

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Utah State vs Villanova

Thursday, March 19, 2026

San Diego, California, USA

Viejas Arena

**Utah State Aggies**  
**Coach Jerrod Calhoun**

**Karson Templin**

**MJ Collins Jr.**

**Mason Falsev**

**Drake Allen**

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by student-athletes Mason Falslev, Drake Allen, MJ Collins Jr. and Karson Templin.

**Q. You guys have played here as the enemy, so to speak, and wondering what kind of reaction you expect from the crowd here and what it might be like to play here when you're not playing San Diego State?**

DRAKE ALLEN: I think we're expecting it to be a good turnout. It's not too bad of travel from Utah. We're hoping we get this place rocking a little bit, a little bit of Spectrum magic in there.

It will be an excellent environment. March Madness is always awesome. So we're excited.

KARSON TEMPLIN: I think we're super excited. Viejas is a great venue, I think San Diego State does a great job when we're playing here. It's always fun to come and play.

But they're a fellow Mountain West team. So hopefully if they have some fans, they'll be rooting for us. But, yeah, we're expecting a great environment.

**Q. When we had a chance to ask MJ after the reveal show didn't know much about Villanova at the time. What have you guys come to learn about the Villanova team that you're going to be facing?**



MASON FALSEV: Obviously they're a good team. They got four good really good shooters and a really big center. And they're just solid. Good shooters, they shoot a lot of off-the-dribble 3s so we gotta be ready for that.

**Q. What's it like matching up against another guard-heavy team? You might not have to deal with the size disadvantage you would against a bigger squad.**

MJ COLLINS JR.: I think it's a blessing for us, considering the fact that we're a guard-heavy team as well. But we have some areas in the game plan to where we're going to go at their guards in different ways.

And I feel like they can't do that in certain areas based off of our defense and how we kind of game plan for certain teams. So I think everything should fall in our favor.

**Q. You guys are coming off four consecutive wins. How do you guys build off that momentum heading into the game against Villanova?**

MASON FALSLEV: It's all about momentum. You don't want to go into this tournament with any losses or any doubts. But I think we're full of confidence right now. We just gotta keep it going.

On the offensive end, we've got to be aggressive. And on the defensive end we know that that's when we're at our best. When we're best on defense we play our best basketball. So defensive momentum is probably the most important thing. We've got to carry it no matter who we're playing, our defense matters.

**Q. The program has now made the NCAA Tournament for four straight years, which is a program record. Mason, you've been here all four of those years, playing for three. What kind of experience have you had playing in this tournament that you can maybe help to coach other guys through that may be haven't, there are a lot of guys that are here for the first time as well?**

MASON FALSEV: Like you said, I've been fortunate to be a part of this tournament four times. I'd just say enjoy it. Soak up every moment. Because you don't know if you



have another chance. Not a lot of people can say they've played in March Madness. Just give it all you've got and leave it all on the court.

**Q. Calling the tournament the revenge tour, what did that kind of do for your guys locker room in terms of your togetherness and just the belief you have heading into the tournament?**

MJ COLLINS JR.: It made us lock in for sure. I feel like going into Vegas last week everybody was bought in. Coach made an emphasis on our keyword being momentum and we kind of carried that through the tournament, the three days.

Then, of course, like I said, it being a revenge tour -- everybody we played they beat us. So we were just on edge. And we had to get our payback.

It was just kind of odd, like I said, a lot of us probably wanted to play New Mexico in the championship. But just basically how the chips fall, we had to beat every team that we played just based off how the bracket was going that weekend. We've just got to be able to take the momentum that we had last weekend, bring it here to San Diego.

**Q. I believe all four of you played on teams that made the NCAA Tournament last year, but did come up short in the first game. So what are you taking from last year in terms of the experience of getting back here but also trying to win this game and hopefully more?**

DRAKE ALLEN: I think we all know what it felt like losing in the first round last year. It's not a great feeling. Kind of makes it feel like everything you've done up to that point -- we know the goal of this team was to make it here. Now that we've made it, we have a goal of winning a couple of games. And we truly believe that we can do that.

We have that same edge. The same edge like we were in Vegas to beat all those teams that beat us. We have the same edge to get past the first round but not only that, winning a game in the second and third round as well.

**Q. Mason, did you notice a difference last year and the year before in terms of preparation or anything that happened in the tournament that was the difference between winning a game a couple years ago and not doing as well last year?**

MASON FALSLEV: I think it all comes down to defense, especially late in the year when everyone's tired. I think if you want to win games, you have to play defense. That's what we've really bought into, and that's what we need to do if we want to win is play defense. And I think if we play

good defense, it's going to lead to good offense.

**Q. Drake, these guys have talked about you having a daddy power now. Can you talk a little bit about -- is there some truth to that? Because your numbers definitely have gone up since you've become a father?**

DRAKE ALLEN: I wouldn't call it that. I would just say my why's changed. A little bit more excitement, less sleep, more excitement. But it's been good. I think like I said my why's changed. I have a different purpose when I get on the floor now.

Being a dad, I want my wife to be proud. I want my son to be able to tell his friends when he's older my dad was a hooper. Just a different change of mind, change of purpose.

**Q. How do you guys see yourselves in this game because there's an aspect of mid-major against high-major. You guys are the 9 seed, but there are places that are having you guys as the favorite in this game. How do you look at yourselves in terms of approaching this game against this opponent?**

KARSON TEMPLIN: I feel we got disrespected by our seed. Our resumé was very good. We won a lot of games this year. So we expect ourselves to win games. We're prepared very well for this team and will do the best we can to win it.

**Q. How does playing in Viejas Arena every year having the experience you have on this floor help with tomorrow's game?**

MASON FALSLEV: Like Karson said, Viejas is a great venue. You guys have great fans. To be honest, when we come here, it's a very hard place to play. I think in the last 15 years, we've only won one time.

But it's nice to have some familiarity, coming here and shooting and being in a place where we've been before on neutral turf. I'm excited.

**Q. Mason, you mentioned defense in the question for anybody, but kind of towards the end of the regular season that was an area you guys struggled, and then kind of the last four games, especially in the conference tournament, really locked in, got back to forcing turnovers getting points off turnovers. Just how do you kind of parlay that into the this game against a team that tends to take care of the ball?**

MJ COLLINS JR.: I feel like we just gotta be ourselves. Just, like, I said follow the scout. The coaches do a good

job at it giving us a game plan. So it's just up to us sticking to it.

And our defense is based on forcing turnovers. So I think you know we pressure the ball, get into the other team and rebound and I think everything can take care of itself.

We're great at scoring the ball, averaging probably like 70, 80 points. So if we can get, you know, 20 of those off of turnovers, then you know, the game will pretty much take care of itself.

**Q. You guys aren't shy about your confidence, talking about being underseeded, stuff like that. Do you think you have to worry about bulletin board material at all in March? Or is everyone ready to play once the Big Dance begins?**

KARSON TEMPLIN: I think everyone's going to be ready to go regardless of the situation, you know. Both teams are going to be fired up. It's an NCAA Tournament game. It's what you watch as a kid, you watch on TV your whole life. So I think everyone's going to be motivated no matter what. But I think you have to have some confidence to win a game, or a couple games.

**Q. This is a team that you guys have only played once many years ago, 1960. How does that unfamiliarity with the team, what do you guys change in your approach to preparing for the game?**

DRAKE ALLEN: You just gotta dig into the scout more time. When you play a team three times like you do in conference, you kind of know what it is the third time around you know the ins and outs the players' tendencies, when you play a team like this with a short time to prepare, you just gotta dig in, right? Whether it's watching film, watching games, launch your own scout. Well, you need to get better at leading into the game so just a little bit more time digging in because all those little things can make a difference in a big game like this.

**Q. This is a Villanova team that's very dangerous, pick-and-roll attack and you know Duke Brennan and basically any of the guards but Lewis, kind of especially, just how much attention is that particular aspect of their offense kind of drawing your attention during preparation?**

MASON FALSLEV: Like I said we've been focusing on defense and our coaches have dug into a lot of games and they figured out what we need to do in order to be successful. So we're just trying our best to follow our coach's game plan.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Coach Calhoun.

JERROD CALHOUN: Extremely grateful to be here, excited about the match-up. We've had good prep. Obviously it's going to be a difficult game. We're really excited to be here.

**Q. You've talked a lot this season about when your defense is able to get set, you guys have been really good. Villanova is a team that doesn't really get out in transition a whole lot. I guess how much does that potentially play to your advantage where there's going to be a lot of plays where you're going to get your defense set?**

JERROD CALHOUN: I mean, I think sometimes people talk a lot about defense, but it's really your offense, right? We've gotta run good offense to get our defense set, right? So if we're turning the ball over, we're taking bad shots, that's going to lead to run-outs for Villanova.

But we've got to be who we are. I think NCAA Tournament time, it's about playing to your strength, playing your identity. We've been really good at creating turnovers, flying around, playing green, which has then led to good offense.

So we've gotta continue to be who we are, finish plays. I think that's the biggest thing, is finishing with good boxouts. And they're going to shoot a lot of 3s, and we gotta box out and finish plays.

**Q. How did playing for Rollie Massimino impact the coach you eventually would become?**

JERROD CALHOUN: That's a very complicated question. Coach Mass took a gamble on me. I was a local kid in the Cleveland area. Paul on my staff, Molinari, had a big part of that. Paul ended up coaching me in college, and then he ended up being in my wedding. He's one of best friends.

So what Coach Mass taught me about running a program is family. We run it very similar to the way he did. Our student managers are a big part of our program, our support staff, our administration.

I don't know if there was another coach that I've ever seen really bring people together like Coach Mass. He was very charismatic. He had energy every day. He never had a bad day. His wife was incredible, Mary Jane. Used to cook us pasta every two weeks. His sons were a big part of the program.

A lot of what we do structurally is from Coach Mass. It's

pretty surreal to be coaching. I'm sure he'd be proud against his favorite team.

**Q. You talked a lot about practice days, having good practices. Playing three games in three weeks or three games in three days last week, how have you recovered from that? How have practices been this week?**

JERROD CALHOUN: I think there's a fine line of contact, bone-on-bone contact, and you're getting good in your concepts. So we've done a little bit of both. I think the guys are excited.

But we've really taken a really smart approach to it, Brandon Buskey is a big part of that, our strength coach. We don't want to overdo it. But we've also got to get some conditioning in.

I thought the way we approached it was really good. You can't lose your endurance this time of year, but you have to be healthy. Guys are all banged up. Basketball is a long season.

I liked what we did. I thought it was really good. And I think we've had good practices.

**Q. The players were just in here talking about playing in this arena over the last 15 years, different experiences, not just this team. But you win at home against San Diego State University, but you fall to them here. What's it like playing in this arena going into March Madness but then also get your first tournament game here at this site?**

JERROD CALHOUN: We beat them in here last year in an epic game. Tucker Anderson made a game-winner. So our guys are used to San Diego.

You know, I said this when the seed came out. I think it's one of the best cities in America. You know, where we're staying, it's breathtaking. We're overlooking the water. It's 80 degrees. It's hot in here. We're outside. There's very few sites for our fans that have these amenities.

Also, travel's real easy. We get on a plane and we're 75, 80 minutes away. So a lot of our returning guys are used to Viejas, I think one of the best venues. The Aztecs have just a tremendous following.

This is a basketball place. So I think it's a great venue and really good for us, personally.

**Q. You overlapped with Kevin Willard in the Big East when you were an assistant at West Virginia. How has**

**he stayed the same and changed as a head coach over the last 15 years?**

JERROD CALHOUN: I think what makes Kevin Willard really good, obviously he can recruit. He has a system. He does a tremendous job of changing his defenses up. He's learned from one of the best to ever do it. But then he's put his stamp on it.

The guy wins everywhere he's been. I thought it was a home-run hire when he went to Villanova. We've got to be ready for a lot of different things. He makes you adjust as a coach.

I've watched about eight, nine games of theirs. I watched a lot of tape on this team. And they can win in a variety of ways. I think that's what makes good programs. They can win really pretty, where they're making 3s. They can win ugly.

He has the ability to play different lineups. And I thought he's done as good a job for a first-year coach at Villanova in this era, getting them back in the NCAA Tournament. Just an A-plus hire and an A-plus performance by him and his team.

**Q. You talked on Sunday about making history in the regular season and conference tournament but then wanting to make more history this weekend. How have you been able to impress that on the mind of your players?**

JERROD CALHOUN: Just have an edge. We ad an edge. We won three games, three days. Having an edge is playing every possession, possession by possession. Whether it's on offense, defense, coming out of a timeout, understanding the details of the scout, what pick-and-roll coverage you're in, setting your defense, finishing around the rim -- we've got to do all those things. And it starts in your prep.

We've got a little bit more prep today on the court. We've got a little more prep at the hotel with the film session. And then not being anxious. I think a lot of these teams, as you watch them, they get anxious, whether it's shooting the ball or just playing in general.

There's a lot of hoopla with the NCAA Tournament, rightfully so. It's the greatest tournament on earth. But our guys have played in this environment before. We've got multiple guys, not just our returning guys that have done it together, but we've got a lot of transfers that played in the NCAA Tournament, too. So stick to who we are and keep that edge.

**Q. MJ said the Mountain West Tournament was sort of like a revenge tour. How have you seen the locker room have an extra jewel of just confidence and belief because of what you guys did in the tournament?**

JERROD CALHOUN: It kind of goes back to coach Massimino and the guys that I've learned under Coach Huggins, and Jeff Young at Walsh. I think messaging is really important to your team. There's certain parts of a season that you've got to break some things out. And we kind of broke that out. And it worked out really well.

UNLV had beaten us, Nevada, San Diego State. The last time we played those teams, they beat us. So I've come up with a lot of messaging. We had former players, former coaches, our donors -- I thought Jim Laub gave a great speech to our guys. And every game, we have a different speaker. After we eat pregame meals.

So I wanted them to know this was our revenge tour. They really bought into that.

**Q. Drake, his life has changed a lot in the last month. How has he balanced just getting enough sleep and enough rest at this time of the year?**

JERROD CALHOUN: Obviously it's a tremendous opportunity for him and his wife. She's on the trip. Once again, she's part of our family. So making sure that they're comfortable. The baby was sound asleep on the plane.

And Drake's done a great job managing that. I mean, we didn't know if he was going to play for a couple of games. We had no idea.

And everything worked out great. Healthy baby. He's getting his sleep. And honestly, he's playing inspired. He's now playing for somebody else, his son, as well.

**Q. You mentioned kind of being anxious a little bit. This is now obviously your second year in a row. Last year didn't go how you wanted. Maybe looked a little anxious against UCLA. How do you adjust, and what things did you learn from last year coming into this game?**

JERROD CALHOUN: Yeah, there's different points in a game where it can go north or south. I thought the end of the first half, UCLA last year went really south. We never recovered. It was 24-23. They went on a 13-0 run, I think, to the end of the first half.

Gotta manage different parts of a game. And those returning players remember that, and that's got to inspire them to play 40 minutes.

**Q. The last month and a half you've been playing teams that you're familiar with, conference opponents you were playing for a second or even third time. How do you kind of switch back to kind of a non-conference mode, where this is a team you knew nothing about, really, as far as on the court?**

JERROD CALHOUN: I mean, I think it's exciting learning, you know, learning a new system. To me as a coach, there's nothing better than game prep. How are you going to use 45 minutes, an hour, whatever our length of practices are? What's our film sessions going to look like?

I've learned in the Big East it's very physical conference. Villanova's guards are very physical. They try to bully the ball. They get in the gaps. They play very green. They go for steals.

Duke Brennan is a tremendous get for them. He is a guy that really knows who he is. Plays well with their guards. Lewis is a tremendous freshman, as good as anybody in the country.

So just continue to learn about them much, implement our system, the game plan. That's what makes March Madness so fun. There's not a lot of sleep for the coaches. There's a lot of coffee intake. I may challenge Coach Willard to a coffee, see who can drink the most. I saw something, he said he's about 13 cups a day. I'm not quite to that level, but probably half of that.

**Q. You mentioned messaging is really important for the team. At this time of year, how important is it for the messaging to come from the players and not to be led by the coaches?**

JERROD CALHOUN: I mean, that's how you go from good to great. Our last month, our leadership from Drake and Mason and MJ, this is a special team. You don't win a regular season and a tournament title if you don't have special people in the organization.

And I think those three kids have really taken extreme ownership of timeouts, coming out of timeouts, our huddles, practices when we need to pick it up.

And we've got guys off the bench that have great leadership. Karson Templin, his voice is heard very loud on our team. So we get a lot of leadership in different ways. Some by example. Some by using their voice. But I think you hit it on the head. You go from good to great. Great teams are led by the players.

**Q. How do you match up against Duke Brennan, a**

**player who has obviously had a very significant role for the Wildcats but has also kind of had some experience on the West Coast playing for Grand Canyon?**

JERROD CALHOUN: Yeah, I mean, I think that was one of the better portal gets in last year's cycle. I think by committee. Kind of how we've done it all year. Gary Clark has really come on strong lately. Zach Keller has carried us. And Karson Templin has been tremendous, sixth man of the Mountain West.

So I think you have to do it by committee. The thing that makes him great, Duke, is his motor. There's very few players in the country who have his size and his ability to go get the basketball.

When I watch him play, he really knows who he is, and I think a lot of guys try to play outside their comfort zone. He's comfortable in his own skin, and he knows who he is and he's a winner, and he makes winning plays.

**Q. Speaking of the forwards by committee. You've got a lot of guys in that 15- to 20-minute range. Do you kind of just ride the hot hand? What goes into deciding who to play at what moment?**

JERROD CALHOUN: I mean, every game presents different match-ups. I think you have to go into a game, have you a game plan and all game plans are typically off, right? Because you've got to change things.

We have done that. We've done it by committee, who is playing well. Foul trouble. Obviously this time of year you have to play really smart. You have to win those margins. You can't put good teams at the line. So you've got to play good defense without fouling. But it's a feel thing, and then sometimes a match-up thing.

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