

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

Friday, March 27, 2026

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

**Alabama Crimson Tide**

**Coach Nate Oats**

**Latrell Wrightsell**

**Lebaron Philon, Jr.**

**Houston Mallette**

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Michigan 90, Alabama 77

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Alabama head coach Nate Oats along with student-athletes Lebaron Philon, Jr., Latrell Wrightsell, and Houston Mallette. Coach, we'll start with an opening comment.

NATE OATS: First off, have to give Michigan a lot of credit. There's a reason they're a 1 seed. They're big, strong, athletic, physical. I thought our guys did a great job to be up two. Did a great job closing the first half.

But you know, the start of that second half wasn't what we were looking for and they kind of imposed their will on us to start the second half.

Give Coach May and their players a lot of credit, but I'll say this: these guys that I coach have been one of the more enjoyable groups I've ever coached in my life. We had no locker room issues, no -- it's tough. Talking about attitudes, these guys did a great job controlling that.

These three guys, along with other guys on our team's leadership has been great all year. I love these guys.

It's disappointing to win -- I'm sorry. It's disappointing to lose, but the most disappointing thing about tonight is I don't get to coach these guys anymore. I think Michigan is a great team. I got a lot of respect for Dusty, and I wish them well moving on, but the saddest thing about tonight is I don't get to coach this group again.



The adversity that they faced and the response to adversity and how they've handled things, I'm going to be using these guys as examples of how to do things the right way for a long time in my coaching career.

It's just sad it comes to an end, but we ran into a buzz saw the second half. We couldn't rebound with them. We lost the glass by 12 in the second half. We gave up 5-0 boards the first three possessions the second half. We chart the blue collar stuff.

The first media timeout it was 30-11 in the blue collar points. The second half total was 61-32 them. They kind of just destroyed us on the efforts, toughness in the second half.

Part of that is their size and physicality. You look at their starting three, four, and five, they double us up on the glass. From our starting three, four, and fives, 26-13, our leading rebounder was a point guard in Philon.

We knew we were going to have to rebound with them and we did in the second half. We were only losing it by one, and we were up two. Then we came out in the second half, and Michigan just seemed like they imposed their will on us.

Then with their physicality, their switches, the physicality of how they defended us in the second half, steering the screens, we didn't get as good of threes off.

We only shoot 5 of 23 in the second half. I think our first three threes of the second half get blocked.

So we go from great offense scoring 49 in the first half to they really clamped us up there, lowest scoring half this season, our second half scoring tonight. Tough way to go out, but I didn't think -- I thought our guys kept fighting all the way to the end.

I have a lot of respect on the efforts stuff. We just kind of got out-toughed and out-physicaled there in the beginning of the second half.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. For any one of you guys, Nate just talked about this a little bit. What did you guys feel went wrong at the start of the second half?**

LATRELL WRIGHTSELL: I mean, I think what went wrong was our energy and effort. I think we started the game off with the utmost energy. We had an edge to us. Coach Oats talks about blue collar points, and that's just all hard work things, basically tips, deflections, offensive rebounding, loose balls, stuff like that.

In the first half we were on top of it. We hit the post, got trapped, kind of got deflections and stuff like that. In the second half they did the exact same thing we did to them in the first half to us in the second half, and we didn't respond.

I mean, it got a little bit away from us and we just couldn't get back into it. I feel like just the edge from them was really good at the start of the second half, and our edge well, didn't start on with an edge for the second half.

**Q. Labaron, if this is your last game, college game, 35 points, 39 minutes, how do you feel like you left things?**

LABARON PHILON JR.: You know, I just have been trying to focus on just Alabama basketball just for the run we've been on. I think that was way more important than, you know, just focusing on anything on the outside really. Just being able to play with these guys every day, practice with the guys and with these guys, you know, be with the coaches. It's a real feeling.

Just trying to take that in right now. Just trying to just build on that. I really just haven't thought about it really. Just been trying to play basketball with Alabama for this little run.

Got to give credit to Michigan. You know, a lot of big bodies inside, and I feel like we could have did a better job in the second half of just, like, starting out, getting those balls and rebounds. I feel like we would have got those, that probably would have turned a possession or two in the game, we probably could have went on a better run, so...

**Q. Latrell, Houston, how have you guys seen Labaron grow as a player, a person, a teammate since he got on campus last year?**

LATRELL WRIGHTSELL: I seen him grow in multiple ways. Just on the court and off the court, just maturity-wise. You know, taking things more serious with treatment, showing up every single day practicing every

single day. Not missing a practice. He never misses practices. He never misses a workout. He always shows up on time, never late.

He's more vocal this year than he was last year. He took a leadership role. You know, he leads with example, too. He's telling people in practice how to lead and how to just do stuff by example and stuff like that.

Then also just his grit and his energy that brings a lot of the younger guys and a lot of people on our team on with him when he's on and when he's off. No matter what, he's just continuing to lead with his examples and his grit and his effort.

HOUSTON MALLETT: Yeah, I would say we room together. We've been rooming together for almost the past two years on the road. I'm going to miss that. He's made tremendous growth both offensively and defensively. Like, his affect on the game, he had 35 tonight. He gave it his all. Seven rebounds. He led us in rebounding, and also led us in assists.

Man, I mean, hats off to this guy. His approach every day in practice, like Latrell said, in the weight room, treatment, his nutrition, all of the above. He's taken tremendous growth. Sky is the limit for this guy. You guys see it. I think he's the best guard in the country by far and away in my opinion. I mean, what he's been able to do.

I love him. He's amazing.

**Q. For Houston and Latrell, Coach Oats just said this is the most -- one of the most enjoyable groups he's ever been a part of. Do you feel the same way? Kind of what was the season like being your last season of college basketball with this group?**

LATRELL WRIGHTSELL: Yeah, I mean, it was super enjoyable. We went through, like -- I mean, we continue to talk about it. We went through a lot of adversity, but I think the adversity was triumphed by just our faith in everything we did with how we connected with each other.

We literally talked about Mudita, and Mudita is just having vicarious joy for each other, for our teammates, and stuff like that. I think we embraced that a lot.

Also, just with the Bible studies with getting closer to God, with praying before the games, with just our team bonding throughout the season from early on to now. It just grew all along.

I mean, I think we grew a brotherhood that can't be broken, and I feel like it's deeper than basketball. I think we have a

faith-based relationship, and I think that goes further than basketball and just the relationship in general. I feel like we can connect on multiple different levels and sources of how we interact with each other. I feel like we're going to hang out and talk about this team for a long time.

HOUSTON MALLETTE: Yeah, this team, we're incredibly close. There's a word that I kind of live my life by, and it's tattooed on my arm. It means agape, and agape is God's love, his unconditional love for us as his children. That's kind of -- not kind of. That is the example that I feel like we all in the locker room portrayed.

We all love each other. From the retreat you could just see how connected this group was. I mean, all the adversity, like Trell said, throughout the entire season, 14 different lineups. Shoot, guys saying they don't care. I mean, Baron after the Tennessee game said bring me off the bench. He don't care. We just had a culture of that.

I mean, it starts from the top down, like Coach Oats and the staff. They get on our tails, but there's no back talk. It's all love. So this was the best year of my life, the most enjoyable year of my life, and I'm sad because I never want to take off this Crimson Tide jersey. I'm sure these guys don't either. We're going to be talking for a while. We really love each other.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, guys. Appreciate it. Take questions for Coach.

**Q. Nate, college basketball in a super-sized era, how much does this roster have to change in order to kind of get to that tier, or do you view this as kind of, hey, we had a lot of adversity this year, we had a bad draw, and had to play a really good team in the Sweet 16?**

NATE OATS: We know we got to change a little bit. I mean, some of the adversity was Keitenn Bristol with the injuries. When we played up here the first time against Illinois, he kind of -- might have been the MVP of the game. He would have changed some things about the lineup.

Collins' big body; hasn't been able to play since the beginning of the year because of a heart condition. So you know, we knew we were undersized. We were a little light in some of the spots, particularly our four spot.

Sherrell has done an unbelievable job manning the five spot, but when you look at our four spot, combined for zero rebounds in the second half, and we needed rebounds. So, you know, it was tough.

Again, they're a little undersized. Both those guys are a little more three and four, so we know we got to get bigger.

Some of it was some injuries and stuff that happened. You know, when we saw the opportunity, you know, to bring some size on after all the adversity we went through after Nnaji was declared eligible and most people, including ourselves, thought, you know, if they're going to declare Nnaji eligible, that Benny (indiscernible) would be eligible, and had one judge that thought so. He definitely would have helped the situation with the rebounding.

So we tried to kind of shore up the Bristol-Collins adversity, injuries, with Charles, and we would not have gotten outrebounded by 13 tonight had we been able to continue to play him, because him and Sherrell would have played together. They both rebound. It wasn't meant to be. We had something else in store for us.

Our guys handled the adversity with the lineup well. I couldn't be more proud of a group. I thought Taylor really turned -- not that his attitude was ever bad, but a little defeatist. He just turned it around. He attacked the end of the season. Was great for us.

I think London learned to be a lot tougher and make tough plays. Amari having to play at the four a lot. He's really a point guard, but whatever the team needs to do to win, he did it.

It showed a lot about the guys' character when they were thrust into roles that we didn't envision at the beginning of the year.

**Q. Nate, you said this is one of your most enjoyable coaching jobs, but do you think it was one of your best coaching jobs?**

NATE OATS: I don't know. That's for you guys to judge. I enjoyed the group. I'm trying to squeeze every last little bit I can out of every group I coach. I would have liked to have done it a little better. You know, maybe my points of emphasis in the first half -- or at the halftime should have been better. Maybe another timeout in the second. I don't know.

You can second guess yourself a lot when things don't go the way -- you know, we got outscored quite a bit there in the second half by 15. Look, we did -- as a staff and as a program, we did a great job, and honestly player-led teams are way better than coach-led teams, and if you just listen to these three guys before you guys let them go, I mean, what kind of more mature answers do you get out of a group ever?

I don't really think it's a great job by myself. I think it's an incredible job by the leadership on the team to keep us through the adversity that we face. I was just happy to be

a part of a group like this. I mean, shoot, listen to what they just said. Listen to what they're talking about. It's mature beyond years for what really matters in life.

When you're about the right stuff and your focus is on stuff that matters for the long-term, for eternity, like these guys are talking about, the short-term takes care of itself a lot of times, and they did an unbelievable job holding the group together through all the adversity. Was it the best coaching job by me? I'm not one to judge that.

Was it the best leadership by a group of guys that I've ever had? Yeah, and you can tell by listening to their answers that they just had.

I was getting goosebumps listening to Treley and Houston. Baron was great. His leadership came a long ways. You heard what they said. How many groups do you hear talking about stuff that they just talked about?

**Q. Your team was 10 out of 10 at the free-throw line at halftime, but only shot four free-throws in the second half. Did you want to see guys go to the rim more, or were there too many blocked shots in there?**

NATE OATS: I mean, look, one of our big points of emphasis was our rim decisions. We wanted -- Aiden Sherrell is a great shooter for a five man. We wanted to get their fives pulled out.

They end up with five blocks. I don't know -- I can't remember the other two, but I know three of them were against threes. I thought we did a pretty good job with the rim decisions. We probably needed to get downhill a little more the second half.

Our rim shots in the second half, I don't know what they were. First half we were 5 of 9. For the game we were 9 of 15 at the rim. Yeah, we only got, was that, 4 of 6. We needed more. Six rim shots.

When you start to get a big deficit and we take as many threes as we did -- obviously we didn't take the right threes in the second half. You know, if you look at -- what were we in the second half? 9 for 24 in the first half. Second half was 5 of 23. Yeah, we didn't shoot very well. 21%.

Yeah, we should have got downhill, got to the rim more. Now, you can say all that. When Michigan has elite athletes with a lot of size, switching over the perimeter, getting physical, getting into us, steering us, pushing up, sometimes it's a lot easier said than done. It would be nice if you could just push buttons, let's get more rim shots. Well, you got to create more rim shots. You got to create good ones, and we didn't do a good enough job creating

those rim shots in the second half.

**Q. I know Labaron said he still has a decision to make, but what has he meant to this program, especially the decision to come back this year after the feedback he got from the NBA last year?**

NATE OATS: Yeah, he said he's got a decision to make. I don't really think he's got much of a decision. He's one of the best players in college basketball. He came back to do what he did to play his way up into the lottery. From everything I'm hearing, that's what he did.

So I made a smart decision. You know what, we need to recruit players that make smart financial decisions in the long-term. We get guys that want to be NBA players. We've done a better job improving guys' draft stock than anybody in the country has done since we've been here.

I've got assistants we hire from the NBA. Coach Fleming did an unbelievable job with our offense. Coach Adams. Both those guys are NBA guys. Done a great job with our defense. They teach these guys how to play NBA style, from an NBA team.

Labaron comes back. He was late first, early second, whatever he was going to be last year. He should go in the lottery. We'll have to see how it all plays out. He made himself a lot of money this year in the long run.

When guys come here, Amari Allen, on no draft boards. He's on every draft board now, it seems like. He's going to have to make a decision. We'll get feedback and see what it looks like.

But to get back to your question, Labaron has been a kid from Alabama that came in I think the third highest scoring season in Alabama history; pretty impressive. He was about the right stuff. He really led the team like he needed to. Just super happy for him. Proud of him. Came back; was about the right stuff; did a great job leading us.

He obviously can score at a high level. I think he came back and did what -- he said he came back to, number one, win a national championship. We came up short. Wasn't meant to be, but two, to improve his draft stock and learn how to be a better leader, and he definitely did those two at a high level.

He had good motives to come back and he helped continue to keep this program at a level. Since we've been here, I think Houston is the only team to make more Sweet 16s than we have. I think we've been in four. Or, no, four straight and five total out of the six years. We've just been six NCAA tournaments. Since we've been here we've

been five out of the six. Labaron kept us there. Made an Elite Eight last year. Up until this year we were the only team that played in the Final Four and Elite Eight. Two years before this year, he helped get us to the Elite Eight. Through all the adversity we had, for him to help lead us to where we got, pretty incredible season by him.

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