

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship - Final Four: NC State vs Purdue

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Phoenix, Arizona, USA

State Farm Stadium

NC State Wolfpack

Coach Kevin Keatts

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're joined by the NC State Wolfpack, Kevin Keatts.

We'll have Coach start with an opening statement.

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, the Wolfpack are here. I'm so excited for our team. We're probably a little different than everybody else that's here in the Final Four. We talked about coming here and having a lot of fun, then obviously getting down to business when we have to.

But I love the way our team's playing. I don't know that anybody has ever had nine elimination games to make it to the Final Four. Starting back in D.C. Winning the ACC tournament. We have continued to play really well in the NCAA tournament. We've done it with defense and a couple DJs who have really played well. Love that part about it.

My team's playing with a lot of confidence. We're going to play a very good Purdue team. We'll be challenged again.

So questions.

THE MODERATOR: First question for the Final Four.

Q. Obviously DJ has been the center of a lot of what you do passing, scoring. Zach Edey is a guy that is also a space eater, takes up a lot of defensive attention. We have all this talk about position-less basketball. What does that say about the role of the big man in today's game?

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, I think everybody probably need to go out and get a big guy now. These are trends. It was trending towards nobody would play with their back to the basket. We're in the Final Four, three guys have led their teams to the Final Four because of the way they play.

I mean, all three of those guys are really good. I'm excited about DJ Burns, great touch, lefty, willing passer. Obviously we're going to play against Zach Edey. If you ask me who keeps you up at night right now, it's Zach Edey.

He's playing at a high level. He can score the ball. We got to get him out of that lane. He lives in that lane. He's really talented. The way he's become a lot better is he passes the ball a lot.

When you lose posts, traditional posts in most times, we got three teams that have three guys that are really, really good.

Q. To that point, DJ, of the three bigs that we just talked about, so unique in the way that he does things. In terms of players you've coached throughout your career, where would you put his unique skill set?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, that's a great question. I was thinking about that the other day. I don't think I've ever coached a guy like that in my life.

Obviously the transfer portal is open now. My coaches are like, All right, we got to find DJ Burns. I'm like, you're not going to find DJ Burns anywhere else.

Lefty, great touch, tremendous personality. Doesn't really catch the ball in the post, but he ends up around the basket. I don't know that there's ever been a guy like that before.

The guards get so mad at him because they don't get assists because he dribbles six times to get where he needs to be.

He's a throwback. Some guys in here have had a chance to spend a little time with him. What a tremendous personality. We were up 10 against Duke about a minute to go. As a coach, I'm locked in, a minute to go, anything can happen. He's over there yelling to the fans, Let's go, let's go.

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I'm like, No, you need to lock in so we can finish the game.

He's about as unique as you're ever going to get. I'm glad that everybody on the national stage is getting the opportunity to meet DJ Burns.

Q. A couple guys in the locker room mentioned that you told them before the ACC tournament to bring something lucky. Have you ever done that before?

KEVIN KEATTS: No, I haven't. I'm shocked that they listened to it, too. But I did. It's hard. Think about us now. We started off 5-1 in the conference. We lose our last four. Everybody loses their mind. Our last four games were really tough. So we're going into the tournament, I needed something else other than we're a good basketball team, because we knew that.

You got to bring something lucky. It's funny when you talk to guys, what's lucky to them, what they brought to the ACC tournament. Whatever works.

But it's working (smiling).

Q. Obviously a big moment for you and your team to be in the Final Four. You have a son on the team, your whole family here. How big a moment is for the family Keatts to all be here for that?

KEVIN KEATTS: I mean, it's great. I have my lovely wife, Georgette, who is over there who has followed me every step of the way. I'm blessed. I really am. This is my third Final Four, two as assistant coach, then obviously having a chance to do it as a head coach.

But to have one son on the team who I get a chance to share this special moment with every single day, and to have my other kid, Kaden, here, my wife, Georgette, family is so important to you. It's a very valuable thing. I don't know if you guys have ever had a chance to experience something this big. But to have your support group. My wife is a complete coach's wife. She understands. She's telling me after the game, at halftime, what I need to run. You know you've been married for 23 years when that happens.

But it's special. I don't know how to put it in words. I'm surrounded by some great folks. My family means everything to me.

Q. Michael O'Connell has come on strong towards the end of the season. How important has his presence been in the lineup for the flow of the team?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, Michael is the guy that I recruited.

When I recruited him, you talk about a young man who has graduated from Stanford in three years. It's taken him a while to get his voice. But, man, when he got his voice, he started playing well.

He's coaching in timeouts. He's talking in halftime. He's encouraging guys. Now he went from a guy who hadn't scored many double-digit games to the tournament playing extremely well. Putting him in the lineup, it opens up everything because it allows DJ Horne and other guys to be able to score the basketball.

You think about it, man, he's hit some big shots. I know you reported, there's no bigger shot than he hit against UVA. We're probably not here without Michael's play.

Q. Not just this week, but since the ACC tournament, how much have you and the guys heard from the team in '83? What has the value been for you?

KEVIN KEATTS: All the time. I don't want to forget '74 and '83 team, they were both on campus this year. They both have been on campus throughout my tenure.

The relationships that they have built with our players and the relationship that I've shared with a bunch of those guys, it's very invaluable.

Every win I could get to my phone and I'll have several text messages from most of those guys. I mean, when the G.O.A.T. is sending you pictures and he's got, 'Why not us' on it, you got to believe in that stuff.

They've been great. Big brothers, godfathers, whatever you want to call them, they've been great for our team.

Q. You mentioned it earlier, but this is your third Final Four. How much did the experiences as an assistant help? You have two assistants on staff that also have been here.

KEVIN KEATTS: It means a lot. We've got a very experienced staff, guys who have shared some common things of being to the Final Four. Where it pays off is we have share our experiences. Does it help on the court? Probably not. But being able to share what we went through and how it looks like, what it was. I think that goes a long way.

I've talked to these guys about having fun, then getting down to business. I use the analogy, they're so young, they don't understand it. I said, Most of some of guys will catch it, when you check into a hotel, a good hotel, most of them ask you, Are you here on business or pleasure? Has anybody else heard that? I hope so. I don't want to be the

only one that says that. You typically say, I'm here for business or pleasure.

I say, If you get asked that, if anyone asks you that, you need to tell them that you're here for both.

Today I want it to be 50/50. Tomorrow I want it to be 75 business to 25. I want 100% business by the time we get to Saturday.

This group has fun. They understand how to have fun. I don't want to take that away from them.

Q. How important is it hitting the transfer portal in today's basketball world?

KEVIN KEATTS: I would say it's pretty important to us. Our starting five are transfers. None of those guys started at NC State. They're NC State people now, don't get me wrong.

It's a different world. It depends on your need. Every coach, it doesn't work for everyone. Sometimes you have really good players. In our situation, we brought in eight new guys this year. Seven of those guys were from the transfer portal. It's worked for us. It may not work for everyone else, but at NC State, it's worked for us.

Q. In speaking with some of your players in the locker room, a lot of them pointed to the moment of getting off the plane here as one of the most surreal feelings for this run. Curious if you feel the same way about when you guys arrived, stepping off the plane to the tarmac?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, I think two moments really stuck out to me. I'm a people watcher, so I'm a player watcher these last couple days. I just wanted to see how they would respond to it.

Getting them the opportunity... I was here 11 years ago as an assistant coach, not here but in the Final Four. It didn't look anything like that. When we got off the plane, we got off the plane. The locker room wasn't dressed up like it was.

Just to see us get off the plane, the look in their eyes, walking into the locker room, having a chance to go out to the floor. That meant everything to me because that showed me how much hard work we put in to get here.

The other message was, Enjoy today. This was the first time that we've ever went to a practice. I said, When you walk out on the floor, bring your cell phone with you.

They brought their cell phones. I wanted to make sure they got pictures and memories. It won't happen again. I just wanted them to enjoy that moment before we started practice.

Q. What was of the actual genesis of the ice cream tradition? How have the players embraced it? Was the shirt your idea?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, so everyone in Raleigh is messing the tradition up. Every time we win a game, everybody is going out and gets ice cream. It's not about that.

I'll take you to the backstory. I took over the head coaching job at UNCW. They had not won a road game in a long, long time. I can't even remember how many games. It was nine losing season, but not many road wins.

We got our first road win, I think we were playing USCG. I came in the locker room and I was jumping up and down, but I had most of the players back from the previous year. They had no idea how to celebrate.

In that moment, I said, We're going to go get ice cream. From that point on, every road win we get ice cream. We took it from UNCW, brought it to NC State. Yes, the ice cream shirt is my idea. The one shirt that I wear, it's only one on one. Everybody is like, Can you get that shirt? You can't.

I love the ice cream. Who doesn't love ice cream? You get a chance to win a road win, you got to go out and celebrate it in some way. That's how it happened. That's what it's become.

Q. There's been a lot of talk in the last five days about DJ possibly having an NFL future. Have you fielded any calls from NFL front offices about DJ? Also, where do you see his future in basketball or football?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, no way he's going to play football. I mean, listen, he's got a great touch. He's not that bully that you guys think. Listen, you spent some time with him? He's a teddy bear off the court.

That's why I get so frustrated when they call a charge on him. He doesn't bully you. He just goes around, he wills around you. I think he's going to play basketball, I really do. Who doesn't want a guy who can really pass and really score the basketball, got a great personality.

No way he's going to be a football player. I have not got any calls about that (smiling).

Q. What was the message before the ACC



tournament? Describe for me what it's like to go compete with Duke and North Carolina 24/7, 365?

KEVIN KEATTS: Here's the weird thing. Like, we're here in the Final Four. We expected to be here. I know people don't believe that. But this is not in our mind as a team, this is not a fluke. Like, we knew obviously playing in the ACC that most of our losses didn't have anything to do with what the other team did, it's what we didn't do.

We're probably a 10-10 team. We finished 9-11. But what we did, the message was, Let's clean up our mistakes, let's become better defensively. I've always had teams that were defensive-minded, 40 deflections, more turnovers, forcing turnovers and everything else.

We were talking about getting better in scout reports, clean up our mistakes, take care of ball screen coverages, and win one game at a time.

As it happened, you could see after every game our confidence growing.

It's weird, we played nine elimination games. During those nine games, I never felt like we were going to lose a game. I felt like we were playing better.

If you go back and look at most of those games, we've gotten better in the second half.

Q. What is it like to go head-to-head with Carolina 24/7, 365?

KEVIN KEATTS: I think it's great. I don't know any conference got three teams in the same conference, obviously they got great tradition of basketball. I'll remind you of this. We don't try to beat Duke or Carolina. We try to be the best versions of ourselves. We're NC State.

We're excited about the competition. I can also add Wake Forest in there. In North Carolina, we got four ACC teams. But it's us. This is about us.

Q. Clinching your spot on Easter Sunday, a text from Coach Pitino expressing his pride that you're here. Rick talks about building a bridge of people like yourself being able to do this. What is the business thing he's imparted on you?

KEVIN KEATTS: Listen, he's the best. I can't say the word, but he work... When I worked for Coach Pitino, man, it was all locked in and work.

I remember, give you a couple stories, myself and Wyking Jones, who used to be the head coach at Cal, there was

one practice where we just got there. We got this Hall-of-Fame coach. He is working his butt off. I'm standing over there looking. I just became -- I was a head coach at Hargrave. I wasn't saying anything.

We had a great practice. He called Wyking and myself into the office. We were going over like, Wonder what Coach want.

He's probably going to tell us how good we got a chance to be.

He ripped us. We just had a great practice. He ripped us because we were not participating enough in practice.

The thing that I will tell you Coach Pitino that has helped me grow is he never put me in a box. He didn't get me to Louisville to be just a recruiter. He held me responsible to be a better coach, to do scouting, to do everything else.

When he hired me, he said, I don't hire assistant coaches, I hire future head coaches.

I'll be honest with you. I've taken some of that with me with my coaches. I've got two guys who worked under me that I hope I did the same thing for in A.W. Hamilton and (indiscernible) who have done a great job.

I think the biggest quality you can have as a head coach is preparing your assistant coaches to have that opportunity. I got plenty of coaches that were assistant coaches for me in Division I, moved on. I think that's the biggest thing, is to share your knowledge and your growth with somebody else so they can the opportunity that I have.

Q. We saw DJ Horne here the last two years. It's almost kind of full circle that now he's playing here. Can you talk about recruiting him and him being a local kid. Was he an easy get for you?

KEVIN KEATTS: It's funny you ask that. This morning he and I were talking to the bus. I said, did you ever think you would be here?

He said, Man, when I got in the transfer portal, I realized this is one of the sites.

I was, You're back now, buddy. You can be back.

It means everything for us to have a kid from the Raleigh area to have so much success in the tournament.

Some NC State's best players are from within an hour, past players that were really good, within an hour, hour and a half from our campus.

What a great year that he's had. I'm glad you guys borrowed him for a year or two, been able to send him back to North Carolina, glad he's on our team.

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