

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

Thursday, March 26, 2026

Washington D.C., USA

Capital One Arena

Michigan State Spartans

Tom Izzo

Coen Carr

Jeremy Fears Jr.

Jaxon Kohler

Carson Cooper

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by head coach of Michigan State Tom Izzo.

Coach, would you like to begin with a statement.

TOM IZZO: Well, first of all, I'm thrilled to be here. It's an amazing Sweet 16. It's a special time. It always gets better as you go down the road. The 16, you usually see some teams that have been in it year in, year out. I think that's fun for me since I've gotten a chance to be in it more than a few times, see some of the guys that made it.

This is like a Final Four, if you ask me, when you look at it's 1, 2, 3 and 5. You could argue where 5 could have been after the way they ended the season. St. John's, they were really good. I think this is almost a chalk tournament. I'm just proud and excited to be part of it.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions.

Q. You mentioned about having been here a number of times. Could you reflect back to the first Sweet 16, your first NCAA tournament run, kind of the lessons that you learned from that to move forward in your career.

TOM IZZO: Yeah, I learned not to play North Carolina down in Carolina (smiling). I think we got beat by a



hundred.

No, my first tournament, we beat Princeton to get there. In fact, we played the late late, I think 10:30 at night or 10:15 against Eastern Michigan. We came back and played in the afternoon. So I'm used to staying up late and maybe having a quick turnaround. I hope we win, so that we can have one.

The only thing I do remember about it, I remember I had Cleaves and them, we were in the bus. We came over this hill, where was it, Greensboro, Charlotte, somewhere in Carolina, my first Sweet 16. I remember coming over the little hill. All of a sudden that's when the trucks had saucers that were as big. My guys are looking over. I said, That's no big deal, guys, it's just TV cameras. There were so many trucks with so many. Now they're just little tiny things.

That was my first experience. It was exciting, it was nervous, it was good. We didn't play great. It led to better things down the road.

Q. I asked Rick this question, so I'll ask you. Not to be snarky, but this game eats at you a little bit, don't always enjoy it. What do you love about it? Why do you keep coming back?

TOM IZZO: Does eat at me a little bit, if you want the truth.

But I keep coming back because I'm stubborn and dumb. I just kind of... I still think there's a right and wrong way to do things. I think what you got here is you got a lot of people that have done it the right way. Even you got the older and you got the younger.

To me, Danny, if you. To say old school, I hate that term, I say right school, but he's as old school a young guy as you can get. Jon I think has done as good a job as anybody this year, when you look at having to be at Duke. He has a very good team, but not as overly talented as some that I've seen and played. He's done a phenomenal job.

I think all the coaches are good. It's fun to go against guys that are doing it that way. I don't know what keeps me in it. I do question it sometimes. I'm not ready to give into the system, even though I think the system is completely



broken.

Q. There was a viral clip last weekend of Charles Barkley defending your coaching style, saying he thought that players, media and parents had gotten a little bit soft when they see a coach yelling. They don't like it. Last year you talked about America had kind of gotten soft when you were talking about kids earning playing time as opposed to being entitled to it. What do you think has changed in the culture where people see things like hard coaching, accountability as being problematic?

TOM IZZO: Yeah, I definitely think it's a problem. God bless Charles.

It's so misunderstood sometimes, too. I mean, everybody says stuff differently. I had a football coach that couldn't say hello without swearing. Didn't mean he was mad at me. It was just part of his language. I'm Italian, I speak with my hands, sometimes my voice.

I just want to know what this concept is that you all have or anybody has that a kid can do the same thing wrong 50 times and you're supposed to say, Geez, Johnny. Hey, Mark, do a better job on the mic next time. You screwed up 15 times. I'd yank you for that.

I don't understand that concept. Never used to be the way.

I'm so blessed that I have had so many veteran guys that have come back. When I first started coaching it was Magic talking about his experience in pro ball. Pat Riley, he told me some of the things he did. God love Pat Riley, I love Pat Riley, I wish I knew him better, because he got after pros. Now we're supposed to just hug and kiss everybody.

You know what, do your job right, go to class, I don't want to hear about not going to class. Cutting out, I don't want to hear about cutting out.

If you're that dumb, bad word but the truth, that you think any coach in America would be yelling at a guy because he did it wrong once or twice or five time or 10 times, you have no idea what coaching is all about.

Every day in practice he's probably hearing the same thing. The difference is, I think these kids have so many distractions now that they don't stay focused in on the task at hand.

Our job? Accountability is going to be big until I leave. If that bothers some people, God bless them. I'm going against Danny Hurley. I love Danny Hurley. Not because

it's a love-fest. Not because I have to say the right things. He's not afraid of saying what he has to say to the players he has. He's even better to me; he takes it to the officials. I love that about him, I really do.

But do you ever question his passion? Do you ever wonder if he really cares? If Charles defended me... I've mellowed some because you have to mellow with the times.

Guys, 24 years ago I put football pads on my team because we got beat by Ohio State rebounding for the first time all year. I used to have film of it. Every time my players come back, they want film. Let's watch the football game we had.

Hell, once lawyers started suing everybody, that film is in the deep six.

I miss that, I want to bring it back some. It was fun. It was a memory-making moment. It was enjoyable. Everybody takes things so personal now.

I'm at one point in my career that I'm happy. I don't give a damn. I don't. But I'll tell you what, I don't have many players that leave. I don't have many players that don't come back. So somebody must enjoy something.

If you think it's easy to get to a Sweet 16, Elite Eight, a Final Four and a national championship, and there are a couple of coaches that can do it maybe with more talent or different ways. Mike is a good example since he's been the greatest of all. First time I coached against Mike Krzyzewski, I looked down. When he got on a knee and said something, I went, Wow, he's no different than me. He just wins more game, so he can be calmer than me. He's awesome. He holds kids accountable. He did it.

It hasn't changed. Some do it by putting our hands up, different ways.

How about this? If you all think and fans think and media things accountability is important, let's just make our kids accountable. After that, everything's cool.

Thank you.

Q. Talking about the changing times, Rick was in here earlier saying there's no such thing as a blue blood anymore and he loves it. Do you agree with that? If so, why?

TOM IZZO: Well, I love Rick, but I don't agree with that. I think a blue blood is somebody that's earned it over time. What I've always looked for is consistency. If you can be

consistent not over two years, four years, but 10 years, 15 years, I think you have the right to feel like that's the difference.

Now, we know with the changing environment and everything, it's going to be harder to sustain that kind of...

To me, Kentucky and Duke, Kansas had earned that over years and years and years. There might not be as many blue bloods anymore. I like the term because I think that means you've withstood the test of time and you've earned the right over years and years and years.

I mean, we've been pretty good for 30 years. Haven't won enough national championships. I don't know where we are. Whoever takes over for me has got a job. We got to get to be one of those if we're not. I think that takes consistency over time.

He's probably right, but I like the term because I like the fact that guys have earned it. You don't call guys blue bloods because they won one championship, even two or three, did well for five or six years. No, it's when it's earned over many, many years.

Q. You can make one rule change for college basketball, what is it?

TOM IZZO: Wow.

Q. One.

TOM IZZO: Am I glad I'm not king. Only one?

Can I pick between two? Transparency, that we all be transparent would be one. I think there's got to be some cap in there that everybody is some way on the same page.

I could tell you the transfer portal, what I think. I'm in for paying players, just not what it's going to. I'm really against the tampering that's going on.

Transparency would help because then agents and runners couldn't lie to you about what this kid's worth, that kid's worth.

The NBA and NFL, at least everybody knows what everybody makes. There's transparency. I've said all along I think if we were more transparent, it would help.

Q. Your thoughts on 31 years of sustained success, kind of being an outlier right now, one place all those years, do you think that's still possible in today's game? If so, what is it going to take other than, as you

said, stubborn and dumb?

TOM IZZO: I'm not sure anybody will stay in one place 43 years like I have as a GA on up. I'm not sure anybody will stay in one place 31 years. I keep hoping Matt Painter, a good friend, has done incredible things at Purdue. I'm hoping because he started so young that he does.

One time I said, You'll break all my records in the Big Ten. I think the question is will anybody stay long enough anymore?

I don't know. I mean, I wish one thing everybody would understand, there's a reason coaches are frustrated. It doesn't matter what sport. Some of my best friends are in football.

If a majority of coaches think something's wrong, it's probably wrong. For administrators to sit in their ivy towers and never come down to the basement and figure that out is disheartening.

I'm fortunate to have the job I have. I am fortunate for the 31 years of success. I do not think people are going to stay in the same place like Jim Boeheim did, Mike Krzyzewski had a long run there. It's nice to be in the same place. There's pressure being in the same place, too. I don't think most people are going to want to do that. I hope they do. I think it's good for the university. I think it's good for the players that played in that system.

I think in all honesty it's good to be able to pump your own gas, wave to a neighbor, be around. I kind of enjoy that.

Q. You mentioned enjoying going into this system that's, in your words, pretty broken right now. All these coaches have talked about how hard it is to retain a roster. With you being able to do that, regardless of how difficult it is, does it mean more to you emotionally to make a run by developing players this way as opposed to going out in the transfer portal every off-season?

TOM IZZO: Got to worried about getting myself in trouble and I would have answered it differently.

Hell, yeah, it makes it exciting. Hell, yes. It is. I still think all these kids moving around, someday they're going to have to come back to someplace, and they ain't going to come back to it.

Everybody talks about how good it is for the kids. I think in the end the kids are the ones that lose. I'm not going to lose. Big deal. Have a good year, bad year, I can leave tomorrow. It's the kids that are going to lose.



So does it mean more to me? I'm so damn proud of the four or five guys that have grown from freshmen to sophomores, juniors and seniors. People will say, Cooper has gotten better. No kidding. That happens everywhere.

Anointed European players that are older to be better than American players. I'm just not into all that. I'm into developing players as people and players.

I really do enjoy that part of it. If that was the only part of my job, I'd stay in it until I died. But it's changing. Somebody's going to figure out pretty soon, when you guys start reporting the number of failures to the system. We all value who are the quarterbacks. We don't talk about the failures.

You guys have done a poor job, too, if you ask me. We start talking about those, and be transparent about it, people will say, Whoa, whoa, whoa, what's going on here?

That's my humble opinion. Let's get back to the Sweet 16 (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: With that we're going to let you go.

TOM IZZO: Appreciate it, man. Good to see you.

We are joined by Michigan State student-athletes. We'll take questions.

Q. Jeremy, what is it you guys have seen of UConn on tape, what is it about them defensively that makes them such a challenging foe?

JEREMY FEARS JR.: Really that they're an aggressive team. They kind of get in your grill, pressure, handoffs, ball screens, physical on the rebounds. They are an aggressive team. That's for sure a challenge.

We try to be aggressive also. I think that's a match made.

Q. Jaxon and Cooper, being a senior in March Madness, was does it mean to get one more week with all these guys and with this program?

CARSON COOPER: I mean, it's really important for me and for our guys just to try to accomplish something that we haven't accomplished yet, get to that second weekend.

I think for us, it's trying to enjoy playing with these guys for some more time, but also realizing that this is how we can make our stamp on the university and the program.

It's that much more important for us. I think we make it the

most important thing and we'll be in good shape.

JAXON KOHLER: A lot of what Coop said. We want to make it as far as we can. Playing with all these guys is something that's really special in my life honestly. Practices and games, the walk-throughs, all that stuff, man, knowing it's not going to be there forever in your future, it's sad.

Taking every day to the most. Spending the most time with my guys is the thing I'm trying to get the most out of.

Q. For any of you, Coach Izzo was in here saying it meant more to him because you guys have come back, he's seen you grow. Can you talk about two aspects of that, emotionally does it mean more to you guys, and what does it do for you on the court? Do you feel that continuity gives you an edge?

COEN CARR: Yeah, for sure. I know with me, that's one of the things I wanted to do when I got to college, is not leave a school, be there for four years.

I feel like Iz was the best person for that, the best coach for that. I think that means a lot more when you've been somebody for three years.

But yeah, I think at least when us four is on the court, definitely feel a lot more comfortable since we've been around each other if a long time.

Yeah, I feel like you kind of know what people are going to do on the court and everything I feel like that just helps.

JEREMY FEARS JR.: We've been together since the summer, every summer since we got here. Just being able to build that bond in time and hours, whether it's going out to eat, going to the arcade, going to play, open gym. We just spend time laughing, joking.

When you know you got guys coming back and playing with you next year, you feel a lot more confident. It just makes you want to win that much more so we all can be successful.

Q. What was the first moment you realized the bond between Coach Izzo and the university was stronger than other places, whether recruiting, or the first do you mean you realized this is something that's a little bit special?

CARSON COOPER: I think for me it was that first summer. It's pretty obvious when you go there and you see the emotions, how see how much he enjoys just being around the university and helping out and everything.



Through the ups and downs, too. He's the first one to help out when something goes wrong, basketball-wise or not. I think that for me just kind of opened my eyes who I was playing for and how much he loves it.

JAXON KOHLER: No, I mean, Coop pretty much said it. The minute that he is in his community, he's such an inspirational thing. He kind of wants to set an example for people that will have the opportunity one day to be kind of that same person to their community.

Seeing what he does kind of highlights the person that he is and who you're playing for. That kind of makes you want to do more for him and work with him more.

He does a great job of hearing us and taking what we have to say and working with us and pushing us to be the best version of ourselves possible.

Q. Jaxon, you've been in this round twice before, but what did you learn over the first two experiences? What will it take to get to the final weekend?

JAXON KOHLER: What I've learned in these two experiences is you can't overlook the team that's ahead of you. You have to be very mature in your preparation for this game. This game ahead of us is the most important game of our season. There's only so much stuff that we can go over in such a short amount of time, but you have to make sure that every moment that you spend watching film, going over the play edits, our stuff, you have to make sure you're all locked in for it.

When we have such a short amount of prep time, it's easy to get overwhelmed, easy to kind of get stressed out, as we all are. But that's what we have our teammates for, is to help us kind of stay upbeat about it, make sure it doesn't become over-stressful or anything. We do a great job of that and it adds to our chemistry. I have the guys that make sure if it ever gets too stressful for me, they're always lifting me back up saying, Hey, we got this. Don't let this get too much for you.

That speaks to our chemistry and our program.

THE MODERATOR: I watched the first round and second round press conference. I know that Jeremy is going to pick somebody out in the crowd to make sure everybody gets their questions in. We've reached that portion of the news conference.

JEREMY FEARS JR.: What about you, got a question? My guy.

Q. Is there any value in something seen a version of

this UConn team already once this year?

JEREMY FEARS JR.: For sure. I think if you were a first-time playing UConn, you might be in shambles, not know how fast, how physical, how good they shoot it. They move. All that stuff. If it's your first time playing them, you might not know what to expect.

We kind of was able to go out there and play them. Seeing their sprint their cuts, they screen, they're physical, aggressive. Kind of seeing how you can prepare in your mind and scout how physical the game is going to go just a little bit. Obviously you can't scout everything they do and run. You can see a little bit of it is huge.

Overall kind of trust our game plan and our prep and go into that game with kind of a little version of them that we seen a while ago.

Q. You are familiar with Tarris Reed. The things that Jeremy just talked about that UConn does, you drop him into that mix, which you didn't see in the exhibition game, what do you think he brings?

CARSON COOPER: Yeah, I mean, Tarris is probably one of the more physical guys ever to play this year. Saw him a couple of years in Michigan. We kind of know what that looks like. We didn't see him last year.

The way he's playing right now, he's playing his best basketball. I think we are, too, so... It's going to come down to who's the most physical, who is the most aggressive. I think we got to be able to hit first. I think the fact that we seen him before definitely helps, for us kind of relaying that and how he plays to the guys that haven't seen him.

Q. Coach Izzo can have an explosive personality. Is there a game or a moment in a game that you guys recall where he was actually able to change the chemistry of your team emotionally where maybe you were flat, maybe you were too jacked, where he was able to put his hand on the dial and get you guys right? If so, what are those moments that you remember?

CARSON COOPER: I'd say every game.

JEREMY FEARS JR.: I was about to say the same thing.

JAXON KOHLER: What Coach can do with his words and his voice is special. I think that's part of the experience aspect of it. But yeah, he does a great job of keeping us humble, but also making sure we're pumped up.



JEREMY FEARS JR.: I don't remember when, but it was a home game, he got a tech for us. He's like, Let's pick up what we're doing. We're not doing our part out on the court.

I think we might have went on a run. I think eventually we ended up winning that game. The fact he was able to get a tech, it was an eye-opening moment.

THE MODERATOR: The Northwestern game?

JEREMY FEARS JR.: Probably, yeah.

COEN CARR: I kind of say the same thing. He's always like he's a master of reading body language. He knows when we're too anxious, we're not really comfortable. He just kind of brings us down in the huddles or whatever.

Yeah, like Coop said, you can go to a lot of games. I can't really pinpoint one.

JAXON KOHLER: Every game, every practice, every day, he can tell when you're a little uptight or when you're not taking it seriously enough.

One time that stands out, one game that stands out to me in my four years of being here was last year against Auburn. I remember I hit my first three in the corner at the beginning of the game. For the rest of the game every three-point shot I took he said, Keep shooting it, keep shooting it. He knew the more confidence I had in my shot, the more relaxed I was, I was going to make, the percentages were going to go up. He kept saying, It's a good shot, it's a good shot. That enabled me to have more confidence, shoot the ball with more confidence.

He knows exactly when you need that and when you need the intense yelling and the emotion that he usually has on a daily basis.

THE MODERATOR: We thank the student-athletes for joining us here.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports