

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Creighton vs Tennessee

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Detroit, Michigan, USA

Little Caesars Arena

Creighton Bluejays

Greg McDermott

Ryan Kalkbrenner

Trey Alexander

Baylor Scheierman

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the dais at Little Caesars Arena. We'll be starting our press conference with head coach Greg McDermott.

GREG McDERMOTT: Obviously excited to be back in a Sweet 16, proud of the way our group performed last week in Pittsburgh. This time of year, you just never know. We've stayed relatively healthy, which has really helped us with our core group. They just continue to believe in themselves. They're incredibly connected. That's the reason we've had the season that we've had.

Realize we have a heck of a task in front of us in Tennessee with how talented and well-coached that group is.

Q. Greg, it feels like the momentum is pushing us toward an expanded tournament. How do you feel about that, and if so, what should that look like if it happens?

GREG McDERMOTT: People aren't going to like what I have to say, but I'm probably in favor of expansion to a certain degree and simply because last weekend is an incredible experience for every student-athlete that gets to participate. So why are we only have 15 percent or 17 percent of our teams participate?

Why not -- I don't know what the number is. Is it 15? Is it 20? Somebody smarter than me will figure that out.



But in this world of student-athlete welfare and doing more and more for student-athletes, why not give more student-athletes that experience?

I think most people that don't want the tournament messed with, it's for selfish reasons because they like it the way it is, and that's not a good enough reason, in my opinion. If it's really about the student-athletes, then give more opportunities for student-athletes that have had a good season.

I think it includes more of the mid-majors. This year was not necessarily a normal year in that there were a lot of bid stealers. So I think more than, at least in recent history, there was a lot of teams left out that could win games in the tournament.

Q. With Dalton Knecht, who do you think about match up with him? With him and Baylor, is he a good example of what could be good coming out of the transfer portal? Players who don't have a lot of choices in high school, they go to a smaller school, they take off, and go to a bigger school.

GREG McDERMOTT: They're both great stories of perseverance and tremendous work ethic. Obviously they've both had great years.

Two years ago Dalton was at Northern Colorado and Baylor was at South Dakota State. Now you have a first team All-American and a third team All-American playing against each other in the Sweet 16. So an unbelievable story.

I don't know that you'd guard him with one guy. I think you have to give him different looks, and that's the plan. Hopefully take away his easy ones because he's going to make enough tough ones because he's an elite player.

He and Baylor, their journeys are similar in a lot of ways. To watch their growth and development from where they were a freshman in college to where they are today is really a testament to their work ethic.



Q. With respect to obviously what Tennessee presents defensively, how tricky is corralling Dalton and Zakai on the other end of the floor and getting them out of sync?

GREG McDERMOTT: I don't know that you can get them out of sync. They have to see bodies. The problem is Tennessee is they're unselfish. They have 567 assists and 356 turnovers. They're a team that's more than willing to make the extra pass, and Dalton is included in that.

That makes a team difficult to defend. They run a lot of actions to try to get him loose and then play off of that. When you've got a guy that scores at his level and is still unselfish, it makes it very difficult to defend.

Q. One of the fans you're going to have back home rooting you on, Jack Elliott. You called him the most courageous child in Omaha. Can you speak to what he means to you and how he's inspired this program this year?

GREG McDERMOTT: I met Jack by chance. I think it was a Make-A-Wish request kind of at the last minute. He came to shootaround and visited with our team.

Jack is a tough little guy. His outlook on life, going through what he's going through at his age with radiation and chemo, and everything they're doing to his body, and yet he shows up with a smile on his face and texts me before and after every game and has developed a really good relationship with Baylor as well. He was by practice the other day, so we got to spend a little time with him.

It's a good reminder to our guys how good we have it and how blessed we are to be able to do what we do. For us to complain about a missed shot and we look over at Jack, what he's going through, we've got to get over ourselves a little bit.

So he's been an inspiration to me, and I know he has been to our team as well.

Q. You guys have talked a lot about how the process has been really important to get you guys here. How important is it to trust your process and your training as you're making this run?

GREG McDERMOTT: That's a great question. That's what it's about. We've talked about process all the way back to June, and trusting your work and being consistent with your daily habits, and if you do that, you'll be put in a position where you're going to have a chance.

Even though it looked a little bleak late in that Oregon

game, I think they never really had any self-doubt creep in because they put so much work in. Now, you can still put work in and the shot may not go in, but had that shot not gone in, I would have still felt great about the shot Baylor got because I've watched him practice that shot hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of times.

So he did the work. He prepared himself. Sometimes you're successful in those situations, and sometimes you're not. But these guys believe in each other, they believe in their work, and that makes it for a pretty fun experience from a coaching perspective.

Q. I'm wondering about kind of the other side of Baylor and Dalton's stories, what the transfer portal has done, particularly in the tournament, but beyond -- when you see guys now, their team ends, they go into the portal the first week or they don't make the tournament, I guess what does that do for the game as a whole? Guys going up or guys going down.

GREG McDERMOTT: I'm all about the student-athlete and them having choices. They deserve those choices. Could we do it at a different time? I wish we could. I would like the stories from Selection Sunday until Championship Monday to be about the teams in the NCAA Tournament. Not about who's leaving and who's joining this program.

It's just unfortunate that that's such a big part of what's going on in the daily news, and I think it takes away from celebrating the teams that have had incredible years and have made it to this point.

Is there a way to maneuver that time a little? I hope so because it's very difficult. My staff, while we're trying to prepare for Tennessee, my guys are also working the portal. You have to. That's an unfortunate thing for a team that's in the tournament trying to advance, that you have to spend that amount of time because, if you don't make calls, you're out.

I don't like the timing of it, but I understand why it's there.

Q. Greg, just wondering what kind of challenges do you expect Zakai Zeigler to pose, and have you seen a guy on his end that compares to him?

GREG McDERMOTT: [Posh] Alexander at Butler this year, very disruptive offensively. Still don't know if he's as quick as Zeigler is. He gets to spots offensively. He's so disruptive defensively. Coach Barnes has really carved out a huge role for him on that team on both ends of the floor. He's hit big shots. He can -- I don't know, whatever how many steals he's got, it's a lot.



But just as a menace defensively with everything that he does. He's a terrific point guard. In a lot of ways, kind of the straw that stirs the drinks for them in a lot of ways because of the impact he has on defensively and the plays he makes for other people offensively.

204 assists to 76 turnovers in the SEC, that's big time.

Q. You talked about -- you and the players talked about the impact of kind of finding joy within that stress had on the end of the Oregon game. I'm curious how you keep hold of that while knowing that you could be 40 minutes away from your season being over.

GREG McDERMOTT: It's the makeup of the team, and I think as a coach, the longer you've been doing this, you've got to let guys be who they are. You've been around practice enough. We don't take ourselves too serious. We don't take each other too serious. We have some fun with the game.

Some coaches, and especially young coaches -- and I was probably guilty of this when I was younger -- there's so much pressure to win and be successful that you coach the joy right out of the game. I don't ever want to do that to my guys. I want to make sure that -- they started playing this game because they fell in love with it, and if I do something to take the joy away from that, then I'm doing them a disservice.

This group really has -- they have fun. There's parts of practice. There's drills. We've joked about drills they don't like, which usually is my favorite drill. If they don't like it, it's probably a good drill.

But they truly enjoy coming to practice every day and being together. That's been pretty cool to witness.

Q. Mac, your initial takeaway was Tennessee's defense obviously. Have you learned anything else about them since diving into the film throughout the week?

GREG McDERMOTT: I've known Coach Barnes for a long time and obviously coached against him when I was at Iowa State and he was at Texas. Interesting story, when Bruce Rasmussen called me and asked me to meet with him about the Creighton job when I was still at Iowa State, I still had a few years left on my contract at Iowa State. Creighton was still in the Valley, and I was meeting Bruce in Des Moines, 40, 45-minute drive.

When I got in my car and pulled out of my driveway, I called Rick Barnes, because I had questions for him about

that point in my career, this kind of move. I hung up the phone with him when I pulled into the hotel parking lot 40 minutes later, and he just drilled me with questions and things to think about, short term, long term, that I think speaks to who Rick Barnes is.

He's been a great friend of mine. I've always respected the way he's coached his teams and how he's gone about it. And this Tennessee team, it's got some of what he did offensively when he was at Texas, trying to run some cutters off the basket, stander under the basket. I've prepared for that a lot before, and he does that a lot with Dalton.

But defensively there's a standard there that's really impressive with how they play, how they compete, and how disruptive they are every single play, and it can turn a game in a flash.

That message has been drilled into our guys over the course of the week. Whether we're ready for it, we'll see. But Coach Barnes has done a great job with this program. It's been fun to watch him be as successful as he has been from afar.

Q. This team has a lot of guys with unique backgrounds: Ryan's a fisher, Baylor was a state champion quarterback, Steven is married and was an entrepreneur, selling at a young age. Talk about bringing different interests together and this team's identity and how they bond helps them be as successful as they are on the court.

GREG McDERMOTT: As you mentioned, they all have a lot of different interests, but they have a common interest in their love for the game of basketball. Because they're selfless on the basketball floor, they also like to learn about each other off the floor. They spend a fair amount of time with each other off the floor even though their interests are very different.

I know Kalkbrenner took Ashworth fishing here in Omaha, and we had a nice day. Steven caught his first fish that day or whatever. They do some pretty cool stuff together. Their leadership, that group of Baylor, Trey, Ryan, and Steven, Francisco, just like off the charts. Not about me, not a lot of an agenda for themselves. Let's figure out a way for us to be as good as we can possibly be.

Q. Just to follow up, why was Rick the one you called about the job that day? Did it have a lot to do with what you ended up deciding?

GREG McDERMOTT: Yeah, I've always had a lot of respect for Coach Barnes. I didn't really know him until I



got to the Big 12. Then you go and you spend time with guys at postseason conference meetings, media days, and then you get to know them and you sit with them recruiting. We just developed a friendship.

He's someone that I respected that had moved around a few times from George Mason to Providence to Clemson and had been in that situation. Of the guys in the Big 12 at that time, he was the one I thought could maybe give me -- make sure I'm thinking about everything before I made that decision, and to his credit, he asked a lot of the right questions.

Then when I had the opportunity, I decided to do it, and it's been a great run.

Q. Obviously Mason Miller is a Memphis area kid, Memphis product. How would you describe his growth from being a freshman and playing whatever, eight, nine minutes last season, to being a regular starter and integral part of this team?

GREG McDERMOTT: Mason, it's a great story. In this day and age, not many young people are willing to redshirt. Obviously Mason's parents, Mike and Jen, Mike has obviously a very accomplished professional career, and Jen was a terrific volleyball player at Florida. So they understood that Mason needed time and he needed to follow a process.

That first process was a redshirt, and then last year it was playing off the bench and trying to spark the team. Then in the off-season, once the season was over last year, we talked about our expectation was he should be fighting for this starting job this year.

To Mason's credit, he's worked, and he's done just that. Obviously was huge for us in the game against Akron to gain some momentum with a big three right before halftime and hit a couple more coming out of the locker room.

He's gotten better. He's worked hard and has become a very important part of our team.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

Pleased to continue with the Creighton Blue Jays. Congratulations. From your left to right, we are joined by Ryan Kalkbrenner, Trey Alexander, and Baylor Scheierman.

Q. Baylor, can you reflect on your journey here? And what choices did you have coming out of high school? Do you feel like you made the most of your opportunities in the transfer portal to be here and on

this stage with this team?

BAYLOR SCHEIERMAN: Coming out of high school, I only had one Division I offer and then chose to go to South Dakota State and transferred to Creighton. I just feel I'm happy with the journey and how it all worked out for me.

Going through the transfer portal is one of the best decisions I made, and I'm very happy with how it all played out.

Q. I'm curious what the difference is in the feeling, the prep, the lead-up, just all of the extra juice, compared to this stage last year and going through it the first time together?

RYAN KALKBRENNER: I think last year we were just a little extra excited about doing it for the first time, but this year we've got a little more experience. We're still super excited about it and trying to take it all in.

It's almost easier to take it all in because you've been here before and you can take a step back easier.

TREY ALEXANDER: Kind of what Kalk said. You kind of know what to expect now. You're still very grateful to be here and you're very excited, but you know what type of prep it takes now. We know what the feeling is to be here, and we know what it takes to get the job done.

Q. Baylor, when you make that decision to go to South Dakota State, it wasn't that far from home, but when you were going through that process of leaving, what were the things that you were thinking about at that point, and how do you feel the move to Creighton has maybe elevated your game from where you were at that point in the Summit League?

BAYLOR SCHEIERMAN: I wanted to go to a place where I thought that I could grow as a player and a place that I thought fit the way that I played. When I first entered the transfer portal, I wasn't really thinking about anything specific, but once Creighton had reached out, I knew that I wanted to come back home.

I felt like just being here at Creighton these last two years and playing in the Big East the last two years and against a lot of the top competition in college basketball has elevated my game to just a different level than it was in the Summit League.

Q. I'm just curious what boxes you feel like you guys need to check to score offensively against a defense like Tennessee's?



TREY ALEXANDER: I would say just don't hold the ball too long. They're a very good team in terms of raking in the gaps and turning you over. So I think limit turnovers, we're able to get out in transition by getting stops like that. I think those are some of the boxes we have to check on the offensive end.

RYAN KALKBRENNER: Same stuff Trey said, just taking care of the ball, make sure we're getting shots and not turning it over. That will feed into our offense.

Q. This is for any of you guys. You've never made it past this weekend. Does that kind of add a little bit of extra pressure, motivation, or kind of both when you're thinking about your performances that have to be over this weekend?

BAYLOR SCHEIERMAN: Yeah, pressure is a privilege obviously. Obviously we've never made it past this weekend, but we can't get to Sunday without taking care of business tomorrow. So really our whole focus is on tomorrow.

We've played a lot of basketball games in our career, and I think we just stay calm and collected, and we just prepare the same way. Even though it's a bigger stage, you can't really change your preparation.

Q. Baylor, did you and Dalton Knecht meet up at all on the AAU circuit when you guys were coming up? And have you kind of followed his journey through northern Colorado and all that?

BAYLOR SCHEIERMAN: Yeah, we never met on the AAU circuit. However, I had a buddy who went to Northern Colorado and was teammates with him in high school. We don't know each other personally, but I do know he went to a smaller school like I did and transferred up, and he's had a phenomenal season.

Q. Kind of on that same note, how surreal is that that the two All-Americans in this game are kind of transfer portal success stories?

BAYLOR SCHEIERMAN: It just shows that you run your race, everybody's different. Obviously I didn't have the high level offers coming out of high school right away, but I stayed down and trusted my work and ended up blessed to be in this position now.

Q. Baylor, how much do you expect to match up with Dalton? When you are, what do you try to do?

BAYLOR SCHEIERMAN: Obviously he's a tremendous player, and he hits tough shots. So for me, just trying to

make it as difficult as I can on him. Obviously he's going to hit tough shots because he's a tremendous player. But I think at the end of the day, like I said, just trying to make everything he does difficult and not give him anything easy.

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