

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Gonzaga vs Purdue

Thursday, March 28, 2024

Detroit, Michigan, USA

Little Caesars Arena

**Gonzaga Bulldogs**

**Mark Few**

**Nolan Hickman**

**Graham Ike**

**Braden Huff**

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good morning. Welcome to the dais here at Little Caesar's Arena here in Detroit.

With that we will begin today's press conference with head coach Mark Few.

MARK FEW: It's just awesome to be back to another Sweet 16. As I told the guys, it's just a great week. It's such a fun week to advance and have a little bit of time to hang out and enjoy each other.

I think that's really important with this group because this group, I've had some really, really close teams, but this group is as close as any of them.

I also told them, as good as this week is, the next week gets even better, it's the best week.

So we're fired up. We know we've got our hands full. We played Purdue earlier in the year. They're a great team, and they've been great throughout this whole year.

**Q. Coach, can you just kind of tell us how your team is different from November but also how Purdue is different from what you've seen watching this week?**

MARK FEW: I think we're both different. I know in our case we're vastly different. We had some -- whew, we had some pretty rough patches there early, if you watched some of our practices and even some of our early games.



We actually played really, really hard against them the first time. We just turned the ball over too much and shot way, way, way too many threes. So I think hopefully we'll get that cleared up. We're sharing it better, and I think we're much more purposeful on the offensive end.

But they're better too, so I think that will be the biggest challenge there.

**Q. Coach Few, since I was 8 years old, for nine years we see the Zags consistently in the Sweet 16 and the fantastic handstands in the locker room.**

MARK FEW: I don't know if they were fantastic. They were moved by emotion but pretty marginal on the execution.

**Q. Well, they inspired me. I've got to know, from then to now, how has your approach changed in these Sweet 16s?**

MARK FEW: Hey, like I said at the start of this thing, I'm excited as ever. I think, even for me, I take nothing for granted any of these years, but I think this one probably feels as special as any just because we were behind the eight ball there for a while. There was a lot of doubts, and we had to really buckle down and play great down the stretch even to get in this tournament, which it's really, really hard to get into and it's even harder to move on to a Sweet 16.

So I think in lieu of all that, this one feels great. It also feels great just kind of going through the journey with this group. They never wavered. They stuck together. They stayed really, really coachable. I think that's been rewarding too.

**Q. The Zach Edey issue, can you kind of describe the challenge of dealing with somebody that unique? And also if there's any advantage that you are one of those few teams that's played them a couple times.**

MARK FEW: First of all, phenomenal, phenomenal player and just needs to be congratulated for putting together



these seasons to be College Player of the Year two years in a row.

Yeah, I've been doing this a long, long, long time, and you just have never dealt with something like Zach, that size but yet that good of a player. He's really developed his touch. His ball goes in now. It's very soft. Great passer if you choose to double-team him. Shoots free throws really, really well. Obviously at that size, really impacts the game on the defensive end.

So he's an entity that you just don't see. The positive is we have seen him. We played him in the PK-85 early a year ago. Like I mentioned, we played him in the Maui tournament at Thanksgiving.

At least we've felt his size and his strength, and also played against a really, really good Purdue team. So anything we can draw on some of those experiences.

**Q. Coach Painter brings a sort of burden to this Final Four -- or to this Sweet 16 to try to get to the Final Four. You carried that for a little while. I think every coach carries it for a little while. How do you manage that?**

MARK FEW: I just think you just totally, unequivocally, just focus on the task at hand. It's just kind of a next-game mentality. I think they've done a wonderful job with that. They've hit it head on throughout the whole year, it seems like, all the way back to the preseason.

Yeah, you just kind of go next-game mentality. Man, it certainly hasn't affected them in this tournament. They've been lights out so far in these first two games.

Now I think all that stuff's off, and now they're playing. They seem to be playing their best basketball, at least based on these last two outings.

**Q. Coach, when you watch Ben play, do you see a little bit of throwback Zag in him and his style and combativeness but with new zag skills and talents?**

MARK FEW: I think the Zags have always -- we've always been like that. I think sometimes you get this old zag/new Zag stuff. First of all, the old Zags were really, really good and talented, and our new run have been really, really tough and got a lot of old school to them.

What he is is he is a Zag, just heart and soul, and he just embodies everything our program is about, his toughness, how he prepared, how he just values team and really works at keeping everybody together.

Then again, this particular group just really, really rallies around him and really -- we figured that out. So it's just important to have him around and on the floor because they really respond to him.

**Q. I know you talked about it a little bit earlier with both teams being different than when you played earlier this year, and we know from following you guys this season specifically, how much can you draw from that matchup? Are you going to look at that previous game heading into this?**

MARK FEW: Yeah, we've looked at it a lot. I mean, both of us will change, but we're not going to change that much. We kind of are who we are.

Like I said, especially when you're dealing with someone as special as an Edey, we've at least experienced it, so we're not trying to describe it to our guys and show other teams playing against it. We actually played against it. So we can obviously draw on those times when we were successful and try to correct the ones when we're not.

It's not just about him. Braden Smith's had a great year. They've been great this year. They've got great balance -- Matt's as good a coach as there is in all of college basketball. He puts them all in the right spots and places, and they execute perfectly. Then they're constantly changing and subbing and putting more skill guys in these positions and these actions to make it really, really hard to guard.

It will be fun trying to deal with all that.

**Q. Kind of going off of what you just said, I think Matt's done a good job of getting the role players to buy into those roles, seven, eight deep. What is the challenge in that? When you've got a team that's this good, those are the guys that obviously make a difference when you get this far in the tournament.**

MARK FEW: They have a lot of weapons, a lot of weapons. I think it's really imperative that our guys really, really dial in to personnel, and they all have their different strengths, the ones that he does bring off. Shooters, we've got to make sure we do a great job on them.

I think they're most dangerous when they're making a bunch of threes, like they did the last game. So we've got to do a great job there, and we've got to understand when shooters aren't in, obviously we've got to shore up the glass or shore up duck-ins inside and all of the above.

All the while keep those guards in front of us and do a good job there, especially in transition. They hurt us in

transition over in Hawaii also. So we need to do a better job there.

**Q. Kind of along those same lines, how have their guards maybe played off of Edey, and in the more recent games, how have you seen the changes with their backcourt based on that?**

MARK FEW: Their backcourt was good, really good against us in Hawaii. That Smith was great, I thought. Gillis is shooting it great right now. Obviously that's what Loyer does.

The best thing they do is they just all -- I mean, they've had so many reps together now, they all play so well together. They're excellent post feeders, their timing and when and where they find him. And they're dangerous, especially on those ball screens. You've got to shore him up rolling, but you also have those guys can make plays.

I think Jones has been a really, really good addition for them from when we played them two years ago in Portland to this year. He does so much. He's a tough guard, and then he's a handful on the other end, the defensive side of things.

**Q. You and Matt both have run your programs at a high level for a long time in changing landscapes. How have you adapted while still keeping kind of the core of how you do things the same?**

MARK FEW: Gosh, that's been a bigger challenge than probably getting these dudes this year to play, get back playing in a good way.

You know what, it's kind of been easy in some ways because it's just Gonzaga, and it's how we operate, and it's who we recruit and who we always end up with. The guys we end up with kind of end up belonging there. The guys we missed out on are frustrating at the time, but you end up, yeah, maybe he didn't belong here.

I always tell the staff it's like that old Garth Brooks song, Thank God for Unanswered Prayers. You need to listen to the words of that sometime. It's pretty good.

Anyway, it's getting hard. It's getting really, really hard. We could spend three hours up here, Matt and I both, because we've tried and tried. The one thing I would say is they need to start listening to us coaches, especially those of us coaches who have been around a long time and have tried to do it the right way, and get us out of this bureaucratic stranglehold where nothing gets done and the stuff just crushes us when it hits, all these changes, and we could all see it coming.

Hopefully we can get to the point where football coaches and basketball coaches are on the decision-making things that can kind of help guide us through this thing because this tournament is so awesome and so special and so great. We've got to make sure we keep this thing rolling.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach. We'll see you tomorrow.

We're ready to continue here with the Gonzaga Bulldogs. Congratulations on getting to the Sweet 16. From your left to your right, we have Nolan Hickman, Graham Ike, and Braden Huff.

**Q. Nolan, going into February (no microphone) to this point you're at right now?**

NOLAN HICKMAN: Honestly, man, I think after that St. Mary's game we had in the WCC conference tournament, I think after that we just started buckling down. I understand we're not going to be facing the St. Marys of the world or the San Franciscos of the world anymore, and we've got a chance to beat up on somebody else.

After that, we just started buckling down and understanding what our strengths are and what our weaknesses are, and we went from there.

**Q. Graham, since you saw Purdue in November, what's the biggest thing that's changed for your team that's put you on the path to have a chance to play them again?**

GRAHAM IKE: The biggest thing is probably just how many games we've played since then. Like our connectivity and our synergy is on a whole 'nother level than it was when we were playing our fourth game against Purdue. We're clicking right now on the right page.

**Q. Graham, how do you guard a 7', 290 pound guy like Edey?**

GRAHAM IKE: Just try to stay legal, try to keep the physicality up as much as possible, as much as the refs will allow me to, and meet him early. That's about it.

Just trust my teammates they'll have my back with good ball pressure, good communication on the floor.

**Q. Nolan, everybody talks about Zach Edey, but I think the guards are really good on this Purdue team. How do Lance Jones, Fletcher Loyer, and Braden Smith really make that team go?**

NOLAN HICKMAN: They definitely complement each other really well, especially with Zach on the post. They're always able to find him whenever things are not going well on the offensive end. Zach Edey is always their, I feel like, their escape goat. When they need a bucket, they always go to him, and they always find a way to.

So, yeah, they complement each other really well.

**Q. Graham, you played Purdue the first couple of games. You missed all of last year due to injury. How different are you today compared to who you were in that first game after coming off the injury?**

GRAHAM IKE: Yeah, I'm a lot different. My wind's better. I'd say my touch is better. The feel for the game is better. The feel in the offense for myself is better. The game just feels a lot slower than it was at that time.

**Q. This is for any of you guys. Mark mentioned a few times in his press conference just how special this team is to him, clearly referencing off the court. What is unique about this group of guys that we can't see watching games?**

BRADEN HUFF: I think we're just a really tightknit group. I think we went through some ups and downs early in the season, and through that we got stronger on the court and also off the court. I think that's shown in our play lately.

Yeah, it's a fun group to be around. Everyone loves each other on this team. So it's a really cool group, and I don't think you see that a ton, especially with the transfer portal and everything in college basketball now. It's cool that we've got such a tightknit group.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, guys. Appreciate your time. We'll see you tomorrow.

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