

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

Thursday, April 4, 2024

Phoenix, Arizona, USA

State Farm Stadium

UConn Huskies

Coach Dan Hurley

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're joined by UConn Head Coach Hurley. We'll ask Coach to begin with an opening statement.

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, just wanted to thank the folks, the welcoming committee, the great people of Phoenix that met us when we got in. To stay out there for us really made it really special.

My brother was right: incredible people out here in this Phoenix area. I know he loves it out here.

Then thank Dan Gavitt for being out there. Always been great to me. We appreciated that welcome yesterday.

THE MODERATOR: First question...

Q. How was your flight?

DAN HURLEY: You know what, it was nice (smiling). You know what, a lot of thoughts because I've had a lot of time to think just in a stationary situation.

I think what goes through your mind once you're done kind of complaining and cursing and muttering, you just start saying to yourself like you don't really deserve to show entitlement. Such an honor to get a chance, once-in-a-lifetime experience to play in a Final Four, coach in a Final Four; that once that kind of edge wore off, lucky to be here. We're lucky to get an opportunity to come play in the Final Four.

Who doesn't deal with problems with the airlines? I mean, people deal with it during the holidays. It's something that you just got to get through.

But it sucked.

Q. Can you give us your take on what you've seen from the women's team, if you've been able to watch them, what they've been able to do.

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, just to see it in the building, 'cause you walk by the training room and they got, like, a top-five team in the country that's hurt, not playing. I mean, it's why Geno is one of the best coaches of his generation.

Obviously Paige and the crew, it's special. To do it with everything that they've dealt with the last two years, it's incredible. Just speaks to a level of Geno and his staff, UConn women's basketball, why they've been the premier program in the country.

Q. You look terrific for somebody that didn't get any sleep. Terrific.

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I got two on the plane, then I got another two at the hotel.

Q. You look good.

DAN HURLEY: Caffeine. That's why God made caffeine.

Q. Everybody is talking about your team. This one's a layup, you're going to beat Alabama no problem. You kind of make up some stuff to motivate your team. What have you made up so far to motivate your group?

DAN HURLEY: I don't think you -- at this point, with what Alabama has shown, in terms of what they're capable of to beat a No. 1 seed in North Carolina, just with how good their offense is, I mean, it will be the best offense that we've guarded this year. It's as good as Illinois was. This is better just 'cause they're deeper, just more athletic, more guards that can break you down.

Look, we've lost three games. We got crushed at Creighton. At Seton Hall we got our butt kicked, too. If we're not on our identity, we're vulnerable like everybody else.

Again, if we play elite offense, elite defense and beat you on the backboard, we're tough to beat.

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Q. In the past you've said you prefer not to, for instance, play against your brother at Arizona State or former teams, guys you know well. Does Nate fall into that purview?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I mean, he definitely fits into the category. I would say you would rather not play Bob or Nate or anyone that you're close to maybe in the first round of the tournament, or maybe in an Elite Eight game.

This one I think I'm excited to compete against a friend in such a big spot. This is like the Final Four. I think it kind of changes it a little bit for me because we've both done something incredible with the season. Somebody that I really care about is going to play for a national championship, preferably me. I also care about Nate, too, to a much lesser degree.

Q. When you look at the people that have won back-to-back, Billy Donovan said he reached out to Bill Belichick. Who have you reached out to, studied on how to sustain success?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, Billy Donovan, I got talking to him immediately really a week after the season ended last year. I kind of hit that emotional crash when it's over and it doesn't feel like maybe what you thought it would in terms of that sustained euphoria. Kind of disappeared quickly.

We talked a lot about that, just the emotions of it all. Then the mindset with the team. The difference is, I had a whole new team basically. Coach K and Billy Donovan, the last two coaches to do it, they returned pretty much intact an entire, dominant team.

We've done this while losing five of our top seven, or whatever it was, scorers and only taking one in the portal. So doing it through player development, been doing it through trusting freshmen, strategic portal, it was different.

I tell you what, we did talk about, like, reigning and defending more than I was told to. Actually, we talked a lot about with Tristen, Donovan and A.K., Karaban, was like you have a chance to make history at a place that's impossible to make history. That was probably what we leaned into a lot with that returning core that could have been complacent because been there, done that. Final Four, national championships, I did it already, why do I go to push so hard? You got a chance to make history at a place that's impossible to make history.

Q. In a Final Four that's got a bunch of really unique big guys, what makes your guy special?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I just think his impact all over the court, because he moves so well, he's got such great mobility, Donovan. He's got the motor and the feel. He can really pass. We can move him around offensively in terms of five out, passing out of the post if he commands a double-team. He's devastating in the ball screen game because he puts so much pressure on the rim as a roller, changes the gravity of the court that way.

Obviously running the court in transition. The threes that he creates in the driving lanes because of his presence is a game changer. On the defensive end is where he's at his best. He can get up in ball screen defense, slow a guard's momentum down, but still deal with the roller, which is going to be critical tomorrow.

Just when you're 7'2", 260 and move like that, that's why it's not bad for honorable mention All-Big East.

Q. You have talked at times about things you do to distract yourself, such as yoga. Took up painting at one time. When you were stationary for seven hours, what did you do to pass the time last night?

DAN HURLEY: I mean, I ruminated a lot. I spiraled. I had my head in my hands a lot. I know Andrea storied that pose yesterday.

The toughest part, we got a chance to go home, which was nice. We sent the guys back to campus because then we were going to leave at 11:30. It was a real mindful exercise from 11:30 to like 1:45 on the tarmac. It was therapeutic to watch the deicing out the window. That was probably the best part of it (smiling).

Q. You last year beat people badly in the playoffs. This year you're beating people worse than last year. What's enabled you guys to sustain that level of play and not literally have any close games?

DAN HURLEY: Just to have a special group of players that have that combination of talent and humility, a willingness to not make it about themselves, a commitment to both ends of the court, doing what's in the best interest of the team, making the hustle and effort plays on the backboard, preparing the right way.

From a coaching staff standpoint, a player standpoint, getting the absolute perfect group of people around you.

This tournament is the hardest thing to do. I mean, you could see it. The programs, the best resources, biggest brands, have a hard time getting here because of the changes in the game recently.

We've made an incredibly hard tournament to advance in look easy. Probably a lot easier than it really is.

Q. As you watched the deicing solution wash over the plane, knowing how you are wired, your players landed at about 6:15 body clock time, East Coast time, what adjustments have you made, if any, to get them prepped? What adjustments you have you made?

DAN HURLEY: We pushed things back a little bit, maybe like an hour and 15 today. The guys were able to sleep in a little bit. We did our same routine. We did our video at the hotel. We knew we only had an hour and a half on the court, so it was important to take advantage of shooting, get a little bit of live play so we could get adjusted to a much, much bigger setting.

We obviously took a little bit off the practice plan. Just make sure that we do a little bit less tonight, let these guys get their rest.

I mean, listen, these guys were getting in a van driving 14 hours to the Peach Jam, playing two hours later. There's no excuses. I mean, shit, I was driving a mini cheese bus to prep school games not too long ago.

We're in the Final Four here, man, with a chance to advance, to repeat as national champions, make history. We're way past that shit.

Q. Nate was in here earlier and said that getting to know the Hurleys, especially your dad, sort of made him realize that if he never advanced beyond becoming a high school coach, that was okay. What was it about him that the Hurleys liked?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, he was running a college program in high school, just like my dad. If you went and watched St. Anthony's, the way the program functioned from the pregame meal that my dad was literally cooking on his own, to game day shootarounds, film session. The quality of what my dad was doing at the high school level was the quality of what the top programs in college were doing. Obviously based on the resources available, right?

That was the thing I noticed about Nate when we recruited E.C. was like this guy's wired different, number one. Different level of energy about him. Just the way he shows up when you meet him. Then just the way he ran his program.

I went and watched them the Florida State tournament game. One of the most detailed video scouts that you'll see. In the back they had spaghetti cooking on the stove. You could see he was a high-level guy that just happened

to be coaching in college [sic].

Q. Around the time that you got to UConn, there were some pretty well-documented financial issues for the athletic department. When you look at the way things have changed over the time you've been there, what has that been like to see some of that growth and change?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, even going back to the '90s when you'd pull up to campus, see how the university has changed into just a world-class university, incredible campus, how Storrs as a college town has really elevated.

I think when you get your program playing back to top of the sport and you find yourself on these big stages, there's obviously opportunity for the university to take advantage of these things.

What we did last year, what we've done this year, the attention that the men's and women's get, yeah, the university's got to figure out every way to capitalize.

Q. We got a Big East team in the Final Four here. We got a Big East team in the championship game of the NIT. What does that say about the Big East? Did the NCAA tournament screw up by not allowing Seton Hall in this tournament?

DAN HURLEY: I'm trying to move on, man. It's like you people are trying to...

Listen, Shaheen, he's just an awesome coach. The NIT has been a blast. I got a chance to watch a bunch of the games. That Indiana-Cincinnati game, I watched that one night. That was an incredible game. Some of those NIT games have been awesome.

I mean, listen, you saw our Big East tournament games, you saw a game begins St. John's. You saw what Seton Hall did to us in the regular season. You saw the season that Providence had. Those teams that could have, should have been in the tournament.

Obviously there's things that we got to do as a league better. You got to look in the mirror, too, across the board. You got to win non-conference games. Win big non-conference games. You can't lose bye games, like nobody. Can't do stuff like that, too. As a whole, in the entire league, it's got to come through in the non-conference.

Obviously there were more teams deserving. A lot of teams, there were some bids that were stolen. Listen, some of our hardest games this year have obviously come

in the Big East. So, yeah, you said it.

Q. Full circleness of Bobby here. He said yesterday that he'd roll out the red carpet for you guys. Can you talk about the full circleness of him trying to go back to back as a player, you guys now being back to back Final Fours here, doing it in Bobby's college town?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, it's awesome to be out here. I see why Bob loves it so much. Obviously, the time I'll spend with him the next couple days, him sabotaging these other programs for me at his site there is going to give me a distinct advantage, too, which I appreciate from big bro.

Yeah, you see why he loves it here. You see why he values his job here. I think when he's in a position to have all the resources that a lot of us at this Final Four have, when he has that at his full disposal, he'll be up on this dais and I'll be supporting him.

Q. Last week you sang the praises of Tristen Newton being one of the greatest guards in UConn history. Do you think he's playing better this year than last year? Do you feel he's made a big step from last year when he was great to this year?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, he's made a big step. A lot more on his shoulders from a leadership point. Adama. Andre Jackson is like one of the great leaders in sports of all time. Adama led like few men could lead, that guy. Hawk was quietly a tough guy with obviously game-changing abilities. Joey California, Nahiem Alleyne, they were like men, great rotation pieces.

Tristen lost so much of his wing men, had to assume so much responsibility. Last year he was a fourth starter, fifth starter to now the driving force behind this team.

With the guys that chose to come back, like Donovan who could have been a top 20 pick but came back, now it looks like that bet on himself and us is going to pay off in terms of where his draft stock is.

Tristen, this is the exactly the way we told Tristen exactly after the draft combine, every reason why he should come back to school has absolutely come to fruition. You just love when it works out that way. It makes obviously that bond between you greater. It's going to help in recruiting.

He is, his career as a guard at UConn, again, I don't know what happens from here with him, I think he's got a great chance to play in the NBA for a while, but guards having worn the uniform with what he's done in terms of winning and accolades, it's tough to beat his two years of accomplishments.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

DAN HURLEY: Thank you.

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