

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - St. John's vs Duke

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Washington D.C., USA

Capital One Arena

St. John's Red Storm

Rick Pitino

Zuby Ejiofor

Dillon Mitchell

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by St. John's head coach, Rick Pitino.

RICK PITINO: We're excited to be at the home of Georgetown. We've been here before. I think the Sweet 16, we've had as much fun as any team could have in a tournament.

It's been a tremendous season with great guys that give it to me every single day. We've had a lot of laughs, a lot of great spirit behind this season.

Really looking forward to a great game against a team that quite frankly I've not seen since 51, 52 years in this game, never seen a schedule like that in my coaching career. Not only the strong ACC, but they've played almost everybody in the Sweet 16. They've played Michigan, Michigan State, Arkansas, Florida is out, but they played Florida, they played Texas Tech. It's an amazing schedule that they played.

Still basically a few blemishes, but only a couple games. It's quite a testament to the basketball team and their staff that they not only played that type of schedule, but to be victorious. We know we're playing a great team.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

Q. I know you're focused on the Sweet 16 obviously. I want to ask you a little bit of a bigger picture question. The opening round of the NCAA tournament set a TV viewership record at a time that the NBA is battling a narrative that the product is less watchable. Your perspective on why you think fan interest in the NBA



seems to be waning while the interest in college basketball is at an all-time high?

RICK PITINO: I think the resurgence of St. John's (smiling).

I really don't know why. I wouldn't give you an intelligent answer. I don't know why.

Q. This is going to sound like I'm being snarky, but I'm not. This game can frustrate you. After all these years, why do you keep doing it? What do you love about it? Everyone says we love coaching, but what is it that you actually love?

RICK PITINO: I think because I spent two years without it, I think the lifestyle that I was leading was certainly, I shouldn't complain about it. But I just missed it every single day I was out of it. So I realized there's no reason to try and get out because I knew how much I missed it.

Sometimes when you retire, like a lot of coaches are doing that, Jay Wright, whoever, they certainly can get back in if they want. Once they get out, they usually don't get back in.

I'd like to stay in as long as I can. As long as God willing is giving me good health, I'd like to stay in it as long as I can.

Q. Is there one area, you go into this game, thinking we have to do this?

RICK PITINO: Well, they're plus-11 on the glass. They do the best job in the country at getting an offensive rebound. Almost like a secondary play of throwing it back out for a three. They're great at it. It's something they look for.

If they don't have an immediate putback, they tip it out or they take it and they throw it right out to the three-point line. The backboard, when you're plus-11 on the glass is difficult. Obviously the personnel is great.

But I think that's the thing. We're not always great on the backboard. We have to make sure we are in this game.

Q. You've been able to create a defense that's able to create some havoc. The balance between being able



to get the right guys in the right positions versus what the coaching staff can actually recruit the right guys, versus what the coaching staff is able to do to get the guys in the right spaces.

RICK PITINO: I've pressed with slow guys and I've pressed with very athletic people. I try to go more to a 2-2-1 press with guys that aren't as athletic. Then an all-out Kentucky-type press that I've had with great athletes.

It all depends on the makeup of your team. Today it changes year to year more than any other time. There's no continuity behind most of the teams. It's just a matter of recruiting the people that fit a certain style.

Q. Before the Kansas game we talked a little bit about how that team seemed a lot like the Kentucky game because their size and athleticism. Does Duke pull anything out of what you guys have played this season that you think is comparable?

RICK PITINO: Not really, no. Duke's unique in the way they play. With the injury they had, they've played Boozier more at the one where they use him in pick-and-rolls, trying to get a switch, and try to dominate the person who switches on him.

No, not really. They're unique. They're a unique basketball team. We're really looking forward to it. I've got grade admiration for the Coach K years as well as Jon Scheyer now doing a tremendous job.

They epitomize the greatness about college basketball in so many different ways because they've sustained success for so many years. It's been an amazing thing to watch.

Q. I'd like you to elaborate on something that you said Sunday after the Kansas win. You indicated that after the Providence game with the ejections that you felt you saw something different from your team going forward, maybe more unity or something. Can you elaborate on what that looks like so we have a better idea of what you meant.

RICK PITINO: Well, I think they always got along great together. But remember, you have one player from Sweden, one from Austria, two from Greece, the Congo, Ghana. You have people from so many different countries that they really didn't know each other.

At that point in the Providence game they all felt so bad for Bryce Hopkins. When he got tackled, they came to his defense. That bothered them. I think that brought them really close together by really caring for Bryce. They care

for each other.

Regardless of where they're from, I think they formed a bond after that game that was special.

Q. How does it show up on the court?

RICK PITINO: It shows up more in the locker room and off the court than it does anything else.

Q. When you won it all in 2013, you obviously beat Duke along the way. Did that victory temper or neutralize the memories of '92? Is that moment in Philly going to stay with you forevermore regardless?

RICK PITINO: I take the '92 game, people misconstrue it, I took it as a positive. We went back to Kentucky, the four seniors, Farmer, Feldhaus, Pelphrey and Woods, they got their jerseys retired to the rafters after that loss, which you never see.

But I always treasured that game. I thought every time I've watched that game, I didn't grimace about Christian Laettner hitting the shot. I thought it was one of the greatest games played. What was it, 103-102 or 102-101 final. We played the overtime without Mashburn. People forget that. I always treasured that.

The ironic thing about what you're asking, when we won with the Kevin Ware injury, it was 25 years to the day, that game, that Kevin Ware. That's really spooky.

But no, I treasure that game in so many ways, not the loss, but the way the game was played. Give all the credit in the world, I can't escape -- Grant Hill has done seven games for me this season (laughter).

Q. I was wondering just to go back to the question, how much can a coach himself foster that kind of chemistry? Do you have techniques, do you trick 'em into it in any way? What is your role in that?

RICK PITINO: You know, I was joking yesterday with the team a little bit about, this is a once-in-a-lifetime for all you guys, you can't embrace these things. You got to set your mind on what's going to happen when we cut down the nets for a national championship, to try and get them somehow to believe they're going to win, and two, also to get them to understand that you can't be happy where you are at this point, because if you get content playing a team like Duke, you're going to get blown out.

You have to be really hungry and believe. We got to foster that type of belief. If you don't, usually you go home. So we just want to get after it. We know we're playing a great

team. There's no question about that. They haven't lost very much. But we want to foster that type of belief, that we're going to win this game.

Q. In San Diego you talked about your team's reliance and acceptance to how important the three-point shot is. This is a building where you hit 15 earlier in the season. You said you needed to hit threes against Kansas to win. Is that kind of the same style you need to win against Duke?

RICK PITINO: I think this team needs to win the three-point battle every night to have a chance to win. We're not a three-point shooting team. So That may be ironic I'm saying it that way. I think we do because we have deficiencies elsewhere.

We're a very poor two-point shooting team, one of the worst in the Big East. We have to make the three-point shot.

Obviously the last two days the second-unit people, they beat the first unit by 30 the first day, the second day they won by two, all because of three-point shooting. You have Joston, Ian, and Lefty on that team. The bench is very important for that.

Q. With all the kind of player movement and turnover, how do you go about establishing cohesion in a quick way? How do you establish team identity?

RICK PITINO: It's difficult. From a motivational standpoint, you have to be really tuned into understanding these guys right away. It was more difficult for me because of the foreign influence of these guys. I knew Lefty a little bit more. He's back. Ruben is from Portugal. I left him out. It's a little bit different.

I imagine what these guys are thinking through all of this, being from Portugal, from Greece, Sweden, Congo, Ghana, all this fanfare of March Madness.

It is very difficult coaching in this environment. I'm from the other end of the spectrum. I think college basketball in the last two years is at the highest level of performance that I've witnessed in my 50 years. That's because the foreign influence, they no longer want to go to the EuroLeague or the EuroCup. They want to go to the States because they make more money. We can even rival the EuroLeague as far as pay is concerned.

What's on court, the way the game is being played on court is the best I've ever witnessed. There's a lot of good to it. There's still some things that need to be worked out. I think the play of about 30, 40 teams I've seen this year is

much higher than I've ever witnessed.

Q. A lot of talk about the death of Cinderella because of NIL and the portal. Are you worried about that? Do you think teams need to have an eight, 10 million dollar NIL budget to go deep in the tournament now?

RICK PITINO: I'm not concerned about it. I think you will see it again. I think you will see it again. But I do feel what's even better than that is the fact the blue bloods no longer control basketball any longer. There's no difference between Kentucky, North Carolina than Illinois or St. John's. There's no difference anymore. There's no difference between Michigan State, who is a blue blood, to any of the other teams from the conferences, from Mississippi, when they get it going. It's all going to be the same.

You're going to see 40 to 50 teams all the same. There's no such thing as a blue blood anymore. There's no difference between North Carolina State and somebody else. Everybody is the same. Everybody is the same in basketball. That's what's going to make it a great product.

Q. (No microphone.)

RICK PITINO: It seems like everybody does have the money. I know in the Big East, I think the Big East is going to be better than ever. The presidents and ADs have all upped their NIL budgets. They realize they're going to do something. Kudos to them for doing that.

We have been notified that we're cutting ours in half. Mike Repole just lost two big horse races, so he's cutting it in half (laughter).

Q. On the blue blood thing, you're playing one here. Kentucky, Kansas, North Carolina haven't been here much in the last four or five years. What of the historical advantages of the blue bloods have disappeared in this era?

RICK PITINO: The Kansas, Duke or North Carolina, they always had the best facilities. Facilities are probably fourth or fifth on the list. I think for Duke, back in the day, if you wanted the best education and the best basketball, Duke has got to be one, two on your list. Probably the players they're recruiting right now don't stay more than one or two years.

All that's gone now. We are an offshoot of professional basketball. I look at it totally different. I think it's great because I just want excellence on the court between the lines. I want to see great players, execution, coaching. We are getting that now.

For you guys in the media and me as a bystander looking at my non-coaching days, I want to see great basketball with great players. We're getting that now. I think it's awesome.

I think the fact there are no more blue bloods, I think it's great. I think it's great. Kentucky will always be Kentucky. Duke will always be Duke because of their great, the legacy they left in the game, the history of their game.

But I can also go back to Dickey DeVenzio of Duke. I go back a long way in watching Vic Bubas. It all started there. I go back to Coach K when he first got in, people were questioning whether he should stay at Duke.

It's great. Great history. Kentucky, great history. North Carolina, unbelievable history. They're no longer the blue bloods in basketball, and I think that's wonderful.

Q. You've had nine different head coaching job. Tom Izzo is here, as well, who had one. You are both Hall of Famers. Do you look back and think, what if I stayed at Providence, Kentucky? What emotions, if so, given the path you've?

RICK PITINO: I've loved every place I've lived. I'm a different guy. I'm not a nester. Everybody is different. I don't want to live in the same place my whole life. I enjoyed Greece probably more than anyplace I've ever lived for those two years. Not knowing one person, just exploring all the islands.

For me it was great. For Tom it's great, being in East Lansing, he loves it there. Everybody is different. Coach K is different.

I've enjoyed every stop along the way. Great people I've met. Great friends. Lifetime friends.

Q. Over your career, recruiting players in this DMV area, any traits about players that have come from this region that are consistent?

RICK PITINO: You mean, the Washington area?

Q. Metro area.

RICK PITINO: No, I really don't have an opinion on that. I haven't had too many from this area, so...

I really believe today, like New York at one time, they always said like if you wanted a point guard, go to New York. They all leave so much and go to prep schools elsewhere, I'm not sure there is -- I couldn't tell you where

the best high school basketball is being played right now. Texas is a lot stronger, Texas and Florida are a lot stronger than the old days.

They're all great areas, depending on -- obviously it's all cyclical depending on young players coming out.

Q. You mentioned you got to be hungry at this stage to beat a team like Duke. Do you feel like your team is still hungry?

RICK PITINO: Yeah, but I haven't fed 'em in a week. They're on water and some fruit juices (smiling).

Q. They're obviously a significant favorite. They've lost two games all year. It's going to take your best game of the year to win this game.

RICK PITINO: Look, we're playing great basketball right now. I told the team this. The one thing you'll find about me is I don't complain to officials. I don't like talking to officials. I hate when officials are talking to the other coach. Bugs the hell out of me. I think they should be professional and just referee the game.

Can you imagine a Wall Street broker, trading millions of dollars, somebody is yelling in your ear while you're trying to trade millions of dollars all the time? That's why the NBA refs get a little better. They pay no attention. You have to focus on the game.

In our game against Kansas, there were three of the most absurd calls I've witnessed. I don't ever say that. A back-court violation, a goaltending violation. There was a referee on the baseline while a guy was a foot out of bounds throwing the ball back in. All three plays could have made a difference in us going home.

Everybody's got to focus on the task at hand. The reason I bring that up is we had to overcome a lot this year at the end of the game. I think Dylan Darling has won five games at the end of a game. We had to win that when calls were not going our way.

I think we're a pretty good basketball team. Are we good enough to beat Duke? I have no idea. We are very hungry. What team in the Sweet 16 is not hungry? You're four games away from a national championship, the dream of every athlete and every coach and every fan.

We are extremely hungry. But we know Duke is very hungry. Our respect for them is off the charts. We know we're going to have to play great to beat them.

THE MODERATOR: We'd like to thank Coach Pitino for

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joining us here.

We are joined by student-athletes from St. John's.
Questions for Zuby or Dillon.

Q. When you win a game in the fashion you did against Kansas, how are you able to, one, really revel in that moment that you had, then how quickly do you have to turn that off and get ready for the next game?

DILLON MITCHELL: I mean, pretty quick. Obviously we were excited just to be moving on. You lose a game around this time of the year, it's over.

Just excited to be moving on. We got a really good Duke team that we're going to play tomorrow. It was immediately back to the drawing boards, just understanding what they do, what they're good at, trying to prepare to win.

Obviously it was exciting at first just advancing to the next round. It's a quick turnaround for us.

ZUBY EJIOFOR: I mean, yeah, piggybacking on him, it's a great, special moment, just for the team, for the fans. Everybody was obviously excited to move on to the Sweet 16.

Like he said, just a quick transition. The next following day, just understand that we got a tough opponent in Duke coming up. Film sessions, hourly practices, stuff like that. Just doing whatever it takes to move on to the next one.

Q. Zuby, you have to ask you about this Mike Francesa radio interview. He said you left Kansas because Joel Embiid was playing ahead of you. Did you hear that? What did you think about that? I think you were nine years old when Joel Embiid went to Kansas. Were you a fan of his? Did you meet him? Then he said he was mistaken and he really meant Hunter Dickinson.

ZUBY EJIOFOR: It was pretty hilarious. My family sent me the video. I watched it a little bit. I thought it was pretty funny obviously. I was not in the program when Joel Embiid was around.

Yeah, that was just it. That was my thoughts on it, even though it was obviously pretty hilarious.

Q. Are a fan of Embiid? Have you followed his career at all?

ZUBY EJIOFOR: Yeah, I'm a big fan. Obviously a really talented player, being in the league for a while. Obviously coming in and playing for Kansas. I seen him a little bit.

Like I say, pretty talented. Big fan.

Q. Zuby, your coach was saying the blue bloods no longer run college basketball, the NIL has leveled the playing field, let programs like yours compete, 40 or 50 programs. For you is it more fun being in a position where you're part of a program trying to hold up this long blue blood legacy or more fun being in the position going out against one of those programs in the Sweet 16?

ZUBY EJIOFOR: I think it's obviously, yeah, I've been with Kansas. But then just coming to a program like St. John's, experienced a few down years, the past two years turning out pretty successful, just seeing the whole city and Johnnies nation having our back, the excitement that we brought to the program the last two years. It's been pretty special.

Now having the opportunity to go out there and compete against a great program like Duke, it's every kid's dream, coming out here, Sweet 16, putting everything on the line for an opportunity to move on and advance to the Elite Eight. Everybody is excited for that opportunity.

It's going to take everybody. It's not a one-man job. They have a lot of talented players on that program. Everybody got to go out there and compete hard for 40 minutes.

Q. When you talk about that support you got at St. John's, what's the difference, how do you describe the difference in the energy at Allen Fieldhouse where they expect to win every year versus a program on the upswing?

ZUBY EJIOFOR: Obviously Kansas, there's always been a standard, even my first year being there, I understood year in, year out it doesn't matter what players that comes to their program, there's a high expectation to come in there and win.

I just come into St. John's, I experienced the ups, I experienced the downs, especially my first year just following short of coming to the NCAA tournament.

All the hype around obviously Coach Pitino coming to the program. The first year the fans kind of expecting, yeah, obviously Coach Pitino is a great coach, so we're going to experience a trend in a positive direction of how this program is going to go.

So especially this past year, being able to bring two titles to St. John's, just seeing the hype, seeing the love that the entire program, my teammates just got. 25 years in the history of St. John's we weren't able to bring a title, and we

did that. Now going back to back as well.

Everybody is obviously really excited. Sweet 16 we haven't been here since '99. It's truly special. It's a true blessing to be to be a part of this resurgence. Just building a standard for years to come here at St. John's.

Yeah, like I say, it's a true honor to be a part of that.

Q. It used to be that guys would play together for several years, bond over a long period of time. How did you manage to gel so quickly?

DILLON MITCHELL: I think it's just the amount of time we spend together. Day in and day out since June, we're in that facility a long time from the morning. You get home, you eat, shower and go to sleep, wake up and do it again.

Being around the guys all day in the locker room. A lot of our moments are locker rooms, just laughing our behinds off, joking around. That's where it all starts for us.

Going on the court every day competing. We have that mindset that we're going to do whatever it takes to protect each other, go out there and play for each other, play for the name on the front of our jersey.

Just how much time we've spent together as a team on the court, off the court, the amount of time we're at the facility day in, day out for hours, being around each other.

The thing about it, everyone is positive, it's a positive locker room. We have nobody on the team that brings it down or brings the energy or vibe down. All of us are happy to be here, proud to be here, excited to be here, just want to compete for each other.

ZUBY EJIOFOR: Just understanding that we all have a common goal. No matter where we're from. There's a lot of guys coming in from different programs. Then you understand that they came here for a reason. They came here to experience something that's pretty special.

I don't know how many guys exactly on the team that's seniors, but at least half of us, it's our last year in college. We want to go out in the best way possible, understanding that we just got to have each other's backs out there. Like D just said, a lot of time spent around each other in the locker rooms, on the court, hours put in at the gym.

There's a lot of love. It's a brotherhood that we've created here since the summer. We're all excited for this opportunity that we have, understanding that we still got more things, more ways to go.

Q. Talk about the problems, the challenge that Cam Boozer presents. Explain how hungry you guys are right now.

DILLON MITCHELL: He's one of the best players in the country. He's big, he's strong, he's smart. He makes the right plays. His offensive rebounding is really good.

But just his size, how smart he is with the game, understanding the game, plays the right way, plays as a team player. Not one of those top guys trying to get his own. He's a winner. He's a really big challenge.

It's great for us to play against Duke and go out there, do what we can to get the win. It prepares us for anything going down the road, just playing a team like Duke. You can definitely say you're prepared for anything else that comes your way the rest throughout of this tournament.

It starts with Duke. Understanding them. One through five, every guy on that team can play good. They have a good coach in Coach Scheyer who took them far last year. Just the team that they have, the way they play, it's a big challenge for us. But we're preparing the best way we can to play.

There's no big motivator that we need right now. I think we've had that type chip through June. We've always ignored the rankings in pre-season, whatever it was. We have a goal. We want to accomplish that goal. Like Zuby said, a couple of us are seniors, both of us included, where we don't have the opportunity next year.

It's just going out there, doing whatever we can to get the win, just taking it game after game.

ZUBY EJIOFOR: Just like he said, obviously just a special talent coming in as a freshman, really smart player, understanding the game pretty well. He makes their team go. It's not just him. There's a lot of talent around him, as well.

So Duke is a great program. It's never a one-man job, especially with Boozer. Really talented, really physical. We just got to make sure he sees bodies and really just get at them, apply the pressure, press for 40 minutes. Making them feel us on the defensive end, just getting out there in transition.

Like he said, there's no bigger motivator. You've made it to this moment. It's a great accomplishment. Our goal is still right ahead of us. So you just got to go out there, compete, have fun, and do whatever it takes to win. That's been our motto all year.

We've always played with a chip on our shoulder. Early in the season we had to fight through adversity. But then it was not all great. Everybody was down on us early.

We always just believed in ourselves. It was always about us, how we felt our season could go.

We're truly excited, blessed to be here, but understanding that we still have one main goal, and that's just to go out there and win.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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