

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Queens (N.C.) vs Purdue

Thursday, March 19, 2026

St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Enterprise Center

Purdue Boilermakers

Matt Painter

Fletcher Loyer

Braden Smith

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Purdue, No. 2 seed of the West region Big Ten Conference champions. They will play number 15 seed Queens University tomorrow night at 6:35. Head coach is Matt Painter. On the dais we have Fletcher Loyer and Braden Smith.

Q. Braden, you first. Your family has been a part of this sort of through all of this. How have they handled it and how has the experience of the collective of everybody who has been on board with you?

BRADEN SMITH: It is obviously a very fun four years. Obviously having my family there every step of the way. Obviously I have a little brother as well. Obviously for him to see and travel and do things I never got to do when I was his age.

It is definitely a great thing to have and to be around. Obviously all just enjoying it and soaking it up while we can.

Q. One for you as well, Fletcher. What flipped the switch in Chicago? Seemed like something clicked that hadn't really since the first part of the season.

FLETCHER LOYER: We played a little better. We know we have the talent in the room and the staff behind us to back us up. Just going out doing our job and executing.

Q. Braden, just the ascent of your career, along with the arrival, how have you been able to manage that and balance that and stay grounded through the whole thing?

BRADEN SMITH: I think for me it is just playing the game you love. It is just something you enjoy doing every single day. So I have never really got out of that, or got away from that. It is just continuing to compete and get better. Obviously, as a basketball player you try to improve every year and every single day. I feel like that's just really what it is.

Q. Fletcher, you know, you were a part of that team, both you all a couple years ago that made that deep run. What enables a team to find their rhythm early? What can you do that first weekend that gives you a hope that you guys can go make that deep run?

FLETCHER LOYER: Obviously winning in March is tough. Getting ready to go you have to be good defensively. You have to be good on the glass and taking care of the ball. Doing a lot of little things that lead to winning, playing well this first weekend and getting confidence rolling.

Q. Braden, forgive me, I know you have gotten a lot of questions about the jersey. Couple things, number one, do you know which number you will be wearing, provided no mishaps or anything going forward?

BRADEN SMITH: 3.

Q. Number 2, do you still have the ripped jersey? Any sentimental value to that or is it kind of like that's gone?

BRADEN SMITH: I am assuming that's the one I will be wearing. That's what I think. I think it is all sewed back up. It got sewed up in halftime of that game. I could have worn it in that second half. But 41 made shots, so we kind of just stuck with it.

Q. Braden, when you look at Queens, do they remind you of anybody you played this year or in the last couple years? And where do you see their strengths in just trying to slow them down?

THE MODERATOR: Fletcher, go first on this one.

FLETCHER LOYER: I think they are a pretty good offensive team. They have a lot of guys that can drive and score. Pretty good defensively as well. They mix up their

look. Come ready to play.

BRADEN SMITH: I would say the same thing. I don't know if it is anyone that we have played against. They play smaller. So obviously for us they are going to pressure more and we have to be able to handle the ball and get the catches in the right spots. Really just execute.

Like Fletch said, they are really good offensively. So we have to be great like we have been the last four games. Offensively be locked in and ready to go.

Q. Athletics is an interesting space right now. Athletes can be free agents every year, which can make them a lot of money. What has that balance been like of kind of testing the market like you would in the pros, and what has enabled you all or why have you wanted to stay at Purdue as long as you have over the years?

BRADEN SMITH: Culture. I think having what we have here in the last four years is really special. I think we have had maybe four transfers in my four years that we have had, and I think that's pretty special and not a lot of teams ever have that. That is one of the things.

I think Coach Paint does an unbelievable job. He's put a lot of trust in us. Who wouldn't want to stay? Obviously if our situation was different, whatever. For us just being around a great group of people as a whole, the community at Purdue, the coaching staff, just staff in general. It just makes it super special.

FLETCHER LOYER: Obviously it is a different day and age. But I think at the end of last season we talked to each other over the phone, and it is like we know we can go make millions and millions of dollars somewhere else, but that's not really what we are too worried about. We want to go win a National Championships and do something special.

Knowing the group we were having when we were coming back and knowing the staff that recruited us at Purdue and trusted us and put the ball in our hands since day one, they believed in us to go do it again. Not looking at other factors other than coming back and playing for Purdue.

THE MODERATOR: The head coach of Purdue is here, Matt Painter. We are going to ask him to make a statement regarding his team being in the great city of St. Louis.

MATT PAINTER: Excited about being in St. Louis, and obviously competing, and, you know, the day before is a great day. Everybody is getting prepared. You get to

practice in front of fans. You are shooting. Kind of get a little bit of the jitters out for your guys, especially the ones that haven't been in this position before.

But now we are excited about being a two-seed. We have worked really hard. I thought we had a great finish there in the Big Ten Tournament winning four games in four days. So hopefully playing a game and advancing, having a day off after what we just went through.

Got a lot of respect for the low to mid-major teams out there that have to win three or four games in a row to get here. That's got to be a tough world. I have been in that world. Got a lot of respect for Queens and what they have been able to do. They can really, really score the basketball. They are well coached. It is going to be a tough game for us.

Q. You obviously played a lot of teams that can score a lot of points, have shot the three ball well. When you go back and kind of look at what Queens has been able to do this season, is there any team you can compare them to whether it is the Big Ten, Iowa State, something like that?

MATT PAINTER: Not really. They are a skilled team. They have a couple of guys that can really shoot it. They have a lot of guys that can break you down and make plays. They are a smaller team than we are used to in the Big Ten. But they are a quality team. Their big guys can rip and go. They have size that can shoot threes. They have athleticism, they have play Americas. They have proven throughout the year they can score the basketball.

For us, trying to stick to our rules, keep the ball in front of us more than anything. They do a good job of advancing the basketball and just looking to attack right away.

Q. What do you like about this squad going into the Tournament and what do you feel they do exceptionally well that could help you make a deep run?

MATT PAINTER: For us how we played here last week is something because we didn't finish the season strong. Offensively we have put up really good numbers this year. We have been very efficient on the offensive end. Got a great assist to turnover ratio. Have a lot of different weapons. We didn't put ourselves even in a position to win the Big Ten during the year. From a defensive standpoint we had to be better.

With that being said, the talent in our league was probably the best it has been in a long, long time. We have really good teams in our league. It was good for our guys to



build some confidence by being able to knock off some of those teams in the Big Ten Tournament.

Q. How Braden has handled his ascent to where he is now and balance he has had to have and stay grounded, what have you noticed out of that since you first saw him play in AAU and all of that to kind of where he is at now?

MATT PAINTER: I never saw him play in AAU. Obviously we recruited him during COVID. We saw him on film. A lot of people don't realize sometimes when you are as good as he is and you have had the career he has had, you can take that and it can help you but it can also be a burden. When things go great, it is a beautiful world. But when they don't, it gets put on you. That's something all competitors want.

Now to be able to grind through the periods when you have those struggles makes you a better player and ultimately makes you a better team.

He has been fine. He is great. He is competitive. He wants challenges. I thought his leadership, his defense was really good in the Big Ten Tournament. That's what we need going forward not just his play making. He is the best playmaker in college basketball. He has proven that. He is going to break this record here in the next game, which is an unbelievable feat to beat Bobby Hurley's record that has been held for 33 years. He deserves it.

We run some stuff and PJ has done a great job with him and helping him and developing him. He showed up on our doorstep being able to pass. He has an innate ability to be able to find people, understand angles.

Q. Raleigh and Antione two guys who took red shirts this year, they continue to be engaged. How have they helped you during the season and what's the best way they have helped you?

MATT PAINTER: Being on that scout team, staying with it and competing every single day give us the looks we need from our opponents, on the interior. Obviously with Raleigh a guy 4 or 5, who can play on the inside but also step out and shoot. Antione's playmaking ability, really his ability to score gives us honest looks right there.

They are both engaged. They are both with it. They are a big part of our program. They are both going to have great careers at Purdue.

Q. Two questions for you. Grant was really vocal about what went on at the conference tournament with the potential tampering and the ethics behind it. What

was your opinion of him being so outspoken him and his players and kind of that situation?

MATT PAINTER: The rules stink more than anything. You get a player, you know, no matter where you are and you are the one that found him, you recruited him and all of a sudden it is so easy for guys to leave whenever they want, especially the guys that play at four schools in four years.

But, yeah, it is frustrating. He is frustrated. They have treated their guys the right way. They've worked them. They have gotten them better and they have improved now they have to move on. Then people are tampering with your guys. Nobody tampers and they want to go in the portal, then that's the rule. That's perfectly fine. But when guys are recruiting people off of your roster and you have worked really hard.

Go look at his path to get here, it is a hard path. Really hard path to get where he is at. Now Queens is finally Division I he has got him in the NCAA Tournament, he should just be thinking about Purdue. Now he is thinking about people tampering? It is really unfortunate. Shouldn't be this way.

Q. At the coaches' convention it is something he will talk about. What do you think should change in the way people go about roster building? What do you think needs to change and curtail some of that behavior?

MATT PAINTER: You just shouldn't be able to transfer. Nothing wrong with a one-time transfer. You shouldn't be able to transfer every single year. That would curtail not all of it, but would curtail some of it.

Some of the things legally are -- you can't change it. It is already happening. You are not going to be able to go backwards on some of those things, even though you don't like it. There's got to be some things, we soften some things so guys can build a roster, so they don't have to sign 10 to 12 guys every single year.

Q. With the run of success you have had at Purdue, it can be easy to kind of take this stage for granted. How have you personally and you with your team kind of made sure to embrace how special going to the NCAA Tournament is year in and year out?

MATT PAINTER: It is your goal. Your goal is to win your conference championship. Then it is to get into the NCAA Tournament. The fact that we went nine, 10 years here with a top four seed. We don't take it for granted. We know it is hard work to get in this position. It is hard for everybody, no matter what your seed is, to get in this

position.

This is what it is all about. We are always thinking about ways to improve for this time. Obviously we have had success, but we have also had failures.

That's what you want to keep doing, you want to keep putting yourself in great positions and obviously playing well. Everything we do, whether it is tapering, you know, during the season what we do in June, what we do in July, all of those things, like just trying to help your guys from sports medicine to rest, to diet, you know, just so you can get to this point for these three weeks and play at your best.

Q. Matt, a lot of memories in this building and with the Valley and all of that. Talk about your history here both with Southern?

MATT PAINTER: It was some of the best times of my life being able to be at Southern Illinois. Obviously becoming the head coach there for one year, but being Coach Weber's assistant for five years, obviously he recruited me to Purdue. St. Louis is a great basketball town. It has been really good to the Missouri Valley in that league, and Southern Illinois, southern Illinois has had a lot of success in that league.

For us I was an assistant for two years and we went to the NCAA Tournament. I was head coach for one and Chris Lowery was head coach for three, which a lot of folks don't realize in that six-year span, Southern Illinois went to six straight NCAA Tournaments, but five of them were at-large bids.

Coach Weber was the one that really taught me how to put the schedule together and do everything in your power with that schedule to try to get in the NCAA Tournament. That's getting harder and harder now for mid-major teams to get those at-large bids.

For us, when people hear that story and say, man, you went six straight years. Obviously I wasn't there the last years to go six straight years, five to be at-large bids, that was pretty special, kind of a special time to be a part of half of that.

Coming to St. Louis we recruited a lot of good players from this area. Darren Brooks from Jennings, Stetson Hairston from across the river. Both of those guys will be coming tomorrow to the game. Got them tickets.

It is cool. Bryan Turner texted me today from Beaumont, but St. Louis was a little under-recruited at the time, which was pretty cool. You know what I mean? It was two hours

away, it allowed us to get in here. If SLU or Missouri or Illinois didn't want them, we had a really good crack to get those guys.

It worked with those St. Louis area kids we got. They all graduated, they all had success. We all got to the Tournament. They won conference championships. Just had good experiences.

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