

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

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State Farm Stadium

NC State Wolfpack Coach Kevin Keatts DJ Burns Jr.

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Coach, do you want good give everybody your thoughts for this morning, then we'll take questions.

KEVIN KEATTS: Excited to be back in front of you. I think I got to take this time before I get started, our women's team is playing today in Cleveland against a very good South Carolina team. I want to wish Coach Moore and the Lady Wolfpack really good luck. Really good team. I've enjoyed their season and watching them. Can't wait to watch them play today. On that part of it, Go, Pack.

Our guys, we're excited about the opportunity, as you guys know. I think it's starting to sink in with some of our guys that there's only four teams left in the entire country, and we're one of those teams.

Looking forward for the opportunity to play against a really good Purdue team. Well-coached, really good basketball players. So looking forward to obviously our last opportunity to practice today, then the game tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. First question...

Q. Three high school coaches in this Final Four. I'm curious, how inspiring do you think that is for other high school coaches watching the journey of yourself, Hurley and Nate Oats? Is it more challenging coaching high school than even coaching at this level?

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, I think it shows you that you can get a foundation from anywhere, and you got to start somewhere. Like, I hope this is inspiring any high school, any AAU coach that thinks he can't make it to this level to be able to coach.



Some of the best coaches in the world are high school guys. They're doing the same thing that we're doing, but they're not making a lot of money to do it. At that level, some coaches get a stipend or maybe \$2,000, \$2,500 to do their job, and they do it for the love of the game. I think that's what is so special about it.

I hope I'm an inspiration to anyone sitting there thinking they can't make it, because they can. The other two guys, too.

I'm not sure why Painter didn't start at high school. We got to have a conversation with him about that.

Q. Did you ever come to this event to network?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, absolutely. I came here when I was at Hargrave Military Academy plenty of times. I was doing it in a different way. I was trying to network in case they had a kid that didn't make it, send them to prep school for me. But also for future opportunities.

Q. When you were at Hargrave, you had everybody coming to recruit your players. What did you learn about the recruiting process and how to be a good recruiter from the people who were coming to try to get your players?

KEVIN KEATTS: I learned that you needed right away to run a good program. We were a military school, not the most popular place for kids to come. We were able to convince some guys to come through Hargrave, obviously take care of academics, then have a chance to be recruited at a high level.

We were averaging 10 or 11 Division I players per year. We saw who's who of college basketball.

When I first got my first college job, kind of had a cheat sheet because I knew everybody's sales pitch, what they were talking about. When I went to Marshall, I knew every mid-major coach, what he was talking about their program, doing the same thing when I went to Louisville as assistant coach.

I learned so much. I learned how to recruit. But I also was able to watch some guys who came to recruit our guys and be able to see how they interacted, what they did.

I wouldn't pass that experience for anything. It was really a great experience for me. It was a great foundation to help me grow to where I'm at today.

Q. How would you describe what Jayden Taylor has provided for you guys.

KEVIN KEATTS: That's a great question.

Probably a little bit unsung hero. He started for us. He's coming off the bench. He's been really, really good for us defensively. I think he's one of the guys that really anchors our defense, get involved.

He's had some stretches that may have not been talked about like some of the other guys. He's had five or six games where I thought he really played well.

He's really grown. When he came here, he was trying to do too much. Now he's comfortable in what he's doing, handling the basketball, getting on in transition.

I'll tell you what, he's another guy that has been so important to our run.

Q. What are you doing to not only let your team enjoy the fun but keep your team focused on the main goal?

KEVIN KEATTS: We have less cameras on us now. They film each other every day. That changes. It used to be different. When you got Snapchat, Instagram, these guys are so used to being in front of a camera.

They're okay with it. We're going to enjoy it because I've asked them to. I talked about yesterday being 50/50, business and pleasure. Today we should be 75 or so. If you see somebody that's having too much fun, it's supposed to be 75% today business and 25% fun.

But I think our guys enjoy it. I'm happy to see some of those guys. I have to go back and look at a couple of 'em because I'm not sure they should be dancing in front of the camera because a couple of those guys can't dance (smiling).

Q. Statistically the Wolfpack entering the tournament, one of the lower-ranked rebounding teams in the conference. Entering the tournament we've seen the team rebounding as a whole take a step. Do you feel the emphasis on that during both the ACC tournament and throughout the tournament has helped create

opportunities on the offensive end, has helped contribute to your defense stifling opponents during this run?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, we had a couple things we really needed to correct. One of them was rebounding. Obviously we try to win the turnover battle by forcing steals. But we were giving up a lot of offensive rebounds, so we were losing the battle because people had second-chance points.

Going into the post-season we wanted to clean up our transition defense, which we thought wasn't very good. Rebounding was another one. Then being really stingy defensively in guarding the three-point line. I think those three focuses are the reason why we're here today because we got better in those areas.

Q. You got a lot of transfers on your team this year. Take me back to the summer, when they all sort of arrived, how did all that work in regards to getting those guys to know each other well? How did all that work out?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, we have seven transfers and one freshman. I'm trying to figure out, like, how to get some type of chemistry in the summertime. Fortunate for us the year before we took a foreign trip to Bahamas, had 10 days of practice, a chance to play against really good teams.

We didn't have that this year. So we did a lot of team-bonding things. We went back to my old stomping grounds Wilmington, North Carolina, three or four days there. Doing stuff on the beach, hanging out and practicing down there.

We tried to create some type of chemistry because I'm one of those coaches that feels like if you have great chemistry off the court, you're going to have it on the court.

We did a lot of team-building things. We brought some people in to talk about our team, talk about teamwork, all of that stuff.

Q. Diarra is observing Ramadan this month. He's very devoted to his faith. Would you say that is a reflection of who he is as a teammate and as a player?

KEVIN KEATTS: He's amazing. He has stayed very true to his faith and true to his teammates. Like, what he's doing now is incredible. The numbers that he's putting up, obviously how he's playing, the personality that he's become, how he's working with his team, going through everything that he's going through and being able to perform at the highest level, that says a lot about his

character.

It's funny. I've seen him grow from the time that he's gotten here to now. It's been an amazing journey to watch him come out of his shell.

Q. Do you consider yourself a Cinderella given your seed or do you not, considering what conference you belong to?

KEVIN KEATTS: We don't. I mean, we play in the best conference in college basketball. We know that. I would say this, it's weird to say this, is when we were 11 seed and we played Texas Tech, who is a 6 seed, I really didn't think it was fair to either team. If I'm Texas Tech, I'm like, Why do I as a 6 seed play against NC State? I'm saying to myself, With the run that we had, I thought we could be possibly 8 or 9 seed going into the tournament.

You don't win five games in five days and beat the teams that you beat, then get an 11 seed. Which is fine. We're happy to be here. But I don't think that we're a Cinderella. I think if you ask anyone that we played, they would probably say the same thing.

If that's what it takes, we'll be okay. I will say this to you. Round of 16 we were possibly ranked the 16th team. Round of Elite Eight, we're the 8 team. Final Four we're the 4 team. It's kind of worked out for us.

We'll take whatever name that we get. We believe. Obviously we came here to have the opportunity to cut the nets down not as a Cinderella. We'll take whatever they give us.

Q. Have you been to Arizona before? What are your thoughts? How special is it to the team to be traveling so far coast to coast?

KEVIN KEATTS: I have been to Arizona before. I love it. This is great. I will take this moment to say that everybody here in Arizona has been tremendous to us. We've become more of the fan favorite. DJ Burns has become more of the fan favorite.

But I love it here. I mean, number one, we've had great weather. I'm one of those guys, if you give me great weather, I'm already going to love you a lot.

But it's been a great place. The folks here that are running everything have taken care of us in the right way. They've got one more job to do, they got to help us get a win, then I really tell you how much I love it (smiling).

Q. You just mentioned DJ. All of the attention, hoopla

around him, does it remind you a little bit of the attention that Zion Williamson got a couple years ago? Is that the depth of it? How is he handling it? Are you worried he could get overwhelmed by it?

KEVIN KEATTS: No. I would say this. When Zion was here, I never paid any attention to it. I don't know if I even went to that Final Four.

I can talk about DJ. I think he's handling it great. This is who he is. He's eating the stuff up. He'll be up here beside me and he'll be smiling and he'll be laughing.

But he's a tremendous personality. I said this to all of our players before we got here. March is for the players. Now I got to say the same thing about April. It's for the players.

As coaches, I'm going to pull the strings and I'm going to sub some guys in. You make your name in the NCAA tournament as a player and personality. It's just so many personalities that I've seen over the years in this tournament. DJ Burns is one of the biggest personalities that we're ever going to meet.

Q. DJ Horne obviously transferred from ASU. When you were looking at him in the portal, what things stood out?

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, it was two things. He's a hometown guy. Getting him back to Raleigh, I thought that was very important. But his ability to score the basketball. We lost Terquavion Smith and Jarkel Joiner who were really good players, led us to the NCAA last year. I had to go out, I knew I couldn't replace both of those guys, but I had to go out and try to replace one.

When we looked in the portal, I watched enough stuff, synergy on DJ, I knew he could be a guy that could come in.

We talked about our system. He averaged about 12, 13 points a game. I knew our system would be able to add four or five points to his average.

So excited to have him. I thank you guys for giving him to us. We needed him. He's done a great job for us.

THE MODERATOR: We'll welcome in DJ Burns at this time.

KEVIN KEATTS: DJ, DJ, DJ (laughter).

There he is.

Q. In your opinion, there's a lot of parallels between

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this team and the 1983 championship squad. What kind of presence have any of those guys had with this team? How do you go about making your own history this weekend?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, I think they've had a great influence on our team because they are willing to share their knowledge and their love and talk about their team in '83. Like when you hear their stories, it's unbelievable. Not only the '83 team, but the '74 team, too. We had a banquet where we had a chance to sit there and listen to those guys and guys like Tommy Burleson, David Thompson, just to share their story.

I hear from all of those guys through text messages or a phone call. Is it the same? I don't know, I wasn't there. I do think our guys are creating their own situation. But we will be blessed. If you get a chance to be mentioned in the same sentence with the '83 team, that's not a bad thing. That's actually a great thing. But I do think we're creating our own moments.

Q. About the portal, you've seen the evolution of it. Bottom line, has this made your life as a head coach, recruiter, easier or it's been a headache? It's more complex than that I know, but...

KEVIN KEATTS: I'd say both. I wish that we didn't have to, as we're in this greatest event that we're in, deal with the portal. I wish it was a little bit later. But I'm also a coach that believes that if there are opportunities for guys to leave, and they want to, then let 'em leave.

Like, I don't ever want a player to be in my program that doesn't want to be there. I think you get the best out of anybody who is dedicated, committed, wants to play for Kevin Keatts, wants to play for NC State. If someone is unhappy with that, certainly you don't want that part of it.

I go back and forth with it. I like the portal a lot. I wish we didn't have to deal with it at this time.

We've done pretty good in the portal, so I'm excited about it. I got this young man out of the portal. All five of our starters are from the portal. I got to be a big fan of it.

But I do say this to you. You have to be careful who you get from the portal. You have to get guys who fit into what you believe in and trust in and have the same vision that you have as a coach.

Q. You are on this big stage, playing in the Final Four. You have to focus on what is ahead. You want to win the game. At the same time you're at the Final Four. You got to be grateful. For you guys, how have y'all

been able to find a balance to stay focused, being able to execute, but at the same time taking a moment and realizing you're here?

DJ BURNS JR.: Honestly, I think that goes back to having the coach that we have. He told us when we first got here, Go enjoy it. When you get on the court, I need your focus 100%.

He's done a good job of reeling us back in when we need it and letting us enjoy it when we're not. We need to be focused right now at the moment.

KEVIN KEATTS: To answer your question, we came here to win. I think a lot of times folks do get to the Final Four and they're so excited about it, they forget here is the main ingredient. The main ingredient is to come here, work hard, the work that you put in, to win. That's why I've had this 50/50, 75/25, 100 in the last three days, business versus pleasure.

We're up to 75 business today, 100 tomorrow. Yesterday was 50/50, FanFest. Now it's time to get closer to locking into obviously what our job is.

Q. It's your second year coaching this team. You also have your son on the team. Has that been more of a motivation to really show out for this team, do great by your son and your team that you brought to the Final Four?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, I have my son on the team. Very grateful to have him. I have one problem with my son being on the team: his mom. She's the only one that has the ability to be able to complain to me 24/7 about her child.

I'm teasing (smiling).

No, it's been great. It's rewarding. It's not on extra motivation. Obviously my son, he's been around basketball forever. He understands. He wants to win just as much as I do. He is in the locker room. He is part of these guys, the memories that I am creating, but he's creating great memories with his team. I think that's so special, too.

Q. I know the job isn't complete yet, but so far in the tournament, inside the game or outside the game, what has been your favorite moment with being in this tournament?

DJ BURNS JR.: I would say as far as the tournament, either after the Marquette game, celebrating with the fans, or after the Duke game. Just the love. These people are

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out there crying, man, because we're winning games and doing stuff that hasn't been done in 30 or more years.

I think it's just awesome to be able to bring the culture back to Raleigh.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, a favorite tournament moment?

KEVIN KEATTS: All of them are my favorite. We've had nine elimination games, and they're all my favorite. Touch onto what DJ said, when we got back to campus after making the Final Four, after beating Duke in the Elite Eight, it was simply amazing. Our campus was on complete fire. Everybody was just pumped up because of the fact that so many of our students, so many of their parents, had not had the chance to experience what folks experienced in '83.

Just to see the smiles and the students, just the administrators, I can't tell you how many text messages, emails I've gotten.

Also to see the reward of the team, this current team. I know the hard work they've been through, the adversity they've been through. To see those guys get to this big stage, I think that was incredible for me.

Q. Do you have any superstitions? My mom told me NC State alum in my community, he's been wearing the same outfit since you guys got in the tournament. Every game he's wearing the same outfit. Do you have any superstitions like that?

DJ BURNS JR.: Not myself. I'll let him take that one.

KEVIN KEATTS: You don't have any?

DJ BURNS JR.: The only thing is I listen to the same music before, same music from high school. Other than that, not really.

KEVIN KEATTS: I got too many. I mean, I'll take his. I'm wearing the same shoes that I've worn for the eight games. I listen to the same music. Every trip I go, I listen to Marvin Sapp, "The Best in Me." I listen to some gospel music.

I do the same thing. Each place that we've been, I eat the same lunch. I have to figure out where I'm eating today because I'm going to eat there tomorrow. I like to do it peaceful. I like to do it by myself. If y'all see me eating lunch, just give me 45 minutes and let me enjoy the lunch because I'm preparing us for a win by doing it, just so you know.

Coaches, we're creatures of habit. We got so many of them. If you ask me in 30 minutes, I'll come up with 10 more I do that I don't even realize that I do.

But I do a lot.

Q. When the tournament starts, you have millions of eyes on 60-plus teams. Today there's you and three other teams, same amount of eyes. What do you do to block out the noise?

DJ BURNS JR.: Just don't read it, honestly. It's going to be everywhere. You can't really avoid it. You can control how much you feed into it.

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, I think you just stay locked in. I saw something the other day that our Duke game was one of the highest viewed games in a long time. I think it's a little overrated because I think when you get on that court and it's five guys on the court, there's another five guys, I think you're locked into those guys, don't really worry about what the outside world is thinking.

Our guys have handled every moment as great as they can. I don't know that there's another team in the country that has played with what everyone would consider pressure. I've said this. We lose any game in the ACC, we don't make the NCAA tournament. We lose any game in the NCAA, we don't advance to the Final Four.

We're battle-tested in that way. I think our guys enjoy that.

Q. I know you were talking about Marvin Sapp. What's your go-to song?

DJ BURNS JR.: Okay, unfortunately mine is not a gospel song. When I first walk onto the court, the first song I always play is "Just Bars" by G Herbo. That's my favorite rap artist.

KEVIN KEATTS: My go-to songs are "Never Would Have Made It" by Marvin Sapp and "The Best in Me." Google it. You're going to like it. I'm telling you. It's weird because I'm bobbing my head. All my players think I'm listening to a rap song.

I have listened to those songs for years and years. It really means something to me. I take every word. Obviously I say this before, we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the good Lord. I listen to a lot of gospel.

THE MODERATOR: Anybody want to drop any bars?

KEVIN KEATTS: DJ is a rapper. He says he has a rap



song.

DJ BURNS JR.: Not right now. We'll save that for later (smiling).

Q. DJ, how have you grown as a man since this tournament?

DJ BURNS JR.: For me, I used to do a lot of responding to negative comments on social media. I just kind of zeroed that out. We don't got time for that anymore.

Q. I said it was your second year of coaching. I meant to say seventh. I'm so sorry. I want to formally apologize for that. But this team has been deemed as America's team. I wanted to ask how you guys feel about that, with this newfound motivation?

DJ BURNS JR.: I think it's interesting. It's also pretty cool to be recognized for your work. Had to come a little bit later, but so be it. We're here now, and that's all that matters. We enjoy it.

KEVIN KEATTS: I think it was going to be us or Oakland. Us or Oakland was going to be America's team. Fortunate for us it's us.

THE MODERATOR: We'd like to thank DJ and Coach Keatts for joining us today. Hope you enjoy your open practice and the rest of the day.

KEVIN KEATTS: Thank you.

DJ BURNS JR.: Thank you.

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