

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Tennessee State vs Iowa State

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St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Enterprise Center

Tennessee State Tigers

Nolan Smith

Dante Harris

Travis Harper II

Aaron Nkrumah

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: The Tennessee State University Tigers are with us. They are the 15th seed of the Midwest region. They are Ohio Valley Conference regular and tournament champions. They will play No. 2 seed Iowa state cyclones tomorrow. Head coach is Nolan Smith who will be with us in a bit. On the dais we have Dante Harris, Travis Harper and Aaron Nkrumah. We will take questions immediately.

Q. If all of you guys don't mind answering this. I know you guys have told me before you have dreamed of this. What is it like to walk in the building see your name tags and go out on the big floor and practice a little bit?

DANTE HARRIS: It is a dream come true. Every little kid dreams of this moment, coming to March Madness. Being in this tournament something we worked all year for. Can't wait to go out there and get started.

TRAVIS HARPER II: It is something everybody dreamed of as a kid. It's a little bit of a surreal feeling, walking in here and just actually being a part of what I used to watch as a little kid and seeing all of the work just pay off.

AARON NKRUMAH: Like Travis said, the work we put in is finally paying off. It is a dream come true. I am in the room with everybody in the room talking into the mic. It's stuff you see like on 2K. It is a great feeling, man.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the internet storm that became a story about you leaving the team to try out



for the NBA. Can you comment how crazy that has been?

AARON NKRUMAH: I told Coach, I didn't think -- that was weird. I never dealt with anything like that. He told me that is what comes with winning. People have false narratives.

When I first seen that I was confused. I had family, friends call me, like, yo, is this true? I am like, no, it is not.

It comes with winning. It is going to happen.

Q. If I could ask Travis, all year long you have been such a confident player and leader on this team. We talked preseason in Evansville how you expected this team to soar. Can you talk about your confidence level and where that comes from?

TRAVIS HARPER II: It is just trusting my teammates, trust my point guard. Trusting Coach Nolan. The confidence it comes from, me working hard every day, putting up shots, doing whatever to stay consistent with my game. It just comes from trusting my work.

Q. Now that you are here, how does it go from a dream to showing what TSU is all about and believing you can win tomorrow?

AARON NKRUMAH: Once you are here, you are here. You got to put on a show for the world. That's what we are ready to do. We are going to put our best foot forward and do what we can to get that win.

TRAVIS HARPER II: Of course it is exciting. It is exciting being here, first time in 32 years. We got a lot of love from Nashville, a lot of love from alumni, just everywhere, being an HBCU, putting us on the map. It is time for the work now. So you know it is time to go out there and show that we are supposed to be here.

DANTE HARRIS: Piggyback off of what they said, it is one of the biggest stages in -- the biggest stage in college basketball. Just going to go out there and showcase our talents. Play our game.

We are a 15th seed, but I feel as though we can compete with anybody in this tournament. We got the guys. Got the



coaching staff. We are going to be all right.

Q. Hi, guys. I was just talking to one of your teammates in the locker room, and he told me the type of conditioning you had to go through to be really -- to play at the pace that you do. Can you talk about what you guys have had to go through?

DANTE HARRIS: We run a lot in practice just to make sure our bodies is up to par. Once you get to the big stage like March Madness, the first four to five minutes is kind of jittery. You feel a little sluggish, tired. We try to preach it practice just to get our wind up, get our wind back, do a little sprinting here and there, play a couple pick-up -- not pick-up but like 5-on-5, just to make sure we are good and ready to go.

TRAVIS HARPER II: I think conditioning is one of the most important aspects of the game, especially around Tournament time, and national and conference tournament. I feel people fall out of shape. If we keep running, we will be in shape.

Q. Aaron, there's a lot of conversation about HBCUs they have done really well in the first four. Dante said you are 15th seed. Do you feel HBCUs have been underseeded over the year and what can you change how you are perceived collectively?

AARON NKRUMAH: Sure I think they have been underseeded. If you look at a lot of HBCUs there's a lot of talent in there right now. HBCU is always going to put on I feel, put on for the world. It is a matter of if people are going to watch it or not.

Q. What are your guys' first thoughts on Iowa State of the big three and how do you plan on attacking them?

DANTE HARRIS: Tremendous team. Well coached. Have a guy that shoots 50% from 3, which is insane. Lipsey a great point guard. Runs his show well. Quick hands on defense.

Jefferson, he is a big body. Plays hard.

We are going to play our game and just do what we preach. Do what we know how to do. We are going to live with results of that.

Q. Dante, you have been in this position before. How do you share what you did with Georgetown with the guys to prepare them for what this is like? And Aaron, if I spent a couple minutes I could probably name every 15 over 2 upset in the tournament. You guys have put TSU on the map. Have you thought about

what it would mean to be one of the 15 over 2 upsets?

AARON NKRUMAH: It would mean a lot. You don't see that real often. When you do see it, it is a lot. It makes a lot of noise around the world.

I feel like we are capable of doing that. We got the talent. We got the coaching staff, everybody around us. A lot of love coming from Nashville. We are really excited for the opportunity. We are ready.

DANTE HARRIS: Me being the fourth time in March Madness, second time I am actually playing, just trying to tell the other guys to just enjoy the moment. I feel like it goes fast. This is my last year. Just to embrace the opportunity. Don't shy away from it, and just play your game. It is March Madness, but you are a basketball player at the end of the day. You work on your game night in and night out. Just play your game. Don't be afraid of the moment. Live with the results, like I said before.

THE MODERATOR: The head coach of the Tennessee State Tigers is with us, Nolan Smith. We are going to ask him to make an opening statement on the team of being in the great city of St. Louis. Then we will go to questions.

NOLAN SMITH: We are honored to be here. Honored to play in March Madness. Honored to be a part of this great historic tournament. This is what you dream of.

I remember dreaming of it when I was a kid. Now for the players, their dreams are coming true. Now for our guys to throw themselves into the moment. Be caught up in the moment and be excited for the moment and be us. I have been saying that for the last week and a half since winning the OVC Tournament. It is being the team that we have become, which is a championship team.

We have been OVC champions in the regular season and tournament. We know what it takes. We are excited to play a really good opponent in Iowa State. They are tough, they are physical. If we are soft, it could be a long night. We are not preparing for that. Our guys are tough. We are excited for a big-time game tomorrow afternoon.

Q. Nolan, congratulations. You guys are so excited to be here and go through the Sunday experience. But now that you are actually here, how do you transition from this is a dream to this is a business trip?

NOLAN SMITH: Just continuing to talk to our guys, continuing to talk to our guys. We have a veteran group. We have guys that are experienced, have been through many different things either in their basketball careers or in everything.

So just being here, being in the moment, starting to talk about winning, starting to talk about how tough we are going to be. Starting to talk about rebounding the ball and doing the little things that it took to get us here.

Again, at the start of game tomorrow, we know their nerves are going to be high, excited. All nerves are not bad nerves, they are good nerves. Get it out by playing fast and playing free and being yourselves, as a team continuing to talk and understand, hey, we have been in big games. We have been in this moment. Let's go.

Q. I know you had a chance to play against Iowa State in 2010. I am wondering if you remember anything from that game and kind of what Iowa State, Iowa State basketball means to you and you have familiarized yourself with the program?

NOLAN SMITH: I remember that game. I don't remember much from the game. It means I am getting older or I have turned the page. I remember playing against them way back in the day.

Right now just preparing for this Iowa State team and Coach TJ and their staff, they are tough. They defend. They get after it. They compete. They are a veteran group as well. They play well together. They know who they are. They are going to make us do things we might not want to do and we have to be ready to respond.

Big-time program and what they have built over there coming from their league, they are ready for this moment as well.

Q. Coach, your guys have a toughness about them. I have watched all year long. And then in the OVC it was a dogfight to win that regular season championship. How powerfully prepared are they at this moment?

NOLAN SMITH: They are very prepared. There is a moment in our season where I would've said they weren't prepared. But that's part of the process of becoming a champion. But once they realized they had a chance to become a champion, that's when they changed. All of the soft stuff, the giving up offensive rebounds, being careless with the ball, we started to see all of that stuff go out the window. We got tighter and got sharper and we started to look like how we looked.

That's the biggest thing. When you are in this position now and you start to grow up and you start to look at yourself in the mirror and say who are we, they made the changes and it really started with the players.

Us as a staff, we gave them the blueprint pretty early. Once I got the job and got on campus, we started about what this needs to look like. After the Morehead State loss the guys talked about all of our flaws and what it is going to take to be a tougher team. As.

A championship team, players take ownership. Once they took ownership over what we are doing, that's where I think everybody that has watched us become the tough and together team that we have become.

Q. If I took a few minutes I could probably count off every 15 over 2 upset in the history of the Tournament. Hasn't happened very much. You were so big on history with these guys, pointing to the banner before practices and things like that. Have you talked to them about the history there and what it would mean to put Tennessee State on the 15 over 2 line?

NOLAN SMITH: We have not talked about it yet. Haven't decided if I am going to talk about it. I know there's a game that I have looked at, Hampton verses Iowa State from way, way back. Can't remember what year that was, but it has been done especially for HBCU verses Iowa State.

So there are some signs there that I look at, that IU pray about and see, but I want my guys to focus on them and then whatever happens happens.

Q. When Dante came with you and then the role he plays as quarterback of the team and then Lipsey, I don't know if they will be man-to-man but talk about him as a value in a point guard?

NOLAN SMITH: He is so valuable. When you are able to get a kid in today's climate that has been in the Big East, ACC, in the American league, and now to come to this league and now be here on this stage, he's built for this stage. He has won at every school he has been at. Watching him walk around now, he is extremely calm. He's extremely calm. That's as a head coach, when your point guard looks like that, every head coach looks at their point guard. Look at your point guard he will make you feel a lot more at ease as far as how you are going to look tomorrow afternoon.

So feel good. Expect his leadership to be on full display as we take the court.

Q. Just in terms of keys, you talked about their toughness, how well coached they are, they have a lot of talent. What's the biggest thing you think your team needs to do to handle the stage and handle the

opponent?

NOLAN SMITH: On the defense we have to gang rebound. All five guys have to be in that paint, in that fight. Keep them off the offensive boards. On the offensive end we have to value the ball. We have to get a shot up every possession or it needs to be a dead ball turnover. It can't be a live ball turnover where we give them run-outs and give them easy points. Momcilovic, don't want to butcher his name, a big-time player, give him 3s in transition. We have to value the ball.

Q. Just talk about Aaron's defense. He is tenacious on the offensive end creating havoc and how that gives you an edge in this game?

NOLAN SMITH: He is a big-time defender. Player of the Year. Could have been Defensive Player of the Year. He has had nine steals in a game. That's how we want to play defensively. He's the catalyst of that, along with Dante. They have freedom to get that ball. We want to be in gaps, we want to be aggressive. If a guy is dribbling at you, it can't be a one-on-one game he has to see a body. AK does one of the best jobs of going to get the ball, whether it is on the ball or off the ball.

He is very dangerous for us. It helps us get out in our transition and gets us playing faster as well.

Q. You talk about getting hired in July but assistant coaches didn't really come until August. How important has it been for guys like Vince and DJ and Dalonte who has been in the NCAA Tournament before as players and coaches, and you as a head coach rely on those guys?

NOLAN SMITH: It is so important to have that experience. For me, when I got the job to be fortunate enough to get those guys at their availability was so big for me. They have been everywhere, worked under big-time coaches. To name a couple, Mark Turgeon, Tubby Smith, Rick Pitino, Frank Martin. My guys come from great coaching trees.

I am sure right now during this media time they are in there hopefully -- not hopefully, I know they are asking those guys questions. Hey Coach DJ, what did you do in the Tournament? Coach Hill, Coach Vince I know it was a long, long, long time ago, but what did you do in the Tournament. I hope he doesn't see this. (Laughter). Long time ago.

Those are the conversations. That's why when you have a great staff that is open, great relationship guys, built relationships with these young men, I know they are talking

about it right now, really leaning on them just for confidence and understanding, and what this is that we are about to see tomorrow.

Q. This is a little off topic, and I don't think you overlapped with Evan at Duke, Evan Bradds, what kind of preparation did you get working with the coach at Duke that will help Evan Bradds at Belmont?

NOLAN SMITH: When you are at Duke you learn about preparation. That's everywhere. I worked with Coach K, Brad working for Jon, preparation and how you prepare for the next day is part of Duke. Being around that, whether it is with Nina King, you see it on a daily basis.

I know without a doubt Brad is going to go to Belmont and be extremely ready and have them do what they have done for decades, which is win. Thank you all very much.

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