

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

Sunday, March 22, 2026

San Diego, California, USA

Viejas Arena

St. John's Red Storm Coach Rick Pitino

Dylan Darling

Ian Jackson

Media Conference

St. John's - 67, Kansas - 65

RICK PITINO: We are so excited. It's so jubilant to see the locker room right now. It's been a while.

I met with Ian before the game, and I knew we needed him tonight because of their size and he came through in a big way. We played great defense down the stretch but didn't block out, and three different block-outs cost us almost the game.

This is the amazing thing, and the funniest thing I've ever been involved with. We're going to run a play, but they've got fouls to give. And Bells come up to me and says, run power, which is a high, back-screen pick-and-roll. So I walk away and I said, wait a second. He hasn't scored a bucket and he wants to run a play for himself.

I'm thinking, as I'm walking, but he's Bells. And not only did he do it, he went with his right hand.

So real proud of him because to want the ball when you haven't made a shot is unbelievable. So both of these guys had a major impact in us winning tonight. I'm so happy for St. John's and the fans. We had great fans out here.

And we get to go to D.C. And I'm so jubilant. So happy for the fellas. We've taken another step now. So it's just awesome. Proud of our guys, and now it's just starting, the fun is just starting.

THE MODERATOR: The student-athletes are Ian Jackson and Dylan Darling.



Q. Dylan, take us through that, saying you wanted to run power and getting fouled over and over and over and then making the play?

DYLAN DARLING: By the time they ran out of fouls, I think there was probably 4 seconds left. And the play coach was trying to run, there wasn't enough time for it. I threw the suggestion out, and I don't think Coach really had a choice at that point in time.

So we went with it. And I probably don't deserve this. I was pretty bad all night long, but my teammates held it down tonight. Everybody stepped up, including this dude right here, and just happy to keep this thing rolling.

Q. Dylan, is this your first buzzer-beater, or have you hit something like this before?

DYLAN DARLING: This is my first one in college. First one.

RICK PITINO: When did you do it, the NBA?

DYLAN DARLING: I played in high school and middle school, Coach. I didn't just start playing ball. I don't know. I'm not sure. I can't remember. Maybe.

Q. Could you just describe what that felt like? After it dropped in, you kind of did -- seemed like you were pretty proud of yourself before everyone mobbed you. What was that moment like?

DYLAN DARLING: To be honest, the ball left my hands and I hit the ground, and I didn't even see the ball go in. I just heard everybody going crazy. And everybody jumped -- was jumping around. It was pretty cool, though, pretty cool, though.

Q. Ian, from your perspective, can you just take us through what Dylan did in those final 4 seconds?

IAN JACKSON: Just being himself. I think he understood what time it was. He understood how much time was on the clock. He called for his own number after he felt like -- what he felt like was a bad night and pulled through for us. It was amazing.



Q. You guys are about 2800 miles away from campus and yet this fan base was still so loud. How much does that mean to you guys tonight?

IAN JACKSON: It means everything. For us to go across the country and still have a super big fan base, it shows how big New York is, how big Johnny's Nation is and how much they root for us.

Q. After Peterson makes the two free throws, they decide to play the foul game as time is dwindling down. What are you guys seeing on the court as they're trying to (indiscernible) on the clock? And what was the final message as you guys did the final inbound with 3 seconds left?

DYLAN DARLING: To be honest, I really didn't know what was going on. They just kept fouling. I wasn't sure how many fouls they had to give. I didn't really know.

RICK PITINO: Was it 3.4?

Q. Dylan, and maybe, Coach, you can help with this, you turned the corner and there was really no one defending down low. Was that part of the plan? Did you see that and just say I'm going to keep going? What happened there?

RICK PITINO: The last play? The last play was a high pick-and-roll. Zuby is a great screener. He's extremely fast. They probably were looking at him to go left. He went right.

It was the only play we could run, or you could try to throw it into the high post area and let Zuby go. But as soon as Bell said to me to run power, I knew he could get to the rim because he hadn't done a damn good thing the whole night, so I knew he was going to do it.

Q. The last time St. John's was in the Sweet 16 was 1999, from what I believe. How great does it feel to put St. John's back on this platform? And just how much are you guys enjoying changing the culture on the campus and just in the surrounding community as well?

IAN JACKSON: For me, it's special. Me being a kid from New York, a kid from the Bronx, seeing St. John's growing up not really being the most sought-after school, to see what Coach P has built, was built here, what we're doing this year and the history we're making, to be able to come home and do something special with this group of guys, with this coach, it's truly special to me.

Q. Dylan, I think you were 0-for-4. You had taken a 3 that, I think Coach had some choice words for you after you took it.

RICK PITINO: I actually didn't.

DYLAN DARLING: Yes, he did.

RICK PITINO: I told you stop aiming and shoot it.

Q. You're surrounded by some pretty good players on the floor. Why did you want the ball in that situation?

DYLAN DARLING: Honestly, just there really wasn't time for nothing else. And the ball was at half court. I think Oziyah and Joson were in. I told them to go to the corners.

And the play is, just Zuby sets a flat ball screen at the top of the 3-point line. I figured if somebody helped off the corners, I would throw it to the corner. Or if they helped off Zuby, I'd throw it to Zuby. I ended up going right, I saw the lane, and I just went for it.

Q. What was that talk like with Coach before the game about needing you? And how did it feel to have such a big role in a historical win for St. John's?

IAN JACKSON: It was just about just understanding both sides of the floor, understanding what the little things are that needs to be done to win these kind of games, you know? That was mainly what it was about, just being able to do the little things to make big things happen.

To have an impact or a role in this win is huge. My teammates believe in me, coach believes in me to go out there and perform and help us win. It's always great.

Q. Dylan, that shot is going to be remembered by St. John's fans probably for a long, long time. Could you think about the fact that you hit the shot that got this program back to the Sweet 16? Like, what that means and how happy you made a lot of people back home?

DYLAN DARLING: I don't think I could give myself too much credit. I did a whole lot of nothing tonight.

I just shout out to my teammates. Playing with Zuby, playing with D-Mitch, playing with Hop, playing with Jack, playing with Joson -- we've just got a bunch of dogs. They all came through tonight. Everybody played their part.

And just happy to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. Knowing that New York takes pride in the Johnnys, and just happy to keep on dancing.

Q. You guys forced 16 turnovers defensively tonight. Can you talk about the impact your defense made and how you got them out of the rhythm offensively?

IAN JACKSON: I think that's kudos to our preparation. I think we spent a lot of time preparing and understanding what to take away, understanding what teams want to do and how to stop it.

And then we've got a whole bunch of guys who love to be on that side of the ball, love getting hands in, that kind of culture thing we do.

I think preparation is huge for us. And that's kind of what showed today.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. You've had great confidence and belief in Dylan, maybe even when some people weren't sure you should. Why? Why did you have so much confidence in him?

RICK PITINO: I put him back in the game. A couple of guys didn't block out, and we were playing great defense and didn't block out.

But believe it or not, he makes free throws the end of games, and we needed his ball handling ability. But we didn't have it offensively tonight. We were up eight at halftime just because of our defense.

But I was imploring my guys the entire game -- this is going to sound strange -- I said you have to keep shooting the 3. I was all over Bryce Hopkins, actually got all over him, I said, why won't you shoot the 3? I yelled at him when made it. I said, hit it, Bryce. Hit it.

We need it because when you're not in sync offensively because of their size and they wouldn't let us have a good look, your only salvation is to make 3s. And they weren't going to play us from the 3-point line with movement.

We just wanted to have an inordinate number of 3s and win the 3-point battle, win the rebounding battle. We did in the first half, then we got dominated in the second half.

But when you look at it and you break it down, it's 33 points to 15. And the 3-point line, which hasn't been in our favor most of the year, had to win it for us tonight because our offense going to the basket was not bringing a lot of fruits for our labor.

Q. You've implored your team to shoot 3s. You just mentioned it right now. They've now made double

digit 3s on back-to-back games after not having done that in over two months. Although they started 5-for-21 from 3, did you like the looks your team was getting despite the poor returns early?

RICK PITINO: I kept telling them and every time out, look, you're going to make five in a row, you're going to make six in a row. They didn't believe a word I was saying, but I was telling them you gotta keep shooting it. It was the only way we were going to win tonight.

Great defense, great backboard, and we have to stop their penetration.

At the end I put in Dillon Mitchell on Council so we could switch it rather than Ian or Dylan getting picked off and that helped us a little bit. We just didn't block out down the stretch, which is a great learning lesson for the next game.

Q. Coach, in your hall of fame career, you have been part and have witnessed many moments like this. How do you put into words and what do games and moments like this mean to you?

RICK PITINO: Well, it just makes me go down memory lane. I remember being so excited playing in front of 150 people in Boston University and going to the NCAA. And the gym was empty, but we were so excited. They carried me off the court on their shoulders and there was nobody there to cheer but the players.

Obviously, from there, on a path where every team makes the NCAA and has great success, this was the final for me, to get St. John's to the next level.

And we're not done yet. We still have a lot in our tank because we're a very good defensive team. We win with our defense, and we're learning how valuable the 3-point line is now. It's taken about 90 percent of the season to get the guys to take it, especially Bryce Hopkins.

Q. Given that Darling hadn't been that productive scoring during the game, can you sort of take us through what you're thinking as you watch that last play unfold?

RICK PITINO: Well, I wanted to go earlier with Ozyiah and lefty and Ozyiah and Joson, because we were so wide open from 3. But at the end, we knew they had fouls to give. And whether he was going to pass it or score it, I knew he had enough time to create something.

He made a great call because we were trying to run a sideline play. But then that was -- when they got the last foul, there wasn't enough time and he came up and said,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

let's run power. I said, do it. And he ran it to perfection.

Q. Hopkins, it's a career high for him on 3-pointers made. Did you expect that the way that he was trending that a game like this might be in store?

RICK PITINO: He passed up three wide-open ones. I said, man, everybody dreams of getting hot like you. You've got to take them. He finally said, I gotcha, Coach; I gotcha, Coach. And right in front of our bench, I said, kill it, Hop. And he did it. And that was a big play for us.

Q. Darryn had a big game against Cal Baptist with 28. I believe finished with 19 against you guys. How do you game plan against a guy like Darryn Peterson?

RICK PITINO: We put Ian on him, and we were going to take away the 3-point shot tonight. In both games, we had to win the 3-point shot, against teams that shoot a higher percentage and shoot more of them -- tonight, especially, because we had a very difficult time getting to the rim because of their rim protection.

So I would say that Dillon Mitchell is one of the premiere defensive players in the nation. And he was good most of the night. And Oziyah did a very good job of denying them the basketball as well.

Q. When Kansas is on that run late that ends up tying it up -- you talked a lot this season about your team's composure -- just how did they keep their composure knowing that this team is on a run and their season's hanging in the balance?

RICK PITINO: Zuby said, man, you've got to block out. There's too much at stake. We've got to block out. I said, okay, no problem. We're going to win this thing, no problem. If we don't win it in regulation, we'll win it in overtime. Just block out. Don't let that happen again. And then we didn't need overtime. We got lucky.

Q. You've pretty famously been on the other side of endings like that before. Can you put in words what the contrast is, just your feeling, the difference between one second to the next when that happens?

RICK PITINO: The other day -- I'm not big into watching "Yellowstone" and shows like that on the iPad, but everybody is convincing me to watch this "Paradise." I was so sick of commercials with Christian Laettner hitting that shot over and over and over. So, okay, I'll watch "Paradise."

In the first episode of "Paradise," the president of the United States has a thing called -- he didn't say Laettner,

he said wildcat or something. Something to do with Laettner's shot. I said, that's cruel, why would my staff and friends tell me to watch "Paradise." And throughout the whole episode, it's that.

But I've been on winning at the buzzer and losing at the buzzer. And tonight a player, it just -- I just can't imagine a player today, in today's world, with all the scrutiny, wanting the ball when he's shooting terrible. I got on him because he was digging and left a 3-point shooter alone. And we weren't supposed to dig, we were supposed to stay on him at home.

But for him to want the ball in that scenario just speaks volumes of what he's all about, confidence, and going on the next play.

So you win some, you lose some. And I'm hoping we can get Duke at the buzzer next to make up for that Christian Laettner shot.

Q. Go back to your 900th after Xavier, when you gave the nickname to Dylan. Did you ever think back then that -- he's probably won five games for you, six games for you?

RICK PITINO: No question.

Q. That that would, you know, that it would go off the way it has?

RICK PITINO: Without question. I really feel the Providence game changed a lot of things for the positive with us, with everybody getting ejection, and everybody feeling so bad for Bryce Hopkins, that they all rallied around him. I think that was the turning point for us to take it to a new level, the Providence game, and everybody getting on him.

They were so protective of him that I saw something in them I thought was really special. And we started playing great basketball. Now, yes, Connecticut just stormed us, but we came back with a great win at Villanova.

Tonight, outside of the lack of blocking out at the end, played a great defensive game. Great defensive. And making big shots down the stretch. Zuby making it. Bryce making it.

Q. Dylan Darling spent the first three years, Washington State and Idaho state. He had won player of the year last year. What did you see on tape, I guess, as you were recruiting him and how has he lived up to his expectations for you?

RICK PITINO: First thing you have to do when you're evaluating is understand they all lie about their height. So I thought I was getting a 6'2" guard until I met him. Found out he was the same size as me.

But everybody said the most glowing things about him, that he has no fear at all. He obviously averages, what, 18, 19 a game, leads in assists. Sometimes guys like that who are always trying to prove themselves really reach back and work at it.

He's got to stop aiming the ball on his jump shot. He's aiming it now. He was doing that at the beginning of the year, instead of taking a 1-2 step in and releasing it. We'll work on that. We've got a few days to work on that. But we struck gold with this recruiting class this year. Ozyiah Sellers.

Dylan Darling Dillon Mitchell, Bryce Hopkins, Ian Jackson, all phenomenal kids, five-star people. And you can see it, the guys who cover us know that. We got lucky with that. They're five-star people that get better and better. And we won the game tonight without playing very well offensively because of our defense and making big plays down the stretch, one after another.

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