

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Northern Iowa vs St. John's

Thursday, March 19, 2026

San Diego, California, USA

Viejas Arena

**St. John's Red Storm**  
**Coach Rick Pitino**  
**Dillon Mitchell**

**Zuby Ejiofor**

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by student-athletes Dillon Mitchell and Zuby Ejiofor.

**Q. Zuby, I guess kind of being out here, 5 seed, you get sent to San Diego. You personally weren't chosen for any of the three All-American teams. Do you feel like your team is kind of being overlooked or disrespected right now?**

ZUBY EJIOFOR: I think it's our job not to worry about what people or outside perspective might perceive about this team. Our job is to go out there and battle, compete, each and every opportunity that we get. And it's a blessing, obviously, to still be playing in March.

We look forward to getting ready for a tough opponent here on Friday. And that's all we can control. All we can control is how hard we go in between the lines and stuff like that.

**Q. I'm sort of interested to hear each one of your takes on what might be different about Coach Pitino in terms of intensity and his methodology between whatever he was in January or February to now that you're in the tournament.**

ZUBY EJIOFOR: If there's any difference, obviously, you know, Coach Pitino is the ultimate competitor. And he's going to bring out the best in each and every one of us, and he's going to hold us accountable in the right way throughout the entire season. He doesn't change.

Obviously the stakes are higher now with the lose and you're out. But everything is, with the preparation and our level of focus has not changed from day one. These guys



are ready to compete for something that's a lot bigger than each and every one of us now.

It's a one-game at a time now. You lose and you're out. And we're here to compete. And we're really excited for the opportunity to come out here and do some special things.

DILLON MITCHELL: I'd say the same. We've treated every game this year like a tournament game. Obviously it's a little bit different now. You lose a game now, you're going home. But that's just the type of mindset that we've had throughout the season -- treating every game like a tournament game and going out there to get that win.

Now it's taking one game at a time and playing for 40 minutes, four-minute quarters for us and just going out there and doing anything we can to pull out a win.

**Q. Dillon, what did you think of Zuby not being any of the three All-American teams?**

DILLON MITCHELL: I mean, obviously we know what Zuby is the type of player he is, and he's one of the best players I've played with, personally, and what he's done in basketball and stuff. It is something that -- we haven't talked about, nothing like that, but I'm not going to say what I really think. But it's whatever.

**Q. Zuby, go back to the summer and the big thing that you always talked about was wanting to advance further in the NCAA Tournament than last year. Obviously winning the Big East was still a goal. But you talked a lot about wanting to advance further. Now that you're here, kind of what does that feel like and wanting to advance further than what you guys did last year?**

ZUBY EJIOFOR: Like I said earlier, it's really a blessing to be able to play March. It's my last go-around here. It is for not only me, but for a lot of -- like half the team, honestly.

So we have an opportunity to make something special out of this year. Obviously we already did some exciting things in the regular season and in the Big East Tournament. But now we can just put all that in the past and really focus in on making a run. It's six games, one game at a time, like



Mitch said.

For 40 minutes, four-minute intervals, it's how we're thinking about, winning each four minutes and going out and competing at a high level. But at the same time, just having fun with this opportunity, because, like I said, not everybody gets a chance at this.

**Q. Zuby, so it didn't bother you that you weren't on any of the three All-American teams?**

ZUBY EJIOFOR: Not really. I feel like the only people that I'm worried about is how I approach each and every day. I would say that my teammates and my coaching staff think differently of me than the AP voters and stuff like that.

So it didn't bother me in the least bit. All I can do is control what I can control. And that's how hard and my effort and my level of competitiveness each and every game.

**Q. A lot of coaches and players we've spoken to earlier today have been asked about Coach Pitino and being in the same arena as him, playing against him. Do you guys as players ever take time to just sort of savor the fact that you're being coached by such a legendary person in basketball?**

DILLON MITCHELL: Obviously Zuby has been with him a little minute now. But it is pretty crazy to me. Even now, seeing him every day, I'm, like, I'm really playing for Coach Pitino. It really is kind of crazy.

Even when I first committed, my mom and everybody like that, they didn't know too much about Coach P. When I came on my visit, I was star struck, like I was meeting a celebrity, which I pretty much was, 100 percent.

Obviously it's a blessing, you hear so much about him. But being with him every day and learning under him, it's the best experience I've ever had.

**Q. Zuby, however long this run lasts, what's this mean to you? You've obviously accomplished so much at St. John's over the last three years. But what does this NCAA Tournament mean to you and what would it mean to you to get this program back to the Sweet 16, which it hasn't done since 1999?**

ZUBY EJIOFOR: It would mean a lot. Obviously it would say that St. John's is trending in the right direction. And I've said it pretty much all year -- obviously it starts with Coach Pitino and the staff and who they brought into the program the last two, three years.

But like I've said, it's one final opportunity for me and a few

of my teammates. So we're trying to make the best of this year. And we've already made some special things. But we have one more goal in mind, and all we can do is just come in here with a high level of focus and come in each and every day and compete.

**Q. Dillon, the way your team played in the Big East Tournament, did you learn anything that maybe you didn't know, the fact how dominant you guys were and just never trailing?**

DILLON MITCHELL: I think it just comes down to how we came out -- in the game, in those three games, we came out to great starts. And, obviously, we won those games. So I think it just comes down to how we come out with the right approach and not just kind of play the pace of the game, start the pace of the game and start how we want to start.

And we had some games this year where we went down, we had to fight back. And that's not type of game we want to be in.

So with us, it's coming out with that same approach this year. I mean, this tournament, just taking it one game at a time. I mean, for some of us, this could be our last game, obviously. We don't have another year unless something happens whatever.

But you know this is our last year for us as seniors, so going out with the right approach every game.

**Q. Is that more important starting fast, considering the team you're playing tomorrow is one of the slowest-paced teams in the country?**

DILLON MITCHELL: Yeah, just not trying to play into the other people's pace, continue to be who we are, push the pace, play how we've played all year. I think that's where we're at our best.

THE MODERATOR: We're here with St. John's Coach Rick Pitino.

RICK PITINO: We're super excited to be here. I don't know if you could get better weather than what's out here. My team's really excited to be playing in March Madness and being part of it. And we're playing against, as we know, a great basketball team.

I have coached against this coach two different times, and we were life and death to beat them both times. And they're much better this year than the other two times I've faced them at Louisville.

So we're super excited to be here and very thankful to be out in San Diego.

**Q. How would you define your transfer-portal strategy in terms of building a roster? And how has it evolved over the years?**

RICK PITINO: Last year, we had a terrific team. We knew all the players. This year we just went after culture guys, guys that we felt were really going to play for the name on the front, not worried about stats or making it somewhere else. Just totally bought in.

And we spent so much time interviewing and researching every individual from Dillon Mitchell, to Bryce Hopkins, to Dylan Darling, to Oziyah Sellers -- every single guy we did our homework and beyond that, and we got great culture guys and it's paid off very well for us.

**Q. How key is it going to be, the speed at which this game is played? They obviously like to play slow. You guys want to play fast. How big is that?**

RICK PITINO: Well, it's like Seton Hall with great offensive players. That's who you're playing. This team would be one of the premier teams in the Big East. 70 percent of their players is back. The only blip in their schedule is when they had their power forward out and they lost four out of six.

But here's what I found out in coaching as long as I have. When you play against the Tony Bennetts and the Virginias, and you try to speed them up, it never works.

This team at the offensive end, may send five guys back on every possession. They totally take away your fast break. You know it's going to be a close game. You know you have to match their defensive intensity.

And it comes down to possessions, the team that gets the most possessions. And you're going to have to match them from the 3-point line, without question.

**Q. The idea of being a 5 seed and Zuby not being named to any of the All-American teams, are you using that as a motivation or a sense that your team is being a little bit overlooked coming into this tournament?**

RICK PITINO: Since I've been a coach, I don't think I've liked the media as much as I like the guys that cover us, meaning all of you. But you guys are so off base with that comment of we're going to play harder because we were (lost audio).

And Zuby, who gets more love than any player I've ever

witnessed in my lifetime, with 10 million people kissing his ass, how you can say the things that you say, that we're going to play harder because we're a 5 seed.

First of all, we're a 5 seed because the Big East is not regarded the way they used to be when I was at Louisville. So that's the problem. We beat a tremendous Providence team that could beat any team in this tournament but it was a Quad 3 win. So none of what you say makes sense.

We know we have to play so hard to beat Northern Iowa. And because we're a 5 seed in San Diego, overlooking the ocean, it's not going to play -- we're not going to play any harder than any game this season. So please get off that, because it makes no sense. And you know how much I respect your basketball acumen, all of you guys. But please don't write that or say that again, because I want you to keep that high level of excellence that you have.

**Q. Dillon was asked about Zuby not being on the All-American?**

RICK PITINO: Darling or Mitchell?

**Q. Mitchell was asked about Zuby not being on the All-American teams. And he said he didn't want to give his real opinion on it. Can you just talk about the level of respect that people have for him in the locker room?**

RICK PITINO: Zuby's one of the top players in the country. Zuby's going to be a great pro. When you lead a team that won the regular season, won the conference tournament, beating a tremendous team with Connecticut by 20 points, you lead the team in scoring, rebounds, blocked shots, assists for a center, you're one of the top players in all of basketball.

The AP writers don't always get it right. But he's one of the top players. You all know it. I don't have to tell you that. But, like I said, he's gotten so much love. There's nobody going to replace him in my mind as a head coach.

I don't think I've enjoyed coaching a player as much since 1987 when I coached Billy Donovan. And I'm going to miss him terribly. And I'm just going to appreciate him while I have him.

**Q. It feels like most of what we've talked to today, coaches and players have been asked about playing in the same arena as you or against you, and just being a legendary coach. What kind of influence do you think you have on up-and-coming coaches and players?**

RICK PITINO: I don't really know how to answer that. As

far as players, I hope that my players have grown as people. I'm hoping they've grown as basketball players.

The only thing I'd like to leave the fellow coaches, just have fun. March Madness -- I could be out of coaching next year. I really can be. You're 73. And I want to have the greatest time of my life.

I'm going to coach this game as if it's the last game I'll ever coach. Then if we're good enough to win, it's going to be here. If it's next year, I'm going to coach next year as if it's the last year I'm going to be on earth. And that's the way I coach.

But I also appreciate the blessings I've been given to be allowed to coach this long. Because it is a blessing. To be at St. John's coaching where you grew up, it's a blessing.

**Q. Zuby was kind of talking about last year and the disappointment of falling short. You do have some guys who experienced that. How much can that experience, you think, help you guys?**

RICK PITINO: It's not going to make us play harder. It's not going to make us play better. It's not going to make us hungrier because it's a totally different basketball team.

If we were like them with seven players back, it would be a little different. I've gone through that. I've gone through one Final Four it really hurt losing to Kentucky and then winning the championship after that.

So it's a totally different basketball team. It's not going to help. It's not going to hurt. It's going to be able to -- can we be as good as Northern Iowa defensively? Can we make 3s? Can we gain the possessions necessary to win? That's what it's going to come down to. None of the other peripheral stuff really matter in basketball.

**Q. You were talking a little bit early about transfer portal strategy and what you target in the portal. But zooming out, Tommy Lloyd was in here earlier talking about -- he was saying that he doesn't think the portal is quite as valuable now as it was a few years ago because of the COVID guys aging out. You obviously do not ascribe to that philosophy. You've continued to build your team heavily through the portal. Kind of wondering why that's been the case and kind of how you decided on your roster-building philosophy?**

RICK PITINO: Well, I think coaching in Arizona is a lot different than coaching St. John's. It's how you have to build your program. We're not -- although we have a lot of high school basketball players, we don't build through the high school ranks. We build through the portal.

And we keep the guys that want to come back and the ones that want to leave should leave. I look at the portal a different way to most people because I've been around so long. College basketball in the last two years, maybe three years, is the best product on the floor that I've seen in my lifetime -- the best basketball being played.

Right now there's probably 12 or 13 teams that could win the national championship. It's not always the case.

The product that's on the floor, because of the transfer portal, and the influx of European players no longer going to the Euroleague or EuroCup -- they're coming to play in the states because they can get paid more money. So I'm looking at some of the top European players right now, and they can play in the Euroleague.

So every program's different. Arizona's different than Duke. Duke's different than -- Duke and Arkansas are in the same boat. They're going to get the top seven high school players in the nation. Then there are teams like us that are different.

**Q. You're in a region with some of the best coaches in the world. Dan Hurley is here, Tom Izzo, Bill Self, guys who figured out how to win in the modern game. When you came in three years ago, was there anything that Dan Hurley was doing at UConn, in particular, because he's in the Big East, or any other top coach like the ones that we're talking about, that showed you some things that you could do to get St. John's to where it's gone in just a very short period of time?**

RICK PITINO: I'd say no, nothing that Danny did that was going to alter my beliefs. And I do think he's awesome. Or Tom Izzo, who I think is awesome. Or any of the other people you named. Bill Self. But nothing they do made me change the way we play or the way they do things.

But the respect level I have for all the guys that are in this region is beyond the sky. I think they're all tremendous coaches.

And I think there are a lot of great young coaches in the game that are going to take our place. Tremendous coaches.

We saw a young man at Siena, who almost beat Duke playing five players. Never heard of that before. Playing five players.

Just tremendous coach doing that at Siena. I know I coached in that conference, in the MAAC, tremendous job doing that. And maybe we'll see him at Syracuse.

