

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

Friday, March 20, 2026

San Diego, California, USA

Viejas Arena

**Utah State Aggies**

**Coach Jerrod Calhoun**

**Mason Falslev**

**MJ Collins Jr.**

**Adlan Elamin**

**Drake Allen**

Media Conference

Utah State - 86, Villanova - 76

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Utah State.

JERROD CALHOUN: Really want to tip our cap to Villanova. I thought that was just a tremendous basketball game. They're very well-coached. I thought Kevin did a great job of really changing up the defenses, man, zone. They made an incredible amount of 3s. They put a ton of pressure in the paint.

So Kevin is a tremendous coach, but our guys in the last seven, eight minutes, I thought we really buckled down. Our execution offensively was tremendous, our screening, getting to the next action. And I thought what won the game was our will-to and our want-to. This team has been very connected throughout the year. And in March, you have to be connected.

**Q. Mason and MJ, as your coach alluded to, the season is on the line. What went into raising your level of play to take the game away?**

MJ COLLINS: Our defense. Coach came in at halftime and we was in a good spot down two. We weren't making 3s so we knew we had to rely on our defense. And it kind of carried us over in the second half.

That's what we're known for, getting our offense and based off our defense. We switched up a couple coverages late



in the game, and it kind of messed them up, and they were kind of stagnant and we executed off of it.

**Q. Drake, when a team makes 14 3-pointers against you just how do you try to adjust to that while not then giving up a lot of points in the paint?**

DRAKE ALLEN: Yeah, I think it's a testament to Villanova. They're a very good basketball team. And I think they made some 3s that were contested and sometimes we made errors and gave them some open ones, right?

We knew they were going to shoot a lot of 3s, and I think we got lost a couple times.

But all you do is keep battling. You can't throw your hands up in the air. You can't say, oh, my goodness, you know, just gotta move on to the next play and keep on fighting.

**Q. MJ, Utah State led the Mountain West in fast-break points. Did you feel like Villanova started to wear down once your guys' transition game started clicking?**

MJ COLLINS: Yeah, for sure, I know we came the huddle. And Coach was like they were wearing down. We strive off our depth and they played seven, eight guys, so we knew at some point they were going to wear down.

They shot the cover off the ball early. You can't really maintain that for a whole 40 minutes.

**Q. Adlan, kind of talk about some of those plays in that first half. It seems like you really got the crowd going with some of those dunks?**

ADLAN ELAMIN: That was really just me feeding off our defense and the energy from the rest of the guys and the guys finding me in the right spot. I was trying to run the floor as hard as I can and just cut, really.

**Q. Coach, I mean if I remember correctly Utah State hasn't defeated a Big East team in the tournament. What do you feel like this victory means for the program moving forward and how monumental was this victory?**

JERROD CALHOUN: Yeah, I mean it started a couple weeks ago. We went into the conference tournament after we won the regular season, and we talked about having a revenge tour. We were playing three teams in the Mountain West that had just beaten us. So it matched up pretty well.

And sometimes I think messaging by coaches it really is important. We message a lot. We have pregame talks from former Aggies. We do a lot of former coaches, our donor base.

The message was we can still play better basketball. So we went to the Mountain West Tournament and I felt our defense took it up another notch. And we did not like our seed.

We were not too fond of being a 9 seed. We won 28 games. We won the regular season title, we won the tournament title. So when this team has an edge and they play with a little bit of swagger and a little bit of toughness and resilience, we can cause a lot of problems.

This defense was originated from Ralph Willard, Kevin's father. And it's hard to play against.

So I think as MJ said, we didn't want to overreact to the 3s, but we felt like the game would loosen up eventually. You saw MJ made some big steals. Mason, Adlan, Drake, their activity, K.T.'s activity, defensively, I thought, was the difference.

**Q. MJ, you struggled at the line today. You looked frustrated a couple times with the misses. Can you talk about what was going on there? And then also what happened, take us through the couple steals and breakaways that you had at the end of the game.**

MJ COLLINS: The ball was a little too pumped up for me (laughter). But I kind of -- I had to lock in. It was winning time. So the ball started to go in.

And then the steals, you know, just reading the game. I know we had two on the ball. I knew -- I think it was 5 was standing right there. So I just ran over. It was nowhere he could throw it to except me. So I ran, grabbed it and went and dunked it.

**Q. And that back-to-back or behind-the-back move?**

MJ COLLINS: I forgot about that one. I've been playing 2K a lot lately. Just natural instinct kind of took over, and-1.

**Q. You guys really took over in the second half 16**

**point each in in the second half. I really feel like especially down the stretch, final six minutes or so, kind of just you two trying to take over the game. Just kind of what did you see in that final few minutes that allowed you to do that?**

MASON FALSLEV: It was a struggle to get the ball to go in the basket, but once a few go in you gain more confidence. And honestly shout out to the point guards, you know, they executed great today. Drake and E.P., they just put the ball in the right spot and allowed us to kind of do our thing.

**Q. You guys had the paint point edge for most of the game. So ended up plus-16. So could you talk about was that part of the strategy for playing against these guys?**

DRAKE ALLEN: I think when shots aren't falling you've got to get to the paint, right? I think we're a really good team when we demand the paint. And then usually ends up being -- giving you a chance to kick out for good 3s instead of, you know, bad shots.

And we settled a couple times today, but we're confident in our guys shooting shots. But they're just better when we get in the paint and we play off two feet. These two demand the paint. These guys fly around. We're hard to beat.

**Q. Coach mentioned how important messaging is to you guys, and we talked yesterday about the revenge tour during the conference tournament. What is a message that Coach or you guys have guests come in, has said to you guys early in the season that has stuck with you guys and how important is that, those pregame speeches that you guys get to hear?**

MASON FALSLEV: One of the things that always stuck out to me is Coach always says you only have one life. Might as well make it great. I always just think about that we really do have limited time on the earth so we might as well do something great and be part of something great.

DRAKE ALLEN: Coach always talks about, especially as seniors, us older guys, he talks about we've got to be desperate. This is our last go, really, then you know we're going to be playing pro, playing overseas, wherever we're going to be.

So we always talks about us being desperate. And I think that it showed tonight -- we were desperate in that last 10 minutes to get a win.

**Q. You guys went into the under-four media timeout**



**with a 3:54 left down two. MJ came out and hit two free throws to tie it but you ended up going I think it was a 15-5 run something like that to close the game. Just what was the discussion in the huddle in that under-four media timeout?**

MASON FALSLEV: No plays, just run and flow and do what we do. We've learned concepts all year that should let us up for good offense, so just trusting in that down the stretch.

THE MODERATOR: Continuing with Coach.

**Q. Can you just walk us through some of the late defense where Villanova really tried to work that pick-and-roll game, get Brennan in the paint, try and create space for their guards with that ball screen?**

JERROD CALHOUN: Yeah, they're a handful in pick-and-rolls. I mean, that's a typical Villanova team. Jay Wright was one of my heroes when I was coming up through the ranks. I just loved his demeanor. I loved his ability to have four-guard lineups, and they put a ton of pressure on you.

Duke Brennan is a tremendous player, but what he does, he's a great screener. He creates advantages at the point of attack that not a lot of basketball fans realize. He's setting those guards up.

So we switched the pick-and-roll and then we brought the big in from the corner to meet the roll sometimes. And I think the last seven minutes, they played one-on-one more than just getting to the next advantage. I thought that was a crucial adjustment throughout the last seven minutes.

**Q. You're kind of in a unique position where every time you're winning a game in this tournament, you're making money for a conference that your school decided to leave. Is that a weird spot to be in?**

JERROD CALHOUN: As I said last week, when we won the Mountain West, Niko and Gloria treated me great. Our university has great history in the Mountain West. This is a very bittersweet deal.

But there's change in college athletics. And each university, each president, each board, each athletic director has big decisions to make. They talk about how tough it is to be a coach, but how about the administrators? I think these administrators got really tough jobs as well.

Everybody's trying to navigate through what makes sense. I think what made sense for us was obviously going to the Pac-12. You get a chance with Gonzaga and some of

these different teams, and obviously the great teams in our league that are going.

But it was sad. Last week, in Vegas, it was really difficult. But we want to represent Utah State, right? Obviously whatever happens with the money happens. That's out of our pay grade. But we're the third team in program history to win a tournament game. We're the first team in program history to win a regular season title and a tournament title in the Mountain West.

So this team's got a lot of character, and I think that's what makes this team pretty special.

**Q. I know you want to talk about the players and what they did, but obviously this is your first victory in the NCAA Tournament. Can you talk a little bit about that journey to this point and the difference between now and a year ago?**

JERROD CALHOUN: Yeah, obviously everybody's story is different. Our pregame talk today was Bobby Wagner. I think he's 64 tackles away from being the all-time tackle leader in NFL history. Right? His story is unbelievable. There's a lot of great Aggies and great coaches.

Everybody's story and past, all of you guys here, you know, had to take some risks, had to take some chances. Mine was leaving West Virginia to take a Division II job. I don't know if there's another coach in the country that would have done that.

We had a \$30 million practice facility in the Big East, and I wanted to be a head coach. I went down the road to Fairmont State and started my journey with Joe Mazzulla and Paul Molinari and Mantoris Robinson. Here we are, you know.

So when I get asked to speak at clinics when people email me or call me, I always try to respond because I think there's a lot of great young coaches out there that could use some inspiration.

It's not about me at this point. It's about surviving and advance. But that was the turning point for me. And I always dreamed of this, you know, watching guys like, you know, Jay Wright and all the great coaches in the NCAA Tournament. And to get the first one, it's special. But hopefully we can get many more.

**Q. Can you talk a little bit about the start of the second half? Obviously didn't start like you wanted it to.**

JERROD CALHOUN: Oh, yeah.

**Q. But your team, within four or five minutes, you're back, have it tied up again?**

JERROD CALHOUN: Yeah, it was kind of an up and-down-game. We didn't value the possessions. There's certain points in a game where you've gotta win the margins. It's right before halftime, coming out of halftime. We've been unbelievable and after timeout plays and coming out of the timeout, and really coming out of the halftime in general. That was very uncharacteristic for us.

So I thought, as coaches, if we hit the panic button our players would too. They stayed the course, and we kept chopping it down and eventually tied it, eventually kept the lead.

So I give our guys a lot of credit. We'll go back and look at that tonight. And you've just gotta value possessions, you know, this time of year. Every one is so critical.

**Q. You and your players talked about playing with an edge. Can you talk about how they did that today? In the last almost 13 minutes you guys missed only two shots. So can you just talk about the grit and playing with an edge?**

JERROD CALHOUN: Yeah, I mean, I've got two tremendous, really I've got a tremendous basketball coaches on my staff. Eric Haut just accepted the Tarleton State job. You know, I thought that was a home run hire by them. So many athletic directors look to hire Power Four conference assistant coaches. It's much different at our level.

We don't have 10 or \$12 million to deal with, right? We've got to be really creative in our schemes. And I thought him and -- Johnny Hill had the scout. He played for Matt Painter. Johnny's a great defensive coach. And the attention to detail, the pass battles, trying to deflect passes, switching our defenses -- you've got to give credit to those two guys.

And then I thought offensively the other three assistants were tremendous in the timeouts. But it's rebounding, winning the rebounding margin and winning those pass battles is what we talk about with our guys.

**Q. (Indiscernible) coffee in front of you and yesterday you said you were going to challenge Coach Willard a battle of who can drink more coffee. What is the next two days going to look like for you in terms of preparation for Sunday against Arizona?**

JERROD CALHOUN: I think you have to at least watch seven games. That requires probably 10, 12 hours of

work. I mean, if you're really working at this thing. So you gotta get to your room. I have a connecting room. Coach Massimino taught me that years ago. He used to do that on our trips. His wife would have a connector.

So you could stay up and watch the tape and really dissect Arizona. It's going to be a tremendous challenge. Tommy Lloyd I think is one of the best coaches in the country. They've got the 1 seed for a reason.

I love the way they play. There's very few college basketball teams I enjoy watching play. I would rather watch Europe or the Boston Celtics, to be honest with you. But Tommy's probably one of the five teams I really enjoy watching.

I think he creates a space for his players. He's done a tremendous job playing big. It's hard to do in today's landscape. I think, their players really know how to play.

So, yeah, coffee is going to be flowing tonight, but there's a lot of other coaches that would love to be in this position. And I want to do everything in my power to make sure our guys are prepared. We've got a lot to do tonight.

**Q. What was Bobby's message to the team before the game?**

JERROD CALHOUN: You know, we've had Jordan Love. We've had Bobby Wagner, Sam Merrill, Joe Mazzulla. What I try to do is create a family atmosphere. We've done this since Coach Massimino's days, Coach Huggins, Coach Young at Walsh, my high school coach, Ted Kwasniak.

You take something from every single coach you worked for or played for. Everyone's got great strengths. And one thing was messaging. So every game after we eat we have a pregame message. And Bobby Wagner's was make Aggie Nation proud.

I think we've had some unbelievable ones. Last week, with Jim Laub talking about character, how far character can go. Character can be one of the biggest components in sports. If you've got great character, you're connected, you've got a chance.

That's what we've been able to do. But Bobby was fired up and hopefully he can make the game here against the Wildcats.

**Q. The last three coaches in the last four or five years have had some great success here taking the team to the tournament. You've added another chapter to that. Could you kind of talk about how you've been able to**



**balance just keeping the momentum of a great program like Utah State while also putting in your own philosophy into being a coach?**

JERROD CALHOUN: I think every coach has his strengths and weaknesses. You've got to surround yourself with people who can help you with your weaknesses. When I got the job two years ago, we really sold the fact that we're going to run great offense. We've been one of the better offensive teams in the country. We're going to be very disruptive defensively. We're going to be different.

But we're going to have guys that put the team over winning, over themselves, and they care about winning.

When we're talking to recruits, if they don't talk about winning, we don't really mess with those guys. We talk about "we over me" a lot. We don't have a bunch of buzzwords. But we put winning at the forefront.

I'm very close with Stew Morrill and very close with Danny Sprinkle. Those guys have talked a lot with Utah State sitting in the chair. Both those guys are personal friends.

And I knew what I was getting myself -- what I was getting myself going into Logan, Utah. It's a storied program. It's a pressure-cooker job. You need to win. You need to win at a high level.

But I think what we've been able to do over two years is really get in the community. We've poured ourselves into Logan, my family and I, our assistants, our administration, our players.

And when you play for something bigger than yourself and you're coaching for something bigger than yourself, you've got a chance to go a long way. And that's what this group's been able to do. But you've got to rely on others at times.

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