

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - San Diego State vs UConn

Wednesday, March 27, 2024

Boston, Massachusetts, USA

TD Garden

UConn Huskies

Dan Hurley

Stephon Castle

Donovan Clingan

Alex Karaban

Tristen Newton

Cam Spencer

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. For any of you, but maybe Donovan since he'll be guarding him more. What do you see from the LeDee? What do you see from him as being a potentially tough matchup for you guys?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: I mean, he's physical. Can score at all three levels. Puts the ball on the floor. He can get to the rim off the dribble. He attacks the offensive and defensive glass at another level.

He's a great player. Much respect for him. I just have to lock into his matchup.

ALEX KARABAN: Like Donovan said. He pretty much covered it all. He is probably the most improved player in the country so far this year. Just the jump that he made from last year to this year, it's really remarkable.

I mean, he's an outstanding player. He is definitely a key focal point for us.

Q. Tristen, obviously you had a good game against San Diego State last year in the title game. Just to be playing them again, sort of what are the feelings there?



Did you think about that game a lot leading into this?

TRISTEN NEWTON: Not really. They had a whole different team last year. So did we.

I feel like last year I was like one of the fourth options, they weren't really, like, worrying about me last year. I have a different role this year.

I don't really think about that game, but just going to go out there and do whatever I can do to help the team win.

Q. What's it like having this in your backyard, and how many fans are you expecting for the game?

ALEX KARABAN: Super excited to play in Boston. Probably the only chance I get to play with UConn in Boston. It definitely will be special. At the same time it's a Sweet 16 game for us. So we're just locked in as if it was at any other location.

I'm trying to get a lot of friends and family. I don't really know the number yet.

Q. For I guess Tristen and Cam, what has Hassan meant to this team? He was obviously a big recruit coming out of high school and didn't quite, I guess, meet expectations at A&M and has blossomed with you guys. What does he mean to you, your team?

TRISTEN NEWTON: He means a lot. He is the voice of our team. He comes off the bench and does great things. He plays great defense. He's a great teammate. I feel like number one thing that he does, he's a great teammate. He's a leader. He's positive on and off the court. He's a good friend of mine, and he's really done well here.

CAM SPENCER: Like Tristen said, Hassan is a great teammate, very hard worker. Always seemed to come in off the bench and gives us the spark that we need. He is always somebody that's always making winning plays, whether it's an offensive rebound, defensively, knocking down shots. He really does it all for us. He's been great for us all year.



Q. I don't know if you guys saw, but the President of the NCAA said today that he wanted to eliminate player-based prop bets for games because players get hassled from fans who maybe lost their bets. Has anyone ever had that happen to them that someone reached out to they and said, hey, you cost me money or anything like that, and would you like to see prop bets banned?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: No, no one has ever reached out to us. Really no comment on that right now.

Q. Donovan, you really stepped up your game the last few games. What's been the difference for you?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Really just at the line I've really felt the best I've felt in a long time. Healthy, feeling light, moving around the floor better. We're competing for the best of the best right now, and we're trying to do special things.

Really I'm just trying to impact the game any way I can and help my team win.

Q. Alex, something just popped into my head. You mentioned tickets and accommodating people. I'm guessing with a big game coming up you've designated someone in the family to handle all that. Who is that person, and how does that all work out?

ALEX KARABAN: My mom. She's been helping me a lot with the tickets. She's telling people yes and no, but all of these guys up here got a lot of tickets too. Not just me. So we're letting other people figure it out. We're just more so focused on San Diego State. We don't really talk about tickets or really try to focus on that at all.

Q. You have veto power on the yeses and nos?

ALEX KARABAN: She's got all the power who can come or not.

Q. For Donovan or Stephon, you guys are laser-focused on San Diego State right now, but in terms of NIL, there's a proposed eight-team NIL tournament in Vegas next year. How intrigued are you by events like that? Is that something that you would be interested in participating in?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: I mean, I don't really understand it. I don't know what's going on, what is behind it and all that stuff. Right now it's hard to think about other stuff, other games rather than San Diego State.

Like I said, I don't understand what's going on in that

tournament. Like I said, no real comment on that one.

Q. Alex, I know you are playing in your backyard, but for the rest of you guys the university is practically here in the East Coast and you can say you're all playing in your backyard, so to speak. How much do you think it will help having this alumni base, having the fan base be here and help you when you are playing on a Sweet 16 stage? For anybody that wants to answer.

ALEX KARABAN: Yeah, it's super important for us. That's why we worked so hard this year. We knew at the beginning of the season that we can go from Brooklyn to Boston. Having the UConn fans is definitely a major reason why we wanted to work so hard in the offseason, just have them in our background too.

Yeah, just super excited to have them come up to Boston. We'll definitely need their support. We'll definitely need their energy.

Q. Obviously much has been said about the Big East only getting three teams in the NCAA Tournament. What does it say about you guys and also Creighton and Marquette, the three entries still alive at this point? It speaks to the power of the league in general.

DONOVAN CLINGAN: I feel like it just shows what type of league the Big East is. We have a lot of high-quality teams, teams that should have been in the tournament, and teams playing at a high level.

I feel like we're just proving how physical the league is, how good the league is, and showing everyone that we can compete against any conference and any competition.

Q. Steph and Cam, if you could kind of both speak to this, but when you hear your coach say that you guys have made yourselves bullet-proof, as players how does that hit you? Does it fill you with more confidence? Does it give you more confidence knowing that your coach is kind of willing to go out on the line like that?

STEPHON CASTLE: For me it gives me a lot of confidence just knowing that he has that kind of thought process for us going into these games, knowing how good, how talented we are, knowing that if we just stay connected, that we feel like we can win any kind of game.

I feel like I fight with the best team in the country, and I think that's what he meant by that. Just sticking to what we do. I feel like we can beat any team in the country when we do it.



CAM SPENCER: Like Steph said, Coach brings out the bulletproof part when we're at our best defensively. I think we lock in on that end of the floor. I think that is kind of when we're at our highest level.

Going forward I think any team can be beaten, but we're pretty confident that if we lock up on that end, then we're the best team.

Q. Donovan, what does this day, March 27th, mean to you?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: I mean, it means a lot. Six years ago today I lost my mom. That changed my life forever.

I really wasn't the biggest fan of basketball, and I loved it and enjoyed playing it, but really when she passed, it made me realize how much I loved basketball and gave me a reason why to be great and how to just give me a reason to go.

She was a big basketball player at Maine and had a great career. Instead of going WNBA, she wanted to have kids and be a mom. She had me and my sister, and I just try to live her name through the game.

Q. Why did her passing make you love basketball more, really go more into it?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Just gave me a reason to make her proud and gave me a way to represent her and feel like I still had an attachment to her. She was the best mom anyone could ask for, and she influenced me in so many ways. I'm just hoping to make her proud.

Q. For Tristen, last year's game San Diego State closes to five with five minutes to go. You run a play for Justin. I think you had the assist on that play. Can you take us through that play, and how important was that three to kind of put them away?

TRISTEN NEWTON: Throughout that game we ran lot of plays for Jordan to get shots. He was one of our best players on the court. We knew we needed a shot to protect the lead. We were up pretty much the whole game and they started to come back. Jordan was our best shooter last year. So it was a good play. Coach drew up a good play for him, and he knocked down the shot. It was a big play in the game.

Q. For anyone who wants to speak on it, Andre Berry and Malik Martin, what have they done for the team throughout these past couple of years for you guys?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: I mean, they push us off the court when we're not practicing and stuff, just doing individual workouts, and trying to expand our game as many ways as possible. They pushed us off the court and tried to help develop us into better players for this team.

THE MODERATOR: You guys can head back. Thanks.

Head Coach Dan Hurley, opening thoughts?

DAN HURLEY: Obviously excited to get into Boston last night for the rematch of last year's title game. It's funny. I think since both programs have played like the maximum amount of games almost. I don't know if they got to the conference championship game in their league last year, but since that championship game we both got to the finals of our conference tournament.

Obviously coming back from that game last year, we have both gotten to this game again. A lot of respect for San Diego State and Coach and their culture. I think it's an awesome matchup. The Sweet 16 has all great matchups.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please, for Coach Hurley.

Q. I just asked Tristen about this. Can you take us through last year? It's a five-point game. They close it. People are kind of getting uneasy in the arena, and you called a play for Jordan. What was the play call? Why did you call that in that moment, and how much did it change the game?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, our people are getting uneasy, I'm sure. San Diego State people were excited.

Yeah, we knew they were going to make a run. They're just such a good team, such a great program, culture, pride. That was just an action that was probably our second or third counter off of something we call scissors. It was scissors triple. It was like a scissor action for the point guard, but what we really wanted was a triple for Hawkins.

Obviously as far as moving shooters go and clutch shooters, they make it hard on you to get to the rim and score. Their defense is excellent in the paint, so that was the call.

Q. Donovan just answered a question about the anniversary of his mother's death. Obviously that's something that's really shaped his life and his love for basketball. I'm wondering, you have obviously known him now for four or five years, recruiting him, being a local kid. I wonder how you have seen him honor her in that way and the depth of that memory and how her death has shaped him?

DAN HURLEY: Donovan is just a unique personality. It's just rare to see somebody that has dealt with what he has dealt with, the heart-breaking tragedy, and then has the personality that he has. He's so alive, and he's so vibrant, and he brings so much personality. He's a total giver. He's just a special, unique human being.

Even how he handled -- the way he was raised by his parents and the community of Bristol, how it didn't let him get too big for his, is it britches, Pete?

Even the way he handled last year at the end of the season. He would have been a top-20 pick. Knew he wasn't ready. Literally the next day just came in and said, hey, Coach, I'm not ready. Let's run it back. There wasn't a meeting with the agent and a series of drama, you know. He is a special kid.

Q. Can you speak to Solomon's continued development and how he has evolved as a bench player as a true freshman? What does Hassan's veteran experience bring off the bench?

DAN HURLEY: With Hass we wouldn't be who we are without that veteran. Multi-positional guard. He is built well for the Big East and games like tomorrow because he is physical and aggressive, and the shooting has improved.

You can't win in this tournament without depth. And Solo, especially in the nonconference, Solo was awesome for us. We don't win the says Carolina game without him. At MSG he was brilliant in that game. League play is tougher on freshmen, but you can see a guy that if he stays with us and trusts the program, he has a chance to develop into a tremendous player at UConn.

Q. You guys obviously have geography on your side this weekend. How much of an impact will that make knowing you're going to have a lot of fans at the Garden this weekend, and especially when you are playing on this kind of a stage?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, we hope so. We certainly hope so. We hope the crowd can be a Storrs North for us. Maybe feel a little bit like MSG does for us when we play there, the Big East Tournament and then during the Big East regular season too.

We've earned that by the season that we've had. This wasn't some gift by the committee to try to make it as easy as possible for us. We've earned our position. We've manifested Brooklyn to Boston since really April, since last year when we won the championship. We've worked incredibly hard over that time period to earn the opportunity

to play in front of hopefully a 60 percent UConn type of crowd. Hopefully Illinois's fans away and Iowa State's fans don't get involved.

Q. I'm curious for UConn as one of the top programs in the country, to maintain that status, how important is it for the Big East as a conference to maintain its strength? Going forward, what changes, if any, do you expect to see to make sure the conference gets the respect it deserves?

DAN HURLEY: We've proven ourselves at the top end. Villanova is not too far removed from a national championship. Obviously, we won it last year. Us, Marquette, Creighton are all vying for it this year. I just think some of the other situations with some of the programs is going to take a little bit more time. Thad Matta has made huge strides at Butler. Coach Pitino and Kim English, Ed Cooley, Shaheen Holloway. We have people in places. Villanova, obviously, with their pedigree. I just think some of our programs are going to take another big jump this upcoming year.

I think the best thing we can all do is schedule the right way with the nonconference. You have to win big nonconference games. You have to. You have to come into the league with some big nonconference wins. We went out and beat Carolina. We beat Gonzaga. We beat Texas before we got to league play. Marquette went out and did the same type of thing. So we just need more teams performing at a higher level in nonconference.

Q. Charlie Baker said today that he wanted to see states ban player-based prop bets because it creates pressure on players. Some people are reaching out to players and blaming them for losing their bets. Is that something you would like to see to take some of the pressure off of players?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I just think that social media -- I don't really know what a prop bet is, but social media is vicious. So anything we can do just to make it less vicious, I would be all for that relative to Charlie Baker.

Q. I read some of your previous quotes about the transfer portal. I hope you weren't asked it today. If you could change it to a certain way, is there an ideal way it could be better, should be better? What do you see?

DAN HURLEY: I think we could wait until we get to maybe the conclusion of the season. That would be nice. It almost feels like in a way right now teams that are really, really successful and having great seasons, it's almost becoming pro sports, where it feels like we're going to have

the last pick in the draft. A lot of the players will have made decisions because we're not recruiting. We may be listed by some players on some lists of having shown interest, but I know that I don't have interest right now because I'm just -- all you can focus on, I think with the way that we function as a program, is on our team and coaching the season, and then we'll make personnel moves once we're done coaching this group.

You can't open up that window until the season is over. I don't think you should play in five schools in four years or four schools in four years. I don't think that's healthy for the individual for the long-term 50, 60-year life after their playing career is over because there's no connection with our university, a coaching staff, a network of alumni that can help create opportunities once basketball is over.

I just think whether it's a one-time -- I don't know. I don't like the window being open right now. I just don't think it's healthy for somebody to be able to change schools like underwear.

Q. Two guys on your staff with Rhode Island ties, Andre Berry, Malik Martin. What makes them good additions to your staff? What do you see for them in the future in this business? Maybe going back to them when they were younger, pinpoints that you saw?

DAN HURLEY: Andre was a championship player for me at Rhodey and a guy that he didn't have instant gratification. He had to earn a role and develop over time. He has a great message for my current players that are either having to earn their role or trying to become a high-level player.

Obviously the Martin family, there's no better family than the Martin family. Hassan Martin is one of the best and greatest players I've ever coached, and that is the greatest Staten Island family of all time right there. Those are incredible people.

Any team you can have that type of connection, it helps your culture significantly.

Q. How did the challenges that you went through as a college player shape you as a coach and how you approach your own players today?

DAN HURLEY: I just think maybe sometimes coaches that weren't the greatest players or were pretty good or had their moments but then also went through some struggles, can you just relate to the entire roster in a unique way that way. All the players at all different points of season.

Then I also think when you've had times in your playing

career where you have struggled, I do think it hardens you, it toughens you up. You've dealt with a lot of adversity, and you know how to handle failure, and I think as a coach in this business if you can't handle adversity, failure, you're going to have a very, very hard time.

Yeah, bricking all those shots back at the Hall certainly paid off.

Q. A lot of talk with the guys, how does last year build into this year. For you as a coach what do you learn coaching a national champion that you then take into the future? Because you had good teams at Wagner, a couple of tournaments at URI. Reaching the mountaintop, how do you then evolve as a coach and learn from it yourself?

DAN HURLEY: I just think you take the confidence from that. Obviously we followed up that with we've been the best team in the country this year with what we've been able to accomplish. We're not going to be able to trade that in for anything tomorrow night versus the team we faced last year in the Finals, but we bring the confidence. We believe. We think we're supposed to win these games.

It's like kind of a double because just UConn, the fan base, the organization, history in men and women's basketball, we truly believe deep down in someplace that this is what we're supposed to do this time of year. Plus, we did it last year.

But then we didn't carry the complacency that other national championship teams carry with them because since June we've worked like we haven't won anything, and I think that's the secret sauce.

Q. There's a new sportsbook at the XL Center and Temple has been under investigation for betting activities over the last few weeks. In light of that, should there be more seminars and player outreach efforts out there to protect the players from some of the unscrupulous, nefarious characters who are in the environment now?

DAN HURLEY: Yes, absolutely. With just how easy it is to gamble on your phone or, again, locally, I don't think you can do enough that way. Absolutely in light of that we've had internal conversations here at the athletic department about continuing to stress that to our student-athletes.

Q. The other day I know you referenced making yourself bulletproof. Today you've talked about how you've earned the position that you're in with no complacency. How much with all the success of the last 60 or so games, 50 games, has your job or



approach changed to where it's really positive reinforcement now? You want to continue to build the swagger and build the confidence that your team has, because there's not much reason to criticize them.

DAN HURLEY: My superstitions are stacking up because we've won a lot, won so much. Keeping track of that has been tough.

Like last year, we were a 4 seed. We earned the position to have to go out West with UCLA, Gonzaga out there, and had to play Gonzaga in Vegas. So, yeah, we earned the opportunity to be the No. 1 overall seed and play in Brooklyn and take buses.

When I talk about bulletproof, we're vulnerable. This is not a best-of-five or best-of-seven. You have one off night, you know, where everything falls apart, you could be the best team in the country and not win the tournament.

When I talk about bulletproof, for me the formula is top-10 offense, top-10 defense, be a tremendous rebounding team, be a team that plays with utter desperation in terms of how hard we play and then having depth to survive the other night a 2-for-22 three-point effort or three, and one of those was from a walk-on not named Andrew Hurley at the end of the game. We shot the ball horribly, but we were bulletproof the other night because of our defense and our passing, our ability to score rim twos. We can win a lot of different types of games.

You want to make yourself as bulletproof as possible in this tournament by just being as well-rounded and as deep.

Q. You've been boring. You've been very boring in this press conference.

DAN HURLEY: I'm not getting the right questions.

Q. Last time remember when I made you do the lcky shuffle? Want to do it again?

DAN HURLEY: No, I do not. Please don't.

Q. This year a lot of opposing coaches will say this year's team is better, scarier to them than last year's. Last year probably had more high-end talent. Do you agree with that, and why?

DAN HURLEY: This team fits. I just think the pieces fit so well. I think a lot of it's been trial and error. Those couple of years when we weren't successful in the tournament, just the personalities, the skill set. Obviously adapting to the analytics and the modern game from an offensive standpoint, the growth there as a coach and in terms of

roster construction.

There's NBA prospects on this roster. I know that somebody said something about being able to win. We were picked closer to 4th than we were 3rd in our Big East coaches preseason poll. I know somebody on ESPN said we could beat an NBA team or something bizarre. That's crazy talk.

We do have several players on this team that are going to play in the NBA, are going to be drafted in the NBA, are going to be drafted in the lottery in the NBA. You can't deny when you watch this team play that it's a fun team to watch because the ball moves, and we share it, and we play for each other. You can see the culture. You can see the energy. You can see the commitment to defense. You can see the personalities up and down the organization.

It's been a great team. It's just been a fun team. I think we've got -- we finally have kind of figured out the formula.

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