

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

Thursday, March 19, 2026

San Diego, California, USA

Viejas Arena

**Villanova Wildcats**

**Coach Kevin Willard**

**Duke Brennan**

**Tyler Perkins**

**Acaden Lewis**

Media Conference



here.

I think we're ready to go hoop our energy's been great the past two days in practice we've been playing against each other. We're just ready to go. I think it's nothing month to say.

**Q. Tyler, you kind of talked about how you only had a general understanding what this Utah State team brings with their guard lineups. Now that you've had a few days to kind of unpack, scout teams, et cetera, looking at film, what does this team bring on the court that you guys have kind of looked at through the film this week?**

**TYLER PERKINS:** I mean they're a really good team. They've got a lot of really good players. And a lot of shooters, high-level scorers. So it's going to be a good game. We know what we have to do though. We have to get back in transition. They like to play fast, but we just have to stick to our habits and our principles.

**Q. Duke, I know earlier this week you had talked about your excitement of returning to the West Coast. How has that emotion maybe changed or grown since you actually arrived in San Diego?**

**DUKE BRENNAN:** It's been great. Coming out here especially you walk off that plane and it's sunny. It feels good. But just seeing these dudes experiencing it, come out here, you're playing for a great team in Villanova and playing know on the West Coast has been amazing. And, I mean, I think we're all enjoying it. But we're focused on the game tomorrow and pushing it into the weekend.

**Q. Tyler, I'm wondering, when you decided to come back here last year, from everything that was going on with the program, to now, how do you kind of put into perspective all that has gone on? And what's it like for you sitting up here today and getting ready to play in an NCAA Tournament game?**

**TYLER PERKINS:** I'm just extremely grateful to be in this position. Last year wasn't the position we wanted to be in. But when I had my talks with Coach Willard and he told me about what his plan was and what his vision was I believed in it. And that's one of the reasons why I came back.

**THE MODERATOR:** We're joined by Duke Brennan, Acaden Lewis and Tyler Perkins.

**Q. Acaden, you're a freshman this year and experiencing a lot of things for the first time. How much did Tyler have an impact on your ability to get through everything? He's a quiet leader in some ways. In what ways does that show itself?**

**ACADEN LEWIS:** I think Tyler's been great for me and just the whole team in general. I think he's done a great job of keeping us mellow in a lot of games and he's always just a voice, something that you hear -- same thing with Duke. He's always here. Both of these guys are older, a little more experienced than me and some of the other people on the team.

I think they're both done a great job of just being there for everybody. In the big games they're always there they're always solid. So I think they're just always here.

**Q. To follow up on that, a few days ago you said that at Selection Sunday you were still trying to process the hype around it and get used to everything as a freshman. What have the last few days been like for you as you get closer to game time?**

**ACADEN LEWIS:** They've been great. I've been enjoying myself out here in San Diego. The vibe's a lot nicer than Philly, to be honest. You walk outside, it's a little nicer. And I went by the pool yesterday, just chilled, hung out with my guys. Everything's just been nice since we got out



And all the guys that have been on this team has been we all get along and it's been nothing but amazing this year. But, I mean, the job's not finished, but it's been a blessing to be a part of this position.

**Q. Acaden, how do you feel you've developed as a defender as the year's gone on? You lead the team in steals. You know you'll have to face some good guards tomorrow. How are you kind of preparing?**

ACADEN LEWIS: Something we always say in practice, is just take some eyeball, and I think that's been something that I've just kind of taken and ran with.

Just trying to pressure the ball. And when you pressure the ball up top and you make stuff, you muck it up a little bit, makes plays harder to run, makes actions harder to run, messes up passes, makes shooters not catch it in the pocket.

My goal every game is to be as disruptive as I can. Everyone makes mistakes on the defense but if you can be disruptive, use your hands well and let your hands go, I think it will help everybody else out as well as you.

And also offense is way easier when you get stops and steals. You get to run, you get in a rhythm earlier, you get some of the nerves out, especially in the big games.

**Q. Acaden, going off that, talking about defense, after that Georgetown loss, outrebounded by a little bit, you talked about guards rebounding for this team. This team that you're facing, Utah State has a big heavy guard lineup, a lot of 3-point balls, a lot of long rebounds are going to come. Over the last week -- and Tyler, if you could address this -- what has the rebounding been like with the guards? What has been that kind of the message been on defense and rebounding?**

ACADEN LEWIS: Making sure the guards stay at the elbows and don't run in and let the ball fly over their head. I mean Duke does a great job of just getting any ball that's around the basket. Anything in the paint's usually him. So everything else that flies out is me, Perk, Dev, Chris, Bryce -- all the guards. The guards gotta get in there and just we gotta battle.

I watched a couple games so far from March Madness, First Four games, and dudes are in there battling. All the guards, no matter how tall, are in there rebounding, fighting. That's gotta be us.

**Q. They play a match-up zone. You guys utilize a**

**match-up zone from time to time. Any advantage, like what's it been like looking at that? You see it sometimes in practice. What kind of that defense their defense looking like?**

DUKE BRENNAN: We'll be ready for any action they throw at us, but this is March Madness now, so every team is going to come out and play the best they can and hardest they can.

And we need to have that mindset and energy pushing into tomorrow. And whatever comes, whatever battle down in the paint and stuff like that, but we have to be ready for it.

**Q. How do you guys feel that Coach Willard's experience in the tournament has kind of factored into any advice he's given or just preparation for this upcoming game?**

TYLER PERKINS: It's been great. The whole season, we've all been only ears to what he's been saying. We all trust him. We all understand. He's a really good coach. Anything that he has to say, I mean, we're all ears. We're listening. We're locked in on the details that he tells us every day. It's definitely a good feeling to have a coach like that on our team, but, yeah, for sure.

**Q. There's been some times these games this season, tough games where this second unit you guys have coming off the bench has really changed the game, the course of the game. Going into this tournament, obviously the lineups look a little different, benches look a little different, what have you seen from the bench guys that have really given you the lift when maybe the game's not going your way?**

ACADEN LEWIS: I think for us, that starts in practice. Blue versus white. Something we always say, white on defense first when we play at home, blue on defense, or whatever, anything like that. And I think we play so hard in practice, and those guys get basically game reps.

And when they come in the game it's just like they know what to do, especially C. Jeff. Shout out to C. Jeff. C. Jeff is always ready to go no matter how many minutes he plays. He could come in for five minutes. He could play 10, 15, he's just ready to go. He's going to get after whoever's on the ball. He's going to play hard and he's always going to bring a spark.

The same thing with other guys off the bench. Devin comes in with more of a scoring role. But C. Jeff and Dev come off the bench and they just change the game. And it's happened multiple games this year. It's definitely not a fluke. I know they'll be ready tomorrow.



**Q. Coach said in the beginning of the year that you guys are a younger team so you did more team bonding stuff, like playing bingo and things. What else have you guys done this year to foster that kind of togetherness given that you're a younger team coming into this tournament?**

TYLER PERKINS: In the locker room, we're joking with each other. When we go on trips when we have downtime some guys will go like the malls and stuff and just walk around and spend time with each other. Because that's how we build chemistry on the court is off the court. Like Acaden said yesterday, some of the guys were at the pool just chilling and stuff like that. I mean we all love being around each other, and I feel that's why it helps us on the court.

THE MODERATOR: We've got Villanova head coach Kevin Willard.

**Q. What do you remember about your initial pitch to Tyler when you wanted him to play for you and come back to school? And what do you remember about your expectations for him, and has he outlived those expectations?**

KEVIN WILLARD: I think with Perk, it was obviously there was no one on the roster that had played in the Big East. So it was kind of important to me to keep someone that knew the league and kind of knew what was going on.

I just told him that he was going to be a big part of what we're going to try to build, and that, I think for Tyler, too, being part of Villanova was very special for him. So I think it worked out that I needed somebody that had experience, and I think he knew that being at Villanova is special.

So I think as the year has gone on, he's gotten better and better, not only on the court, but I think as a leadership, I think he finally started understanding what his role is on the court and off the court, and I think guys really listen to him.

**Q. Coach Calhoun had mentioned that your father was somewhat of the architect of the matchup zone defense he plays. A lot of times Utah State plays teams, especially in non-conference, they're not familiar. How much does that familiarity help you learning it at the dinner table help you in this game tomorrow?**

KEVIN WILLARD: I had to listen to my dad when I drew Utah State because Coach Calhoun does it probably better than anybody. And I've tried it. The match-up zone is really difficult.

And I think what I've seen from them is, the difference from last year's team to this year's team, is guys that have played in it multiple years. And I think that's why it's so good now is it's a defense where most of the time they don't know what they're doing. So that means the offense has no clue what they're doing. That's kind of what it was always designed to be.

Circle around the 5 man, keep your 5 man low. Try to keep him out of as much pick-and-roll coverage as possible. And I think Coach Calhoun -- the difference, I watched their UCLA game last year -- the difference from last year to this year's team is it's crazy how much better they are at it. And he's taken what my dad's defense was, and he's actually made it even a little bit better in my opinion.

**Q. You've had a week now to kind of break down this Utah State team. Coach Calhoun was in talking about how much little sleep you guys get and coffee you guys drink. Now that you've seen it. You kind of had a general understanding of what this team is, what do you see now, what's the biggest thing that stands out to you going forward?**

KEVIN WILLARD: I think I'm so impressed with how connected they are. I always say, you know a team's good by how they communicate, and if you could see a team communicate on film, then you know they're really good. And this is a team, when I watched them on film, from the first moment -- I watched their last five games -- from the first moment I watched film I knew they were going to be a really good team because they communicated.

Not only did they communicate during the play, but what I've been most impressed with, with guys like Collins and all these older guys, is that they really come together when there's a dead ball.

And more than anything, they are an older team, they're physical, they're very good defensively. But they're so connected and they communicate so well on both ends of the court. And for them to win as many games and go through the Mountain West Conference tournament like they did just shows how good they are.

**Q. Couch Calhoun had recently just talked about and emphasized the physicality of the Big East. How important have you made it to the team continuing that physicality in this tournament?**

KEVIN WILLARD: Yeah, I wouldn't -- just watching film, you know, I don't watch a whole lot of West Coast basketball just because of the time zone. It just doesn't

work. I watch a little bit of UCLA because of Mick and how good of friends we are. But even then he's on at 10:00 at night. It's usually towards the end.

But just watching their last five games, I was so impressed with how physical that conference is. And from a rebounding standpoint, that was something that we really struggled with in the Georgetown game, that's something we've really talked about the last four or five days in practice of just getting back to understanding that we have to be physical on the defensive end.

**Q. You have so much experience in the NCAA Tournament. Having such a young team what have you told them? What has been the message to them over the last couple days, now that you're here in San Diego?**

KEVIN WILLARD: I mean, I think at first just to really enjoy the fact that you're one of the best -- to get an at-large bid is really hard. If you get an at-large bid it means you've really had a good year all year. You've been consistent and you've been good.

So my message, really just to enjoy it at the start. But then once we hit Tuesday it was more about, all right, now it's back to business. We've been really good on the road. You know, this is a road game for us. Let's just get back to really focusing on every possession and block everything else. That's the great thing about going on the road in college is that you kind of get away from everything. That's been my message to them.

**Q. Because you have at least a baseline understanding and it's in your blood, the match-up zone, do you have an inherent understanding of how to attack it? And how does one beat this zone?**

KEVIN WILLARD: Again, what's really cool about my dad's defense and what Coach Calhoun has done with it, is he's put his own spin on it. It's not like I'm going to call my dad up and be, like, all right, what gave you the hardest time? Because what gave him the hardest time might be totally different than what gives Coach Calhoun's defense a totally different time.

So we have a good feel for what we need to do to attack it. I think we're going to have to adjust during the game because there's one thing -- it's morphed into a little bit more of a man-to-man than it was last year. Last year I think it was a little bit more of a traditional 2-3 match-up. It's kind of morphed into a little bit more of a man-to-man switching, not making nearly as many runs.

This time of year, you really can't reinvent the wheel of who

we are offensively. So we're just going to have to make sure -- the other night against Georgetown we still, we rate -- our offense was rated like 1.4 points per possession per shot. We just didn't make shots.

I mean we're going to have to make shots against the defense because they do such a good job on penetration of really going after the basketball. They use their length good. They use their physicality.

I think that's what I've been most impressed with. They create turnovers for touchdowns. They capitalize on their turnovers so well, probably as good as any team I've seen in a long time.

**Q. When the players were just in here, I was asking them about the second unit and sometimes the backup bench has changed the pace of the game.**

KEVIN WILLARD: Do we have a second unit?

**Q. Over the course of the season. But Acaden name dropped Chris Jeffrey, and said he's in practice, in games, he makes every use of every minute he has. What have you seen from Chris Jeffrey coming off the bench and having an impact?**

KEVIN WILLARD: I hope I get to coach Chris for as long as possible. Chris is one of those unselfish players in a selfish time.

He really showed his true character when he could have peaced out and tried to redshirt. He sacrificed that for the better of the team. I think a big reason why we played so well in the second half of the season is we had guys looking at what Chris was sacrificing and what he was doing and really respected the shit out of that, to be honest with you. And I think Chris will get rewarded next year because of his sacrifice.

**Q. What's your relationship with Jerrod Calhoun like, obviously the stylistic similarities and stuff like that, but how long have you guys known each other?**

KEVIN WILLARD: I really don't know Jerrod that well, to be honest with you, just through coaching circles. He's bounced around a little bit. I've bounced around a little bit. I just respect him for the job he's done and the team he has.

**Q. You've got guys that can shoot the 3 off the bounce, which NBA guys can do that all day long. It's rare at the collegiate level. Is that something you're able to develop or recruit to? How have you been able to harness that?**

KEVIN WILLARD: It's a little bit of both. I think the way the game changed with the centers being out as much -- like, Devin Askew was a much better 3-point shooter off the bounce and the catch last year, statistically. But we also work on it a lot. So many teams now play drop coverage. One of the best ways, if you're going to play drop, you're going to have to shoot the 3 or you're going to probably have to shoot it off the dribble. We work on it a lot, but we also recruit guys that can really shoot the basketball.

**Q. Utah State has the opportunity to play here every year as a part of the Mountain West Conference. How do you think this venue and stare will affect tomorrow's game?**

KEVIN WILLARD: I think, actually, I think they play here -- this is one of the best college atmospheres there is -- so I think for them it might be actually nice just so they don't have to go against 11,000 people rooting against them.

I think in the NCAA Tournament, no matter what, you're pretty much on a neutral floor.

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