

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Kentucky vs Iowa State

Saturday, March 21, 2026

St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Enterprise Center

Iowa State Cyclones

T.J. Otzelberger

Media Conference



MODERATOR: Head coach of the Iowa State Cyclones is here, T.J. Otzelberger, and we're going to ask him to make a statement on tomorrow's match-up and then we will go to questions.

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. First, tremendous respect for Coach Pope. Known him a while. Really respect how hard he gets his teams to play. His successes at Utah Valley, BYU and now Kentucky are no surprise based on his character and work ethic. We know it's a big challenge in front of us. We know what a great team he has. They're playing terrific basketball and we're going to need to be at our absolute best. That's what we're going to aim to do come tomorrow.

Q. T.J., what's Joshua's prognosis for tomorrow?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. Right now we're continuing to evaluate. It appears unlikely, but you never want to rule anything out. So we'll just continue to do what we can in his best interest and we'll be prepared to go either way.

Q. While everybody is tweeting that out, I might as well get another question in. If he's not able to go, what do you all need from everybody else to fill that void?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: I think what we saw yesterday is exactly what we were hoping for, is other guys step up in more pivotal roles. Killyan Toure played terrifically yesterday offensively. Nate Heise really stepped up in a major way. I think for all of our guys. We've got so much confidence in this group and guys that can step up on a given night. Obviously when you have a guy like Joshua out, it's going to be imperative that other guys step in. That's something we had early in the year when Lipsey was out in the tournament in Las Vegas, guys stepped up as well. So there's a lot of pride in our team and our ability

to play for one another.

Q. Coach, you talked about having various guys step up, Dominick Nelson certainly did that for you yesterday. He started the year in the rotation for you guys. How did you see him handle the process of a changing role in your program this year?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: I think he did a great job in terms of his readiness and stepping in yesterday and not really knowing what was coming his way. And I think earlier in the year when minutes, when we cut to eight in the rotation, he's shown tremendous character. He's stayed ready for the moment and the opportunity, and I think when guys do that and that opportunity comes around, they're going to be prepared. And he did an excellent job, and he stepped up for us yesterday. It was great to see.

Q. And to follow up, what do you think it says about his character that during his senior year, to deal with the frustrations of that not going maybe exactly how he wanted it to, that he was still able to continue on the path that you guys had outlined for him and then to produce like he did yesterday?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah, no. It speaks to his credit, to his character and who he is as a man and how he continues to work.

Look, I think he knows every day that in our program there's opportunity to earn playing time, and he's continued to work through the challenges. So he deserves all the credit.

Q. Coach, what are the challenges to facing someone like Otega Oweh who just seems to find a way every game?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. He's a relentless competitor, really gifted in space, gets into the paint, gets to the foul line, makes plays for himself and his teammates. Just a dynamic scorer. We played against him earlier in his career when he was at OU. He was a terrific player then. And now he's playing with such tremendous confidence.

It's definitely not a task for one person. It's a team defense thing, and it's being intentional. It's trying to be back in

transition, keep him out of space and then make sure that he has to work and earn everything.

Q. Coach, I just talked to Dom Nelson about the mental side of basketball, and he said that you and your staff kind of push that on the players to do things on their own. And then he also said you may have brought in some people to do that. Can you explain that process of what you put an emphasis on on the mental side of the game?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. We place a tremendous premium on mental toughness and I don't think it's as much talking about it as what you live out every single day, how you make decisions, how you work, the intentionality with how you operate your schedule, how you push through adversity. Those are things that we really place a premium on.

For us, whenever we can find living examples or people to help provide insight on that topic, we welcome it, and I think it's something that for everybody to really dive into, I think for all of us, that we can push and challenge ourselves even more with the right mental focus and approach to things.

Q. Coach, Coach Pope and you both appear to know each other quite well. How would you define the identity of a Mark Pope team?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: I think his guys play with tremendous passion. He's really talented in terms of being able to get teams offensively to play with great pace and ball movement, purpose. And I think defensively, they recruit guys who are bigger guards and wings and have tremendous versatility and yet have great size on the interior to protect the rim.

With each job and each opportunity, certainly there's a different way to win games at that place, but I think with Coach Pope, you can count on a team that they're going to play really hard, they're going to compete. They're going to play with his passion, energy and enthusiasm and it's something you understand as the personnel changes. Those are characteristics and attributes of a Mark Pope basketball team.

Q. I'm curious, we saw the first weekend not a lot of high seeds, I guess the lower seeds are not doing all that well. Why do you think that trend has been that case over the last couple of years? And for the game, is it good, bad indifferent? What are your thoughts on that?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: I would guess you could speculate

that because of the transfer portal and media eligibility and NIL that guys are going to naturally gravitate to the programs that are with more higher acclaim, on national schedules or whatever that may be.

Yet at the same time, I know as one who worked at South Dakota State and UNLV prior to, that there's really good teams out there at the Mid Major level and teams that on a given night can go out and beat anybody. So I don't really have any long-range opinions on it. I just try to keep my focus on the things we can control and how we can make our program the best it can be. But I do think that that's something that you're hearing people talk about more and more is there's not as much of a Cinderella story, potentially.

Q. Coach, yesterday Brandon Garrison for Kentucky played a huge role in switching with the guards and helping guard the perimeter. As you guys were watching the film, what did you see that it makes it hard for teams to have success on the perimeter when he is switching like that?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: We remember him even when he was at Oklahoma State and his defensive versatility. And I think now what you're seeing is maturity in his motor. I think it's one thing to have the physical tools. It's another to have the experience, the discipline, the knowledge of guarding on the perimeter and the strengths of that personnel. He did a terrific job yesterday. It completely changed the course of the game, his ability to switch and impact plays. So, again, it's a veteran guy who's been in the fights before, who cares about his team winning and stepping up on the biggest stage.

Q. Coach, your history with Mark Pope, how did you guys meet and what is it that clicked early on?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: He had a friendship with Fred Hoiberg. I think they played together at Indiana with the Pacers, and I worked for Coach Hoiberg. So got a chance to meet him back then. When I was at UNLV, and whether he was at Utah Valley, BYU, and we had crossed paths on the road, and then with BYU, just we had an opportunity to go up to Salt Lake City and play. So we had a game there.

Again, somebody that has a tremendous track record and we respect very much and just really admire the man that he is and how he goes about his business.

Q. To go back to the question about Brandon, from a coach's perspective, especially in the modern game, what is so disruptive? You talked about it a little bit, but what is so disruptive about a player that's not afraid to switch, is not afraid to sort of like go onto

smaller players, to step away from maybe where he would be normally defensively from his position?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: I think when you have that length and versatility, you have the ability to contest shots on the perimeter. You have the ability to challenge shots at the rim. And I think oftentimes when a big gets switched onto a guard, the guard thinks it's time to attack off the balance or create space, isolate and be able to get to his shot.

With Brandon, he has such great discipline defensively, not only does he use his length to his benefit, but you always have in the back of your mind, do you really want to drive him to the rim and challenge him in? I think there's a psychological thing that happens there is, all right, he could block my shot on the perimeter or the rim and he's still got the mobility and agility to contain the balance. So he poses a huge challenge because of his ability to do all those things.

Q. The game tomorrow that has the potential to be very fast-paced and chaotic, both teams are going to be able to go on runs. What do you trust the most about your team?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah, our half court team defense. That's where we hang our hat. That's where our greatest belief lies, and that's what we work to earn every single day. So it's important for us to make sure we get our defense set, make sure that we dial in to our daily habits defensively and that we set the tone by dictating. And that's what we work on every single day, and that's what we take tremendous pride in.

Q. Just talked to Joshua, and he said that he has a large say in maybe when or how much he decides to do. What's your approach on letting players decide when they're able to go out and play basketball versus your approach to letting medical staff and people have a say in what they're able to do?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: I think Joshua is someone that we have unbelievable trust in. I mean, he's a guy that's been a complete warrior for us. How he went down yesterday, not something that we've seen in the two years with him at practice. Sometimes there's such a thing as a player that goes down and then they're fine right after. When Joshua goes down, you know it's real.

So it's really everybody working as a collaboration. We have tremendous medical staff. Our trainer, Vic Miller, is as hard of working and talented trainer as there is in the country, and it's just pooling resources and information. I don't think it's as much of a set plan or a way of going about it as everybody just communicate effectively and let's

make decisions in the best interest of Joshua and his health and well-being first, and then let's do what's best for Iowa State basketball, as well.

Q. From a match-up standpoint, is Kentucky's length, would that be the biggest challenge that they present for you guys?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. They have great size at all the guard positions. So I think on the defensive end that's switchability, versatility, that's ability to close space on close-outs and take some air space away when you're contesting jump shots.

On the offensive end, that size is a factor, when they get to their spots and they can rise up and make shots. So I think size, length, versatility, both on the perimeter and the interior are certainly things that we have to factor in and things that pose challenges.

Q. Seems like very often your name is mentioned on these hot boards for other jobs. Even if you have no real link to them, is that frustrating? Is it kind of humbling that so many people think that you're such a good coach that you should be up for all these other jobs? How do you kind of handle that when you hear your name being mentioned for this job or another?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah, how I handle that is I focus on the job that I have and doing the best job I can with that. When those things come up, it's a credit to our players, because what they're saying is our players are doing a great job with the work that they're putting in. We don't really get any further ahead than that, and we leave it at that.

Q. When J-Jeff went down, he was basically replaced by Dom Nelson in the rotation and the minutes and everything. He's smaller. He's a guard. How do you prepare for having another guard in the rotation versus Joshua Jefferson?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. We practice very intentionally every day. We understand, as unfortunate as this is and as much as our heart breaks for Joshua, that you've gotta build a model of winning where even if one guy is out or in foul trouble, that you continue to move forward. So we lean into the strengths of the players that are going to be playing and that we have and the things that they do best. So we've seen Dom Nelson be a dynamic ball handler, get to the basket, make plays, get to the foul line. He needs to focus on just being Dom Nelson, doing what he does.

And the same way Nate Heise, when he came in yesterday

for Joshua, he needs to play the best that Nate Heise can and to his strength. We build our system to have guys that have tremendous pride, unit, care for our program, and at the same time, when it comes to the offensive talents and strengths, leaning into what each guy does best.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much for your time. Best of luck tomorrow.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

