

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - St. John's vs Kansas

Saturday, March 21, 2026

San Diego, California, USA

Viejas Arena

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

Oziah Sellers

Bryce Hopkins

Media Conference



upbeat. And after a loss, it's like some of the worst things that you ever might experience. It's just tough to be in there. He's definitely going to get on you, going to tell you what you did wrong and stuff like that. But I feel like it only gets us better. That's why all the guys chose to come here because he expects us to play hard every possession. He's going to get the best out of us.

Q. Is that one reason you don't think he loses very much?

BRYCE HOPKINS: I do. I feel like it gets the guys going, and the guys don't want to feel like what we feel like when we lost. I feel, I said in a previous interview, when we were in the tournament in Las Vegas and we went through a rough stretch, we lost some games, it was a tough environment to be around and we didn't want to feel that too much.

Q. What jumps out on film about Kansas?

OZIAH SELLERS: They're a big team. They got a lot of size. They push the ball in transition, and obviously, they have some great guards, great bigs. They like throwing lobs, looking for the short row. So just that.

MODERATOR: St. John's Red Storm head coach Rick Pitino, and we'll begin with an opening statement from Coach.

RICK PITINO: It's very important that I put my beer in a body armor or cup so you all know. You're not allowed to have a beer bottle or a Coke can or something like that. So here's to you guys. No, it's water. (Laughs).

We're excited, obviously. It's a lot of fun being out here in San Diego and playing against a team like Kansas. Kansas is -- probably haven't faced anything like them since Kentucky as far as the length, size, size of the back court. They're certainly very well coached. They're certainly extremely talented, and it'll be interesting to see how we combat their size.

Q. Rick, you and Bill have had long runs without playing each other hardly at all, I think just once. You've watched his team play over the years. What stands out about a Bill Self team?

MODERATOR: Joining us from the St. John's Red Storm is student-athletes, Oziah Sellers and Bryce Hopkins.

Q. This is a question for either of you. Zuby mentioned post-game about how it's important to set the tone early. You guys each knocked down a three-pointer to jump up to a quick 10-0 lead. How crucial was that start to ease any possible nerves and play with composure the rest of the game?

BRYCE HOPKINS: I feel like it was a big key for us, especially coming into the game. We know March Madness, you're only guaranteed 40 minutes of basketball.

So I felt like that was a big thing that Coach preached to us even in the Big East tournament was just preparing for the March Madness tournament and knowing that every possession matters and we can't come out lackadaisical.

Q. I'm curious, what is your relationship like with Tre White, and just big picture. You know, can you look at your old journeys and, you know, kind of meeting up here in this, maybe, last game for one of you.

OZIAH SELLERS: Yeah. Tre is definitely like a brother to me. Obviously, we both came in the same recruiting class to USC. We live right next door to each other. We'll go to classes together. He's like a brother to me, and yeah, it'll be fun playing against him tomorrow.

Q. How would you describe Coach Pitino after a win versus after a loss?

BRYCE HOPKINS: It's two totally different people. After a win, it's a lot more joy in the locker room, a lot more



RICK PITINO: They're always tough. They're tough-minded, tough physically. They play great defense. They play exciting offense. This team throws more lob dunks than any team I've seen this year. Council just comes down and just throws it up, and they dunk the ball. He's always been one of the premier coaches. Ever since I've entered this business, he's always been great each stop along the way, and he's had a long run at Kansas. He's a great guy. We did only play him once in Iona and he sent us home crying. So we're looking forward to this matchup.

Q. Two questions. Last night you said you've never had to beg a team to shoot the three to a team as much as this one. Going up against a KU defense that defends the three well, do you expect them to shy away from taking so many attempts, and if so, will you implore them to shoot the three once again?

RICK PITINO: I implored them to shoot the three every opportunity they get an open three. The one thing we don't want to do is pass up an open three. And they'll take it. We got a couple of guys like Lefty and Joson that will never pass one up. Ozyiah passes up a lot. Bryce will pass up some. But we need to make the threes, but we have to take them when they're open.

Q. Second question. Last year you scored off against a legend in John Calipari. And now it's Bill Self that stands in your way between a Sweet 16 appearance. Earlier in the week Self mentioned that you are as good a coach as there is in the sport. Obviously, it's the players that play the game, not the coaches, but can you talk about Bill and what he's done as a coach and an ambassador for this sport?

RICK PITINO: Well, there's so many great coaches out there, but they have a tough time standing the test of time. Bill has stood the test of time every single year. He's won more Big 12 championships, and now the Big 12 is stronger than it's ever been, and he's still at a level of excellence that he's been when he first started there.

So he's great at everything he does. He's a great recruiter. He's a great evaluator of talent. He's a great offensive coach, and he's a great defensive coach. He's such a well-rounded guy. His teams do everything well, and that's what I look at when I evaluate a coach. It's not just offense or defense. It's everything they do from out of bounds plays to the way they pick up full court.

Q. Mitchell has been such a key piece to this team, especially defensively, and now you go up against one of the most talented guards in the country. What do

you think makes Dylan so good defensively, and how do you feel about him trying to help slow down Peterson?

RICK PITINO: Well, his length and his athletic ability is incredible. He's very long, very quick. Very athletic. I'm not sure he's 100 percent going to guard him. There will be times where he'll be on him, but we haven't quite made up our mind yet with that matchup.

Q. Watching Peterson, what makes him so good, and does he remind you of anyone?

RICK PITINO: Well, he gets to the foul line. He's got great size. He's got a beautiful looking jump shot with great arc. His size is -- presents a problem. When he uses the pick and roll, he'll reject it, and his size getting to the rim is great. He's a great scorer. He's going to be a great NBA player because he has an NBA game. And we've got our work cut out for him trying to stop him.

But they have a well-rounded team. Council is terrific. He's great on the break. He's got one of the best floaters in the game. They've got the Defensive Player of the Year. They've got a terrific team. They're well rounded.

Q. Rick, this team that you're going to face, it's got length and athleticism that's pretty different from a lot of the opponents that you've faced. You've often talked about how Jackson's defense has improved during the season. Do you think that Jackson could have a bigger role perhaps in this game than he has in the last one?

RICK PITINO: You were happy with his defense yesterday?

Q. I felt like he played when it was pretty lopsided.

RICK PITINO: Well, he played very early on and gave up six early points. It was the only six points they scored early on. So you weren't watching, obviously, but I do think that Ian Jackson can play.

Look, Ian is a much better basketball player than he's shown this year, and the reason he hasn't shown it as much is he's playing way out of position. He's not a point guard. He's had to play that because we don't have a backup.

So it's not fair to judge Ian, but he has gotten better defensively. You're right. But he didn't play great defense yesterday. But he can play. He can play with anybody. I wish I could play his normal position. He would look much better out there.

Q. The other thing I was going to ask you is, you did mention at the beginning about their size being similar to what Kentucky had. At the beginning of the Kentucky game, they got a bunch of blocked shots on Zuby on the interior, and it kind of seemed to like move him a little bit further away from the basket. Do you think that you guys have a way to deal with that, if that happens again?

RICK PITINO: You know, that's a great question, because I was thinking about that all last night, because of their defensive presence inside, what he does. He does a great job of -- most people wall up and climb up and just hope you miss. This guy walls up, but then he blocks your shot. And that type of length has bothered everybody who's played against him.

So Zuby is going to have to move more and not be a one-dimensional guy. Just gotta get him away from the basket. He's going to have to hit the outside shot. He's going to have to do other things, but I think the most important thing for Zuby is not to rush, let the game come to him. Relax out there and let the game come to him. But that's a problem. I was thinking about that all last night when I was watching Kansas about his defensive presence.

Q. Rick, kind of building off that point with Zuby, obviously, from what we've seen over the past two or three years seems like a very even-keeled player, but now a match up against his former team. Do you have to have a conversation with him about not trying to do too much in a game like this with the stakes this high?

RICK PITINO: I don't think Zuby cares about playing Kansas. I think he's concerned about this is a chance to get to the Sweet 16.

But I think last night, he was a little bit tight. He came out of it, and I think he'll be fine tomorrow. But the whole team has got to make sure they understand that the transition that -- last night that team wanted to play in the 50s, and we had to get off to a big start.

The reason we played so well is the amount of respect the players and the coaching staff had for that team. Now, they didn't look good last night. But I watched eight separate games myself, and they're terrific. They could really, really be painful to play against, very similar to Tony Bennett's team with Virginia.

This game is totally the opposite. Now it's you have to watch Kansas in transition because they're great in transition. That's when they're at their best, when they're

playing up and down.

Q. I know you probably talked about this a lot before, but could you just take us through the process of getting Zuby? Did you reach out to him or did he reach out to you? And what did you see in a guy who barely played that you thought you could develop over these three years?

RICK PITINO: Ricky Johns found him from the transfer portal, and I really didn't know anything about him. He came in and -- it's kind of a funny story. He said this is my parents, and the parents were five foot four. And they didn't look anything like Zuby. And then I said to Ricky, are these his real parents or did they adopt him? And he told me the story.

And then I met the dad, and I just is loved the dad, his foster parents, and he told me the story about Zuby while Zuby was loosening up. And we fell into him. I worked him out for about an hour, put him through a really tough work out, and I thought he was a terrific athlete, but he never -- I gave him an extra hard workout to see if he could hold up against it, and he never tired. He just worked his butt off, and I said to his dad, I'd really love to have him. He said, we're going to visit Providence this weekend, and they called Providence and Providence coach was going out of town. So he could go on the visit, but without the head coach being there. So he canceled it.

We went to dinner that night, and we got him. So kind of fell in our lap a little bit just by working him out. And I'm a big believer in working all guys out that come in. If I can't work them out, I'm not going to give them the scholarship.

Q. Rick, how big of a moment is tomorrow for this program? Three years, you've obviously done so much winning. But this program hasn't been to the Sweet 16 since '99. You've back-to-back terrific years, but how are you looking at the significance of tomorrow?

RICK PITINO: You know, no different than any other NCAA game I've coached. I think that we have a chance to move on, but we're playing against a great basketball team. We played against a great team last year.

When you get by that first round, now if you're a one or two seed, you're probably going to play a team that you're stronger athletically than. But as you watch Siena/Duke anything can happen. If you watched Virginia when they lost to Baltimore County, anything can happen. But once you get past that first round, now you're playing against a great team, and we're playing against a great team.

So I don't really look at the significance of it. We just have to play for 40 minutes as hard as we can. If we win, we're going to be in the Sweet 16. I'm not looking ahead. I'm just looking at every possession.

Q. I'd rather ask you about the great game tomorrow, but NIL money seems kind of important, too. What pitch would you make or do you make on behalf of increasing funds in that area? Maybe you don't need to make that pitch with Mike. But what's the thrust of what your selling point is?

RICK PITINO: No. We need to raise money. Mike has been awesome to us, big, big supporter. But we gotta go out there and raise six, seven million as coaches, whether it be golf tournaments, speaking engagements, whatever we can do. But Madison Square Garden has helped immensely because we've gone from 3 or 5 games to 11 games. So that helps. And when you're selling out the Garden, it really helps.

When we first took over, I think they played four games in the Garden, but they were losing three to 400,000 every game they played in the Garden because it's very expensive to rent out Madison Square Garden.

We're not a wealthy I school, St. John's. We don't have -- it's a commuter's school and there's not a lot of wealth behind it, so we gotta go out there and bang on doors and raise some money.

Q. Rick, when you were hired and you talked about restoring St. John's to a lofty place in college basketball, I'm sure that you had some sort of vision for what that would look like. Now, you first made the program relevant in New York, nationally relevant, now a destination for college basketball players. How important in the big picture of achieving what you wanted is tomorrow's game?

RICK PITINO: Again, I look at more what Kansas does great and just focusing on that. I'm not looking at the future, and I'm not looking at the fact that St. John's hasn't been to the Sweet 16 in 40 years.

You know, I can't speak -- I don't even know who the coaches were, to tell you the truth. I know Steve Lavin coached there, and I don't even know who coached before him. So I don't know. I was kind of preoccupied with my own job to concern myself with St. John's failures. And I'm not going to embrace the success we're having now either.

So all I'm going to do is just coach against Kansas like we coached last night. Tremendous respect for Bill Self. Tremendous respect for Kansas basketball. We're going to

play probably with a little bit of a road game tomorrow. They're going to have most of the fans. But that's okay. We've played a lot of road games this year where we've played well.

Q. Rick, a couple players from different sites around the tournament have talked about the difficulty to adjusting to the overinflated and particularly grippy at-bats that they use during the tournament. Have you guys had to adapt to in the tournament the past few years and if there is anything you would like the NCAA to change about how they approach that?

RICK PITINO: I haven't heard that. So I'm sorry that I can't answer. My players -- they're complaining about the food in the locker room, but that's about it. And they would just like some more food. The NCAA has cut back.

Q. Why is Kenny Klein the secret weapon for St. John's. In all seriousness, having him come over to work with you there and you kind of have the history of having people that are with you at various places. Why has that kind of been important for you?

RICK PITINO: We have a great SID in Steve Dombrowski. And I wanted Kenny Klein to come in and just talk about -- he's run the Final Four, the scoreboard, for 40 years. He's run the Kentucky Derby. He just has media savvy. But more important, why I wanted him there is just to tell us where we can get better.

Sometimes when you have a program like St. John's that's been beaten down so much, the moral is low, and I said to him Kenny, look at the marketing department, look at this department. Where can you get better? And he's worked with the people great because of his personality. And he's made a big difference with everybody in marketing, ticketing, how they do certain things. And he's changed thinking a lot in so many different areas. And he also is a very humble person. So he gets along with everyone.

For me, it's a big treat, because I spent 17 years with him, and in 17 years we had so many great times. So for him to come back, and he's agreed to come back next year as well.

I have to give him half my salary, but he's agreed to do that.

Q. Dillon darling has been such a vital piece for you over the last several months. I'm curious what that progression with him has been like. I know we've talked earlier in the season about changing his shot and kind of the three-point shot for him hasn't fallen over the last five or six games. Is that a worry or

concern for you?

RICK PITINO: Well, he stepped back and he did what he did prior. He started aiming, taking his time and aiming the ball as if he's throwing a dart at the dart board. When you see a player start to aim and he doesn't take it right away, you know he doesn't have great confidence. When he catches the ball he just lets it go a lefty lets it go. He feels he's going to make it. And I told Dylan last night, stop aiming your shots, step into it and take it. So I think he'll come back tomorrow, he's going to have to. He's going against great size tomorrow and one of my biggest fears is him getting in foul trouble.

Q. Rick, you mentioned Kentucky. You played some big athletic teams earlier in nonconference. How different do you think you guys are and how much more equipped do you think you are to handle what you're going to see tomorrow?

RICK PITINO: I don't think you're going to see any better big men than the guy who plays at UConn. I'm still blown away, he had 27 rebounds last night. That's mind boggling to me. So I don't think -- I know they have great bigs, but Reed is as good a big man as there is. And we didn't play him very well and stores, but we played him well second night. But we've gotta team rebound against these guys, because they are great on the back board, they are great on the break. And I've never seen so many lob dunks by a team. I'm not sure we -- I think they have more lob dunks in one game than we have in the season.

Q. Kind of combining two elements that you brought up, one, the Garden and the cost that goes into playing there, then two, the marketing piece and just kind of rebuilding the identity of the program. How does the Garden sort of factor in to that rebuilding when you're talking about a place with so much history, including with so many great St. John's teams, back to Lou Carnesecca and those days?

RICK PITINO: In the old days, St. John's prospered a lot. Obviously, they had great coaching with Lou Carnesecca. But they prospered because they had no dormitories. So you could give the players their rent money and live at home. So they were all making 2, \$3,000 a month. And that was an incentive to stay home, because they were from, you know, middle class families, poor families by and large, and they could get that stipend per month.

Now it helps St. John's, the NIL, and the transfer portal, because St. John's -- today, when you look at recruiting, there's just a normal student, there's been a great influx to the SEC. A lot of kids want to go away to now suddenly Alabama or Tennessee. They're very high in demand

schools. We don't have football in the Big East.

So to have Madison Square Garden, the world's most famous arena, you have the NIL, and you're in the greatest city in the world. It's really, really something that's very positive, because football, as you all know, March Madness I think is the greatest, greatest month in all of sports, better than the Super Bowl, better than the Grand Prix or Monaco. It's the best, because it's madness the entire month. It's not one game in the Super Bowl. So it's the greatest event there is, and for us to be part of it each year is so exciting.

But football has dominated. I mean, if I turn on ESPN during the day -- I'm in my office and turn it on, they're speaking football in April all day long. It's all football, football, football. Then the draft goes for a month and a half.

So back when I first started in this business, basketball and football were on the same level, the NBA and the NFL were on the same level. College, college football were on the same level. Today, a Miami of Ohio versus Miami University in football will out draw an NBA game.

So it's changed, not necessarily for the better, because I like basketball a lot better than football. But that's the way it is.

MODERATOR: All right, coach. Thank you very much. Good luck tomorrow.

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