

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Final - Purdue vs Arizona

Friday, March 27, 2026

San Jose, California, USA

SAP Center

Purdue Boilermakers

Coach Matt Painter

Trey Kaufman-Renn

Braden Smith

Fletcher Loyer

C.J. Cox

Oscar Cluff

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference



FLETCHER LOYER: After the game, obviously, we had to come talk to you guys, so that took up some time. Didn't get to watch much of the game. Then we, as soon as we could, put it on.

Obviously they're very talented team. They've got great front court and backcourt. They dominate the glass a lot. Trying to keep them off the glass and trying to keep the ball out of the paint, and they've got a lot of guys that can drive, score and create for others.

Q. Fletcher and Braden, you have played in the national championship. You know what it takes to get all the way there. What has been the process and the strength of this team, how you guys as a veteran group have shepherded this new group now since Zach went to the NBA, all the way back to the Elite Eight?

BRADEN SMITH: I think having that experience what it takes to be there before, I think it helps. And obviously with Trey too, having a core group of guys that have done it, we're able to obviously help these guys out. But at the same time they're also very skilled basketball players and also understand what it takes to win high-level games to get to that point.

So for us it's just to go out and be consistent, do our job and do it at a high level.

FLETCHER LOYER: Just sticking together through the highs and lows. And win games, lose games, people got a lot to say. But just letting our guys know that you gotta do a lot of little things to win big games and beat good teams. Whether shots are going in or not, making sure everybody's doing their job and playing a consistent full 40 minutes.

Q. Braden and Fletcher, I know every team is different, but do you see any kind of the same characteristics or same traits in this team that you did see in the team that made it to the national title game?

BRADEN SMITH: I mean, yeah, I would say so. Just with the attention-to-detail stuff and the sense of urgency, especially late for us here, is definitely there. I feel like we're better with our depth with this team than we were

MATT PAINTER: Obviously excited to play in the Elite Eight. You have to put yourself in a position to get to the Final Four. Our guys have worked really hard to get in that position. We know we're playing a very talented, athletic, skilled, physical team in Arizona. One of the best teams in the country, if not the best team in the country.

But just looking forward to competing, and our guys are really excited about playing.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Oscar, could you talk to us a little bit about your time playing at Cochise College and playing in southern Arizona and some of the connections between there and the University of Arizona?

OSCAR CLUFF: Yes, my coach has worked and is close with the Arizona head coach. He's talked a little bit about me. I've played at Arizona a couple times before. There's a bit of history there. So it will be fun.

Q. Curious what you guys did after the game yesterday. Did you guys watch any of Arizona/Arkansas? I'm sure you guys watched film of it at least. What did you guys see from trying to scout Arizona?



before.

But, no, it's just a lot of experience. Obviously our core three here are a lot better than us back at that age. I think we have a little bit more of an advantage.

FLETCHER LOYER: Obviously Zach was really good. We played around him and played through him a lot. But I think this team can play in a lot of different ways depending on what the other team throws at us, whether it's pressuring defense or trapping defense, whatever it is, we can score in a lot of different ways, and then also we're really good on the glass as well.

Q. Obviously you guys were in a little bit of a rut in February, losing games before the Big -- in March losing before the Big Ten Tournament. What sort of changed for you guys heading into the Big Ten Tournament? Was it just getting into the postseason, a fresh start, or what sort of allowed you guys to lock in starting in Chicago?

BRADEN SMITH: I think the sense of urgency was a lot better for us. Attention to detail, concentration, those type of things. And obviously we weren't the best at that point. But we've got a lot better than we were. I think we just cleaned up a lot of different things.

And obviously it's tournament time, and you have that understanding that it's win or go home. So obviously the urgency is different. The environment's different. Everything's just different. You've got to be on top of your stuff because, if not, then you don't get another opportunity or another shot at it. So I think it's just a mixture and combination of those things.

Q. Obviously back in St. Louis, there was a big question if you'd even be playing right now after what happened in the Miami game. Can you walk us through what the timeline was like in terms of getting to this point and playing last night, and ultimately how much of a decision, if at all, it was in the lead-up to the game last night?

C.J. COX: It was just taking it one day at a time. I trust Chad and Dr. Day make sure that I'm as healthy as I can be. And I did a lot of rehab and a lot of icing, stem, to work on my knee and my leg. And I feel like I was in a really good position after practicing the day before the game yesterday that I could play in that game. And I felt like I was 100 percent in that game, and I'm glad I was able to do that.

Q. Braden and Fletcher, you've been asked this plenty over the years, but you're on the doorstep of

potentially a second Final Four. Could you both take us back to when you were in high school and the guy down to the left of this row saw something in both of you that was way ahead of the pace of everyone else? What is it like to be recruited by Matt Painter as a high school prospect, and can you now reflect on what this has meant, this journey, to you as you are one game away of making a second trip to the biggest stage in the sport?

BRADEN SMITH: I think for me, like, he put a lot of trust and faith in me when a lot of people didn't. Not a lot of people thought I could be here and had the career that I've had. And obviously it's a mixture of them trusting me and my teammates trusting me, but also hard work that I've put in. So there's a balance there.

But, no, just having somebody that is willing to stick with you and trust you along the way when a lot of people didn't. And obviously I trust myself, and I'm a competitor that way. So obviously that was always going to be a thing. But to have someone, like, throw you out there and be: All right, go make plays. It's what you do. Like, go shoot the ball and go do those things.

And I think for me it's what you want as a competitor and as an athlete. Who wouldn't want that, to say go out there and kind of control the game in any way possible.

So for me, it's just, obviously, gone by super quick, just these four years. So being able to experience all the ups and downs, literally everything in between, with the group of people here and obviously the coaching staff and just the community at Purdue, which has made it unbelievable for me.

FLETCHER LOYER: I think over the phone, it's a little bit different during COVID. I met Coach and the staff because they recruited my brother as well. But you didn't really know much. So over a phone call, you had to trust the guy. And he just kind of gave it all out there to me, what role I was going to come in and play. Maybe it was coming off the bench, maybe it was starting.

Then throughout the summer, you saw some time to go play, and he obviously put us both in the starting lineup. For a Hall of Fame coach like him to put trust in two young kids from Indiana, it's pretty special. But it's a lot of trust that he put into us to go out there and do our job.

Q. Oscar, Purdue has a reputation for great big men. But Arizona has a ton of giant players, basically a lot of size to deal with. What's going to be the challenge having so many players to deal with in the front court that are all skilled and can all affect the game

physically?

OSCAR CLUFF: Just coming out, being physical, being ready for 40 minutes. Not letting up. Not coming out with a soft mentality. Just being ready, being physical with them, and just playing tough.

Q. What do you guys need to establish early on, and how important is it to get off to a fast start against an Arizona team that's won 12 straight?

C.J. COX: I feel like with us, I feel like mainly on the defensive end, Coach Painter and all the coaches emphasize communication. And I think that's something we did a really good job at during Big Ten Tournament and throughout March Madness so far. I feel like continuing to keep that up.

Arizona has a lot of physical bigs, so just being able to match that with Oscar, Daniel, TK, Jack Benter, and then us guards being physical as well. I feel like the offense will come. I feel like P.J. and Sasha do a great job at teaching us everything we need to know, and just it's about us executing at the end of the day.

Q. Oscar, we talked about this a little bit yesterday. Omer, he said he got you in chess, he has you when you guys match up. What do you think of that?

OSCAR CLUFF: I think it's like 2-1 now. He's got me by one, but he's not that much better.

Q. Oscar, do any of the coaches, assistants, support staff, do they ever join you guys in these games?

OSCAR CLUFF: Yeah. They've been playing PlayStation with us and doing stuff like that, yeah.

Q. Trey, I wanted to ask you, after the game what was the reception like, checking your phone, hearing from friends and family just about making -- I think I saw it was the first game winner for Purdue in March Madness in history or something like that. What was the reception like, just being able to come -- realizing all of it?

TREY KAUFMAN-RENN: It's kind of funny. Believe it or not, I think I watched the replay twice. Other than that, I called my girlfriend, called my mom and went to bed. I really didn't. To be honest with you. I don't know. It's been crazy to see, like, how many text messages I've gotten. But I'm also not good at responding to people. I don't know. I went from 400 messages to about 800 messages overnight, unread.

Q. Trey, I saw Cam was waiting around for you for a long time last night to say congratulations, or I don't know what the conversation was. So I guess my question is what was that conversation, because you guys got into a little bit of a scuffle out there on the court, when you were able to finally connect with him?

TREY KAUFMAN-RENN: Unfortunately, I wasn't. I think he went to go see his family. I was doing media or something else. No, it's all love, my way. And shared -- he's a hardworking guy, hardworking player.

I always made fun of him that that's how he guarded me in practice, too, at Purdue. So I don't think there was any difference there. But no, he's a good player. He's a competitor, and we were just out there competing.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. In today's college basketball, NBA basketball, all levels of basketball, I guess, it's kind of a 3-point shooting game and at the rim. You go 8-for-11 from mid-range yesterday. That's kind of been a weapon that you've had throughout the course of the year. How are you able to utilize kind of a lost art in basketball to your advantage?

MATT PAINTER: Right. It's just having guys that can make pull-ups and guys that can hit intermediate shots. Like Trey Kaufman-Renn is really good at his floaters. C.J. has got a good pull-up. Fletch has a good pull-up. Braden Smith has a good pull-up.

So like the guys that are taking them are the guys that consistently make them. Even though analytically, it says that you want your rhythm 3s. But the defense is also trying to take that away. You want to be able to play at the rim. But sometimes you can't get it to the rim. Like a lot of times people just think you can just organically get whatever you want. You've got to be able to execute and get shots.

I'm a big believer in, when you start, people want you to pass up a good shot and get to a great shot. In theory, that makes a lot of sense. But when you play great defenses like Michigan and like Arizona, you better take what you can get, because if you probe the defense too long and you say work the ball, do whatever, you end up having -- how many bad possessions did we see at the end of the shot clock?

You know, like you guys are probably like, why in the world are they taking bad shots? Well, throughout the shot clock, there's probably some opportunities to shoot the basketball and be able to shoot a pretty good shot.

And with that, I always encourage guys to shoot it. But it has to be something that makes sense. It might not make sense in a game. It's got to make sense through the course of the season. And especially even when some guys struggle at times with certain shots, if they're consistently making them during practices and you've been around them a long time, you know water is going to find its level, and they're going to get to that percentage that they're normally at.

So we just try to encourage our guys to take what they give us. You're going to have more pull-up shots from people playing a drop. You just are. You know? But you don't want to take anything. The only way you should take a tough shot is at the end of a clock, if you've got guys that can control the ball. And obviously we've got guys that can handle the basketball and pass the basketball.

Q. Been asking some of your players just about how they're able to build like that cohesion just off the floor through games and such like that. From a coach's perspective, how do you best kind of facilitate that closeness and cohesion without forcing it onto them?

MATT PAINTER: You have to have a shared passion. You have talented guys that they don't love the game of basketball, it's just not going to click that way. You have to have guys that love the game, that sacrifice for the game. And then that respect comes in.

When you have everybody in the locker room doing what they're supposed to be doing, doing their job but they're also outside of practice watching extra film, getting in extra shots, you know, having a defined role and taking pride in that defined role. When you have that across the board, now you have a special team, and that's how you have that cohesion.

Q. Matt, Tommy has a long history of going overseas, getting skilled international bigs and turning them into big-time players in America. Obviously like dating back to when he was an assistant at Gonzaga. What has stood out to you about how he's able to just keep doing that? Even though now everyone's going overseas looking for those guys.

MATT PAINTER: Right. He's been doing it for a long time, you know, 20 years. That's a big key, is the relationships that you have with the decision-makers. But if you're constantly doing it and you're getting face to face with people, like he has overseas, and putting that time in -- a lot of times guys are -- they'll try to recruit big-time players overseas, and they're not getting face to face. They're not going and talking to their parents. They're not having

relationships with international agents, things of that nature.

You know, when he's been able to do that for a long, long time, and you see the dividends, and now a lot more people are doing it. Sometimes now, it gets -- with some of these guys, whoever has the most money, because it's just from a professional standpoint. I think he's on the other side of that because he's the one that does have the relationships, but he also has, look at what each one of those guys have done, that history.

When you have history -- it's like when you deal with big guys. Like we've thrown the ball inside more than any school in the past 10 years of college basketball in the post. And then you'll find big guys out there and they'll say, well, I'm thinking about these two or three schools. And you'll be like, they never show the ball inside. You know what I mean? Then you show them the data, and they'll still go to the schools. And then they're unhappy because they don't get the basketball.

So he can go and do it from an international standpoint and not talk about a couple guys, he can talk about 30 guys. He can talk about 15 elite European players in the EuroLeague. He can talk about 15 really good NBA players.

So when you have that behind you and you have facts behind you in recruiting, it really helps. Sometimes you'll miss out. Someone will just have a relationship or maybe you're at the end and now somebody has more money or things like that. That's going to happen. But, like, his track record's pretty impressive.

Q. Obviously the Big Ten is playing at a pretty high level during this tournament. How did going through that conference season prepare you? Was there a point where you thought, man, this is even tougher than it typically is for us?

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, the talent in our league is very good. I think you're seeing that here in the tournament. Like very good. I think it's been about as good as it's been for a long, long time. I think the influx of international guys, our league, is like a corporation now, with 18 teams.

So now we added four really good teams. And just brought a lot of talent into our league. But, yeah, for us, the struggles that we had, four of our five home losses, we were really good offensively. So it wasn't real hard to figure out, like, what we needed to shore up.

You kept talking about it, kept talking about it, kept working on those things, and I think the Big Ten Tournament really

helped us understand if we're going to be able to advance in the Big Ten Tournament or advance in the NCAA Tournament, we're going to have to be better defensively.

And the better you are defensively, it's going to lead to a better defensive rebounding team. You're not in as many rotations. You're not behind plays as much. You're not fouling as much. And now that adds up at the end of the game, and it really helps us.

Q. It feels like for the second straight game C.J. had an underrated mini burst that kept you guys stable and do things. What did you see from him in the game last night, and then also his story and his recovery and getting to actually being able to play?

MATT PAINTER: Right. He's a steady hand. If he has to shoot the basketball more, he does. If he doesn't, then -- he's just a solid player, a guy that can get to his pull-up. He can make 3s. But him and Gicarrri Harris played an entire season and rarely turned the basketball over. They don't turn the basketball over. They guard their man. They compete. They play hard.

For him to battle through what he's had to do here, nobody really knows except him. But like I know last week he couldn't come back into the game, and so now he doesn't practice, and then he comes out and helps us win that game.

Kind of speaks volumes. He's got a lot of character. He's been a big piece for us.

Q. When you get to this stage, people can kind of start pressing when they see that the end of the road is coming, no matter in however many wins or losses come down the stretch. Have you seen your team come with the right level of focus and controlled aggression, not trying to try too hard in these types of games?

MATT PAINTER: Right. Yeah, you just organically take what you know the defense gives you. Offensively you have to be efficient. And some nights, you're going to get more shots than not. Like we don't have a team where a guy wants -- when you have good offensive players, they're excited. They want it. But you can't press. You have to take what the defense gives you and just read the floor, read the game and make the next play and just try to keep that focus.

Q. These programs are kind of similar in a sense that a couple of years ago, you were trying to get Purdue's first Final Four in a very long time. Arizona is in the same wave of just trying to get that first Final Four in a

really long time. At the same time, both really talented, having all the pieces, but sometimes just falling short. What is it like when trying to break that spell, curse, whatever it could be, when it's been a while and the expectations are so high?

MATT PAINTER: It's just something, as a coach, you want to do it for your school. You want to do it for your fans. We have great fans. We've had over 105 consecutive sellouts at our place. We sell out our exhibition games. We don't have to battle pro sports where we're located. I think that definitely helps us.

But, no, a lot of people kind of look at it like a burden. And sure, when you go to the Final Four, you're excited about it. But there's relief there. It gets talked about a lot. You don't have to wait for the morning paper to hear what people say about you anymore. You hear it all day long.

It really makes you callous as a person, to be honest with you. It makes you just be able to keep your focus. One of the things for me that I really try to get to these guys is just don't let it steal your joy. You play basketball and it's fun, and you go to the Elite Eight or you go to the Sweet 16 or you make the tournament and you get beat in the first round. A lot of people look at that as failure.

And failure is when you don't try your best. Failure's when you don't put your best foot forward. And you've got to go out there and compete. And sometimes you just run out of time and you lose.

But when you can get to that mountain and be able to get to the championship game and you come up a little bit short. That hurts too. That hurts like getting beat in the first round or the second round or the Sweet 16 or what have you. It's definitely there, but you still have to keep your focus on what you can control.

Q. You touched on the success Arizona's had. With their international bigs you've obviously had success with all kinds of bigs, including Zach from Canada. What is the challenge of developing big men in this day and age, and what challenges do they present with the size they have?

MATT PAINTER: It just depends on how you play. Do you play to the low post? Do you use your 5 in a five-out situation? There's a lot of differences there, and it doesn't mean you can't incorporate both within what you do, because you can.

I think that is -- we haven't tried to be like a cookie cutter-type offense. We've tried to allow things to, organically in the summer, just happen. And this group

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

here, obviously you return a lot of people. Like a couple of years before we returned Zach Edey. So you have a feel. Now how are you going to fill in with them.

And I always say that in recruiting that there's such bullshit in recruiting. And people believe it over and over again. And here's how the table gets set in basketball. Whether you're in high school, college or the pros, you deal with two or three people who can really score, and then the other guys fill in. And that's just the way it is.

But in recruiting, when people ask you, how are you going to use me? How are you going to use me at Purdue, I'm like, well, if you become one of our top two or three scorers, here's how we're going to use you.

And what's the next question? Right. The next question is, well, what if I don't? Well, then you're going to have to fill in with those three people. That's basketball. That's just the way it is. That's just the way things happen.

If you can get a really talented team and you've got five guys and they all average 12 points, that's pretty rare. It's pretty rare. But I bet somebody has the ball more than everybody else. I bet somebody has more usage than everybody else. I bet you have someone with second usage.

There's a separator somewhere. So in recruiting, you don't have that crystal ball, especially in today's world. You just don't. We've just tried to be honest with them and say here's the two scenarios. Here's where you're one of the top three guys, and here's where you're not. Learn to understand that.

Because when you go to the NBA and you've been that guy in college, and now you can't do those things in the NBA and you can't play with the superstar and you can't run shit and you can't guard and you can't rebound, and you can't do that, you're not going to be in the NBA. That's just the way it is.

Well, when you come to college, it's just on a lesser version. It's the same thing. You're dealing with a really, really talented guy that isn't very functional as a player. Because what you bring to the table is your value to winning. I don't care what level you're at. Your value to winning.

If you can jump over the moon and do a 360 on a breakaway, why in the hell can't you rebound? Right? We're not in the talent game. We're in the production game. But you see really, really talented guys, they take because now they're elite at that level. Those guys are rare and they don't stick around college very long.

So when you're trying to put a team together and trying to do things, it has to start with your honesty in recruiting. If you lose them that way in recruiting, that's okay, because you just strengthened your program.

Q. When you look at their trio of starting freshmen, between Burries and Peat, what specifically jumps out about those two guys? I guess big picture with their group, is the guard play or their big kind of more eye-popping to you?

MATT PAINTER: It's a great follow-up question because now you're dealing with talented players that are both really functional. Koa Peat can break you down off the dribble. He can get to the rim. He's strong. He can score around the basket, but he can also pass the basketball, which is rare for somebody with that size and that kind of frame.

Brayden Burries is just a killer. He's one of those guys you're shocked when he misses. He's got that extra gear. It really, really helps him who he's playing alongside in Jaden Bradley, because he's so good and he's so fast and he can break you down and get in the paint and get to his pull-up.

But, no, he's got range to 25 feet. He's a special player. When you play a great team like this -- we've played Michigan, who's a great team -- you've got to look at everybody like they're the number one player on the team, and that seems to be a problem at times. But both of those guys are special players.

Q. I'm curious, feels like every time Braden comes up to a press conference he has at least one question about his size and how small he is.

MATT PAINTER: Yeah.

Q. When you are watching him in practice, on the sideline of a game, is that standing out to you also still, just like, wow, this person is tiny but they're very productive, or do you not even notice anymore?

MATT PAINTER: He's got big hands. He's got long arms. He's got kind of a fade-back to his pull-up to where he can extend a little bit. When you're that size, there's about ten guys in the league that's that size, you've got to be the toughest guy on the court. You've got to be a pest. You've got to be able to get into the basketball. You've got to be able to dictate things.

But he's very intelligent. He makes people better. And I think that's something that offsets everything. And I think that's a hell of an attribute to say, do you make other

people better. He obviously does. I said that about the record, and I've talked about that, about the record, whether that's Ed Cota at North Carolina or Chris Corchiani at NC State or Bobby Hurley at Duke.

I think that's cool when he breaks a record because that brings those guys back into us talking about it, even though Bobby's in coaching. But you don't get that honor that all four of those guys have had without really good players you're playing with.

Like an assist -- you have to score the ball, and they're not the ones scoring it. So being setup guys and being able to have those guys. So it ends up being a team award. That's what he's about. He's about our team.

Even though he's had more success than most everybody in college basketball, he's still had tough days, he's always been able to battle it. I think he battles it through that chip on his shoulder because he's always been told -- just like those other 10 guys in the NBA, hey, man, at six-foot, you can't make it.

But as long as they believe in it, that's a big piece of how guys have success is that they believe in themselves. He definitely believes in himself.

Q. With tip-off approaching, what are the key areas you're emphasizing tonight to make sure your team is prepared?

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, really the same things when you're playing anybody. You have to be able to take care of the basketball. You have to be able to rebound. It's just harder against teams like Arizona, with their athleticism, their experience, their quickness, their length, their strength. It's just harder. They've only lost two games for a reason.

They're a really, really good team. They're well-coached. You've got to play to your strengths, just like what they're doing. They're like, let's dominate the glass. Let's take care of the basketball. Let's do what we do. Let's stick together. There's a lot of runs in the game. Let's diminish their runs and let's lengthen ours.

Q. Arizona gets to the foul line, gets to the foul line a lot. Yesterday they shot 39 free throws, visibly frustrating Arkansas, not really letting them get any sort of momentum. How do you go about trying to defend a team that is so elite with so much playmaking but also at the same time, if they're getting to the paint, they're most likely drawing fouls and they're getting to the foul line?

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, keeping the ball in front of you and not getting behind plays, that's hard. Just with what you said, when you have quickness at not just your point guard position, but at your 2 and your 3 and at your 4 and you have that positional quickness to where you can drive the basketball and get people behind plays, and now you've got help, when you have to overhelp against teams like that, it's very difficult and you end up fouling.

So trying your best to not turn it over and get quality shots so your defense can get set is first and foremost against teams of this nature. But then you also have to be physical, too, without fouling, or they'll just wear you down, and I think you see that in games that they play that are relatively close.

You see that at the end where it's just that spurt they make, because that ends up being the difference. They have a 10-0 run at some point and you're like, ah, they won by 11. You're like, the other team was right there. But that's what they do. They use that one spurt to knock you out. Then they have games where they just manhandle people and they shoot loads of free throws. You've got to be physical and not let them get to that point, but that's easier said than done, because when you get behind plays, they're going to get where they want.

Q. Coach, when it comes to teachable moments kind of on the other side for you, just how this team, this squad this season, maybe the best thing they've taught you, best lesson learned or moment with them as you head into this game?

MATT PAINTER: I think for us, it's probably our failures in conference play. I think the why. I think you have to be honest as a coach. It's not always what you're doing, it's how you're doing it. And you have to be able to look into, how can we change? How can we make improvements?

So for us, I thought it was just our presence on the basketball defensively. You're going to have to get in rotations at some point. You just can't live in help and you can't live in rotations.

When you do, especially against teams like a Michigan or like an Arizona, now you don't have great blockout responsibility. So just the emphasis on those three things and then just trying to stick with that.

But we've been much better in that area. But also when we played -- like, we played against Michigan and we turned it over twice. Like, we're just helping our cause. But we have just a regular game and you have eight turnovers, like, we lose that game. Eight turnovers is pretty good against anybody.

So we've had to be special on the offensive end to get things done at times. But that's okay, we have a team that can do that. But we all know, when you play one of the best teams in the country on defense in Arizona, you've got to have a balance. You've got to be good on the offensive end. You've got to be stingy on the defensive end, and you just can't get outrebounded by 10 to 20 rebounds. You just can't. It's just too many possessions to overcome.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

