

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Alabama vs North Carolina

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Los Angeles, California, USA

Crypto.com Arena

Alabama Crimson Tide

Coach Nate Oats

Grant Nelson

Mark Sears

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Alabama - 89, North Carolina - 87

NATE OATS: Our guys showed some character. They've been showing some character these last three games. We've been questioned all year on defense, probably rightfully so, but our defense showed up particularly in the second half. We had a game plan.

You've got to give North Carolina credit. They're a very good team. They've played well all year.

We had a game plan. Gotta give Cadeau and Trimble a lot of credit. We planned on leaving them open; they hit four 3s in the first half. We questioned whether to stay with it or not. We decided to stick with it. Those guys ended up not playing very many minutes, 13 between the two of them. I think the plan was right.

Sometimes stuff doesn't go your way. They didn't hit that many 3s but we stuck with it. Our word has been "next," this whole tournament -- next play, next play. They hit it. I told them, that's on me. Next play. Next play. We'll figure it out.

We made adjustments, made adjustments, and these guys just kept making plays.

And I'll say Sears -- he scored at least 20 points, I don't know how many straight games, 20 out of the last 22 or something. Late he's been great for us. I went to him when we were down there late. And I said, (indiscernible). He said forget it, get it to Grant, Grant's cooking, let's go.



When you have your leading scorer and best player to tell you run plays for somebody else, we used the word Mudido (phonetic) we stole from Coach Murphy with softball. That's the definition of Mudido.

Vicarious joy through Grant's great game. And Grant has 24, 12 and five. He showed up.

And we've been in one Elite Eight in the history of Alabama basketball. This dude showed up tonight in a big way against one of the bigs in the country.

And Bacot was good. He had 19, 12 and one. Grant had 24, 12 and five. I think people question whether we're frail, soft, Grant showed we're not. We can go with the big boys.

And Clemson's good. Clemson beat us at our place. We've got to get locked in and figure it out. They're a really good team.

We've got a short-lived celebration. I told them they can celebrate about 30 minutes. As soon as the media is out of the locker room, we've got to get moving on to Clemson.

Q. What Mark did, just believing in you and I saw there was no doubt when the ball was in your hand, iso, what were you feeling out there?

GRANT NELSON: Just all the confidence in the world. These guys coming up to me, telling me great things. I didn't start this tournament with the best two games. These guys are saying, go out there, go get a bucket, really. That gives me a lot of confidence and I give them a lot of credit. I couldn't have done it without them.

Q. Coach said this is the second-ever Elite Eight for Alabama. What's it mean to lead the team to this point?

MARK SEARS: It's very historical. But like Coach said, we can celebrate this for like 30 minutes and now we're on to the next opponent.



GRANT NELSON: We've been working for this all season. But this wasn't our end goal. It's good we got here. It's something at the school, we haven't done, or one other time.

It's great. We're going to celebrate it a little bit and then move on, next game.

Q. Grant, there's a period in the second half where I think there were several possessions in a row where you were just making plays. What was behind it? What was your mindset there?

GRANT NELSON: Like I said, coaches, players giving me confidence to go out there and just giving me the ball and being able to make plays on their bigs. If they shrunk in I'd be able to kick it out.

But they played one-on-one defense. I give them a lot of credit. They played a great game. But, like I said, just giving me confidence and using that.

Q. Mark, tough second half for you, but what was it like seeing your boy, Grant, go to work?

MARK SEARS: I was very proud of him. Like he said, he was struggling first two games. To see him carry us to get this win, it was very amazing because at the end of the day all I care about is winning. I don't care about points or all the accolades. At this time of the season it's all about winning. It's win or go home.

Q. RJ Davis was held to 4-20 shooting, 0-9 on 3s, what was the approach and game plan with him?

MARK SEARS: Shout-out to Rylan. He did a great job on him. We don't win this game without Rylan locking him up. And he executing the game plan.

GRANT NELSON: Like he said, Rylan, locking in. I think 3 got hot for a little bit. Rylan said I want him. He stopped making shots. Rylan was a big factor in this game. He deserves a lot of credit.

Q. They had 10 3s in the first half. You all were still right there. What were you thinking at the break?

MARK SEARS: Their main guys, they weren't going but it was like, I'll say, the reserves and role players, they kept them in the game. We know we were executing the game plan, we just had to fix those little things. In the second half, I felt like we fixed those little things to get this win.

Q. Probably quite a few people who tune into college basketball late in the year when March Madness

begins, and probably quite a few people saying, who is Grant Nelson. Could you fill us in about life in North Dakota and how you ended up here? And Mark, could you share some details about Grant as well.

NATE OATS: I don't think they're asking that anymore. Maybe in the middle of the game, but by now they shouldn't be asking anymore.

MARK SEARS: They know who he is now.

GRANT NELSON: I'm from a small town, Devils Lake. Shout-out to all those guys. But it's a loving community. Really grew up with everything I could ask for. Playing basketball at the park every day.

Had a good high school team. We didn't go very far many years, but, I mean, they got me to North Dakota State where I stayed three years and entered the portal. I liked Coach Oats a little bit and I gave Alabama a chances and I think it's paying off.

NATE OATS: We're both bad golfers trying to get better. We've golfed a little bit. He's trying to teach me how to drive. Neither one of us are very good.

Q. Grant, we all know Carolina, the long, long tradition, history of winning forever. They came in the top seed and you beat them. Tell us why we should not be surprised by what your team did tonight.

GRANT NELSON: I think us scheduling our non-conference really had a big part in this. Learning from a lot of those games we played. A lot of the losses playing some of the best bigs in the nation, whether that was Arizona or Edey at Purdue.

Just kind of being able to learn from those games and figure out a scouting report. And then coming into this one and executing it. And then just not like going away from it when they started hitting shots or stuff like that. So I think our non-conference had a big part to do with this.

Q. Mark, could you talk about Nick Pringle's toughness tonight. He was clearly labored. And Wednesday looked like he was limping in practice and it caught up with him but he never stopped fighting.

MARK SEARS: We don't win this game without Nick. He was battling with Bacot, who is one of the best bigs in the country. They were going at it. Down the stretch when we was getting stops he was a very big part of that because he was very locked in and he was getting rebounds and stops. And it really helped us get out in transition and run.

Q. You've talked about once you got Grant, you had a big that played the way you guys want to play. Did you ever envision it could be as good as it was tonight with him in the lineup?

NATE OATS: I did. I thought he could be this good. Do I say, I thought he would be this good going into the game today? No because he had been struggling, but I knew what he was capable of when we got him. We ran the one pick-and-roll with him handling. He got down hill and he scored when Bacot had the three fouls.

He's 6'11", can handle it on pick-and-rolls. He shot the one 3 when we took the lead and that thing was all net. He's been shooting it really well the last -- we had voluntary shooting two nights ago.

Three guys went. Grant Nelson went. And he showed up. He was 10-of-11 from the free-throw line before those last two, 2-of-2 from 3. Grant Nelson deserves to play well. He works hard. He's been all about the right stuff all year. Even when he struggled he just stays with it, stays with it. I couldn't be happier for Grant.

But did I expect 24, 12 and five? No. Would I have said I would be totally shocked? No, because I know he's capable of it. But, man, he showed up tonight.

Q. There was a point in January where you said these are a lot of good kids and there's a lot of good personalities on the team but maybe they weren't competitive or tough enough in some of the big moments. How did you get from point A to point B where in these big moments they were obviously very competitive?

NATE OATS: We kept challenging them. We've got to get more competitive in practice. Challenge, like, just put it there. And I'll say what, leadership on the team, like Pringle's been great all week. The last three games, Pringle's leadership. And tonight, he's been battling the foot injury all year. It was really flaring up. He just wasn't himself. But, shoot, I'm looking, we were like 28 points per 100 possessions better on defense with him in the game than when he wasn't.

So you can say a lot about the leadership of guys trying to get us to compete. Mark Sears has competed as hard as he's ever competed since he's been at Alabama these last three games. When the season's on the line, we've been challenging these guys all year. They've stepped up.

I've got to give these guys a lot of credit. Aaron Estrada, the next time we lose that's the last game he plays. He came out playing great. We just go down the line.

Jarin Stevenson didn't score well but led the team in plus/minus. The kid from Chapel Hill, special game for him. He should still be in high school. Just go down the list, we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Dioubate. They're bringing their competitive side out at the right time. You want to peaking in March; we're peaking in March.

Q. I asked you yesterday about the five years you've been here. And all you talked about was Final Four. You're starting turn Elite Eight. Last year everyone thought that was the team. Why not this team?

NATE OATS: We're one game away. And it's not easy. I told these guys at halftime it's not easy to win these games to get to an Elite Eight. There's only been one in Alabama. They've had all kinds of pros and all kinds of really good teams. Wimp Sanderson was one of the better coaches in his era in the country. They were never able to make it.

Gottfried made it to the Elite Eight when Pettway was on the team. And we heard about it forever because Pettway has got the only Elite Eight and now we have two. We're going to try to get the only Final Four.

And Clemson is good. Some of their guys killed us. So we've got to get a better game plan. I thought the coaching staff, the assistants, our analytics crew did an unbelievable job getting us ready for this game. I thought we had spot-on game plan. We've got to do the same thing for Clemson. We won't be getting a lot of sleep tonight.

Q. How was your team able to respond to the run tonight, especially you up at the under-4 timeout and North Carolina goes on a run, and then how did you see your team respond and not fold in these kind of moments?

NATE OATS: It was a little disappointing. There was like three minutes and 30 seconds, or whatever three at the under-4 in the first half, I think you're referring to, we were up seven, if I remember right, or maybe up one and they went on an 8 run and we were down seven. I had to call timeout.

We gave up some runs that -- we've been using the word next, next, next where I thought maybe we didn't move to the next play as good as we could.

Whether it's my timeout I called or whether it was a media timeout, when we were able to get them together, I thought the energy was good.

I thought Mark Sears' energy at the under eight, like, gotta get this. The under eight -- I don't know what the score

was at the under eight media timeout, but that timeout I thought won the game with the energy in the huddle, Pringle, Sears.

Things were not going well at that time. Things had gone well and they were trending the wrong direction. We came out made a run, Grant Nelson got going, and we took off from there.

Q. I was hoping you could talk more about this team's defense and the struggles earlier in the season, just the fact they delivered today, wonder what you said at halftime and how the team sort of finally peaked in that?

NATE OATS: Listen, our defense definitely had struggles through the years. There's some guys on this team that have been trying to be great defenders all year.

I think Rylan Griffen is one of them. We had a scrimmage against TCU and he wasn't very good. We challenged him; he stepped up. He's been great.

One of the best players in the country, All-American status, player-of-the-year status. RJ Davis went 4-of-20 and 0-for-9 from 3. And Rylan stepped up to the challenge and he's competitive.

When Cormac Ryan hit those back-to-back, whatever, 3s, he said put me on him. He wouldn't take no for an answer. Preston, on the scout, I said just put him on Cormac, figure it out, he's going to take Cormac. We had to deviate a little bit from the game plan because the game plan we thought was working.

Rylan's defense was great. You look at, we really were trying to zone in and stop Bacot and Davis. Bacot ended up with 19. RJ ended up with 16. But they took 38 shots combined to get those. They were a combined 12-of-38.

While they got points, they weren't very efficient. You look at our guys, Grant Nelson scores 24 on nine shots. Sears has been ridiculously efficient all year, scored 18 on 14 shots.

I thought our guys were able to be a little more efficient. That's why we shot 48 percent, they shot 39 percent from the field. I thought we forced them into taking a lot of shots. Those guys are being locked in the scouting report and guys being competitive. Rylan Griffen took it personal. Nick Pringle -- Grant took Bacot. Mo Dioubate came in and guarded Bacot, giving up all kind of size, and I thought he battled and fought pretty hard for us in there.

Q. Heard the players talk about moving on to the next

game already. How have you been able to instill that attitude of raising the bar and trying to move this on to, like you said, trying to make the first Final Four in program history?

NATE OATS: That goes with the next, next play, next action within the play, next game. But I did tell these guys, that's great, we made a Sweet 16. We've made three of them around here in the last four years. Four NCAA Tournaments since I've been here. In three Sweet 16s. We haven't really done anything yet. We beat 2 seeds that we were supposed to beat.

We beat Charleston, no disrespect to Charleston, Pat does a great job, does a great job at Louisville. But Charleston has one NCAA Tournament in their program. We beat Grand Canyon, they didn't have a tournament win until this year. Those programs had two combined NCAA Tournament wins.

We haven't done anything yet. It's great to be in the Sweet 16, let's not take it for granted; there's only two SEC teams left in it. But we haven't done a thing yet. So let's not act like we've done anything yet.

Now if we can beat Carolina, now we have done something. Now we're one win away from a Final Four, the first one in school history.

I think these guys will be locked in. We won't get to any video with them tonight. The staff will get it all first thing in the morning. It's a quick turnaround but we've been good on these turnarounds. I think we've got one of the best staffs in the country. They'll be locked in. They're working out here. They got out of here immediately.

And we'll have a game plan together by breakfast time and we'll put it in. And I think our guys will be ready to go come Saturday.

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