

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Four

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Dayton, Ohio, USA

UD Arena

Howard Bison
Coach Kenny Blakeney
Bryce Harris
Cedric Taylor III
Ose Okojie

Media Conference

Q. Bryce, you were here two years ago. What do you remember the most about that game against Wagner apart from the outcome? Obviously you're wanting a different outcome, come tomorrow night?

BRYCE HARRIS: Honestly, I just want to remember the experience, remember the camaraderie with my teammates. That was cool. We still have a group chat to this day. We talk about that same experience, how priceless it was. We've come here to get a different result than we did last time, but also, too, we want to be present in the moment.

Q. What about this team sets it apart from that group that made it here two years ago?

BRYCE HARRIS: There are a lot of similarities, but I feel like defensively we've taken it up a notch, not just how our defense performs but also connectivity. Our connectivity and spirit is on a different level with this team, as well. So I'm looking forward to seeing how we perform on one of the biggest stages.

Q. Cedric, your first time here. To be here and in this situation, what kind of things have you been hearing from your teammates about what this is like and how are they trying to prepare you for this atmosphere?

CEDRIC TAYLOR III: Yeah, I've just been hearing around it's the biggest stage in America. But I think they've just been trying to reassure me to play my game, not let the lights get too bright. At the end of the day, it's a regular basketball game. So just do my thing, do my pregame ritual, same pregame ritual I've been doing all season,



make it a regular basketball game, and hopefully we come out with the result that we want.

Q. Ose, how hard is it to make this just another game? Is that a simple thing to do or is that hard?

OSE OKOJIE: I feel like I can speak for me personally. I remember the first time I was here my freshman year in 2022, it was kind of a surreal experience and I kind of didn't want it to get to my head. I remember the night before I had trouble sleeping. That was probably the biggest thing. I remember staying up, staring at the ceiling going, I'm going to be in March Madness.

I feel like this year especially, my senior year, this will be my third time in March Madness. Just trying to be that reassuring and inspiring role model that my seniors were to me, to my young-uns now, and trying not to let the game get too big for them. Also for myself, keeping it -- the sense that it's the biggest stage in America, we know what March Madness brings, everything like that, but just trusting yourself knowing this is a basketball game and this is a game we've played since we were kids and the game we love.

Trying not to get too high or too nervous or overthink the game that we've been playing for our whole lives.

Q. Bryce, what's the best trait of this basketball team?

BRYCE HARRIS: Honestly, like I said before, it really comes down to our connectivity. It's not really anything you can put down on paper. But we've been through a lot of ups and downs this season, a lot of trials and tribulations. And still to be coming into Dayton and still participating in the first game of the tournament, it's huge and monumental. But it's a testament to my teammates' character and how we handle adversity as a team.

Q. You guys are not only here to represent Howard but you guys are representing for HBCUs on a national level. What message do you want to display as we take on UMBC tomorrow?

OSE OKOJIE: Kind of what I want to represent is being an inspiration. That was always my goal, especially growing the game of basketball and growing in the game of me as a



man, a young man. I always wanted to inspire people because I was inspired by my seniors, by the people that came before me.

So just being a role model and to show kids -- me, I'm from Toronto, Canada. A lot of kids don't get to be here on a national stage being an international student. Even going to an HBCU back home because we don't have that in my country. Just to be that inspiration, that role model to the next generation to show them, like, no matter what -- I'm a big believer in Christ and everything. From being the rejected stone to the cornerstone now is kind of a testament to my story.

CEDRIC TAYLOR III: Yeah, just to piggyback off that, I just want to show HBCU sports need love, too. I've been fighting that battle for three years coming from Morehouse. But I think it's kind of like HBCU sports get overlooked sometimes, and I just want to show that we play basketball the right way. You can achieve your highest dreams at HBCUs also.

BRYCE HARRIS: Being honest with you, I probably would have said exactly what Cedric said. Especially here at Howard, we play basketball the right way. We play basketball together. I feel like there's a stigma on HBCU basketball. We're going to be able to show that tomorrow, who we are and how we play.

But yeah, I definitely agree with those two.

Q. Ose, you being Canadian, here in the States, everybody is locked into television watching the games. Is it the same way in Canada?

OSE OKOJIE: Absolutely. I have a little brother, he goes to Mercer, too, so we've been playing basketball our whole lives. Like March Madness is always a big thing. It's always on TSN. That's kind of like our ESPN, TSN. I've been watching since I was a kid. I have vivid memories of watching with my dad and my mom. And I have a little sister, she's getting to the age now, turning 11 in April, so watching it with her now. She came to the MEAC championship and everything. Her now learning about March and everything like that, it's awesome.

The whole country of Canada is really big into basketball, especially March Madness.

Q. Outside of obviously playing in March Madness, do you have a favorite memory as a kid watching the game?

OSE OKOJIE: I've got to really think. I don't think I was a kid. I think the run that St. Peters had -- I was in high

school. The run that St. Peters had, that was a legendary run, being a 15 seed and going all the way. I remember being at practice and just telling my friends -- we would have bets on who's going to win. And I remember I made a lot of money off those bets, a lot of money off those bets. Personally, though, not online, but personally, with my friends about St. Peters. And just watching that run was really, really legendary.

Q. Clarification, high school?

OSE OKOJIE: High school, yes.

Q. Bryce, kind of what Ose said, seeing St. Peters do that, you guys have seen other schools do that, the team you're playing did that once upon a time. Do you ever think about that, like what if that's us some day?

BRYCE HARRIS: I think about it every day ever since we won. Honestly, I've been thinking about it ever since we won my sophomore year. We played Kansas off the rip as a 16 seed. We ended up losing to them. Then the very next year, we came back, thought about it going through that. Ever since we kind of get a glimpse of March and what comes with the NCAA Tournament, it's something that you constantly think about because you want to win.

Especially coming in as an underdog, that's the American story, baby. Everybody loves that. I know for me personally, being back at home watching underdogs take games, it's huge.

I'm a little different from Ose. I started taking basketball -- I'm a late bloomer. I started taking basketball seriously around 12 years old. I was a football player at first. Some of my first experiences with March Madness was watching Villanova and North Carolina go at it. That's a pretty darned good game to have your first college basketball impression, seeing what type of game that was.

Yeah, I think about it all the time and just think about the Magic of March and sitting in front of the TV. You've only got the court view, but you want to see how big the arena actually is.

But yeah, it's cool, just the little details of it.

Q. What's special about playing here?

BRYCE HARRIS: Honestly, just having this arena be the place where you kick off the tournament. That's where the Magic of March starts. Some people say you walk down the ramp right here and it says the road to March starts here.

Kicking that off, something that me and Ose would talk about all the time, we were speaking about it necessarily in terms of winning a conference championship, but you participate in March Madness, that goes down in the history books. We call it basketball immortality. That's something that's huge. Even when I'm 50, 60 years old, I'll tell my kids, I was a pretty darned good basketball player, and they don't believe me. Luckily we live in a different era now, I'd probably be able to pull up the film. But yeah.

Q. Player of the Year in the MEAC. That's a pretty good title there. That will go a long ways. Cedric, I want to talk to the Defensive Player of the Year in the conference. I know quick turnaround, you find out the news last night, but do you know anything about UMBC and looking ahead towards tomorrow night's game?

CEDRIC TAYLOR III: Yes, sir. We had our first team film session today. Of course I cannot give you, like, the inner details of our game plan that we talked about. But yeah, we have a great defensive game plan from our coach. We've been working on a lot, a lot of intricate details. We definitely think we have a game plan summed up. But looks like a pretty high-powered offense, but we hang our hat on the defensive side of the ball. I like our chances.

Q. For all three of you, having won the MEAC just this past Saturday and it's more closer to a typical game week situation as opposed to if you guys had played a week earlier, does that help you guys knowing that only three days off is more closer to the regular season as opposed to if you had had a week off to prepare?

CEDRIC TAYLOR III: Yeah, I feel like it's pros and cons to everything. Sometimes that week can hurt you more than it can help you. There's such a thing as too much rest.

But I think we're prepared for anything as a team. Once we heard it was a quick turnaround, our mindset shifted immediately, and we adjusted. I think that's a pretty special quality to have not only as a team but as a human being.

Yeah, I think we're prepared to go tomorrow.

OSE OKOJIE: Yeah, kind of like what Cedric said, we're ready to go. Our conference games are Monday and Saturday, so there was always quick turnarounds after that Saturday. We have shooting practice, film, walk through and then right back to Monday you've got to get at it.

I think we're ready. We're battle tested, especially coming from the conference we come from. America might not

know, but those are tough games. Those are tough games. We've got to give a lot of MEAC credit and a lot of teams in the MEAC credit because they play hard-nosed basketball from the first minute to the 40th minute. I think we're battle tested and truly ready to play.

BRYCE HARRIS: Yeah, I definitely think we're ready to go, honestly. Being an experienced player here and being in Dayton before, as soon as I seen we was playing UMBC, 10 minutes later I busted open the Synergy and was watching their final game while we were at Selection Sunday. Kind of just turned the page.

And like Ose said, we played Saturday-Monday, and the biggest part of it is mentally preparing. Shoot, there was a lot of times this season where Saturday we came in and -- most teams come in Sunday and they could walk through and we're practicing, we're doing zigzags. But that experience of having that, being part of that over the course of years, there's a mental toughness, a mental callus that I'd like to say, to be able to mentally push through those moments even when your body isn't at 100 percent.

I feel like we're built for that. We're definitely built for that. The game coming tomorrow, our bodies will be -- like Coach would say, well-rested minds, well-rested bodies.

Q. Bryce and Ose, you guys have made three NCAA Tournament appearances at the same school, Howard. In this day and age of college athletics, that is increasingly rare. I think Caleb Foster might be the only other player in the tournament that's done that. What does it mean to keep going back to the dance with the same school and your experience at Howard and how special is it to come back year after year and connect with the community and the alums and the program?

BRYCE HARRIS: Honestly, I said this after our conference championship game, I understand it's rare, but for me, I embrace Howard because Howard embraced me first as a young player. But also as a young student, from the program to the yard, as we would like to call it, with our student body.

There's a lot of culture and characteristics on Howard University's campus that makes you proud to put the jersey on. Basically not even just how our program goes about their everyday but how our students go about their everyday and how serious they are about their academics and about how they are with their social justice and how they are participating in the communities in Washington, D C., about organizations, things of that nature.

And I talked about the standard. There's a lot of students at Howard University who are intimidated by some of the other students that go there, but you got to understand that continuing to push the standard makes you a better person. As our coach would like to call it, a healthy pressure. That's something I feel like I'm proud to be able to lace them up for Howard knowing that those are the students and the alumni, that's in their DNA, so that also puts that in my DNA also.

OSE OKOJIE: Really honored and truly humbled to just be part of this university and to be here for four years and be here for three years. Like I said, it's really a blessing. It's really surreal, too, because I always thought as a kid I'd be here. But just being in it and being present is a really beautiful thing.

Howard has changed me in multiple ways, more than one, but just made me a better man. And the impact, the people, the connections, it's really a place -- like our Coach calls our team the Dream Factory. Dreams can come true.

Freshman year after we lost to Kansas, I was a little angry, a little sad, tears in my eyes and then Kamala Harris walks in and tells use she's proud of us. I was like I've got to wipe my face and look presentable. I wouldn't think this is happening right now, but she shook my hand and everything like that and she was I'm proud of you Bisons and everything like that.

I never would have thought in a million years because of basketball that a kid from Brampton, Ontario, Canada, would meet the vice president at the time.

It's just a testament to the impact and the strength of Howard University, not just as a university but just as a place. And Washington, D.C., the legends it created like the late Chadwick Boseman -- Bryce talked about basketball immortality, even think we might be up there one day, we always joke around with Bryce -- not a joke anymore.

Bryce Harris should be in the rafters and will be in the rafters at Howard University. But just cemented our names in history and just at that great university, kind of like -- it's truly a blessing. I give all the glory and honor to God because without him, we wouldn't be here and be in this position to inspire the next generation. That's one of the biggest things, inspire the next generation.

If any of you guys have kids that want to come to HBCUs, don't hold back. Take that visit.

Q. Talk about what you've been able to accomplish this year in reaching the NCAA Tournament again.

KENNY BLAKENEY: Yeah, firstly, I'd like to thank my Lord and savior, Jesus Christ. Without him, none of this is possible.

I am just so blessed and fortunate to have an opportunity to be an educator, a mentor, and someone our students look up to, and represent Howard University. It's one of the most fabulous universities in the country. From the alums that we've produced, Thurgood Marshall, Kamala Harris, Ose mentioned Chadwick Boseman, Mary Ann Shadd Cary. I can go down the list of people. It's why we call it the Dream Factory.

We truly believe that if there's anything that can be accomplished that you put your mind to, it can be done on the beautiful grounds of Howard University.

Q. Curious your initial reaction once you learned you were coming to Dayton for a second time in three years and seeing that pop up on the screen.

KENNY BLAKENEY: I was so excited. Looking at the numbers and trying to understand, Ken Pom, that I'm not sure that the other things that the NCAA takes into effect. But we really felt like this was going to be the destination, and I was excited.

Dayton is a special place for the First Four. The community here, the area, this university, which is a basketball university, it's a basketball town, embraces this event like none other.

For me, I have chill bumps right now thinking about it because I'm so excited to have an opportunity to play in front of fans that really get it and understand it.

Q. Being here two years ago, and then last year the record was what it was, once the clock hit zero on Saturday, was it kind of a new wave of emotion because you're coming back to a place because you didn't get to experience it last year?

KENNY BLAKENEY: It wasn't. For us, each season is a new challenge and a new chapter. Coach K has a book that a season is a lifetime, and that's something that I have on my bookshelf. It's something that I look at frequently to understand and kind of really stay present in the moment. That's what I wanted to do, and I wanted our players to be present in the moment. I wanted them to have fun and enjoy it and soak it up because there's not a lot of programs that have an opportunity to make it here.

When I talk about presenting Howard University and our basketball program to student-athletes, I talk about it being



a student experience. That's really important for me, for our young men and our women and our managerial program to have a whole well-rounded student experience.

Part of the presentation that we talk about is winning championships in the MEAC, either regular season championships, conference championships, and having a chance to come to the NCAA Tournament.

It's so special because our students get to brand, market, separate themselves amongst other students and campuses throughout the country.

I tell them the story when I was getting recruited, Bryan Davis, who was a member of the team at Duke, said if you come here and you're part of a championship team, there's no alum that you can't call and they won't either pick up the phone or return your call. It's the same thing for our young men. They are able to position themselves to make phone calls for the next 30 to 50 years with our Howard community that will pick up the phone and certainly help them in any way possible.

For me, it's about the student experience. Then the other thing is I want them to be able to give back to our university, where they have such an incredible experience that they want to come back and mentor. They want to come back and donate. They want to come back and maybe coach or teach and lead and give back.

For me, that's the full 360 spectrum of the student experience.

Q. I think you're kind of answering a little bit of what I wanted to ask, sort of the value of schools like yourselves getting to play in this tournament. Obviously at Duke, you expect this, to be here --

KENNY BLAKENEY: We expect it at Howard, as well.

Q. I'm sure you do. I guess everybody, the country, expects Duke to be there. They might not expect you --

KENNY BLAKENEY: But we expect it at Howard, as well, absolutely.

Q. What is that value -- I think you answered a lot of it, but the fact that you expect to be here, why is that?

KENNY BLAKENEY: It's our standard. It's the history and the tradition of our university. That's why we call it the Dream Factory. We've had the first Black Supreme Court justice in Thurgood Marshall, the first Black mayor of New York City, the first Black governor of Virginia, the first

woman to vote in a major election, we had the first Black U.S. ambassador. We can go down the list of firsts. They've laid down the groundwork for us to follow.

Howard is a university of dreamers. There's been so many things that have been done on that campus that if you -- the thing that I thought was the only thing that we need to do on this campus now is have a sustainable basketball program and also get somebody as a President of the United States. We've touched every stone.

That is the standard of not only our program, but that's the standard of our university, and it comes from the leadership of Dr. Wayne Frederick and from my boss, Mr. Kery Davis. It's expected in the sense of he brought me in to win and to lead, and I think to build young men and women in a way that they can go out and be able to serve, lead and give back in the future.

Q. I know how important culture is to you from your high school days at DeMatha Catholic to being a part of two National Championships at Duke. How has what has been poured into you translated over to you coaching and coming to March Madness three times at Howard?

KENNY BLAKENEY: That's a wonderful question. Being at DeMatha and being at Duke, you don't see the culture as it's being built. You get in the back of the line and you do what the older guys are doing in front of you.

I didn't understand how to build culture. I understood how to follow culture. There's a huge difference. I had to learn how to build a culture.

That took some time, and thankfully -- my man over here, Mr. Davis, was great. Was great. I don't know how many games we won our first year. Four, five? Our next year we were one and whatever before COVID and we had to shut the season down.

But he was nurturing. He was loving. He was tough when he needed to be. But he was right by my side as a partner.

Q. What would you say are the most important attributes that you found success in when you learned how to build a culture?

KENNY BLAKENEY: I think the most important attribute that I've noticed and I appreciate is young men that understand the sacrifice that they have to make in order for the success that they want to be accomplished. That's the biggest thing. It's like, seeing young men -- and for us being an HBCU, young Black men -- working together to accomplish something that's bigger than them. That's a

narrative in our country that isn't presented enough that I love seeing and showcasing in atmospheres and venues like this.

Q. There was a really good question asked to some of our players and student-athletes, and two of the three that were up here in Ose and Bryce, now playing in this game for the second time in three years. And the landscape that is sort of college athletics and the transfer portal, new faces to some programs each and every year, how satisfying is it for you to be here with this program having sort of that leadership that you're talking about from within your own program?

KENNY BLAKENEY: It's incredible. If you look at each of our trips to the NCAA Tournament, being here in March Madness, our first year we had a group where we platooned five in and five out. We were real deep. We could probably play 12 to 13 young men during the course of a game.

Our depth, the way we played, really gave us an advantage over the course of 40 minutes in wearing teams down. I think we could literally see around the eight, nine minute mark of teams grabbing their shorts and breathing a little harder.

Our second championship we were six deep because we had so many injuries we had sustained. Our sixth man was a walk-on who hit one of the biggest shots in the history of Howard basketball in the semifinal game against Norfolk State. So we had to play a little differently there.

This year we were without Cedric Taylor for the first 11 games and had to learn how to gain some rhythm and some continuity when he came back. So that took us a little bit of time. But since that, we've been able to run.

But the one constant with those is that when we become really good as a team, our players take ownership of the team, and every year I challenge our guys in terms of being leaders. And we do so many things in the community that I think also help us embrace leadership and ownership, not only in the community but also in the classroom and on campus.

Q. The players mentioned this, that the majority of weeks, especially once you hit conference play, the game nights were Saturday-Monday. This week it's Saturday-Tuesday. Does that help you that the MEAC championship was just a couple days ago as opposed to one of the tournaments taking place earlier in the month?

KENNY BLAKENEY: It doesn't help me. This has been an

incredibly fast turnaround, trying to understand who our opponent would be. Obviously we knew it would be one of three teams, just looking at the numbers.

But once we found out that it was UMBC, a team that I knew absolutely nothing about but I knew they were good and had a successful season, for us, it was let's dig into the film, watch as much as we could last night. This morning, woke up, watched as much as we could from the time we left Washington, D.C. to when we got to Dayton. Then quick turnaround, get to the hotel, and we watched more film.

Right now I'm probably working on about three and a half hours of sleep, and I don't know if that's conducive to me being able to process and analyze UMBC probably to my best ability.

But it is what it is; we're grateful and we're humble to be here.

Q. I just wanted to ask, you and Coach Krzyzewski, do you still lean on him for certain aspects of the game as you move forward with your championships and getting to the First Four?

KENNY BLAKENEY: There's no doubt about it. Coach sent me a text Saturday and was so happy. He knows everything about our program. We played three games this year at Cameron Indoor Stadium, and we may be the only college team probably in a long time that has played three games there in one season.

So we're very proud of the relationship that we have, not only with Coach K and his mentorship, his friendship, his love, but also with Duke University men's basketball program.

We've partnered with the Emily Krzyzewski Center in Durham. We do more social justice work than any team in the country, hands down. It's a big part of I think why our young men become a little bit more serious in a faster way and grow up and mature in a faster way. We talk about service. Service for our program and service for our university is really important. So we partnered with the Emily K Center when we were in Durham.

We've done so much with them this year, and it's been something, I think, really rewarding, not only for our program but also for our players. That relationship with Duke University, Coach K and the Emily K Center in Durham is a special one.

Q. Your women's team is also in the March Madness tournament. What's the connection between the men's



program and women's program at Howard, and how do you guys connect with each other?

KENNY BLAKENEY: That is so cool. The first time, I think, in Howard history that both teams have made it to March Madness. Last night we had a joint viewing party at Burr Gymnasium on the campus of Howard University, and it was really nice to have all the trophies lined up that we both accomplished this year. Ty Grace is our head coach, and we had matching nets on, which was really cool.

They got to see that they've earned this year, which is, I think, a testament to Coach Grace and her leadership, but also to her players that are incredible ambassadors and representatives of Howard University. They carry themselves with grace and class, and they're also incredible in the community and on the basketball court.

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