

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

Thursday, March 26, 2026

Washington D.C., USA

Capital One Arena

Duke Blue Devils

Jon Scheyer

Dame Sarr

Nikolas Khamenia

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Duke student-athletes have arrived at the main interview room. We're looking for our first question for Dame or Nikolas.

Q. Approaching this game, what excites you the most? Your first Sweet 16 for the two of you. What excites you the most about this upcoming challenge?

DAME SARR: I mean, really just being able to compete out there. We know how important is this game. It's the Sweet 16. Not many teams get a chance to play this weekend. We're just grateful to be here. We're going to approach it that way.

NIKOLAS KHAMENIA: Yeah, I mean, super excited. Obviously our first Sweet 16. Just playing in that environment. Even last weekend, just making in March Madness was just a different feeling. Just super blessed and excited to be here.

Q. Is Jon Scheyer as cool inside the locker room, inside the huddle, as he appears to be?

DAME SARR: I don't know. Definitely he's really cool. He's just a great person to be around with. He's our leader. He sets the tone. He shows us how much he cares, how much he works for this.

We just follow him. I think he's a great leader, just really blessed, grateful to be able to play under him, for sure.

Q. Maybe the word I shouldn't have used is 'calm'. He looks very collected. He doesn't look very emotional on the sideline. Is he more emotional behind the

scenes?

DAME SARR: I feel like he's really composed.

NIKOLAS KHAMENIA: High-level word (smiling).

DAME SARR: He tries to bring us calmness and just try to show us that no matter what's going on, he tries to stay composed, understanding we have to do our thing, no matter what, no matter what's going on, no matter the circumstances. I feel like that helps us a lot seeing him be calm on the sideline, even though in the moments of the game he can be kind of stressful.

But he's always really calm. That really helps.

THE MODERATOR: Nik, did you have a different word?

NIKOLAS KHAMENIA: I think he does a good job of staying calm throughout the day. Like he said, no ups and downs. He stays pretty level. It helps us just play.

Q. For Nik, how does Coach Scheyer, having played for Duke, help him kind of relate to you guys a little bit more, the fact that he not only has been here as a player? What are some specific examples of the times where his time as a player helps you guys out?

NIKOLAS KHAMENIA: I mean, yeah, I think he just kind of understands just the everyday life. Obviously playing for Duke is a blessing. But there's a lot that just comes with it.

Obviously you have a lot more eyes. There's obviously a little bit more pressure coming to Duke, as well. You're expected to pretty much win. I mean, he's been in those shoes, he's been in those moments.

I think part of him being so calm, I think he doesn't do it on accident. He definitely does that for us because he definitely knows what it's like to play in those games.

Q. Dame, Coach Pitino was in here a little bit ago. He said college basketball is the most talented he's seen in 50 years. A big reason for that was the influx of European players. They can make money to play in college. I'd like to hear you speak on that.



DAME SARR: Yeah, I mean, I feel like this past summer, a lot of international guys had the opportunity to come here. Myself, you know. I made the decision because I felt like this was the best for me to become the best player I could possibly be.

I just feel like the resources we have in college basketball is really hard to have them in any other situations. I just feel like college basketball is such a great opportunity for young guys to grow and to experience the college life, being with teammates your age, just going through hard moments, going through Sweet 16. These experiences are life experiences. I feel like it's something that is hard to give up on, so...

Q. Fans are expecting a physical game tomorrow. You've had these kind of games before. How has the approach changed from the first game against Texas till now in how you approach teams that are physical against you?

NIKOLAS KHAMENIA: I think that's part of our identity, too, is being a physical team. Rebounds and defends. Obviously from the beginning of the year, I think we've just grown in that aspect, focusing on those little parts of the game.

I think we've played a lot of teams that have been physical, which is obviously going to help prepare us for tomorrow.

Q. Dame, different international players have come in with different ideas of the NCAA tournament. Some had never seen it before, some had watched it. What was your level of familiarity with the tournament? That first weekend, did it live up to everything you imagined?

DAME SARR: Yeah, so, I definitely watched a lot of March Madness before coming here, especially in the last couple years. Just knowing that I wanted to kind of take this route.

Honestly, I thought it was going to be amazing, but it was everything. Everything was even better. Just being able to play in March, play with my teammates, play with "Duke" across my chest, it was unbelievable. Just the experience, the fans show out, it was just an unbelievable experience.

I'm just grateful to be able to play another game, for sure.

Q. Nik, Coach Pitino said there is no such thing anymore as a blue blood in college basketball. Do you still think Duke is a blue blood in college basketball?

NIKOLAS KHAMENIA: Yeah, I do believe Duke is a blue blood. I grew up watching a lot of college basketball

games, schools like Kentucky, Duke, Kansas, Carolina were always referenced to me as blue bloods.

THE MODERATOR: I think in context he said NIL has leveled the playing field.

NIKOLAS KHAMENIA: I mean, I am not too big on the NIL stuff. I kind of just show up and play for Duke. That's where my mind is every single day.

Q. Has there been a moment during the season where Jon Scheyer changed something for you with something he said, whether in the middle of a game or practice, where you felt some kind of turn in your game?

DAME SARR: Honestly, yeah, for me it probably was during the Christmas break. Going into the Christmas break I don't think I was playing my best basketball because I wasn't focused on the right things.

I sat down with Coach Scheyer. He just asked me to play to my strengths. I think that's what changed during this period after Christmas break, just understanding what the team needed me to do and what I do best also.

Just really grateful that we was able to talk about it, just understanding what was best for me, what I had to do to put myself in the best situation and my team. That's why I came here. I came here to help my team win. I didn't feel like I was doing it the right way.

Just being able to help my team now, that's such a great thing for me.

Q. (No microphone.)

DAME SARR: I definitely wasn't focused on helping on the defensive end. I felt like my mind was just not in the right place. When I switched my energy into just playing defense and just helping my team, understanding that's my superpower. Just bringing it every day and helping my team win. It made this experience so much better.

Now I just feel like we're so much a better team because everybody also steps up and just understanding that.

NIKOLAS KHAMENIA: I mean, I don't think there's any, like, specific moment. I think there's a whole bunch of times throughout the year where Coach Scheyer has talked to me about different things, even in film sessions telling me different things that I can do better. Pretty much just doing what each game asks of me to help the team win.

Q. Dame, your upbringing, being able to play for Barcelona, a little bit of a different youth basketball structure in Europe, do you feel like it's given you any advantages in the college game? Do you share those with your teammates?

DAME SARR: I feel like yeah, growing up in Spain, the culture of basketball is really big, especially the understanding of basketball. The IQ I feel like, that really helped me to understand and make the right reads. That's what I try to bring every time I step on the court. I try to make everything right every time, every single play.

When I can help my teammates, that's what I try to do. Yeah, so I definitely think the experience in Barcelona really shaped my basketball.

THE MODERATOR: We thank Dame and Nik for joining us.

Coach Scheyer joins us now. Do you want to begin with a statement?

JON SCHEYER: Yeah, mainly I just want to say what an honor for us to be here to be playing against a really good St. John's team. A ton of respect for Coach Pitino, everything he's done as a coach, what he's accomplished. Then most importantly the team that they have. They have a terrific team that is playing the best they've played all season.

For us, we're very excited about the challenge, very hungry to keep this thing going.

So I'll take any questions.

Q. What stands out to you most about the St. John's team? What threats do they pose? Zuby has been playing great. With Coach Pitino, do you have any specific history or memories of interacting with him?

JON SCHEYER: Really it's just admiration and respect for him, what he's done. You look at the variety of his coaching, right, the different levels of college basketball, NBA, Europe, which I'm well aware what he did over there. A little after I played over there, but...

I think you just have to have a ton of respect for that, right? The success he's had every step of the way no matter where he is.

As far as their team goes, I think it's a reflection of him as a coach. Other teams he's had, coached against some of his Louisville teams. Known him a long time obviously. They're hard-nosed, they're tough. They make it incredibly

difficult for you to get comfortable on offense.

For their offense, they put a lot of pressure on the rim. They do it a variety of ways. They have good depth. They're playing so well together. I think the best thing that they do, they play with great confidence. They're just relentless. They're just relentless, which is for us going to be a key thing not to relax at all.

Q. Can you update us on Caleb and Pat?

JON SCHEYER: It's been a different experience, right, with both these guys. Pat responded well. You never know how that's going to go. He's on track to play again tomorrow, which is a really big deal for us.

Then Caleb, I just go back to when he got hurt, he told me, Look, if I do this and work every day, you got to promise me you'll let me put this uniform on again with our guys.

He's in a position where he's going to try to do that tomorrow night. He had a good day of practice yesterday, doing a little bit. We have to see how he feels today. Hopefully he progresses well enough tomorrow where. Again, it's not like there's a lot of practice time, but we have to make sure he's in position before the game, more of a game-time decision.

He's going to give it everything he has to go tomorrow night.

Q. The physicality of St. John's is pronounced. You guys are a physical team. How have you embraced this opportunity to go into the trenches against another team?

JON SCHEYER: It's a combination of having a lot of respect for who they are and how they play, the job they've done, understanding they are very physical, they make it tough on you on both ends in the paint. At the same time that's been our strength. We don't want to get away from who we've been.

You think about the schedule we've played, I think it's prepared us to be in moments like this, to understand what it takes. Now it's a matter of trusting that, going ahead and executing that, then just being true to who we are.

Hopefully the depth, Pat and Caleb again are in position, that can give us also where there's not the pacing, there's just the effort in a game like this you have to have every possession. It's harder to play longer minutes. That's something for us that's going to be a key thing.

Q. Coach Pitino talked about the advantage of historic

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

blue bloods kind of disappearing. You've been able to preserve that at Duke. Do you agree with the sentiment it's flattened out, or if there is an advantage to being a legacy program?

JON SCHEYER: Yeah, I think the biggest thing I would say is it changes so rapidly, so you have to make sure that you're -- it can go quickly I guess is what I'm saying.

I think with us, even the transition, the succession plan, you just want to make sure you establish right away that you're not going anywhere. I think of all things that's something that's been a big focus of mine, then everybody around me, our entire athletic department, our staff, our coaches, starting with Coach K when it initially happened.

But yeah, that's talked about less in the recruiting process now. When you think about when I was recruited, history, tradition, those things are very valuable. Now not that it doesn't mean anything. I think playing at our place means a lot still.

You have to find the right people and you have to understand that's not the only part of the equation anymore. I think that's something we've adjusted to, want to continue to adapt as we go forward, as well.

Q. There was this prevailing thought that NIL and the transfer portal might ruin college sports. The NCAA tournament saw its best ratings ever. Why do you think those doom and gloom predictions don't seem to be coming to fruition?

JON SCHEYER: There's a couple things at play. One, more talent in the game means there's higher level of competition. I think you look at there's been a lot of great coaches that have stepped down the last few years. I think we're seeing a resurgence of really good coaches getting in the college space, as well.

Then the fact of when you combine the talent and just I think the style of play, especially the last couple years, I think it's exciting. That's a good thing.

Again, I think we have to be smart about who is eligible, who isn't. There's a lot of questions we have to answer still. End of the day I think we should like the fact there's really good players that are in college basketball that are exciting to watch. I think that's what's made our game even better.

Q. You played under Mike Krzyzewski. He played and built something that had lasting power. What did you take from him in that regard? If you were to be offered opportunities down the road, what did you take about

the way he went about considering the opportunities that arose?

JON SCHEYER: I haven't even thought about that, to be honest. I just think the biggest thing is to be incredibly present and grateful for the place you're in, right?

When I first fell in love with college basketball, it was actually watching Duke-Kentucky in '92. To think here you are in the Sweet 16 coaching do, what a blessing that is.

We talked about his opportunity with the Lakers and other places. Again, down the road that's something you cross that bridge when you get there. For me, it's 100% being at Duke, the place I want to be. We have unfinished business. That's what this is all about for me.

Q. Obviously you're focused on tomorrow night. How the calendar works now, is there a period you and your staff are focused on player retention, having continuity?

JON SCHEYER: Yes, unfortunately you have to do two things at once. I've made the decision the last two tournaments to be 100% with our current team. I really try to do the job of preparing ahead of time, making sure. That's why my staff is so valuable and they're so good with what they do. To be in position where we understand what's happening when the season ends. We're not going to miss out or be behind, as long as we're on top of those conversations and anticipate what's going to happen.

But the thing we focused on more than anything the last two years, that's not going to change this year, is retention. It's effort and attention you're giving the guys in the locker room, focusing with them where they know you're there with them. I think that's the best thing you can do.

For me it's all about this team. I'm not doing other stuff. I'm focused on our group right now.

Q. When you look at the level of coaches that are here, the teams, what are your impressions of this grouping?

JON SCHEYER: Yeah, it's a high-level group. I think there's no question about it.

At the same time I don't think you can anticipate being in a Sweet 16 game and not going against great coaching and great teams.

I think the fact of the consistent success, I'm talking about the three other programs, have had, they're all great coaches that have done it at the highest level. A ton of

respect for each coach and their programs.

I think that's what makes it exciting, right? It's going to be an exciting atmosphere, high-level basketball, high-level coaching for sure. I just keep going back, it's the same thing of having great respect and admiration, at the same time having great confidence when you step on the floor.

That's what I want our players to have, too.

Q. Along the lines of the diminishing sort of built-in advantages for blue bloods now, what are some of the levers that are still there to pull, still have juice in the brand name?

JON SCHEYER: Well, I think from our perspective part of reason we played the schedule we did this year, I think you want to be in big-time environments where the games matter that you play.

You look at the amount of TV games, the ratings that we've had this season. Last season you get a chance to show your skill to millions of people. I think that matters, right? I think it matters the environment that you're in when you go to college to develop. I think that's one of the biggest strengths that we've had and we've continued to develop when you come here.

It's not just the one game, it's every day in practice, it's every day being around like-minded people that you compete against, that push you, that are thinking along the same lines. I think there's such value in that.

To me, those are two key things. The fact that being at a place where basketball is valued. You don't necessarily find that everywhere, most places.

Our leadership, Nina King, President Price, they value basketball. Basketball's a priority, which you can't take for granted. That's something that at Duke hopefully never changes, will be prioritized that way.

Q. If I'm doing my math right, you were probably about five in 1992.

JON SCHEYER: That's right.

Q. Not to imply that you don't belong, but Rick was the coach at Kentucky. Do you ever sit back and think as you're sitting here, it's kind of a little surreal to be on the other side of all of this?

JON SCHEYER: I mean, I'm well aware that I was five. Like I said, Coach Pitino, national championship, all the wins, everything, national championships, everything he's

done.

At the same time I feel confident I'm right where I'm supposed to be. I think it's a good balance of confidence and humility. I don't want that to change for me.

Again, you have great respect for each of the coaches, programs that are here. I also think with what we've been able to do, when I was watching Duke play when I was five years old, everything in between, has got me ready for moments like this.

Q. You have to reconstitute a team every year now. Was there a moment where you felt you got this team's frequency? Can you tell me when this moment might have been, whether it was in a game or in the locker room?

JON SCHEYER: I think it was, this was a team that was great from the get-go. I don't think we hit our stride until we lost to North Carolina, we played at Pitt and won, but just didn't feel like we played great connected basketball.

Right before we played Clemson, I credit Caleb Foster. He came to me and basically said he didn't love the mojo of this group. He felt like we needed to do something.

We had a team meeting that day before the Clemson game. I thought that was the moment that we really came together in a different way, just understood this is a precious moment we have in front of us. We talked about, I'm going to keep some things private that was said in there. Basically what we had to do, I think everything ever since that moment, the connection we've had, the joy these guys have had every day practicing and playing, then just the understanding of what we control and our purpose every day for how we're going to play. I think that I was a pivot.

Clemson we played great. I think we really took off from there, if you look at statistically, if you look at just watching our guys connect, coach on the floor. I think that was a big difference.

I credit Caleb with getting that started.

Q. You added Jayson Tatum as the chief basketball officer before the season. You've had Carlos Boozer sitting right on the sideline. What is the impact of having that this time of year?

JON SCHEYER: Yeah, it's meant a lot, just all the four players, their support, their texts. I just feel like our place is unique with how can we continue to have continuity and have our guys feel connected to it. All those things are

precious.

Jayson has been great just supporting all year. I want him to really focus on his comeback. He's got more important things in his own personal career. Nonetheless, he texts after every game helping our guys. That's been a really special thing.

Carlos from a former player's perspective, just coaches guys. It's been awesome to see that connection, but also he's just been dad, which has been just a special thing.

Q. You're kind of the youngster of this group of coaches. What do you think about the success Coach Pitino has, coaches into their 70s? Do you think we'll see that thing as commonly in the future?

JON SCHEYER: I don't think so (smiling). I don't think so. I'm sure they could tell you better stories because they've lived it.

I mean, I know from Coach K, initially when you start coaching, you have months, all right, you finish the season, your players aren't going anywhere, you go to the beach, you go wherever you want for a few months, you come back in the fall and you're ready to roll. That's just not the world we're in. As you all know, it's right to recruiting mode the next day, as soon as the season ends.

But I think it's incredible what Coach Pitino, what coaches have done. You think about adapting, you think about staying true to their values in terms of how they coach and how they communicate.

I think I would assume both of them would say you're coaching different players now, different people than they used to. You look at the reflection of both there are teams. They still have the identity of how they've always coached: the toughness, the defense, all those things, but they've done it a different way.

I admire that. I think it says a lot about both of them as coaches. They're two of the best coaches ever.

Q. From talking to some of the other coaches and players, it sounds like Evan (Bradds) was a factor in the late-game offensive stuff. How much of a role has he played in that? Sounds like he's one of the driving forces for guys having more movement in those situations?

JON SCHEYER: Evan has been incredibly helpful for me. When we were talking even before he was hired, I was very transparent with what I was trying to accomplish. So I've enjoyed some of the early mornings, late nights just

bouncing stuff off of him, talking to the staff, figuring out how we can put our guys in the best position to execute late in games.

He's got a great mind. He's been around a lot of great players, a lot of great coaches. I think that experience has been helpful.

He's creative. So for us as we're talking, we're able to throw some different stuff at the wall and see what sticks at times and experiment.

I think it's led to great confidence in our guys in understanding what we're looking for, what adjustments we can make, then trusting and executing that plan.

But he's been awesome for us.

Q. How do you feel about a universal ball in college basketball?

JON SCHEYER: Good way to bring it home. That makes sense. I think that's pretty easy to say that makes sense, right? You tell me how we're going to do that.

Q. (No microphone.)

JON SCHEYER: I don't know either, but I'm for it.

Right now, we'll play with the ball that they give us. Thank you, guys.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach Scheyer.

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