

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Charleston vs Alabama

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena

**Charleston Cougars**

**Pat Kelsey**

**Kobe Rodgers**

**Bryce Butler**

**Reyne Smith**

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the Charleston student-athletes.

**Q. Kobe and Bryce, is this completely different than the D II tournament or when you walk out into this kind of arena, is it like, holy smokes, or is it a pretty similar feeling?**

KOBE RODGERS: I think it's really different, actually. We got to treat it like it's another basketball game, but at the same time, there was a lot less media, a lot less cameras, a lot less March Madness kind of feel to it. But I'm excited. This is kind of where I've always wanted to get to and now that I'm here it feels like a great accomplishment.

BRYCE BUTLER: Yeah, obviously Division I, Division II, there's a difference. Like Kobe mentioned, the attention and when March rolls around this is what everyone's talking about. This is the reason me and Kobe came to Charleston and the belief that we had in PK and the opportunity that he gave us and that's why we are here.

**Q. Bryce, when Pat was telling you what your role was going to be coming into the season, has that been pretty much what you thought it was going to be, what he said it was going to be, and then how did that role for you evolve?**

BRYCE BUTLER: I just really came in here willing to do whatever it took to win, and whatever PK needed me to do, that's what I was going to be willing to do. From day one, you know, I understood what my role was going to be and



just be the best leader I can and do whatever I can to help the team win.

**Q. Reyne, what was it like to see your family and how did that whole trip happen?**

REYNE SMITH: It was awesome having 'em here. I knew Mum was making her way over, but my aunty and uncle were a surprise, which was awesome to see them. I haven't seen them for maybe four or five years. So great seeing them again. Having my mum in the stands is always nice. It's kind of going to give it a little home feeling, kind of -- a good chance that I'll probably hear her in the crowd too. So it's just great having 'em here and, yeah, just lucky to be here.

**Q. What is March Madness like in Australia?**

REYNE SMITH: It's big. It's talked about. You watch it in class and everything like that. There's sports fans, it's on ESPN at home, so it's the reason why I wanted to come over to the U.S. and play college basketball, and just kind of having that come true has been awesome.

**Q. Kobe, just talk about Bryce as a teammate and as a player and then kind of how y'all's friendship has evolved over the year in being roommates and everything like that.**

KOBE RODGERS: I would say he's probably one of the best teammates I've ever had. Coming in as a senior leader like he is, it's easy to kind of follow his lead and take guidance from him, especially learning from him from the National Championship game from just last year, seeing the heart that he played with and determination. Luckily, I was on the winning side of that, but that's something that we can always look back on, we can always talk on throughout practice, and even in the house because we're housemates.

**Q. For Bryce, Alabama, what do you see on them on tape and how much -- I mean, are they elevated from a CAA opponent or is it pretty much watching like a CAA opponent?**



BRYCE BUTLER: Yeah, obviously Alabama is a really good basketball team. We're preparing the same way. Not necessarily focusing on what we're watching, but focusing on how we prepare and how we go our daily business and everything that we've done has been the same as it's been all season.

**Q. Reyne, last year to this year, just the differences on the team and then what kind of -- I don't know if leadership is the right word, but what do you take and kind of give to everybody else? Like, hey, this is March Madness, this is the NCAA tournament. I don't know if you shared that with your teammates or not at all?**

REYNE SMITH: I spoke to Kobe a little bit about kind of the March Madness feeling. You want to try and treat it like another game and stuff, but it's hard to. You see March Madness branding everywhere and it's just, like, you kind of are in awe a little bit, where you're super excited, so it's not really another game in that sense, but I think everyone's excited. And then kind of returning to this stage, it's taking a bit of responsibility and kind of leading the group and kind of telling guys what to expect in it.

**Q. I think we had talked on a Zoom quickly about your new tatoos this year and how many there are. Any of them basketball-related and will there be any March Madness-related ones if a win happens here?**

REYNE SMITH: Yeah, I got one basketball one in a part of my forearm and I think maybe when my college career is over, there might be some March Madness somewhere on me. I don't really know yet, but probably a good chance.

**Q. Are you guys a little bit more calm, the guys who have been here last year, than you were last year, or is there a more sense of calmness for you guys going into this game as opposed to last year?**

REYNE SMITH: Yeah, to a certain degree. I still feel those kind of same nerves and excitement as last year in that sense, but also a calmness of, like, you've been here before, and I think that's what we got to try and kind of get to with all the other guys that maybe haven't been on this stage yet. So it's still definitely the same feeling of excitement and everything like that.

**Q. I know that the trip from Charleston was long to Spokane, but do you have to adjust to the time changes?**

BRYCE BUTLER: I would say definitely, yeah, you do. But we got pros in our organization on jet lag and a lot of guys from Australia, so we got a lot of experience here with

that and some good information that we can use to help ourselves out there.

REYNE SMITH: Yeah, so Coach Michael Cassidy, one of the Australian assistants, he gave us his expertise on jet lag, so we've been kind of going under his guide on how to get adjusted to this three-hour time difference.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. We'll have Coach up in just a few minutes.

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: We will take an opening statement from Coach and then we'll open it up to questions.

PAT KELSEY: Just feel very, very fortunate and blessed to be representing our institution in the national tournament in an amazing part of the country. I've been to Spokane before. We came out when I was at Xavier and played Gonzaga. Gosh, I just think of the passion that this city has for basketball. I found out since I've been here that the nickname that -- not only they have for themselves, but I guess nationally, is Hoop City USA. Understandable.

So we're just blessed to be here. My family's going up in the mountains and seeing this beautiful part of the country, and these passionate basketball fans in this area, if you're listening to this or if you get this on social media or stuff, hey, we can use as many fans as we can, so come out and cheer for the Cougars. It will help us a little bit.

But just really excited to have the opportunity to play. Alabama is a phenomenal team. Nate Oats, I believe, is one of the best coaches in the country. Over the last couple years, you've had some retirement of the icons of our game, like Coach K and Roy Williams and Jim Boheim, I'm probably missing some, I'm sure I am, and kind of that -- the new era, I would say Nate is right there. He's unbelievably respected in the coaching fraternity, he's a phenomenal coach, very, very difficult to prepare for. They're unbelievably talented. We obviously have our hands full, but we're excited about the challenge.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

**Q. What has Bryce Butler brought to the team this year and has he done anything or have you seen anything from him that maybe you didn't know about that -- for positive-wise for the team and the team building?**

PAT KELSEY: I mean, I hope a guy like Bryce Butler knocks on my door or asks my daughter's hand in marriage some day. Like, he's that caliber of a human being. He is

a special, special person. He's so mature. He's so mature beyond his years. In today's day and age with the COVID year and you have fifth -- last year Dalton Bolon, I think, was, like, a ninth-year guy for us. So you have that a little bit. But Bryce is just so stinking mature. He's a phenomenally leader. He is soft spoken, he's a man of relatively few words, but he's the type of guy when he says something and speaks up, the room gets absolutely silent. He has the respect of his teammates, not only because of how decorated he is as a player at the Division-II level, being an All-American and playing in the National Championship game, but they just respect his toughness and his tenacity and his grit. Very, very blessed to say I was able to coach him for his last year of college basketball.

**Q. Do you notice, is there any, like, calmness to the guys who have been here before, the second year in a row, maybe a little bit -- last year everybody was super excited, kind of their first time in March Madness, but now that they're a little bit calmer or is it the same?**

PAT KELSEY: I think experience is always a blessing, right? So we preach to our guys every day to stay present, right? Whether it's a June 5th meeting on their first day on campus, it's in the middle of the rigors of conference play, or it's right here getting ready to play in the greatest spectacle in American sports. It's just enjoy the moment, enjoy the walkthrough this morning, enjoy the little practice we had over at Gonzaga Prep, which is pretty cool. Home of the Bullpups. I thought that was a cool nickname.

So our guys are unbelievably consistent. They're great in film sessions, they are so on point in scouting, and so these bright lights and this big moment, it's not too big for these guys. But, yeah, I mean, I sense a little bit, at least -- I almost feel like I'm that way a little bit. Following my own advice. I got my son here asking questions at the press conference. He's going to be outside shooting baskets with the guys because my boss, Matt Roberts, who is the best AD in the country, allows us to have our families as a part of this.

So, you know, it's going to be hot tomorrow. It's going to be hot. It's the biggest moment -- one of the biggest moments of my career on the biggest, biggest stage, but you have to take a deep breath and step back and realize how blessed and lucky you are and I am to be able to do this, do what I do for a living, and be here in this extraordinary event.

**Q. For you, when you look at each of the tournaments, is there something specific that you remember from each of your tournament berths? Do they kind of mix together? Does this feel different than last year or**

**does it feel like deja vu?**

PAT KELSEY: Well, I've been very fortunate, God is great, that throughout the course of my career as a player, I went to three NCAA tournaments as a coach, and as you know, I wasn't a great player, missed a thousand points by 874. I've said that before. And then when I became a coach with Coach Prosser down at Wake Forest, we went to a ton of NCAA tournaments, and I went back to Xavier and I was the associate head coach there, we went to back-to-back NCAA tournaments, and then this is my fifth as a head coach.

First one, I just remember my son was, like, three years old and shooting with him at the open practice like we're about to do right now. The second one, I just remember the exhilaration of cutting down nets and just the absolute gut punch of the pandemic hitting and the cancellation of the tournament when I had four seniors that were playing their last college game and never got to experience playing in the greatest spectacle in American sports, including the Super Bowl.

The one after that, I just remember, it was just a special group of high-character guys and then that's our last year at Winthrop, and then last year that group at Charleston, I just remember how that team captured the city's minds and hearts, right? Our city, Charleston basketball became a deal, a big deal again, must-see TV.

And this year, it's just -- I'm just so proud of these guys because all they heard all off-season, all year, last year's team, last year's team, last year's team, last year's team, and they were top 25, and they won a million games in row and did this, this, this, this. And all they did was put blinders on and go to work and stay consistent and they have made their own mark on College of Charleston basketball history. Hopefully, there's a lot more to be written.

**Q. How cool is it that C.J.'s parents are here and that Reyne's parents and you kept kind of an international squad there, but these guys, the families are finding a way to get here?**

PAT KELSEY: It's awesome. I mean, I played college basketball at Xavier in Cincinnati, so my parents were 16 minutes away on the West side of Cincinnati and I could get back for a home-cooked meal and get laundry done and they were at every single game watching me sit on the bench, because that's what I did.

But I can only imagine what that would be like for four of the most formative years of your life to be on the other side of an ocean and never get to see your mom and dad



except for on FaceTime calls and Zoom calls. All of our international guys, all of our players, they have extraordinary families that love 'em and that care about 'em, that want to be a part of their college experience and be at every game, but they can't.

So for them to hit this and be at the pinnacle of their playing career and to be able to celebrate this and experience this and share this with them is really, really special. So I love it. That's awesome.

**Q. I was talking to Reyne, I talked to him this year. He went zero to 60 on the tattoo game pretty quick and he said if they win today -- win tomorrow, there could possibly be a March Madness ink on the inside of his arm. Any suggestions from you? Do you give any art tips to him?**

PAT KELSEY: Well, I probably shouldn't say this, and Matt might not want me to be his head coach anymore, but I always -- so I had a bet with our team at Winthrop that, if we made the tournament that year, I would get a tattoo. I ended up getting like my whole shoulder. And here -- and then I, these guys said that, if we go to the Sweet 16, you got to finish it, get a whole arm sleeve. So, my wife is not going to be happy about that, so if we're lucky enough and blessed to do that, I might have some extra ink as well. But, yeah. I can't believe I just said that. I did this one -- because, seriously, it was because the guys challenged me. I came home and the girls were, like Caroline, she almost fell down, like, who are you, like, what are you doing. And I just remember going and just saying, like, Look, this is what I want, and I'm not coming back, so do it all now. And it's like all of this (indicating) and it took like nine hours and I stayed there the entire time. It was brutal. And, like, what the crap was I doing? But anything for your players.

**Q. Obviously, everybody loves the Johnny Ballgame, seeing him on TV, and everything like that. How special is it for you to share it with your dad? I mean, he, some dads are in the stands, your dad is sitting with the student managers reading box scores, like, he's involved. How special is that?**

PAT KELSEY: Well, again, Matt allows that. He allows that. When he interviewed me and we talked and they asked the question in the interview process, what are you about. And I said, faith, family and hoop. Faith, family and teaching, right, that's what I'm about. We talked a lot about family, and told him like, look, there's no such thing as balance in this profession, so the two have to co-exist, and my son's going to be around. He goes, Great, that's exactly what we want. So he sits on the bench. He's on the team plane. When he's not in school, he travels with

us. That's special. And then my dad, I mean, I'm very biased, okay, but I think I have the greatest mother and father in the history of civilization. They have 24 grandchildren, there's five of us, so I have four siblings. We all played sports. All the 24 grandchildren play sports. There's, on a weekend, there's about 14 stinking games, and they're at every single one of 'em. My mom says all the time, you don't measure your life zeroes in your bank account, you measure it by love. And I'm very blessed. It's awesome to have my dad here, my wife, my kids, this is awesome sharing this with them.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, Coach.

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