

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

Sunday, April 7, 2024

Phoenix, Arizona, USA

State Farm Stadium

## Purdue Boilermakers Coach Matt Painter Fletcher Loyer Mason Gillis

Finals Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're now joined by Purdue head coach Matt Painter.

Coach, would you like that tell us how things are going today so far.

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, obviously it's a little bit quicker turnaround for us, for everybody. Just watching the game last night, watching a little bit of tape. Trying to talk to as many people as possible.

The most important team is your team. I think anybody would say that at this point. But UConn is a very, very good basketball team. Very good defensively. Run a lot of really good stuff offensively. Probably going to steal a couple things, going to steal a couple things for next year.

Just done a phenomenal job. To win the national championship, then to be back in this position, I think there's a lot of things that come with ultimate success that's hard to do what they've been able to do.

To be able to piece a team together, be able to compete and win multiple championships in their conference, in the tournament, and to keep that focus. The way they've won, you know, there's been some teams that have hung in there with them, then they've separated from them. There's some other teams that have gotten flat-out blitzed.

You have to be on your Ps and Qs. You got to take care of the basketball. You got to be able to rebound, be good in transition. If you take bad shots and you turn the ball over, you're in deep trouble. It's a quick two or a quick three for them. They're probably the best I've seen in a long, long



time in being able to take your mistake and make you pay for it at times when you make mistakes.

Other teams are probably going to make you pay, but it's just not automatic. It just seems, once that happens, it's automatic. Can't have those type of turnovers and those types of bad shots.

Then you got to be able to guard 'em. If you do those things, you got a chance. Doesn't guarantee success, you got a chance. But if you don't, you don't have a chance.

THE MODERATOR: Our first question, Coach...

**Q. In terms of personnel and roster construction, you look at you guys, UConn, then go back to Kansas, Virginia, Villanova. What have we learned or what should we have learned wins and works these days?**

MATT PAINTER: I think everybody is in a different situation. I think the landscape is what it is. I think, first and foremost, can you recruit nationally? Can you recruit your area? Like sometimes you take a job, everybody always says, We're going to recruit our backyard. If your backyard is not very fertile, you don't have a lot of players there, what are you really supposed to do? Just take the best players that aren't quite good enough?

When you're an elite school and you've put yourself in a position like a UConn or Kansas, who has done it for many years, you can get involved with a lot of people.

What we've been able to do through our losses in recruiting is understand who we can get and who we can't get, then just be smarter about it. We've really recruited towards the production and the functionality of our system, what we're trying to do.

Now, with that being said, you still have to be able to get your guys, right? You got to have Braden Smith, got to have Fletcher Loyer, obviously Zach Edey, got to have Swanigan, got to have Carsen Edwards, then that's when role definition is so important.

A lot of people that are picking out of the portal and doing



that, they're trying to get the most talented guys, if they're getting multiple guys. Someone has to get six or seven guys, there's no way six or seven guys are going to be successful. It's impossible, right?

In our situation, where you have to get a guy or two -- Cam Spencer is a great example. You're blending into what they already had. What he brings fits what they do, especially how tough he is, how he has a great feel, how he understands offensively.

That's a little bit different than somebody going into the spring, and their roster management is two-thirds of their team, right? We've always seen that before this with when somebody gets a new job. Now if you get a new job in this landscape, you could sign 13 people? That's a whole lot different.

It kind of depends on who you are, where you're at, who you can get, who you can't get. What is tough is name, image and likeness wasn't supposed to be put in place for whoever's got the most money gets the best players. But if you want to kind of be truthful about what's going on, the part of our business that stinks, that was happening before. Now those teams that were doing that before now get to do it through name, image and likeness and it's a double whammy because they're not just getting their name, image and likeness money, they're getting their money that they were getting before that was illegal.

People that do it the right way, you can get mad about it all you want, but you have to try to keep your focus on yourself. If that's what you want to do, good for you. We can get good basketball players, mesh 'em together and have a good product.

**Q. As much as you have to talk about and live in and some ways get defined by tough tournament losses, how do you as a coach keep focus on just being good every year and the value in what your program has done?**

MATT PAINTER: Right. Just try to keep working, try to be honest about your mistakes, try to be honest about just everything. It's an inexact science at times, especially from a recruiting standpoint.

Learn from your tough losses and don't run from 'em, face 'em. That's what we've tried to do. We've been to that second weekend a lot, but we haven't been able to get through it. We only got to the Elite Eight once before this.

Just keep plugging. Feel good about what you're doing, feel good about your convictions. When it gets right down to the game, our tough losses the last four years, don't turn

the basketball over, don't go 4-for-22 from three, or whatever those numbers are.

But I know this. If we don't turn the basketball over and we still go 4-for-22, whatever those numbers exactly are, we're probably going to win those games. Like last night was an outlier game for us. We had high-level turnovers, but we went 10-for-25 from three. We still established Zach Edey. Not an unbelievable game for him, but those numbers are very average for him, not average for everybody else.

Trying to do those things, stay functional in what we're doing.

**Q. I'm sure you're trying to keep a lot of consistency in your prep, but have you noticed a different energy or vibe from your players?**

MATT PAINTER: Not really. Obviously it's a quick turnaround. Like, you go to your postgame meal, you go to breakfast, you watch film, and here we are. It's not a lot of time in terms of what we're doing.

They understand what we're up against. They understand we haven't played anybody like UConn. They're not fools. We have cable where we're from, so... We're very familiar.

I think that's the number one thing of not fearing your opponent but respecting your opponent. We have a lot of respect for UConn. They have great individual players, they have a great coach. So understand it, like absorb that, take that in.

That's where you have to start. But we've played great teams all year. Just like when we dive into the personnel, whether that's Gonzaga, Marquette, Wisconsin, Michigan State, on down the line, respect your opponent, respect those coaches, respect the players. Understand how they've really beat people, how they've really dominated people.

I think the word 'dominate' comes out with UConn, right? They've dominated people. They haven't just dominated the bad team, they've dominated some great teams.

It's easier to study and look at. You got to be able to do your job, embrace the physicality, keep them out of transition, keep them off the glass, keep them out of their sets and what they want to do.

It's easy to watch and understand that, but it's very, very hard to do. And that's our challenge.

**Q. We've talked about what you learned after last year, getting better at the three, being more athletic. Would**

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**you be here today if you didn't have those scars from last year? If someone had told you you're going to have to go through it in order to get to this place, would you have taken that deal?**

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, the answer to your last question. I think to get in this position, you would take it, right? You would say, Hey, let's take that loss to get here. I'd prefer not to do that, though.

The problem with a really tough loss when it ends your season is you don't have another game. Like when you blow a game on January 16th, you just play on January 21st. You get that taste out of your mouth. But when you have a loss at the end of the season, you have to sit in it, you have to take it.

Some of that is healthy in a sense. It's why I try to keep our players from going into coaching because there's such a level of misery. There's so many good things. I'm so glad I did it because of the relationships. You don't choose how you feel. I always compare it to dreams. Like, why is this person in my dream that shouldn't be here? You don't pick your dreams. Your dreams are your dreams. We all understand some of our dreams are nightmares, too. You don't pick those either.

That piece of it, of being able to go through it, feel that, I think helps you get on edge, helps you to be a little sharper.

I think you only need to do it once, though. We've done it multiple times.

What was your first question? I apologize.

**Q. (No microphone.)**

MATT PAINTER: I don't think so. When you make a statement, Would we be here without Zach Edey? Braden Smith? No. As you start to trickle down as a coach, you realize importance. I had two guys that didn't play for me last night, Caleb Furst and Ethan Morton. They started for me the year before. With their attitudes, the way they've handled things, been professional as young people, we wouldn't be here without them either. It's a big part of our team. It pains me that they don't play. It's hard for me as a person to do that. I want it to work for each individual.

At the end of the day, I have to make decisions that are best for Purdue. It's also best for circling around Zach and circling around Braden and our core guys, how they do it. We've really went to a more offensive front to where we're putting as much skill out on the court as possible.

I'm appreciative of those guys, appreciative of the guys on our scout team. People that come to Purdue, they don't come to be on the scout team, they come to play. When you don't, you have to be on the scout team, do those things, man, to be able to swallow your pride and do it, try to help us, I have a lot of respect for that. I appreciate those guys.

**Q. What similarities can you draw from the journey you're on compared to what Virginia did in 2019, or do you look at it as something different?**

MATT PAINTER: I think it's actually an accurate narrative. Sometimes people will pick up narratives out of thin air instead of doing their work. This is actually the right narrative.

The thing I grab from it more than anything is just the humility of Tony Bennett and how he handled it with class. I think anytime you can take it, you got to be able to take it, you're a little kid, that was always the line, You can dish it out but you can't take it, right? We're all that way as young people. We can say whatever we want, then it hurts when it comes back your way.

Use that in a positive spin. More than anything what stood out to me was when we had that loss, we joined that club with Virginia and Tony Bennett. He had just gotten beat by Furman that day.

You're at a low when you have tough losses like that. For him to think of us and to think of me and to reach out to me on that day, that was great. So from just a humanity standpoint, there are some good people out there that are thinking about others even when they're down and out.

Once again, it's not who you are, right? It's not who you are. It's what you do for a living. It means a whole lot, but it's not who you are. Try to keep that in perspective.

**Q. Last year you talked a lot about how your team lost confidence. This season it seems to be the opposite regardless of results, there's been confidence after losses. What about your team this year? And in regards to Braden yesterday, what did you see from confidence in him and your team?**

MATT PAINTER: I think through confidence for us, I think a lot of that gets drawn from how people shoot the basketball, right? Not necessarily how they play basketball, but how they shoot the basketball.

I think when you miss shots, you're used to making them, you turn the ball over, you're used to not, I think that combination for Braden yesterday was really hard for him

to take in.

I think our team, our staff did a good job of keeping him positive. He's a big piece of what we do. He runs the show for us. That was just a great example of not being at your best but still winning a game in a really tough environment versus a tough team.

Yeah, you just stay with it. You just keep plugging. You keep trying to help each other. Now you step up and you have a good game, maybe that other person is going to be somebody that was helping you the night before that you have to help. Just the reciprocity of being a good teammate, being a good coach, and understanding that you're going to have some failure, but sometimes you can build off of that failure and even have more success because of it.

**Q. Could you give us a little X's and O's insight on the big man matchup. Reflect a little bit on your philosophy of staying with recruiting and developing big men like Zach when the trends of the game have clearly gone away from that.**

MATT PAINTER: Right. For us it's circling the wagons around our best players. If it's Carsen Edwards, so be it. When we came 3/10ths of a second from going to a Final Four in that game, we didn't play post-up basketball. We tried to do as much stuff in space. He was so good and dynamic that we just let it rip.

People don't realize with that team that he really struggled at the end in the Big Ten, even though we won the Big Ten that year, we really struggled. Got beat in the first round of the Big Ten tournament. He didn't shoot well the last couple games of the season after really shooting well.

Then going into the tournament, he became the darling of the tournament. His last three games he made ten, nine and eight threes. Going in we thought we had a lot of makes coming our way.

We just tried to circle around our best guys. We just had a lot of big guys. We still had some pretty dynamic guards from E'Twaun Moore to Jaden Ivey to Carsen Edwards. Obviously we have good guards on this team. Just trying to play through them and their strengths, keep building out off of that.

I think the one thing we do a better job than most people with it is we make 'em decision-makers. If they're going to get the ball a lot -- yesterday like Zach had some turnovers, and let's watch those turnovers, let's learn from that. No different than a point guard. Braden had some turnovers yesterday. Let's watch that and see the mistakes

that you're making, then just grow from that.

Even when you start to have success in certain areas, it can still rear its ugly head. Great teams, they will enhance that with their pressure, size or length. But both players are really good.

I think the important piece of it also is not to neglect who UConn brings off the bench, too, because Johnson, he's a really good player. Their backup is a really good player. He gets out in ball screen defense, he's active. He does a great job on his flip-up dunks. They have a superb system. I love their system. I love what they do. They have purpose in what they do on both ends.

Everybody defends on that team. You're not allowed to play, right, if you can't guard. It's one of those deals, like old school.

But no, Clingan is really good. He changes the game defensively, but offensively he's a good player, too. He's just going to keep coming. He's going to be a fabulous player. He's got 15 to 20 years in front of him.

But don't take anything away from other guys on that front line because they're good players.

**Q. I know you've heard instant gratification world of college sports. Was there a time when you as a kid or as a player or coach, you just realized, like, I can live with myself more if I'm honest with players as opposed to telling them whatever they want to get them over here?**

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, no question about it. Like, I would break down things, my assistants would be like, If you keep going this route, we'll have nobody on our team. Your honesty is, like, killing us. That was about 10, 12 years ago.

I just said, Yeah, but when we get 'em, it's easier to coach 'em. Just be a truth teller.

I think there's a lot of people out there that understand that and feel that. I just put the caveat on it. The guys that cover us all the time have heard it a hundred times. If you become one of our top two or three scorers, here is my vision for you. If you don't, then you're going to have to be able, from a role definition standpoint, to fit around those guys offensively.

What happens in recruiting is, you can have a two-year relationship and you can talk about your role, not one time do they talk about defense. Pretty important part of the game. If you get there, and you can't handle pressure, you

can't play without turning it over because you handle pressure by just shooting, you can't guard your man or you don't know what county he's in, it's going to be really hard to play you on a really good college basketball team.

You'll see, like, talented guys. That's why you see a lot of talented one-and-done guys. The guys that are one-and-done, like Carmelo Anthony, they are rare. Functional, win a national championship. That is hard.

A lot of the one-and-done guys, on their talent, they get there, now it's hard for them because now they're being asked to do some things they never used to do.

You'll see it a lot in the portal. Get a low to mid-major players that averages 20 points somewhere, he's going to come to your place. If he can stay in a role and average 20 points, can he have a little bit more freedom because that's what a leading scorer gets. You don't like to say that, but that's just the truth, the way it is. You're going to be able to play through your mistakes more when you can get us 20.

A guy comes to a high level, now he's going to average four to 10 points for you, like now all the things you harp on is what the previous coach harped on, but he just kept him in the game 'cause he needed his 20 points.

Now I don't need some joker that's averaging five points for me to get beat backdoor on two different plays. It's like, get him out of there. The guy that gets beat backdoor, averages 25, it's like, Can we get beat backdoor while he's running down the court (smiling)?

That is the contradiction of coaching, right? It's just the way it is. But we all search for a role. That's what we want. Like nobody says, Hey, man, I hope I can come to your place and play 10 minutes and set screens and rebound, that would be cool.

THE MODERATOR: We welcome at this time Mason Gillis and Fletcher Loyer.

**Q. What do you see as the backcourt size disadvantage that your team has in this championship game? How do you want to play into that? Does that change your strategy at all?**

MATT PAINTER: I think we have a disadvantage if they make poor decisions. I don't think it's a disadvantage if we make good decisions. They swarm you, they get into you, they make it difficult on you. Don't put yourself in difficult scenarios. Take care of the basketball, run our stuff, make good decisions.

Those guys are really good at pressuring. Stephon Castle, all down the line. When they sub, they're good. All those guys can pressure, take care of the basketball, make good decisions, run what we've called, and stick with that.

If we do those things, you'll have success. What they do a great job of is when blood is in the water. When you show weakness or you turn your back on pressure, you dribble in place, you leave your feet, you don't play on two feet, those guys are the best in the business, they will make you pay. Like I said earlier, that's two or three points at the other end of the court.

I think that's important for us. That's our challenge, is handle pressure, take care of the basketball, make good decisions. They'll get into you. They're solid. But they're just waiting for you to do something stupid. Don't do something stupid.

**Q. Matt, you talked about the turnovers. The glass half empty is that they turned it over, the glass half full is you got through it. The evolution of this team's composure this season, how has it worked out?**

MATT PAINTER: I thought we did a good job of kind of playing through it. We offset it by going 10 for 25 from three. You throw a 5-for-25 on top of that, you get beat. That's where we've lost in the past. We've lost in the past because of high turnovers, high volume threes and low percentage.

We can take a high volume of threes and a low percentage, then have eight turnovers and still win a game. But we can't do the 3-for-23 and the 17 turnovers. That's a recipe for disaster.

They understand that. I've talked those numbers to them the whole season. It's also the functionality of play, being able to handle someone's pressure, being able to take care of the basketball.

We had a couple elementary turnovers, overdid our dribbling a couple times. Our spacing wasn't good. A couple of those scenarios, that was on me in terms of our post action and what we do when the ball goes inside.

We've played this whole season, we've seen a lot of different looks. I think this is the biggest challenge for us on the biggest stage. That's what you want. You want to be able to do that.

Like I said earlier, just being functional in what we do is the most important.

**Q. How hard is it to find guys like Zach Edey in the**

## current climate?

MATT PAINTER: It's very difficult because most big guys that are that size aren't very good at basketball. If you go look at the numbers across the board, like how many other players are good at 7'4", 300? There's not very many of them out there, period.

We scoured the earth for size. We try to go out there and get it because it's proven if you can work with it -- I think we have a great assistant in Brandon Brantley, done a great job with those guys, gives a lot of time and film, individual instruction.

Then you have to offset it with skill. Both of these guys to my right just didn't come to Purdue and learn how to shoot. These guys were great shooters before. If you can get high-level competitors that are skilled, both of these guys are very, very competitive, but they're also maniacal in their work. It's not something I got to check on because I found out that's who they are no matter what.

If they would have went to another school, they would still work on their game, right? A lot of people say, Through our development, we did this. I think that's bullshit a lot of times.

Like these guys did it. Give them credit. It's a players' game. That's an important piece to really embrace in coaching. I'm yet to see somebody come up here and get interviewed all the time with bad players, right? It's a players' game, and these guys are great players.

But we also have to piece it together. They sacrifice, too. They can do more than they actually do, but they're playing with a guy that now they get role definition.

Fletch might get 12 rips at it, he might get six. Mason has games where he shoots the ball two or three times, sometimes seven or eight times. If you want to let him play one-on-one, we'll let him play one-on-one. If not, we'll pass the ball. They pass the ball, too. They pass it more than he does, and rightfully so.

It's a system that they know that they can flourish in and we feel that they can flourish in. Now, when he moves and we change, like how will that -- that's the difference. We've won games before that, too.

**Q. You obviously played a lot of very good teams this year. Is there anyone you've played that you would say is comparable to UConn? Are they in a class by themselves in terms of your opponents this year?**

MASON GILLIS: I don't know necessarily how to classify

them in their own class. But they won the national championship last year. They deserve the respect that they've gotten. We've done our work to get here. They've done their work to get here.

The thing about the game that we have Monday is that it's two great programs, two great coaches, two great coaches going at it, and the players are going to do their best. That's what we can do.

We don't necessarily worry about comparing them to other teams. We just have to do our job.

THE MODERATOR: Fletcher?

FLETCHER LOYER: Kind of like Mason said. You don't really compare them. You compare what you're going to bring to the table, how you're going to get ready to play. You have to get ready as if it's to win the Big Ten, as if it's to win the national championship. Bigger stage. Just getting ourselves ready.

Obviously they're a great team. They've made it here second year in a row. That's very impressive. But giving them the respect and making sure we're ready to go.

**Q. Matt, you brought in a new strength and conditioning coach a couple years ago, Jason Kabo. What did he bring in terms of impact? What has he changed the way you prepare physically?**

MATT PAINTER: He's done a great job. He has good rapport with our guys. Very experienced. Been in the background, has worked with a lot of high-level college guys, high-level pros, being at UNLV. A few NBA players go through Vegas in the off-season. I don't know if you knew that.

He's worked with a lot of different people at a very, very high level. These guys can speak on it. I can let Mason speak on it because they work directly with him.

But more than anything, just having a good rapport with guys, try to help them in their own situation. There's a lot of things that are similar in what we do with each guy, but there's a lot of differences, right?

What Zach Edey and what Fletch does, there's going to be some differences. That's the key thing, is to help each guy improve their strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes guys want to dive into what they struggle in, when there's some things in the weight room that are strengths you want to keep enhancing.

MASON GILLIS: Like Coach said, his experience has



shown over the two years. I think whenever he first came into our program, he did a good job of learning who we are, learning how to work with us. Like Coach said, everybody's different. Anytime you're new to program, you have to learn that.

I think he did a good job of going to each of us, talking to each of us, figuring out our weaknesses, figuring out our strengths. We've grown with that over the course of two years that he's been with us.

He's really been able to isolate what Zach needs to do a couple days before the game to get him feeling the best. He has learned what I need to do, whether that's more on some days, less on some days, specific exercises, things like that.

Like Coach talked about, he's been around. He's been through things. It always helps when you've seen things personally. You can't compare anything to real-life experience. Him bringing that into our culture just helps us. Helps us grow.

He's a good guy, too. He's able to converse with us outside of the locker room. He's had us over to his house to have food. He's done his best to get us here to the national championship.

THE MODERATOR: We'd like to thank Mason, Fletcher and Coach Painter for joining us.

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