

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

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena

Alabama Crimson Tide

Nate Oats

Aaron Estrada

Grant Nelson

Mark Sears

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll get started with questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Last week Coach said that playing on Friday would kind of be beneficial for y'all for rest to get your legs up underneath you. Is that something that you feel like is true and how has this week been from a rest standpoint?

MARK SEARS: This week's been very good from the rest standpoint. We've been going -- in practice, we do a lot of conditioning, so getting up and down the court, for the first like Monday, Tuesday, and then from there on out, we just pretty much be doing, like, skill work.

GRANT NELSON: Like he said, just practice the first two days was a little tougher and then the last two have been a little less and then getting in with our trainer has been a lot more this past week.

AARON ESTRADA: Kind of just what these guys said. The first two practices it was a little harder, but then they kind of got shorter and shorter, just skill work, and it has been helping our bodies to be fresh for Friday.

Q. After that SEC tournament game, I spoke with a few of you, and I know Coach said you guys have to make a decision coming into this game. A lot of you talked about what needed to be said. Since that SEC tournament game to coming here, what has been the conversation in your locker room between you guys of what needs to happen here in this game or for not



having a finish like you did in that SEC tournament?

MARK SEARS: We just got to realize it's a new season. Everybody is 0-0. We just got to come out and just play with a lot of energy and enthusiasm and just set the tone from the tip.

GRANT NELSON: I would say for some of us, especially us three who have been here -- I mean, I haven't played in a tournament here and Aaron hasn't, but, like, this late in the season it's kind of win or go home. For Aaron, this next game could be his last game. Hopefully, it's not. But for us, it's kind of win or else your season's over.

AARON ESTRADA: I feel like we took the approach of, first, flip the page from the tournament. Like Mark said, it's kind of everybody is 0-0, and then off of what Grant said, everybody is banged up around this time, tired, so at this point you got to find a way to win or you're going to go home.

Q. I'm trying to get a perspective of a lot of the players that have come from a space of growing up in the Black neighborhood, Black landscape, and just being here in Spokane, we don't have a lot of diversity here. If you have any input on it, but what would it take -- what would it take for you to inspire some youth and give them some words of what it took to get to where you are and how do you appreciate this moment, being in this space right now?

AARON ESTRADA: Something I would say to the youth is just don't give up on your dreams. I have younger siblings and they look at me as a role model. So for me, I kind of have been that person they look up to since I was -- well, since my two younger brothers was born. So, yeah, that's what I would probably say as far as to the youth.

MARK SEARS: I would say that it takes a lot of sacrifice. You can't go out and be with your friends, you can't party, you just got to be disciplined, and in the long run, it will pay off.

Q. What are your thoughts on Spokane and how do you feel about having two other Alabama schools here



also competing?

MARK SEARS: It's a very quiet city. Just having Auburn here, we really don't -- we see each other when we leave the hotel and we come to the gym, but other than that, that's all we do, just really no interaction.

GRANT NELSON: Yeah, I love the landscape over here, a lot of hills, a lot of trees. Then like he said, for Auburn, like, we don't really see them, but hopefully, there's a lot of Alabama people in the building for both games.

AARON ESTRADA: Yeah, about Spokane, it's super quiet where we're staying at, a lot of hills and stuff. I kind of got a little glimpse of that when I was over at Oregon. It was kind of like the same kind of landscape. But, yeah, about Auburn and the other Alabama schools, we don't really talk to them, so I don't really have a comment on that.

Q. While you were at Hofstra you played Charleston four times. Have you brought anything from those games to your preparation for this game?

AARON ESTRADA: Yeah, I kind of know their system. I know how they like to play. I know most of their players on that team because I played against 'em. So for my preparation, I'm already knowing what to expect and how they play. I try to tell the guys that too, as well.

Q. Did you guys grow up dreaming of this tournament, playing in this tournament? I assume you did, and if so, what are some of your first memories or greatest memories of March Madness?

AARON ESTRADA: For any kid that probably played basketball growing up wanting to play in college this is probably their ultimate dream. So, yeah, this was definitely a dream of mine. And then, like, my biggest moment, it actually wasn't that recent, but it was when St. Peter's went on that run because I used to play for that coach. I kind of knew all them guys and I was extremely happy for them and proud of them when they made that run.

GRANT NELSON: Yeah, definitely a dream of mine since I was a kid. I grew up watching all these teams, even Alabama. So it's cool to be here. I fell short the past three years, but it's good to finally get here and play. Then the most recent memory I have is Jalen Suggs hitting that half-court buzzer beater. That was a pretty cool moment.

MARK SEARS: I would say it's been a dream of mine to be able to be here, I would say three out of the four years I've been in college, and one of my memories would be probably when Marcus Paige hit the double-clutch three to go into overtime. I forgot which team they were playing,

but it's still fresh in my mind.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll dismiss the student-athletes and thank them for their time and wish them good luck.

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: We'll ask Coach to make a quick opening statement and then we'll open it up to questions.

NATE OATS: Happy to be out here. We've been sent out West before, at least personally myself at Buffalo, and it's been good for us. We're happy to be in the tournament. I mean, to get a 4 seed, it's the first time in school history we've been a 4 seed or higher in back-to-back tournaments. So we felt like maybe we could have been a little bit better, but we had some injuries we didn't close the season well with our injuries, but we're excited to be in the tournament.

We got obviously to play well. Charleston's good. When I started watching 'em once we got the draw Sunday night, they're really similar to us. Coach Kelsey does a great job. They're in to back tournaments. This isn't, like, new to them. They're used to being in the tournament with all the surrounding stuff that goes with it. They're not going to be intimidated by us.

Offensively, they're one of the better teams in the country. So, they play fast, they shoot a lot of threes, they run a lot of five-out stuff, got very talented players, so we're going to be ready to go. But it is good, we'll finally be healthy with Rylan and Trely both able to play, which it's been a little while since we've had both those guys fully capable without a minutes' restriction. We really tried to get healthy over this last -- well, we've only played the one game in the last 12 days. Our biggest goal was just to try to get healthy and I feel like we're as close to healthy as we've been in a while.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. Nick Pringle, is he going to be available to play tomorrow? And Davin Cosby had a boot on his foot. Is he doing okay?

NATE OATS: Davin broke his foot in practice earlier this week, so he's out, so we're not a hundred percent fully healthy. That's the one injury, and it was unfortunate. I think he stepped on somebody's foot. He continued to practice, but then when we got it X-rayed after practice, it's got a break in one of the bones, so he is out.

Nick's available to play tomorrow. Nick's with the team.



He was dealing with a personal issue, and he's here with us now, and should be good to go tomorrow.

Q. How have you looked at how Aaron Estrada played against College of Charleston at his time at Hofstra? Has that gone into any of your preparation in this game?

NATE OATS: He played pretty well. I think he had 25 points in the first half last year against them. So obviously, he's playing in a different system now with different teammates, and Charleston's a lot different, but it was still Charleston and it's still Aaron. I hope he's got some confidence because when he's playing with a lot of confidence, he's one of the best guards in the country. I'd love for him to come into this game playing with all kinds of confidence.

So it's hard to go look at -- it's just all different. He's got all different teammates, different system, but they have got some of the same players back and he was pretty good against them last year. Yeah, he was very good, actually.

Q. After the SEC tournament, you said that the guys had to make a decision coming into this one about how they wanted to play and how they wanted to go. What have you seen over these last few days to show that they have made that decision and what's been your message to them coming into this game?

NATE OATS: Yeah, the last two days we haven't really done a ton of live stuff in practice, trying to stay as healthy as we can, but I thought Monday and Tuesday they got after it. It's to the point that you don't play defense like your season's going to be over. So a lot of the defensive issues we've had, I feel have come down to just decisions you got to make, how hard do you want to play, how much do you want to be locked in. If you can't get locked in when your season's on the line, I'm not sure what will get you locked in.

So I felt like Monday and Tuesday's practices were pretty good. We got back to just -- really some of it was just doing some defensive fundamentals and going over some actions that -- you know, Charleston runs all kinds of sets. They're really good, but they've got some definite actions that you have to know how to guard. We started putting that in Monday. Tuesday, I thought our guys were pretty locked in. So we'll see where we're at when we come out tomorrow, but I certainly hope we're playing with max effort and really locked in to try and get stops on the defensive end, regardless of what happens on the offensive end.

Q. Defense question. As far as messaging, this is your fifth season here, how has the messaging

evolved in terms of how you approach defense when you talk to guys about it and where do you feel like it hasn't been received as much this year?

NATE OATS: I felt like I gave 'em the similar messaging to what we gave last year. Last year the messaging was, we were third in the country in defense, won the SEC regular season and tournament, made a Sweet 16 run. Following year, we were 92nd. We were, I believe, a 6 seed in the SEC tournament, got bounced in the first round, the SEC tournament and the NCAA tournament. So we've got to guard. That year we were third in the country again and won the SEC, won the tournament, and proceeded to make a Sweet 16 run, we were the No. 1 overall seed.

So my point this year was, like, we got to get back. Our goal is to try to be a top-5 defense in the country. Well, we're obviously not that. Now, we do things a little bit different. We had Herb Jones, and we were third in the country. That's a huge help. He's one of the best defenders in the world right now. He's guarding all the best players in the NBA when the Pelicans play. We had Bediako with some real rim protection last year. We don't have Herb or Charles, so it's a little bit harder to be third in the country in defense. But, you know, and we had the No. 1 offense for a lot of the year. Now, we were a few possessions away from winning the SEC. If we beat Tennessee at our place, and that was an even game up until about the last couple minutes of the game when they kind of pulled away late, but if we had beat Tennessee, we would have won the SEC. So we were a lot closer to being a championship-level team this year than we were two years ago. I think, because our offense is a lot better, we move the ball better, I think we've got guys that are capable of being good defenders, that have shown it at times, they just got to choose to guard. We've looked at some teams that have made runs in the tournament when maybe they didn't close the season great, and we have tried to sell 'em on that. When we guard, we can compete with some of the best teams in the country. Arizona, Purdue, Creighton, you look at some of these teams with their seeds that they have got and what they're doing, and we had leads on all them in the second half, nine-point lead, six-point lead, whatever, like at least a 60 percent chance or higher of winning the game in the second half. So we've competed with all these better teams in the country. We also, we don't have any bad losses on the year really either. Like, two years ago we had some like where we just didn't-show-up-at-all losses. We haven't had that.

So, our defense isn't what I would have liked for it to be or what our program has kind of set the standard to be. I think we're capable of beating anyone in the country, and we're going to have to come out and guard this year, or this

week.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, Coach.

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