

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship - Final Four: Alabama vs UConn

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Phoenix, Arizona, USA

State Farm Stadium

## Alabama Crimson Tide

## Coach Nate Oats

### Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Alabama head coach Nate Oats.

Coach, can you please give us an opening statement.

NATE OATS: It's great to be here. Very fortunate that I'm able to coach at a place like Romulus that gives us the resources to be able to make a run like this.

I mean, shoot, a lot of reminiscing over the last week as people were asking me, 11 years ago I was coaching high school basketball, just getting to know the Hurley brothers pretty well.

It's ironic that my first Final Four that I make, the first one Alabama makes, coaching against Danny Hurley, brother Bobby is the one that got me in this business. If it wasn't for Danny and Bobby, I wouldn't be here. We're playing each other in Bobby's town down here in Phoenix. Kind of funny how it comes full circle.

It would be nice if I wasn't having to play against Danny's team because it's a pretty good team.

We've been underdogs kind of through this tournament. Nobody expected us to be here at this point. Last year we had the No. 1 overall seed. That's the nature of the season. One-game elimination tournament. The best team doesn't always win. That happened last year. We've been able to make a run now and we're going to have our team ready to go Saturday night. We know we have a daunting task in front of us.

Me and Danny talked earlier in the week. We're going to have fun. He's ultracompetitive, as I'm sure you all know. Not quite sure what happened with the plane. Wasn't me. I didn't send anybody over there to mess with the mechanics. I'm sure he's conjured that up in his head

already (smiling).

I did get a good night's sleep last night, so that's nice. I'm sure he'll be fired up and ready to go Saturday. It will be fun. We'll touch base after the game.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, our first question...

**Q. How many hours of sleep did you get?**

NATE OATS: I got a solid seven to eight hours in a bed, not on a plane.

**Q. They got in at 3:13.**

NATE OATS: That's not -- I am glad I'm not the ops person for the University of Connecticut basketball team during this trip, that's for sure.

**Q. How do you approach this? Nobody is picking you guys to win. You're a heavy underdog. How are you approaching this with your group right now?**

NATE OATS: Listen, we were an underdog. Nobody expected us to be here. We weren't playing our best basketball coming into the regular season. Now part of that is we weren't healthy. The last time we had our full team healthy, we beat a really good A&M team 100 to 75.

We had to sell our guys that we can make the run before the tournament. Now that we made the run, get to the Final Four, I want our guys playing loose and free, but I want them thinking they got a chance to win.

If you know me, I'm not going into this game just happy to be here. UConn is great. Danny has done a great job. As Danny said, they're bulletproof. Other teams have been up on them, going on runs. The problem is, they go on a huge run as evidenced by the last game, 30-0. They make these enormous runs.

We're going to show our guys success other teams have had. The success that other teams have had, we also do those things very well. We just can't give them these big runs that everybody gives up.

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It's a lot easier said than done. I mean, over 40 minutes, we're going to be in there, we got a chance. We played some of the best teams in the country. We didn't win in the non-conference against some of the best teams, but we had margins. We were up at least six on all three of those games. When we played Purdue, Creighton, Arizona, we were up at least six with at least a 75% chance of winning each game in the second half. We played good teams and been up on 'em. We can go back to that. We just got to close out 40 minutes.

**Q. What elements of UConn Hurley basketball are present in Alabama basketball? In general, what do you tell your team about playing against a supreme shot-blocker?**

NATE OATS: I mean, the similarities, Danny, everybody makes it out to be like we're the ones doing all the analytics and efficiency. Danny is about that stuff, too. Me and Danny have talked about it. They're trying to get the most efficient shots they can. Trying to force inefficient shots. They do it a little bit differently because they have a post player in Clingan they can go to. We don't play through the post as much.

They like to shoot a lot of threes, too. Every big run I've seen them make, they made plenty of threes. They take threes in the break, like we take 'em.

Now, we play a little more loose and free in the halfcourt. They're a little more set oriented. They're going to run a set every time they don't score quickly in a transition break. Our guys play a little bit more in a flow.

Probably a lot more similarities than there are differences. He does a good job with the sets. And then obviously attacking Clingan. Well, Illinois tried to go right at him, and I think they were 0-19 on shots that Clingan contested. Probably not the best plan of attack. We have played against Edey, we played against Kalkbrenner, we played against Jonas Aidoo at Tennessee. We played against some real shot-blockers. We've had some success with them.

Can you pull them away from the rim? We can play Grant Nelson at the five some, if he's making shots. There's other things you can do. But we certainly aren't going to just drive the ball at him and expect to score over the top of him all night. That didn't seem to work very well their last game out.

**Q. You talked about reminiscing over the last several days. When you think back to that time in your career, were you happy being a high school coach for the rest**

**of your career, or were you grinding every day to strive to get opportunities to do something like this?**

NATE OATS: That's a good question.

So when I took the job at 27, I'd been a Division III assistant for five years. I think I would have taken any Division I assistant job anywhere in the country. Didn't really matter. Just to be at this level.

As I stayed at Romulus longer and longer, I was getting more and more picky where I'd go. I had three daughters that were born right outside of Detroit there. I didn't want to have to move my family. Really the Hurley family kind of helped me come to grips in my head with I'll be okay just being here the rest of my life. We were successful at Romulus. We were winning. Good retirement plan as a schoolteacher.

I had interviewed at a few different schools in the MAC, didn't get 'em, just wasn't right, been promised a job that didn't come through when they had an opening. Could be frustrating.

I come to grips. If Bob Hurley Sr. can be a Hall of Fame coach, multiple Division I head coaching jobs that he turned down to stay at St. Anthony's -- and we were nowhere near St. Anthony's at Romulus. I'm not trying to compare the two programs. But the fact that he stayed at the high school level, everybody knew him, he was great.

I could stay here and be a very successful basketball coach and be happy with it. Seems like every time you kind of get that way in life, a pretty good opportunity comes up.

Kind of when I got to the point I was working hard, I wasn't just grinding to get to a college job. Let's do this the best I can because that's the way we should do it. Then I had a pretty good opportunity come up, Bobby Hurley offered me a spot.

I got to the point I was not going to go into college if I wasn't pretty confident the guy I was going in with was going to be successful. I was pretty confident the Hurley family was going to be successful, Bobby Hurley being part of it, was going to be successful in his college coaching. I didn't want to have to move getting fired year after year after year. I've been fortunate, we haven't been fired anywhere yet.

**Q. You talk about your background. I think four out of the top five scorers on your roster transferred from mid-majors. Do you think that kind of player is a little more hungry, more appreciative that there's something**



**about that journey that makes those players in some ways tougher?**

NATE OATS: I think so. I feel like I'm a little bit the same way. I'm just a high school guy that caught a break that's still trying to prove that I belong at this level.

I think those guys are mid-major players with a chip on their shoulder. They played well enough that now they get an opportunity to prove that they belong at this level, and they're still trying to prove it to this day. They're going to try to prove it Saturday that they belong at this level.

Look at a kid like Mark Sears, from the state of Alabama, we probably screwed up and didn't offer him a scholarship. No probably about it, we screwed up. He's obviously good enough. But I'm not sure he would be this good if he didn't have to go to Ohio University first before he came here 'cause he is a kid that's improved every single year.

Out of high school he had to go to Hargrave. He has to go to Ohio. Didn't shoot well as a freshman, got to prove he's a shooter. Plays well. We take him. He ends up being our second leading scorer. Now this year he's our leading scorer and he's improved every year.

They all have a chip on their shoulder. Estrada from Hofstra, Player of the Year, great league there. He didn't play a ton at Oregon. Now he's proven he can do it at this level on a team that can win and go to the Final Four. Grant Nelson and Wrightsell, even Nick Pringle started at Wofford, only played in half the games his freshman year at Wofford.

I think all these guys are trying to prove they belong at this level, just like I am, to be honest with you.

**Q. There's a stat that came out that over the last few years the Final Four coaches have an average of 20 years of experience as a head coach. I believe yours is nine in Division I. How many people have said to you that you can't do it this way, your route was different? What do you say to those people that there are different routes to take to get to the Final Four?**

NATE OATS: Yeah, there's definitely a different route. Mine is a lot different than most. I was at Romulus. Danny being at St. Benedict's, Kevin being at Hargrave, and Romulus is a little different. It's cool we were all in high school. Mine was a little more like the traditional high school. Had you to live in Romulus to go to Romulus.

I think it gives some hope and belief for just the normal high school coach out there, maybe not the high school coach that's on this national level recruiting nationally.

I wouldn't trade my route for anything 'cause I got experience at that in different ways like a lot of these coaches don't get. If you haven't coached at a high school level, you have no idea what it's like to be on the other side of the recruiting level. I had 18 kids go play Division I. I took a lot of them on visits. I took E.C. Matthews on an unofficial visit to Rhode Island, drove him out there from Detroit to Rhode Island, sat in on all the meetings.

I know what it's like to sit on that side of it, so I can use that to apply. I'm able to experiment with how I play. If your first head coaching job ever is Division I level, there's a big spotlight on you, you can't experiment as much.

One year we pressed the whole year, found out what worked, didn't work. If you do that at this level, do that, you may get fired after a year. If they fire me from being a coach at Romulus, it only takes like \$4,000. I'm still good as a teacher. I still got my math job.

I was able to experiment a little bit more, coming up that way. I think it gives me a different perspective on some things. But I'm here. To those that say you can't do it, it's definitely harder, but you can't do it, I just did it. You got to catch some breaks. If I had some secret formula, I'd write a book and make millions, retire from coaching. You got to catch a lot of breaks. But you got to be ready for your breaks when they're given to you, too.

Yeah, I mean, I'm thankful to be here. Grateful I worked at Buffalo under an A.D. that took a chance. He's now in the SEC, Danny White is at Tennessee. He gave me a job after being there for two years. I was only out of high school for two years.

I know I'm fortunate. I worked for different people, caught different breaks that a lot of people don't get. There's a lot of high school coaches that are just as good if not better than me, but just haven't had a break that I've been able to have.

**Q. What made you want to recruit Aaron Estrada? How does NIL help someone like him change he and his mom's life? He talked about how much NIL has allowed him to support her.**

NATE OATS: I mean, Aaron is an unbelievable kid, a great player. I coached at a level similar to what the CAA is to MAC and the CAA are similar levels. When I got the job at Alabama, the best player in the MAC could definitely have played for us at Alabama for sure just about every year. You find a Player of the Year back-to-back years in a league as good as the CAA, like we knew, and we had a third-party analytics company that helps us evaluate

transfers. He was like the best guard in the portal that we could get for how we want to play. He's proven to be pretty good. He's got a triple-double. You think about all the pros we've had since we've been at Alabama. It's only the second triple-double we've had. Kira Lewis had the first one.

He's played great.

As far as the NIL goes, you go from Hofstra to a place like Alabama, there's opportunities for a lot of NIL, more than there was at Hofstra. For him to be able to bring his mother down to as many games as they did, help her...

I did an in-home visit in the Philly area with him and his mom. It kind of talk to back to my Romulus days. I used to go to all my players' houses. It was cool to kind of be in there and know that he could support his mom. I mean, she's a great lady. I love seeing her at all the games. She's super nice.

Yeah, he's able to help her with what he can, bring her to games. The NCAA is great. They provide the money to bring the families to the Final Four. Now with NIL, the kids can bring their parents to all the NCAA tournaments, Spokane, L.A., they can fly them up to Toronto when we play Purdue.

**Q. Can you put into words what Mark Sears has meant to the team's success?**

NATE OATS: Well, obviously he's our leading scorer, top five offense in the country. A lot of the year we were the number one offense in the country. He's a huge part of that. We wouldn't be where we're at without him. We know that. Offensively he's been one of the best players in the country all year.

We would not be in the Final Four if it wasn't not for Mark Sears' defense, leadership. Like, he's turned it around a lot in that regard in the last month. I think he made a decision, he wants to play as long as possible this year, wants to put himself on a national stage.

The only way we're going to do that is if our best players are locked into the defensive end of the floor. He's locked in and proved he can be a great guard defender. He's doing it. We need him to do it on Saturday night again 'cause he's got to play. Our best player on offense. He's going to play a lot of minutes.

When your best player's playing really hard on defense, leading the way he's been for these last few weeks, you got a chance to make a special run like we've done.

**Q. You've talked all tournament the philosophy of next, next, next. Can you expand a bit on the different things that might mean to you on a practice level, game level, season level? How hard is it to trust that process in a single-elimination tournament?**

NATE OATS: Yeah, so I talked to Coach Saban after we lost in the SEC tournament. I think just about every year he won a national championship, they lost some point during the year. Football is obviously different. There's a lot more games than basketball.

Like this year they lost the Texas game. He did an unbelievable job getting the season turned around. I called him, How do we get this thing turned around this late? We're not playing our best basketball.

He watches all the games. Coach, guys got to go to the next play.

We talked about that a little bit as a group. We're going to make this real simple, we're going to come in and we're just 'next'. It goes all kinds of different ways.

Like I said, we had the number one offense for a bulk of this year this year until the injuries came. But sometimes we'd be on a big run, be up on a team big, we'd relax on defense. It even happened to us in the NCAA tournament. Got up 31 on Charleston, relaxed over the last seven minutes, they outscored us by 18. We did a pretty good job of 'next' until then, then we didn't.

It's also been the other way. We'll have some offensive struggles, guys will drop their heads, they're thinking about the last play on offense instead of the next play on defense. It's the next action within the play. It's the next play no matter what happens on offense, good or bad. Bad call by a referee, teammate misses you on an open kick-out. It doesn't matter, just go to the next play and give everything you have to the next play. When we're done with this game, move to the next game.

I think it's great philosophy in life. There's a lot of adversity you hit in life. Move to what's the next best action. We go through all kinds of things in life. Move to the next one and make that the best one.

You live in the past, you're not going to be very good in the present. We've been trying to move to the next play, the next action, the next timeout, next, next, next. Our guys have been doing a pretty good job of it the last four games.

**Q. You're 105th in adjusted defensive efficiency in KenPom. Your team's defensive capability or lack thereof is what it is. When you face UConn, as a**

**coach, with your staff, are you going to lean in on everything possible that you have offensively knowing that you have certain limitations, what data says? How do you prepare this team after seeing UConn essentially eviscerate teams in the tournament?**

NATE OATS: We have a third-party analytics company that does a great job. We look at KenPom a lot, Bart Torvik. We look at a lot of them here and there.

Bart Torvik has one that you could put in a set number of games. If you look at our four games in the NCAA tournament, we're not close to 105th. Do you know what we are?

**Q. (No microphone.)**

NATE OATS: You should look at just the tournament. If you looked at the four games in the tournament and took the part, look, we did a very bad job once we got up 31 on Charleston. We relaxed. If you take out those seven minutes, where they outscored us by 18 after we got up 31, you could probably do it.

I should ask our third-party analytics company, SSI, to do it. I believe, like, our defense is top 30. We're not going to assume we're a terrible defensive team and try to outscore UConn. I think that's a recipe for disaster. They're too good on both sides of the ball.

I will say we -- basically our mindset with these guys have been, Guys, if we're back healthy and have the number one offense in the country like we had when we were healthy, and we can be a top 20 to 30 defense, we can make a Final Four run.

Forget it. We're not fixing the 105. There's not enough games left. Forget that, let's lock in, we're going to do everything we can in those games.

We did give our guys after the first week of the tournament, in the last two games we were, whatever it was, 30 something I think it was. I haven't run it yet. I've been a little bit too busy. We have our hands full with UConn.

You can run it quick. I should have had it run. Our offense has to be great, we know that, against a very good defense from UConn. But we are going to try to be as good as we can possibly be on defense. I just don't think you can try to beat UConn 120 to 118. That's probably not going to be a good idea.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

NATE OATS: Thanks. Appreciate you guys. Roll Tide.

