

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Furman vs UConn

Saturday, March 21, 2026
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA
Xfinity Mobile Arena

Furman Paladins
Coach Bob Richey
Alex Wilkins
Charles Johnston
Tom House
Media Conference



UConn 82, Furman 71

BOB RICHEY: First of all, a lot of credit to UConn. I thought, obviously, a really, really good team, a well-coached team, and somebody that I personally watched a lot of film on over the years, and I've taken a lot away from Coach Hurley. I have a lot of respect for those guys and their program. Really proud of our fight tonight. The obvious thing is, we didn't do what we needed to do on the backboard. They had a guy get 27 rebounds and he's a little bit bigger than our guys, but I thought our guys fought and we were not able to do much on the glass.

They had plus 10 second-chance points, and we basically lose the game by ten. What an effort by our guys to continue to stay in the fight. These three to my right and the rest of the guys in the locker room, to play in front of 19,000 people and to have some things, I thought our guys continued to fight back.

We have had an unbelievable year that we put our best together when our best was required, and I'm going to really miss this group. I think it's a special group of people and I thought there for a little while, 70-65, and I think we had the ball and I thought if we could have gotten a score there, that we would have really made the game interesting.

But, once again, you have to give UConn a lot of credit. They got some key offensive rebounds and that put the game over the edge for them.

Q. For any of you guys, for the experience of coming here and having all your fans and then all of the rest of the crowd kind of backing you, did you get to feel the magic of March even though you came up short?

ALEX WILKINS: Yes. Obviously, everybody dreams of this as a kid. Walking around the arena yesterday for the shoot around was amazing. We didn't come here just for the experience. I feel like we showed that. We came here to work hard and try to get a win. As a team, that was our goal and we went out there and competed pretty hard. Feel like we didn't get the right outcome, but it was a good experience. We went out there to compete.

CHARLES JOHNSTON: Yeah, the sport has been incredible all year, and to see that many Furman fans come out to Philly and fill up that section of purple and take a second and look around and take it in, it's a really special kind of moment that you will remember forever.

Obviously, wanted to win, but, you know, it's still a very special moment that holds a place forever, especially with all these guys on this team.

TOM HOUSE: Yeah, I would say it was pretty amazing. We knew that if we could get it to the last ten minutes and it was close, we knew that people would start to rally behind us, so we were kind of feeding off that. We just appreciate the support of our fans specifically, but it was awesome.

Q. Tom, a lot of people have talked about how you guys have overcome all the injuries. You have overcome some other stuff. You personally had a tough start to your year and it's your senior year. How much did that turmoil that you had to deal with early on personally make you stronger enough to go out here and start in March Madness? What was the journey like for you and obviously, you came up short tonight, but you had 21 points here tonight. To go from where you were early this season to this part of the season, can you tell me more about that?

TOM HOUSE: Yeah, had a ton of adversity, not only this year, but throughout my year. It's made me a better man, a better player. Everything is either going to break you or it's going to make you. So I'm appreciative for the



struggles, and I'm appreciative for the opportunity to go out there and put my best foot forward. You have to just love every opportunity and it will help you get to a better place.

Q. This one is for Alex. Alex Karaban was just in here talking about being from Massachusetts and how you have the same trainer. This a night where both of you guys take the floor and show out, what does it mean for you coming up that way and seeing someone who has had a career like that and you being able to match him essentially shot for shot almost tonight?

ALEX WILKINS: A lot of respect for him. Obviously, growing up watching UConn. I said, yes, I wasn't a fan, but I'm a fan of UConn. Just watching those games and seeing Coach Hurley's offense is amazing. Massachusetts has a lot of hoopsters that kind of go under the radar. We have a bunch of guys in college basketball this year. It was great to see him out there and yeah.

Q. The first half, you had three and chest bumping you guys. What's going through your mind right then and there? Did you feel like it gave you the umph to keep it going in the second half?

CHARLES JOHNSTON: Yeah, that was a fun for sure. Obviously, was 14 seconds left, I think, and they had the ball out of bounds, and we were in the huddle just saying, you know, I have to hit a rebound here. Got to stop, get a rebound, finish this half off strong and, yeah, we got a stop.

Ben dribbles up and I don't remember too much else. I saw the single digits on the shot clock, so I was like why not? I think that's my first transition three I shot this season. Yeah, it was fun to get to throw the wings up one last time. That was fun and, yeah, to go into halftime with that was good for momentum, but, yeah. Fun times.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, guys appreciate it. Head back to the locker room.

Questions for Coach?

Q. Coach, congratulations on a great year. No matter what team the Southern Conference sends to the NCAA Tournament, it makes life hell on opponents in the first round consistently. What allows and has allowed the Southern Conference to be a league no matter what representative goes to the NCAA Tournament, it's a tough match-up. You can go back to Steph Curry and Davidson and Wade way before that. How does that league help to produce coaches like yourself and many others who go on to bigger conference schools?

BOB RICHEY: Well, first of all, I think I've always felt like our league was undervalued, and I think if you look at -- you mentioned Davidson and Bob McKillop that did, I think in 33 years, he went to the NCAA Tournament ten times and had that magical run with Steph Curry, and what Charleston did in this league for years. And really if you look at our league right now, we have ten teams in our league, and in the last 15 years, you have seen transformational experiences with the basketball programs, whether it be what we've done coming here to the last four years and getting a win three years ago, or you saw what Samford did a couple years ago, having a chance to beat Kansas.

And then you saw Wofford, what was that, eight or nine years ago, come in here and beat Seaton Hall and play Kentucky close with Mike Young's teams. You've seen Chattanooga in here, had a shot to tie or beat Illinois eight years ago. I'm leaving out a few, but Wes Miller brought two teams here from Greensboro. And ETSU, what Steve Forbes has done.

There's been so much continuity of program and coaching and commitment in our league. Unfortunately, this thing is all metric driven now. As long as subscription-based metrics are running college basketball, it's going to be hard for leagues at our level. Our league winner, ETSU in the regular season, went down 30 points in the metrics and won our regular season. That makes no sense. It literally doesn't make any sense.

So what's happening is these leagues are getting penalized. We come here as a 15 seed, we banged up to heck. Nobody knows that, nobody cares about that. Big boys would know about that, but I don't think that looked like a 15 seed tonight out there playing. It's unfortunate. This is the setup that it is right now, and we start out the year 1-3 and everybody is like what's going on? We had to play who would agree to play us. So you're playing High Point on neutral, which no one wanted to play them, so we did. You go up to northern Iowa, and we're starting a freshman point guard. You're playing northern Iowa and they're in the tournament. And then you play Troy and then you play Queens. That's our first Division I games but if you lose them, you're penalized.

Mid-majors should play mid-majors, but if you lose to them, look at what happens in the rankings. If you win, you don't move a lot either. So you're like, what do you do, right? You go in these situations where our league has continued to show continuity and unbelievable parody, especially a lot of these programs committed to basketball.

You just wish at the end of the day, I'm hoping that we're all worried that like last year was, oh, man, the mid-majors

didn't really show up. I think this year, it's been a little bit different. There's been much more competitive games and High Point got the win yesterday and Wright State played a heck of a game today. We played a heck of a game today. I'm sure I'm missing a few right now but the magic of this tournament was because you think of the March Madness moments, like, don't count us out. Don't change what makes this tournament special, but there's going to have to be some understanding of how good some of these leagues are and not just put them in situations where they can't put themselves in competitive situations metrically.

Q. Dan Hurley was just in here talking about how much respect he has for you, your guys' offensive scheme and culture. You were talking about how much respect you have for him and what he's done. How much does that mean to you to here that from a coach like him?

BOB RICHEY: I told him before, the game I have a ton of respect for him. He's won so much, sometimes it's easy, people like to poke at winners, but he's as good as it gets from a basketball standpoint. I don't care how many wins we get, I'm always going to find a way to get better. I fell in love with watch his teams play, and I think he and I share in our desire to see multiple actions in a possession and not just standing around watching one guy get a ball screen or play isolations. I think forcing people to guard multiple layers of concepts. They had 22 assists tonight on 32 shots. We had 14 assists tonight on 21 shots. We're both assist percentages of convincing good players to move the ball and play through good concepts.

That's what makes the game beautiful in my opinion. I thought there was some beautiful offense on both sides of it. And, look, I don't mind. Some of the actions we ran tonight I stole straight from him. It's funny how that works. We were playing in the quarter finals, and a team that Lenny Acuff and I have watched each other for years, I have taken a ton from him. They scored on a play twice that they take from us. We call it Connecticut and we were running it for House tonight.

It's one of those things where I'm always going to pick a few programs out each year that I'm going to watch and they're complete. They defend you and then they stretch you offensively, and I'm always looking for those coaches to look to see if I can get a little bit better every single year. He's somebody I have always respected and look forward to potentially catching up with him in the offseason.

Q. Coach, the team motto, it's better together. Tell me how these seniors this year have brought that motto to life.

BOB RICHEY: I don't know if I have ever been more proud of a group. What our group did three years ago was incredibly special. They came back out with a mission to do that. They got their soul taken out from them in a buzzer beater situation in a conference championship, and won a tournament game and beat Virginia and made it to the second round.

But you're talking about two fifth-year guys. One that's playing in the NBA right now, and one in Mike Bothwell, a three-time all-league player in a little bit of an older team and it was incredible. I will remember it for the rest of my life.

I think this team changed. This team grew and you think about the life lessons that you try to get through sport, we use the word adversity a lot in sport. It's not real adversity but it's created adversity. It's adversity in their particular life, in their particular craft so they can see how to deal with that so they can draw back on these experience.

This group had every excuse to just let the season drift away and they chose to change. It's one of those things we always talk about. Nothing changes unless something changes. I think it's easy right now in today's time, we're as quick with our thumbs as ever, and we can blame somebody else with a heartbeat. We have been better at it as a country, as a world, it's somebody else's fault. It's out of our control. We can't do anything about it and you go, oh, shucks and you just try to do it again and don't take any responsibility for it.

I think when adversity hits you, you can try to face it. And if we do change, can we utilize this and leverage this into something we couldn't have been without it. That's what this group did. We had three freshmen out there in our top nine. 33% of our roster is freshman. We had every injury you could imagine this year. Those guys pulled that all together and had a hard loss at home versus ETSU, and we had a tough day the next day.

But Tom House, I remember he was in my office with the three seniors, 7:00 at night on a Thursday night before we went up to Wofford, and it was one of those conversations that this is going to define us. It's going to destroy us or it's going to develop us. We won five of six to get here and, man, I'm sure we had the basketball world watching when we cut it to five there at the end.

All of these guys, I think from Ben VanderWal, the sacrifice he made. He's been to two tournaments. He's won over 90 games here. He goes to the bench. You think about Chuck Johnston and how he grew from last year to this year. Tom House, you asked him the growth he brought. That's what you're looking for in this. Can you see real

growth in people that they can take these experiences and take them to the rest of their life and in that, can you continue to see that in your program? I think watching how they played in the conference tournament, I told them tonight they're going to draw off this the rest of your life. I have never been more proud of a team.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach. Congrats on a great season.

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