

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - vs Alabama

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena

Alabama Crimson Tide

Nate Oats

Rylan Griffen

Jarin Stevenson

Media Conference



players who have played at the high-major level and played at a bunch of other schools and different systems.

So they're really experienced, really athletic, really big, really strong. They've all got play-makers. So it's going to be a really, really tough game. They went out against a great St. Mary's team that deserved to be in the position that they were in and came out and beat them. So we've got to be ready to go.

Q. What can you do to be more consistent defensively? Yesterday you allowed 34 points in the first half and 62 in the second. How do you maintain that for a full 40 minutes?

RYLAN GRIFFEN: We've just got to focus and pay attention, stay locked into the scouting report, stay locked into the game plan, and just cover each other, be there for each other, help each other, make it hard on the other team and just be great IQ defenders and not selfish defenders. Just making sure we do that consistently.

We did it great in the first half, and I think we also did it great in the second half until the end. Midway through the second half they had only made two threes, so I think we guarded pretty well in the second half until the end, but we've got to make sure we do it full 40, not 24, not 30, not 25. Just full 40.

Q. Rylan, I think we saw yesterday that Grand Canyon had a pretty impressive fan turnout. If that is the same thing tomorrow, how do you think you've handled hostile environments this year and how do you think you'll handle it tomorrow?

RYLAN GRIFFEN: Yeah, we've been to Tennessee, we've been to Auburn, we've been to Kentucky and all these places. So it's not nothing that we're not gonna have seen before. In those games that I mentioned, we actually let the crowd get in our heads. So we've just got to make sure we come in and be like, hey, if they have a big crowd, it's nothing that we haven't seen before. The game is going to be played on the court, not in the stands.

Just if they have a big crowd, we've got to make sure we

Q. Rylan, the story about this team has been you guys score so much but the defense has lacked behind it. What about this team do you think can buck the trend of teams who have had good defenses and won National Championships that you guys can make score enough that defense falling behind you guys can still win despite that?

RYLAN GRIFFEN: We're not going to win just like that. We have to play defense. Everybody knows our defensive ranking and stuff, but that doesn't really matter right now. It's just we could be a top-20 defense in this tournament and then win the whole tournament.

All that other stuff is just in the past. We just look forward to the future. I think we have a team that's capable of playing great defense in the future like starting now.

We've just got to be consistent with it.

Q. Did you guys have a chance to watch Grand Canyon play last night? What did you take away from their athleticism and being able to disrupt the offense with their ability to block shots?

JARIN STEVENSON: I watched a little bit of Grand Canyon play. They're very athletic. Again, going in for offensive rebounds, getting steals, getting blocks. We've got to be careful with that. I feel like we've got the team to spread the ball, spread them out and make plays.

RYLAN GRIFFEN: Yeah, Grand Canyon, they're in a mid-major conference but they're pretty much like a high-major team. They've got a bunch of high-major



tune it all out and get the win, because that's where the game is going to be played, on the court. We can control whether we win or not, not the fans. Of course the fans are a big boost always, but at the end of the day, the game is played on the court. They can bring as many people as they want. We brought as many people as we wanted, like we played Tennessee on our home floor had a big crowd and still lost because the game is still played on the court.

That's all I've got to say about that.

Q. A lot of college basketball these days is kind of slow and played in the half court and you guys don't play that way. Maybe specifically what do you guys like each about the style you guys play and the way you guys play?

JARIN STEVENSON: I just feel like the fast-paced offense that we run is a lot more efficient. That's why we have the top offense in college basketball. Just running, getting out. That's the most efficient baskets, getting lay-ups or just open threes in transition. That's a high-percentage shot.

So just playing fast paced, it really fits our style and gets our guys open, and it really helps us.

RYLAN GRIFFEN: Yeah, it's hard to guard. It's easy to go against -- it's easy to guard when you're set on defense and everybody knows their rotations. So the point of attack is just make sure we go before the defense gets set, because I think we're a great team on defense when we get set, too. It's just a lot of teams be beating us in transition on offensive rebounds, stuff like that.

I think that way, playing fast just make sure you get more offensive possessions, as well. So you've got a chance to score more points. It doesn't feel like you have to score every time down the floor because you're going to burn 30 seconds of the clock and get one shot up.

So yeah, I feel like, like he said, it's just an efficient way of playing basketball.

Q. Rylan, I've got a question for you. As part of the backcourt at Alabama, one of the best backcourts in the nation, what have you guys worked on all year that has made you so efficient?

RYLAN GRIFFEN: We just share the ball, make shots, get to the paint. Pretty much all our guards, pretty much everybody on the team can pass, dribble and shoot. When you've got five people out there that can do that, it's kind of hard to guard.

But as far as the backcourt, we just push each other every

day. It be me against Aaron sometimes, Mark against Trely, me against Mark, Mark against Trely. You just mix it up, throw it together. We just make each other better. Iron sharpens iron. So practicing against them dudes every day has made me better for sure, and it's made all of us better.

Q. For both of y'all, Nate has talked recently about how you guys really enjoy playing with each other and that's helped when y'all have gone through some adversity. What have you told each other in those moments of hardship and how have you bonded over the course of the season going back to the summer?

JARIN STEVENSON: I think the big thing is mudita. It's a big word that we try to strive for and follow. It's vicarious joy for each other and each other's success. I feel like we just try to follow that and just push each other, make sure that we're there for each other and each other's help or if somebody makes a mistake, we're there for them, cheer them on, and just being there for each other.

RYLAN GRIFFEN: Yeah, just the same thing. I love playing with this team. Even after a loss, I still love these dudes. It's not like I'm upset with anybody or anything. There's just stuff we've got to do to get better, but I love coming to practice the next day seeing all these dudes. I love going to war with these dudes. It makes it more fun, and it makes you want to compete a little bit harder because now it's win or go home, and I don't want this team to go through anything like where our season is ending on a bad note.

It makes me go harder just for my brothers, and I think everybody has that same type of attitude.

NATE OATS: We're excited to still be playing in the second round. We don't take it for granted. I thought our defense was good for large stretches against Charleston, and going to have to be even better against Grand Canyon.

First time I really looked at them was watching the St. Mary's game last night, and they've got a high-major roster. They've got more athleticism than a lot of high-major teams.

Coach Drew has done a great job. They've obviously got a lot of support from their administration with how they're running their program. There's a reason they've been winning multiple WAC titles since Coach Drew has got there. He was in our league in the SEC for a while. He knows what SEC talent looks like, and he's got some SEC talent on that roster.



They're one of the best rim-protecting teams in the country.

They turn people over a lot. They play hard. They like to get up and down. Hopefully they still like to get up and down. Our guys obviously like to play a little up and down, as evidenced by the 109 points, whatever we had, last game out. I don't know if this will be first to 100 or not, but it should be for an entertaining game because they've got athletes. We like to get up and down. They've got some big-time scorers, and there's going to be some plays -- I'm guessing there will be quite a few highlight reel plays on both sides. Hopefully we can limit their highlight reel plays.

I think we both had a nice little underneath out of bounds alley-ooop that looked a lot different than I would finish back when I played.

We're looking forward to playing them, but they're good. We're going to have to really guard them. We're going to have to keep them out of the paint.

But I think for the most part, we're healthy. Latrell, if you saw how much he was bleeding with the nose injury, we kind of let him rest in the hotel rather than doing a shootaround, just trying to get some of the swelling to go down a little bit. I think he should be good to go for tomorrow.

But other than that, we're pretty healthy and ready to go. Really healthy for this time of the year.

Q. Like you said, what they did against St. Mary's was incredible, their athleticism, being able to block shots, steal the ball. This is going to be a totally different style, the way you play, than St. Mary's. Do you feel like that's going to be an advantage or can you make that an advantage for your team?

NATE OATS: Yeah, St. Mary's is a really good team. They won a really good league. They're tough, they're physical, and I thought Grand Canyon out-physicaled St. Mary's, to be honest with you.

Now, we've played against some of the toughest most physical teams in the country in our league. I think Tennessee is a right at the top of that list. Mississippi State is very tough and physical. I think Florida did a good job being physical with us. Those have been some of the games we've struggled with, but we've also done well. Mississippi State, very tough and physical, and we've been able to beat them twice. Tennessee beat us twice. Florida, we beat them once, lost twice. Auburn we split with; they're pretty tough, physical.

So we've played some tough, physical, athletic teams in our league. I think it's prepared us for a game like this.

I would have thought maybe St. Mary's slow pace would have caused problems with Grand Canyon. It didn't so much. I'm not sure how deep Grand Canyon is. They play about seven guys a majority of the minutes, so I would hope playing a second game in two days, we can get out and run on them a little bit. Our front court is pretty deep.

I think we've got to keep our guards as fresh as they can to keep the pace up. I would hope it would be an advantage with us, but they're pretty athletic and like to run, too.

I don't think they're a team that's going to try to bridle their thoroughbreds and rein them in. I'm not Coach Drew, but I think you recruit athletes to be athletic, so my guess would be they'll let their athletes be athletic and this will be a game that's pretty up tempo.

Q. You've talked about especially on the defensive end maybe some misses affecting things on that end of the floor. With this team, the crowd that's going to come in here supporting this team, what's been the message to keeping that confidence, that mentality up, makes, misses on both ends of the floor?

NATE OATS: That's a good question. Grand Canyon has done a great job getting their students up here, having a big crowd. We're out here on the West Coast, and their administration has done a really good job whatever method they have of emphasizing getting the crowds here. We're going to kind of have a road game it seems like, at least with their crowd they had last night.

The good thing is we've played a lot of tough road games, and again, now we don't always do it, what we tell our guys. The scoreboard is irrelevant to how hard we should be playing. It's really a distraction. Well, the crowd should be a distraction, too. Just focus on what's going on on the 94-by-52 right here and what we're doing. If the crowd is into it, great. If they're not into it, great. Whether there's 15,000 people in Coleman or whether we're in a practice where nobody but us is in the gym, it should have zero effect on your effort.

Now, we're human, and sometimes that doesn't happen, but we're going to try to -- if you don't turn the ball over and give them a bunch of highlight reel plays going the other way, I think you can -- I don't know that you're going to totally keep the crowd out of it, but you can keep them down. The crowd gets amped with these highlight reel plays.

Now, a lot of their highlight reel plays are an opponent's mistake, whether it's a turnover leading to a dunk, whether it's a big time blocked shot on a shot you shouldn't have

taken. We've got to do a good job of playing sound, fundamental, solid, tough, gritty basketball which I think will keep the crowd down a little bit.

But it's college basketball. I like having a crowd. Whether it's an away crowd, a home crowd, pack the place full and let's play in front of a bunch of people. I think the band, the crowd, the student section, it's a better crowd than professional sports, and I think that's what makes college basketball -- one of the things college basketball college basketball. I'm looking forward to having a good crowd in here tomorrow.

Q. You talked yesterday about kind of taking guard play to win in March and you guys have that. But I want to ask further about that because obviously the mold of most national champions in the past 20 years has been a top-20 offense, top-40 defense. You have the offense, maybe not the defense. Can this team break that mold and make a run?

NATE OATS: We had it for 30 minutes last night. I'm hoping that the sense of urgency that should come with an elimination tournament brings on the type of effort that would be top-40 defense.

So we haven't been there like we needed to for too many times this year, so it's not going to climb into the top 40. You can't move the needle that much in one game when you're comparing it to 34, 35, 36, whatever games we ended up playing here.

We're not going to get into the top 40 over the year, but I think we can be a top 40 defense for a however many game stretch here. Hopefully it's five more games, if we can keep this thing going. If we can have the No. 1 offense in the country and a top-30 or -40 defense, we have a chance to make a deep run.

I thought we had a top-30 or -40 defense for about 30 minutes. I do realize it's human nature that when you get up 31 and your guys think the game is over, they relax a little bit. I wish we hadn't done that because I think we really could have pitched a really great defensive game if we'd have stuck with it after we got up 31 to close the game out with.

I don't think we're going to get up 31 on Grand Canyon. I think they've got too many athletes. They're a really good team. Charleston was a good team, too, but Grand Canyon's level of athleticism is a lot different.

Whatever the score is, they hit a bunch of tough shots and we're down, we make a bunch of nice plays and get up, it shouldn't affect how hard we play. But I think, like you

said, top-20 offense, top-40 defense, my prayers, my hope is that we can show it with this elimination tournament and the sense of urgency brings that type of effort on.

Q. Nate, I'm wondering if the way the rules are now with transfer portal and NIL, in your opinion, it's easier to become an emerging program and jump up the way maybe Grand Canyon has the last couple of years, versus maybe the kind of program building you had to do when you were at Buffalo before you got to Alabama. Do you feel like that's the case now, that you can see more programs like Grand Canyon sort of emerging from the smaller, mid-major kind of conferences as we move forward?

NATE OATS: I think it's a good question. I think you're right on. If you've got an administration, a donor base that wants to contribute heavily to your collectives and you're able to go -- I think technically it's not supposed to be involved in recruiting. I think we all know how that works.

If you can put together a strong NIL collective, it makes recruiting a lot easier. So it's a lot easier to elevate a program quickly if you've got the support behind the program than it was -- I don't feel like I've been at this level very long. This is my fifth year at Alabama. I was only four years as a head coach at Buffalo and two years as an assistant, so I haven't been in Division I very long, 11 years now, but even if you go back seven, eight, nine years ago like when I was building Buffalo, you had to get a high school kid -- we ended up being 14th in the country at Buffalo and won some high-major games. But we had to -- I don't want to totally say get lucky, but you had to kind of hit on some high school kids that everybody else missed on, didn't think they were good enough.

Now if you're at a place like a Grand Canyon, shoot, some of these kids are coming back from some really good programs. They've got some transfers from -- it's not like these programs missed on them, they just went somewhere and had an NBA player playing in front of them, and they couldn't get enough minutes and want to play, and now they're going to come back down and now they're looking like they belong at the high-major school that they went to initially.

It's a lot easier to do that recruitment with some of the resources.

I don't know, Grand Canyon looks like they've got -- we played down there when I was an assistant at Buffalo. The crowd was great, facilities were great. You could tell they're investing in trying to build this program, and they hired Bryce Drew who's a high-major head coach that knows what he's doing. This program is definitely on the

rise. They won a tournament game. They've made multiple NCAA tournaments, and they've done -- between the administration and everybody involved around that program, they've done a great job raising it in a hurry over there.

Q. I saw you go to the Yale locker room after their game the other day. Can you talk about what you said to those guys in there?

NATE OATS: Well, I think Yale has won two NCAA Tournament games in the history of Yale basketball, correct? So their first tournament game that they won was over Baylor in Providence. Is that accurate? I was there. We played right after them. That was my first NCAA Tournament game in Buffalo, so I was obviously happy for Coach Jones then.

Now we're back in the same building. We play right after them. They got their second win.

Look, I don't know where they're going to get sent next year, but if they could maybe convince the committee if they're fortunate enough to make the tournament to send Alabama to play right behind them, they're 2-0 with Coach Oats following behind them in the tournament.

We took a kid Jordan Bruner -- you can't be a grad transfer and play in the Ivy League. So Jordan graduated, had one more year left, came -- that was our second year at Alabama, the first time we won the SEC regular season tournament, went to the Sweet 16. Jordan was our starting center.

I had known Coach Jones before that. Obviously we played Providence together and just through the business. But he was great with Bruner's recruitment. So I had gotten to know him a lot better.

It had nothing to do with the fact they beat Auburn. I know everybody wants to make that out to be. No. You want your league to do well. It looks a lot better for us if our league does really well.

It was just I've known Coach Jones, a lot of respect for him. I was at Buffalo as a 13 seed playing Arizona. I know the feeling in that locker room. I just wanted to -- I didn't talk to their team or anything. I just congratulated Coach Jones, who by the way an unbelievable coach. He's done great work at Yale for a long time. He's a great coach and a good friend in the business. I just want to congratulate James on a win.

Q. I wanted to ask about the impact Mark Sears has had on your program and also his mother is a big

proponent and cheerleader for him in the stands, as well. I wanted to get your thoughts on that.

NATE OATS: She's got a lot of energy, that's for sure. I don't ever see her. I'm focused on the game. When I go back and look at the TV replay after the game, she's telling me she's getting more into it on defense, so maybe it's like some synergy between the two of them. Like he gets in a better stance if she gets in a better stance on the defensive end.

She's got a lot of energy. We need Mark playing with the same energy she's cheering with. I think he's been pretty good here lately. I thought his defense was great yesterday.

Look, Mark is leading us in scoring. He's second team All-American and he's first team All-SEC. He's a really good player. Their family is from the state of Alabama. He's the one kid we've got on this team from the state of Alabama.

She's been following Alabama basketball for a long time, before Mark was even there. Now her son is one of the best players in the country playing for the in-state team. It's a good story. I'm glad that she's having a bunch of fun, and hopefully she continues to have a lot of fun for a couple more weeks here, and I'm all for her bringing her energy to the gym every game.

Q. You touched on something about human emotion earlier. Unfortunately yesterday we had some human emotion that cost a team possibly a loss yesterday with a player being ejected. At this point in the tournament, is there a time where you talk to your kids about how important staying emotionally fit, how important that is for your team to advance?

NATE OATS: Yeah, for sure. I mean, we've had some issues like that in the past, too. Guys get emotional, knee-jerk reaction decision that it's not in the game of basketball, and it costs you. We had a player suspended for a game earlier this year, and it's not who we want to be, and I know Coach Pearl, it's not what they want to be.

I had talked to my team even before that. I'm sure he did, too. But sometimes players make decisions and you don't have full control over your players' decisions. But I make the point to our team, it doesn't matter how much trash is talked, how much dirty play you feel is being done to you. We're trying to win on the scoreboard. We're not trying to win a rock fight. We're not trying to win a backyard brawl. That has nothing to do with the scoreboard.

If we're trying to win the game of basketball on the

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

scoreboard, anything that anything to do with giving the opponent an advantage, two free throws, ejection, that's not winning the game of basketball. I don't care to win a fight, a brawl, a trash-talking contest. None of that. If it brings a T and it helps them score more points, we don't want it.

When you lose and you go home, every single point matters, you look at how many one or two-possession games are in the NCAA Tournament. It comes down -- there's no time for -- I had it happen at Buffalo. We won three MAC tournament championships and were able to go to three NCAA tournaments in my four years there. The one year we didn't, we had a kid get a flagrant foul and it cost us in that game.

I've had similar incidents, and you feel for the rest of the Auburn team and Coach Pearl, because I'm sure that they all didn't want -- shoot, he was a good player for him. But you've got to make better decisions when the season is on the line.

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