

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

Friday, March 20, 2026

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

Xfinity Mobile Arena

UCF Knights

Coach Johnny Dawkins

Jordan Burks

Riley Kugel

Media Conference

UCLA 75, UCF 71

THE MODERATOR: All right, Coach, give us an opening statement, and then we'll take questions for the student-athletes.

JOHNNY DAWKINS: It was a great game as it is in March. The games are going to be challenging. UCLA is very talented, a well-coached team. I thought they did a good job in the first half of establishing their tempo, and we had to respond. I thought we did respond as the game went on. As we settled in, we started taking care of the ball more and that allowed us to get more of a rhythm offensively for ourselves.

But hats off to UCLA. They played a really good basketball game. They were deserving of winning. I thought our guys did a really good job of fighting and putting ourselves in a position to come back, but at the end of the day, they made the plays they needed to make, and that's what March Madness is about. We have to learn from this going forward.

Q. What do you want this team to be remembered for?

RILEY KUGEL: A team that battled through ups and downs, that persevered through no matter what critics and media said. Preseason polls, just 13 individuals that came together who kind of have one goal. We came up short, but still to come this far. We came far. So just to be able to buy in and lock into what the coach is telling us all year and staying together. I think we got to respect it.

JORDAN BURKS: Piggybacking off what he said. We're



competitors. I wouldn't say we were underdogs here. We just came up short. I felt like we had a good group, and we made a platform for the years to come to show them what it takes and what we need to do more, so...

Q. Hey, Jordan, you've taken a pretty big leap this year, especially on the scoring front from last season. I wanted to ask you about your development and what UCF and being under Coach Dawkins has really helped you with.

JORDAN BURKS: The whole staff, Coach Dawkins, they pour into you off the court, on the court, it doesn't really matter. They molded me into a nice young man. I feel like they gave me a chance, and I just took the opportunity and capitalized as much as I possibly could.

My teammates helped me with my confidence, just everything. The program and the coaching staff is terrific. I'm blessed. Thankful, for sure.

Q. Riley and Jordan, talk about the fan support tonight. The fans were amazing.

JORDAN BURKS: Yeah, Coach brought that to our attention in the locker room just a couple minutes ago. They seen how hard we were fighting and they got into the game and they were so enthused. We just came up short. The fans have been amazing the whole year. I'm thankful for them.

RILEY KUGEL: Yeah, like he said, there was a time the whole gym was rocking. Just to bring that joy and that excitement to the stadium, the arena, it meant a lot to us. It definitely boosted us, and we fed off their energy.

Q. Johnny, I wanted to ask about the first half, 88 turnovers. Defensively, what was UCLA doing to kind of create some havoc, and how did you adjust to it as the night wore on?

JOHNNY DAWKINS: That was a good word "havoc." They did. They disrupted some of the things we wanted to do offensively. They were very active. They got a lot of deflections, and that led them in the first half, 11 turnovers. I think they had 14 points scored off our turnovers in the first half. That's a huge number. They definitely



contributed to the deficit we had at halftime, so we just wanted to settle in the second half and take care of the ball a little better, which I thought we did and that helped.

But they did set a really good tone in the first half with turning us over and getting out and getting easy baskets in transition.

Q. For Jordan and Riley, you guys are both pretty pure shooters. You guys have had struggles as a team from the three-point line over the last few games. What was it about today that all of a sudden made you guys -- things started to click a little bit?

JORDAN BURKS: Honestly, like Coach Dawkins always tells us, shoot with confidence. Like, we work on it every day. Some nights, it's going to go in; some nights, it's not. Whatever the defense gives you, take it. He said that the whole year.

RILEY KUGEL: Yeah, we're a three-point shooting team. It's hard to stop us when we're making our shots, but people have been asking the same question over the last few games, but we have the same response. It doesn't really matter. We're going to come in the next game and we might hit ten threes. It's a confidence thing, and we weren't really too worried about it knowing we had another game to play.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much, appreciate your time. We're going to stick with Coach for the rest.

Q. Can you talk about what this whole week has been like knowing that you used to play for the Philadelphia 76ers, having this game tonight here in Philadelphia?

JOHNNY DAWKINS: Just amazing memories. When I come to Philly, it's always fondness for me. I love the city and what it represents. You come in here and have a chance to compete again, although not playing anymore, but with my team, it was special. I don't know how many times you have a moment like that where you get a chance to come back to a city you've enjoyed for so long and have a chance, to come in and compete in NCAA Tournament.

It's a memory I will always have. I wish we had a different outcome. Unfortunately, we didn't, but I'm proud of my guys. I think the city would be proud of them. That's what this city is about. It's about toughness, how hard you work. Until the last second, they were fighting until the very end. That's what they've done all season long. That's why I have loved coaching them the entire season because of their mindset, their approach to the game and how hard they compete.

Q. Johnny, I asked the players about this, but what do you think this team will be known for after this season?

JOHNNY DAWKINS: I want this team to be known for -- I think they left their legacy, obviously. You take a team to a NCAA Tournament, you left your legacy. They're a team that will have left a foundation for what we want to build on. They left a foundation for what we want to grow our program from this point on. I think for the players that will return, you never know in our world. I can't say that with assurance anymore, but that I have experienced this now, and they understood what it took along this journey to put us in this position.

With that type of experience, you want to just -- the foundation is being laid right now for our program, which those guys will always be known for that. When you think of the foundation being laid for us in the Big 12, you will think of guys like Themus Fulks, Jamichael Stillwell, Devan Cambridge, Riley Kugel, our seniors, George. George Beale, all of our guys who were upper classmen who were instrumental in doing this. We couldn't do this without those guys and their maturity on a daily basis to help us get better.

Q. You were mentioning there's no guarantee about the roster returning and all that, but as a coach, how do you use a loss in the NCAA Tournament for motivation for next season?

JOHNNY DAWKINS: Well, as we just said. It's a tough -- it's a bitter feeling. Obviously, the spring and the summer, there are things you're going to reflect on the season, you're going to look back on the NCAA Tournament, and you're going to look back, okay, what could we have done better? How can we continue to improve? How can we move the program forward? Those are things we're going to study as a staff, and with the personnel that we have as we try to move forward.

But, you know, it's motivation. These guys are competitors. The guys we have had in that locker room this year are competitors and they're motivated by a lot of things. They were motivated by things they mentioned earlier, you know, no one believed, but we believed in ourselves. That's all it took, our guys believing and our staff believing. That's the approach we're going to take. The foundation is laid.

How do we move forward? How do we improve? How do we move forward together is what we're going to try to do.

Q. Terry mentioned he's spoken to your representation. What does your future look like going



into the last year of the contract? How much do you want to get that out of the way and settled during the off season?

JOHNNY DAWKINS: You guys know I love UCF. I have been here for over a decade. Of course, I don't handle those things. All I was thinking about was winning this game here today. So I haven't had a chance to think about anything other than that I love UCF and I love Orlando. The community has been great to me my entire time there. I have nothing but fondness for the area.

We'll see what happens, but the bottom line is, I'm still getting over a tough game, a hard-fought loss that we just had and those things will take care of themselves, I'm sure.

Q. A lot of the talk surrounding you being in this building is about your time at Philly, but I want to turn it back to your time in D.C. and a brotherhood that you share with another coach also in March Madness, Kenneth Blakeney. I want to know for you, how much does your background and upbringing translate to the type of team and fight that you had tonight and the success that you've seen from how you've come up?

JOHNNY DAWKINS: Definitely. I do think your team is a reflection of your coach. The lessons that we teach, the way we go about our business, whether it's practice on or off the court, as Jordan mentioned, are things we're trying to establish, whether it's high character, whether it's toughness, competitiveness. I think we have to set the tone for that and our players follow our lead. I think our staff has done an amazing job of that as well.

I have a great staff, as Jordan mentioned earlier. I think we have been really connected. I think the connection that we have had as a staff and information that we have poured into our young people, they have been taking that and they've done a good job of going out and executing the things that we want to do, whether it's our system offensively, whether it's a certain mindset we have to have as a team. I think our guys have done a great job of following our lead.

Q. You talked about building this team and with so many transfers, how difficult was that process? And did they exceed your expectations? Because clearly, they exceeded the media's projections in the preseason. You were not picked very high in the Big 12 at all.

JOHNNY DAWKINS: No, they didn't exceed my expectations, to be quite frank. They alluded to it subtly, but they knew what our goals were, and they didn't achieve them, but along the way, we did some beautiful things.

Achieve the ultimate goal? We did do that, but we achieved some things along the way, like getting that large bid, the first team in UCF history to -- since we finished the Big 12, play in the post-season, to play in March Madness. Those are things that we achieved on the way as we were trying to fulfill our goals that we had in front of us.

So just really happy for our guys in that regard. But, no, my expectations were higher for our team than I think most people's were.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach Dawkins. Congratulations on a good season.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports...

