

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - UAB vs San Diego State

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Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena

UAB Blazers

Eric Gaines

Yaxel Lendeborg

Andy Kennedy

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're excited to get started and very pleased to welcome UAB student-athletes Yaxel Lendeborg and Eric Gaines to the stage.

Yaxel was the AAC Tournament MLP, and Eric is the team's second leading scorer. We'll go ahead and open it up to questions for Yaxel and Eric.

Q. If both of you could answer this, it would be great. Describe what Coach Kennedy is like.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: Well, Coach AK is a very tough coach. He tells you what you want to hear, and he speaks from experience because he's a players' coach, so he relates to us.

Sometimes in game he sees things that you don't see, so it's very helpful. A real role model, dad type figure kind of guy. Really appreciate having him here.

ERIC GAINES: I'm going to piggy-back off what Yax said. He's a hard coach. He's outgoing. He's going to tell you what you want to know. Love him to death. He put me in the position made me be great, and I love him for that.

Q. For both of you guys, at one point in this season, you all were 4-5, had lost three straight. I'm interested, you obviously rattled off all of these wins to get to this point. What was the conversation in the locker room at that point in the season, and what has led to this turn being here in Spokane?

ERIC GAINES: Around that time, we were still getting to know each other. We were new. In the locker room, we



were just telling each other just like let's stay together. We're not going to be in the hole, this ditch forever. It's going to come to light.

We got it rolling, we got to knowing each other, and we started winning. Got that little streak, and I can't explain it. We were a new group. It was just hard coming back and seeing the progress from the beginning of the time I came. Then as we started playing, started rolling, no doubt in the team. We started winning.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: I would say we had multiple talks in the locker room, some with no change. Eventually, once you get that first three-game win streak, now you start feeling really good about yourself. We started trusting our teammates more than we did before and started clicking more.

Our defense really lacked all year, but eventually we started helping each other out more on defense, which helped with more chemistry and just believing in ourselves. That's what led to the wins.

Q. For both of you guys -- and Yax, you just touched on something about chemistry. On any given night, it could be any player that scores. Eric could be the leading scorer. A.J. could be the leading scorer. Yax, you've been the leading scorer. What is it about this team and what about the chemistry that makes it so special, especially getting ready for the postseason here?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: We have a lot of threats on defense, like you named. A.J., he really carried us to our championship win last game. Daniel, he's been struggling all season, but he stepped up big in the playoffs much.

I feel like just trying not to lose the motivation you have and always find a reason why you're playing. Coach AK believes in all us guys the same way no matter how he shows it. I would just say keep the trust we have. And Eric doing his best to find those guys in the right spots. So just making the best of our time.

ERIC GAINES: As he said, just as a point guard, finding



my teammates, giving them confidence, seeing them make a shot, letting it go in. That's it.

Q. (No microphone.)

ERIC GAINES: I wish we were closer, but it's a great experience for the whole Alabama state, seeing a team that made it to the tournament and may be playing one of those teams. So it's a great experience.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: I would say it's awesome too. I'm a big Twitter guy. I always see those Alabama fans coming together to cheer one another on. I just hope those fans that are here early for the other teams can cheer us on as well and we can do the same for them.

Q. I'll direct this to you, Yaxel. I know you've talked throughout the season about what it's meant to you to be a part of this team and for you to be here. To have UAB and this group especially on this stage, how special is this moment, and how are you all feeling heading into it and representing your school and you as a group?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: This moment is really big. This is a dream come true of mine. Before I signed to UAB, I told the fans that hopefully we can get a ring, and I'll try my best to get it for them. I succeeded in that aspect, I would say.

Playing here is really amazing. I never thought I would get as close to a coaching staff as I would. Cross really stepped up his recruitment with me, and we got really close together. But everybody else on the staff did a great job of making me feel welcome and keeping me sane, I guess.

Q. For Yaxel and Eric, both obviously, you all pride yourselves on a defensive lot, even though it hasn't been the best defensive year, but you've really kicked it up in the past couple weeks. What's been the secret or the juice to run the defenses that Andy asks you to, switching a lot and go from 1-3-1 to man-to-man. What goes into that ability to be able to switch so much?

ERIC GAINES: Just being physical. We switch up defenses a lot to confuse the opponent. I feel like when we do that and we're being aggressive in it, it's effective. I think that's just the key, being aggressive and being physical, more tough than the other team.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: Another big part would be communication. Nothing really works unless you're talking to your other guys and helping them see their blind spots and figuring out where to go next.

Q. Eric, you mentioned how far away you guys are

from Alabama. How are you kind of playing this one for the fans that couldn't make it? How motivating is it? How important is that for your fan base?

ERIC GAINES: It's important because I don't feel they could make it all the way over here. First, to be that many hours away and they're watching on TV, I feel like we have to go harder because we don't have no fan support here besides maybe our cheerleaders and probably our band. So just got to go hard for them.

Q. (No microphone.)

ERIC GAINES: I watched the game last year against FAU. They lost a couple guys, but they still have the same group. They're physical. They remind us of a North Texas type defense. We've just got to be tough. I feel like that's the key to victory, just being tough and being able to score on offense. We're not really worried about defense. Our defense is going to show.

But offense, I feel like we're going to struggle a little bit. So we've just got to be tough and just finish plays, execute the plays. That's it.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: Yeah, I watched the tournament run last year. I liked how they were a really well connected group. They played off each other really well. You can see that they had belief and trusting each other.

I would say our biggest point here, like he said, would be to score offensively because they have a great defensive group. And just contain LeDee, if I said his name right, and just make the most of what we can do.

Q. You mentioned defense. You played some good defenses. San Diego State has a good defense. They're one of the top ten in the country. What is it about their defense, and what adjustments do you feel you need to make?

ERIC GAINES: They're tough. They're connected. They do the most fundamental on D. They X out a lot. They switch. We've just got to be physical. Like I said, we have to execute our plays that AK calls that he sees, and it's got to work. We've just got to execute and play tough and finish at the rim.

When our shooters are open, we've just got to be hands and feet ready, knock down the shot.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: One thing they do is close the gaps off really well. They don't really give you a driving angle. I would say we've got to be really tough with the ball and avoid countering as much as we can, like AK was telling



us, and that will be the biggest part of our success.

THE MODERATOR: We welcome UAB Coach Andy Kennedy. We'll ask for Coach to give a quick overview, and then we'll open it up to questions.

ANDY KENNEDY: Thank you. Excited to be here. It's my first trip to Spokane. Hope we get to stay a few days. I'm actually friends with Mark Few. We go back decades. Dan Monson, the guy that really helped get this thing started, was actually a grad assistant at UAB when I was a player there. So that's how far back I go with the guys that are the pioneers behind this dynasty.

I'm excited to be here. Excited for my team, who have certainly earned their way -- I don't like the term bid stealing. We didn't steal anything. We earned our way here through the play of our guys. So really excited for them and for the opportunity this tournament presents.

Q. You've seen coaching from both sides of it, mid-major, high major. The tournament expansion talks, where do you stand on how many teams there should be and how the access should be?

ANDY KENNEDY: I'm definitely for expansion. I've got some crazy ideas. I think we should do away with conference tournaments. I think we should award the automatic to the regular season champ because I know a lot of it is timing. Timing is the essence of life.

A lot of folks say we don't want to expand the tournament because we have to finish at the appropriate time before those flowers start blooming at Augusta National. So they say we're going to run out of time. We're not going to run out of time if we move it back a week.

If we added a week to the NCAA Tournament and you based it off of -- I'm an analytics guy. Shout out to KenPom. If you based it off KenPom rankings of your conference -- for instance, I think we were the 9th rated conference maybe via KenPom this year, meaning the American Athletic.

With that, if you finished in the top ten, you were going to get, okay, if you finished in the top four of the regular season, then you're going to get a bid to the NCAA Tournament. If you're the Number 1 conference, the Big 12, I don't even know how many they have in there now. But if you're the Number 1 league, you get ten teams in the NCAA Tournament, so forth and so on.

Everyone says, oh, I don't want to do that, it's going to water it down. I bet you'll watch. I bet you'll pay to watch. I bet TV will pay to watch. I bet it'll solve a lot of our

problems. I don't know what that number is, but I'm definitely for expansion.

Q. Two questions. Number one, how easy is it to get over the jet lag for this long trip when you're coming to play in March Madness? And number two, I asked the guys earlier, on any given night, you have any player that can step up for you. How good is it to have this type of depth going into the tournament?

ANDY KENNEDY: Actually, in our last five games, we've had five different leading scorers. We've been on both sides of this the last two years. We had a kid named Jelly Walker. Two years ago, he stole the attention of a lot of people in this field of college basketball by the incredible run he had in the Conference USA Tournament, leading us to a tournament championship, allowing us to get back to the NCAA Tournament.

Everybody, myself included, knew that when a big shot was going to be taken, it was going to be taken by him. Whether I wanted it to be or not, he was going to take that shot.

This year it comes from different guys. We're a team that, quite frankly, is mediocre in a lot of areas, but we're really good at attacking the paint, getting to the free-throw line, eating off our offensive glass and trying to put pressure on your defense by constantly attacking.

The two guys that were here prior, Eric Gaines and Yaxel Lendeborg, are both guys we'll run a lot of offense too. Alejandro Vasquez, in our championship quest in beating Temple last Sunday, scored 29 points, the most ever in a conference tournament game in UAB history, and that's a very storied history.

So we've got a number of different guys that can rise up at any given time. I would certainly like all of them to show up tomorrow.

Q. Two questions for you, Andy. Number one, this is a team that's struggled a little bit with 1-3-1 at times this season. Just what's going to be kind of, I guess, the secret to kind of implementing that at times as much as you change defenses?

And number two, what goes into guarding a guy like Jaedon LeDee, a guy that's been named All-American?

ANDY KENNEDY: Second part first. Jaedon LeDee is tremendous. We're going to try to make him work for his touches, shrink the floor as much as possible, and try to match his physicality. Again, easy to say, hard to do. He's a tremendous player. I think San Diego State does a great



job of making sure that he touches it each and every possession down the floor.

He puts a lot of pressure on you at the basket. He's good at what we're good at, quite frankly. He's good off the offensive glass, good in the painted area, and he gets a lot of fouls drawn. So we're going to have to be really strategic in our match-ups and understanding where the help needs to come from, number one.

Number two, we're going to do what we do. There's a number of teams in the Mountain West -- I'm a basketball Jones. Where we are in the central time zone, we always get that late TV slot where it's Mountain West versus conference play, and I watch it. I like to watch it. I know a lot of the guys in the league. I've known Dutch for over three decades. I've had a lot of relationships in the league. So I like to watch them.

I've seen San Diego State a handful of times. They played for the National Championship last year so it doesn't get much better than that. The job that they've been able to do there is really remarkable.

It's going to be a tremendous challenge for us, but we're just going to do what we do. We've said since June, when we got this group together and we lost 85 percent of our production off last year's group that won 29 games, we had to figure out what this group's identity was. And ultimately, we just want them to be the best version of self. That won't change tomorrow despite the bright lights.

We'll mix and match and try to see what works.

Q. A question for you is you said a question ago, an answer ago, you said mediocre in a lot of areas. I'm interested -- this was a team that was 4-5 at one point in the season that lost three straight, and you've made it to this point.

What is it about this group that's gotten you all here to this point, and what is it you think will keep you here for this weekend?

ANDY KENNEDY: Thank you for making that point. I was trying to block that out. You just cost me some therapy hours.

(Laughter).

ANDY KENNEDY: We were 4-5, and we had lost -- as you said, we lost three straight, two by double figures. We had no identity. We had a lot of questions, very few answers.

To this group's credit, I'm really proud of this group. I

guess any coach that's sitting up here in the NCAA Tournament is going to talk about how proud they are of their group, but I'm really -- I feel gratified. I feel like this group has accomplished so much.

Ultimately as the coach, you want your team to reach its potential. You don't know what that is, and I never have gotten into we have to reach a certain number in order to be successful. Ultimately, you want to always try to compete for your conference championship, which we did during the regular season. Then we were able to walk up that ladder with a pair of scissors in your hand. As a child, you're told not to do that. We've all been told that. But as an adult, it sure is fun.

To capture that and to get this program back to the NCAA Tournament for the second time in three years, I feel like this team is close to being everything that it's capable of being, and that's the ultimate goal for a coach.

This group never takes credit. They continue to work. We talked about stacking work, man. Stack work, stack work. Then in March, when you stand on that stack, you're going to like your view if you continue to stack. This group continued to stack. We started having some tangible results. I think the gain was we came back and beat a couple of people.

Then right before Christmas, we had Drake Bulldogs coming to town. They were a little like us. We'd won some games. They'd won some games in the previous three years. Actually, we're two of the top ten winningest teams, Drake and us, over the last four years. We're like eighth, and they're like fourth or fifth in most wins. So it's difficult for us to get games.

So we had a conversation, and we did a home and home with Drake. They come to the Bartow, the get-out game right before Christmas, and we beat them in overtime.

When we came back from that, and we had a couple at UNC Asheville, who was right at the top of their league, and then we started league play, we started stacking some wins. With that came tangible results that, hey, we starting to figure out our formula.

Then you have to be disciplined enough to stay to that formula. We don't play a real sexy formula. It's not lot of fun to grind out wins, but our guys got committed to that.

Then we started having a real trust. This group trusts each other. I want them to trust me, but I would much rather them trust each other. I think they really trust each other. And as a result, we made a little run. We've won five straight. I hope we can extend that tomorrow.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Q. You talked about the Spokane connection earlier on. I'm wondering, with three Alabama schools here in one site, how unique is that to share that experience with the other two schools and all to be here at one site?

ANDY KENNEDY: Bananas, isn't it? I think we should invest in a map maybe and put it in that room in Indianapolis. Those big wall maps, you can get them pretty cheap. If you just look up there and take a glance, it's bananas. For us, I don't care. We're just excited to be playing.

Think about this. We played the late slot for the AAC conference tournament championship. I think it was a 2:15 tip. By the time I got all the confetti out of my hair and we were able to get that trophy and we were able to get up that ladder with the scissors that I referred to earlier, then there were some media obligations that come on.

We still haven't left the arena so they whisked me up to this room. I had literally walked in the room -- I hadn't been in the room 30 seconds before I saw our name pop up. As soon as it popped up, I immediately got my group out of there and we got back and tried to get home. I had no idea Alabama and Auburn were in the same region until we got back and the dust had settled. And then to have the opportunity as being in the same bracket as one of those.

So it's just kind of crazy the way things work. I can speak for myself. I don't really care about a lot of things. I'm just glad we're in the tournament.

Q. One, you played against San Diego State as a player and had a good game. What do you remember about that game? Secondly, you mentioned your relationship with Mark Few. What did he tell you about San Diego State, particularly in light of this year?

ANDY KENNEDY: You said big game. I'm having a hard time remembering. Do you remember who the leading scorer in that game was?

Q. You.

ANDY KENNEDY: Excuse me. Give him that mic back. I didn't hear. I'm kidding. It was a long time ago.

I think Jim Brandenburg, I don't want to butcher their name. Am I saying that right? I think he was the head coach here, and Coach Bartow had a home in Palm Desert. So he was close with Brandenburg. We came out here -- we came to San Diego. What's the nice hotel, the Del Coronado, or something like that? We came out and

played in their tournament back in the day when you did those things, just a little tournament. Came out and played in San Diego State's tournament, and they returned the game the next year. I think it's the only time UAB has ever played San Diego State.

Anyway, I don't remember much about the game other than I was the leading scorer. I remember those things.

I didn't talk to Few about San Diego State. I talked to him about, hey, man, I need a place to practice. He said get in line. He kind of busted my balls. I called him on like Tuesday. He said, well, the staffs that were organized were calling me on Sunday. I was like, bro, you had no idea. I was getting through TSA precheck.

I didn't talk to him about San Diego State. I don't -- the tape tells me all I need to know. I've watched them play a lot. I was in the back. I heard my guys. They're right, at least they're regurgitating the messaging I'm giving them. We've got to be really, really tough. We have got to embrace the physical battle, and then we have got to be strong and resilient and all of the things, quite frankly, that we haven't been over the last ten days.

I just hope we have enough gas in the tank to continue that mission.

Q. You've been doing this for a long time, and I'm sure a week like this is a lot of fun. But with all the changes that have happened between the portal and NIL and other aspects of the game, is the job still fun? If it feels like some of that is being lost, how do you get some of that fun back?

ANDY KENNEDY: You know what, I run hard in every endeavor. I run hard in my job. I run hard in the fun area. I try to find joy in the journey regardless of what the journey may look like. And this group has brought me some joy. It's not easy.

When you look at me tomorrow, I'm not going to look like a very joyful person. I may project it differently than you may envision. It won't be quite like this. I feel like I've got this aura on me right now. I've got the lights. I'm sure it's a great optic out there.

But tomorrow I won't look very joyful, but I am. I'm proud of this group. I'm going to try to drive them as hard as I can drive them and help them as much as I can help them.

To your point, things have changed, man. I don't sit around and put a lot of time in thinking about things that I can't control. I try to avoid frustration as much as possible because I think it's a useless emotion. And adapt or die.

So we've got to adapt.

There's a lot of things I think are good. There's a lot of things that I think are bananas. But I'm going to just try to do the best I can in my position at UAB to get this program to places like this as often as possible.

Q. Coach, wanted to ask you real quick, you mentioned a lot of players earlier, and we talked about the depth. Could you just talk about the importance in what Chris Coleman has meant to this team.

ANDY KENNEDY: Man, I love Chris Coleman. What a story. I'm sure you guys are somewhat familiar with his story, graduated from high school, Waynesboro, Louisiana. I think he was 6'1", 160. Had no opportunity, so what did he do? Went and got a job.

Everybody, we've all had jobs we reflect back on. Hey, I worked here. Hey, I worked there. He worked for two years at Walmart and then grew. And actually was the driver for a teammate of his to get a tryout at an NAIA school. He was the only guy that had a car. He took him down there and got in the game, and the rest is history. They ended up giving him a scholarship, and he was Freshman of the Year, and then one thing led to another.

And him and Yax, especially, Alejandro. Eric Gaines was here with LSU obviously -- I don't think he made it to this room. He was back there in the back. I don't think he got to the dais, so a different role for him.

Our guys are approaching this honestly. There's a seriousness about it. We don't want this to be the ultimate goal. We want to try to extend this thing as much as possible.

But I also want them to appreciate what they have earned. My guys honestly are kind of approaching this with a Christmas Eve-like naivete that you don't see a lot in this sport. They're excited to be here. I know they'll play excited. I just want us to play good because we're going to have to play good because San Diego State is really good.

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