

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Alabama vs Michigan

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United Center

Alabama Crimson Tide

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Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference



Carolina and we played him a certain way that game. He's drastically improved his shooting. I don't think you can play him the same way we did two years ago. I think he'll hurt you that way. A lot of credit to him.

Look, I'm a high school coach that has gone all in on player development, both in the high school ranks and in college. And I think you've always got to give guys a chance to improve. He may play a particular player one year, and then the next, you've got to take into account the fact they've had an entire off-season with him. He's had two off-seasons. So he's worked hard on holes in his game, and I don't think you can play him the way we played him when he was at Carolina.

So a lot of credit to him, a lot of credit to the Michigan coaching staff on developing him into a shooter. This team is good. Yaxel, one of the best players in the country. Played right in our home state at UAB where we knew about him. Michigan did a good job to get him.

He's super versatile. They kind of start him at the 3, moves down to the 4. Their 3, 4, and 5 could start anybody in the country, and they're good. They're going to make it hard to finish in the paint. These teams have got real rim protectors that try to build out on our 3s. We've got to be very exacting, if you will, precise, locked in on how we're going to get our threes.

We obviously take a lot of threes. Somebody showed me a stat. I've gotten to be pretty good friends with Joe Mazzulla. I think they had the highest three-point rate in the NBA, 53.6, and we're at 53.9. The Celtics last year obviously taken a lot of threes. So these teams that come in to guard us are going to try to take away the three. And Michigan has got a team that's pretty capable of doing it, because they've got rim protection.

We're going to have to be smart, thorough, focused, locked in on how we execute our offense. Because a lot of times these teams take bad shots, and it results in transition buckets the other way on Michigan because they've got elite rim protection. So when we do get to the rim and they've got a rim protector there, we're going to have to make smart reads because they're also going to try to take away our reads.

NATE OATS: It's good to be back. We were fortunate to play in this building already. They got us in the same locker room when we were here, shoot, back whenever it was. We walked in, I thought which season did we play here because it feels like it was a couple seasons ago already. So we've been through quite a bit since that Illinois game.

But it's good to be back. Sometimes it's good to remind yourself how good you played at different times.

I think some of our non-conference road games prepared us for this moment. Go to the first week of the season, go to St. John's, they're still alive, look like one of the best teams in the country. Got a road game at Madison Square Garden. You come to Illinois, play them, it wasn't technically a road game because Illinois doesn't play their home games here, but I would call it a semi-road game, pretty close to a road game. We were able to get a win here.

Now Michigan is a different deal. I mean, they're physically imposing. There's not too many holes on Michigan's team. Their front line is as good as any front line in college basketball in recent history. Their backcourt is very good. Obviously they've gotta Nimari who played for us who was part of a lot of big wins. Love Nimari. He's a great kid. He's their best shooter. He's playing well. So it's not like they're like a non-shooting court.

Elliott is their point guard. We did play against him at



Michigan is a top 10 offense and defense and they're going to be hard to beat. I do think we can compete with them. I thought that game against Texas Tech, who by the way is a very good team -- I'm also pretty good friends with T.J. Otzelberger. Actually I'm good friends with all three of those coaches here in Chicago. I've got as much respect for Rick as anybody in our league and I've gotten to know him really well. Love Rick.

I've known T.J. since he played at UW-Whitewater and I coached at UW-Whitewater right after he got done playing. And then I've known Dusty for 20-plus years. He actually helped give me my first job in Division I. I know all these guys.

But Tech went to Iowa State and won at Iowa State -- and Iowa State is one of the best teams in country -- without Toppin. So we played a very good Texas Tech team and played pretty well against them. So I think we're playing our best basketball and have to play even significantly a lot better than to beat Michigan. But I do think we're presenting in the right direction at the right time like we've tended to do here in this program.

I think we've got our guys locked in, ready to go. We're going to have to execute the game plan. We're going to have to make some shots. We're going to have to take care of the ball. We're going to have to find a way to rebound. If we do that, we're going to have a chance to beat this team.

Q. With the Carolina job opening and others potentially down the line, your name gets brought up. Do you have any comment or reaction to that?

NATE OATS: Yeah, it's not the first time. Look, a lot of respect to the other programs that may open and they've got great basketball tradition. As a young high school coach, maybe --shoot, I didn't think I'd even be in this spot to be honest with you that long ago.

If you've gotten to know me, I'm not a guy that's trying to always jump around. The grass is not always greener. I love Alabama. My girls love Alabama. They're here with me. I love working with the administration that I work with. I think Greg Byrne is the best AD in the country. I love working with him. Would be great if I was able to work with him the rest of my career.

They're doing everything they can to make sure that we've got a competitive program. And as long as we're able to compete to win championships here, SEC -- National Championships, we haven't done that here yet. I'd love to be the coach to bring us our first National Championship. We got to a Final Four. To me there's absolutely no

reason to leave here.

While it's flattering that a high school guy that caught a couple breaks would be mentioned with some of these jobs, because they've got a lot of tradition, I'm not a guy that's looking to get out of here anytime soon. I love it here and my girls love it here. I love working with the people at Alabama.

Yeah, names are going to get mentioned. I'm probably one of 10 or 12. Like whatever. It is what it is. That's the business. I haven't talked to anybody, nor do I plan on talking to anybody.

Q. You're clearly capable of making Sweet 16s, of course made one Final Four. Do you feel like you can win a National Championship at Alabama?

NATE OATS: I do. I think things have changed. I think obviously you've got to get supported with the right resources, but I feel like -- when I came to Alabama, I was at Buffalo, I was going to have some options, this one came up. I talked to my agent and his point was, the athletic department at Alabama generates as much money as about anybody in the country during a year. I think you've got to be at a place that has resources to win, and Alabama has those resources to win.

We may not have the tradition that some of these other places had, but Indiana football probably didn't have that tradition, either, and they won it. I think their athletic department supported them, they got a good coach and they won it.

I think in basketball, you get the right coach with the right resources -- and I'm not saying we have to have No. 1 in rev share, NIL. We've just got to have enough to be competitive. And I feel like we've got a coaching staff, with the assistants that I have, we've got an administration that supports us, we're moving into what I think -- now, I haven't been in every practice facility in the country.

But part of the reason I'm pretty close to Dusty May is I used to go to all these different college practices, and when he was an assistant at Eastern, me and him went to a Bulls training camp together. I've been in a lot of college places. I think the practice facility we're about to move into with the offices are going to be as good as anybody in the country.

I'm excited. I think everything they're doing to support men's basketball is going to give us a chance. We've been the No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament. If you can be the No. 1 seed you're favored to win it. Now, Brandon Miller had an injury, we didn't shoot well, we got upset. But then

the year after we went to a Final Four. We went to an Elite Eight. We're the only program that's been to a Final Four and an Elite Eight the last two years.

The year before that we were the No. 1 overall seed. We're right there every year knocking on the door. You've got to catch a few breaks injury-wise and all that. You've got to do a great job putting a roster together, and I've got to do a great job coaching them. I think we're going to continue to be right there and hopefully everything goes well and we're able to win one of these years coming up. Maybe it's this year.

Q. What do you remember about your impressions of Dusty when you first met him, and what stood out to you about him?

NATE OATS: First off is that he was a great guy. My start in this business is a little bit different than a lot of guys that are in my shoes. I was a Division II player at Maranatha. I coached there. My dad is still a professor there. He's two hours from here. He's driving down. He's from Illinois. Used to come down here to Illinois to my grandparents' house in Pekin all the time growing up. I was able to watch WGN every time I'd come down, so I'm familiar with here.

But I used to go to all these college practices, so I got to meet college coaches. I went from Maranatha to Whitewater where Otzelberger played, then I went to Romulus and I got to know all the college coaches that came through my gym, and it was hundreds of them. Some of them you could tell were using you to try to get your players. Some of them you could tell were great guys that were not using you to get to your players, and they were actually trying to build a genuine relationship with you.

Dusty was one of those guys that was genuine, real, smart, and worked hard. He was an assistant at Eastern Michigan when I knew him. He was the manager at Indiana. I liked him. I went over -- I tried to go to Michigan practices, Eastern, all this. We got to be very close because we were both young basketball junkies trying to learn every which way possible.

Got to know him when he was at Eastern, liked him. He moved around. Stayed in touch with him. I stayed at Romulus. When he was an assistant under Mike White at Louisiana Tech, they recruited a kid of mine, Leo Edwards, who went there from Romulus. So Leo goes down to Louisiana Tech, he stays with Mike. I get the chance to go with Bobby Hurley while Bobby Hurley got hired by Danny White, who was Tennessee's AD that's here. Now Danny talks to Mike White and Dusty about me, then Bobby goes on.

Two years later, I get a chance to interview for that job at Buffalo and Mike White calls -- sorry -- Danny White calls Mike White, I think Dusty was involved with that a little bit. So he was a part of me getting my first head job in Division I.

As a matter of fact, Dusty spoke at our clinic. We do this clinic where we bring in NBA head coaches, NBA assistants, which I think is the best clinic in college basketball. My assistant Ryan Pannone helped start it, put it together. We do it every year. It will be great this August.

Dusty came down and spoke at it this last year. He said, look, if you need me to speak, I'll speak, but I'd really like to just come and learn. Because he learns a lot. I think he's one of the best coaches in college basketball. It's not one of these games where we're going in and they've got a lot of talent and we think we can just out-coach a poorly-coached talented team. Michigan is very talented and very well-coached.

I think Dusty has not let his ego -- he's the same guy that I knew as assistant at Eastern Michigan. With all the success he's had, his ego hasn't gotten any bigger, and I think that speaks a lot to the character of the guy. I'm still friends with him. I'm sure we'll talk after the game. Actually he texted me last night and asked what hotel we were staying at. I thought we were staying next to him. I didn't talk to him about our basketball game. I talked to him about other stuff.

Q. With respect to what you said at the beginning about wanting to be at Alabama, a couple years ago when you guys made that Final Four run, you and Alabama did a contract extension before the tournament. I was curious why have you not done that this time, and where do those conversations stand?

NATE OATS: Well, one is the contract they gave me back when we did that one was pretty good. Listen, I say this a lot. I am a high school coach that caught a couple breaks in life, and there's probably high school coaches better than me out there that just didn't get the breaks. As a matter of fact, I know there's high school coaches better than me.

When my salary goes up a half million dollars every year -- you know how long it took me to make a half million dollars at Romulus? I got paid 4,700 a year to coach basketball for 11 years. So I'm not going to them asking them to redo -- we redid the contract and I went to a Final Four. And we didn't redo it, because they got good faith in me and I got good faith in them.

We've had discussions. I'm open to redoing them. But I'm not really looking to leave. I'm pretty honest with them. If they come up with one that makes sense to do, it's good. I'd love to stay there.

But I'm not really looking, so --

Q. You don't have an offer in hand right now?

NATE OATS: No, I don't have an offer in hand, but we've had some discussions, and it's probably getting close. We'll see where it takes us.

I feel like I'm probably too honest with everybody, includes you guys in the media, and sometimes you use it against me, which is fine. I'm going to be honest, I'm going to tell you what I'm thinking. I'm probably too honest with the administration. I'm not looking to leave.

They don't need to be in a huge rush to fix a really good contract that I've got right now. On March 15 my salary went up \$500,000. I still can't believe I'm getting paid this much. I'm coaching basketball. Guys, I did this thing free at Maranatha for three years. I got paid \$500 out of the Warhawk fund at Whitewater a year for the next two years. I made 4,700 dollars a year for 11 years.

So add it up. For the first 16 years I coached basketball, it was less than \$50,000 total. My salary goes up a half million dollars every year. Glorified PE teacher making too much money right now. I'm not going to complain.

Q. I wonder if you could go back to your opening. You talked about Yaxel. Was there any conversations or detail to the connotations that you might have had with Yaxel in the transfer portal? Secondly, how do you plan on defending him tomorrow night?

NATE OATS: He was at UAB. We did make a call. It never got very deep. I think there were some programs that were in a little deeper with a lot more money at the time. It's one of those, you kind of call, see where the situation is at. Probably wasn't something we were going to be able to do, so didn't spend a lot of time on it.

I knew Michigan would have been involved pretty heavily early, and I made a call to Dusty. We've ended up recruiting the same guys a few different times. He's pretty open and honest with me, I'm pretty open and honest with him. And we didn't go very far. It wasn't for lack of thinking he wasn't a very good player. He was the best player in the portal.

To get to where you defend him, well, you're going to have

to hope he misses some shots because he's a super athletic basketball player with a lot of size that's playing the 3 and the 4 for them. So at the 3 he kind of overpowers you. At the 4, he still overpowers you, but he's a little quicker. So you're going to have to guard him with guys that are big enough, strong enough, and athletic enough, and there's not many of those so you're going to have to get some help from teammates on the floor.

Typically we've switched 1 through 4 or at least 1 through 3 all year. I'm not sure you want to switch small guards on to him. You may have to. Then you're just going to have to figure out what to do with him when they go in the post.

Dusty is good. He knows what he's got. He puts him in good spots. I'm going to say this: This is not a game where you can guard a lot of these guys one-on-one because you're going to lose the one-on-one.

Against most good teams, you've got to figure out what you can give up because you're not taking away everything. So we can't take away all their rim shots, take away all their drives, take away all their threes, take away all their post-ups. You've got to give something up. So you've got to figure out what it is that makes the most sense to give up.

We obviously don't want Yaxel posting us and we don't want him driving. So we've got to figure out what -- you're going to have to give him something. We're going to have to get a lot of help.

But we've got guys with size, some toughness, some competitiveness about them that I think will do a good job. And doing a good job on him is probably not holding him scoreless, making him take tough shots. He's going to make some of them. You can't give him anything easy.

Our whole thing with these guys is whatever they get that we choose to give up, it can't be easy, and we're going to have to make life harder on them. If you can't rebound with these guys -- I'm not saying we're going to dominate them like we did Texas Tech on the boards, but you've got to at least rebound with them.

We can't get drilled on the glass like we did against Arizona, Gonzaga, Florida, some of these teams with some real size. So if we don't come with some toughness, some competitiveness, some physicality, we're not going to be able to be in this game. The good thing is we've shown it enough times this year.

Q. Houston, after that win against Tech, you said you would die for Alabama. What has made your experience here so positive, and if you guys could say

what it's like to have Houston as a teammate.

HOUSTON MALLETTE: Yeah, I love this place. It's the best place I've ever been. I love my teammates. I just love it. I don't want this thing to end. Bama has treated me and my teammates in a way that's changed the rest of our lives. It's changed my life through relationships, through the bonds with my brothers. And I don't know, there's this verse in John where Jesus talks about greater love has no one than this than to lay one's life down for his friend. And that's a verse I take to heart. I would lay my life down for these two guys and for anybody in our program. I love this school so much. Yeah, I love it, man.

LABARON PHILON: Just having him as a teammate, it means everything. Just seeing him walk in the gym early, getting up shots, greeting everybody, putting a smile on everybody's face. Really when he's around, there's no possible way to have a bad day. He can uplift anybody, and I've seen it hands-on and stuff like that.

Like I said, he's a great person, great leader, and he gets all the guys just together, just like with anything. Just talking to guys about Christ and stuff like that. That's really important to him.

I feel like all the guys really just love him. Like he said, we don't want it to end. Just been playing so hard for this university and program.

Q. Labaron, we've seen some significant improvements in your shooting percentages in this season from last year. Would you attribute that to what you learned when you went through the testing the waters in the NBA Draft and the exploratory process?

LABARON PHILON: I would just say in the off-season, having a lot of time to just work on your game was really the biggest thing for me. Like I said before, it really wasn't anything that I had to change. It was just about the type of shots that I was getting and the confidence level.

I feel like when I was working in the summer, my confidence just grew so much that every shot that I shot, I thought it was going in. That's how I play the game of basketball now. I didn't really have to change anything in my shot mechanics or anything like that. Just getting extra reps in and building that confidence.

Q. For all three of you, what does it mean to be a massive underdog in this game? How do you embrace that?

LATRELL WRIGHTSELL JR.: I mean, we're not really

opposed to it. We know that Michigan is a really good team, and they've proven that multiple times throughout the season and stuff like that. We have the ultimate respect.

But we also know what we can do, too. And we know if we put in the work and we play our best and we play hard and we play for each other and have fun out there, we can compete with anybody in the country.

We know that they have a really good size and they have really good bigs and really good guard play, and they're a full team. But we put in the work to be here, too. We lace our shoes the exact same way. We know we have the talent. We have the coaching staff. We have the game plan, and we have everything we need to be successful as well.

HOUSTON MALLETTE: Yeah, we've embraced adversity all year long. We've had 14 different starting lineups. We've had probably a million different lineups, who's been available, who's been out with injury.

We embrace it. Like Trel said, it's a basketball game. We prepare. I think we've had our best two weeks of preparation. Like our practices last week were phenomenal and then our practice the past three days has been incredible. We love each other. We've got real Mudita. All respect to Michigan, they've got a really good program like Trel said. They're really good all around. They're well-coached. But we're just excited for the opportunity.

LABARON PHILON: For me, just seeing the coaches get real riled up for this game. Coach Oats, all the coaches, they're just ready to play. For a player just to see that, that just gives you more confidence that we're going to be out there ready to play just like they are. They're a great team, but we've also been finding our way here. I feel like we've progressed a lot. Just seeing that as a team that's coming in really hot and playing against a great team is going to be a really good game.

Q. Labaron, you've tallied 19 assists in the first two games of the tournament. How do you feel like that side of the game has grown for you, and how do you expect that to be a factor tomorrow night?

LABARON PHILON: Just finding a balance of knowing when I have to get off the ball. Some teams have aggressive coverages and some teams like to play drop coverage, some teams like to get up there and switch. Just being able to balance it, like I said, being able to get in the lane, being able to play outside, being able to find guys in tight windows.



Like I said, it's the balance of the game. Really I can't explain. Just as a point guard you always have to have a little bit of in between of just doing everything, and for me, I've been trying to get rebounds, push the ball, and just get the ball movement for the guys and trusting that the ball is going to find the right person.

Q. For Labaron, what do you like about playing in March Madness and just kind of the stage of the Sweet 16 and the opportunity it provides?

LABARON PHILON: Just playing in March Madness in general. It's one of the biggest basketball outlets for college and just around the world. Everybody watches college basketball, but it's a lot more people tuning in when it's March.

For the guys that's out there trying to get their name known or teams that want to prove something, it means more in March. Everybody's season is on the line and nobody wants to go home. For seniors, nobody wants to play their last game I'm pretty sure. So just putting it all on the line really.

Q. Houston, you guys are preparing for your third game without Aden. How has that team rallied in his absence, and how are you guys preparing?

HOUSTON MALLETTE: Yeah, we love Biz. Our prayers are with him, and that's our brother for life. I think we've prepared the same way we've prepared all season. We've had, like I said earlier, a bunch of different starting lineups, a bunch of guys in and out of the rotation.

We have like a superpower, and that's our Mudita. We love each other. We have vicarious joy for each other's success as if it was our own. That's our superpower. I think that's what makes difference within our team.

Guys have stepped up in his absence, like Taylor Bol Bowen is playing some of his best basketball. Jalil, the way he's been practicing, you guys will see, he's been really good. Noah Williamson, he's having a phenomenal tournament. Guys have stepped up left and right.

Like I said, that's our brother. But we're ready to play. We're ready to prepare, and we love each other.

Q. Labaron, you mentioned that being able to see the coaches riled up for the game gives you confidence. In what ways have you seen the coaches give it their all in preparation this week?

LABARON PHILON: I mean, Coach Oats, he's so into it. These guys can explain it. He's just ready. You can see

the look in his eyes, just going through the game plan, the way he's talking about the game. You can tell he's been losing sleep and just putting in the extra hours of just wanting to win this game. I see the look in his eye. He really wants to win this game.

As a player, that means everything. Just that confidence right there can give you just a little more of an edge to go make the plays that we need to make or plays that can flip the game. And he kind of talked about that, just being ready to play for 40 minutes. I think that's going to be the special thing for this group to do in this game, just be ready to be out there for 40 minutes or even 50 if it goes that long.

Just putting in all on the line, like I said.

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