

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Wright State vs Virginia

Friday, March 20, 2026

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

Xfinity Mobile Arena

Virginia Cavaliers

Coach Ryan Odom

Jacari White

Malik Thomas

Sam Lewis

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are now joined by Virginia head coach Ryan Odom, Malik Thomas, Sam Lewis and Jacari White.

Coach, we'll start with an opening statement.

RYAN ODOM: Can't say enough good things about Wright State. They played lights out. They gave us everything that we could handle throughout the game. It was an excellent and well-played game, a real competitive game. They played a little bit differently than we were expecting going into the game and how we prepared. They did a nice job on picking on our big guys a little bit in terms of popping and shooting some threes, but our guys did a nice job throughout the game of adjusting, and just hanging in there. And that's what you've got to do in this tournament. It's not going to be perfect. It's not meant to be perfect.

Other teams, all of the teams in this tournament have prepared at a high level and been in tight situations throughout the season, Virginia included in that. Just really proud of the way that our guys fought throughout the game. Certainly, the second half was key for us, locking in on defense and really contesting and making things as hard as we could possibly make them.

We get up 67-61, and they go on a run, 68-67 and we were reeling a little bit. I thought our guys did a nice job in that moment of rallying and finding a way to focus on what the task at hand was. We were in a possession ballgame at that point, and our guys did a great job finding Jacari certainly, but then getting key stops when we needed

them.

Q. This one for Jacari. I overheard on the broadcast they talked about your long road to get to Virginia. When you have a performance in a game like this and a big one, what does it mean to you when you reflect on that journey a little bit?

JACARI WHITE: It feels good knowing that I can have a performance like that and help us win a game. It's a lot of our first time being here, and I know, for it being my last year, I didn't want for it to end so early. I love this group of guys that I'm with right now.

Q. This question is for Malik. Yesterday, we talked about this team coming together to end Virginia's last couple of losses in the NCAA Tournament. Now that you guys were able to get this win, what does this do for the locker room? Does it feel like you have something a little bit off your chest or something?

MALIK THOMAS: Yeah, for sure. I think the first game is always the hardest, especially Wright State, credit to them. They did a great job executing. Their game plan was amazing. As a team, we were a little bit nervous. Like Jacari said, it's our first time being here. So I think after we got our jitters out and we started to play our basketball and come together, we were able to string some shots together and hit some big shots.

Q. Jacari, for you, the point about the big shots down the stretch, you hit quite a few of them. What do you think got that ball going and tipped the game in your?

JACARI WHITE: Yeah, I think our defense really helped our offense a lot, getting stops. We were able to get out in transition. We were able to put them in a scramble. It's hard for them to close out for everyone, and we made the right passes. I think that really helped us a lot.

Q. Jacari, late in the second half, you got the ball out, extended left elbow for a three. You were double-teamed, and all of a sudden both defenders backed away from you. You kind of looked around like -- what was your reaction when they both left you open to shoot it?

JACARI WHITE: I guess I was just as surprised as you were. (Laughter) I made them pay for it. Bad miscommunication by them. I just made them pay for it and hit the shot.

Q. Malik, you guys had 14 turnovers today. They cost you some specific moments in this game. What did the Wright State defense show you?

MALIK THOMAS: Yeah, 14 turnovers, uncharacteristic for us. Like I said earlier, just nerves and getting adjusted to the new ball and the facility and the bright lights and all that. I think after that we settled in, we did a great job of taking care of the ball and learning how to get our offense going.

Credit to their 22, Burch. He did a great job disrupting our point guards and us guards in general. I know I got to do a better job taking care of the ball, and, yeah.

Q. Sam Lewis, the front court defense, especially the two rim protectors, Onyenso and Grunloh, he, late in the game, especially Johann getting the one where he basically took it off -- what were you trying to do in that situation? It looked like you were trying to funnel the ball to the baseline when they had the drive.

SAM LEWIS: I can't really think about what play you were talking about, but, yeah, Johann was great, trying to play our best perimeter defense. We send it to those guys, we know they got our back.

THE MODERATOR: All right, we appreciate it. You can go back to the locker room.

Questions for Coach Odom?

Q. Hey, Coach, as someone who has been on the other side of a really big upset, do you feel like your experience in that helped you maintain the composure of the group today?

RYAN ODOM: I don't know about that. I think when you get to this level, you get to this tournament, all these teams belong here. Wright State has had a great season. They got off to a hot start. You saw it. One of the benefits for us was watching yesterday and not playing on Thursday. You got a chance to see some other teams and how momentum can really shift. I think the biggest thing that I'm proud of with these guys is they stay together and they trust their training. They understood that defensively, we weren't at our best in the first half. We weren't -- we were on our heels too much and we weren't forcing them into harder shots. They were too comfortable.

We encouraged the guys at halftime, we have to go for it on defense. We have to make them miss and we have to force hard shots. We'll be able to clean those rebounds up if we do that. It did play out that way. Certainly, there were tense moments back and forth, but really proud of the way the guys stood up on the defensive end.

Q. Coach, every time you guys seem like you were making a run in the second half, 6-0 run, 7-0 run, Wright State would come back and hit a three or respond in some way. How does a coach -- what do you tell your players in those moments when they might get a little discouraged and you're trying to prevent Wright state from making another response again?

RYAN ODOM: Yeah, one of the things we do, we talk about our pillars. We talked about our pillars after halftime and what pillar is being represented right now in the situation that we're in? The guys immediately came back with passion. It's not meant to be easy. It's meant to be hard. And you have to fight for something that you want. You have to go for it in these moments.

I think that's just what our guys did. We have to put things in their proper perspective in the time-outs. They have to take a deep breath, relax and play and trust their training and trust their teammates. If you try to overplay, more mistakes will happen, and I think our guys just really settled into the game, and we've played a lot of games at this point, and they settled into the game and just figured a way and found a way to win this particular one.

Q. Obviously, it's been a few years since Virginia has won a game in the tournament and even your ties here. Did you feel the pressure more than maybe you should have?

RYAN ODOM: We never talked about it. We only talk about what this team wants to accomplish. We had no thought about the history other than being proud of the history of Virginia basketball. We do talk about that without question and we showed them one shining moment two days ago from the 2019 National Championship and the guys got a since of, okay, I'm wearing that jersey. This is pretty cool! And today we showed them one shining moment of all of them playing over the course of the season.

So it wasn't an actual tournament game. Now we actually have some footage, but it was all these guys. Billy Bales put it together for our guys this morning. I wanted them to see themselves over the course of the season having tremendous joy, both on and off the court. This is the culmination of the season. We're all at the end here.

We're all trying to extend it as long as we possibly can.

The more you focus internally on the guys that you're with and trying to play for the guy beside you, the better chance you have of staying in the tournament. You're going to face hard challenges throughout and we certainly faced our fair share today.

At the end of the day, these guys just did their job and enjoyed the moment.

Q. Wright State took its last lead on those technical free throws at 5:32 to go, but that might have also given you a moment to bring your guys together, maybe have a word, and I'm curious as to whether you did and whether, through that or not, what you thought finally turned things in those last -- after that, in your favor?

RYAN ODOM: The play before I think I was trying to call a time-out. I didn't get it, and that's going to happen. It's pretty loud in there and the players didn't hear me at that point. Sometimes these pauses can reset you and you're able to just communicate, look one another in the eye and begin to figure out the plan of how we're going to get it done.

The key for us is not complicated. We had to get stops. We had to keep the pressure on defensively. We couldn't watch the guys shoot threes. A couple of times, we watched guys shoot and they made us pay. That's not something we have done all season. I think our guys did a nice job of showing the proper poise that was needed to be able to come out victorious.

Q. So, back to that technical foul. You went on an 11-0 run after that technical foul. We see in basketball where technical fouls can motivate teams. Do you feel like that technical foul motivated you guys?

RYAN ODOM: No. I think Sam was disappointed that he did it. They were pressuring us and they were on a run at that point. So not the reaction that he should have had or that any of us wanted. We don't want to give away points. Thankfully, it didn't hurt us in a key situation.

Technical fouls can go both ways. Sometimes there is a motivation there that can happen, crowds, coaches getting irritated, whatever it is. Maybe that's more what you're talking about, but you want your players to have the poise to be able to deal with any situation, and certainly, they've been coached to do that, and they're a good basketball team.

Burch is an excellent -- he's number one in the country at

stealing the ball per possession of any kid in the country. That's what he does. You can show guys film over and over again, but you have to live it. Our guys experienced it, certainly, today, and fortunately, we were able to come out on top.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach, appreciate it.

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