

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

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State Farm Stadium

Alabama Crimson Tide Coach Nate Oats

Mark Sears

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Nate Oats joins us now, the head coach at the University of Alabama.

Coach, we'll ask you open things for a statement.

NATE OATS: Yeah, had a good practice yesterday. We made it through injury-free, so I think as long as we can get through today's practice injury-free, we should be healthy for the first time in a while. We're going to need to be healthy. Going to need to use our depth against UConn.

I like where our guys' heads are at. Obviously we're big underdogs, we know that. UConn is very good. They've been running through the competition. But I don't think our guys are scared. I think our guys are confident in their abilities. We're getting healthy, we'll be ready. We know it's going to be a tough game.

I think we've had good game plans going into the last few games here in the tournament. Our guys have done a good job executing them. I think we'll have a solid game plan. I think our guys are going to be pretty locked into what we have to do to get this thing done on Saturday.

THE MODERATOR: Our first question...

Q. Obviously getting to the Final Four is a huge accomplishment. How do you shift from getting that accomplishment to now looking towards accomplishing something else?

NATE OATS: We talked about at the beginning of the year, you know, our goal is to win championships. We didn't win the SEC regular season this year. We won that two out of the last three years. We had a shot at it. Lost the home game to Tennessee, road game to Florida. Had

a shot to win the tournament championship, which we did two out of the last three years. Didn't do that.

Here is a chance to win the biggest championship out of all of them. While I don't want to take anything away from making a Final Four, 'cause it's special, something that's never been done in school history, but there's still two games to be played. The biggest championship of all is still sitting in front of us. We need to get locked in and play it.

Let's not discount the fact we've made a Final Four. That's a big deal. But we're still playing for a championship. We've got two games left to win the biggest one of all. That's where our mindset's at right now.

Q. The last couple of weeks you've really accredited Mark Sears' leadership as being the catalyst for this run. What is he doing differently or more of in the leadership department that has driven the team?

NATE OATS: I think he's done a better job encouraging his teammates, talking in the huddles. We got to get stops. He comes in, he's a lot more vocal.

I think a lot of guys, maybe it's not their nature to be as vocal. They kind of let their play kind of lead the way, if you will. You've got to do more than that if you want to be a real leader. There's no option. You have to be vocal, you have to speak up, inspire your guys.

He's become more vocal. He's talking in timeouts. He's talking in huddles. He's making sure that he knows what the scouting report is so that he can really talk through with some of these younger guys what we have to do.

I think a lot of the more vocal, inspiring, holding guys accountable stuff he's been a lot better at.

Q. Over the last couple years, UConn has gone from a solid offense to one of the top offenses in the country. In your scout, what accounts for that?

NATE OATS: You know what, I know Danny fairly well, as it's well-documented. I've had discussions with him.



We're obviously very analytics-driven. They are, too. They take a lot of threes. They don't take too many tough midrange. You look at their shot chart, it's pretty similar to ours.

Now, their at-the-rim shots, they get a lot more post-ups than we do. I think their shot geography, if you will, has become pretty clean with a lot of paint shots, threes. They get to the free-throw line.

I think Danny has a good feel for what he wants their identity to be. We played them last year up in Portland at the PK 85 or PKI, whatever it was. They do a really good job playing through a pretty dominant post player and getting their shooters wide-open looks, and not really settling for bad shots. They have no problem going deep into the clock making sure they get the shot they want, are looking for.

He's got all kinds of different sets to get the types of shots they're looking for.

The other thing they do a good job of is a guy gets hot, Spencer hits a three, they're probably going to run a play for Spencer the next time down. He does a great job of controlling who gets the shots, and their better players are going to get shots in the areas they can make 'em. I think he's done a really good job of that. He's got really good players, obviously. Recruiting has gone well.

You can get really good players and not put them in the right spots. He's got really good players and putting them in good spots to get the shots.

Q. Bobby Hurley said you have stayed in touch since your time together at Buffalo. What have your interactions been like and how impactful was he in preparing you for your first head coaching gig?

NATE OATS: We definitely stayed in touch. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him giving me a shot. I feel like he's a mentor of mine. He's one of the best point guards to ever play. I learned a lot about point guard play in the two years I was with him. The way we want to play, we've had great guard play, we've done a pretty good job putting guards into the NBA. Feel like I did learn a lot in those two years.

We've stayed in touch on different things throughout the years. We've kind of stayed in touch on he's had some really good teams. We've talked about them. Sometimes one of us is on a losing streak, kind of pump the other one up. We always see each other on the recruiting trail. How is recruiting going? When we played Arizona here, they allowed us to use their gym to practice in.

Obviously we both got the connection with Danny, his brother. I've known Danny a long time. Danny has been pretty successful. We'll text on some of Danny's games, too, on some of that stuff.

Different things. Different areas. Just kind of touching base on basketball-related things throughout the years. Yeah, I mean, him and his brother both coach super intense. I'm not sure I'm quite at the level of intensity those two guys carry on the sideline, but we're pretty intense, as well.

I think there's a reason that their family has won big in basketball at all levels. Shoot, I learned a lot of drills from Bobby. He got 'em from his dad and from his brother. We still use a lot of the drills I learned from Bobby. They're good. His dad probably has the best drills in basketball. The two of those, Danny and Bobby, learned a lot from their dad. I was able to learn a little bit, a lot, from Bobby, and Danny as well.

Q. Three of the four coaches here were high school coaches. How important is that for someone once you get to this level? You always hear there's so many great high school coaches who never get that shot. What was it like for you when you did finally get that shot?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I agree with that. I think there's a lot of really good high school coaches. I went up against some in metro Detroit area. I've gotten to know a lot of them. Shoot, I still steal drills when I go on recruiting trips to see different high school coaches work. I've been fortunate enough to go into some pretty good high school coaches' practices.

I was fortunate. I got some breaks. Bobby gave me my first break. If it wasn't for Bobby giving me that break, I wouldn't be here. I think there's a lot of really good high school coaches that never got a break.

It's unfortunate, but there's only so many jobs out there. It's hard. Everybody's not going to get a break, so... Kind of got to be ready for your breaks if they come.

It is pretty cool that three of the four of us were high school coaches, and not that long ago. 11 years ago I was a high school coach. It wasn't too long before that that Danny made the jump straight from St. Benedict's to Wagner. Keatts moved from high school to college assistant, a little bit more like I did. Was able to get a head job at Wilmington. I think it's pretty cool that three high school guys, I'm sure there's a lot of high school coaches out there looking at this Final Four wondering if they can get a

break. I just tell 'em, Keep working, be ready for your break if it comes. Sometimes you got to make your breaks.

I think it's cool. I think it shows you that there's coaches at all levels. Shoot, I've got a coach on my staff I hired, kind of high school over in Europe, he had never coached Division I basketball before I hired him last year. He's done a really good job for me.

I think you can make hires from all different areas and levels. Does the guy know basketball? Is he passionate about it? Does he work hard at it? That's more what I'm looking for in hiring assistants. Maybe this Final Four helps some ADs see they can think outside the box maybe a little bit more.

Q. Question about Nick Pringle. Last week after the Clemson game, you cited his leadership, felt like he had an inspiring performance for the team. Six or eight weeks ago, touch-and-go. Can you speak to the transformation he made mentally? Do you think his relationship with Scotty Hollins has had a lot to do with that?

NATE OATS: That's a good question. Kind of ironic that question comes after the high school question because I go back. Sometimes some guys need some maturity and just need to grow a little bit. Being a high school coach for a lot of years, I saw a lot of young men change, over the course of one year or over the course of four years.

I never would give up on a kid in high school. There was a kid that I kicked off the team his junior year in high school that ended up moving in with me that spring. I brought him back and never let him play the rest of his junior year. I brought him back in the program because I was afraid of where he'd end up if he didn't have basketball.

He did something significant enough to be done with the team, he didn't play any more games the rest of his junior year. Veldez Green [phonetic] was his name. Went by Vinny. Vinny ended up being in a tough spot. He moved in with me that spring. Stayed with me all spring, summer the next year. Played for me his senior year. Got him in a junior college, came back, stayed with me on his senior breaks. You see guys change. Especially, like, the high school level I was at.

To answer your question about Pringle, I think he has changed a lot. I think sometimes they have to see things from a different perspective. One of the statements he made to me when he'd come back, he got suspended, I think that's what you're referring to, six or eight weeks ago, I didn't realize what a distraction I was to my teammates.

His big thing is he's always wanted to be there for his teammates, and he has been. He's been a good teammate. He didn't realize some of the stuff he was doing was a distraction. He didn't want to be that.

Scotty's traveled with us all year. Scotty started traveling with us last year with kind of the adversity we went through. Scotty has been a great mentor to Nick, great mentor to a lot of our guys. I think Scotty helps Nick stay grounded. Nick is very vocal, got great personality, natural leadership about him. Just need to make sure he's leading the right way.

I think these last few weeks, six to eight weeks, he's made big changes and he's leading us the right way. He's got this great, infectious personality about him that when you get him leading the right way, he can really be a great leader. I think that's part of why we made this big run here in the NCAA tournament.

Q. I was talking to some of your players about how personable you are, Grant going golfing with you, Sam having a dinner with you. I know you're a teacher at heart. How have you learned to balance being a friend and relatable with your players but also being tough on them, coaching them?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I think, again, I said it yesterday, I wouldn't trade my path for anything. I think being a high school coach helps me in that regard.

The high school job I had wasn't one of these they pay you a bunch of money just to be the basketball coach. I had to teach a full-time teaching load. I was teaching five hours of math at Romulus. I taught Algebra 1, I taught geometry. I had freshmen, I had sophomores. I taught statistics so I had juniors or seniors. I literally had my players dang near every year, their freshman year up through math classes.

It was easier to build relationships with my players in high school because I'd get 'em every day in class, even in the off-season. At college, you have to create different ways to build it with them outside the basketball floor.

In high school, I mean, I remember E.C. Matthews, big name here, that's how I got to know the Hurleys, but E.C.'s mom went on a cruise the fall of his senior year. He bought him a ticket, assumed he was going to go. He didn't want to go because he was going to miss practice for a week. The only way she agreed to leave him home was if he stayed with me. I said, Yeah, c'mon, you can stay with me. He stayed in my house for a week.

It's different things like that. Vinny lives with me

permanently for a couple years. You have the whole team over for a barbecue. You have the whole team over to shoot some pool. I made sure my house... Now I've got a little nice game room where I've got a pool table, ping-pong table, got an XBOX. I like to have the guys over.

In college it's a little different because they're not going to come over all the time. In high school it's different. You put food on the table in high school, they're going to come. In college they got a lot more resources. You can't entice them with some food.

I like to hang out with them off the court. When I got to Alabama, they had a pool table, apparently it didn't get used much, at least by the coaching staff. I established myself as number one on the billiards. Scotty Hollins, our team chaplain, we got ongoing running tally. I'm ahead right now. He's probably second best pool player. We also have a ping-pong table in there, shuffleboard table. It's easier to interact with guys on things like that. Going golfing with Grant. I put a simulator in my house like a year ago because I stink at golf. I can go down and hit balls. I still stink, I'm terrible.

When I went with Grant, I think I beat him by like one. He can hit it a long ways. He's a little inconsistent like me. I don't hit it near as long as him. Think I beat him by one. I think I had Sam over there hitting on the simulator. I got a video on my phone of him hitting at the FanFest yesterday. Three strikes he was out. He missed the ball entirely three straight times. Looked similar to on my simulator.

I think when you're able to hang out with the guys a little bit, do some fun stuff. The day before we left for the tournament, they have a new Popstroke mini golf thing in Tuscaloosa, took the team out for that. Get away, don't talk basketball, let them see you as a real person. I think it works a little bit.

Yeah, we try to do some of that type of stuff.

THE MODERATOR: We welcome in Mark Sears.

Q. I know you can't give specifics, but from a recruiting perspective, what do you think this Final Four appearance does for you going forward? Does the recruiting pitch change?

NATE OATS: Certainly doesn't hurt. If kids don't want to be a part of a winning team, I probably don't want to take 'em.

We've had one of the more - what would I say - modern offenses, one of the more recruitable two offenses in the country over the last five years. We've did a study. We

improved our guys' draft stock more than anybody in the country than anybody has over the last five years we've been there. We have the NBA deal, more lottery picks than anybody in the country, have the offense going.

We've won at a high level. Since I got to the SEC, they've given out nine trophies, I think we have four of 'em. There's five regular season, four tournament. They didn't have the tournament my first year. I think we've got four. Kentucky has one. Tennessee has two. Auburn has got two. We've won those championships. We've got an offense. We put guys in the pros. Now we're competing on a national stage in a Final Four to win a national championship.

There's not a lot missing in the recruiting pitch now. Preston is a big-time recruiter. He's certainly using this Final Four run to our advantage, for sure. We'll see what type of dividends we can gain from it moving forward this spring and summer.

Q. I asked Mark yesterday if there was such a thing as too many threes in a game. You've run the calculus. You tell me. I'm sure Dan knows the calculus, too. Is there such a thing as too many threes?

NATE OATS: No. It all depends on how the defense wants to guard us. I think you go back to our Purdue game, what did we shoot, 46 if I remember correct. I don't really care if we shoot 50 in a game if that's how they want to guard us.

If they want to take the paint away, we'll take threes. If they want to take threes away, we'll take the paint. UConn presents a challenging because they have Clingan to run the paint. They're going to run the three-point line. Most games there's a pretty good mix of threes and paint shots.

No, there's no max. Shoot, my first year we set the SEC record for threes made in a game. Made 22 at Auburn. Broke that record, made 23 in a game. We've hit 20-plus I think five different times. Can't make 20 if you're not taking 40, 50 of 'em. Let 'em fly.

Q. You talked about how it's important to be here and the job's not done, not to downplay the fact this is your first appearance in the Final Four, your program's first appearance. What does that mean to you to be here on this stage?

NATE OATS: You didn't listen to the question (laughter).

MARK SEARS: Having a first program appearance, it's very special to soak it all in. We didn't come here just to be satisfied of making the Final Four. We obviously have



goals and ambitions to win the whole thing.

Q. Alabama is full of traditions. Do you have any traditions within the locker room, any superstitions that go on?

MARK SEARS: I don't say we have, like, any traditions, but the Rama Jama, personally, I love going there. Very about breakfast spot. I also go there occasionally for lunch.

NATE OATS: She's asking if we have any traditions in the locker room before the game, superstitions, we have to do this before the game starts.

MARK SEARS: We play our music. We say a team prayer before we walk out the game.

NATE OATS: It would be a good question for Lameka Sears. She's got a few superstitions, I'm guessing.

MARK SEARS: Yeah (smiling).

Q. Mark, knowing that you're a student right now, y'all been away for three weeks now, has it been difficult for you and your teammates balancing that schoolwork along with focusing on what's at stake here?

MARK SEARS: I say we love it. We love traveling. We love being away from the school. Especially to play basketball without having to go to do schoolwork. We love what we're doing (smiling).

NATE OATS: We also travel with our academic coordinator with us on these long trips. Brittany is on these guys and mandatory study halls. The school does a good job of tutors on Zoom making sure they're still doing their schoolwork.

Q. Mark, you're coming from Ohio University, now you're here as a transfer, making it to the Final Four with Alabama. What do you think the transfer portal has benefited the team for getting to the Final Four? How do you plan on using that momentum you have right now to continue your career, if that makes sense?

MARK SEARS: I say when I went in the transfer portal, it was all about the right fit. I felt like Alabama was the perfect fit for me because of the style that we play. I feel like that would be very good for future transfer portal commits to come here.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, any thoughts on the transfer portal as a follow-up?

NATE OATS: Yeah, we've obviously used it. Our rotation, we have a lot of guys that come out of the transfer portal.

I think used appropriately, you can build a good roster. You have to be cognizant of the fact that you want these guys to graduate. You've got to make sure their credits transfer, you get them in the right programs so they can still get their college degree.

That's the one issue I see with being able to openly transfer whenever you want. If you're transferring multiple times, credits don't transfer, can you get them to graduate in the appropriate time, where they finish their playing career and graduate at the same time?

Mark is on track to graduate this spring. I think we've done a good job. All the transfers we take have taken this year are on pace to graduate at the right time.

Yeah, I mean, for Mark, Aaron Estrada from Hofstra, to Grant Nelson from North Dakota State. If you're able to prove it at a level that you got under-recruited out of high school, there's no reason if you get under-recruited out of high school that you can't then play way up to play on the biggest stage. We've got Mark, Grant, Aaron, Latrell Wrightsell, Nick Pringle started at Wofford. You kind of go down the list. These guys are now playing on the biggest stage.

I think if you prove yourself, keep in mind that we're still here to educate the guys, as long as they get their degree, I'm not opposed to the transfer portal. We used it to create this roster. I think it's done well for the individual guys themselves, as well.

Q. Mark, how has it been going from the MAC to the SEC? MAC can get a little disrespect. How has that transition been for you personally?

MARK SEARS: I say the guard play in the MAC is very similar to the SEC. We have great guards in the MAC. The only thing different would be the big play. There's not going to be a five man in the back that can switch onto a point guard and stay in front. I would say that's the biggest difference in the MAC and SEC. SEC you have versatile big guys that can stay in front of the guards.

NATE OATS: He didn't play in the MAC when I was in the MAC. We had a versatile big guy that would have stayed in front (smiling).

Q. Obviously tomorrow is the first time Alabama will be in the Final Four. How do you handle the nerves going in, not let the game get too big?

MARK SEARS: I say take it like it's any other game, just more people watching. That's the fun about it. Just being able to play for the University of Alabama, just know this game has meaning, you're not just playing for yourself.

Q. Knowing that you have this unique opportunity, how have been able to find the balance between seeing what's at stake, focus on the moment, but at the same time taking a step back to be grateful for where you're at, soak everything in?

MARK SEARS: When we first landed, that's when we started to soak everything in because they were celebrating us. We got to see the trophy. People were handing us gifts and stuff.

I say it really started when we just started watching the film. We realized we're here. We're not here just to be satisfied because we made it; we want to prove more people wrong. That's where we stand.

Q. Coach, what lessons can you take from your time coaching high school that you apply now?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I think on some levels coaching is coaching. You've got to have relationships with your players. Part of coaching is motivating them to play hard.

I think if they don't trust you, if they don't believe in what you're telling them, they're not going to play at the same level they need to. I think you need to build trust with your players.

I think you have to be super knowledgeable. Even coaches that build great relationships with their players, if they don't study the game, know what they're talking about, they lose trust.

Relationships, trust, you got to have it all. You don't need to be their friend to build a relationship. I can have a really good relationship with them. I'm almost 50 years old, I'm not going to be like hanging out with Mark on the weekends. He's going to do some different stuff. But I can have a great relationship with him.

I felt like when I was a high school coach, I wanted to be the hardest-working coach in the state of Michigan so I could build their trust. I had a long time assistant Josh Baker who took over his own program, won a bunch of championships at Southfield Christian. I told him, if all we're doing is just teaching these guys how to put a round ball into a ring, we're wasting an awful lot of time.

If I can get their respect so I can teach them how to grow

into be a young man, in a lot of other areas, they respect you if they know you put the work in to make them better at what they're trying to do. Then you can use that to teach them life lessons, a lot of things.

I think the same thing goes now. If they know I'm lazy and I don't know what I'm talking about, they're not going to respect me as a coach, as a man. Let's be the hardest-working guys, the most prepared coaches we can possibly be. You earn their respect, treat them with respect.

I've gotten on Mark over this year, got him to guard a little better, play harder. He's gotten it. You can get on without being disrespectful, have a relationship with them, get their respect, get them to play hard. All of that's pretty similar to high school, college, all of that.

The biggest lessons in coaching, I think I was able to learn at a high school level. Now tweaking game plans, X's and O's, obviously the higher you get up, the more information you have, the more you're able to do a little bit of that, the better that can go.

The crux of it, if you can't build a relationship, garner respect from your team, high school, college, NBA, doesn't matter, you're not going to be a very good coach.

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