

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Yale vs San Diego State

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena

Yale Bulldogs

James Jones

John Poulakidas

Matt Knowling

Bez Mbeng

August Mahoney

Danny Wolf

Media Conference



we're taking care of everything we have to ahead of tomorrow.

AUGUST MAHONEY: Yeah, it's hard to answer after those three great answers, but this past week has been a whirlwind of emotions. A lot of unexpected things have come to all of us, but I think it's important to note that we all believe that we belong here, and as much attention as we're getting, I think it's well deserved, just through how much work we've put in, not only this year but years prior.

Then to piggyback off of John and Bez's point, yesterday is over and tomorrow is a new day, and I think we're all focused and locked in on the task at hand now.

MATT KNOWLING: Yeah, I think these guys basically covered it. It's just the balance of trying to enjoy this and soak it all in, but also stay focused and know we have a big opportunity ahead of us.

So just trying to take it minute by minute and just enjoy it but staying focused, too.

Q. August, for those of us that haven't seen you guys much this year, the shot-making that John made yesterday, is that normal what you guys see in practice or was that even a little bit beyond the day to day that you see from him?

AUGUST MAHONEY: We see that all the time, at least three times a week. John gets hot and it's pretty fun playing Azar Swain back two years ago, and I would say him and Azar are two of the best shot-makers I've ever played with, and when John gets hot, we expect every shot to go in.

And hopefully tomorrow he has that hot hand still going and we can replicate that effort.

Q. You guys are a bit unique in the sense that all of you average in double digit scoring figures. Anyone can have a big night on any given day. Can you talk a bit about the trust that you all have in each other and what it's like knowing it could be anyone's night?

Q. (No microphone).

DANNY WOLF: Yeah, I think it all started about a weekend ago when we had that crazy ending in the Brown game and carried over from down 10 against Auburn yesterday. Just to be able to experience that type of emotion with these guys and our bench and my teammates and our coaches, it just means the world to us.

We put a ton of work in, and to have the support from family and friends just with the plethora of text messages and phone calls, it goes a long way, and it just shows how much support we have and the amount of people that care about us. Just to be able to experience that amount of emotion with these guys.

JOHN POULAKIDAS: Yeah, I think the energy has certainly shifted as far as in the last 24 hours, being more back focused. We certainly celebrated that great win, rightfully so, in the locker room after the game yesterday. But once we got back to the hotel, everybody is refocused, and we're ready to go.

BEZ MBENG: Yeah, for sure it's just been a main focus on understanding the opportunity we have ahead of us and not getting -- we're trying to stay levelheaded and understanding that San Diego State is a really good team but so are we. So we have to focus in and make sure



DANNY WOLF: Yeah, I think it's one of the first points I mentioned whenever this question is asked. You look around and there's just so many talented guys on the floor, and it can be one person's night and try to feed the hot hand, but if that's not working, you go to the next look.

Last night it so happened that John went 10-for-15, had 28 points. I may have struggled offensively but all the other guys really pick each other up, and down the stretch you can count on everyone, and it just makes the game so easy because it's hard to really hone in on one guy. It just makes the game so much more fun being able to celebrate and pick up each other in the goods and bads.

JOHN POULAKIDAS: Yeah, I think the balance of our team is just the beauty of it. When you've got five guys that can go for 20 points on any given night, it just makes you that much more difficult to scout as an opponent. So I think I speak for everybody here when we're all grateful to be part of a team with a lot of talented guys that are very gifted at this game.

Q. What stands out about San Diego State when you look at them? Obviously they're known for their defense, but what do you guys see when you have looked at film already?

MATT KNOWLING: Yeah, they're a super talented team, like you said. Defensively they're aggressive, they're long, they're athletic, they're strong. So we have to be ready to take care of the ball and run our sets in a good scoring area. They have good talent offensively, too, so we've got to be ready to guard, get in the gaps, rebound the ball, play physical, and just be confident like we were yesterday.

AUGUST MAHONEY: Yeah, we all watched San Diego State in the National Championship game last year, and they returned a lot of their pieces. They've shown that they can succeed in this tournament, and we're not going to underestimate them at all because we know how good they are.

Like Matt said, they're one of the top defensive teams in the country. They pressure the ball. They've got size. They make running offense difficult.

But I think we're going to just hone into basketball and listen to our coaches, and try and execute ourselves to the best of our abilities, and hopefully one of us five or someone off the bench is going to make some plays.

Q. For August, take us through the incident with Chad Baker-Mazara yesterday. He re-Tweeted a video of a play right before that where it seemed like you hit him not in the same way. I'm curious what your reaction

was, and it seemed like it was a little bit back and forth.

AUGUST MAHONEY: Yeah, I mean, it happened so fast. I was first running down on offense, I was just running in transition trying to get ahead, and if I made some contact with him, it definitely wasn't anything intentional.

Then going back on defense, it happened so fast that I haven't really even looked at it. I just got hit, and it's unfortunate, but the ref made the call, and as a player you've just got to move on to the next play and kind of put that behind you and just try and be with your teammates.

Q. Are you guys aware of the stand-in band that you have performing for you this weekend, and do you have any opinions on their performance yesterday?

DANNY WOLF: Yeah, a few of my buddies back home right after the game sent me that video, and I remember we were on the bench prior because in our shootaround we didn't have a band, we just had our cheer team that flew with us. I remember looking to my coaches and being very confused as to how we had a band all wearing extremely interesting Yale-branded gear.

But for the University of Idaho to be gracious enough to come here and be able to play our fight song to the best of their ability, I just appreciate that, and I think it goes without saying that it's very, very -- it was a very gracious thing they did, and we appreciate it, and hopefully they can bring that -- I don't know if they'll be here tomorrow, but if they are, hopefully they can bring that same energy.

JOHN POULAKIDAS: I think it's a little, I guess, unfortunate that we just happened -- our school happens to be on spring break during this time, and I'm sure our band is rightfully enjoying their time home with family. But to piggyback off Danny, we're grateful for our fans. I thought we had the arena pretty loud last night, which was definitely in our favor, and it was a great atmosphere to be a part of.

AUGUST MAHONEY: Yeah, we played Gonzaga earlier this year, and I think we put forward a pretty good effort against them. So I think the Spokane community kind of has rallied behind us a little bit, and hopefully they're just as loud tomorrow against San Diego State.

Q. Coach talked about how he has to recruit -- I think he used the term, we have to turn over some rocks to find guys that are good enough academically and athletically. I'm curious if you can take us through each of your stories. Did any of you guys have high-major deals, and how did they find you? Obviously he found really good players.

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MATT KNOWLING: So I'm from Connecticut, actually, about 45, 50 minutes from Yale. The coaching staff came and watched me play in high school quite a bit. They offered me during my junior year. That was like my third offer, and from that point I kind of knew that I wanted to go to Yale. Just the opportunity to go to such a prestigious university and play basketball at such a high level, it was hard to say no to that opportunity.

I was talking to some high-major schools, but I just couldn't say no to Yale. It was too good of an opportunity.

AUGUST MAHONEY: Similarly I got raised by parents who really prioritized academics my whole life. My grandfather attended Yale as a running back. That Yale offer was very special to me.

I did have an offer from the University of Illinois but was I always kind of under-recruited in that sense, and I knew I wanted to go to an academic institution where I would be pushed not only academically but athletically, and there's no better fit than Yale it's the best of both worlds. You see us on the national stage in basketball but everyone knows what it provides in the classroom. It's been a dream come true to be able to attend a school like Yale, and I'm forever indebted to Coach Jones and the coaching staff for allowing me this opportunity.

BEZ MBENG: My parents also preached academics first, so that was always in the back of my head for sure, but my situation was a little different. COVID hit and that slowed down a lot of the recruitment that was going on. Seniors getting another year and eligibility was a little up in the air.

Yeah, losing contact with some schools during that time was pretty weird, but yeah, Yale really came out of nowhere. Coach Simon recruited me a little bit my sophomore year but that sort of fell under the radar, and then during COVID it sort of came up out of nowhere. It was pretty weird but I'm thankful to be here with these guys.

And also like he said, forever indebted to Coach Jones and the staff for giving me this opportunity, and yeah, I'm just grateful for sure.

JOHN POULAKIDAS: Similar story. During COVID my junior year I received a handful of other offers to obviously potentially play at other schools and then Coach Kingsley started showing me a lot of love, taking that trip from New Haven to Chicago fairly regularly. He came out to see me a few times and it was a pretty easy choice for me. I always knew I wanted to go somewhere high academic. I was recruited by high-major schools and I always knew I

wanted to end up at an Ivy League school, and it so happened to be Yale, and I made the right choice.

DANNY WOLF: Yeah, I think each guy has their own unique recruiting experience and I think my process was a whirlwind just with COVID and then transferring to a prep school. I remember I just played on such a talented prep school team, and I don't know the exact stat but I think 12 guys or 13 guys ended up going Division I. From the moment the live period began we would have 20 to 30 college coaches, head coaches in the gym at any time, and I remember the first few days the entire Yale staff came and they were one of few entire staffs there and they prioritized me. That just spoke volumes to what they saw in me and how much they appreciated what I could bring to the team.

I think that just really went a long way to my family and I. As all these guys said and everyone in the locker room would say, when academics comes first, it's hard to say no to a school like Yale. It's one of the most prestigious degrees you can get. Yeah, I had some potential offers to go and play at the high-major level. But when you're on a team like Yale you've got a chance to go play in March Madness and prove yourself on the highest level in front of a national worldwide audience. We proved yesterday that we belong and I hope we can do the same tomorrow.

I think the talent in the Ivy League is better than anyone knows. It's unfortunate that we're a one-bid league, but I think there's multiple teams in the league that could go out and prove themselves on this level.

Q. Samson Aletan was kind of thrust into the action yesterday, one just being in the rotation and also coming in after you fouled out. What type of advice are you or anyone on the team giving him, being thrust on to the national stage?

DANNY WOLF: Yeah, Samson is an extremely talented player. He chose Yale over numerous high-major schools, and it speaks to the talent that he has, and being able to go against him in practice every day, he pushes me to be the best I can be. It's not every day in the Ivy League that you have another 6'10" high-major player that you've got to compete with.

We make a joke about it, but I think right when he got in -- not right when he got in but down the stretch in the second half, he blocked one of Johni Broome's shots. And he goaltended every day in practice every day. He goaltends a lot of our shots. They are extremely eye-opening blocks because he's an extremely athletic player. So we were all kind of like, we knew that was going to happen and of course it was a goaltending, as it always is.

But on the last play of the game he had two -- the second block he had on Jalen Williams practically sealed the game for us. He's always in a good mood, he always has a smile on his face, and just to be able to have him have that in his back pocket now and just to be able to see he did that, I think we're all grateful for that and it just makes us all happy because he's one of the happiest guys that I've ever played with.

JAMES JONES: Again, happy to be here. Excited that we have another opportunity to play tomorrow and another really good team in San Diego State. Had a chance to digest them somewhat, and they're very similar to Auburn in terms of what they do defensively. Similar type players, and we'll have our hands full again, and looking forward to the competition and an opportunity to prove ourselves.

Q. How are you planning on defending Jaedon LeDee tomorrow?

JAMES JONES: He's really good. Does a great job at scoring the ball. I would suspect he's very similar to the young man Broome from Auburn. He just plays more minutes. Broome only plays about 25 minutes a game but he's extremely efficient. So we're going to have our hands full with him. He's a big part of what they do offensively. So we'll have our eyes open and we'll know where he is on the floor.

Q. You mentioned these teams play similar styles defensively. Can you talk about the trouble you had inbounding the ball and facing the Auburn pressure at times yesterday.

JAMES JONES: It took a bit to adjust to the pressure yesterday. We had eight turnovers in the first half but we only had three in the second half, but for 11 for the game. 11 turnovers in a game isn't really terrible, to be honest with you. Actually most teams in the country would like to average 11 turnovers. We average a little bit less.

But like I said, it was a little bit of an adjustment, the speed of the game. The nerves of playing in an NCAA Tournament. We had four guys who actually played in a tournament two years ago, and the four starters we had returning and Danny is new. So we had some adjustments but we finally settled down and took care of the ball, and that was the difference in the second half, taking care of the ball and not turning it over and giving them offense, because we gave them offense in the first half.

Q. You've been coaching this team a long time. This is only the second time in program history that you're at this stage in the tournament. I wonder if you could

just reflect back to the last time you were here going up against Duke, and maybe think about some lessons that you learned from that game and applying them here?

JAMES JONES: Yeah, the biggest lesson I learned from it, I think I got overexcited after we beat Baylor. I showed the guys a tape of us -- a highlight tape from 2016. It's on my laptop. I watch it probably three or four times a year just to make myself smile. Brandon Sherrod is in that tape and it was good for the guys on that tape to see Brandon score and what he did to Duke that year.

In any event, there's a clip where I run into the locker room and I jump on the players who were huddled up and water being splashed and stuff. I thought we got a little too high. Came out in the game and Duke really jumped on us. They were up by 24, 25 points in the first half. We were able to get it all the way back down to three.

I think that if we had a better understanding of what we needed to do and were calmer, we would have had a better chance at winning that game.

I try to be as calm as possible, celebrate obviously the win somewhat, but to be calm and just let the guys know that we have more work to do.

Q. I'm sure you immediately turned to starting a scout on San Diego State, but if you could look back on yesterday, you're down 10 with seven and a half to go. What do you feel like you guys did really well over that seven-and-a-half-minute stretch?

JAMES JONES: We were able to make some big shots. I think in that stretch, John hit the baseline jumper, I believe. He hit the three that tied the game. Danny Wolf made a three, as did Bez Mbeng. So being able to make those shots were a huge difference for us, and being able to give us more confidence, give us a little bit more energy on the defensive end, so that really helped.

Then down the stretch we were just really poised at trying to make the right play. I think that that's what's really key about this team. I said yesterday that I was out of time-outs, so I had to depend on our team to play the right way and to make the right plays, and thankfully they made enough to have us win the game.

Q. Correct me if I'm mistaken here, but I believe you grew up in Dix Hills?

JAMES JONES: I grew up in North Babylon and I spent my last two years of high school in Dix Hills, yes.

Q. There's quite a little bit of buzz about you, not just nationally but also in this neck of the woods. Could you please reflect a little bit or describe any of the influences that you encountered in Long Island that have sort of helped you along the way to this stage in basketball?

JAMES JONES: Well, I'll give you a great story. My fifth grade teacher is named Pamela Katz. I received an email from her, and sadly I was driving and I was reading the email while I was driving. Nothing happened, but I remember being just awestruck by this email that I received from her, and she told me that I was her favorite student of all time.

She was my favorite teacher.

Sense then we've reconnected. She still lives on Long Island. She watches all the games. She sends me a text message after every game. So my connections are really strong.

But when I went to sixth grade, my class was across the hall from my fifth grade class, and my sixth grade teacher didn't like me nearly as much as Mrs. Katz did. And one day I was getting yelled at by my sixth grade teacher, who shall go nameless, and Mrs. Katz came into our room knocked on the door and asked to speak to her outside, and she just gave her a tongue lashing.

That moment having someone protect me at the age of 12 just gave me a lot of confidence in myself to go and to do and to be, and I owe a lot to Pamela Katz for protecting me, so to speak, way back when, when she didn't have to.

Q. Did you hear from Mrs. Katz yesterday after the game and what did she say?

JAMES JONES: Just how proud she is and how enthused she is about our program and our team. She's come to Yale to see a game, and when we're on Long Island and we play Stony Brook, she comes.

Lovely woman, and she means a lot to me.

Q. You mentioned yesterday about having to overcome the emotional release from a big win. 13 seeds have struggled historically in the second game, Furman same thing to San Diego State last year. Are you aware of that and how do you guard against that?

JAMES JONES: No, I'm not aware of that. That means nothing. Like that absolutely means nothing to me that somebody else struggled in a game.

This team that I have and that I'm a part of I think is really good, so I have confidence in them and what we've done.

We haven't come out flat in many games at all. I know San Diego State is a very good team and we're going to have to play well to be successful, and my expectation is that we're going to play well.

One of the things I did say, and this may speak to your point, back in 2016, we came out flat against Duke because we were a little too high, I thought.

I kind of managed that somewhat in the locker room yesterday. It wasn't this crazy party afterwards. It was like, hey, we're happy we won. That's great. But we're going to focus in on trying to get this done tomorrow.

Hopefully my guys are in the right frame of mind.

Q. Coach Jones, were there people from the Long Island basketball community who you are very close with or maybe whom you felt were influential for you?

JAMES JONES: My high school coach, Warren Isaac, was very influential to me when I was going through it all. I was not the player that I wanted to be. I was a lot better in my mind than I was on the court. But Warren was someone who really inspired me to be a better player, work harder. But I didn't work nearly as hard as my guys do and how they play.

I didn't really realize that I wanted to be a basketball coach until I graduated college, and I went back to get an MBA, and was coaching at the same time and I got snakebit by it.

A lot of those relationships that I had on Long Island kind of were lost on me because it wasn't something that I felt like I needed to do.

One other quick one about teachers, and this is basically what we do in basketball, we teach. My 11th grade English teacher, Mr. Richard Hogan, he's reached out to me, as well, and he actually came to a game at Yale this year, and those kind of people have inspired me as much as anybody.

Q. The players were just talking about some of the process of their recruitment, and you mentioned you have to find unique ways to find players that fit academically and athletically. Are there any stories you can share about finding guys and uncovering this level of talent that other people either missed or how you found them?

JAMES JONES: Well, a great story was with Miye Oni.

Miye is from Southern California and didn't know anything about him. He was set to go to Williams College after his senior year. He was a teammate of a young man who played at Harvard, and my assistant Matt Kingsley had gone to watch him in a game. Noticed Miye but we didn't really recruit him.

That spring before he was going to go to school in the fall, I got a call from his AAU coach Robert Icart, and he sent me video of Miye, and I took one look at the video, and I go, yeah, we'll take him. We got him to come visit campus, and I had never offered a kid off of a videotape before, but you could just tell how special he was, his ability to pass, his ability to make players better, not to mention he had like a tomahawk dunk down the middle with four guys in the middle of the paint.

It was an easy one for me, and I was really -- but at the same time you think to yourself, why hasn't anybody else seen this? It's not like he's from someplace where they don't recruit from. He's from LA. So he's just one of those kids that fell through the cracks and that we were fortunate enough have come play for us.

He had a tremendous career at Yale and led us to -- helped lead us to the NCAA Tournament in 2019.

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