

NCAA Men's Frozen Four: Michigan vs Quinnipiac

Wednesday, April 5, 2023

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Quinnipiac Bobcats
Coach Rand Pecknold
Michael Lombardi
Zach Metsa
Jayden Lee

Semifinal Pregame Media Conference

COACH PECKNOLD: Everything is excellent. Tampa is a wonderful host. We're excited to be back and really just anxious to get the game going. Ready to play. Can we move the game up? Can we get earlier than 8:30 on a Thursday? We're excited. Just proud of our group this year. Had a great season. More work to do.

MODERATOR: Jayden, what's it been like since you've been down in Tampa?

JAYDEN LEE: Awesome experience. Got off the play, got greeted by fans. And last night got a nice dinner treated by the team from 2017. That was awesome. Great to be with by guys. Great to get on the ice, feel the ice. And like Coach said, super excited for tomorrow. Can't wait to get going.

MICHAEL LOMBARDI: I've never been down here. It's awesome. I love it. We're walking around this morning just soaking everything in. To actually be here on the ice is special. And to do it with your best friends makes it even better.

MODERATOR: We had previous people say we should have this event here about every three years. What are your thoughts?

ZACH METSA: Yes.

MICHAEL LOMBARDI: I'd be in on it.

ZACH METSA: I was watching the national championship game in 2016 when it was here. It's cool to be back and see a different side of it. Obviously from a player



perspective, they've pulled out all the stops. They make us feel pretty special. We're pretty lucky to be here.

Q. Zach, you guys have a group that's got some players who have accomplished some good things. What have some of the newcomers, what have they brought to you guys on and off the ice?

ZACH METSA: They've been awesome. They've been, honestly, unbelievable. One of our keywords is "buy in." And from the moment they stepped on campus they were ready to go. They bought into how we play and the little details we care about on and off the ice to help us find success. And they're invaluable. Just like every other member.

But especially from a couple of young guys, Graffer came from Union, just kind of dumped whatever habits he had in Union and adapt and become a Bobcat.

Same with Lipper. He showed up and he was ready to go. He was eager to learn. He's been a sponge his whole year. It's been awesome having those guys. And having them contribute has been a special treat.

JAYDEN LEE: It's been awesome. On top of everything Zach said, they're all great guys. They're all great guys and it's fun to be around them. They all listen to you and they'll show you some things that they think may work and they've been great. Nothing but good work from them.

Q. What's it like playing in an NHL facility?

MICHAEL LOMBARDI: It's pretty special. We were lucky enough to play at Nassau Coliseum our freshman year. So you've got the big arena feel.

But there's something special about here. Obviously the history with what the Lightning have done the last couple of years makes it really special. Really exciting tomorrow to see all the fans. We're really looking forward to it.

ZACH METSA: Unfortunately, in the Nassau game I was scratched for that. I didn't get that experience. But it's cool. Obviously --

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COACH PECKNOLD: You're better for it.

ZACH METSA: It's cool. It's always special being in an NHL arena. You know the guys that have played here. And like Mike said, the history before. It's always a special treat. It's cool.

MODERATOR: You weren't scratched.

JAYDEN LEE: I wasn't here yet. It was the year before me. So my first time in an NHL facility. It's surreal. The guys you watch on TV every day growing up as a kid, the guys you look up to, it's like they've stepped foot in that same locker room, same hallways. It's special to know. And it's a really cool experience.

MODERATOR: Rand, you've coached in a lot of NHL buildings a facility like this?

COACH PECKNOLD: It's a great facility for us. We'll play Frozen Four wherever you want to put it. We just want to play the game. I've been here before at the Frozen Four actually '16 as a coach and then in '12 I was actually I was on the committee. It's just a first-rate facility. And Tampa does an awesome job.

Q. Rand, you touched on not wanting to wait to play this game. What are the pros and cons of having such a long layoff between the regional final and the Frozen Four?

COACH PECKNOLD: The way we were rolling, honestly, after Merrimac and Ohio State, we'd want to play right away. But we did have a couple of guys banged up pretty good against Ohio State. So that time off got our guys healthy. We really needed that.

There might be years you don't want it. There's pros and cons to both. But in the end we have that bye weekend and you have to adapt. All four teams adapt to it, and everyone's playing under the same rules.

Q. A lot of dynamic players left in this Frozen Four. Curious what you'll face in Fantilli. What stands out to you and what makes him a game breaker in all situations?

COACH PECKNOLD: Just watching him, he's such a dominant athlete. He's an athlete. He's just a thoroughbred. He makes plays, he makes plays out of nothing. You think you have him shutdown and all of a sudden, bang, it's under the bar.

For us, we've got to get up on him, on all their players and

kind of deny time and space. He's a lot easier to defend when he doesn't have the puck than when he has the puck. And certainly have to defend him in waves because he's going to beat people. And it's going to happen. We know that. As long as we have waves there, and he beats one, we got another one. Beats two, we've got another one. And someone you have to go with a fourth guy. We have to make good reads off those plays too.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about the alumni support? Obviously you had the dinner last night, but how many guys have been reaching out to wish you well, and what's that mean to you?

COACH PECKNOLD: We're a family, that's for sure. This is my 29th year. I think it's one of the nice things about being at a school for so long. Today, we came to practice. I texted with Todd Bennett. He's an '02, he lives in the area. He's been out a while.

And he reached out to me and Joe, like, I've got stuff for the guys. He went out and bought T-shirts and hats. Sent them down to the guys with the Frozen four logos. It was great, little things like that mean a lot.

We got a huge contingent of our alums, hockey alums coming down for the weekend.

Q. This is now your third time in the Frozen Four in the past 11 years. And many people are calling this the new blood versus blue blood rivalry because Quinnipiac is the only blue blood out of the four teams in the Frozen Four this year. What does this mean by being considered new blood in this thing?

COACH PECKNOLD: We're certainly not a blue blood, but the three programs that are here are established. They've got long histories. We're 25 years into Division I. For a chunk of those we didn't have our own rink, and for a chunk of those we had to practice at midnight.

We're an upstart, an up and comer, but we've had enough success over the last few years and our players know how to win and we know how to beat teams at this level. We just have to make sure we execute.

Q. I just want to get your perspective, kind of piggybacking off of that. Michigan has a litany of NHL-caliber prospects. And you guys throughout the entire season consistently have shown that you deserve to be here. On paper, it doesn't necessarily look like that, when you look at the rosters. What can you tell us about your team and why you believe that you're going to come out on the right end of things tomorrow?

ZACH METSA: I think, to me, it's always come back to how close we are as a group. Every night we show up and we play together. We've supported each other. We're there if someone makes a mistake. We're there to bail them out.

Like there's layers to how we play. And it's tough for guys to get by all four or five layers consistently throughout the game.

So, yeah, we always hear, like, teams are more talented than us and whatnot. But I think as a cohesive unit I'd put us up there against any team in the country.

MICHAEL LOMBARDI: He said it pretty well, but I just think it comes down to being a family. They have a lot of draft picks and high praised players and all, but at the end of the day we work harder than anybody in the nation. We're here all summer working together. We all work out together all summer. Nobody misses a workout.

It's just a culture here that it's about hard work and having your brother's back. And I think that's what separates us in a lot of those games. You see people yelling at each other, bad body language. That doesn't happen on our team. Everybody is next rep, keeping everybody accountable. And I think that's why we have a lot of success.

JAYDEN LEE: They said it pretty well. Comes down to the culture. Doing it collectively as a group, not necessarily outskill a team. But we'll grind other teams down. We do it as a group. When everyone is going, I think we can beat anyone.

Q. NIL is a huge issue at the highest levels in college football and basketball. Wonder from where you sit how big of a deal is it in college hockey and how big of a strength is it for your program?

COACH PECKNOLD: That's a good question. I think men's ice hockey is behind football and basketball in NIL. It's just starting to creep in at the Big Ten schools. We'll see where it goes in the next five to 10 years and where the NCAA lets it go or tries to let it go or not let it go.

But it's something that if you want to repeatedly go to Frozen Fours in the next 10 years, you need to get on board with it because it's coming. It's kind of here with some of the Big Ten schools and some of the bigger schools. And you're going to get left behind if you don't get on board with it.

Q. Zach, you had mentioned a few months ago on an

ECAC podcast how as a team you've won a lot but not much. How does it feel now to be in the Frozen four coming back as a fifth-year, returning to the school?

ZACH METSA: It's special. I'd still almost agree with what I said, we've won over 100 games, 120 games, maybe, in our five-year career. And the Whitelaw was something for us that we wanted really bad. And unfortunately that slipped away from us over our career here.

But this is an opportunity for us to win something special. And for us, it would mean the world to bring, like, a national championship back to Quinnipiac. It would have been special to bring a Whitelaw back. Unfortunately that didn't happen. But now we have our next opportunity. And it's an opportunity for us to win something.

Q. You guys faced off with Michigan in the regional final last year. You came up short. Obviously both teams are different, but what can you guys take away from that experience last year?

COACH PECKNOLD: I watched that game a couple times just recently just to get ready for this, just to see tendencies and stuff. Naurato was the assistant; now he's the head. But there's still some things. But what I took away from that game. We played great in that game. We out-chanced them. We were awesome. We played so well.

And their goalie's making saves early in the game. We could have defended better. We needed to pick up sticks better on that front, which we normally are good at. We had a couple of kids struggle with the moment. But we did have a really good game.

And, again, that Michigan team last year was maybe the most talented team ever assembled in college hockey and this one is not far behind. But we know if we play to our identity and we let our culture come through, like, we have more than a chance.

ZACH METSA: I think something to take away from last year is just how you embrace the moment. Last year we kind of let the moment get to us. We didn't really play our way. And let it slip away. And we let the moment overtake us.

And with the crew we have coming back we can all learn from that and understand when you're inside the boards and inside the glass it's the same game. Obviously if you can put all the distractions from outside the glass away and behind you.

At the end of the day you're playing on the same ice sheet

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as anywhere else. You just gotta embrace the game and for us embrace the grind. So I think that will be an advantage for us this year.

Q. As you know, there's a rabid following locally for the NHL team here, the Lightning. But some of the local fans that come this weekend may not be that familiar with college hockey, may not have seen many games. So how would you describe the appeal of college hockey for those who haven't experienced it firsthand very much and what is the following for your sport as you've seen it grow during your career?

COACH PECKNOLD: Well, certainly the Lightning fans are outstanding. And honestly they're spoiled to have Kucherov and Stamkos and Edmonds and a great head coach in Jon Cooper.

College hockey is obviously a little different. The players are younger. I would say it's a little more frenetic is probably the best way to put it. A little more "shot out of a cannon and let's go, and see how this goes, up and back."

And pro hockey is more cerebral and guys pick apart what they want to do both offensively and defensively.

But it's a great product and both teams will put together a great show Thursday and then in the national championship game.

Q. Can you talk to me a little bit about the four-year buy-in of coming to a program? Like, when you guys are recruited because you're not this elite-level draft pick, there's no thought of you only being here for a year or two, like you are committing to four years and wanting to build something. And then obviously, as well, when you guys committed, you were just coming off of a national championship appearance, right?

COACH PECKNOLD: Correct.

Q. The timeframe is about the same. I'm curious about how that impacted you and wanting to play in this and knowing that this was a program that could take you there and just that kind of collective buy-in?

MICHAEL LOMBARDI: I committed here a long time ago. I actually committed in the winter of 2017. So following the championship appearance. And I'm from Rhode Island, not too far from Connecticut. And I've always been a fan of Quinnipiac and the way they play. And honestly it was a dream for me to have an opportunity to come play here.

And it's just pretty unbelievable to think back on it. I was kind of a late bloomer. And to finally get here and then

learn from some of the guys. Like our freshman year we had Chase Priskie, who has played for the Florida Panthers, a great guy. He just taught us the way, and a lot of things we still do are carried on from things we learned from alumni who have gone on to play.

But it's funny, Zach and I are actually in our fifth years. We're grad students. If you ever thought -- we had the extended year.

But it's pretty special to play for a team like this. And I think the culture of our team, it's been passed down for years and years. And I think that's what makes us special.

JAYDEN LEE: I think just the culture that Rand has been able to build over the past 25 years -- my freshman year, like there was alumni weekend. I met tons of alumni. Just hearing their stories, hearing kind of what they brought to the table and kind of the memories that they had, like, it really kind of just lit that fire inside of me made me really want to be here, made me feel welcomed here.

And everything they provide us with, they set us up for success. It's not hard to stick around.

ZACH METSA: When you're recruited and you're going through the whole process, you're excited for all four years. You look forward to every year, especially with a program like Quinnipiac. When you see the championship appearances and how often they're winning and competing, and makes you excited because you know every year you'll have a chance at something special, like a great opportunity like this. And we've been fortunate, we've been to the tournament four times. And that's exactly what's happened.

So when you talk about like the four years and what the mindset is, you're excited. It's a great opportunity. And like Jayden said, you don't want to leave. And if we could do a sixth year, I would keep playing here, if I could. I'm sure Rand would want to kick us out the door at some point.

COACH PECKNOLD: No, I would take you for another year. You can come back. Lombo, we gotta talk about it (laughter).

ZACH METSA: It's special to have that time, put the work in, leave your mark on the program.

COACH PECKNOLD: So we talk a lot about culture, and I was just thinking about how to answer the question. But culture is not an easy thing to define. And I could take an hour and a half to explain everything that we do to kind of develop it at our program.



Probably the biggest thing, the most important thing is just you need to recruit high-character kids on the way in. They have to be great kids. Are we perfect? No. We make a mistake once in a while.

But for the most part, like the three up here, they're not A-plus, they're A-plus-plus. These are phenomenal young men. I didn't actually pick them. I just walked in here, these three, so maybe Cam picked you guys, but he picked three great ones.

We do a really good job of that. Joe Dumais and Mike Corbett do a great job. Before that, I had Bill Riga, who's now the head coach at Holy Cross, and we hammer that; he's got to be a great kid. There's times I go -- I don't do a ton of recruiting, but I go once in a while. Mostly because my son is an '05, I'll see him, and I'll say, I like this kid on this team. And Joe Riley, We don't want that kid. I'm like, Well, he was great. And goes, No, you don't want that kid. He's not a Bobcat; you'll pull your hair out.

It's important for us. We know what we're good at. We need high character, elite character players with high hockey IQ. That's what's successful for us. We want as much talent as we can get. We certainly have talented players. We've got some really talented players, as you've already seen this year. But we've got to have those first two things for us to be successful.

Q. I know, obviously, a lot of physical preparation goes into the game. I'm wondering about the mental aspect and how you guys get your head in the game beforehand, and like any practices that you guys use that you found to be successful.

ZACH METSA: I think that's something you constantly work on. We have a great sports psychologist in Devin Markle that's worked with us the last few years.

I think a lot of it is just trying to get into the right head space. It's like positive reinforcement, the positive talk that you go through the entire day. Visualizing what's going to happen so you're prepared if something goes wrong or whatever happens in the game.

And I think everyone's got their own special routine, what they do throughout the entire day from the moment you wake up, and you kind of find that routine and it gets you in the rhythm. So when the game rolls around, you're gearing up the whole day, and you're ready to go when you step on the ice.

JAYDEN LEE: To me, it's the habits. Like Zach said, everyone does something differently. But finding the habits

that work for you.

And being able to take a step back and realizing maybe something isn't working for you. And being able to work with Devin Markle has been awesome, just fine tune that mental side and just the habits that you do every day kind of lead into when the puck drops, you're ready to go.

Q. Who runs the playlist, by the way?

ZACH METSA: Game day playlist?

Q. Or practice.

ZACH METSA: Practice rotates a little bit. Some guys will jump on the speaker if they want to play something, like Jay Quillan will play more rap. If I'm on it, I'll play country, mix it around. But game days is always Ethan de Jong. He takes control and plays a good EDM mix before. Gets some energy going.

COACH PECKNOLD: I have to ask Ethan sometimes what songs he's got on. Last year our win song was "23" by Chayce Beckham. I liked it so I added it, and now my daughters like it. Now they're into country music. So go figure.

Q. You talked a lot about (indiscernible) and he helped out with you pretty much from the ECAC semifinals against Colgate, when you guys lost, all the way up to Tampa Bay. Were there any words or encouragement or advice from the last time he was at the Frozen Four that you took to heart?

MICHAEL LOMBARDI: Absolutely. We had a great talk with him. It was really great that he would take the time out of his day to give us some advice to help us. But a lot of it was just about some regrets that they have about not getting the job done, being so close to it.

And obviously he's played on the biggest stage, won the Stanley Cup and different things. And a lot of things that he regretted was not bringing back a national championship to Quinnipiac, and that really stuck with us.

ZACH METSA: We were fortunate. I reached out to him after the Colgate game and just looking for any insight, like obviously he's made a run for the national championship and then with Colorado Avalanche.

He had great points for us and the kind of things we can bring back to the guys and helped us recenter, I think, a little bit after that loss and refocus on the job and the regional.

But it's special. It's so cool that we're able to leverage those guys and ask them for advice. And they're eager to give it to us. They want to be involved. They're following along the entire time. So it's really cool.

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