

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Creighton vs Louisville

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Rupp Arena

Louisville Cardinals
Coach Pat Kelsey
Reyne Smith
Terrence Edwards Jr.
J'Vonne Hadley
Chucky Hepburn
Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Louisville student-athletes Reyne Smith, Terrence Edwards Jr., J'Vonne Hadley and Chucky Hepburn. At this time we will take questions for the student-athletes.

Q. J'Vonne, you were sitting next to Coach Kelsey on Sunday whenever you guys saw your seeding. You guys had a moment where you shared a look. Just want to give you a take me through what happened there and your thoughts and the moment of getting an 8th seed here in Lexington.

J'VONNE HADLEY: Just right away we're grateful to have this opportunity as not every team in the country gets to participate in March Madness. So we're extremely grateful.

We were a little bit shocked that our name was called that early for sure, but like I said, we're just grateful to be in this place and, you know, just -- probably after that we got right to work. So we were determined right away.

Q. Reyne, an update on the ankle and how it's feeling and how excited you are in this journey with your teammates at Louisville.

REYNE SMITH: It's feeling really good. Had a great past week of treatment and doing everything I can to get back. So it's in a really good spot right now. Looking forward to getting on the court with my teammates and kinda competing in this tournament.



It's an exciting time of year, so just really excited to get out there.

Q. I know on Sunday there was discussion and talk about how you guys should have been seeded higher, but once the game begins, does it become irrelevant and not at all a factor in the game?

CHUCKY HEPBURN: No, it doesn't matter. At the end of the day, it's still basketball. We like to look at it like we're in Lexington, an hour away from Louisville. So we will have more fans and be able to play in front of more fans.

TERRENCE EDWARDS JR.: It's irrelevant once the committee selects the team that you play. We have a veteran team, someone that's been here before. So we're just grateful to be able to get a bid to be able to get in the tournament.

Just like J'Vonne said, we're grateful to be here and play in Lexington, and our family is able to drive down to the game. So, yeah, everything works out.

Q. You were just talking about playing in Lexington and whatnot. When you think about it, not having to travel far and having family a part of this event, being able to come, wherever they are, and also getting to play potentially in front of 10-, 15,000 Louisville fans, how special is that for you guys being that it is the NCAA Tournament and you get that opportunity?

REYNE SMITH: Yeah, it's really exciting. And once we saw we were in Lexington, we knew straightaway it's an opportunity for Louisville fans to come out, only an hour down the road.

So it's going to be a cool experience to kind of have those fans there. And for us to travel a little less, nicer on the body, so that's always good. So just looking forward to getting out there in front of the fans.

Q. Reyne, watching this team as you recovered, what kind of personality have you seen them develop that you feel like has really helped them down the stretch? Where do you feel like, now that you're getting healthy, where you can contribute and take it to another level



or maybe even in a different direction?

REYNE SMITH: First, just the toughness within the group. No matter how things are going, kind of the connectivity of the team is really special. I was kind of able to observe that over the last few games of sitting out.

Kinda just seeing the small, different things of kinda how to react to stuff and kinda seeing how reactions kinda carry over. For me it was just kind of learning those small things and how I can help the team when I come back.

And kind of having a new look after the days and games that I was out is kinda just giving it a little different approach now coming into the next game.

Q. J'Vonne, Terrence or Chucky, speak to what it was like to play the past week in Charlotte without Reyne in the lineup and how that changes the things you're doing on offense and what it's been like to get him back in the rotation this week heading into the tournament?

TERRENCE EDWARDS JR.: I can say that it's always better when Reyne is on the floor because he spaces the floor and he kinda knows the system like the back of his hand because he's been with the coaches. And he helps us a lot with the offense, setting cuts up and setting things up. He makes your job easier. He helps out guys that come in the game because he knows all the spots.

Yeah, he's just a great leader on the court. We was just lucky that we was able to get over the hump a couple times without him on the court. But, yeah, the court is so much spaced out when he's on the floor, it's so easy to get downhill and find him in transition. He does all the right things, and it makes our jobs a little bit more easier.

Q. Chucky, Coach McDermott mentioned he has known you since the 8th grade being from Omaha, and Steven Ashworth said you guys played pickup last summer. Was Creighton ever a consideration for you? Secondly, what are the challenges going against Ashworth tomorrow?

CHUCKY HEPBURN: He's a great guard. He never stops running. That's one thing about him. Even in open gym, when we play, he constantly is moving. And that's where we will have to keep our focus at because if we lose focus on him, he can get away from us in an instant. And he knocks threes down from NBA range and beyond that.

So we just have to know where he is at all times and being able to stop him in transition.

Q. (No microphone.)

CHUCKY HEPBURN: Yeah, definitely, especially being a hometown kid. I think, you know, if you're a hometown kid, you want to be able to play for your city.

Q. Chucky, when you all met with us before the season, you all talked about how well you all were getting along and gelling from the offseason. Back then, did you think you could have this kind of success to be this kind of team with this many wins? When you look back on that now, how different -- how much has it changed? Was there a turning point that you saw it could be a special season?

CHUCKY HEPBURN: I mean, since we stepped on campus in June, we all knew how special we could be. But all we could do is talk about it. Now, when we really hit the season, we were able to finally show it, you know? We had an early slump, but we knew we were going to be over it, especially after the Gonzaga game. You know, Pat said the right thing, you know, and that speaks to how veteran of a group we are.

We just knew how good we were going to be, and we knew it was going to take time. And it took time, and as time passed, you know, we just kept winning, stacking wins, and we're in a great place right now.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thanks so much.

At this time we want to welcome to Lexington Louisville Head Coach Pat Kelsey. Coach?

PAT KELSEY: We're excited and feel fortunate to be here. I believe in my heart that March Madness, the NCAA Tournament, my mentor, Skip Prosser, used to call it "the national tournament." It's the greatest tournament in American sports. It captivates the hearts and minds of people that love sports around this country during this time.

It never gets old. I've been here -- been very, very fortunate to be in this tournament a bunch, both as an assistant coach, as a player, and as a head coach. And to be here once again is always special, because it always is.

We're excited to be in our home state. I think our fans are going to come out in droves, hopefully, and our guys are excited to compete against a world-class coach and a high-level program in a very, very, very dangerous team.

Q. Pat, you spoke all season about how laser focused you guys are in preparation, the players specifically. I'm wondering how have you maybe seen that taken to another level entering the postseason? Also,



considering the players may have a chip on their shoulder after getting the 8th seed.

PAT KELSEY: Brooks, you've been in every single press conference that I have had all year long, and that laser-focused approach and attention to detail that our guys have never wavers and never changes.

I tell our guys all the time: If you have that high standard and you pursue excellence in preparation -- because you asked the question and mentioned specifically preparation -- you don't have to rise to the occasion when the moment is big, you just trust your training.

And their training has been elite. That's the way we look at it.

Whether we were playing a non-Division I in November or we're playing a phenomenal team in Creighton, our guys always have that same approach. I haven't seen anything but what our standard is the last several days.

In terms of your other question, we haven't blinked an eye. Don't talk about it. It's a nonissue at that point. We are here, and we are playing Creighton, and we have to be at our absolute best to beat Creighton. You don't need any added motivation when you have an opportunity to represent your school and your city in the national tournament.

Our guys are competitors, as you know. You've seen them compete all year long. So whether the Committee decided to make us a 16 seed, an 8 seed, a 4 seed, a 5 seed, we're here. And all of our attention is on trying to beat a world-class coach and a world-class team.

Q. Coach, when you talk about the laser focus of this team, in having two ten-game winning streaks, obviously it shows how well you can bounce back from losses, how much has that surprised you with this team? And with losing in the ACC Championship game, what do you feel your team learns from losses that can help you rebound?

PAT KELSEY: Whether you win or lose a game, I'm a big believer that you can always learn something. We always say never accept in victory what you wouldn't accept in defeat.

Our game review in the midst of, you mentioned, several double-digit win streaks never changed. The standard never changed that next day when we reviewed the tape. I tell our staff, and my approach is, act like we lost. Nitpick this tape and make adjustments and correct things with the mentality that we just lost the game.

So I don't think it really changes. Obviously there is probably a little bit more to clean up after the Duke loss, but it was the same approach.

Our guys are unbelievable in just the daily process of practice, weight training, individual skill workouts, film sessions, the next thing, the next thing. The next thing is what we always focus on and always try to be the best at that.

Q. Pat, I know you touched on this before, but getting the draw in Lexington, it's 80 miles east, this place will be packed with Louisville fans tomorrow. How much is that home-court advantage something you need to harness?

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, I mean, Creighton has a phenomenal fan base now, that atmosphere. And I've never coached there, but the reputation that their fan base has is well-known and well-documented.

So those people are going to travel. I don't think you can make the assumption that it's just going to be overcome with red. I guarantee you there's going to be a bunch of Creighton in there, too.

Being right down the road and making it easy for our fans to travel here is a positive, and I know how our -- I talked about Creighton's fan base, and it is, they have a phenomenal reputation, but being here at the University of Louisville for the last -- almost going on one full calendar year, it was apparent to me very, very early on.

And I already knew it. I grew up right up the road in Cincinnati. I was a Xavier fan, and I played at Xavier. But you knew one of the greatest brands in all of collegiate basketball was right down the road growing up. And I grew up in the '80s, and that was the heyday of all heydays with multiple national championships.

And I remember going to a game one time, Xavier played Louisville at the Cincinnati Coliseum. I forget what it was in, but I just remember seeing that and being in awe really of that name across the chest and the big C-A-R-D-S chant. And now I hear that in my sleep because I hear it all the time. It's pretty cool.

We have a passionate fan base, they have a passionate fan base. It's the greatest time of the year. It's going to be a great college basketball atmosphere and a big-time game.

Q. Coach, how have you seen Aly Khalifa approach his rehab and the redshirt this year? What role does



he have for you guys now?

PAT KELSEY: Aly Khalifa is an extension of the coaching staff. He has one of the brightest basketball minds that I've coached. He has such a wonderful heart and gives of himself every day to help the players that aren't redshirting.

He has taken great pride in taking James Scott under his wing. James has been a terrific player for us this year and one of the best rim threats, lob threats in the country.

But he and James GBT all the time. We call it GBT, great basketball talk. And they're constantly talking about nuances of the game, schematics, not only just post play, but passing. It's fun to watch.

He's been a member of our scout team, right? So it makes it a little bit hard when he's out there making those -- because Aly Khalifa is one of the best passers in the world. He is a remarkable passer. Sometimes I get a little bit worried it hurts our guys' confidence because he's picking us apart with backcuts and things like that.

Wonderful young man, has worked really hard on his rehab and is making us better behind the scenes.

Q. Speaking of Scott, I guess the way he has blossomed under that tutelage, how surprising is that to you, and where do you feel like he's taken his game since -- with the injuries that you've had?

PAT KELSEY: So James came with us from Charleston. Last year at Charleston I think he was the second youngest player in all of Division I basketball. And I'm going to get this statistic wrong, but I think he was Top 5 in the country in dunks in basketball.

And the thing I realized about James right away, and it kind of goes along with the answer that I had for Aly Khalifa, but James is one of the most curious basketball minds I've ever been around, like curious. He is asking questions constantly.

I wish he would get more hobbies and maybe enjoy college a little bit more, but all the kid does is study basketball. He watches tape. If he's not doing that, he's watching an NBA game. And he will come in with ideas and concepts. He's otherworldly when it comes to a voracious film watcher and learner of the game of basketball.

He has been asked to really step up because of the injuries that we faced, and our injuries that we've had throughout the course of the year are very-well documented, with Kasean Pryor going down for the year, Koren Johnson going down for the year, Noah Waterman missing five

weeks with a broken thumb, Aboubacar Traore missing six weeks with a broken arm, Reyne Smith, who has missed the last several games for us.

So guys like James, amongst other players has really had to increase his usage and his role, and he plays enormous minutes for us. We rely on him heavily for a lot of things, but he does it with a smile on his face. He's tough as nails. You can see the crazy dark mask that he wears after he got his teeth knocked out, had facial fractures, never missed a game. The Speed School of Engineering built that mask, which is another cool story. He still hasn't replaced his teeth, so he looks like a hockey player, and I think he kind of likes it. I got him smiling more, so the big gap there is kind of fun, but it's become his identity a little bit.

Q. Sticking with James, you talked about recently how has taken such care scouting the Bigs that you all have faced. This is obviously a huge match-up for him, going up against Kalkbrenner. What does he do that's different from the Bigs you saw in Charlotte last week? Seems like you're going to have your hands full.

PAT KELSEY: He's special. Every superlative that I could possibly imagine. He's tough, he's a motor, he's skilled, he's got unbelievable hands. He's a ridiculous rim protector. You know, I talk about James' lob threats, he's -- potentially the best lob threat in the country. He can score in the post, he's got touch around the rim. I mean, you name it, 4-Time Defensive Player in the Big East, All-American, decorated as all get out. You mentioned James, you've got to guard him with all five guards, which is hard to do, because they've got other really, really good players. One is one of the best point guards in the United States of America, with range when he gets off the bus. They got other guys with range when they get off the bus.

When that name popped up on the screen and we knew we had Creighton, I'm look, whoot! I'm a Xavier guy and a Xavier grad, so I keep my eye on the Big East and things like that. Gosh, I know how good they are. So we have our hands full, and we have been working our butt off in preparation, and it will be a big challenge, but we're excited about the challenge.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thanks for your time.

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