU in the first round.

we will open it up to questions for the student-athletes.

Q. I wanted to ask you guys, I know you have only been here one season at UCF, but what do you think playing in this tournament would do for this program long-term?

JOHN BOL: I think this program itself, to play in the Big 12, I feel like us being here right now is speaking volumes of the coaches during the recruiting process, who they're recruiting, the right people, the right pieces for us to be here right now.

DEVAN CAMBRIDGE: I would say it means a lot. in the gym, you don't see too many banners, especially championships. that's been a goal all year, to win a championship. we missed out on the regular season and Big 12. this is the last chance to go and do that. we have a group to do that. we have a bunch of hard-nosed dudes that's coming to prove themselves. like I said, we try to be 1-0 every game. we got six games to make that happen. yeah, it's going to mean a lot.



THEMUS FULKS: yeah, we understand how important this is, how big this is for the community. we're playing for something bigger than ourselves, legacy, everything. at the end of the day, we're blessed to be in this position, and we're going to try to take full advantage of it. we're not going to think too much in the future. we're trying to look back on this and say we had an amazing time. we know the banner is going to be risen in the gym and we can look back and talk about this forever.

Q. John, I wanted to ask you about the chest injury you had in the game against Arizona, what you experienced in Arizona.

JOHN BOL: I feel good.

Q. how long did it take to get back to full health?

JOHN BOL: I don't really know, but I just know I'm ready to go for tomorrow.

Q. Themus, you guys were not picked very high in the Big 12 this year, and a lot of people would say you overachieved or surprised people. what do you think came together that turned out to be such an outstanding season?

THEMUS FULKS: I feel like since we got this group together, we knew what we were capable of. we didn't really care what the outside noise with us saying. we just came in every day, put our work caps on and went after it. throughout the summer, we just continue to get better. throughout the preseason, we just continue to get better. we just continue to get better. and when conference play came, we brought it all together.

we're still upset we didn't finish it the right way the way we wanted to finish it, but we did enough to get us in this position and we just need to get in this position to show what type of team we are.

Q. is this the closest group you guys have been around your entire time playing basketball making the tournament and it's a special moment for UCF?

JOHN BOL: I want to say yes. we have been together



since summer like a lot of other teams, but we started from right there and then when we first met, but have basketball too. we all knew each other before we went to UCF, so we already had some sort of chemistry, but we just keep getting better throughout the season. the chemistry part of it, the bond, all of that kept getting better too.

DEVAN CAMBRIDGE: I would say yes. in a way we're brothers. my brothers, we fight sometimes. we storm a lot, but that's what builds that relationship. we just have a relationship that's indescribable. yeah, it's close-knit, and when you're with a group like that, you can do anything.

Q. Johnny played in Philadelphia back in the NBA days. have you talked to him about it and what he's able to do here?

DEVAN CAMBRIDGE: I wouldn't say deep in detail, but when I came on my visit to UCF, you see the office he has, he has some things hung up about his career, and we talked briefly, but nothing since we have been here or anything.

THEMUS FULKS: same (inaudible).

Q. for Devan and Themus. you guys have played in this tournament before. have any of the guys leaned on you or asked if it's about the moment itself as far as what to expect going into tomorrow and potentially the weekend?

THEMUS FULKS: I mean, when I first came to the tournament, it was maybe three years ago, and I was a sophomore, and I remember I had a lot of senior leaders on the team, and I just know during the game, I really looked at them to get me through certain situations during the game.

and I don't want to speak for Devan, but I know for me personally, since they did a great job of just leading me, I want to do the same thing. I'm in a position where I got to be able to lead. I got to be able to be the person to make sure everybody is calm in certain situations. nobody really came up to me personally and talked to me about the environment or anything, but I know it's more like actions. I have to do more just to make sure my guys are ready and we're ready to roll.

DEVAN CAMBRIDGE: to piggyback on what he said, nobody specifically, but knowing the stage and I have been here every year other than my first year with COVID and stuff like that, but like I said, it's a big stage. it's going to be more on the court in the moment where they look at you. if we're down or if there's a big-time moment, we can't let up, things like that, you have been here before, we're looking

at you to lead and being able to do that for the guys.

Q. for any of guys, what about UCLA impresses you? what do you have to be ready for tomorrow to play against them?

JOHN BOL: we have done our research, the program, what they've done, what they've been with but we're ready for them, regardless of the name on the jersey, we just go out there and be ready to play.

DEVAN CAMBRIDGE: I would say it's a historic program. I played them when I was in the PAC-12 Arizona State, and I think we lost both of those games, actually, but they have great culture, got the most championships ever all-time, NCAA. it's just a good basketball school, great coach and, yeah, I'm ready for that rematch game, yeah.

THE MODERATOR: other questions for the student-athletes? all right. thank you guys. appreciate it. good luck tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: all right. we are joined by UCF head coach, Johnny Dawkins. he led UCF to the second round in 2019 and Stanford to the Sweet 16 in 2014. Naismith Hall of Famer. played five seasons right here in Philadelphia, though not in this building. he actually led the Sixers to an Atlantic Division title.

JOHNNY DAWKINS: excited to be here, back in Philly. I love it here. no better fans in all of the country. it's an amazing supports place. looking forward to competing here and happy this team made this opportunity pretty special, the fact that we were able to run through that gauntlet of the Big 12 and have the opportunity to play if the post-season. I know our guys are very excited. we're very excited for the opportunity and what a great field. NCAA. I think it's amazing.

I think it's important for everyone to understand as a young player, I know I did and I'm sure our players as well, they dream of this moment throughout their lives. so to have this moment to be on this stage and to realize your dream is something special. just excited for our guys, proud staff whose done an amazing job.

Q. Johnny, you have been to NCAA Tournaments at different levels as a player, assistant coach, head coach. what makes this tournament so special? what makes being in this tournament so special?

JOHNNY DAWKINS: it's just a select group of teams. you're talking about 366 Division I teams, and you take it to 64 to 68 teams. that's a select group. It's very hard to get into that room. so that alone, the level of competition that's

required for you to even be in this tournament, is amazing. once you're in it, you're playing against some of the best players and coaches in all of college basketball. when you're in it, just the excitement of anything can happen. if you watched this tournament throughout its history, all dreams are possible. you watch a 1 seed lose to a 16 seed, you watch a 15 seed beat a 2 seed.

so you take this tournament and you realize, once you're in it, anyone can have success and you can make your dream come true. that's what I think has separated this from a lot of other supporting events. I don't think there's one better in the country than college basketball during the NCAA in March Madness.

Q. besides the conference, what feels different from your appearance in the NCAA Tournament from 2019 against 2026?

JOHNNY DAWKINS: a big difference is, of course, we're in a new conference. being in the Big 12 as opposed to the American, that's a huge change. people don't realize that's a monumental change, no different from going to the ASUN to the American. this university has gone through some amazing changes, all for the better as we continue to grow as a university, all of our brands have continued to grow as well. it's put us in some amazing places.

I think the best is still yet to come for our university and our athletic programs. it's just a process for us that we're going through building our culture, building our tradition, but it's all going to come, and I think you can see glimpses of it. we were in the American and took an at-large team and played in the NCAA Tournament, and now we're doing the same thing in the Big 12. our future is bright at UCF and we're very excited about what we think the possibilities are as a university, as well as athletic programs as well.

Q. Johnny, I asked your players this: relatively new group. you were not projected to finish very high in the Big 12 this year. what happened that you overachieved or surprised people or maybe just played to what you thought were this team's capabilities?

JOHNNY DAWKINS: well, first, I definitely thought we played to what our team's capabilities were. we believed in our team from the summer on. we felt we had a group that was capable of competing in our conference. then we didn't let the noise distract us. we didn't let the fact that people didn't pick us as a tournament team, didn't pick us high in our conference. we didn't let that distract us from our overall mission. I think a lot of times, you can hear those things and that becomes your reality. we didn't let the naysayers predict what we were going to do and that become our reality. we said, Hey, we believe in ourselves,

we believe in our team, and we're going to keep fighting. we took that approach and we never wavered.

we talked to our team a lot about in this room. we understand we're capable of doing certain things. let's not let anything outside distract us from our overall mission, and that's finishing as high as we could in our league and playing in the post-season..

Q. you mentioned Philadelphia. when you saw you were coming here, what goes through your mind just thinking about when you played here, and I guess, used to coach, you played Temple here a couple of times, your feeling of being life.

JOHNNY DAWKINS: I love Philly. I was here in my longest stint in the NBA. I was here for five years. I was very fortunate to play with some great, great players. of course, played with the great Charles Barkley, thinking about memories of winning the Eastern Conference, and going and playing in the semis. That was an amazing experience here. you always want to leave your legacy wherever you are. a banner should be up there for that team and what they were able to accomplish.

that's what you want to do wherever you are, leave your legacy. I thought we were able to do that. heresy Hawkins, my back court mate, I think about him and all the great moments we shared together. you think about Rick Mahorn, Scotty Brooks, God rest his soul, Derek Smith. all the players I played with that I have great and fond memories of, and all these good teams that we're part of. so you think about those things.

and then you think about Philly in itself, just like I said, how unique a sports town it is and how, when you drive through the city, you just feel it. they care. they care about their sports and they care about their programs, whether it's collegiate and professional.

so just always good memories about this place and being part of it and I was fortunate, like I said, to have five years here and experience it.

Q. (inaudible).

JOHNNY DAWKINS: never played in this building, unfortunately. it's a very nice arena, but I never played here. I'm dating myself talking about changing arenas and so forth. now you're making me feel old. (Laughter) you understand. but I know how they feel about their programs here, and that's what makes it such an incredible place to be a part of as a player or a coach.

Q. obviously, there's a million things to do whenever a

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team travels anywhere for an NCAA Tournament. do you have any time to take a players to have any sort of cultural experience while they're here? or is it all business? and also, I know there's a lot of the transfers on your team. there's a lot of transfers on every team now at a major level. some of them have probably played in an NCAA Tournament before, but what do you tell the guys who have not?

JOHNNY DAWKINS: you want to just educate the players on what to expect. you try to kind of tell them, hey, this is what you're going to face on a day like today. you try to walk them through it just to make sure they're not as distracted. the main thing, as you said as before, this is a business trip for those teams and you have to approach it that way. everyone wants to succeed. if you start getting distracted, I think that lessens your opportunity to be successful in a tournament like this where it's one-and-done. you want to make sure you're prepared.

if you have a day in between that you can get your team out of the hotel, I think that's a bad thing to get them out to show them something historical. I think that's always important because they're student-athletes and you want to continue to educate them, but you have to find that balance of what you want to do with your team with regards to preparing them for a business trip.

and if you have time to be able to maybe show them something historical, show them something that's pertinent that they can take from that city, that's something that most people may never have a chance to experience.

Q. Johnny, how does getting to the NCAA Tournament, how does that help this program long-term? I know it's a goal every year for you, but how does it, like in the big-picture wise, as you're building this program and continuing to build the program, how does help getting here add to that?

JOHNNY DAWKINS: I think it helps in a number of ways. one, I think it's great for our community to see what's possible. our program and university has been growing so fast that we have had a chance to establish a complete culture, establish a hundreds of years. that's going to happen for us. ours is going through the natural processes of that. and so for us, any time we can be on this type of stage, we can have this type of moment, it just shows our community, our student body, our fans what's possible and to continue to dream big. no one would have predicted us coming out of the American in '19. no one would have predicted us this year going into the NCAA Tournament. we know it's a function of continuing to do these things, continue to put our brand out there so our brand becomes more common so people will look at UCF and they go,

okay, we know more about them and Orlando and what they represent.

the more we do that, I think the better it is for our university, the better it is for our brand.

Q. coach, you were talking about adjusting to the Big 12. there were some growing pains in the first two years with the wins and losses, but what do you think stood out in year three prior to the other two seasons in the Big 12?

JOHNNY DAWKINS: well, I thought the biggest thing is the conference is incredible, top to bottom. every night. there's not a night that I have gone to compete in any of these teams where you feel oh, this is going to be a night that we feel we can get this game. no, you can go in every night thinking you're going to be 0-1 in the Big 12, but that helps you be better because you have to be prepared every single fight you step on the floor. it makes you better.

and then you need your team to understand as they're going through it, especially when your rosters are turning over as much as they are now, they haven't faced this level of competition on a nightly basis. they have to grow into understanding, no, every single night, it's going to be the exact same, who your opponent is. it's going to be a fight. it's going to come down to the end. you have to find a way to win.

I think our team was able to respond to that this year as opposed to other teams. we had moments that we showed flashes, but as the conference season starts to wear on you, it kind of can beat you down. I thought this team was able to be resilient and to fight through that and come out on the other side.

Q. talk about UCLA and what you face going against them and just what kind of game you're expecting.

JOHNNY HAWKINS: I expect a great game. Mick being does a great job with his team, of course. UCLA is a storied program of all of college basketball. what an amazing history they have had there. and, of course, Coach Cronin is a coach I have known from the American as well. how about that? we faced each other in the American on numerous occasions as well. great coach. I know his team is going to be really, really talented. they're very skilled and they're tough. that's usually their MO, and that was his MO in the American, and I'm sure that's his MO there at UCLA as well.

THE MODERATOR: all right, Coach. thanks very much and good luck tomorrow.

