

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

Friday, April 5, 2024

Phoenix, Arizona, USA

State Farm Stadium

UConn Huskies

Coach Dan Hurley

Donovan Clingan

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Dan Hurley, the head coach of the Huskies.

Coach, would you like to tell us how your day is going so far.

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, good day. For us, just did a lot of our live work, the scout work for the game tomorrow at ASU. I got to see my big brother over there. Got to spend a little time with him.

Now we'll do a lot of shooting, let these guys get a lot of shots in the dome.

THE MODERATOR: Our first question...

Q. Three of the four coaches here were high school coaches, and not that long ago. How much do you think coaching in high school prepares you for this? Do you think the fact you have these high school coaches could help other high school coaches who never get that shot?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I mean, obviously there's opportunity at the high school level, through trial and error, without college pressure, to kind of work on your craft as a coach. Then you have to do all things in a high school program. You don't have Adobo, three full-time assistants. You become a one-man show.

That experience, you get to develop in every way as a coach. Also you get a chance to witness and get to know a lot of college programs that recruit your players. You see some programs that did it really well with your players, and you saw some other ones that didn't do a very good job with your players. You learn a lot from that aspect.

Me, Kevin and Nate, I got to coach low and mid-major. To have the high school background with the low and mid-major coaching, too, it obviously prepares you when you get a high-major job like the three of us have right now.

Q. Even with the most important work and the biggest goal right ahead of you, is there any element of appreciating a final journey with this group? I don't know if you get sentimental at all, appreciate just being here.

DAN HURLEY: No doubt. A lot of emotion. Just thinking about the level of success that this group of players has had this year. Really going into the season, obviously we talked about Brooklyn to Boston to Phoenix. We really wanted the Big East regular season and the Big East tournament championship. Those were the ones we hadn't had. We had the regional championship last year, we won the national championship. Just a run that this group has been on has been historic, historic within the UConn program and then the first defending national champ to get back to the Final Four since 2007. It's been an historic run.

You do take little moments to appreciate it, but they don't last long.

Q. You and your players have talked about Luke's influence on this program, bringing in European basketball concepts. What leagues has he got you watching these days? What is the strangest league you've found yourself watching on Luke's laptop?

DAN HURLEY: He's sends a lot of clips. Trying to think. I mean, we've watched it all. Turkey, teams in Turkey. The Japanese league. We watch low Division I, Division II. Obviously we're watching women's college basketball. We're watching a lot.

Luke and Kimani, those two guys, they're head coach quality. They're high-major-level head coach quality. Those two guys have no holes in their game at all. They're highest level recruiters, great player development, great with tactics, understanding the branding piece, great motivators.

Q. Given the fact that you are defending national champions, you're winning games at an alarming clip, do you feel like Connecticut is being disrespected in this process?

DAN HURLEY: I don't think so. I think a lot of really smart basketball people that watch us play have an appreciation for how well we've played.

I think coming into the year, I don't think people on the outside expected us to play this well. I don't know if you stuck a lie detector on me if I thought we'd play this well, especially in a tournament that's so hard. It's so hard to advance in this tournament and get to a Final Four.

I mean, look at the biggest brands, the best programs historically have a hard time getting to a Final Four in recent history.

I get it. We've been brilliant. We've played great. The thing about this tournament, though, none of that matters on Saturday. We are going to have this two-hour game versus Alabama. If we're not on point, we won't play on Monday.

Q. Last year after winning the championship you said something matter of fact, but very profound, in that winning a championship wasn't as fulfilling as you thought it would be. I know you have a foundation of faith. In light of this weekend, does your faith help keep wins and losses in perspective?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I think for me, when I get back in the locker room after a great victory, I find just a couple minutes to pray, to pray to God, to be grateful and thankful for giving me and the team the strength. I think about all the people that you've lost in life that are in heaven that have helped you get here.

When you're going through the struggles, too, it's the faith, your faith in God, that gets you through the tough times. Whether it's good times or bad times, your faith in Jesus Christ is what's going to be your rock.

Q. How do you know when a player of yours has bought into your coaching style? How do you see that reflected on the court?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I think we can tell in the recruiting process. Our visits, when we talk to them, when we meet them in person, campus visits, we're not trying to put on a show. It's about substance. For us, we want them to watch us practice, see how hard we go. We want to talk basketball with them and talk about winning and our

old-school values in terms of our work ethic, accountability, responsibility with a modern style of play with basketball.

We don't try to fool people on a visit by showing 'em the arenas, putting together just great branding presentations. We make it about ball, what we're trying to accomplish as individual players and obviously as a program.

We're just old school with the way we go about things.

Q. All tournament you've talked about how much pressure you've put on yourself to get Cam and Steph to this stage. Has it intensified now that you're here?

DAN HURLEY: I don't think if it's ramped up. It's pretty consistent. Obviously going into the tournament, there was a lot of pressure to get this team here, especially those guys. You run through the season the way we did, just the Big East tournament, all that. Yeah, I mean, getting them here. Now you're staring at a chance to make history as a back-to-back. Just getting to that championship game, what that would feel like.

I don't know. When you play at UConn, we don't have the benefit of flying under the radar. We don't. When you get to pressure moments, and everyone in the Final Four now feels pressure, but we don't have more pressure on us than Alabama, Purdue or NC State because everyone here believes they're going to win the national championship.

What helps us, though, is the pressure that we feel from the beginning of the season, because of the history and the tradition, and the pressure of every game that we play in at UConn, helps us when we get to these big spots.

We're not under the radar ever. I think that helps us when we get out under the bright lights.

Q. Were there any moments early summer or off-season when you had to drop the hammer of it's over, everything is now going forward? If so, what did those times look like?

DAN HURLEY: I would say the closed scrimmage. I thought we had a really good summer. As soon as we saw how good Kam was, as soon as we saw how good Spencer was and Steph, I think we knew that we had a starting five that was going to be as good as what anyone had in the sport.

Then we got drilled in the second half in the closed scrimmage at Virginia. That was a real eye opener, wake-up call there. We had a pretty good first half, then the second half we got smashed. We got back, and that was a real wake-up call going into the start of

non-conference. That was, like, right around the corner.

I was seething.

Q. Was part of you thrilled to see them get thumped like that, that banner only lasts so long?

DAN HURLEY: No, I guess when you taste that blood that first time, you don't know how the group's going to respond. I mean, you don't want to lose that bad. You don't know your team is good either at that point. That was our first real live game. Just to get beat up like that in the second half of that scrimmage was jarring 'cause when you play bad and lose, no matter how good you are, you don't ever think you're going to win again.

I mean, we... Yeah (laughter).

Q. How do you think your boys handled the travel problems with the flight getting here after 3 a.m.?

DAN HURLEY: I think we handled it really well. We didn't really talk about it. I know there's a misnomer. I think a lot of the external things that you use, like the slights, the tweets, being undervalued, under-ranked, players not getting their due, what have you, a lot of that stuff is really great during the monotony of a regular season, like the dog days of February.

A lot of that stuff, you can't use it as much when you get to this time of year. Like me being mad about the flights and all these different things, at this point of season everyone is super motivated. There's nothing but top teams out there. No one cares about you're a little cranky 'cause you missed your sleep cycle.

Q. You started the season against a Northern Arizona team and now you're back here in Phoenix. Is that something you had planned going in or just a coincidence?

DAN HURLEY: Lumberjacks? Yeah, we got the Lumberjacks. Tim Russo, 2, the Mad Dog, that was part of the deal I think. They had to take him, and then we would do a bye game. And then Bob out here, Nate. Sometimes stuff just happens.

Q. A couple of the guys in the locker room were saying they often see the old high school history teach in you coming out, referencing historical figures. How much do you enjoy that? Your dad had another job in addition to coaching high school basketball. How did that help you grow as a coach having other duties?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I love that. I've been a high school

teacher, I've taught world history starting with the collapse of the Roman Empire, mostly focused on European history. From the Dark Ages all the way through to the Reformation.

I've also taught driver's ed, health, sex ed to coed classes at St. Anthony. Being able to at 22 years of age, 22 years old, be able to teach sex ed at St. Anthony, coed classes, you learn how to control a classroom and keep an audience captivated. I think it's definitely helped me as a coach in the huddle. I think it also helps, too, if you have other jobs, besides just being a coach, I think it just helps you with perspective a little bit, too.

Thank you for that (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: We welcome in Donovan Clingan.

Q. It's been really intriguing to hear you talk about transfers and the portal, all that kind of stuff, because you've seen the whole evolution. I'm wondering, bottom line, has it been good for the industry? If you were on the committee to tweak it, what would the tweak be?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, it's tough because there's just a lot of situations that come up. I don't know if it's maybe a situation where you give a player like a one-time transfer, then also if there's circumstances like a coach getting fired or a coach taking another job where there's more flexibility involved.

I look at my own situation. Obviously I'll reflect on that. What changed my life was having to stay at Seton Hall, work through my own shortcomings, have to fix myself. Also coming to the realization that I wasn't an NBA player, that I need to develop a skill set and mindset that would maybe put me in a situation where maybe I wouldn't peak until my 40s and 50s, and it wouldn't be as a player, it might be as a coach or in business, another aspect in life.

Yeah, there's a lot of positive things about being able to get a change of scenery. You just hope it doesn't create an environment where young people just run from fixing themselves, which is usually the issue, so...

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Donovan Clingan.

Q. Coach Hurley, what is the most valuable lesson the players have taught you this year?

DAN HURLEY: I would say Tristen for me has been the biggest thing, the evolution of our relationship. I think as a coach sometimes you want your players personality-wise to mirror you, have my same level of intensity, my same

level of energy.

Just have an appreciation for having a locker room with different types of people. Some cool customers, like Tristen. Some fireballs, like Cam. Some guys in the middle, like Clingan over here. Some guys are fired up but also have their confidence level.

Not everyone has to look like me, sound like me or act like me, or sometimes you implode as a team if you have too many fireballs.

Q. As far as your coaching style, have you picked up anything from your brother or father's coaching style that you put into your own?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, absolutely. I think, number one, we talked constantly about the position, right? All the tactics, the psychology, leadership, the player development piece, how long you're practicing, maybe some wrinkles and things that we both are doing on offense or defense that we like.

Sometimes you have common opponents. I think there's constant conversations about things that are working or are not working that we're always sharing with each other.

Q. Your men's team right now has a No. 1 seed, and your women's team is sitting at a No. 3 seed. What does it mean to the university to have such hugely successful programs? Do you think UConn could possibly take home two titles this year?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: I mean, yeah, it's great to share a building, just seeing the work they put in all year, especially the injuries they've had, the struggles they had this season.

It's the basketball capital of the world. To have both schools in the Final Four, it's special. Both teams are trying to do special things. We're going to do everything we can to bring back two titles.

DAN HURLEY: This time of year, too, to be on this stage for just the university has obviously an opportunity here to capitalize on that. Like Donovan said, we're so thrilled for the women's team. Good luck to those guys tonight. We'll be having our own watch party for that.

But they deserve it. I mean, all the injuries, to be where they are, it's just incredible. Speaks to the talent, the character.

Q. Have you guys had any superstitions that you've taken throughout? Have you had any superstitions or traditions that you've carried through as a player and

coach, even now in the locker room?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: I mean, I have a couple. Just the way I put my right sock before left sock, right ankle tape before left ankle tape. Nothing too crazy. I keep it simple.

I just don't overthink anything. Go out to the game and attack it the same way.

DAN HURLEY: This guy's crazy (laughter).

I didn't do any as a player, maybe that's why I came up short there. Maybe I should have had these superstitions (smiling).

DONOVAN CLINGAN: The song.

DAN HURLEY: Everyone knows mine. I'm good (smiling).

Q. Donovan, you have a stacked list of your NIL deals, they're super awesome. Do you find it hard to balance all of those deals with your schoolwork or even balancing keeping up a certain persona with those deals?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: No, I mean, I have people around me helping me. My focus is basketball and school, making sure all my schoolwork is done, all my basketball stuff is done.

If there's opportunities on off days or free time, I try to get some stuff done with the time I have. But it's really rest. It's basketball, it's schoolwork. If you have time and the opportunity to, then I try to do it.

DAN HURLEY: He loves to fish, too. It's surprising he didn't get anything with any of the fishing --

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Nothing. Bass Pro Shops.

Q. Obviously you're in the Final Four, and you've been away for three weeks now. For you personally, Donovan, have you been able to easily do your schoolwork still and still focus on basketball? Is that kind of difficult right now?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Yeah, I mean, I feel within the last couple weeks, we've done a lot of traveling. The bus rides, the plane rides, trying to crank out as much work as I can. In the mornings before practice.

Right now it's basketball and school. You're not worried about anything else. When you're not on the court, you're able to have some rest time to do some schoolwork, do some homework, make sure everything's taken care of.

Q. Having a Connecticut kid in Donovan up there, what does that mean for you and for the whole state of Connecticut that is so passionate about UConn basketball?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, man, it means a lot more that he's 7'2". If he was 6'2", wouldn't be as great.

I think just in general, if you're going to recruit a kid from Connecticut, it has to be a home run. There's going to be just such expectations, especially with this guy coming in. He was a larger-than-life figure. Coming in, legendary kid coming up, such anticipation.

To have him absolutely exceed expectations, just absolutely knock it out of the park, be on the cusp of being one of the greatest players to ever put the uniform on, as a Bristol kid, that's how you want it to work out, exactly the way you hoped it would.

Q. Dan, you've been on both sides of this at Rhode Island, power conference team. The fabric of the NCAA tournament is Cinderellas. With the NIL, the transfer portal, are you concerned that might wipe out the Cinderella?

DAN HURLEY: I mean, it's not going to help the Cinderella advance. I think what it's done is it's created a lot more depth among the high majors. If anything, it probably hurts the blue bloods because I think maybe players, pre-NIL, they were moved by the brand, the history, the attention. I think the Power Fives and other high majors, the NIL has balanced the playing fields against the blue bloods is what I think is even more impactful.

Q. For those of us who have been covering this stuff for decades, we've seen instances of players and coaches whose careers were ruined because of taking extra benefits, things like that. When you look at some of the numbers, the old clips, the numbers were like nothing if they were playing today it would be unbelievable. How do you feel as a coach that's been through the system, should there be some kind of reparations or something to go back and, I don't know, expunge the records, say we realize this was not a good thing? How do you feel about that?

DAN HURLEY: You know what, I'm probably not smart enough to figure out how you would do that.

Obviously there are missed opportunities for a lot of players that way.

I'll say this. I personally coach hard. I coach these guys --

the last two years since NIL started, I've coached my teams harder than I've coached any teams just because of everything that these guys now have at their disposal.

The resources that the University of Connecticut and programs now invest in these players is not for their attendance. It's not just to be on campus. It's to produce and to produce winning. The way we travel, you know, the residence, the full-service dining we have in our 40 million plus practice facility, the NIL opportunities.

I coach the hell out of these guys because of everything that they get. And they have a responsibility to work harder and to represent UConn and to fight their absolute ass off to win games for our donors, our fans, the university because of everything that they get, that past players didn't get.

Right Donovan?

DONOVAN CLINGAN: Yes, agree (smiling).

Q. Dan, I understand that all the coaches at UConn go through a CPR training. Can you describe what that was like for you and how aggressive you were on the dummy?

DAN HURLEY: I'm a certified lifeguard. At Seton Hall, a couple of classes I took that got me to my degree was beginners aquatics and advanced aquatics. I don't know if I still have the certification.

I'm a certified lifeguard, so I have all of those abilities. Obviously you take it seriously because you know of situations with players and with staff members. We do the training every two years or so.

I'm a certified lifeguard.

THE MODERATOR: We'd like to thank Donovan, who is not a certified lifeguard, and Coach Hurley who is, for joining us.

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