

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Santa Clara vs Kentucky

Thursday, March 19, 2026

St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Enterprise Center

Santa Clara Broncos

Herb Sendek

Elijah Mahi

Allen Graves

Christian Hammond

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: As advertised the Santa Clara University Broncos are with us. They are the 10th seed of the Midwest region and they represent the West Coast Conference. They will play number 7 seeded Kentucky tomorrow at 11:15 in the morning. Head coach is Herb Sendek. He will join us a little later. Basketball contact is Matt Stewart.

We will go to the questions with the three on the dais, Christian Hammond, Allen Graves and Elijah Mahi.

Q. Has Coach Herb talked to you guys about what Kentucky is and the brand that that means when you guys play them, and what kind of opportunity does that bring you tomorrow?

CHRISTIAN HAMMOND: They are definitely a storied program. We have watched the film on them. We have seen the skill they have 1 through 5, even though their bench players are really -- they're a really great team. We are excited to play the matchup.

ALLEN GRAVES: Like he said, we know Kentucky has the pedigree, the prestigiousness of the university. We know what we are getting into. We watched the film earlier and we see 1 through 5 all of the skill and talent that they have. And we are preparing and we know what we need to do.

Q. This question is for Elijah and Christian. That guy sitting between you has a unique set of skills. Can you kind of describe what it felt like when you first saw him and how you saw how he played?

CHRISTIAN HAMMOND: First time I would say, yeah, he is a really good player. Obviously he works really hard. I redshirted with him my sophomore year, his freshman year. I saw his work ethic every day. See him growing and developing his jump shot.

One thing I don't think he gets enough credit for is how active his hands are to get the rebound and get deflections and steals. To see his growth every day has been special to be a part of.

ELIJAH MAHI: Exactly. Last year I got to see him redshirt, improved his game a lot all aspects, his ball handling, how good he is as a rebounder and how good he is as a defender. He can guard 1 through 5. Yeah, I have seen it all.

Q. You guys obviously are going up against a brand in Kentucky, but to be able to establish your own brand here on a national stage, what is that like for you to have this opportunity?

ALLEN GRAVES: It is definitely an amazing opportunity for us to come out and showcase what Santa Clara is all about. We have built this culture. Coach Herb has done a great job. Our team has bought into the culture. We have an opportunity to go out here and really showcase that.

Obviously there's plenty of amazing teams here, but I think we could be -- we are one of the best and we could go out here and show that.

ELIJAH MAHI: Like he said, feels great that we were able to make it here, and we are a good team and all this stuff. But Coach built a great culture out here and we are just excited.

Q. First for Allen. You mentioned Sunday that you guys are excited to be here, but that the job isn't finished. How has that process internalized and taken shaped over the course of your practice this week?

ALLEN GRAVES: The practices have been very competitive. They are always competitive. The whole season we haven't really switched too much up. Because we are sticking to what we know and sticking to what we

do. Obviously we don't want to look too far ahead forward. We want to be where our feet are, be in the present moment. Attack each day as an opportunity to grow and continue to improve.

Q. Christian, WCC has three bids in there. How has the conference prepared you guys for this and the physical games you have had against St. Mary's and Gonzaga given you a good measure for what Kentucky may do?

CHRISTIAN HAMMOND: Playing against those high-level opponents at St. Mary's and Gonzaga prepared us really, as well as our non-conference schedule. I think that's the biggest part of our preparation, our practice every day and just how physical and competitive it gets. I don't think anything can prepare us more for a setting of a game like this than our day-to-day practice.

Q. What was your reaction when you saw Kentucky's name pop up there to be able to play a national brand like that?

ELIJAH MAHI: Excited. We are in the WCC, got to match up with an SEC school. Like he said they are a great school, great team. We were so excited. We wanted to play whoever. We are just excited.

ALLEN GRAVES: It is another opportunity especially with how big it was, the accomplishment of making the NCAA Tournament. It was an opportunity to go out there and play no matter who it was.

Q. For any of you, you guys I think have had five straight 20-win seasons, you have been competitive the last few years. When did you get a sense, whether it was in the summer or somewhere in the season, that this team could even go a level above in some of the wins you posted and obviously winning an at-large berth to the Tournament?

CHRISTIAN HAMMOND: I would say at the beginning of the year. You just kind of see the pieces that we have, during practice workouts and pickup. Building that bond with each other on off-the-court activities, that was the start of it.

A game that I remember vividly was when we went to Xavier at the beginning of the season, we went out there and competed and we played well. I just saw the fire and the hunger that this team had. And then that made me believe we could be something special this year.

Q. A lot of national experts are picking Santa Clara to upset Kentucky. Why do you think that is, and where

do you think Kentucky is the most vulnerable?

ELIJAH MAHI: We just believe in us. We know if we go out there and play hard, we play hard like we've been playing all year that we can beat any team out there. We're just going to believe in us and play hard.

ALLEN GRAVES: Our coach has done a great job instilling that, just be where our feet are, don't focus on the outside media or anything else. But control what we can control. I feel like that's where our mindset is we can control and do our jobs and go out there and do our best, and that's what we are going to do.

Q. From what I understand you guys haven't traveled east a whole lot this year. With the time zone change and with the early start time, what adjustments are you guys making to make sure that you are prepared for this?

CHRISTIAN HAMMOND: Just go to sleep earlier. That's the only thing, go to sleep earlier. Just try to maintain, we have our schedule and stuff that we do, our habits have been real important. What we do at practice, just our attention to detail and film. It is an early game for us obviously, but also an early game for them as well. We will all have to match up on the court at the same time. So yeah.

Q. We have read about you and heard your coaches talk about you, how would you describe your playing style, what is your scouting report of yourself?

ELIJAH MAHI: I think I am a great passer, a great scorer. And I am able to do a little bit of everything on the court, whatever the coach needs or whatever the team needs to win. I am highly competitive and just want to win at any cost.

I'll have to say I am a great passer and great scorer for sure.

ALLEN GRAVES: Describe ourselves or the team?

Q. Yourselves.

ALLEN GRAVES: Team-wise I feel like we are going to come into this game and play hard, we are going to pressure the ball, really leave it all out there on the floor each and every night. I feel like that's what we pride ourselves on, that's what we work on so hard in the summer, conditioning and all of that.

We are going to leave it all out there for 40 minutes and we are going to just go out there and play our hardest. That's



what we are going to do.

CHRISTIAN HAMMOND: I would agree with Allen. Just saying we are going to do, play 40 minutes as hard as we can. That has been our identity for the whole year. Something we harped on big. As individual players, I know we are all willing to do whatever it takes to win. At the end of the day that's all that matters.

Q. Allen, you redshirted. What's the benefit of a redshirt year, how did you benefit? Where did your game change the most, just what are the benefits of that?

ALLEN GRAVES: Definitely my body. We have a great strength and conditioning coach, Allison. I give her credit. And athletic trainer, Kevin, just really giving them credit for the transformation of my body. Being able to attack that year in the weight room, rather than on the court. In the weight room getting my body right, getting stronger.

Also on the court, just more time for development. Obviously we have a very great player development program, and just being able to attack every aspect of my game each and every day was definitely very beneficial for me, and coming into this year is proven to be beneficial.

Q. Question is for Elijah, West Valley College alum. How did West Valley College and Coach Danny Yoshikawa shape you to be in this moment right now?

ELIJAH MAHI: He prepared me a lot. Helped me slow down the game in junior college. Helped me understand the game. Me and him used to watch a lot of film and helped me simplify my game and figure out where my shots will come at and how I could be a great player at the Division I level. Shout-out to coach for sure.

THE MODERATOR: We are going to ask Coach Sendek make a statement on his team about being in the city of St. Louis then we will go to questions. Herb, please.

HERB SENDEK: Thank you. Obviously it is great to represent Santa Clara University here in St. Louis and be part of the historic NCAA Tournament. Be happy to answer any questions that you have.

Q. First, your team consistently mentioned that they are happy for the mark that it made for Santa Clara to make the first Dance since '96. But the job isn't finished. How do you see them take ownership of the process in preparing for Kentucky?

HERB SENDEK: This team has done a tremendous job of staying in the moment all season long. And they have

done a great job understanding that it is a process. Right?

And I really like the way they responded both to a measure of success and when we have had adversity. They have been very even keel in their approach.

Q. Specific to your guys' situation, you guys are going through finals this week. Have you seen your group navigate that and emotionally stay poised through it all?

HERB SENDEK: Yeah, they have done a great job with that, for the most part. We finished our final exams Wednesday, and so we are able to now focus on the Tournament exclusively.

Q. Herb, you and Mark Pope both had academic careers. You could have done anything. Why coaching?

HERB SENDEK: I don't know if I could have done anything. This might be the only thing I had a shot at.

My dad was a coach. I have been in gyms since I have been in diapers literally, not sandboxes. Now I look back on that and I realize he was never too busy or going to be with somebody too important to have me tugging at his pants leg. He went out of his way to include me.

And beyond that, as I grew up in Western Pennsylvania, I was surrounded by teachers and coaches who made me say, hey, I want to be like him. I trace it all back to the wonderful, amazing childhood and upbringing that I had.

Q. The stories of the time you spent coaching with Rick Pitino at Kentucky are growing as we speak. They are becoming legendary. You and Rick seem like such different personalities. What are some of the maybe character traits you have taken from him that have helped you in being able to guide your team?

HERB SENDEK: Sure. You are right. You are right. We do have different personalities. Everybody is unique but I can't even begin to tell you the impact that Coach has had on me. I was fortunate to work with him both at Providence and the University of Kentucky, and both of those were just incredible experiences.

And to this day I continue to stand in awe. What he is doing at St. John's what he started to do at Boston University and moving forward is legendary. Obviously, as a young coach I was all eyes wide open, ears, trying to learn as much as I could. But to your point, obviously had to integrate it into my personality, right? And some say I don't even have a personality.



So that was an important step, because you got to be yourself at the end of the day.

Q. Kind of along those same lines, we have heard a lot of stories from Mark Pope about what it was like to play for Rick Pitino. What was it like to work with him and some of his crazy stories? Pope always talked about how demanding and crazy the practices can be.

HERB SENDEK: It was an all-consuming endeavor. You couldn't just stick your big toe in the water. You had to be all in. For a guy who grew up, like I just mentioned, who played Division III basketball at Carnegie Mellon, here I was as a young coach afforded a mind-boggling opportunity at Providence in the Big East and then at the University of Kentucky.

So although we worked hard and we all had moments where we could have used a little bit more sleep, I wouldn't have traded it for the world. I mean, I had to pinch myself. Are you kidding me? I had to pinch myself every day with the gift that I had been presented.

I think across the board, when coaches and student athletes gather to reminisce, invariably we talk about what was most difficult, what was most challenging, what we had to overcome. I have never had a former player come back or gone to a gathering where anybody reminisces about a shortcut they took or where they got over or what was easy. That is not what people hold on to. You know, we hold on to something that was hard, that required us to give all of ourselves, and then the stories go, and the legends grow.

Q. Herb, you have known Mark since a teenager. What was your reaction when you learned he was one year away from being a doctor and said, no, I am going to be the lowest-paid assistant at Georgia?

HERB SENDEK: There are so many stories like that in coaching where this thing just kind of gets in your system and you follow your heart. Obviously Mark would have been a tremendous doctor. He is so bright. He is so caring, but he has also turned out to be a great basketball coach.

But my first recollection of Mark as a young man he was a young gentlemen, he was very bright, very engaging, but more than anything just a really nice person.

Q. Herb, you detail your father's impact on your love for the game and you being in the gym so early. How has that translated into your program at Santa Clara and a lot of players mention the relationship they have

with you and the staff, how have you seen that play out over the course of your tenure?

HERB SENDEK: I think it's something that you realize along the way that the relationships really touch every part or almost every part of leadership, right? It is hard to come up with maybe more than a couple examples when you talk about leadership that doesn't also touch relationships. Right? And I think that's something I had to learn as a coach that the investment you make in relationships is much more important than the investment you make in Xs and Os.

Not that it is not relevant or important, it certainly is. But it is the most important thing, and the guys we have on our team now make that easy. If you don't get along with them, you better look in the mirror, because we are blessed with some extraordinary young men.

Q. Revolving around the game, OA is a very good downhill guard. What is the chess matches with the coaching staff trying to have a guard with speed on him or having a bigger forward have the length and physicality? How do you go back and forth with that?

HERB SENDEK: Their size in general is noteworthy. Their guards are big, strong and athletic. They have tremendous length and shot-blocking at the rim. They have a number of guys that present matchup challenges for us. Not the least of which is Oweh, their leading scorer. Starting in transition and in the half-court as well is a force to be reckoned with.

Q. Going up against the team you used to coach for, what are your fond memories of your time in Lexington?

HERB SENDEK: I better answer that the right way and I will tell you I met my wife there. That would have to be the fondest, you know, if this is an official press conference, for the record.

So Coach Pitino actually played cupid and set my wife and I up, and sure enough, 30-some years later, we are here. So that would be memory number one.

And then the second thing is, once again, just some great relationships, with the players, people in the community, even this week, had a chance to reconnect with a couple friends from the Lexington area.

But that four years was just, I mean, it was magic. Coach Pitino often refers to Kentucky as Camelot. And there's a lot of truth to that. It is not like that everywhere else, you know.

If any of you are native Kentuckians and that is your sole experience, I assure you Big Blue Nation is one of a kind.

Q. Herb, you know the Kentucky experience better than anyone. You lived it. Do you have to have a conversation with your team or maybe even with yourself, you are not playing the brand Kentucky, you are playing a specific team?

HERB SENDEK: We don't. And that's not because we are playing Kentucky. It would be the same no matter who we are playing, because we never do. It is always about us. And we respect every opponent. We understand in college basketball if you don't play well, you are not going to win or have even a chance to win.

So we really try to focus on the task at hand, and not feed in to any extra drama.

Q. Herb, I am curious, how do you handle, because it has been such a story in the news the last few weeks, coaches outside the power leagues mentioning basically tampering from bigger schools, and then when a guy like Allen Graves, if he doesn't go to the NBA, bigger schools are probably going to come after him this offseason.

HERB SENDEK: Yeah, I mean it is our reality now. And schools don't necessarily wait until the offseason. It could be after the first game of the year, you know, it starts. I just think it is until we get different regulations, our reality, and you just got to navigate it and deal with it. It is not a surprise. I don't think there's anything in particular that the NCAA can do to prevent it. Through no fault of theirs, it is the way it is.

Q. I have been told to ask what a sewer rat is?

HERB SENDEK: I have never done this. I should probably give coach Jimmy Valvano credit. A few years ago even before I became coach at NC State, I heard him maybe in a camp talk use that metaphor. And somewhere along the line, we put it in neon lights.

A sewer rat for us is once again just a metaphor to talk about, you know, playing with an edge, with toughness, and so that is what a sewer rat is. We put a lot of different adjectives in front of it to bring it to life.

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