

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - UCLA vs UConn

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

UCLA Bruins
Coach Mick Cronin
Sky Clark
Trent Perry
Xavier Booker

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We have Xavier, Trent, and Skyy.

Q. Skyy, I just want to see how you're doing. Heard that you were headed to the dentist last night. Want to see how that went, oh, great.

SKYY CLARK: I'm all good now. So shout out Dr. Goldfine. He got me right. Took me in at like 12:00 at night. Thank you to him.

Q. So you're diving for a loose ball, and you catch an inadvertent elbow to the face. When did you realize you had lost part of that tooth?

SKYY CLARK: I felt it instantly. I kind of like put my tongue where my tooth was, and I felt nothing there and I was like, yeah, it's gone, so.

Q. And so your teammate Jack Seidler was nice enough to help you out there? Did you get that part of it put back on or was it a new thing?

SKYY CLARK: I just threw that piece away. He said there was no saving the tooth. He just put a temporary on, and after a few weeks, I get to get a new one.

Q. Trent and Xavier, what does it say about Skyy that he lost a tooth, stayed out there and helped you guys finish out that game?

TRENT PERRY: He's a dog. I feel like a lot of people, he doesn't really get hurt. The only time he gets hurt is when



he pulled his hamstring. At the end of the day, he's a dog. He'll do everything for us to win.

SKYY CLARK: Thanks, bro.

TRENT PERRY: Of course, man.

XAVIER BOOKER: Yeah, what Trent said. Diving on the floor, that's who Skyy is every day, so.

Q. For Skyy, one thing I noticed under Coach Cronin is that you guys seem like you have a lot of freedom to go out there and hoop in those types of games. What does that freedom mean to someone like you who is able to handle the ball like that, and does it enhance the game you can play out there?

SKYY CLARK: It definitely means a lot. I'm sure it means a lot for, and the Book, too. He just trusts his guys to go out there and do what they can do what they can do, and show what they can do, and it just allows us to play confident.

Q. If you go back to your 18-year-old self, if you knew at 18 what you know now, given your journey, would you make any changes?

SKYY CLARK: Yeah, I don't think I would make any changes. I feel like everything that I have been through and all the decisions that I've made help me become the person that I am today. So, yeah, I don't think I would make any different decisions for sure.

Q. My second question is this: Can you imagine a world where you couldn't transfer? In other words, you couldn't -- where you were, where you start is where you are. It would be very difficult to make the moves you need to make to get where you are. Could you imagine that world?

SKYY CLARK: Yeah, I definitely could. That world was the reality. I got a lot of trust in God, and I got an amazing circle around me. I'm sure things will always work out no matter what.

Q. Xavier, a big game last night. What do you like about his game when you watch him on film?

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XAVIER BOOKER: I got a chance to play against him my freshman year. He's a talented big at the post. He's huge down there for sure. Ultimately, we have to rebound together, play strong together. Communicate, do whatever it takes to win.

Q. Skyy, just to clarify, you went somewhere last night or they came to you?

SKYY CLARK: I went to Dr. Goldfine's office. I got there at 11:30.

Q. You were numbed out, you didn't feel anything?

SKYY CLARK: He shot me up with anesthesia. He had to take the nerve out, take the root out, shave my tooth down to a nub, put in a new one, and it was like new.

Q. How does it feel right now?

SKYY CLARK: It feels normal right now, so I don't have any complaints.

Q. I don't know that it would change the way you play. Obviously, it was an inadvertent -- (inaudible) tomorrow, mouth guard or anything like that?

SKYY CLARK: No, I'm getting a mouth guard tonight, so I'll still go out there and play hard.

Q. You're not going to wear a mouth guard?

SKYY CLARK: I am, yeah, yes, sir.

Q. Xavier, when you found out last night that Tyler wasn't going to play, what's going through your mind when you're getting ready to play and realizing you're going to have a larger role?

XAVIER BOOKER: It's just like any other game. I just guard. Going into the game, knowing the scouting report and just trusting my teammates, trusting the coaches to help me out. But ultimately, just knowing myself and trusting myself and just going out, playing, not over thinking anything, just going out, playing.

Q. And once the game starts, it's normal.

XAVIER BOOKER: Yep, for sure. Yep.

Q. For all three of you, we all know Coach Cronin is really intense on the sideline. Tell us about him in practice, behind the scenes, things that as fans or people watch the game wouldn't know about him.

SKYY CLARK: Yeah, what you see is what you get. Cronin is the same person every day. He's different a super fiery coach. He just expects a lot from his players and holds us accountable. That's helped us a lot, helping me personally grow a lot in a lot of areas and, yeah.

TRENT PERRY: Just going off what Skyy said. Coach Cronin wants us to be intentional in what we do and have enthusiasm and have intensity. Just not on the basketball court. He tries to teach us life lessons within basketball. Just very grateful for his teachings throughout my career.

XAVIER BOOKER: Yeah, I would say he definitely always tries to push you past your limits, especially me coming in as a new guy. He kind of pushes us past our limits, especially limits we don't know we can get to.

So he holds us to a higher expectation and he expects a lot out of us. I'm grateful for him. He's intense, like they said, but I felt like he just wants the best for us, and he's not telling us things just to yell at us. It's for us, for our career and what's best for the team, too.

Q. In your previous game, 9 blocks, 13 steals, is that intensity on defense something you have had all year? I haven't seen a lot of you games. UConn is going to play it tomorrow. How does that fit in? That's some big numbers.

SKYY CLARK: Yeah, that's what we have been trying to do all year. I think the last few games of the regular season is when we really locked in on that and started playing like that Mick Cronin style of defense. We've just been sticking with it. It's working so why change it?

TRENT PERRY: If you asked me that question two months ago, we were nowhere where we needed to be defensive wise. He kind of joked around with us, saying we were his worst defensive team. So that lit a fight in us to withhold those expectations. We know we can do it. We have done it especially these past couple of games.

XAVIER BOOKER: Yeah, just going off what he said, especially coming from the beginning of the year, looking at the beginning of the year up until now, we have come a long way defensively. Just got to keep it going.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions for the student-athletes? Fellas, you are excused.

We have Coach Cronin here. Make an opening statement and we'll get to questions.

MICK CRONIN: You sounded serious about the cell

phone. Got an FBI look to you. I like it.

Obviously, happy to get the win. I feel like I'm back in the American conference. UCF and UConn.

Q. Couple of things for you: First, just talking to Coach Sabino, he knows the Hurleys very well. How well do you know this UConn coaching staff?

MICK CRONIN: Danny, I have gotten to know Bob through Dan. Dan coached at St. Benedict's when I got the Cincinnati job. He was great to me, helped me get a really good player that played for him, Rashad Bishop, that was like a four year starter for him. Lives in Vegas. Great guy. Love him. With some other guys as well. And his Bengals fandom. I don't know if you know this, huge Bengals fan. So, yeah, I know Dan extremely well.

But Kamani Young is one of my best friends in the world, basketball or no basketball, their associate coach. I know a lot of guys on their staff because we're so close, know those guys so well.

Q. Over the years, it's no secret that you and Coach Hurley have kind of caught heat from the media about the sideline --

MICK CRONIN: What are you talking about? (Laughter) Are you giving me heat?

Q. National media.

MICK CRONIN: I respect you come to the games. At least you're there. People that aren't there...

Q. I know you don't care about it, but do you think it's fair that you have --

MICK CRONIN: It's ridiculous. Everybody needs to get a life, bro. Get a life, man. Come on, man. Get a life, bro. You want to win big? But you think Coach Hurley is not supposed to be intense, but you want to win? Come on, man. We're not coaching little league, buddy. Everybody doesn't get an at-bat. Come on, man. Paying us a lot of money to win games.

Q. Coach, for you, you and Dan both, the sons of high school basketball coaches, Are there any characteristics you both have growing up in the competition business?

MICK CRONIN: I think it's a huge advantage growing up the way we grew up in the gym, which you don't realize until you go into coaching. Everybody else has got to learn things that you learn through osmosis, like how to attack an

odd-numbered front zone with an even-numbered front? It just does. If Dan and I would have went into something else, we would have had no idea what the hell we were doing.

So osmosis is the whole 10,000-hour theory. We had it by eighth grade probably. It's not just your dad. It's his friends are coaches. Everything revolves around that. You really don't know how advanced you are at it. I didn't until my first year. I was 19. I was a freshman coach at Woodward High School. I didn't know until I started coaching that I knew all that.

You're a kid, you think everybody knows everything about basketball. But everybody's dad is not Cronin or Bob Hurley, Sr. You're a kid, you think everybody knows what to do in late-game situations or how to run a practice, or how to teach these things. You realize everybody doesn't. Everybody doesn't have those dads.

Q. Is there a favorite piece of advice from your father, whether that's back to your high school days that you carried with you up until now?

MICK CRONIN: Yeah, my first year, we lost in the city title as a freshman and I was distraught. He said, I got bad news for you. It's not going to be the last big game you lose. Did the kids learn? Did you have -- did the kids get better? Did you enjoy it? That's what you -- you need to be happy. That is a fight. It's a fight for all of us because you're so competitive, that you have to step back.

And in the words of Mike Bray who called me, we were in a tough stretch this year, you have nothing to prove, man. You already won by being where you're at. But it's tough because in the moment, the competitive spirit that you see out of Dan and myself is why we are where we are.

Good to see you, long time, Don. Your fans still love me?

Q. Absolutely.

MICK CRONIN: I can't wait to see them.

Q. Another thing that you and Dan have in common is you both --

MICK CRONIN: Hair? (Laughter).

Q. Well, yeah, you both know what it's like to sit in the chairs of programs that have these illustrious histories.

MICK CRONIN: Well, you got Coach Calhoun. Is he here, by the way?

Q. No, he's not. Have you guys talked much about what you've learned about taking on that kind of responsibility, having that history on your shoulders.

MICK CRONIN: Yeah, we haven't talked about that. It's different, right, in Coach Calhoun was still around. He did have an office when Dan first got the job. We did talk about that, Coach Calhoun did have an office. For me, Coach Wooden had passed.

At UCLA, it's still there, but I read one of Coach Wooden's books. I read them all, but one of them said it shouldn't be a problem, only one guy, the guy that followed him. For everybody else, they didn't follow me. If they're worried about that, they're worrying about the wrong things. When I read that quote from him, it kind of helped. He became so philosophical after he retired. One of the best of all time, right?

But the standard is real. The standard is real. I think it's not for the faint of heart. But I wanted it. I left a place that I loved, my alma mater, for the chance to sit in a seat at UCLA. So it's been everything I've dreamt it would be. Our recruiting advantages of weather, campus, tradition, Pauley Pavilion. We have an unbelievable practice facility all went out the window when it came pay-for-play, but you have to keep fighting on.

Q. Trent mentioned that at one point a couple weeks ago you told them this was the worst defensive team you have had.

MICK CRONIN: Yeah, well metrically it was. If you look at KenPom, at that point, they were the worst defensive team in my 23 years. That's changed.

Q. What have they done to change that in the last few weeks?

MICK CRONIN: We pushed a lot of buttons schematically, some things. But generally, our care factor has been much better. Defense and rebounding are more effort than anything else. But we have done some things schematically that have helped us, that are going to be put to the test tomorrow night, I can promise you that. They got some really good players that can shoot the ball and Reed's a big problem for us down low. This is well-documented on the west coast by the guys that cover us.

I would tell anybody listening... you got to challenge your guys. You guys want to win? I challenge them. Why is Nebraska fifth in the nation in defense when Fred Hoyberg, his son, Sam, is 5'11", former walk-on is their best

defender? Because he plays so hard. That's what it's all about --

Q. Being out west, coming Midwest, Big Ten basketball, your home record was great, road record not so much but that's the way it is. What are the difficulties of managing that travel, coming east so often and playing in this conference?

MICK CRONIN: We're used to it. This is our sixth trip. What I would tell you is the teams are the problem, not the travel. Our women's team is undefeated. They have never lost a game traveling in the Big Ten. I think their only loss was USC last year. They have better players than everybody else, and Coach Close has done an unbelievable job.

Ohio State was the problem this year. Michigan is the problem. Those guys, it's just a much deeper, better league. Not that the PAC-12 was a layup, but it's not the travel, it's the teams. And the coaches.

Q. You have had some crazy games against UConn. Great battles over the years. I wonder what it will be like playing them tomorrow night.

MICK CRONIN: Playing UConn? Tarris Reed is good. I was going to say I'm glad Hasheem Thabeet is not walking out there. A lot of years in the same league. A lot of games with UConn. A lot of respect for them. I would have liked a chance to play them in the Elite Eight full strength in '23 when we had two NBA picks go down in March.

So, you know, I tell Kamani he owes me for that one because he and Dan both got a raise for that title. No, they have done an unbelievable job. I think this year might be the best coaching job to have the record they have. What they did in a nonleague was amazing.

Q. Can I just ask 0.8 seconds still not enough time to get a shot off?

MICK CRONIN: No shot. No chance that was good. At the end of the day, it didn't matter. Conference tournaments are to line people's pockets.

Q. How did Tyler look today, coach?

MICK CRONIN: We did a glorified walkthrough, Make sure Dan's awake. I know he was up late last night. I heard the press conference was at 1:00 a.m. Don, you stayed up for that. It was really at 1:00 a.m.? At least we play at 8:00-something and not 10:00-something. We'll see how he does tomorrow. Our main prep for tomorrow night will

be tomorrow over at Penn. Get Coach McCaffery, he's probably on vacation, get him out there to help me out. I got to see him moving with confidence. I got to watch him and make sure he's not doubting his stability and his health on his knee.

At the end of the day, I got to do whatever I think is right for him. So we'll see how he looks tomorrow. That's what happened yesterday. He looked great on Thursday but did not on Friday. I had to scratch Sovereignty from the breeder's cup classic.

Q. How you doing?

MICK CRONIN: I know who you are. Wow. Good to see you.

Q. You mentioned a few minutes ago how everything, all the amenities UCLA all that went out the window with NIL.

MICK CRONIN: Oh, yeah, and academics. That's out the window, too.

Q. That's a whole 'nother story.

MICK CRONIN: Yeah, sadly.

Q. How long has it taken you -- a lot of young coaches grew up in this, it's natural. How long has it taken you to turn the corner in terms of accepting it and deciding whether it's good or bad?

MICK CRONIN: Yeah, that's a great question. You either change with the times or they change you out for somebody else. At UCLA, I was the only one to embrace NIL at the beginning. Only one. It's been a yearly fight to continue to raise money. We've gotten a little better every year. I was immediately on it. I think it's irrelevant -- when you're in the middle of something, whether you like it or not, is irrelevant. I always tell people who complain about their job, why don't you quit or get another job? I'm not a believer in it is what it is. Yes, about travel, yeah, we're not moving anywhere in the Big Ten, it is what it is. If I don't like it, I need to quit.

The portal is what it is. I think our president's a little busy, but I think he's going to try to get involved. There's so many pieces. I'm of the opinion that you can't try to fix and patchwork the old system in the today. We got to just blow the whole thing up and figure out what works today. We're holding onto rules from a long time ago and trying to work it into today because it all happened and nobody was prepared.

The NCAA stuck their head in the sand for so long. I actually had the PAC-12 former commissioner reprimand or tried to reprimand me. Called my president at UCLA when I said in the New York Times way before NIL happened, pay-for-play is coming. He called and said your coach doesn't need to say that. He wanted to keep it down, don't pay the players. That's why it's such a mess. But we need some sort of a system. We keep trying to fix the old system to fit the new way of life that's been brought in by the courts. I think you just got to start over. You got to start over. Somehow we got to start over. The patchwork stuff we're doing, I know everybody's trying. It doesn't work in business.

If you look at anything else, it does not work. We got to start over and figure out how to have rules for this day and this era somehow. It's not going back. To your question, it's not going back. It's not. They keep trying to regulate NIL. The Nebraska guys are in the lawsuit now. I think they're football players. It's not going to stop. We got to figure.

Q. Freedom of movement...

MICK CRONIN: Again, the reason unlimited transfer came in is because of court rulings and the NCAA. That's when they put the one-time in to appease what they knew was coming, losing that lawsuit to the athletes that filed that. So then when they started the file, saying we want to be able to do more than once, they just said okay, you can do whatever you want. We can't lose more lawsuits. We just agreed to pay \$4 billion. I think it's 10 million a year, that the power schools are paying to that settlement, to the Austins, 10 million for each school for 10 years or something like that. We can't lose anymore lawsuits, so they said just transfer whenever you want.

That's why it's in. So can we get some sort of way that the government will allow us to have a set of rules? Right now, people knock the NCAA, but they go out of business. It's the schools can't lose anymore money or it's all over. It's Armageddon. They can't fade it.

The worst thing about this is the Olympic sports. At UCLA, we have won 120-something national championships. You got Jackie Joyner-Kersey. You got so many people on our campus, our women's softball is one. I'm one of the few guys who hasn't won a title. Like, Kelly's won in softball. Adam's won in women's water polo. Margurite just left, she won in women's soccer. That's what they were talking about at that summit. Eventually, there's going to be no money for those sports. Eventually, that's coming. Everyone is in debt, and they have to take the money from somewhere, and that's what's coming. You're going to end up having to cancel a bunch of sports, and that's sad.

We got to get it fixed not for us, to save college athletics as they were talking about. It's a feeder system for Olympics. It's free training for Olympics.

I just think the only way to fix stuff is to start over. We got to quit trying to come up with the NIL go and all these regulations. I just don't see it all working. All right, guys.

Q. I'm not sure I can follow that, but I'm going to try. In the process of pushing buttons and trying to get your guys going, are there little signs that you see over the course of a few weeks that, hey, it's starting to work? Just keep going and pretty soon the dam will break?

MICK CRONIN: Yeah, well, obviously, performance would be the main one. Focus and scouting reports, focus in walkthroughs. I think that's what you're trying to get some -- the number one was our effort defensively against Nebraska. We held them to 52. Last night, our effort was great. They hit some wild shots late, man. We would have had them in the 60s easy. 27 in the first half. So results, but, yeah, effort and focus from your guys.

Look, Ray Lewis said this a long time ago in football. The film don't lie. The film don't lie. The film shows effort and it shows lack of effort. I see more effort on film.

Q. So Sam Hoiberg should get an assist?

MICK CRONIN: 100%. I told Fred and I told Sam. I know Sam can play golf, so he comes out to do whatever in the offseason. I take him out. He can beat me, but, yeah. I vote him defensive player of the year. I have never seen a guy hustle like him disrupt a team at 5'11" like he could, and that's all effort. Showing our guys their film was humbling for our guys.

THE MODERATOR: All right, Coach, appreciate you taking the time.

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