

# Big East Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 15, 2025

New York, New York, USA

Madison Square Garden

**St. John's Red Storm**

**Head Coach Rick Pitino**

Postgame Media Conference



St. John's 82, Creighton 66

THE MODERATOR: Coach Pitino, when you are ready. Congratulations.

RICK PITINO: We had three phases we set out, and phase one was to win the regular Big East Championship. Phase two gets very difficult because you can't embrace what you are accomplishing. You just have to keep getting better. We accomplished that, and phase three was to make the tournament and go as far as we could possibly go.

These two young men make it possible. Kadary is about as much fun to coach as any coach could have because he takes coaching really well, and he owns up to every mistake he makes. In the first half we were just really intimidated by Kalkbrenner, and we were pulling up missing at midrange. What we talked about at halftime was to take it to the rim, use the rim as a shield. He can't cut through steel. Then take the three when it's there. Don't worry about the midrange game.

Both of these guys took it to the rim. They used the rim as jail, what we call jail, and even when we missed two free-throws, RJ got the rebound. So both of these guys have had an incredible season. I've said it all along with RJ that he's going to be even a better pro, and he's a hell of a college player. Kadary is going to have a long career because somebody is going to invest in Kadary and get a 6'6" guard who is going to play a long, long time in the NBA. I'm positive of that.

So I'm proud of both of them. Great win for the city. Great win for our university. You hear it all along that it's New York's team, and it truly is. As a New Yorker myself, I'm very, very proud that St. John's has gotten to this level.

So we're all excited. We're all thrilled. These guys deserve all the credit because they shot 72% in the second

half, 66.7 from three, and they were just brilliant.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please, for players.

**Q. RJ, you go from Big East Player of the Year to Big East Tournament Most Outstanding Player and most points, I guess, ever in a Big East Tournament Championship game. Can you just describe the feeling right now?**

RJ LUIS JR.: First and foremost, got to give the glory to God. Without him, wouldn't be here. I'm just very blessed for this opportunity.

Like Coach P says, there's not that many second chances in life, so when the opportunity presents itself, you've got to grab it by the neck. I mean, I'm just truly happy. Wow, this is incredible just to come from last year to this year and to see the transformation. Obviously we brought in big-time transfers with Kooks here, Deivon, A. Scott, Vince, so it's just great.

Coach P is the mastermind behind all of this. I mean, it's truly special. I'm at a loss for words. Been asked a lot of questions so far.

I'm just truly blessed, and I'm just very happy to bring this championship back to New York City and obviously St. John's University. We're going to continue to build on.

**Q. RJ, when you climbed up the ladder the second time and you were sitting there on the rim and you had the flag on you and everything, posing for the photos, can you kind of think of a better encapsulation of everything you thought this journey with Coach Pitino could be in that moment?**

RJ LUIS JR.: I didn't think you were going to out me in front of Coach P like that. He could have been like, Oh, don't climb on the ladder, you might get hurt.

As a little kid, you dream with these special moments during the March Madness and the tournament championship. When I was little, I would see the guys go



up to the ladders and cut the nets. Obviously to do it myself is incredible. It's a great feeling. I mean, I'm just truly blessed.

God has been so good to me. I just keep my faith in him and know that he has already planned all this. This has been my destiny. I'm just continuing to work on my craft and just trust in the process.

**Q. Kadary, I wonder as a New York kid, can you walk me through your day today when you woke up and you realized kind of what was on the line tonight and what the building was going to be like and then taking the bus here and kind of whatever you were feeling? Did it sink in what the possibilities were of this day?**

KADARY RICHMOND: I knew what today was going to be like after what happened yesterday. You know, just waking up today, we had breakfast, walk-through. You want the whole day or -- (laughing).

RJ LUIS JR.: Tell him what we ate for breakfast (laughing).

KADARY RICHMOND: We had walk-through, got back, took a nap. We had film, and then we got here, warmed up, and we got a big win.

**Q. You fell asleep during your nap?**

KADARY RICHMOND: Definitely. Pregame nap.

**Q. RJ, you guys have been thinking about championship all season. You were thinking about the regular season championship, and now you were thinking about the tournament championship. Is the lived experience of having won it, how does that compare with what you imaged it might be?**

RJ LUIS JR.: I don't think it settled in yet. Just still trying to soak it in, and it's just crazy how much you can speak things into existence and just watch it all come together.

This has by far been the most emotional, happiest week of my 22 years of existence, so this is great. I mean, I love Coach P, what he does for his players. He looks out for all of us. Not even Coach P, but the whole entire coaching staff, all my teammates.

We mesh. We gel very well together. We goof around on and off the court. We go to war every day in practice to obviously experience moments like these.

**Q. What were conversations like at halftime when you were still just a little bit behind?**

RJ LUIS JR.: The conversation was just not to let up. We were only down I think two points.

RICK PITINO: Three.

RJ LUIS JR.: My bad. Three points. Just to lock in. Like he said, he brought up trying to attack Kalkbrenner and not being phased from his length and stuff like that and using the rim as jail.

I mean, that's really it. We've been through a lot of adversity this year. Like Coach P says, his famous quote with what's the basketball game if you know that -- what does he say? He says something about, This is the game of life. So, I mean, really just sticking to the principles and knowing that basketball obviously is a game of runs. The other team is going to go on their runs. So we just try our best to stick to our defensive principles and win the game.

**Q. For both Kadary and RJ. Congratulations, first of all, on an incredible tournament. Early in the season Coach had a concern about the players and listening. As you guys have developed over the course of the season, one of the things that's been noticeable in the games is how in the second half you guys seem to get sharper and close out opponents. In terms of the NCAA Tournament coming up, do you have any concerns going forward? What do you expect from Coach?**

KADARY RICHMOND: I don't think we have any concerns yet. We don't know where we play or who we're going to play. So just taking it day by day, staying humble like we've been, and being ready to go when our name is called.

**Q. RJ, you talk about this being a game of runs. Just during that run where you guys made 14 consecutive baskets in the second half, what is that like? What was going through your head as you guys are going through that run? What allowed you to get so hot specifically?**

RJ LUIS JR.: I mean, we definitely fed off the crowd, the energy, the atmosphere. It was ridiculous. It was very loud. I mean, it's great to have that level of support from the atmosphere. We feed off that energy, so it's big-time.

Obviously, like Kooks said about we're not going to know where we're going to play, but we want to get the 2 seed in the East so we can stay local and our fans can come out and support.

**Q. Kadary, that second half from RJ, what was it like**

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**watching him 27 points and just what do you think worked for him so well there?**

KADARY RICHMOND: I think that was just beast mode being beast mode. You know, he got in foul trouble in the first half, so there was no doubt in my mind that he was coming out to be aggressive and do anything to get a win.

THE MODERATOR: Kadary and RJ, thank you. Questions for Coach.

**Q. Rick, when you brought in Zubyr and RJ last year, did you look at those guys and think, these could be star players on a championship team?**

RICK PITINO: I think that neither guy was heavily recruited. Neither guy had great seasons where they were, but after working both of them out, I thought they both had great potential as basketball players, could get a lot better.

Did I expect them to reach these heights? I didn't really think about it, but I have great gratitude that they did because we won a regular season and a Big East Championship because of their play. The three of them have been unstoppable.

**Q. Coach, at any point leading up to today or during the tournament, did Coach Carnesecca cross your mind, and what do you think he would say about this team?**

RICK PITINO: No, he didn't cross my mind during the game. He crosses my mind after the game. I'm thinking he would be so proud of this team.

You know, I say it all along. St. John's is Lou Carnesecca, Chris Mullin, Mark Jackson, Walter Berry, and all the great from Joe DePre and Johnny Warren back in the day. That's St. John's.

I'm just a caretaker of what all those guys built and I'm a proud caretaker of that. After the game you obviously think of Lou and how proud he would have been.

**Q. Coach, just under the 12 minute mark was the first time you took the lead in this game, and I did a tweet: The minute St. John's takes the lead in this game, it's over, and it was. It was Vince that made the basket, and I think Vince has been playing incredible starting in this tournament really. Can you comment on that turning point? Also, the way the crowd helped you.**

RICK PITINO: Well, the crowd was great, and I'm glad you have those tweeting powers. It's amazing that you have those powers (smiling). Kreskin would be very proud of

that.

He made a very good play inside. He's a project, but he's a worthwhile project. I'm a very confident coach. Didn't have quite your confidence, but I was very appreciative.

**Q. Rebuilding a program is hard. You've taken this St. John's program from around the middle of the conference to being just on the edge of the tournament, to now you've won a regular season title, a tournament title, and you're probably going to be a very, very high seed in this NCAA Tournament. What message would you send to this country that have been used to a St. John's team towards the middle and now they're about to see in March Madness a St. John's team towards the top?**

RICK PITINO: I don't send any messages to anyone. Humility is a big part of my life right now. It wasn't always that way. I don't believe in redemption. I believe in humility. I don't believe in things that -- I believe in living what I call the precious present, a gift that we all get.

We just lost a super star in Louisville, Junior Bridgeman, who was a young man who didn't smoke, didn't drink, carried his life in God's name in a big way. So I take life as one day at a time. I take it one game at a time. I don't consider ourselves that people should beware of us. I've lost in the first round. I've been to seven Final Fours. So we'll take it one game at a time, one possession at a time.

**Q. Both Coach Smart and Coach Hurley yesterday commented on sort of the officiating differences in the Big East versus the NCAA Tournament and the style of play there. How do you see your team --**

RICK PITINO: What did they say? I don't listen to those guys at press conferences. I mean, they're very interesting, but...

**Q. Yeah. They talked about the physicality and how there's a lot more physicality that's allowed in the Big East versus the NCAA Tournament. Do you buy that having an impact?**

RICK PITINO: That's been going on when I coached at Providence when John Thompson was roaming the sidelines. Everybody said the Big East is a much more physical league. Tonight those officials did a great job.

I don't know what he was doing with RJ when RJ went three, and he thought he was making a gun sign. I don't think RJ knows what a gun is.

It is physical, but you have to adjust come tournament

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time. You have to adjust, move your feet more, but that's been said in 1987 when I was a coach, they said that about the Big East. I think that Connecticut did an awfully good job of adjusting, don't you think, in the last two years of adjusting to the officiating? I know Danny is very happy with officials, especially in the tournament (smiling).

**Q. You've obviously been here before with different programs, but what does it mean to have St. John's here, Big East regular season tournament, postseason tournament. It's been a program that's basically been dormant for 25 years, and people said St. John's couldn't do this. What's it like for you to be able to bring it back?**

RICK PITINO: Well, first of all, I think there's a lot of misrepresentations about NIL. NIL didn't get us this team because Zuby and RJ are very low-paid players. That's nonsense about the NIL.

When you are in free agency right now, you know and you've seen it for all of you that carry pro sports, you get a batter that you think is going to really help the Yankees, the Mets win, whatever it may be, bats .150. You don't know what you are getting.

Somebody asked me about Zuby and RJ. You don't know what you are getting. Zuby didn't even play at Kansas. RJ was a good freshman, solid, but you don't know what you are getting.

So here's two stars, very underpaid. I'm sure they'll be at Matt's window as soon as the season ends, but they're not going anywhere. So you build a team by making sure you understand the whole puzzle of what goes into it, and people just mischaracterize the NIL and why St. John's has been built. St. John's didn't get built by the NIL. St. John's got built with character of the players, and certainly we are excited to have these young men.

**Q. Rick, every team that comes here to the Big East Tournament wants to win it. Do you feel like because of where St. John's has been, because of where St. John's is located, and because of the building it's played in, that St. John's winning the championship is kind of a bigger deal?**

RICK PITINO: Well, because of everything that Zach just mentioned and you guys keep pointing it out about all the things that weren't accomplished before I was born -- we keep saying 40 years, 25. I wasn't around back then. I was in my prime in diapers.

I am as a New Yorker about as proud as any person could be because, you know, when I hear St. John's is New

York's team and we're New York strong and we represent New York, that makes me feel awesome inside. So for New York, for St. John's, to see that crowd tonight, it's an extra special feeling for me.

Now, I was elated with Louisville when we came in here and won three times I believe, elated for the players. There's an extra special feeling being a New Yorker who grew up on 26th Street and grew up in Queens and then Long Island. For me it's just extra, extra special because I share this with every fan that takes great pride in what accomplished this year.

The fans are very much part of our team. Tonight when we celebrate, I will toast the fans, I will toast you, Roger, and I will toast everybody in this room that's supported us. It's a lot of drinks tonight, guys (laughing). Thank you all very much.

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