

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Utah State vs Arizona

Saturday, March 21, 2026

San Diego, California, USA

Viejas Arena

Utah State Aggies

Coach Jerrod Calhoun

Zach Keller

Adlan Elamin

Garry Clark

Media Conference



huge in a close game. Granted you've always been a great free-throw shooter, but was there any nerves as a freshman playing in your first NCAA Tournament game?

ADLAN ELAMIN: It was definitely exciting. Yeah, it was a pretty nervous game, but I played a bunch of those guys over at Villanova multiple times. There's a lot of DMV guys over there. It just felt like another game, really.

Q. Garry, you like to talk about your contributions off the bench. Seemed like you really have been a big part lately. What's driving you the last little bit?

GARRY CLARK: I don't want it to end. We lose, we go home. This means the world to me, come out, give my team everything I've got every night and go from there.

Q. Garry, Coach yesterday used the term "revenge tour." How much has that been motivating hearing this process since Selection Sunday?

GARRY CLARK: Means everything to us. We felt disrespected, and the only way to get back is to win. So that's our goal. We're going to come out, give it all we've got. We know what we've got on the table.

Q. MJ credited his behind-the-back and-1 play yesterday to his 2K abilities. I've got to ask, is 2K a team-wide thing? And the follow, my career or my player if you guys are 2K people?

GARRY CLARK: Well on the game, MJ is always on 2K, so I believe him on that. He plays the park a lot, my player. So that's probably what he's talking about.

ZACH KELLER: I don't play 2K, to be honest. I'm out of that question.

ADLAN ELAMIN: We play the game a bunch, a group of us. But MJ, specifically, plays a lot of 2K.

GARRY CLARK: A lot.

Q. Obviously a big part of your guys' beating teams is getting out and running, getting steals, fast-break points, points off turnovers. That's one area that

Q. Zach, question about Arizona's front court, your thoughts, a lot of size in there, what the biggest challenges Arizona presents with the length and size they have in their front court?

ZACH KELLER: They're a very big and physical team. Our job is to match that. And they're obviously a top five rebounding team that's on our plate as well.

Q. How important is it for you guys to be able to find ways to finish inside. Because that's been a struggle on a few of the losses, can't finish inside against teams with shot blockers. What are the keys for you guys?

GARRY CLARK: Coach has been emphasizing getting in there, playing off 2, getting the bigs involved, they're going to help, looking for the outside and moving -- spacing without the ball. So that will be big.

Q. Obviously you didn't shoot the ball very well from deep yesterday, but inside the arc, 26 for 35, 78 percent. Just what did you see that went well yesterday inside and how can you kind of take those lessons against Arizona?

ADLAN ELAMIN: I think that was really just us moving without the ball really well, just having good spacing. We just kind of stuck to our principles offensively, things that we harp on practice and we found success in that.

Q. You went 5-for-5 from the line yesterday which was



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Arizona was not great yesterday. Only had seven points off turnovers and nine fast-break points. What do you think you can do to force more turnovers, get more run-outs and easy baskets?

GARRY CLARK: Do our principles. Be in the gaps when we need to be in the gaps. Coach has been stressing we need to force turnovers. So that will be big for us.

Q. Can you guys just talk a little bit how you celebrated that win? Obviously a momentous occasion for you guys. What you did to celebrate or who you might have heard from.

ADLAN ELAMIN: I mean, yeah, we obviously celebrated the win. You've got to celebrate every win, especially at this stage. But, like, we know we didn't come here to win one game. We know our goals. We know what we want to get to.

We kind of just -- yeah, we've got to focus on the next game, really, right after.

Q. Can you talk about Drake and Mason's leadership on the court? When things kind of get tough, down big, that run that Villanova had on you, just for your guys' senior leadership on the team that keeps you all composed and calm during those tough situations.

ZACH KELLER: When times get hard, they always bring us together. They have been our leaders on the team since this summer. So we know to follow their role. They bring us to the huddle so we'll be good. This is our time to go on our own run. The rest is history from there.

Q. Free-throw shooting has been a struggle for the team, but I think all three of you guys maybe missed one or two free throws between you throughout the entire game. And I know Garry and Zach, you guys have struggled at times on free-throw shooting. But what has it been like for you guys to shoot well, not just in the last game, but it also carried over from the Mountain West Tournament as well?

GARRY CLARK: Just being more focused. That's probably my biggest thing with my free throws. Lack of focus, when I get tired, not focusing as much as I usually do. Just locking in on that, and every point counts now. So when we miss and leave points out on the table, it leads to disasters.

Q. Garry, when you hit that floater moving left to right, it seemed like you knew all along that you were going to take that shot. How much confidence are you playing with right now as opposed to maybe in the

middle of the season? Do you feel like you're in a groove with this team?

GARRY CLARK: Yeah, I'm in a groove definitely. I feel more loose than I have. Just coming out, Coach has given me more confidence now, he's talking to me, and telling me that the team depends on me so that means a lot to me. So coming out, giving it all I have is all I can do.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, gentlemen.

We're joined by coach Jerrod Calhoun.

JERROD CALHOUN: Obviously very excited about the opportunity to play Arizona. Storied program. Great coach. Ton of respect for the Wildcats.

But our guys are excited. We've had a good quick turnaround of prep, film sessions. And then obviously we'll take the floor here in about 20 minutes. So I think our guys are in a really good place.

Q. How much caffeine since yesterday? And secondly, you said you've been big on messaging. What's the message for this game?

JERROD CALHOUN: I'll answer the first one. I'm losing track of coffee. It's starting to taste like all the same, whether it's a latte, a light roast, a dark roast. Four already today, to be honest with you.

The nice thing about being here in San Diego, you can get out and you can walk. I think it's really important to keep perspective, obviously with all the media and the hoopla of the NCAA Tournament, I encourage our guys to get outside and walk. I think it's refreshing for them. We've got a lot of family members that are here.

Q. Messaging. You said you've been big on messaging. What's the message?

JERROD CALHOUN: It's a 40-minute game. I think there's going to be so much made of Arizona, rightfully so. But we have 29 wins for a reason. I think our guys need to understand that. They need to lock in on the details of this scout and play our game.

I think the teams that are successful this time of year have an identity. We have a true identity on both sides. And every team has different challenges. The challenge with these guys is their size. So we need MJ and Mason and Drake and all these guys, we've got to use our quickness against their size.

Q. Where does this Arizona team rank in terms of

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some of the toughest teams you've faced either as a head coach or even as an assistant coach?

JERROD CALHOUN: You know, it's hard to say until I see them in person, right, and coach against those guys. But, certainly, they've got a lot of talent, right? They've got at least two to four NBA guys. They've got size at every position.

I would say the only other team right now in today's college basketball is University of Michigan that looks anything like them, with their size.

But our style is a little bit different than most. So we have to play to our strengths. Our defense is very different. Our offense is very different.

So it's really about us, as crazy as that sounds. We've got to worry about us the next 24 hours.

Q. Why do you think the Utah State program has been able to continue to be successful, despite there being a bunch of coaching changes in the last few years, yourself included in that realm? Why has that success maintained?

JERROD CALHOUN: It's like any good organization, right, it's people. What makes good companies? It's people. It's connectivity. It's leadership. I think our tradition, certainly there's a great tradition. All the great programs have it.

We just happen to play in a weird time zone. So a lot of the east coasters don't know what Utah State has been since Stew Morrill.

But I think they've made great hires. They've made some unconventional hires. We've got great players. I think each coach has had a different style. Ours is a little bit similar to Coach Odom, Ryan Odom, a couple coaches ago.

So everybody's kind of put their stamp on it. And I think obviously the HURD, the student section, is the best student section in America. They're very organized, connected. It's one of the best home-court environments in all of college basketball.

But I give our administration a great deal of credit. I told a lady over here that just interviewed me that, I had interviewed for a couple other jobs in the last three or four years, but Utah State was the most unique.

Diana Sabau was the athletic director at the time. I flew out to Logan, Utah and did my research and landed and drove 80 minutes north up to Logan, Utah.

And when I got there, I met with the players. There was about four or five meetings. And I'd never had an interview like that where I got to meet Mason Falslev and Great Osobor at the time and Isaac Johnson and Karson Templin.

And I think that was a unique approach to all of it. And I think it all adds up to why Utah State is pretty unique. When I left that interview, I really wanted the job and I was fortunate two days later to get it. It's worked really well.

Q. You mentioned Arizona has the edge with their size, but you guys have more experience as Arizona starts three freshmen. How can you use that to your advantage to disrupt them, given anything can happen in 40 minutes?

JERROD CALHOUN: I mean, we're 19th in the country. I think they're 144, if you look at the true analytics with experience on KenPom.

You know, guys like MJ, guys like Mason, guys like Karson, guys like Drake, they've been in these settings. Nobody has played in the second round on our roster. So I think all of them are very anxious to try to advance in the tournament.

But what makes March so special, it is a 40-minute game. This is not a five- or a seven-game series. So whoever executes, whoever makes shots, defends, will advance. And it really doesn't matter if you're a 9 seed, a 1 seed, a 10 seed, it really has no bearing on tomorrow's game.

Q. You just mentioned how you got to Utah State in the first place. Given that the previous three USU coaches have left to Power Four schools, to go alongside the tremendous job you've done this season, obviously coaching rumors have swirled around your future. How do you block any distractions and noise, if you even heard it at all, to maintain your focus on Arizona?

JERROD CALHOUN: I mean, what I try to do is read or listen to podcasts. So I have no social media. My wife or somebody may mention something, but she doesn't really follow it either.

So I read a book this year, it's called "Inner Excellence." And it's really about being present. So I don't really worry about those things, to be honest with you.

Somebody asked me about eight, nine days ago, are the coaching rumors a distraction? No. I think we've had these rumors for years.

When was the last Utah State coach that hasn't been rumored for a job? Anytime you have success, coaches are trying to steal your players, and athletic directors are certainly wanting to talk to the coaches.

So continue to have inner excellence, realize these things are not easy to come by. You don't take your days for granted. You live in the moment. You stay present. And you worry about the Wildcats, has really been my focus.

Q. I'm from Cleveland, Ohio, watched you play at Cleveland State.

JERROD CALHOUN: I didn't play a lot. I watched a lot of basketball for Coach Massimino.

Q. What were the top takeaways from Coach Rollie that formulated who you are as a coach?

JERROD CALHOUN: I mean, I said the other day, Coach always made a joke to start practice. So he created an environment at practice where kids wanted to come in and really work.

I think part of coaching is motivating guys and getting guys excited for the day. So Coach would come in, he would tell a joke. Sometimes -- it could have been a dirty joke. Who knows what was on Coach's mind that day? And then after practice, he made sure that you were understanding basketball's going to end.

He gave me a deflated ball to start my college career. And he said, listen, the ball's going to stop bouncing. It was a constant reminder that you better get an education, you better have a plan.

When I told him I wanted to get into coaching, he said you get one opportunity, and it doesn't matter the level. Part of my thought process of leaving a Power Four assistant job for a D-II was Coach Massimino in the back of my mind.

He was coaching at an NAIA school at the time. And then I met with Coach Huggins and he said, hey, where I started and I learned and I grew was at Walsh University in Canton, Ohio. And that's really kind of why I did it.

And then his game planning was incredible. He had the ability to read the game throughout the game and make adjustments. Sometimes we knew a little bit too much about the opponent. I really worry about us. So you also learn things not to do from coaches you work for.

He was a father figure. He was a mentor and just a great leader and a great culture guy.

Q. Going back to the messaging part a little bit, you mentioned 40-minute game. How much are you able to extract from yesterday specifically where your team goes down 10 early in the second half, flips it around and wins by 10?

JERROD CALHOUN: Yeah, I mean, when you have big-time players and they're really connected and they're playing for something bigger than themselves, something special can happen.

I thought there were some crucial plays in the game. I think one was we ran a cluster action on the right side and MJ got fouled. I thought that kind of got him going.

When MJ has it going, I've said this all along. I think he's one of the best players in the country. I think him and Mason Falslev are two of the best 1-2 punches in all of college basketball.

Those guys carried us the last eight or nine minutes. His deflections, he got out, he made the and-1 steal. This is a guy that averaged eight points a game, or 7.5 a game last year, 20 minutes a game. It's one of the best stories in college basketball.

I think a lot of portal gets a bad rap. And the switch just went on with our team. Nobody panicked, don't hit the panic button. Next play mentality. And then you could see a couple guys had that look in their eye. It was winning time.

Q. With the importance of NIL money, what has been your pitch to people who are candidates to help you out in that area? And the second part is, how important has that been in your success?

JERROD CALHOUN: Yeah, I mean, I think it's on every coach's mind, right, around the country. You think about back in the day it was what's your practice facility look like? What's the arena? Are you chartering? What's the deal?

Now it's what's the budget? What's the school sharing with you? And what's the donor base like?

I know this, our donor base has been incredible at Utah State. We went from eight hundred I think \$880,000 last year, probably the lowest budgeted team in the country to get an at-large bid, to this year to 2.4. We tripled it.

The efforts that we made, we had a night out with the pros event. We brought Joe Mazzulla back and Sam Merrill and Neemias Queta. We raised about three hundred thousand that night. Guys like Tom Willis, Jim Laub and Kent Alder

-- Jonathan Bullen just stepped up big time.

We have a lot of great people not just in Logan but all over this state and Aggie Nation. For two years in a row our university -- it's not a knock, I'm not shedding negative light, we just weren't ready to do it. Our university didn't share revenue this year.

So we opted in but we got zero dollars from the university. We knew as a staff we've got to spend about 70 percent of our time in the offseason fundraising. And that's something I've always done at Youngstown State, Fairmont State and now Utah State.

Then I had to really convince my wife that, hey, if we're going to ask people for money, we've got to donate ourselves. So we ended up doing \$150,000. I think we were the second biggest donors this year, with NIL.

I think it showed our donors and it showed our fan base how much our family's invested in Utah State.

I think the sky's the limit. Football is really important to our university too. Bronco Mendenhall is a great coach. So we want to be great in all sports.

I think that's the fight that every university has. And that's what I said yesterday with the administrators. They've got a tough job. ADs don't have it easy either.

But we've made significant strides. We'll continue to work at it. It's been a total group effort but a lot of work.

Q. Last year no mid-majors made it to the Sweet 16. We'll see what happens this year. Not necessarily trending very well right now. You guys maybe could do something about it. You've been on both sides of this. How concerned are you about the future of the tournament if we start seeing those mid-majors not making deep runs into March?

JERROD CALHOUN: Well, I mean, we're going to find out after tomorrow probably what the price tag it is to go to a Sweet 16. Most of the Power Fours you talk to, they say 10 million. And it's not going down.

So it's different. I think strategically we try to get old. That's why we went out and got Kolby, we got MJ. We got Zach. If you look at the way we do things, we want to get old and stay old. We want guys with experience. And we want guys that have been coached.

So I think every coach, every level, you have to be able to navigate it. And it's certainly an ever-changing landscape.

But I think America is dying for a mid-major. So if one of these three or four teams that are left can get to a Sweet 16, you instantly become America's team. Right? Everybody in the country roots for the underdog.

You've just got to worry about kind of your program, where it's at, and do the best you can with the resources you have because some of these schools just don't have it.

Q. A lot's made and rightfully so of MJ and Mason, but how important is Drake Allen to this team and what you guys like to do?

JERROD CALHOUN: I think since the arrival of his son, Gaines (phonetic) Allen, he's been a changed person. You talk about what he's talked about to the media, his "why" has certainly changed.

He, most of the time, is passing the ball to MJ or Mason. He sees the game at a high level. He's 6'4", 6'5". He plays above the rim.

It was an absolute tragedy that he wasn't on the all-defensive team in the Mountain West. We still don't understand that. But he's very disruptive. And he's playing at a high level. And those three guards, I think, are some of the best guards in the country.

Q. When you do your scouting, what do you make of Ivan Kharchenkov?

JERROD CALHOUN: I think he's an X factor, right? He's got size, positional size. He's tough. I think he's seven out of his last 11 from 3. He's shooting at a high clip right now.

And those guys play off the bigs. That's what those perimeters -- when you have that kind of size for perimeters to be able to play off those bigs, it makes life pretty good.

We've got to know where he is at all times. We understand he wants to attack with his right hand. We have to get him left. I think he's really tough. They've got a lot of guys that are tough.

So it starts and ends with our physicality, but he's certainly a glue guy X factor for them, for sure.

Q. Obviously yesterday the 3 wasn't really falling, but you're incredibly efficient inside the arc, shot almost 80%. You struggled at times against teams with size such as Arizona. Just how do you kind of take what you had yesterday and try and continue that against a big Arizona team?

JERROD CALHOUN: I always go back to what one of my old assistants, Joe Mazzulla, has talked about really for about three or four years. Every game, the game needs something different.

The game needed MJ to go make defensive plays. Our game yesterday, we needed transition baskets. We needed to switch up our defense. So I think every game presents different challenges. And guys have to understand what the game needs.

Maybe we can't get to the rim. Maybe they're taking the paint away. Maybe we've got to shoot a bunch of 3s. Maybe we can go create turnovers. I don't know.

I think every game's different. You can't go into a game and say, hey, you've got to do X, Y or Z. You've got to be able to adjust.

I think that's what our group's been able to do. We call that timeout, we're down 10. You don't need to panic, shoot a bunch of 3s. You've got to continue to read defenses. You've got to continue to provide space for each other, and really you've got to get stops. That was really the biggest difference in the game. But every game's different.

Q. You had some pretty good first half sets and out-of-bound sets to the point where Coach Willard was joking about firing his staff. You got any tricks left up your sleeve for this game?

JERROD CALHOUN: Yeah, that's why you drink a lot of coffee. As Pat said, you don't just sit in your room, I can tell you that.

We'll throw out the whole deal. We're going to do whatever we've got to do from a defense standpoint, offense standpoint.

It's win or go home. As far as Coach Willard's comments, I think he was obviously joking. That was kind of -- it reminded me of a Coach Massimino line.

I think he told Coach Molinari plenty of times he was going to fire him, my chief of staff. So I think maybe that got blown out a little bit out of proportion.

I thought Ben Asher, he's in charge of our blobs, right. And he worked for Steve Pikiell at Rutgers. He was a student manager, worked with us at West Virginia. He's worked really, really hard at becoming an assistant coach. He spends a ton of time on blobs. Those are the situations where the coach, we have to do our job.

So I thought he did a masterful job with that. Max Bent and

Mantoris Robinson do a lot of special situations in the game-to-game package, along with myself.

We'll throw everything at the Cats. We understand their basic principles. They're physical. Sometimes they'll blitz the ball screen. They'll mostly be in drop. They're going to top block on off-ball screens. We gotta be ready for everything.

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