

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

Thursday, April 4, 2024

Phoenix, Arizona, USA

State Farm Stadium

## Purdue Boilermakers

## Coach Matt Painter

### Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're joined at this time by Purdue head coach Matt Painter.

Coach, can you give us an opening statement.

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, really excited obviously to get going, start practicing and watching film, just preparing for our next game.

Excited our fans and our players and staff, former players. Just everybody a part of our basketball family. To be able to have an experience like this, have an opportunity to play in a Final Four, hopefully win a national championship is pretty surreal.

Just everything that we've been through last year, last couple years, having really tough losses, to be able to continue to fight through things, battle that adversity to be in this position is great.

Everybody on our end is just looking forward to competing and playing on Saturday.

THE MODERATOR: We'll begin with questions, Coach.

**Q. Obviously DJ Burns has been a valuable piece for them inside. Zach has done a massive job for you guys. All the talk of position-less basketball, three-point shooting, seems like this is the Final Four of the big men here. What does that say about the value of the big man in today's game?**

MATT PAINTER: I think it says a lot about the quality of the big man for guys such as that, like DJ Burns, Donovan Clingan and Zach are all elite, All-American, All-Conference type players. All three of those guys are different but yet have a lot of the similarities, especially from a competitive standpoint. To me that's what really

jumps out watching DJ Burns, is how competitive he is.

Sure he has the game. To me kind of is like a Zach Randolph type, which is a huge compliment because Zach was a fabulous player for a long time in the NBA. He looks like he's having a lot of fun out there, too. The ability to score, to pass.

Love the way when he's not in the game he's engaged and cheering for his teammates.

Donovan Clingan, the way he dominates a game, gets after it, competes, plays at both ends.

Obviously with Zach I'm biased, best player in college basketball. But plays hard, keeps getting better, keeps working on his game and is very, very unselfish.

**Q. Talking to Braden, he seems to have this inner drive whether he sees things on social media that says he can't do this. His whole drive is they think I can't do, watch me go out and do it. Do you see that kind of edge out of him?**

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, no question. But I think in today's landscape, kind of social media, it's out there for everybody. No matter who you are, you get doubted. That's kind of part of it.

If that's what you need, our guards weren't good enough to win the Maui Classic, our guards weren't good enough to win the Big Ten, get to the Final Four. But we were able to accomplish all those things.

He's got a pretty good career record. He's been pretty successful. If that's what he needs to get his engine going, so be it. I think you'll find a lot of competitive people that are that way.

He's answered the bell this year in every challenge that he's had.

**Q. Zach was just telling us when he was in high school, there was a lot of dialogue about him having to redshirt his freshman season. He said, Look, I was**



**real with Paint, and I said, I don't really want to redshirt. He said that you said back to him, If you beat people for a spot, you're not going to.**

MATT PAINTER: Right.

**Q. Can you reflect on that?**

MATT PAINTER: I remember where I was sitting when I got that phone call. It was really at the end. He was close to going to Baylor. I just said, Hey, man, I can't promise that to you. But I'm not going to waste your year and not redshirt you if you're not going to play. But come in here and beat somebody out.

We had a kid transfer who actually started for us, then left. That competition would have been real interesting. That guy started for us, we won a Big Ten championship. That guy started for us and we went to the Elite Eight.

He ended up transferring, him and Trevion Williams competed for that spot, and he played.

I don't get there at the end and say things to promise just to get guys. That's a hard thing to do, man. To me, I really liked him. I was somebody who thought that he was going to be a really good player. I just didn't know when he was going to be a really good player. I didn't know he was going to be this, I'll tell you that. Somebody averages three in high school, you don't think they're going to be a two-time national Player of the Year.

**Q. I was speaking with Mason in the locker room about his embracing the sixth man role after being a starter. Can you talk about how important, how big it is to have a player of Mason's caliber willing to take that role off the bench when the transfer portal is as big as it is?**

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, I mean, there's a lot of scoring roles. Four guys that start, but there's also that scoring role for that guy who comes off the bench and gives you that spark.

We just felt with him and Trey Kaufman, they were so different. One guy's ability to post up, rebound around the basket, the other guy's ability to make shots and spread the defense from an offensive standpoint, was really going to be a good match, but it also gets the opponent where they have to think differently when Mason comes in because of his ability to space.

He didn't make any shots the other day in a game, but he made a bunch of winning plays. You see that emotion there at the end.

He sacrificed a lot for us. There's not a team here that doesn't have more than five starters, right? Great teams have more than five starters. I think we're one of those.

But Mason has sacrificed a lot for us.

**Q. Can you speak to how important it is to your offensive calculus to make an opposing center guard another action before they have to counter Zach, what toll that can take on them?**

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, just depends on what they're going to do, right, from a ball screen standpoint. Are you going to blitz a ball screen, trap the ball screen? Are you going to plan a drop, are you in a deep drop or switching.

Kind of watching and getting tendencies of what people are going to do is what all coaches to do.

But with Zach, most people don't like to get detached from him. They want to stay with him. That's why sometimes in our games you'll see people get wide-open layups. You're like, How in the hell can they get just get a wide-open layup? It's because they're trying to cheat to get back to him, and then they don't stop the basketball.

His presence alone gets people to do things and get off their on defensive rules. Everybody has their ball screen defense rules. So they stick with those rules. When they get off of 'em, you normally get disconnected.

When you get off it with him, you get in between, you're opening up a can of worms. When we make it, it's positive. Sometimes when we miss it it's positive because now he's in perfect rebound position.

**Q. I don't know if you know this, everybody is talking about it's been 44 years since Purdue has been in the Final Four. Next week will mark 20 years since you came back to Purdue. Seems like just yesterday, seems like a million years ago. What is the perspective on that?**

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, obviously it's been a great ride for us. I think that's what kind of gets lost. We haven't been to a Final Four in 44 years, but we've won 11 Big Ten championships in that time. You average one championship every four years.

We've been very successful. We've been at the top of that ladder even when we haven't been getting first, we got a lot of second-place finishes, third-place finishing. We've been knocking on that door and been very competitive.

In terms of what I think about where we start is really just the people that we inherited and where we could go with it. Carl Landry and David Teague were our two best players right away. We were able to sign JaJuan Johnson, E'Twaun Moore, and Robbie Hummel. That's what gets you going.

Now it's a little bit different when someone takes a job, they jump into the portal. The people they get out of the portal might be with them for three years, but really are going to be with them for two. A lot of them will be with them for one.

Like now, you can go and have a good season with that, but sometimes you can't have growth with that. The way we've been able to do it at Purdue now is just like we did it then: we're trying to sign high school guys and develop them and grow with them.

Now, at some point I think it comes and finds us also, going into this year -- excuse me, this next year, we'll have two transfers in four years. That's the fewest amount of any high major program in the country by a long shot.

We just signed six high school guys in the fall. We want to continue to do what we've done and we've seen be successful for us with that.

Yeah, when you look back and they kind of run your career, I'm happy that I have hair, but it went from dark, now it's getting half to where it's gray. Then you see all the players, you see the differences, the growth. It's pretty cool.

It makes moments like this, when you go through the heartaches, it makes it worth it.

**Q. Obviously getting to the Final Four was emotional for you guys. How do you avoid the trap of being satisfied and happy that you got here without realizing that you have two more games to win?**

MATT PAINTER: Right. Just keeping a focus. Really just talking through it more than anything. Kind of owning the emotional piece of it. There's nothing wrong with that. Then just being process-based and get back to what we do. Kind of talk about NC State, be familiar with NC State, understand how good they are.

My message to them about NC State was we're playing an undefeated team. The team that was 17-14 doesn't exist anymore. The team that's 9-0 does. That's the team we're playing. If we played 'em six weeks ago, then we would be playing that team. If you go back and look, when they lost six out of eight or seven out of nine, it was coming out off

of them starting their conference season and being 5-1. It wasn't like they were struggling before. They just had that tough stretch right in the middle of their season going towards the end. Obviously winning those nine state games.

When you start to talk about who they beat in those nine games, it's pretty impressive. Dukes, North Carolina, Virginia. Our guys, we've played all those teams in the last couple years. So they understand that.

Then you look at who they beat in the actual NCAA tournament. It speaks for itself. They're one of the best teams in the country and they can beat anybody in the country, including us.

**Q. In the college game, the big man position, has it changed? Is it just a talking point here?**

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, I think it depends on who your big man is. For us, we play through ball screens a lot. He sets a lot of ball screens for us, then he dives and we play through that, whether that's transition, whether that's sets, whether that's regular motion.

Sometimes we just anchor him. Then he get into the 4-1. When you get guys that can do that, they can drag people out, and they can dive and play at the rim, you get the flip-up dunks, the lobs, and you get the threes. Those are the toughest to cover.

His physical presence causes a lot of problems. That's why you see a lot of pushback with it, because there's very few people that have that physical type of presence where you get people doing things against what they want to do. I think that's the ultimate compliment.

I've always compared it -- there was a good guard at Indiana named Yogi Ferrell, and I always used to complain he was carrying the basketball. At the end of the day, I just deep down didn't think we could guard him. That's all it was. He was so quick and so shifty in his ability to pull the trigger off the dribble and make threes, he was just a tough cover.

I always complained about him. I just finally caught myself one day and said, I need to shut up. I'm losing a lot of respect with these officials because he's not doing anything differently than anybody else except that he's just better than everybody else.

I think Zach gets a lot of that. He gets a lot of flack from that. But I've always said that for people that understand basketball, and people that have to guard him, coaches that have to go against him, it's a chore. It's a chore.

But it can be done. He's had tough games before. Everything hasn't been perfect. But he goes into the game, I think what kind of separates him from a mindset standpoint is that he has a lot of respect for opponents. Like, he dives into DJ Burns. He dives into the guys at Tennessee and the guys at Gonzaga. He respects 'em and he knows they're good players. He's not trying to do that.

But he's going to play the whole game and he's going to compete and he's going to go after every rebound. He wants the basketball. He definitely wants the basketball in crunch time.

**Q. You've had a lot of opportunity to be around two of Purdue's all-time greats, Zach, then you played with Glenn Robinson. Besides their obvious talent, what was it about those guys that made them top-notch, elite players?**

MATT PAINTER: Glenn Robinson's ability to score probably separated him. He was 6'8", 6'9", he could make a pull-up, he could shoot threes, was explosive. Had an unbelievable knack to score the basketball in a variety of ways. That matchup was always difficult for opposing teams. They're very different, obviously, because Zach plays through the post a lot. But they're both very competitive.

I think probably the number one similarity between the two of them is just that competitive spirit.

**Q. A couple times this season you mentioned getting pressure even within your own coaches to change your approach. How were you able to stick to your convictions and talk through that process?**

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, it's really diving into whether -- you always lose the last game of the year unless you win a national championship. I've always dove into what we're doing and tried to pick at what we're doing to make improvements. When you get beat in the first round of the NCAA tournament by a 16 seed, that doesn't change anything.

I felt like we needed some more athleticism, some more quickness and skill. We added that. We had guys that shot a lower percentage than I think they should have shot.

There's a lot of variables that go into that. I thought we had some really good shooters that were shooting 32% that should shoot 42%. We had guys shooting 28% that could shoot 38%.

That's come to fruition. When you look at Braden Smith,

he shot a good percentage as a freshman, but he didn't shoot much. Fletcher Loyer had a much better percentage. Mason Gillis has shot a better percentage. Their percentages weren't bad before, but they had a chance to be elite. Now you throw in Cam Heide, Myles Colvin. I've really went to a rotation of more people that can shoot the ball because I think offensively that raises the value of Zach and that raises the value of Braden, how we piece things in.

I went with Trey Kaufman as a starter. Gives us another rebounder. Gives us another low post guy. If they're going to put a lot of attention to Zach, we post him and try to score the ball there. We don't go to him a lot. He'll definitely get more opportunity next year. But we go to him enough. If he's ready and going, we like that matchup, that really helps us.

I think the combination of all that really helps you. Then if you dove into what we do, you understand basketball, analytically we were doing some really good things, some really good things. We just were getting in moments in the NCAA tournament where we turned the basketball over, we shot high-value threes at a low percentage.

I don't care where you do that at. If you have a high level of turnovers and you go 4-21 from three, you better dominate that glass. There has to be some other stat that's just glaring where you're probably getting beat.

I don't neglect the defensive end, right, because obviously you got to be a good defensive team. At the end of the day, man, if you can't score 60 points in an NCAA tournament game, you don't deserve to win. We did that back-to-back years. With you had a top-five offense in the country when we did it.

We didn't, like, score 58 points in a NCAA tournament and we're the 126th best offense. We had the fourth best offense and can't score 60 points.

Just trying to keep working defensively but trying to really focus in on what's best for us offensively. There's times when you get at this level where you're going to struggle to stop somebody. If you can keep putting that ball in the basket, you can keep getting points and put that burden on your opposition, it's really going to help you.

**Q. Maybe a year or two ago, did you have to politic more on Zach's behalf about all the times that he's getting hammered in the lane, maybe all the way to the Big Ten office? Lastly, we know you're biased, but do you think he's officiated fairly now?**

MATT PAINTER: For him, the number one thing that I say

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

to officials when they talk to me, Now the rules are the same for everybody, right? That kind of stops and gets them to kind of reset their thinking. He can't get officiated any differently than someone who is 6'8", 210. He just can't. He's entitled to position.

They allow the bent elbow right there, so that's all you can give. You can't give two. That's always my argument point. I haven't got a technical in 10 years, so I try to be very diplomatic in my approach with it.

I also just want them to call it how they're calling it down there. Don't call it any differently. When he starts to get those fouls, he starts to get those things, is because they can't handle his strength and his size. I don't think we need to apologize for that.

That's always my fight. Call it the same way. He's so big... So think of it from this standpoint. 6'9", 250 is big. Seven inches shorter and 50 pounds lighter. Digest that for a little bit.

When you see a 6'7" guys and a 6' guy in a post-up, get him the ball, it's a mismatch. So let's all we're trying to do is get that mismatch with him and then be able to play from there.

What I try to do through our league office is no different than any other coach, if they understand what's going on, is not give my opinion about it, is get the clips so they physically see it and then ask questions. Do you think this is a foul? Do you think this is not a foul? What do you think is a foul?

'Cause my whole point to it is, I just want to go back and coach him and tell him what he can and he can't do so we're consistent. You're going to get a bad whistle. What they end up doing is the rules aren't the same and they pass on a lot of things.

He'll go and foul them at the other end, they'll lose their mind, it's a foul, he should be called for it, but they just passed on three. Now that's where the dilemma gets.

It's like if you've ever officiated before, when you start to let things go, you're going to have a problem because now you're like, Damn, I let that go, now I got to let this go. That.

When you miss one as an official, you got to stop it right away. You got to get the next one. No matter who it's against or for, any of that, because now when you get into that game, it's too much. When they say, Hey, let the players play, that's a ridiculous statement to me. Let the players play. No, what they say is a foul should be called

and what is not a foul should be left alone.

If you can get to that consistency. When you communicate that with good officials, like it's easy, it's really easy. When you communicate with guys that really don't understand -- you'd be surprised at the guys that don't do their homework. The good ones do their homework. They get a couple opponents, they're traveling, they're watching clips, they're watching things. They're watching guys who flop and flail, do all those type of things.

I like my conversations with good officials. I don't like my conversations with guys that don't do their homework and don't understand.

THE MODERATOR: We want to thank Coach Painter for sharing his conversations with us this afternoon.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports