

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - New Mexico vs Clemson

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New Mexico Lobos Coach Richard Pitino Jamal Mashburn Jr. Donovan Dent

Media Conference

Q. Jamal, you guys, the way you played at the Mountain West Tournament it was almost like you almost locked into a different gear. Is that fair to say? Whatever was going on through the whole year, everybody was on the same page, now let's go.

JAMAL MASHBURN: Yeah, we found a way to click at the right time. And I think that just goes to a testament of how well we practiced together and how serious we take practice. We never took a practice off. And no matter how we felt, no matter, coming off a win or loss, we treated it the same way. We were just able to click at the right time.

I always say defense wins those type of games and wins those championships, and when we're connected on that end, we're phenomenal. That's what I would say.

DONOVAN DENT: I'd say the same, basically. Our defense was amazing that whole last week. I feel like it just created our offense and everything. So really the whole thing we harped on all season was being able to defend because that was our knock last year. That's really what won us that last weekend.

Q. You guys had a rough stretch towards the end of the season, but you put that beside you guys and went to the conference tournament and won it all. How does that speak to your ability to work through adversity? And also just what momentum does that bring you guys with into the tournament?

JAMAL MASHBURN: I think for us, we definitely had a tough stretch at the end of the year. But, like I said, we never took a practice off, and we stayed humble about the



process and just continued to put our best foot forward each and every day and tried to stay present in the moment and not think about, okay, like we had a bad Air Force loss. And that's going to be the determination of our season; we didn't let that happen.

So we stick together and we got great leaders on our team, me included, and the guy to my left included. So we feel confident going into the tournament. We feel confident going into March Madness as well.

Q. Jamal, you missed the regular season finale with the flu. Donovan, you missed the Mountain West championship because of the flu. Are you here because you're isolated from the team?

JAMAL MASHBURN: No, we're feeling great.

Q. Donovan, missing that championship game, and kind of the culmination, I know you played 12 minutes, you were at the end of the bench and things didn't look good, the culmination and that celebration and thousands of New Mexicans and all that going on and you not being able to enjoy it as much as maybe you thought you would through the whole season, what was going through your mind in all that? And is there something in any way to prove because you did miss that game kind of?

DONOVAN DENT: It kind of sucks a little bit, but sitting on the bench, watching my team do what they had to do, it was amazing to watch from the sideline. It was a proud moment. I know I didn't get to contribute that much. The sickness held me down a lot.

It was a great watch them play and win. Not being able to celebrate means you need to do it next year. So I get to celebrate next year. So I'm not really stressed about that.

Q. A lot has been made since the seedings came out that New Mexico was disrespected, that the Mountain West was disrespected. I'm curious with so many people across the country picking New Mexico not only to win this game and maybe go as far as the Sweet 16 or Elite Eight, what's your feelings of the



national perception this team has gotten in the last few days?

JAMAL MASHBURN: I think it's a blessing, honestly. I think I didn't feel disrespected or anything like that. I mean, that's just what it is. We've just got to go out there and play basketball.

Everything is in our control right now. I mean, I don't look at it as disrespect, I'm just blessed that we're here and we're able to play a great brand of New Mexico basketball.

DONOVAN DENT: Seedings are seedings, you can't really pick and choose them. We'll just go out and play the best we can. It's all up to us, really.

Q. With what San Diego State did last year, is it more the idea of showing that this isn't -- that they weren't a one-hit wonder, that it's more than the Mountain West and that it's a tough conference, and trying to build on what's come before rather than pressure of trying to live up to something else?

JAMAL MASHBURN: Yeah, I think this Mountain West Conference has really grown over -- at least my three years being in this conference. The competition is high level. The dudes that we play, top to bottom, it's a great conference.

I think it's going to continue to get better. It's going to continue to grow. And I think this year will kind of have a platform for it to continue to grow with more games that the Mountain West Conference wins in this tournament.

It's exciting. It's exciting. It's going to continue to get better.

Q. Jamal, have you and your dad ever compared notes on what it's like for playing for Richard Pitino and what it was like playing for Rick Pitino? Did you talk about the differences in them?

JAMAL MASHBURN: Not really, honestly. Not really. I don't have much to say about that. Not really.

Q. I'm sure you've been asked this several times before, but I'm just curious, you obviously followed Coach Pitino from Minnesota to New Mexico. How long has that relationship been there? Was it something that just started in the recruiting process? Was it something because of your dad's relationship with his dad? How did that all play out and why do you think you've stuck with him like this?

JAMAL MASHBURN: Richard, he's seen my game and

seen me as a man develop and grow ever since my eighth-grade year. He's took the initiative to recruit me and really understand who I am and my game and what I bring to the table and stuff like that.

That relationship's kind of started early. And he had to recruit me. It wasn't just like, oh, my dad played for Rick, and y'all just get my son. I had other options, and he had to initiate and recruit me.

And it's a blessing that I was able to be with him for four years. He's a great coach and a great guy. I can't complain.

Q. With such a fast pace of play this season, how are you guys able to mitigate the turnovers having one of the lowest turnover percentages in the nation?

DONOVAN DENT: Really just taking care of the ball. We don't make too many dumb plays. We make smart decisions. Keep it real simple. A lot of ball-screen stuff. Make the right read.

And Coach P does a good job of just letting us play free, so we're not worried about the turnovers. It's going to happen. It's part of the game. As a team, as a collective, we have to take care of the ball and we do a great job of it.

Q. Donovan, you got a chance to see tape on Clemson and stuff like that. What do you have to do to be successful against them?

DONOVAN DENT: Just play the type of defense that we know we can play. We know they have two solid bigs in the middle that rebound, play hard. We know we have to control PJ Hall a good amount. Really it's up to us. We have to guard the ball and play the way we know how to play.

Q. Jamal, three years. So maybe you more than Donnie, even, but last week the world got to see Jaelen like you've known him for a while, I'm curious if last week was any different from what you saw from Jaelen House, or the same Jaelen you got to know over the years?

JAMAL MASHBURN: Somebody asked me a similar question about his antics. Like I said, when I got here, the pit was empty, nobody checking for us, he was yelling at fans then and staying stuff to nobody because that's just who he is.

I respect the heck out of that kid for always being who he is and always, no matter what, no matter the circumstances, no matter if it's on the biggest stage, no matter if we're

playing Air Force, he's going to be the same kid. There's nothing different that we saw.

Q. Donnie, who would you compare these guys to that you've already played?

DONOVAN DENT: Remind us a lot of Boise, two bigs, play strong, play physical. It's going to be like another Boise game for us, I feel like.

Q. So what's the game plan? Is it that physicality? Is it running the floor, what is it?

DONOVAN DENT: Just being physical playing at our pace. We know we're a fast-paced team. I think they're kind of more a slower-paced team, (indiscernible) at their stats a little bit. We just outrun and play physical.

Q. Have you guys noticed the fan support even all the way to Memphis? Because I say that, I've ran into a couple of Lobo fans in the airport, and they were saying, oh, there's no experience that's going to keep me from this.

DONOVAN DENT: I mean, yeah, of course, I saw a lot of people, they're also doing like this bus stuff. All the flights are sold out. It's a tremendous community, a lot of support on the back of us.

Q. Mash grew up in this a little bit, but, Donnie, this is your first experience at the NCAA Tournament. It's just getting started. What's the feeling like for you?

DONOVAN DENT: I mean, it seems like it's going to be a really fun weekend. We've got a lot ahead of us a lot of games to win. I'm excited for it all.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Richard Pitino.

RICHARD PITINO: Obviously very grateful, excited to be in this situation right now, Memphis is an amazing basketball city. We're honored, obviously, to be part of one of the best sporting events in all of sports. So our guys are excited about it.

We know we have a very tough challenge on our hands with Clemson. But we're certainly very grateful for this opportunity and hopefully we can make the most of it.

Q. You guys play with such a fast style of play, but have one of the lowest turnover percentages in the country. How do you mitigate your turnovers with such a style of play that in most offenses would cause more turnovers?

RICHARD PITINO: We shoot it so fast, we don't turn the ball over. I think that has a lot to do with it. But for the most part, it's in the hands of guys who are good decision makers. Whether it's Dent, whether it's House, whether it's Mashburn. For the most part, they're not a high turnover-type player.

I think one of the reasons, underrated reasons why we play fast is we get a lot of steals. And those normally lead to breaks. More than anything, it's just making the right play offensively. And when you're playing essentially three point guards together, they're going to do that.

Q. I know how much you like answering questions that we've already asked you a million times before. So I'm going to ask you about the NIL collective. We're in a different age with transfer portal, NIL. It's a crazy time. But how important is the NIL collective for you? I know there are people here, and is Kurt Roth the most valuable person in the basketball --

RICHARD PITINO: Well, I think when you first started in this profession it was about facilities, and then it was about nutrition, can we build all this up, housing -- it kind of changes every couple of years.

And the biggest thing about NIL is if you don't have it, you have no chance. Is it the end all, be all? No, but if you don't catch up and compete, it's going to be very, very difficult for you.

It's like everything in this profession, it's always going to be an arms race. And everybody is, I think, understanding it a little bit better now than when it first started.

It's just a different world. I feel like we have a different job right now. It doesn't mean it's all bad, that's for sure. And it's like they had in the movie "Moneyball" -- adapt or die. And you've got to do that.

Q. I want to ask about your dad and watching him in the NCAA Tournament, winning national championships and having so much success in this tournament. What did you learn and take away from your dad's career in the NCAA Tournament? And have you sought out advice on this NCAA Tournament run for New Mexico?

RICHARD PITINO: No, I have not sought out advice. He's been a little bit busy with his season. I've been lucky enough, this will be the ninth tournament that I've been in, third as the head coach.

And I think more than anything, when you make a run like we made in the conference tournament where it's just so

emotional and our fans are there and it's the high of all highs. And then you come to the first round of the NCAA Tournament, it's a lot of media, and then there's the open practice and all those things and longer timeouts, and obviously that win-or-go-home pressure.

But you can't make it more than what it is. So I've been lucky to be at a lot of NCAA Tournaments growing up. And then as my coaching career has evolved I've been a part of it.

You've got to get them as prepared as possible. You want them to certainly enjoy the moment. 80 percent of the teams in college basketball are not playing in this. So it is a privilege, and you've got to enjoy it.

Q. Donnie had mentioned that Clemson reminds him of Boise. Do you see similarities there?

RICHARD PITINO: Well, they had asked us who do they remind you of in the league. And we said Boise maybe. I mean, Clemson is a well-coached. PJ Hall is as talented as it gets for a big guy. They've got good size and length. So it's going to be a great challenge.

Somewhat similar but not exactly the same. But that was kind of the comparison we tried to give the guys.

Q. You mentioned emotional fan base. On the way out here we ran into a couple of fans who were just saying there's no expense that would keep them from this. Upon you hearing that and seeing that, you feel like you're supported even this far away, right?

RICHARD PITINO: I think it's one of the top five fan bases in all of college basketball. And you could even move it up a little bit by our lack of success versus some of the other amazing fan bases.

The experience of winning in Vegas Saturday night, it wasn't just a normal fan experience. I mean, there were people crying. They're emotional. When we landed the next day at the airport, it's just special.

And hopefully our players see how unique that is because it's not like that everywhere else. So I have no doubt, obviously Memphis is a little harder to get to than some of the other sites, but I have no doubt that our amazing fans will get here as best they can. We know it's certainly challenging.

Q. I know I've asked you about Jaelen a lot this season. It's kind of come in almost how do you defend what he does on the court as his coach kind of thing. I'm curious, instead of just necessarily trying to defend

him as a coach, if you could describe what people are about to see this week who haven't seen Jaelen House before, how would you describe what they're about to see?

RICHARD PITINO: Unbelievable, endless amounts of energy. Somebody asked me, was I concerned with four games in four days, and I made the comment I'm not concerned about No. 10. He will not be tired. And it doesn't matter. Plays so very, very hard. Plays with amazing emotion, spirit.

His leadership has gotten substantially better over the years. He's commanding huddles. He's commanding the locker room. Obviously different for an NCAA Tournament, but he does not care to engage in the crowd. That does not affect him in any way. Probably motivates him.

So he's the type of player that belongs in this amazing tournament.

Q. My question is about Josiah Allick, who is obviously also here in Memphis. What did he bring to the table his one year in New Mexico? And how much have you followed his path since then?

RICHARD PITINO: I haven't followed it much. Certainly focused on the guys on our team, but for the year that he was with us, played very, very hard. Rebounded the ball really well. Similar to a Jaelen House, never really got tired.

You were disappointed when he left, but to see him go back to his hometown where he's from and now being in the NCAA Tournament is something that I'm sure is amazing for him.

Q. With the competition you all beat in those four days, and with what San Diego State did last year in this tournament, how much does it add pressure? Is it more wanting to help take the next step for the Mountain West? Or just see what you all can do as a program alone and just let it stand on its own?

RICHARD PITINO: I'm not too concerned with saving the Mountain West. I'm more focused on New Mexico. I think the Mountain West had a historic year to get six teams in the tournament. I know people are talking about underseeded, this and that. Let's just remember they got six teams in, which is amazing.

The theater throughout the year on television was phenomenal. The fans were amazing. It's a great basketball conference.

But for us, when we got here -- and I know our local media are probably sick of hearing it -- we were 303 in the NET. We had to add eight players in year one off of Zooms. We were able to hit on two really good ones in Jamal Mashburn and Jaelen House. And Sebastian Forsling has an amazing member of the team as well.

And I think we did a good job in year two and three in adding some younger guys and older pieces, and now we're sitting in the NCAA Tournament. See if we can take on a really good Clemson team. We know it will be hard but we try not to make it bigger than that.

Q. You have people picking you to win the national championship or make a deep run. What's your reaction to everyone picking the Lobos?

RICHARD PITINO: Bregman might be a little biased. For people who don't know he's from Albuquerque. Other than that, I've always been a believer in I treat praise very similar as criticism. It doesn't really matter a whole lot.

So I don't know if it fuels our guys. I hope it doesn't. We know if we're able to beat a Clemson team, we're going to have to play very, very well. And all the other stuff is just, it's good for the fans and obviously good for social media.

Q. You mentioned earlier the NIL collective that you guys are doing. Could you talk about the evolution of college basketball from watching as a young kid with your dad to now, you don't have to go to Kentucky or Duke or Carolina to get noticed if you're a player. You can go to the NBA, win a national championship about anywhere in the country.

RICHARD PITINO: I think television, you used to sell play on TV. Well, almost all the games are on some type of television streaming or whatever.

Then you'd sell playing in front of great fans. We have one of the best fan bases in college basketball. Then you'd sell facilities. We've got a great facility.

So, you can go anywhere. I always tell recruits, go to a place you can be one of the top 15 players in your league. And we have shown in this league -- Paul George. Kawhi Leonard -- that you can come to the Mountain West and you could play in the NBA. You could play overseas. And you can have a high-major experience. And our guys are having that.

Q. Have you made it clear to the guys how hard it is to even get here? It's been 10 years since New Mexico has even been back here. And that alone gives you a sense of urgency, hey, let's take what we got and make

the best of it?

RICHARD PITINO: I think there's always a sense of urgency at this level. Especially in college basketball, there's only 31 games. You've got to take advantage of every opportunity you get.

I think we are absolutely proud to be in the NCAA Tournament in year three. I think guys like Jaelen and Jamal who came here with kind of a leap of faith. They'd never seen Albuquerque or the campus. And to be able to not only be here but bring our amazing fan base back is something we're proud of.

But tomorrow, when the ball tips, like none of that is going to matter. It's a win-or-go-home tournament. And we're going to give it our best shot tomorrow.

Q. Would we have seen JT Toppin develop into the freshman star and setting all the records he did if Josiah was still part of the program?

RICHARD PITINO: Probably not. I mean, so good thing Josiah left. I mean, I think that's just the whole part of the deal is you see what we got, we're going to figure it out. Whenever this tournament is done, what we're going to have stay, leave, then you figure it out from there. It's an important month for every team.

I'm sure there will be surprises coming into my office that I never knew of. So you've got to be ready. To JT's credit, he took advantage of an opportunity and hopefully he continues to do that.

Q. Obviously we talked a little bit about PJ Hall. Curious about the guard match-up. Is this a guard match-up with Clemson that you see your guards able to take advantage of in any way?

RICHARD PITINO: They're bigger than us, which is probably natural with an ACC team. So our guys have got to be scrappy, gotta be tough.

I think the best part of Vegas obviously was winning a championship, which was awesome, but the growth of our toughness and our scrappiness and our fight was really good. And with a team that's bigger than you, like the message has been all year, you just gotta find a way, and hopefully our guys do that and everybody's ready to go.

Q. I know Will already mentioned everybody picking you guys. Did you happen to see that Jack Pitino didn't pick you guys at all but did have you go to the Elite Eight?

RICHARD PITINO: It was a little reverse psychology. We're trying to see if we don't jinx us. But, yes, I was sitting with him when he was making out the bracket. I didn't watch his whole thing yet. But it's us against Jack, that's going to be the message in the locker room, let's prove him wrong. If we do go to an Elite Eight, which will be obviously very, very hard, but that will be the sole message, let's prove Jack wrong.

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