

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Final - UConn vs Duke

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Washington D.C., USA

Capital One Arena

Duke Blue Devils

Jon Scheyer

Cameron Boozer

Isaiah Evans

Cayden Boozer

Dame Sarr

Maliq Brown

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference



JON SCHEYER: I think, one, that's the goal that I've had, and I think for our program, the best sign is to have consistency. You want to have as many at-bats as possible in March of getting a chance to win the whole thing, but the success you have through the course of a season, and I think for us it's been having great players.

I don't think it's really a secret. Can you get great players like the guys next to me? Can you have a connected group and have a culture? Which I think is harder to do these days, but I think these guys have shown that they have as good of a culture and are as connected as any team.

I think that both those things lead to having a great program. Blue Blood, whatever you want to call it, that's something we take a lot of pride in.

Q. A lot is made about the impact of veterans in March, but for UConn, Braylon Mullins has been successful here as well. What have you kind of seen from him and his game? What kind of difference has he made for UConn this year from your standpoint?

JON SCHEYER: He's had a really good year. His shot-making, his ability to hit shots off the bounce. He's got quick release. Then just to play at this level, he's been a difference maker. He's been the third-leading scorer in the tournament, and I'm really impressed with what he's done.

Q. For any of you guys, can you all just speak a little bit about Nik Khamenia? The fact he was a five-star recruit, McDonald's All American, but has really embraced his role off the bench. What does that say about him and the impact he's had, his toughness?

CAMERON BOOZER: Obviously when you come to a place like Duke, you're going to be put in situations you've never been in. Obviously Nik has been a great player his entire life. Obviously this has been a different role for him, but he's embraced it really well.

He wins us a lot of games. Whether he's on the bench or starting, he's the reason we win a lot of games.

CAYDEN BOOZER: I'll just say for Nik, I think his best trait

THE MODERATOR: We're joined now by Duke head coach Jon Scheyer, student-athletes Cam Boozer, Cayden Boozer, Isaiah Evans, Dame Sarr, and Maliq Brown.

JON SCHEYER: I'll be very brief. Obviously last night was a big-time game against St. John's. We know the challenge ahead with UConn, very impressive watching them. For a short turnaround, the amount of action and what they do on offense, and their defense has been terrific.

For us, it's really been about recovery. It's been about just getting fresh for tomorrow as quickly as possible and getting a great understanding for who UConn is and what we're trying to do to continue to advance.

With that said, I'll let you guys ask any questions.

Q. Jon, some of the discussion the other day about Blue Bloods and are they still Blue Bloods. One of the things Izzo said is, I still like the term because it's proven over time, kind of the consistency over time. You guys and UConn are two programs that in an era of chaos are kind of consistent with how you run your programs, with having guys come back. Is that key, and what is the key to having it in a program right now in chaos world?



is how much of a competitor he is. Every night he steps on the floor, he's going to do whatever it takes to win. He's going to defend. He's going to rebound. He's going to throw his body at someone. He'll bang his head, whatever he has to do to help us win. I think for him that's such a great skill to have, and it's going to help him moving forward so much.

Like you said, you come to Duke, I think everyone has to sacrifice when you come to a school like Duke, and he's found a way to just, like you said, carve out a role and affect winning in a big time way. He's made some really big-time plays for us as of late. He's having a great year for sure.

Q. We all know about the depth of UConn's playbook on offense, and the number of players coming in talk about the number of sets they have to learn. How hard is it to prepare for that, especially when you're on this quick two-day turn, what you have to do on that side?

JON SCHEYER: It's very impressive what they do. It's very impressive. I think what Coach Hurley has done, he's been able to -- as a coach, you want as much control as possible, right? The way that they run called actions, they're able to manipulate where they're getting what they want most times.

It's a game where to think that we can go over every action or every play, it's impossible in a one-day prep. So for us it's been about concepts, it's been about personnel, and then still doing what we feel we do best, and that's the activity we have on the defensive end and the ability to protect our paint.

They have as good of shooting that there is in the country, and obviously Reed down low is a handful. I credit their staff, what they do offensively is terrific, it's unique. It's not really a different team that you play against. So you have to have a different mentality going against them.

Q. Jon, two-part question for you. You mentioned recovery early. How is that going for Caleb after last night? That was a lot for him coming back. Secondly, in what ways will his play be important to you tomorrow, kind of like it was last night?

JON SCHEYER: One, he's doing well. For us, he's not doing anything on the court today. Even for these guys, it's been more of a walk-through day getting ready. First time playing in a few weeks, he's sore and recovering like you would expect, but nothing concerning.

Then we want him to just continue to be himself, his leadership, his ability to get downhill, just making plays

himself and really more of what he did yesterday.

Q. Just another Caleb Foster question, has his starting status changed for tomorrow, or did you kind of like the spark he provided off the bench?

JON SCHEYER: Nothing's changed.

Q. Isaiah and Maliq, you guys have the chance after tomorrow to go to your second Final Four in a row. What does it mean to you guys, put you in rarified area where I think Chris Duhon was the last Duke player to go to two Final Fours in his career? What does it mean for you guys?

MALIQ BROWN: It's obviously a special moment. Obviously for me just missing a lot of games, this whole season is not taking anything for granted. Obviously we've got a great group of guys all have the same motive to try to get back to that same level, same game, and we have to take care of business tomorrow and get to the Final Four first.

ISIAH EVANS: Just being able to insert our names in history definitely means a lot. Like you said, a lot of people haven't done that. With Duke having the history it has, to be one of the people that did something different, it means a lot to me.

Q. Cam and Isaiah and anybody else who wants to answer it, does this game have any added buzz or significance because it's Duke versus UConn? Coach Hurley was just in here and he said these are the two best programs in college basketball since the 1990s. Duke's won five championships, Connecticut's won six. Does that kind of give it a little added buzz? What are your thoughts when people say UConn-Duke?

ISIAH EVANS: I don't have -- I don't think we have any extra buzz when we think about UConn.

CAMERON BOOZER: I would say it probably does for the media, but just for us, it's the same mentality going in facing St. John's. It's another great opponent. We have a lot of respect for them. Great coaching, great players who just want to win. We're going to go in there and compete and win just like any other night.

Q. This is for the student-athletes, the players. Really quickly, you guys use more pump fakes than I think any team that I've seen this year. Who has the best pump fake on the team?

MALIQ BROWN: I would say between Isaiah and Cam. Obviously they're the two we see do a lot of pump fakes.

So I would say them two.

DAME SARR: I would say probably Isaiah.

THE MODERATOR: Isaiah, you've been accused of having fabulous pump fakes. Your chance to answer.

ISIAH EVANS: No, I think it's somebody else. It's got to be like, I don't know, maybe Caleb. I think Little Booze right here has got a good pump fake.

I feel like, just because I can really shoot it, then I don't have to use a great pump fake. People are going to fly. I don't know, that's a good question.

CAYDEN BOOZER: I think somebody actually had a sleeper pump fake is Nik Khamenia. I think Nik, Cam, Slim. We work on pump fakes a lot. I would say our whole team.

CAMERON BOOZER: Honestly I would have to say Slim (Evans). I think he's underrating his pump fake. His shooting threat really gets people in the air. I would say probably Slim.

Q. Cam, obviously we've heard so much about how much of a winner you are. Can you remember the last time you lost something, a tournament that was really important to you, and what that feeling was like? When you hear winner, winner all the time, what does that mean to you?

CAMERON BOOZER: We lost twice this year, and I didn't really like that. The last tournament I lost probably junior year, GEICO Nationals.

Something I always want to be remembered by is my winning. I think winning is a skill, and it's really hard to do. I just want to continue to do that at every level I play at. I want to continue to do it with these guys right here. We've worked so hard all season to get to this point. I'm just excited for the opportunity to compete tomorrow.

Q. For the coaches and for -- Jon, for you and the student-athletes. Just what it is about Duke to not only survive but thrive in a time of chaos and a lot of individualism and collegiate athletics? Why has the brotherhood that you have at Duke be so consistent and successful?

JON SCHEYER: I think the most important responsibility that I have is the people we have in our program. These guys next to me, it's the commitment that Isaiah and Maliq, the decisions they made to come back for another season for these guys coming in. And their ability to bond,

connect, and grow together. I think that's what it's about. You're not able to do that if you don't have the right people.

So I credit them, and I think that's the biggest job we have with our staff, for our coaches, how do we continue to bring in these guys that think the game the right way and are about not just themselves.

MALIQ BROWN: I would just say I feel like the foundation has been built obviously since Coach has been here playing. They call it a brotherhood for a reason. For me, before I got here, they welcomed me with open arms. Obviously with the injury last year and just coming back, they all just kept me close and just focus on coming back this year.

I feel like same thing with Isaiah. We obviously talked a lot, just trying to get this team ready on the same path going into this year. I feel like Coach and the staff did a very good job with recruiting those type of guys and those type of players and that type of caliber and just helped us get ready for the season.

ISIAH EVANS: I feel like Coach did a really good job of scheduling, and a lot of the games that we played in really early, and even late, it helped prepare us for the games in March. It also just brought us closer together. It helped us be able to figure things out on our own. We've been down a lot this year. We've been up a lot and lost leads before and still won.

I think we just -- the season -- the preparation this year was just a little different.

Q. Last year prior to the Final Four, you were asked about what it means to you to be a Jewish head coach at that level. You've talked before about your personal ties to Israel. In this heightened climate, political climate where everything is amplified, how does that affect how much you think about talking about those types of topics on these stages?

JON SCHEYER: For me, I want the attention to be on our players and what they're going through. I'm not diminishing anything that's happened in the world. There's a lot of serious things. But for me, this is a special thing for these guys, and that's where I want the attention to be.

Q. Cam, you and the frontcourt could be going up against one of the most decorated players in the sport in Alex Karaban. I know it's a quick turnaround from the St. John's game last night, but what impresses you about what he does on the court and what he's done at UConn?

CAMERON BOOZER: He's a great player. Anyone who wins two National Championships is a big-time player, especially in those two runs. I think his off-ball movement is great, especially for someone his size. He's a great shooter. He shoots from way behind the line as well.

At the end of the day also, he's just a competitor and a winner. He's a great player. I'm really excited for that matchup. Should be a lot of fun.

Q. For any of the players, you guys have been down double digits in six games this year, and you're 6-0 in those games. What is it about this team that you guys are able to handle those situations so well?

DAME SARR: I feel like it speaks a lot about the type of players who have and what the coaching staff have done this year. Since we got here in the summer, we worked so much in game situations and in being in different situations during the game, even though you're up or down, just sticking to the game plan and being able to execute our basketball.

I just feel like a big thing is also the type of people we have in the program. On our team we have nine guys that all care about winning. Every time we step on the court, we don't make excuses. I feel like we've been in different situations where we were down guys or maybe the media was talking like Duke is not going to be able to do this or do that, but we never make excuses when we're out there.

We know we can win, and we know that, when we execute our game plan, we have real chances of winning, and that's what we do every time we step on the court.

Q. Cam and Cayden, a lot of schools are not recruiting freshmen anymore because they want older players in the portal, they want a 21, 22, 23-year-old. Coach Scheyer has said many times he's going to continue to recruit elite freshmen like you guys and Cooper and other guys as much as he can. What is the ideal blend in your mind of a roster of having elite freshmen plus older players? Is the best thing to have a couple, some really good five star freshmen plus some older players to kind of balance the roster? What do you guys benefit from playing older players like this?

CAYDEN BOOZER: I feel like it depends on the team that you have. Obviously a place like Duke, freshmen being on the team has been successful for the most part. I think the biggest thing is just having a group of guys that just want the same thing and the same goal, which is winning. Obviously having these guys from last year's team understanding what it takes to get to a Final Four and to put yourself in position to hopefully win a National

Championship, it just makes it a lot easier for the freshmen coming in to understand the habits you need to have and what it takes to get to that level.

CAMERON BOOZER: For me, it's less about whether you're a freshman, upperclassman, whatever. It's more about if you're a competitor and a winner. I think we do a great job of bringing guys in who are about that kind of stuff.

People talk about how Duke gets these players, how other schools get these players, but it's really tough to find five stars, four stars, who are really just about winning. I think Duke does a great job of bringing in guys that are about the right stuff. Same thing with the older guys. Maliq is one of the most unselfish guys I've ever played with, and it's hard to find guys like that.

Duke is about getting guys who are about the right things and want to win. Shout-out to Jon Scheyer, man.

THE MODERATOR: Shout-out to Maliq, Dame, Isaiah, Cam, and Cayden as well. Coach Scheyer joins us here.

Q. Coach, there's a video that went viral this morning of a celebration in South Korea from a business room in South Korea celebrating the win last night. Can you just talk about the --

JON SCHEYER: I haven't seen that.

Q. Yes, Duke fans over in South Korea in the business room. Can you talk about your appreciation for the global reach of Duke basketball? Also, building on that, do you feel any personal motivation for the fans, the older fans, that have had their heartbroken by UConn 22 years ago and 27 years ago?

JON SCHEYER: First of all, I promise I think about our fanbase all the time. Whether they're in South Korea, whether they're in Washington, D.C. I don't know if it's specifically about something that happened over 20 years ago, but again, I know what this means. I don't diminish that.

I love the fact that we're in a position where we're exactly where we want to be. Yeah, for the fans I want it badly. For our guys I want it. That's a special thing. I've got to check out that video.

Q. I talked to the guys obviously about the importance of the pump fake. What is the difference between a good pump fake and a pump fake, just a pump fake? And what makes Cam so effective? I think he had probably a hundred of them last night.

JON SCHEYER: I think the important thing is just we talk all the time about the paint decisions that you make. Sometimes that's with a shot fake, sometimes it's not. But in college basketball, where there's not -- it's not like the NBA, right? There's more congestion in the paint. So shot fake, and especially with his size, because he has the ability to go right through you as well, it just opens up his passing. It opens up his vision and also his ability to get guys in there and get to the foul line.

Again, I think there's a balance of doing it too many times versus doing it when it's there. But these guys have done a great job playing to their habits that we've worked on all year, and the shot fake is definitely a part of that.

Q. Coach, building on this conversation about Blue Bloods, Cinderellas, Blue Bloods, I'm curious if you think that these monikers have any meaning anymore in the transfer portal and NIL era? Do they have any meaning to you?

JON SCHEYER: I don't know, it's interesting you ask that because I've never referred to our school like we're a Blue Blood. I've just never said that. I think you recognize the fact that -- the success that a Duke has had, the success that whoever you put in the Blue Blood category, right? I don't know who determines that or who says you're in or who says you're out.

I think just the fact of us and UConn, there's no doubt about it, they're fighting to be the best in the country consistently.

Again, I don't get into the definition of it, but I would hope that anybody that associates the highest level of college basketball would put Duke in that category.

Q. We talk so much about the transfer portal and the volatility of the players, but we've seen it in the coaching ranks, including in The Triangle this week. You'll be coaching against your third coach of NC State. Hubert won 125 games in five years and he's out of a job. Can you talk about the volatility where winning at a high level can send you somewhere else? It's true with the players but also on the coaching side as well.

JON SCHEYER: I've got a lot of empathy for other coaches, for Hubert, not just the fact of him coaching at the school down the road, but the fact that he played there as well. So there's the meaning behind it. I understand that obviously well in this position myself.

Coaching is a big blessing, but it's also what you sign up

for in this business unfortunately. So I think this thing is really delicate. I think it's really fragile. I think this week has been an example of that.

I try to just always this time of year appreciate being in these moments for that reason because it's fragile and delicate. I have a lot of empathy for other coaches being in different positions.

Q. Dan talked about Karaban. He's obviously a rare player, five years, same place, very good player. Obviously you don't need that type of player to be successful and it's hard to find, but as someone with a roster of generally a little younger players, where do you look for that type of leadership in terms of like, hey, assistant on the floor, he's the translator, the voice of me to my players?

JON SCHEYER: One, I just want to say this, I have so much respect for Karaban and what he's done in his career at UConn. He's such a winning player. You can tell he's all about the right stuff and makes everybody better on the floor. Big fan of his.

With that said, I think that's what we try to do with Maliq Brown and his value for our program, Caleb Foster coming back. That's important for us. You look at some of our best teams, I think of a Quinn Cook, Matt Jones, Amile Jefferson. I could go down the line of some key guys that we've had.

Karaban, obviously the success he's had in the tournament and the amount of wins has been terrific. We need that. It's part of roster construction, right? You need talent of course, but you need to make sure that each player complements one another. I think that's the thing that a Karaban, he can complement a bunch of different guys on the floor. He can also be the best player. That's a helluva skill to have.

Q. Just following up on this roster construction freshman thing that I asked these guys before, do you understand the logic of these other coaches that maybe say they don't want to recruit freshmen? Coach Pitino pretty much said a year ago he wasn't going to recruit freshmen. He was going to mostly go in the portal. What is it about Duke that allows to you recruit freshmen like Cooper and Caleb and Cayden and have them be successful year after year?

JON SCHEYER: I don't judge how any other coach thinks is the best way for them to put together a roster because I think each school is different with what they can and can't do. I found, for me, this is all I've ever known is coaching freshmen and young players. It's been harder the last few

years with the age, ages being older, of course, and different levels of experience.

But for me I think what Cam said is key. I think it's less about the age and more about the mindset, the competitiveness, their feel for the game. I think that's really something important for me and this program. And the rest takes care of itself.

Now, are we going to try to have eight freshmen? No. You try to have some balance, but you end up -- we end up having to replace so much so quickly, so we have to make sure we recruit for that with the incoming class. Then there will be a time and place for the transfer portal as well.

Q. I wanted to give you a little credit, you and your staff. Last off-season you're going to lose Cedric Howard, who opts to go to the NBA Draft, quickly pivot and pick up Dame Sarr. Can you talk about how he impacts winning, especially at the margins like you talk about?

JON SCHEYER: I think Dame had one of the biggest plays last night. We were down ten, we are struggling and he had the rebound and Caleb ended up getting the layup. He does so many you call them little things, but they're not little, to impact winning. Rebounds, defense, his decision-making on offense and his readiness to shoot open shots, his ability to slash.

I love how he's matured as a player this year. He's had a huge impact on us winning. I think, when you look at his trajectory in terms of his improvement, I think it goes right in sync of how we've improved as a team as well.

Q. Jon, in your research before taking over this job on succession plans, what was the most interesting one or most successful one that you maybe found and connected with and thought, okay, this is a piece of that working that I need to hold onto?

JON SCHEYER: I mean, look, I went all the way back to Gene Bartow, UCLA. I looked at a bunch of different college programs, whether it be basketball or football. I don't think it's about one specific program or situation that I thought worked so well for me. I think it was just about the overall lessons.

I think there's two main things I learned. One, not to change too much too quickly. I think that's something I really learned that can go wrong. Now, as I say that, my first year coaching was the first year of NIL where you could pay guys, so that was difficult not to change too much too quickly from that perspective.

Then the second thing, it's just to make sure the succession plan and the transition of the former CEO and the new CEO where you're in sync with what's happening. I've had the privilege to -- like what Coach K did for me that last year of him coaching, I think it goes really under the radar of how valuable that was for me, and to be in sync and have a smooth transition, me and him have been locked in sync every step of the way, which I think has been incredibly helpful to make this successful.

Q. Your team has played elite 3-point defense this year, top 10 in the country, tops in the ACC. You've got big guards, but what do you attribute that to? And how important is that tomorrow against an UConn team that's found its 3-point shot the last couple of games?

JON SCHEYER: It's a challenge for sure. Those guys, they put as much shooting on the floor collectively as any team we've played. That's the first thing. I think we've done a good job this year. One, our coaches have done -- they do a great job of scouting and game-planning and all that.

But we have good length, which can make up for being a little bit out of position or being a little bit behind. Then against UConn, the thing you can't do is relax because they're always moving. They do a great job, a lot of misdirections, a lot of staggers, flare screens.

So the key is how can you be in a stance, how can you contest as much as possible, knowing that all those guys are really capable of going off for big time 3-point games.

Q. In a tight turnaround like this where you didn't find out your opponent until midnight and you're going to play at 5:00 tomorrow, you obviously can't go watch all 30-some UConn games this year. How do you pick and choose which games you really want to focus in on? Do you look for teams that are similar to your own and see how they played against them? Can you break down that process?

JON SCHEYER: Sure, it's obviously a challenge. The first thing is you remind yourself it's a blessing not to get sleep, it's a blessing to be going through that process of watching film all night.

It depends on the opponent obviously, but naturally we have a different kind of team. We have a certain style that we like to play. So I try to watch games that we can take some takeaways of what can be translatable. I've had a hard time doing that this year just naturally with him and some of the guys that we have, and you try to see where they've been at their best and where have they not been as

good, and what can you do to combat both of those things?

Q. I want to ask you about kind of the unofficial Caleb Foster photo, the one of him like standing at a bus stop that you guys have used often, to kind of promote --

JON SCHEYER: I haven't even seen that picture, to be honest. You can show me.

Q. It might blow up the question a little bit. What is it about his determination and perseverance that still impresses you after three years of coaching him?

JON SCHEYER: I think the thing you learn is your character is revealed when you go through true adversity, and Caleb's faced a lot of adversity. You think about the two injuries, two of our postseason tournaments, and the way that he's handled it, his leadership, the way that he's handled the off-seasons where, again, transferring and all that stuff is a very real thing that happens all the time.

He just has not wavered literally. He has not wavered. I'm just really thankful to coach him. You see what he did the other night. You talk about roster construction. Well, how can you find somebody who really values this place and will put his body on the line to do whatever it takes? And Caleb is the example of that.

Q. I feel like this is one of the toughest Duke teams that there's been in a long time, just even among your own teams, but going back -- I'm an '02 alum -- what makes them so tough in general, coming back and playing all these hard teams and still coming out on top?

JON SCHEYER: It means a lot that that's the reflection of this group. I think this group at first had to get out of the shadow of last year's team a little bit in the beginning. I think that these guys have done such a great job of just establishing their own identity of being true to who they are.

Really I was worried about the schedule we put in place. I didn't know how that was going to go, including the exhibition games of playing UCF and Tennessee. I think we learned in both those games what we had a little bit, and then just to see how we responded. I think back to a three-game stretch where we played Arkansas in Chicago, came back home played Florida, at Michigan State. Our guys just answered the test each step of the way.

I think it's their character. I think it's about the fact of learning on the fly, realizing they can be that good. Then I think that belief has kicked in the second half of the year.

THE MODERATOR: We'd like to thank Coach Scheyer.

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