

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

Friday, March 20, 2026

San Diego, California, USA

Viejas Arena

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

Bryce Hopkins

Zuby Ejiofor

Media Conference

St. John's - 79, Northern Iowa - 53

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by coach Rick Pitino and student-athletes Zuby Ejiofor and Bryce Hopkins.

RICK PITINO: Well, our guys did a tremendous job. The coaches were, including myself, we watched about 12 films of these guys, and the players watched about five. And we knew what we had to do to win this game. The obvious thing is we had to get our tempo.

And we said, look, although the greatest 3-point shooting team, we had to win the 3-point line. So we had to stop it, choke it down and make out 3s. And tonight obviously it was 30 to nine from the 3-point line, which was big. Rebounding wise, it was 45-29.

Bryce Hopkins, to my right, is playing great basketball right now. He just does all the little things that are making us win. Played a lot of minutes. And Zuby got a lot of rest. So he's ready for the winner of this game.

Q. Bryce, the Big East Tournament, probably three of your better games of the year, and your offensive efficiency has gone up. Now tonight, again. What do you think is kind of, are you making more 3s? Is there anything specific that's happening for you lately, offensively?

BRYCE HOPKINS: Not really. I feel it's just being comfortable. We're playing some really good basketball. We're playing together as a team. And we're not thinking out there on offense.



Coach gives us all the confidence and freedom in the world to play, which makes it easy for us to play. I mean, you know, our focus is on the defensive end, and that makes it easier for us on the offensive end.

Q. Zuby, do you feel like that now you're starting to realize that you're playing your best basketball, or do you feel like the best is still yet to come on your end?

ZUBY EJIOFOR: Absolutely. The best, even for me and the rest of this team, I think our ceiling is still high. There's a lot of things we can improve on. We're playing really good basketball right now. The effort is there. We're competing on both sides of the ball. But I feel we can still take it to a whole new level.

Q. The last four games you guys have gotten out to pretty quick big leads. What do you attribute that to, and how important is that to maintaining over the course of 40, especially as the competition gets even harder as the tournament goes along?

ZUBY EJIOFOR: One of these things we're appreciating to ourselves is coming out and setting the tone early. Like you said, with the Big East Tournament and now this game, we came out really strong and we were able to hold the lead.

They were a really tough opponent, you know, but we played together. We competed at a high level. And we understand, you know, the stakes is -- nobody wants to go home. This is one step to the bigger goal.

Q. Zuby, you talked at the beginning of the season about the idea of going beyond where you guys had gone last season, and now on Sunday you're going to have a chance to do that. Can you sort of speak to this opportunity and how significant it might be for the guys on your team?

ZUBY EJIOFOR: It's really a blessing, playing in March Madness. Obviously, it's a lot different than the Big East. Guys are really excited. It's a one-of-a-kind opportunity. In March, anytime you have an opportunity to still be playing in the month of March, you know, it's really a blessing. Guys are really excited. Now we move on to the winner of the Kansas versus Cal Baptist game, and we're looking

forward to it.

Q. Bryce, can you kind of expand upon the idea of how fast your team has been starting over the last four games? You've opened up each game on at least an 8-0 run. What goes into these fast starts of the last four games?

BRYCE HOPKINS: I feel like, first starting off in the Big East Tournament, I feel like Coach preached to us that you know we have to treat this like the March Madness tournament. We have to come out fast. We can't come out lackadaisical, because once we get to March Madness it's win or go home.

And I feel like that was the biggest thing, that's the biggest thing in our mindset is just coming out fast and knowing that we can't come out slow because we're only guaranteed 40 minutes every night. And we have to play like that. We can't take any plays off, and we just have to come out fast for sure.

Q. Ozyiah Sellers was one of the consistent 3-point shooters on this night. When you watched him at Stanford was 3-pointing like part of his biggest strengths?

RICK PITINO: Yeah, we have individual instruction four days a week, and he sets, he's off the charts with his percentages. I was upset at him tonight in the second half. He passed up about four open 3s. He made a good move to the basket but he missed the layup.

But I get upset at him all the time for not shooting his open 3s. I'd like him to take 10 or 12 a game. He got nine up. But he's open and he passes up open shots. It drives me crazy, because if a coach said that to me, I think I'd take 30.

Q. Zuby, your coach just mentioned about winning the 3-point line. You and Sellers led the way with four each today. What does it mean to you, especially as a captain of this team, executing your coach's game plan on your stat sheet?

ZUBY EJIOFOR: It's what Coach P preaches. We have our defensive identity. So defense is our calling card. Offense is going to come, if you have the 3-point shot and you're able to take it.

Like you said, we want to get up as much 3s as possible. You know, we have so many great 3-point shooters on this team. So coming in, especially for the rest of the tournament, we know that obviously it's going to be really huge for us hitting 3s, especially -- and holding the

opponent down to less 3s as well, you know, is going to be really good for us.

Q. Rick, you guys hit 10 3s tonight. How good of a sign is that for you that you were able to make 3s? And how important is that going to be for you guys to continue to make them?

RICK PITINO: Well, remember, this is a team that holds their opponents to like 28 percent from the 3-point line. When I left the locker room, I said, we know the keys to this game. We know the backboard, we know the turnovers. But the key to the game is stopping the 3 and making our 3s.

It's all we talked about all week because these guys, they looked up at the board and they see six guys that shoot it better than 35 percent. I said, we've got to beat them at that line. We'll beat them in the other areas, but we've got to beat them at that line. And the guys did.

They played a fantastic first half. Second half they held serve. They didn't play great, but they held serve and did a good job. But the first half was a brilliant performance on offense, brilliant performance on defense.

Q. Zuby, on TV, Coach said you're good tonight, but he thinks you have greatness in you on Sunday. Thoughts on that?

ZUBY EJIOFOR: I didn't play all too well today. But the biggest thing is coming out with the win. And my teammates were, especially Bryce Hopkins, everything that he was able to do on the floor tonight, something that we're going to definitely need down the stretch. And Dillon Mitchell, and you could go down the line with guys that made big plays after big plays throughout this game.

RICK PITINO: He did have 14, 11 and three blocked shots.

ZUBY EJIOFOR: That's not good enough.

RICK PITINO: About time you said that (laughter).

ZUBY EJIOFOR: I'm looking forward to the next game against whoever the opponent is.

Q. Rick, you talk a lot about preparation. And we've seen these brilliant starts the last four games -- I think 9-0, 8-0, 10-0, 13-0. How much of that is about being prepared, and how much of that is about the intensity that you bring to the game?

RICK PITINO: I think it's both. I don't think I've ever



watched more film on an opponent myself than this team. We were really concerned about this game because of their pace, and I played them twice with a championship team, and it was tough to beat them. And then in the Bahamas, we beat them by 5.

If you allow them to control their tempo, they can beat anybody. We didn't allow them to control tempo. We got out there off our defense. And that was the key to the game. They're much better than this final score. So we were overly concerned.

Now, you only have one day to prepare. So it changes. In the Big East, it's not as difficult because we knew all those teams. Now we've got to watch this and we've got to really cram hard because preparation is the key to our defense.

Q. What has stood out to you about Bryce lately offensively? He's making more 3s, and just seems he's been much more consistent on offense?

RICK PITINO: I think he's a little quicker, he's jumping a little higher and he's playing with confidence. I think he's been going like this (motioning) the whole season.

It's tough coming off an injury, a very serious one, and he's working his way. He's very confident. Dillon Mitchell and him together play great together. And Zuby feeds off both of them as well.

Q. When Bryce is making 3s and is aggressive on offense, how much does that kind of --

RICK PITINO: It helps. He doesn't like taking a lot. I get on him all the time, like, Bryce, take it, man, take it.

I've never had to beg a team to shoot 3s like this team. It's incredible. He's getting very comfortable with it. There's only one guy I don't have to tell to shoot 3s, that's Joss -- and Ian a little bit. Ian wants to shoot it as well.

Q. When Zuby said his stat line wasn't good enough, what kind of standard does he hold himself to?

RICK PITINO: He knows he didn't play great tonight. He lost a few balls in the paint. He knows he didn't play great because he's a great player. But he played good. The great ones know. And Zuby's always trying to get better. He's always talking about his teammates.

He's an All-American off the court because it's all about his teammates; it's never about him. He's a huge throwback to what you see with young athletes today. It's never about him. It's always about the teammates. It's always about St. John's. So he's a great throwback.

I'm going to miss him terribly. But he's capable of playing much better than he played tonight. But he did play good.

Q. Rick, you talked a lot about the preparation and everything that goes into starting these games fast. But in these last four games, has anything surprised you about just how quickly these games have started in at least four 8-0 runs?

RICK PITINO: Yeah, I think they're focused on the defensive end. And that gets them out on the break. Tonight on the break -- we didn't have a lot of fastbreaks -- but we were 8-for-10. And we shoot an incredible percentage on the break because we're good athletes, we handle it well.

In the first half we got out on the break consistently off our defense. So you know I'm a big proponent of stopping the 3, making the 3. If you can have a disparity, and we all know that that's not something we've been great at all year, but when you can come into the tournament and go 30 to nine, it's a hell of a night.

And more so stopping it. Making it was great, but stopping it, really important for any basketball team. You have to stop it. It's a weapon that everybody's passing up 2s to take 3s.

Q. What did you make of the loud traveling support that made it out here to the West Coast supporting your team today?

RICK PITINO: I think it's great. It's not easy to do. The one thing I'm proud of our team is we never said, oh, we got screwed with the seed. We were super ecstatic that we could come to San Diego. We were really excited.

Now after getting out here, at 85, 86 degrees, we love it. So we never once said, boy, we deserve better. We said it's a privilege to play in the tournament. We have no chips on our shoulder at all. We just play the game that we love and that we're very thankful for being out here, very thankful that we're a 5 seed, 6 seed, wherever they wanted to put us; we're not going to complain.

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