

Big East Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 14, 2026

New York, New York, USA

Madison Square Garden

St. John's Red Storm

Rick Pitino

Oziah Sellers

Zuby Ejiofor

Dillon Mitchell

Bryce Hopkins

Postgame Media Conference



St. John's - 72, UConn - 52

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions for the players.

Q. Zuby, when you left the floor for the last time it looked like you were breaking down a little. What was that like, the emotions? You had the whole crowd chanting your name and you obviously looked like it kind of got to you there. What did that feel like?

ZUBY EJIOFOR: Who was crying? He was crying. See, I told you about that. I told you. I saw that tear.

See, this is why I won't be doing nothing. I can't even show emotion no more.

Anyway, man, it was just bittersweet. Obviously, like I've said pretty much all year, we've had a target on our backs and we had to battle through adversity all season. Nobody believed that we could get to this moment but us. Everybody in the locker room and these guys, they earned it. They earned it. This is what they came here for, and we accomplished a few of the goals that we set out to do.

Q. Zuby, when they start to make a run in the second half and they get it down to seven, Bryce hits the jumper, and then you make three big plays, the hook shot, the three-pointer, and the block that ends up in the Mitchell dunk. Can you sort of share, like, your feelings of personal responsibility about making sure St. John's gets over the finish line?

ZUBY EJIOFOR: Every time I go out there I just try to compete at a high level and do whatever it takes to come out successful, on the defensive end, on the offensive end, and do whatever it takes, like I said, to come out with the win.

But these guys, they competed all game, and they understood the assignment. We had to set the tone early against UConn because they're such a great program. So we set the tone early like we did pretty much all tournament, but we had to be resilient to come out with a win like this and these guys did that.

Q. Bryce, obviously a lot has been said about your decision to transfer from the outside world and all that. Does a tournament like this, a game like this, the celebration after the game, does it make all that worth it, this journey and what you've been on over the last year?

BRYCE HOPKINS: A hundred percent. I feel like the biggest thing for me is I'm just extremely blessed to be back healthy playing basketball at a hundred percent. I feel like that's the biggest thing. We have a great team right here. I'm in a great group of guys that I love going to work with every night. So, you know, this is some momentum that we can build on running into the tournament, and I just love playing with these guys.

Q. Bryce, you're a graduate student, you're coming from Providence. It's got to feel good for you to come into this program for the first time and get a big win like this. I want to ask you about your emotions right now. Obviously, you still have a lot of basketball to be played, the NCAA tournament, but right now, obviously, some gold right in front of you and a hat to just cap a great season for your guys. What are your raw emotions after a big win like that?

BRYCE HOPKINS: It means a lot. We put in so much work, starting in the summer, and we're still putting in a ton of work right now, and it's just so rewarding that all the work we put in in the summer and all the long days, the



long nights, the ups and downs, it paid off. We're not done yet. We have a lot more to go that we want to achieve, but this is definitely rewarding right now for sure.

Q. Bryce, early on in the game, you guys got multiple teammates involved outside of Zubu. How much did that kind of help open up the offense not only for you guys, but also for Zubu later in the game?

BRYCE HOPKINS: For sure. We know what Zubu brings to the table and we all play off of that. But when everybody else is clicking as well, I feel like we're just that much harder to guard. Everybody's building their confidence when they see shots falling and it just means a lot for all of us to just go out there, have the extreme confidence playing off of one another.

Q. Zubu, back-to-back nights, you have Hines and then Reed right after. What's it like having to battle against such high caliber and physical big men on back-to-back nights?

ZUBU EJIOFOR: I think it just brings out the best in me. I love competing at a high level and obviously those two are special talents, especially Tarris. But it was never about Tarris versus Zubu. It was always about St. John's versus UConn and do whatever it takes to come out with a win and that's exactly what we did tonight.

Q. Zubu, you had this experience last year, winning a championship, and the euphoria and then of course some of the disappointment happened in the second round of the tournament. How do you take that experience from last year and use that for motivation or use that to kind of teach the other guys that have not been through this experience before?

ZUBU EJIOFOR: Just carry the momentum that we have with this tournament to the NCAA tournament. But all you can do is just approach each and every day in the best way possible, practice, compete at a high level like a champion that we are, and we await to see who our next opponent is. But like I said, we're just going to enjoy this one tonight and regroup sooner than later.

Q. Rick, could you just put into perspective, you came here three years ago and a program that obviously had been through a lot of tough times for 25 years, and to win four titles in the last two years, to do it with basically different teams, have you even -- are you even surprised at what's happened the last two years?

RICK PITINO: You know, last night I had a big treat because every time I step on the floor at Madison Square Garden I think of something that has happened in my

lifetime, and last night I drafted a local product from St. John's Bishop Auckland, Mark Jackson, and he was here at the game, he's here at the game tonight. He was my Rookie of the Year, second year made the All Star team.

So it was such a thrill for me because it brought back so many incredible memories of him flying a plane every time we scored into the press. And to have Mark here means a lot to me because it's the past.

And now we fast-forward to the present and there's so much history with St. John's and we brought it all back in three years, not only with a high ranking, but the first time in history of the school to win back-to-back regular season back-to-back tournaments. But I told the guys in the locker room, I said, The one thing I always want -- obviously you want -- every coach wants to see the team get better and to peak at the right time. But I want to see the individuals get better. And these four guys all got a lot better as the season went along.

Zubu has taken it from a guy that came in without a lot of confidence to now one of the great leaders in the game that I've ever coached. Bryce Hopkins has got significantly better, and I told Dillon and Bryce going into this, If you guys don't dominate, we can't win this game. And they both played unbelievable.

Oziah's been consistent from the summer to now, gotten a lot better defensively, but they have all gotten significantly better at latter stages of their careers, which is great for our coaching staff. And for me personally, being a New Yorker and seeing the thrills of our fans and seeing the thrills of the team means a great deal to me to be a small part of this whole thing.

So I'm really, really proud. I know Louie is looking down on us with great pride. Joe Lapchick's looking down on us with great pride, and I'm really, really impressed by all of them.

With 12:30 to go in the game, I had to take a timeout -- I had to waste a timeout, which infuriated me with these guys, and I said to them, You are fatiguing. Don't let this clock run out. You've got to keep the pressure on them offensively. Johnnies don't get tired. Johnnies don't get tired. I took Zubu out right before that, and he said to me, Coach, at eight minutes I'll kill. Bring me back in. And he did.

They all played a lot of minutes in this tournament and didn't fatigue, and at that point they just turned it around and dominated the game once again against a very good Connecticut team, very good. We held Mullins without a three-point shot at halftime. These guys played great. I

don't know what was better, the defense, the offense, or the attitude.

So I'm real proud of all four of you guys. You're tremendous young men as well as being great basketball players, and you've all gotten significantly better, which is what every coach wants.

Q. Rick, when we spoke to you on Wednesday, you spoke about how impressed you were by how this team had responded from the loss to UConn. I guess now seeing what they did tonight, just can you kind of describe what allowed them to bounce back in such an emphatic way?

RICK PITINO: Well, we talked about it, and I told 'em, I said, Look, my Louisville team lost to Providence by 32, and we went to a Final Four. We lost to Notre Dame by 31, and we went to an Elite 8. I said it's meaningless. It's meaningless.

Now, what's meaningful is how you come out against Villanova. You can't do anything about that loss, but you can do something about the way you come out against Villanova. And true to form with the character of these guys, they came out and I think won by 32 points against a very good Villanova team.

Q. Can you describe the closing efforts of Dylan Darling? Obviously his shot wasn't necessarily falling, and then that 13-0 run that you guys had to end the game, he scores six of the points and was really aggressive.

RICK PITINO: Yeah, he didn't have it his way at all during the game. It just shows you about -- I said to him, Take it easy, Stef. Take it easy, Stef. Because he's trying to just go one-on-one. I said, Zuby, will you do something with this guy? Set a pick, get him out of going one-on-one.

But it shows you it wasn't going his way. He just tried to take over the game offensively and defensively with a great back tip. But listen, these two bookend forwards, they are tremendous, they are tremendous. Don't underrate them. This guy takes a lot of publicity away from them because of his greatness.

But those pipkins there, the three of them, they make up a great, great front court. Dillon Mitchell, I was getting all over him. I said, You handle the ball. You handle the ball. You are the point guard. And he was brilliant. Hop kept getting better and better. What a great tournament. I'm proud of you guys.

Q. Yesterday you mentioned a starving dog approach

that you guys came out of the gates with. It was another fast start tonight. Was it that same starving dog approach or what was it tonight that allowed you guys to do that?

RICK PITINO: You know, we never mentioned revenge because we have so much respect for Connecticut. We just talked about championship. This is the championship. It doesn't matter who we're playing, it's a championship at stake. You guys get a chance to be a part of history. It's a championship. It's another night to get better and improve. And we did. We improved every single game and we got better.

Remember, we were struggling come back against Xavier, come back against Butler, come back against Seton Hall. We're always trailing. And we came out, the ball went up and three straight nights we didn't relent at all. That's a great sign offensively and a great sign defensively going into the tournament.

Q. Oziyah, since media day, you talked all season about your excitement to be on this team, and here you are, you're a part of a legacy now, and there's some kid somewhere shooting a basketball, looking at St. John's the way they did 40 years ago. What's the lesson that you carry forward that you could tell that kid shooting a basketball?

OZIYAH SELLERS: It might sound a little cliché but to just never stop working. Me being from California, coming out here, it wasn't for any reason -- I mean, for no reason. I wanted to come to win a championship and that's what I had as a goal ever since June. So to be in this position and to win it feels great, it feels amazing, and we're not done yet.

RICK PITINO: You know, one thing I told these guys, I said, this is Oziyah's third school, and he's a very bright, articulate young man. And Dillon as well as Bryce has been to a couple schools. But they are always going to be Johnnies because their home court is Madison Square Garden. It's the Mecca. They're never, ever going to -- they will talk about the other schools. I'm sure they had great experiences. But they're always going to be Johnnies, even though it's been a short period of time, because Madison Square Garden is their home.

Q. I kind of fear you might hate this question, but --

RICK PITINO: You're going to ask it anyway, though.

Q. Do you think this team is better situated going into the tournament than last year's team? I know it's a very different team, but do you think the team is built

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better?

RICK PITINO: Well, I think last year's team was one of the best defensive teams in the country. But I believe defense is all scouting. It's all scouting because they're all good athletes. It's all about preparing and taking away what the other team does well. If you know what they're going to do and you prepare for that, they're good enough athletes to take it away just like tonight.

Now, you obviously will be well prepared for the first game, but then -- I told these guys that these three games have to be the first three games in the NCAA tournament because you get little prep time. We'll be ready for the first game, God willing we get by that game, and then the second game you got one day. So they're ready for that now. They all know it's prep. Everyone of them knows it's prep. And they're all locked in defensively, they're locked in offensively.

But one of the things I loved tonight is Bryce Hopkins just said, Give me the ball. I'm going to the rim. I'm taking over. And then Dillon Mitchell flying down the court. It was just exciting to see the confidence of both players. And then Ozyiah shooting the ball. This guy doesn't -- you know, he doesn't need a boost in confidence. He thinks he's the best player in the country and he shows it every single night.

Q. In December, you talked about how the lack of this team's continuity made it the most challenging thing you've ever experienced as a coach. Does this accomplishment and figuring it out make it that much sweeter?

RICK PITINO: Well, I think every coach would say that right now. Every coach is going through this. We didn't have -- we had Zubey and Ruben who played a lot of minutes, and next year we're going to have Ruben and a couple other guys. So it's going to happen every single year. It's going to be tough to get that continuity.

The most ridiculous rule in history of the NCAA is that professional athletes giving you four hours a week during that. I mean, that is the dumbest thing I've ever witnessed in my lifetime and in all of college basketball. To have professional athletes saying, well, you can only have four hours during the summer. I mean, come on, these guys are in this game. They come to St. John's to get better.

And so I'm hoping they do away with that ridiculous rule. Just think of how good Bryce would be right now if we had eight hours a week. (Laughing.)

Q. Last season when you played Connecticut in

Storrs, you felt like in the first half of that contest that they had too many easy shots, and then you utilized your press in the second half. I mean, can you just describe what you saw with the press tonight and what about your team makes them so effective in utilizing that press?

RICK PITINO: Sometimes the press doesn't get you a lot of turnovers, but what it does get you, it gets you the fatigue element so their jump shot is not as good. That's happened to me so many times in coaching. You just wear the other team down. These guys, when I called that timeout, I said, We don't fatigue. You guys, your practice is much tougher than this game.

So we don't fatigue, and it takes a way from their jump shot, their movement, because they have got great movement. But these guys were totally locked in tonight, locked in at the full court, 90-foot level. Once they crossed half court, they were all locked in defensively.

Q. When you arrived here three years ago, UConn was in the midst of winning back-to-back championships, national championships. Now you've won two double championships in the Big East. When you got here and you saw what UConn was, I guess what did you think you had to do to get St. John's to this point, based on knowing that they were at the top of the mountain?

RICK PITINO: Well, I think it's great that Connecticut's at the top of the mountain because this league needs more better teams. We need to get Georgetown back. We need to get Providence back. We need to get -- I got to get my son to start recruiting great basketball players. (Laughing.)

So we need the league to get back. We've got great coaches. I think the misconception is, well, the Big East has got 22 million to spend because they have no football. We're not spending 22 million. But we all need to -- everybody needs to get \$10 million to spend. For the rich people like Georgetown and Villanova maybe they go to 12. For those people that are poor, trying to get a break in life, like us, we maybe get to 10.

But everybody needs to get that up there so we can get greatness back. That's what it's all about right now. It's a salary cap. Everybody needs to get to \$10, \$12 million, and with this coaching in this league, everybody will be back and the Big East will be great once again.

Q. Zubey, so you've got a second championship here, a second tournament championship here. I'm not going to ask you to compare them, because they're both special. Can you sort of describe what the difference

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is between like winning the first one and then the experience of the repeat?

ZUBY EJIOFOR: The first one was truly special. Obviously it was the first time that I experienced winning at such a high level. But this second time coming around it was more so not even about me, it was more so about the new guys that came in. I wanted to win for them. I wanted them to feel the thrill of winning a championship here in MSG. And we accomplished that goal. And just to see the excitement, the smiles on their faces, it meant a lot to me. Like I said, that's who I do it for, I do it for them, I do it for Johnnies Nation, for my family. And, yeah I was just excited, and more so than anything I wanted to get out with a win for them.

Q. You're nodding your head, Dillon. What is it like for you to hear him say that he was more in it for you guys.

DILLON MITCHELL: Yeah, we talked about it earlier until the year just our goals coming in. Zuby, D Crew, Ruben all the guys that were here last year just talked about the accomplishment of winning the Big East, not only the conference, the regular season, but also the tournament. And then seeing when they hung the banner up, they got the rings, it's unreal, and it's something that the new guys want to be a part of. And we preached it from the jump what our goals were, it's a long season, and we got to take one game at a time and 40 minutes at a time. But now to accomplish something that we had early June, it just, it's just a big testament to what we have put in every day on day-to-day basis.

Q. You go to Tarris Reed tonight one-on-one, and your perimeter defenders did an excellent job staying with their man. What did you see on film in the scout from the last game that led you to make that decision?

RICK PITINO: Well, we wanted to trap him big last game at Connecticut, and it didn't work out very well. So all I said to Zuby was, Look, we're going to dig if anybody gets below the three-point line. But, Zuby, you got him one-on-one, and just make it difficult. And the other thing I asked him is don't foul him, don't foul him. If he makes the shot, he makes the shot. He's then got to guard you, so don't worry about that. And Zuby did a great job of staying out of foul trouble, and we took away the three-point shot by doing that and that's what we wanted to do. It wasn't so much that we were trying to stop him, it was we wanted to take away the three-point line.

Q. In the early 2010s after realignment many called the Big East dead. They said they replaced the poets with businessmen. Yet here you are. You sold out the

Garden again. Back-to-back Big East championships. You brought St. John's back to the national stage. How does it feel?

RICK PITINO: What do you mean by businessmen? I don't get at analogy.

Q. That's what they said, that's what ESPN said famously in their Requiem for the Big East.

RICK PITINO: And what was that?

Q. They said they replaced the poets of the Big East with businessmen. Yet someone like you, Hall of Famer, national champion, you're a poet of college basketball here, and you're back.

RICK PITINO: Well, the Big East right now is mostly Catholic schools. It's mostly schools where enrollments are down, they don't have a lot going for themselves right now except the pride in their university. We have great pride in our university. Our student body does, our administration does. Our enrollment's down, but sometimes it's better to have a smaller university and bring quality than quantity. And I think that's what St. John's is trying to do right now is really build quality. All of us in the Big East -- because I know this. Look, I coached in the SEC, ACC, I coached in the Big East for a second time. There's great coaches at every level, every level. But in the Big East it gets extra competitive because, for us, every single team that comes into the Garden, we're going to get their best night, because it's Madison Square Garden. It doesn't matter what their record is, we're going to get their best night. So the Big East will be back and I think it will be back big. We got Villanova back. We got to get the other schools to come back right now. So we got great coaches now, we just need to beef up the individuals. They got to get players like the four guys I have up here.

Q. You mentioned you called the timeout with about 12:30 to go. How momentous was that swing there when Bryce hits the mid-range jump shot, Darling forces the turnover, and then Zuby hits that three. Just how momentous was that?

RICK PITINO: I thought we were fatiguing a little bit mentally. And I don't like to call a timeout. My staff yelled, We got one coming. I said, It's too late for that, I got to get a timeout, I got to speak to these guys. And I just said, Look, you got the lead, stop deflating, get after them. I said stop -- a lot of teams with a lead, they don't play to win. And you got to play to win, you got to keep the pressure on offensively. And these guys went out and attacked the basket, attacked the defensive end of the court. And it's just a reminder to them, I had to get -- I



always sense when he gets a little tired. You know, he works so hard on every offensive rebound. He's battling physically. And it's really tough on him. Now Ruben's giving him some good minutes, but it's tough on him. He's been through a lot. And the three games in three nights, playing this type of competition's difficult. So he got a nice rest and came back. But the other two guys never relented the entire night. The two bookends, they were awesome.

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