

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

Sunday, April 7, 2024

Phoenix, Arizona, USA

State Farm Stadium

UConn Huskies

Coach Dan Hurley

Cam Spencer

Tristen Newton

Finals Pregame Media Conference



Obviously Donovan versus Zach, but so many other pieces to both teams. What is it like knowing you're going to step on the floor against this Purdue team tomorrow, how big this is for the sport that this is how we end a remarkable season?

CAM SPENCER: Yeah, I think it's a great matchup between two teams who have had two great years. Obviously we have a lot of respect for them and their program. They won the national championship for a reason. I'm sure people have been waiting to see this one for a while.

We're locked in and will be ready to go.

TRISTEN NEWTON: Yeah, we've been the two best programs the past two years, us and Purdue. It's a great matchup. We're looking forward to it. The coaches are going to get us well-prepared and ready to have a good game tomorrow.

DAN HURLEY: I'll say that I'm sure Cam endeared himself to their fans while he was in the Big Ten.

Q. Dan, when you look at the way you've constructed your roster this year, last year, the way Purdue has constructed the roster, Kansas, Baylor, Virginia, winning titles, what should everyone know about what wins to get teams to this level?

DAN HURLEY: I mean, I think all of us should just shut up about it and stop trying to help the people that don't know what they're doing.

You know, you got to be able to score obviously to win a six-game single-elimination tournament. I think the days of kind of the rock-fight style of play in modern basketball, I think it's going to be tough to win that way.

I think obviously balanced roster. Young players with talent that are insulated by returning players to your program that can uphold the culture. Then strategic portal additions that can put you over the top.

But I think the roster construction... Skilled players that

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by UConn.

Coach, we'll ask you to make an opening statement.

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, obviously deep into the prep for both of us. Just basically a day and a half prep for each other here. I think I said this about Marquette during the season. Playing certain programs, it feels like a privilege because of what they stand for, how they do it, how good they are.

To be able to play the national championship versus Purdue, how good they are, how Matt runs things, it's a real privilege to play them for the championship.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Dan, I couldn't help but notice you sat down with a little manila folder. Where are you with prep? Is that a typical scouting report?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, immediately after the game, after the media was done, you literally get that tablet as soon as you get on the bus. You're into Purdue on the way back to the hotel. I was able to consume three games before I went to bed last night. Luke Murray obviously was prepping for the winner of that game.

I've been able to catch six of their games already. I imagine I'll watch maybe eight. That's all kind of the analytics, scouting report, some of that type of stuff.

Q. Can you guys reflect on how great of a matchup this is for men's college basketball. This is 1 versus 2.



can process the game. Balance, in terms of veterans and young players.

Q. Coach Hurley, your team has done a very good job as a whole with your lineup in terms of crashing the glass as a unit. Playing in the Big East, how well did you think attacking the glass as a team against great post players are going to help prepare you to go up against Edey?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, you may coach or play your whole career and never coach or play against somebody of his stature. Truly a giant player.

Yeah, I mean, we're a pretty physical team. We more so just fly to the ball. I think we're disciplined like they are. They're an excellent rebounding team. We're an excellent rebounding team. We both block out. A lot of the time it just comes down to tracing that ball and who's going to make that life-or-death pursuit to get it.

Q. Dan, considering the narrative of Purdue getting here for the first time since '69, you guys are getting back, are there differences between getting here the first time and doing it again?

DAN HURLEY: I think, listen, when you break through that euphoria that you feel when you punch your ticket to the Final Four, just the bigness of this event, just participating in it as a coach or a player, the experience, this setting, the buses, police escorts, 70,000 people, I mean, it's an incredible, incredible experience.

The second time you make it feels just as good as the first.

Q. Dan, I think you talked in the Big East tournament about needing your Jolly Green Giant to get nasty. How good of a job has he done in this tournament of doing that, and how easy is it to get him in that mindset when the two-time national Player of the Year is on the other side?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I think with Donovan, he got healthy at the absolute right time of the year. In a similar way, Steph Castle at the end of his freshman year is probably playing like a sophomore. You have Donovan now who has enough experience, enough experience in big spots where he's perfectly conditioned.

He's healthy. He's confident. He's playing more like a junior player. He understands the challenges that he's dealing with with Zach Edey. It's a unique matchup. He's played against some outstanding centers in Soriano and Kalkbrenner. But this is a different animal and they use him in a much, much different way.

It's going to be a heck of a challenge for our front court, for our guards, our whole team. It's going to have to take a team effort to try to slow him down a little bit.

Q. Dan, can you reflect on what it's been like to coach your son? Do you remember when he was finishing high school, the thought process about his decision to want to play for you?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I mean, he was good enough. He would have been a Division II, Division III player. He can dunk. I could never dunk. I got short arms. I couldn't jump that high.

He humanizes me a little bit. I don't know what he does in the locker room when I'm on like a heater and I'm being completely brutal ass to everybody. I don't know if he goes in the locker room and endears himself to these guys by crushing me and saying, Yeah, he's the worst, or if he goes in there and says, Hey, guys, he loves you, he just cares.

I don't really know what's going on back there (smiling). I don't know if these guys will tell me either before it's over.

As a coach, you sacrifice a lot, especially at the college level or the NBA level. Oftentimes your wife and your kids suffer with that time lost. So to be able to get that time back and be together 11 months a year, see each other every day, multiple times a day. The highs and lows of everything we go through. Made up for a lot of time we lost.

THE MODERATOR: We'd like to thank Tristen and Cam for joining us. We'll continue with questions for Coach Hurley.

Q. You've talked about how much pressure there is in that first-round game. Can you imagine what they went through, losing the 1-16 game, doing what they've done? What does it tell you about them and the character you're facing tomorrow?

DAN HURLEY: I mean, we can relate. Everyone's motivations are different. It was very relatable.

Again, the COVID NCAA tournament, I'd like to throw that one out. For me, I'll accept responsibility for a degree for that brutal performance. That New Mexico State loss, then the Iona game, we felt the heat. I know what that felt like.

For them, it probably was even more so than that. But they're such a classy program, their culture is as good as anyone. There's as well-coached as anyone. You could see they had an attitude about 'em going into this

tournament, throughout the season, where I don't think anyone thought this would be a similar situation for them. But I can certainly relate to the pressure they felt.

Q. My question is about Clingan. You talked earlier about Tristen Newton, how he's grown as a leader. How do you think Donovan has grown as a leader?

DAN HURLEY: You learn so much in coaching. When you see how different personalities affect just the team vibe, especially when you're going into these big, high-leverage moments.

I think my experience about Donovan, some of the folks we brought in the last couple years, Joey California, Andre Jackson, you just realize how important it is to have people that are alive, they're for the zombie-like creatures. They bring life to the locker room. They've got passion. The people that you can lose with and still be able to pick the pieces up because they're good people, they're charismatic, and they're just great in the locker room because it's a grind.

Q. You talked a little bit about Steph Castle a couple minutes ago. It seems like for a five-star, McDonald's All-American guy, he's remarkably low maintenance. Wonder why he's been able to fit in so well and how he's grown over the last couple months?

DAN HURLEY: I think he told on himself. I mean, he's got the great parents, Stacey and Quan, they've kept him humble all the way through in a sport where we put these kids on a pedestal way before they should be. We treat them like they've arrived way before arrival.

They didn't allow that to happen with him. The way he handled the recruiting process, it didn't turn into a fiasco. It didn't go from a I've narrowed my list to 20, now I've narrowed it to 18, now 12, now 9. Like, he was decisive. He watched us practice. He saw our culture. He wanted to be coached hard. They wanted an old-school environment for him to be challenged in, to be held accountable.

It's just been the perfect situation for him 'cause his draft stock is right where they want it to be right now, and he's won big. You can still do both, and everyone can win.

Q. From a big-picture perspective, do you feel like UConn could have reached this level of dominance if you hadn't rejoined the Big East a few years ago?

DAN HURLEY: Oh, yeah, absolutely. We were well on our way. In a similar way to what Coach Sampson was doing in the AAC. Obviously going to the Big 12,

everything's bigger, tougher league. We were recruiting at a very, very high level.

We would be where we were regardless. I got the best staff in the country. Got one of the biggest brands in college basketball. It has certainly helped. But we've also had a big impact on the Big East, as well.

Q. As reigning champions, you've had a target on your back all year. How has that motivated you?

DAN HURLEY: I mean, number one, my biggest motivation really for the last two, three weeks is I just don't want to deal with the portal shit (smiling). That's why we're trying to win so hard right now. I'm seeing what other people are doing, and it's chaos. I can hide behind, Hey, my season's still going on.

But yeah, I think we've used that. For a lot of the year we've used the external slights, the perceived slights, all those things, the world's against us mentality, I think that gets you through, like, the regular season, Big East grind, January, February, where the team's tired and you've got to create these different things.

Where we really used that motivation external, everyone's trying to get us, they want what they got, we're the champs. Somebody is going to have to rip this out of our hands. We used that a lot.

But once you get to this time of year, everything is just you are who your identity is. The way you play, it's very automatic. It just comes down to hoping that it's your night.

Q. You and Matt come at it differently, but you're both strong in your convictions how you want to do things. Both have taken some heat for it, perhaps. How do you maintain the courage of that conviction?

DAN HURLEY: I think we do have a lot of similarities in terms of the culture and the old-school values that we have in terms of the type of people that we recruit, the type of teams we have. So maybe the personalities are a little bit different on the sideline. I wish I had his composure at times (smiling).

I just think we've been involved in the games our whole lives. We were both players. We both played for incredible coaches throughout our careers. I think those coaches we played for have made us stubborn and strong in what we believe.

I think we're both very confident people that are authentic and aren't trying to put on a show. I don't think there's anything fake about either one of us. We are who we are.

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Q. What does having an enormous backcourt like you have, like you had last year, what strategic advantage does that give you, particularly against a smaller backcourt like Purdue has?

DAN HURLEY: Just the size of guards, to have a 6'5" Tristen Newton, Steph Castle who is 6'6", to be able to put him on a point guard or on a wing scorer, either one of those guys. It just affects passing windows. I think for guards, whether it's the ball screen game or post feeding.

Obviously it shrinks the court for the opponent, as well. Allows you to contest the three-point line at those spots. Even Karaban, who is 6'8", 6'9", he's got great length at his position, as well.

Q. You're a very good three-point shooting team. Donovan Clingan plays a big role in that. Purdue is the second best three-point shooting team in the country. Is it a similar formula with Edey in the middle to open their three-point shooters?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, you got to pick your poison. I think you got to mix things up. Single coverage for Zach Edey, it's a scary proposition, even with Donovan, 'cause he's a game changer for us at both ends of the court and on the backboard.

I just think we can't give them one look. They're too good. In a lot of ways, we mirror each other. They're two or three in offense in the country, 12th in defense. There's just not a lot of holes in either team. It's NBA-level talent up and down each roster. Teams that are just well-rounded without a lot of vulnerabilities.

Q. I'm going to ask you to extend that thought 'cause Edey is combining for close to about 44 points in rebounds a game. Are you anticipating the necessity to double-team him? How are you going to prepare for this? Are you preparing for Edey to go Edey again, whatever else we can do to shut everybody else down, we'll win that way?

DAN HURLEY: It's a unique change. He's a unique player. I don't think that one thing is going to work in the game. I think you've got to try to keep him off balance. Matt, unfortunately for us, really constructed a great roster around such a unique player.

Obviously the blind spot for them last year was subpar three-point shooting, which allowed you to surround him, whereas now if you put two on the ball with him, you're now turning loose a team that's shooting 40% from three. If you single coverage him, even with Donovan, a player of his

caliber, he obviously gets fouled a lot or he's at the free-throw line a lot. So now we're putting maybe our most impactful player in position to maybe get in foul trouble, which would cause big problems for us at both ends and on the backboard.

I just think even though it's a short prep, we've played a lot of games this year. I think there's a number of different things we're going to have to try to do and mix up and see what's effective.

Q. When the you deal with alums of a certain era, what's been your experience seeing them process what this place has become?

DAN HURLEY: I'd say UConn's unique because, I mean, where UConn is the pro sports franchise of the state, and obviously it's two things: the impact that basketball at UConn has had on the university and the growth of the university, what it was like in the '80s and '90s, the small agricultural college. I think when I drove through campus in the early to mid '90s, I thought I missed the campus as I arrived at Gampel.

The explosion of basketball, what it's meant to the state, what it's meant to the campus becoming a world-class university, the impact has been great.

What Dee Rowe and Coach Calhoun and Geno and the former players that want to be around, not just for the Final Four or when the cameras are around, but the amount of folks that come through to watch a practice, to talk to the boys, it's a unique relationship. It's special.

Q. This era with so much conference realignment, the portal, NIL, it feels like it should be harder to win back-to-back championships, which obviously history has proven to be rare. Can you identify a couple things about your program that have allowed you to be in this position?

DAN HURLEY: Yeah, I think at this point we understand that we could, as Teddy Atlas would say, pass on some of the neon talents to get our type of people. Obviously there's a baseline that you need in terms of size, athletic ability, just ability with the basketball to do things.

But we really hold out to get our type of people. The staff continuity. We've made it so good I think for guys like Kimani and Luke to not take a low or mid-major job. I've been able to keep my staff intact by making sure they're taken care of that way.

We just haven't changed a lot. Like, we don't kiss the kids' ass during recruiting. We don't kiss it while they're on

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campus. We bring tremendous value to our players because we're old school and we push 'em to get better and to become better people. We teach 'em how to become successful.

I think we try to play modern basketball with the use of analytics. I bought more into that. But have really held on to, like, old-school values the way coaches maybe used to be more, where we're in charge and we hold people accountable. But we play a modern style of ball.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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