

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

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Alamodome

Duke Blue Devils Coach Jon Scheyer Cooper Flagg

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



doors were some of the most impactful I've ever had with him.

Q. Can you take me back to after your eye injury, trying to make a comeback there, how frustrating was it not to be the same player that you were before? When did you realize it's time to stop, consider coaching?

JON SCHEYER: I was determined to make it to the NBA still. I felt I was the same player. But I think part of what made me the player that I was is I had a special belief and a special edge.

The eye injury, I could never regain that same confidence to that level. I'm proud of all the attempts I made playing for the Los Angeles Clippers two months after it happened, training camp, going to the G League with the Houston Rockets. Played a year in Israel. When I was playing in Spain, my dream was always to coach someday. I thought it would be more starting at 35 after 10-plus NBA career. Just so happened it was at 25.

As I was going through that season in Spain, I have Chris Collins to thank. He put coaching in my mind at that time earlier. I think he felt he had a good chance of getting the Northwestern job. He mentioned he wanted me to come with him.

I really started to thinking bit, really had a dream of being a young head coach. So I was ready to go with Chris. I called Coach K. Coach K called me an idiot for thinking about going anywhere other than Duke. Word for word. Don't be an idiot, come back here.

It was the best decision I could have ever made. Chris and I are still as close to this day as can be, as well. I felt in my heart it was the right thing at that time.

Q. You're obviously led by a bunch of talented freshmen. People are starting to realize how good the roster construction around those guys has been, especially with some of the guys through the portal. None of those guys were among the top 10 or 15 most heralded transfers last year. What was your approach

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. The transition year that you had, what was important to you about that year just in getting you ready to take over the head coaching job, maybe did people mischaracterize what was going on, thinking it was a farewell tour for Coach K?

JON SCHEYER: Yeah, 100%. I think that year was definitely mischaracterized. Coach K's biggest intention of just having, he wanted the program to be able to sustain great success. In order to do that, especially at that time, I think it's a little bit different now, but especially at that time you had to have a chance to recruit a team.

So that freshman class for us, to be able to bring in those guys, Dereck, Mark, Flip, Tyrese. We wouldn't have Tyrese Proctor if it wasn't for that. Not only would you not have Tyrese, you wouldn't have Tyrese after going through three seasons together.

I thought that was really important.

Another thing that was just as important and made it more real for me, so some of the best conversations I've ever had with Coach is throughout that season, just talking about why he made certain decisions, what's going on in his mind. Real-time in game, you're thinking about, He called a timeout. Would I have called a timeout at the same time. Why is he calling a timeout. Being here at the Final Four, going through the tournament. It made it more real.

I think that was a great trial run for me to imagine what plays you would call in certain situations, things you would do. Like I said, the conversations we had behind closed



to finding those guys who fit exactly what you were trying to build around your freshmen?

JON SCHEYER: It was an interesting use for us, starting with analytics of just understanding you're not just looking at a player, just one versus one. We felt we had a great core to our team specifically, especially guy in Cooper.

For us, it was about influencing plugging different guys in for the best fit with potential lineups we could have, then understanding there's going to be some fluidity in that. Once you get a team on campus, different guys are more ready. Things always change and evolve.

We really prioritized shooting. We prioritized defense, the versatility with the defense.

Mason Gillis for us, sixth most efficient offensive player in the country the year before. Mason was a no-brainer for us. Maliq was a no-brainer. Really we were patient with the last spot. We knew we needed one more guard. We looked at some other guys, all good players. Then Sion came up late. It took me about two seconds to say, All right, this guy, he's perfect for what we need. That was really the last piece to going full out for this big, versatile, unselfish team.

It's hard to imagine our team without Sion. That last get of him going in was huge for us, the numbers behind it, but also just the vision that I had and our staff for surrounding our young guys with strength, with security, then having great shooting on the floor, which has led to some great kill shots, all right? We've had some great kill shots because of that (smiling).

Q. Bruce Pearl talked about this a little bit. Three Jewish coaches leading teams in one of the highest-profile college sports events. Does that carry any personal significance for you?

JON SCHEYER: You know, I'm proud of my Jewish background. Bruce actually recruited me to play for the Maccabi team when I was in college. Todd was on that same team. I've had close relationships with those guys for some time. Really happy for them, to see what they're doing.

Yeah, of course you're proud. You're proud of a lot of things, too. Proud of representing Duke and our team. I also acknowledge it's a pretty rare thing to have three of us in the Final Four.

Q. You've talked about, ad nauseam, carrying over the success that K built here. You've mentioned how much things have changed in terms of recruiting, team

building. Is there one element of sustaining the culture that you felt was absolutely integral when you first took this job? Is there one element that you had to build differently than K built?

JON SCHEYER: I think there's two main priorities that I had. The first one was just of the values of our program. That's something that I've learned under my time with Coach K. Again, you kind of evolve where you have a spinoff of a couple personal things you believe in.

Our program has been built on communication and trust and having hard conversations or direct conversations at a moment's notice. You do that. That's something I've really prided myself on with our time here.

Then the second thing for me, I think I can relate growing up, when you watch Duke play, Duke has made you feel a certain way. For the most part I think it's made you feel good. I'm sure other people would say it hasn't made them feel good. That comes with it (smiling).

I think this group really embodies it. When you watch Duke play, you love how hard and together they play. That's something for me, winning, of course, but then also the way it makes you feel. That's something I think we've regained this season.

Of course, along the way I've been on my own personal journey as a coach where I read and learn. Coaching guys now is different than how I was coached. There's different tactics, different things we do. But it does boil down to the honest conversations you have, then of course just keeping those values every day in our program.

Q. Two years after there were four No. 1s right here in San Antonio, you were on a team that played against a mid-major for a national championship. In the climate that we're in now, is it foreseeable beyond this year and the next few years to see a power conference school going against a non-power conference or non-Big East?

JON SCHEYER: Yeah, I think we have to be careful or at least in my opinion just because we have four No. 1s this year to assume that's just going to happen going forward.

The margin is really thin. Even the odds, if you go back, the odds of four No. 1s, if you do the whole tournament again, the odds of all four of us being here is rare. Just it is. It's hard to get here.

I think for us, I think anything can be expected. I think my three years, each time you think something has been established in terms of now we're not going to change in

terms of conference realignment or NIL, it continues to change.

I think there's still going to be opportunity for upsets, going to be opportunities for different seed. I don't see this being the way it's going to be all the time going forward.

Can it happen again? Of course, sure. But I think it's too difficult to get out of your own region where it's going to be top seeds all the time.

Again, we'll see if I'm right or wrong, but that's just my opinion.

Q. Cooper's mom, other Duke moms, have promised to get a tattoo commemorating a national championship if you win. What are your thoughts on that? Will your wife or your mom be participating?

JON SCHEYER: I was expecting will I participate (laughter). That question is better. One, is that true?

Q. (No microphone.)

JON SCHEYER: So I love it (laughter).

I will say this. I'm not just saying this 'cause the Flagg are here, we have parents here. Our parents have been incredible this year. I'm not watching during the games, but you see after games, you hear when parents are rooting for their own kids, for other kids like they're their own, it's had such an impact on our guys with how they cheer for each other, how they want each other's success. I think that's harder and harder to find now. Our parents, moms especially, have popped.

It's the motherhood now we have, we have the fatherhood. My daughter asked me, we need daughter-hood shirts. It's been a cool thing to see our families come together this year.

I'm making my wife get a tattoo with them if that's what's going to happen. I would even consider getting one if we win a national championship, all right (smiling)? I shouldn't have said that because that is going to come back to me now.

Q. I think it's safe to say there's never been a freshman class more confident and more mature than this one. Does that set an unfair standard for future classes or do you like that?

JON SCHEYER: I think that's the thing you try to do always, right, is try to set a new standard for what you can do.

Now, we've had some pretty special classes, some freshman classes. I think this group, the way they've been so mature with really just being up for any challenge, the way they compete, the way they understand the game.

They've been mature. Obviously Cooper is up here and deserves so much of the recognition. Khaman, Kon. For Pat and Isaiah, their minutes were up and down at times, to be ready to come in at any moment to make an impact on winning is incredible. Darren didn't have his number called. He comes in against Florida State.

Their maturity of not getting too up or down is special. For me as a coach, it's been amazing to have, to have guys that are always ready. As freshmen, that usually doesn't happen all the time.

THE MODERATOR: We're going to transition to the second 15-minute session. We're inviting Cooper Flagg. We're going to do a session where we get some Full Court Press questions. Before we do all that, we'll turn things over to Matt Norlander for this introduction.

MATT NORLANDER: It is my great, great honor to congratulate and present Cooper Flagg with the National Player of the Year, the Oscar Robertson National Player of the Year, on behalf of the National Basketball Writers Association, an organization that has existed for seven decades. You are the youngest to ever win this year, the 10th Duke player to win among the six major voting houses.

I want to take you back to your roots in Maine. How old were you when you first thought I'm good enough to do this, I know I want to do this, and you really developed a pure love of the game of basketball?

COOPER FLAGG: I mean, I'd say it's two different things of knowing I could do this, this is what I wanted to do, then having a love for the game.

I mean, I think I always just loved to compete, loved to play basketball from a really young age. As soon as I picked up a ball, was able to start playing.

As far as an age when I knew I could do it, I don't really know. I always believed in myself, I always just let the work show itself, put in all the hours.

MATT NORLANDER: Speak on the man to your left. What was it about Jon Scheyer that made you, your family, your parents, entrust your future in college to want to play for him, for his program? Take me back to the first time you got to know him, how that relationship was built.



COOPER FLAGG: Yeah, I mean, I think it starts with the honesty. Coach Scheyer is always really honest with me. We have a lot of honest conversations, I feel like. That is something that is always important to me.

My AAU coaches and parents were always brutally honest with me. That was something I was raised on. Just looking for something like that, and then knowing having a coach that was going to push me, be hard on me, not take it easy on me at all, get the best from me. I think that's where that comes from.

I can't speak for my parents. I feel like my mom was always more set on Duke. My dad was devil's advocate, yeah.

MATT NORLANDER: I want to give Jon a chance sitting up here with Cooper. This is your first National Player of the Year as a head coach. There we go. To experience this moment right here right now with him next to you, you got a huge game tomorrow night, but what does it mean to you as a coach to have had the pleasure to coach this guy leading up to the big game tomorrow night?

JON SCHEYER: Well, for me, we'll be ready to go tomorrow night and all that. But I do think just so proud of this guy, what he's done. I have to remind myself it's a year early. He should be graduating high school now. To have the season that he's had, I think the stats speak for itself. I think how hard he plays, the highlights, all those things speaks for itself.

But it's the person he is every day. His energy is contagious for our team. He's an amazing leader. The job he's done in the classroom at Duke. Just everything he does has taken our program to a new height this year.

He's humble. Up here he's humble. Behind the scenes not as much, which I'm good with. That's what I want. But him, his family, they've been a dream come true for me, for us and our program. Obviously we got more work we want to do, finish this thing off.

But couldn't happen to a better guy. Couldn't be more proud of this guy next to me.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Cooper or Coach Scheyer.

Q. I want to ask you about a former player and current coach, Justin Robinson. You recruited him when he was 14, then he left to go be a pro, you recruited him back to your coaching staff. What is it about his work ethic and what he brings to your team that you

wanted? Why have you invested so of time into him?

JON SCHEYER: Justin, to see his journey at Duke first and foremost, five years at Duke, we recruited him as a walk-on. He could barely walk and chew gum at the time he got to us. By then he's starting. That team that year I thought had a great chance to make a run. He was a starter, doing a great job. Obviously COVID and all that happened.

Played professionally. Always kept in touch. He was as smart as anybody I've ever coached, knowing every scouting report, technique, all of that. I always thought he'd be great at this.

Told him when the time comes, want you back here. He's been a great guy to have. Just he can get into practice, he can block shots, he can move still. But just his knowledge for the game has been awesome for us to have. The experience of a former player...

Q. Regarding Houston, obviously they might have the country's best defense in some ways. I was wondering when you're looking at 'em what you see that they do that maybe other teams don't.

COOPER FLAGG: Yeah, I mean, I think you have to give them a lot of credit for what they've been able to do all year long with the pressure and the effort they play with every single night. I think that's the biggest thing from watching all the film and whatnot. Just seeing the amount of effort and pressure they're able to put on teams is the biggest thing I've seen so far.

JON SCHEYER: I would just say been fortunate or not fortunate to coach against these guys a couple times. One in a scrimmage, then last year in the Sweet 16. Just watching them on film, any Coach Sampson team, you talk about five guys moving as one on defense, they're the epitome of that. Whenever something is happening, you see five guys always moving. So the window of opportunity you have is smaller than a regular game you play.

I think the other thing, though, their offense impacts their defense. Their offense takes time, can grind you out. All of a sudden you can be playing more time defending than you do on the offensive end.

I think it goes hand-in-hand with what they do on offense and their defense. They have good individual defenders. But I think by far the best thing they do is how they have five guys always moving together.

Q. The title that has been following you around this

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year is the youngest ever. What has that title meant to you and for your confidence in this entire knowing that you are the youngest ever to achieve an amount of things?

COOPER FLAGG: I think it's pretty cool. But I think just speaks to the opportunity I've been given, the work that I've put in, my teammates and coaches for putting me in great positions all year long, great situations, just letting me be, letting me do what I do.

Q. Cooper, I'm guessing you heard my question to Coach Scheyer about your mom promising to get a tattoo if you win the national championship. She told us that you get to design it.

COOPER FLAGG: Oh, okay.

Q. Decide where it goes, but not on her face. Where are you going to make her get it and will you be joining her? You don't have any, right?

COOPER FLAGG: I do not. I didn't hear that part before this. I thought she already decided what she was getting and whatnot.

Very interesting. I'm going to have to carefully consider my options (smiling) and really make a smart decision here on what I want to do, if I want to torture her or... I'm going to have to think about that one.

Q. Cooper, you've talked a lot about being the youngest player, you've been asked about being the youngest player, how you've been able to be in so many commercials, balancing all of that. You mentioned earlier trying to still be a kid. What does that look like for you?

COOPER FLAGG: I mean, it's hard to describe. Just being a kid, hanging out with my teammates, playing a game with them, playing the game with my friends back home. Whatever it is, just doing normal things.

I mean, I think I'm a regular kid. I'm okay at basketball, I guess. Just doing normal things that any teenager, any kids like to do. Not acting a certain type of way, being humble, being who I am, how I was raised by my parents.

So yeah, I think just being normal and knowing I'm no different than anybody else.

Q. Cooper, you're the best player in the country, but you're also a commodity. Your coach was asked yesterday what his favorite commercial of yours was. How have you been able to balance those two things

beyond maybe your parents? Where does that come from?

COOPER FLAGG: Yeah, I mean, I think that's just kind of what the game and the opportunity that college players in this day and age, the opportunity that they have. It's business, then it's basketball. You have to be able to kind of decipher through and figure out and keep basketball the most important thing. Obviously it's the first thing.

I think just having a tight circle. Me and my family, all these people over here, keep me grounded, keep me focused. They do a good job of keeping my plate as clean as possible, giving me time to rest, recover, focus on basketball. The other stuff, the business stuff, we can figure it out. Make sure we have it all planned and scheduled so it's not too crazy. I think it's having a tight circle and support system around you.

Q. Coming in as a 17-year-old freshman, where would you say your confidence has come from on the court?

COOPER FLAGG: I mean, I think it's just the work and hours you put in. So many hours I've been in the gym by myself with my trainer Matt this year working on the skills, putting in the hours that you just trust that. It's just coming from game experience, being in the moments, just trusting what you've done to get to where you are.

Q. Cooper, can you talk about the team chemistry, the brotherhood at Duke, how that translated to success?

COOPER FLAGG: Yeah, I think it starts with having an incredible group of guys come in. 15 guys that are all putting the team above themselves no matter what. Having connectivity off the court. We hang out all the time as a team. We love each other, love spending time together. That connectivity and togetherness kind of brings us together, lets us be who we are on the court.

Q. How much credit do you give your mother toward your younger development? She shared that she literally played until she tore her meniscus against you in a one-on-one in the driveway. What kind of dedication is that to your growth?

COOPER FLAGG: I mean, honestly I don't know if she was playing one-on-one with me to better my development. I think she just enjoyed beating me all the time. That competitive edge is what pushed her to come play against me.

Yeah, both my mom and my dad, the countless hours they spent taking me to the gym at night, rebounding, passing me the ball. I have to give my dad a little bit nor credit.

Mom, got a little lazy sometimes. Dad would never say no to taking me to the gym no matter what time it was so...

Both of them have so much credit of taking me to the gym. My mom was a schoolteacher, so she had the key, so we were able to get in the gym, shoot around late at night, stuff like that. That was really helpful.

Both of them so helpful for me and sacrificed so much.

THE MODERATOR: Mom, microphone for a rebuttal or corroboration?

(Off microphone.)

THE MODERATOR: For the benefit, dad is a little bit more even-tempered. On the record now (smiling).

Q. You haven't had a chance to see a whole lot of the city, but your impressions of what you have seen, including the workout in the Spurs' relatively new facility?

COOPER FLAGG: Yeah, I mean, it's a beautiful. It's a beautiful place. I've enjoyed the weather and everything just being here. It's a beautiful city. The Spurs facility, obviously it's very new, very modern. A beautiful facility. Top-of-the-notch facilities, what they have over there. Great place.

Q. Your family has followed you closely for a long time, your close friends. What do you say about the followers you have that have extended outside of that, that have been everywhere to follow you in the last year plus? How does that make you feel? How often someone references, hey, I know someone from Norridgewock that knows you, your mom or dad, whatever it is.

COOPER FLAGG: Yeah, I mean, it's incredible. It's been an incredible support from all over the country. In particular the New England region, things like that. There's two things I can look back to so far that were, like, huge. The main event last year when we went back up to Maine, were able to sell out the Hughes Gym there. Just the support that we felt.

Even this year, Boston College, there was a huge Maine population of people that made that drive to come up and watch me. That support means a lot to me. It travels really well. I see it all over the place. It gives me a lot of confidence and a great feeling.

Q. Cooper, you talked about practicing in the Spurs' practice facility. Spurs are currently seventh in the

draft lottery right now. What would it mean to potentially get drafted by San Antonio? Did you meet any former Spurs?

COOPER FLAGG: No, we didn't see any of the players. I don't know what they had going on or anything.

I mean, it would be a blessing for me to get drafted from my team in the NBA. That's a dream of mine, to play in the NBA. I would feel completely blessed and honored to play for any team.

THE MODERATOR: We congratulate Cooper Flagg on the Player of the Year trophy. We thank Coach Scheyer as well.

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