

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship - Final Four: Houston vs Duke

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San Antonio, Texas, USA

Alamodome

Duke Blue Devils

Coach Jon Scheyer

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'd like to welcome Coach Scheyer back to the Final Four.

We'll ask for an opening statement.

JON SCHEYER: I think it goes without being said, I couldn't be more excited to be here at the Final Four. It's a special thing to be playing Houston. We understand what an amazing challenge this game will be.

Look, for me, year one when I got the coaching job at Duke, you're trying to figure out how to scrimmage, what you can do. We sought out scrimmaging Houston. That was the respect that I had for Coach Sampson, Houston's program, what they stand for. To be here competing against them, it's an honor.

Couldn't be more proud of our team. We're taking it all in and excited at the same time.

I'll let you guys ask any questions. I just want to comment on Coach Sampson and his team, just the culture they've had is something that I looked at right away when I became the head coach. We're ready for the challenge.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for coach.

Q. What is your favorite Cooper Flagg commercial? How has he and how have you sort of managed in this NIL era to keep the locker room level?

JON SCHEYER: Well, I think that goes with anything, right? Playing time. There's always going to be things you can compare or look at.

At the end of the day, for our guys, they've all had amazing opportunities. I don't think anybody is coming away empty-handed.

To answer your first question, my favorite one is the bingo. I think the bingo one was great acting. You see his mammy in there. I thought it was a pretty good job by him.

Frankly, our guys have done a great job. Once the tournament started, they haven't done a lot of NIL stuff. They did it earlier in the year. They've been locked into this once-in-a-lifetime chance we have here.

Q. We've heard over the last few years that you are willing to tell guys what they need to hear instead of what they might want to hear. How important is it to you to be honest with guys both in the recruiting process that you're going to coach them hard, then follow through on it?

JON SCHEYER: Well, to me it's the only way you can have success. It's part of how I was raised as a player, getting that from Coach K, Chris Collins and Steve Wojciechowski, Johnny Dawkins every single day. It's part of who we are, part of the culture. For me, I've had the biggest breakthroughs as a player and now as a coach when you have those confrontations. They don't always have to be hostile, but it does need to be based on truth.

I'm glad I've been able to go through that with our guys. I'm always going to be myself. That's who I am.

I think at the end of the day you find out very quickly as a head coach you're not going to be liked all the time. You have to accept that. But I do think if you're always honest and show that you care, you'll always have the respect. That's something that I always hope to have.

Q. You've made that walk to the court in the middle of a football stadium as a player. Considering all the pressure that was on you following Mike Krzyzewski, what it meant to be here, making those walks and having a team here as a head coach for the first time?

JON SCHEYER: It's special. You feel a great deal of responsibility to be the head coach at Duke. You want for your players to be able to experience this.



Walking out there today for practice, I was just soaking it in like when I was 22 years old walking out for the first time. The Final Four is a once-in-a-lifetime kind of thing. To be a part of this, being my fourth Final Four, obviously first as a head coach, but if you're around great people, you're at a great place, it's something I'll never take for granted.

At the same time I feel we belong here. I feel this is what we've worked for. So there's that combination of amazing pride, wanting to soak it in, but then the incredible hunger and understanding what a challenge this game is going to be on Saturday.

For me it's that combination.

Q. Your philosophy in recruiting. You have obviously made some nice additions from transfers. The core of your team is recruited players out of high school. When you were starting three years ago, was that a conscious decision? Was it just because we can get these great players, or is there some way you decided that was the best way to move forward with Duke?

JON SCHEYER: I've learned a lot in three years. I think year one, we kind of felt like we could just keep this thing going like it had been going and recruit a lot of freshmen, retain.

Actually I recruited even more my first year hoping those guys could turn into veteran players in our program. But the reality is the college basketball landscape just blew up at the same time where that became harder to do.

But for us, I think it's foolish to say you have one way of recruiting and always doing that. I think there needs to be some agility, also understanding we're relying heavily on freshmen players. They better be ready to go right away.

For this year we felt very confident that this class we had coming in could impact winning right away. Next year I feel we have a group that can do the same. I think it's going to vary year to year. I think it's based on the freshman class and the readiness, who we can have returning. Last year was less. Next year may be a little bit more.

Then you supplement in the portal based on readiness and the things I just talked about.

What I found this year in the transfer portal, for the right guy, it could be an amazing situation. But it's going to be different here. The job that Sion James, Maliq Brown and Mason Gillis have done, that profile for us is going to be there going forward.

I do think you have to adapt. I don't think it can be just one

way. You see where rev share goes next year, and it may be different a year from now. I think still having an identity of how you want to put together a team, but also having some agility with understanding you need to adjust to all these different things that are being thrown at you.

Q. What has Mason meant to you guys? Obviously a minor role. You talked about the experience factor. Is he a good luck charm? Second year in the Final Four with a different team.

JON SCHEYER: You know what, Mason is more than a good luck charm, Mason is a winner through and through. He may not have the best statistics or the most points, but he's played a major role for us.

If you look at our season, some of the toughest moments we've been in, the toughest spots, Mason has really won us the game. You think about at Louisville, we're down double-digits. Cooper gets four fouls in the second half. Mason comes in, we make a comeback and we win.

At Wake Forest we're down six in the second half. Mason comes in, hits the biggest three of the game. We win.

Actually our one loss we had was without Mason. He's a winning player with his physicality, being able to shoot. But it's his voice every day in the locker room, the confidence that he gives everybody else. And it's his readiness no matter when his number is called to come in, compete. He's a guy that's not afraid because he's seen everything at Purdue for five years. I've loved coaching Mason. He's been a huge asset to our team with his size, physicality and leadership.

Q. I know you talked before about how you struggled to get as much sleep as you want. Has Houston allowed you to get a wink? Defense on an entirely different level from anyone you faced this season. What have you told your guys about preparation, and how much can you prepare them for what they physically go up against?

JON SCHEYER: One, haven't slept much. That's a credit to Houston (smiling). But I'll force myself to the next couple nights. It's also the excitement of everything, of course.

But Houston, no offense to our scout team, we have a great scout team, it's not something you can replicate. It's a combination of understanding what could or could not be there, but at the same time you don't want to make them out to be the boogeyman either. You have to have confidence.

We're a great offensive team. I want us to be us. In doing

that, you're going to have some moments where you may go through a stretch you don't score. The thing that's been consistent for us is our defense. We can't let any offense impact our defense.

But we're going to be who we are. I know firsthand after playing them last year, scrimmaging them the year before, we know very well how legit their defense is and their physicality and all that.

Let's be us and let's not be in on our heels. I think that's an important thing when you play them, 'cause they're terrific. You talk about five guys moving together on defense, they're the best at it. They're the best at it no matter what you do. You really have to take advantage of that window of opportunity, and then you have to go north-south, you can't be going east-west against these guys.

Q. You're the only team here that starts a teenager, you start three of 'em. Was any part of you concerned you're going this way, the rest of college basketball is going the other way in terms of roster build? Is it good for college basketball that guys are staying literally as long as they possibly can?

JON SCHEYER: The first question, I think there's a part of you that feels maybe you're a little crazy at times just because it's so different.

I will say the confidence level is pretty high, though, when you think about the freshmen being Cooper, Khaman and Kon and Isaiah and Pat and Darren. We felt like we have a special class that you can't have every year.

We especially felt confident when we knew we could support them with great experience, toughness, winning players in the portal and returning with Tyrese and Caleb. That at the end of the day felt great confidence and belief in what you feel is best.

I think it's good having guys stay. I think there's a limit to it, though. I think we're getting to a place here where now four or five years is enough. I think, shoot, for us, we have been able to take advantage of it, too. Having Mason Gillis has been an awesome thing for us. If I missed a year with COVID, they deserve that year back.

I think going forward, it's probably going to be pretty good having that age where it should be, 23 years old. It should be the last year, around then. Again, I could go on about that, but I'm not gonna (smiling).

Q. What did compel you to seek out Houston on the road for that scrimmage in what amounted to your first competition? What do you remember about it?

JON SCHEYER: Well, I remember, one, the toughest test for our team. I just believed Houston would be the toughest test. Actually a bunch of guys we're playing now are still on that team. That was the first thing.

They're the toughest test because of their coach. Their coach is as good as it gets in college basketball, and basketball, period. I just admired from afar the way they defended, how they were building their culture. We had such a new group. Jeremy Roach was the only player returning that played, Jaylen Blakes just coming back. I want our guys to be exposed at the highest level, and we were.

That day I actually learned a lot about our group. I thought we showed great toughness. We probably lost that day. It's hard to say if you win or lose a scrimmage based on we're stopping it more and all that. I think we got punched in the face many times that day. We punched back, though. I thought we had a great gauge for how our team was and how we could move forward.

We also learned this is what it looks like to have a big-time team and culture.

The thing I enjoyed most before the scrimmage, Coach Sampson and I sitting down for 45 minutes talking about life. It wasn't just about basketball, it was talking about life. His knowledge, his support. He texted me many times throughout that year. Not many coaches do that. Genuinely reached out for his support. Me and him were stuck in recruiting this spring in Phoenix, probably the worst thunderstorm that ever came through Phoenix. Me and him were there for a couple hours talking about each other's teams.

I've really appreciated the friendship, the mentorship. I can't tell you how much I respect him and what he's meant to our game and who he is as a coach.

Q. On that scrimmage, we were talking about Tyrese, he said -- I'll clean it up -- he got his butt kicked that day. What do you remember about the lessons he needed to learn from that? Has it carried forward? Is this the best version of Tyrese we're seeing now?

JON SCHEYER: Tyrese, he came in as a boy. You throw him into the fire against Houston. Probably the worst and the best thing we could have done.

I think he just has shown so much toughness throughout his three years. He's playing at such a high level 'cause he's as good of a two-way guard to me as there is in college. What he does on the defensive end, how he's

been ready to shoot, his play making, toughness. He's just become a complete guard.

In order to become that, you have to go through some moments like that day at Houston. So I feel so confident having Tyrese on our team. Just for him, just going through those moments, he's become even tougher and better.

Q. I'm going to go down memory lane for a moment because a couple years ago, talking about David Webber, he says he believes the 2005 national championship game between North Carolina and Illinois, he was convinced that if that game goes a different way, maybe you end up suiting up for the Illini. How would you reflect on those thoughts?

JON SCHEYER: I've been fortunate, I had a close friend who brought us to a couple Final Four games. The first one ever was 2001, Duke-Arizona. I was sitting there in the Arizona section, because Michael Wright from Chicago got tickets through him. I was sitting in the Arizona section rooting for Arizona.

2005, I promise I was not rooting for North Carolina in that game. I was rooting for Illinois.

But whether they won or lost, my heart was with Duke. Like, I knew that's the place I belonged. I really enjoyed my experience being recruited by Illinois. They had a big-time team. I mean, there's nobody that I love more than Dee Brown as a player, watching Dee, Luther Head, James Augustine, Roger Powell, Richard McBride. Their whole team was awesome. Deron Williams, obviously.

I knew Duke was the place I wanted to go.

Q. When Tyrese first came over and you brought him over early, what was it about that experience that you were willing to do that with him? Not as much as a player but as a person, how have you seen him grow?

JON SCHEYER: Well, I think it's coming from a place of how I was raised at Duke where you go after the guys you believe in, then you know you're going to go through some tougher times maybe, but you just believe at the end of the day you're going to be somewhere special.

Probably now I would feel more pressure to go in the transfer portal instead of bringing in a young kid. I'm so glad I made that decision. Look, we've had great success, 27 wins the first two years, championship, Elite Eights, but we probably aren't here if we didn't make that decision at that time for Tyrese to come early and for him to go for it. He was going to have to basically take a year off. I think it

was the best thing for him and his career, but also the best thing for us and for Duke to grow up together and to go through those moments.

Q. Correct me if I'm wrong, it seems to be my understanding that since Coach K retired, he has given a pretty wide berth to the program. He hasn't come to practice, not around games the first couple years publicly. Is that something he talked about as a plan? How much has that helped you as a young coach in turning this program into Jon Scheyer's Duke program?

JON SCHEYER: I mean, basically that's true. Coach K has given me amazing room to be myself. Really the only advice he gave me from the beginning was to be true to me, to be true to myself. I already knew that. But for him to remind me of that from time to time has been important.

I think he understands when he's around just the gravity and the people looking at him and all that. But we've gotten to a point, one, our communication has been the same all the time.

I'll tell you for me, in the toughest moments that I've had as a head coach my first three years, the person that I call is him. For him to talk me through different moments or situations, not many coaches still have their coach, and I do. I couldn't be more grateful for that.

The thing I have loved is he's come around more this year. He's come to some home games. He hasn't come to a tournament game yet. I hope we can see him in San Antonio.

But he's crossing paths with our guys. I love when he all of a sudden has a conversation with Cooper in the hallway or saying something to Khaman because I want them to know the guy that I was coached by.

I think it's been, like, a beautiful thing, very organic and natural with Coach K and I, the fact that we're still tight as could be. I've wanted this. I want him to be proud when he watches us.

The defense, the sharing, all the things that he's taught me, I want him to see and feel with our group, also understanding I'm not going to be perfect. I'm not going to bat a thousand. He's really given me the room and the support that I need in order to succeed. A lot of us being here is him having the vision of just a successful transition.

The last thing I would say is not many coaches truly want the program to succeed once they're done. I think part of his legacy forever will be the fact that he set our program

up for such success, and we're able to be in a Final Four in year three. It's a credit to him and how the succession has gone down.

Q. A lot of conversation about the transfer stuff versus the high school stuff. The physical traits you were looking for in your players, we all know how good Cooper is, but it feels like you did an unbelievable job of adding size, depth behind him. What did the roster building look like?

JON SCHEYER: You know what, obviously, look, Cooper gives you the luxury of having a guy that's so versatile where I think it's easier to add around him.

My first two years, year one we were big. Hard time scoring. Year two we could really score but we were smaller. The goal was let's combine the two, let's go big and actually we can score and defend. We really valued the positional side, but we also valued shooting in a big way.

I think if you look at our roster, everybody can shoot, which is a big thing for spacing, for Cooper having the ability to operate. Going forward, I don't know if we can be this big every year. But something I've fallen in love with. We're going to try.

Also having the versatility on both ends of the floor, offense and defense, to be able to guard, is going to be something we're going to look at.

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