

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Grand Canyon vs Saint Mary's

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena

**Saint Mary's Gaels**

**Randy Bennett**

**Mitchell Saxen**

**Aiden Mahaney**

**Alex Ducas**

Media Conference



get quicker shots up, it's just really about offensive efficiency. So for our guys to be able to get the best shot every time down is really important to us and Coach Bennett, which is why St. Mary's has had one of the best offenses in the country for 20-plus years now, since Coach B has been there.

But I wouldn't take that away from anybody's individual ability to get a bucket at any given time. It's not really how we like to win and how we like to do things and, clearly, it's worked out pretty well for Coach B and us so far.

MITCHELL SAXEN: We really preach fighting for the best shot, so a lot of times that doesn't come in the first 10 or 15 seconds of the shot clock. So it's not like we're not trying to get a good shot early on, but we're going to run our offense and play for the best look.

**Q. You guys obviously made comment about having good memories from the last trip up here back in January or February. Do you guys have a sense of what it's going to be like tomorrow night, especially with probably a lot of neutral fans here are probably Gonzaga fans and their fans -- or their players making a couple of comments this week about hoping fans showed up and would show up in purple for tomorrow night's game? Do you feel like this could end up being a little bit of like a road game tomorrow night?**

MITCHELL SAXEN: I honestly think the WCC has a lot of good fan bases and will support each other. I know a lot of them aren't juiced that we are here, but at the end of the day, you want to support your conference. But I have a feeling Grand Canyon is going to ship out a lot of fans up here and it will be a great environment, so we're excited for that.

AIDAN MAHANEY: Just for clarification, there were Gonzaga players you said that said that their fans should show up in purple? We love it. That's all good. We're excited to go. We like playing on the road, so bring 'em on.

ALEX DUCAS: Yeah, we are undefeated on the road, so let's hope there's more GCU fans in there.

We'll take questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Maybe just give a comment about being in Spokane to not play Gonzaga and thoughts about tomorrow's game.**

ALEX DUCAS: I mean, it's great to finally be here and not have to think about the Zags for once, but we're super excited as a group. We think we're prepared and ready to get into it.

AIDAN MAHANEY: Good to be back in Spokane. We left on a happy note last time, so hopefully, we do the same this time.

MITCHELL SAXEN: We've got a lot of good memories here, so we just want to make some more.

**Q. You guys do a great job of working the shot clock down and getting really tough, hard great shots. The execution, this personnel, has it always been the way Coach Bennett runs your team or is it just team happens to be able to do really, really well with this?**

ALEX DUCAS: Like you said, credit to the coaches. They really put out a game plan for us that they think is the best for us to win and we've got a great group of guys that are committed to doing that every night and we go out there and get it done.

AIDAN MAHANEY: Just because you touched on the personnel, it's not that I don't think we have guys that can



**Q. Along those lines, what has allowed you guys to be as good as you are away from home and handle some tough environments that you've played in?**

ALEX DUCAS: Every environment is still the same, the rim is still the same height, the ball is still same shape. At the end of the day, we're a tougher and tighter group and it doesn't matter where we are, we believe in who we are.

AIDAN MAHANEY: Yeah, I think we got a lot of guys that like playing in that environment and I think that's not the case for a lot of teams. But when you got guys that are kind of built for those moments, for me, I feel like playing on the road kind of fires me up a little bit more, so I love playing on the road.

MITCHELL SAXEN: I think all of us come into road games with a little extra edge and chip on our shoulder because we know now we built this program up to where when we're coming in, it's a big game for the other team, always. So we want to go and stay composed and we've been through battles together to do that.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, guys.

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and take some questions.

RANDY BENNETT: Anytime you make it to this tournament it's been a great year and that's kind of how I feel right now. It wasn't an easy route. We got off to a rough start, but these guys ended up improving a lot and playing well the last half of the year and then some. So we're excited to be here. We're playing against a good team, Grand Canyon, pretty familiar with 'em, and they have -- shoot, they have been in the NCAA tournament three out of the last four years. So they know what they're doing too.

Drew's a good coach and -- yeah, Bryce has done a really nice job there and they have done a great job with their program, so it should be a good, tough game.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

**Q. The way you play your offense, your execution's been so good, especially end of the clock. I mean, is that just because you want to work for the best shot or if it's there early will you take that and what's your biggest concern with Grand Canyon as far as their defense?**

RANDY BENNETT: Yeah, so that's just how we play. I

mean, our deal is to try and get a good shot and work until you get it. We tell 'em all the time just get singles, get singles, get singles, get singles. Don't try and take a tough one. So that's just kind of how we play, and that's how we've played for a long time. We have good guards, so we would play off those guys a lot and on-balls and we have a good inside-out game. So that is normally that's how we've played for a long time.

Grand Canyon, they're good defensively, their guards are big, physical, and they turn you over a lot. They will take risks, try and tap the ball from behind, they will get physical with you when you drive. They actually have good rim protection. They can block shots. So you're going to have to get singles against 'em. If you just try and take a tough shot overhand, it's going to be a long night if you do that. So we'll need to hang on to that ball and get good shots and do a good job defensively on them at the other end.

**Q. It might be a little bit of a partisan crowd against you guys tomorrow night, depending upon how things play out, but you guys have been really good on the road this year. You won at Colorado state, you won up here. What has allowed you guys to play that well away from home this year?**

RANDY BENNETT: I'm not positive, but my best guess would be we have pretty tough group. They're just pretty mentally and physically tough. They like challenges. I mean, the boxes they were trying to check at the beginning of the year are the boxes they checked at the end of the year. I think to win the league, to win the conference tournament, those things, you had to be tough on the road. All expressions that are there about toughness travels, things like that, they buy into that. Our leader, Alex Ducas has done a phenomenal job leading this team, especially from where when we were 3-5 and we had to hold it together and keep getting better, he was the guy leading the ship.

So that's kind of why I think we're good on the road, is our guys are pretty mentally tough.

**Q. With your valley roots, do you have a different appreciation for the arc of the basketball program over the last decade at GCU? And do you know President Mueller as well, too, in addition to your father?**

RANDY BENNETT: For sure. For sure. I appreciate what they have done. I mean, yeah, I've talked to Brian Mueller for a long time. I watched the thing grow from day one, and I remember when Brian was an assistant for my dad at Mesa, and so that's how I got to know him. Then he went into his business world and just his -- whatever he's touched has turned into gold. That's the same as Grand



Canyon University and the same as Grand Canyon University sports programs and especially their men's basketball, which was -- I remember talking to him way back then, and that was the goal, to have a first-class NCAA Tournament men's basketball program, and they have one. So it's pretty cool. He's a friend.

Yeah, it can be competitive tomorrow and there will be nothing about all the relationship stuff tomorrow. But up until this point and watching that thing grow has been fun for me. Shoot, I was calling it eight years ago. I said, they're going to get good, they're going to get real good. I told our league office, the whole deal, and here they are and now we're playing 'em.

**Q. I'm sure you addressed this awhile ago, but next year with Washington State and Oregon State joining the conference, what do you see as that doing for the level of competition in the WCC? Do you think it will raise it or do you think it's -- they're stepping in with peer institutions that are kind of on par with right now?**

RANDY BENNETT: That's a great question. I think it will raise it. They come from a Power Five, so they have football money, they have resources to -- I mean, in the PAC 12, they have resources to help our league and I think for sure that will happen. Washington State's had an incredible year. Oregon State's had a better year this year.

So I think it will definitely raise our league. I think it's a good move for our conference for these two years, and then we'll go from there.

I just think now things are changing so fast, I think conference realignment, I think AD's and presidents, everybody's on the hook now. They all have to make good decisions. They can't just -- I mean, we saw what happened with the PAC 12. You're going to have to make some -- you're going to have to play a good hand in this card game, especially in the conference realignment. If you don't, then you're going to -- you'll lose your league.

So I think that's where Washington State, Oregon State, that's a good two-year move for us, and I think we're going to have to make other moves moving forward, just like every other league will have to do if you want to stay in top eight or nine leagues in the country, which we are right now. We want to stay there.

**Q. In Vegas, after you guys beat Gonzaga, Augustas and Alex were talking about how unusual your program is, that there aren't many transfers in or out. I'm just curious how that continuity, how much of a factor you think that is in your success that you guys have stayed sort of true to your motto?**

RANDY BENNETT: It definitely helps us. I mean, we call 'em margins, you got to win the margins. It could be leadership, it could be working hard, it could be -- it's stuff that doesn't show up in the stat sheets but helps you win. That is a big one right there. Our guys have been together for a long time. That helps. They know our program, they know what we stand for, they know we're not about -- we want guys who want to play for something bigger than they are, and so that's all that. Like, the thing has gotten so selfish now, it's hard to keep that, but we've been able to thus far. But we're vulnerable too. Everybody is. We're not bulletproof. I think for the most part our program will be like that and stay like that and we will have to adjust to NIL, we'll have to adapt. Just like any team that wants to be an NCAA tournament-type team every year, they're going to have to do that. You're not going to be able to just money ball it and not go NIL and things like that. When I hear people say that, then I'm like, you don't get it. Things have changed, college sports have changed, college basketball's changed, and we're going to have to adapt. But you don't have to lose that component of having a really good culture and guys that are four- and five-year players in your program, which is what we've always -- well, since about my sixth year, we've been that. We had to get to that, where we just brought freshmen in and built those guys up, developed 'em. We've had a lot of that.

So I think we'll stay with that. But even when we were like that before for like the last 16 years, we still would bring a transfer in every now and then. We have Mason Forbes and we had Joe Rahon and Rob Jones. So we've had some, but I don't see us changing. I don't think have you to. And I think a lot of programs have gotten in trouble or put themselves in a tough position that are high-power programs with money because they have gone that direction and then probably didn't totally understand what the byproducts could be from doing that. And I don't know either. I don't proclaim to know more than anybody else, but I do know it's tricky.

There's a lot of good programs right now that are aren't good that should be good, that are blue bloods. So you got to be smart with it. I'm very confident on how we're approaching it, and again, we're not bulletproof, but I think we make good decisions and keep your values right as far as what you want from the character of your players and loyalty from your players and just caring about, like I said, something bigger than themselves.

I think those are the keys for us when we recruit and bring guys in and I think once you get 'em in, if you treat 'em right and figure out all the NIL maneuvers, then I think can you do it.

THE MODERATOR: Okay. Thank you, Coach.

