

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Utah State vs UCLA

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Rupp Arena

Utah State Aggies Coach Jerrod Calhoun

Media Conference



the other team better?

JERROD CALHOUN: I probably have watched more of his games than he has watched of ours. I watch about three or four teams throughout the year. Obviously you watch a lot of your friends' teams. I could tell you and recall a lot of plays of the Boston Celtics this year because Joe is a good friend of mine.

But UCLA is a team I've watched. My uncle passed away a few years ago, and he was a huge Bruin fan ever. Can't tell you how much he loved the Bruins. So to be playing these guys and this storied program is pretty neat.

So I've watched them seven or eight times live throughout the year and obviously the last two days, a ton, a ton of tape.

Q. I wanted to ask about the tournament experience your team has. Three of the guys that were up here have been in one or two games, other players on the team have been in this tournament, won a game. How much of an impact can that have on a team being prepared mentally as well as on the court?

JERROD CALHOUN: I think everything is experience, continuity. It's confidence, it's swagger. Right? You gotta have all that. So to have Mason and Ian and Fish and Karson and Jaxon Smith part of last year's team that beat TCU in the first round, and then Aubin having that game experience against UConn is critical, being able to handle and manage the hoopla of this.

I've been pretty fortunate. I've been part of a couple Sweet 16s and a Final Four run. So I've seen this as a guy that was part of a staff.

It's different on the kids. You've got to block out the noise. You have to stay off social media. I think there's so many things out there that can distract you. Just stay focused. Have that belief that you can beat anybody, and anybody can. Tomorrow starts the greatest tournament that we have in the United States.

It's the greatest tournament there is. There's going to be millions and millions of people watching. It's what makes college basketball so unique.

THE MODERATOR: At this time we want to welcome to Lexington Utah State Head Coach Jerrod Calhoun. Coach?

JERROD CALHOUN: Yeah, I think our team is extremely excited to be here. It's a lot of hard work making the NCAA Tournament. We have nine new players. So seeing these guys come together for one common goal. Our motto in our program is we over me, and I think our kids have really done a great job of carrying that out throughout the year. So we're really excited to be here.

Q. Coach, Mick Cronin talked about knowing you well. Can you talk about your relationship with him, how you got to know him and how it's evolved over the years?

JERROD CALHOUN: Yeah, we never worked together, but we came up under the same coach in Bob Huggins, never crossed paths. Mick's path is very similar to mine. He started off as a high school assistant coach, worked in the video room at Cincinnati, and obviously has worked his way up to one of the elite coaches in the country.

I've had a great deal of respect for him, and he's given me a lot of advice over the years, whether it was at the Division II level, Youngstown State, or currently at Utah State.

We joked probably about ten days ago. We talked for close to over an hour that night about his team, my team, the current landscape of college basketball, some of his beliefs and philosophies. And sure enough, here we are playing each other in the first round. So we go way, way back.

Q. Coach, do you know Coach Cronin's team better than he knows your team? Who do you think knows



But I do think having that experience will certainly help.

UCLA was not in the tournament last year. They're hungry. I've read Mick's growth quotes. I know the hard work that he went through, the frustration of last year. They're a storied program. They're expected to make deep tournament runs. So they're going to have swagger. They're going to have confidence. There is no reason the Aggies can't as well.

Q. UCLA is 9-0 this season when Aday Mara plays 15 or more minutes. Knowing that stat, are you hoping you can keep him to 14 minutes? And what's the best way to counteract somebody who is 7'3" at this level?

JERROD CALHOUN: He's massive. He's only going to get better. Tremendous young talent. I think one of the most talented young players in college basketball. You can see when he gets going in a game and he gets that swagger and that confidence, a lot of times it's easy baskets. He's one of the best lob threats we have in college basketball.

Mick does a tremendous job of putting him in Spain actions, high pick and rolls. So your ball screen defense against him has to be really good. You got to do a tremendous job of playing physical. If he catches the ball in the block, you have no shot.

You've gotta play physical against him. He's certainly one of those guys on their roster that nobody has that. Nobody has that height in today's game. We saw it last year with Zach Edey. We saw it firsthand as a program. So we're certainly aware of him.

Q. Coach, you've been able to maintain the program's postseason continuity three years running with three different coaches. When you look back on your arrival, how do you think you were able to kind of change your approach to coaching, especially with the transfer portal and other things like NIL?

JERROD CALHOUN: Yeah, that's a great question. I think certainly college basketball has changed. You have to have a very, very good plan. You have to have partnership. I was very fortunate to get to the Utah State job. Diana Sabau took a gamble on a coach that really had no ties to the West Coast, right?

I think so much nowadays you don't have to have ties to certain areas. I think if you can relate to the players, you can be there for them, you can hear their story, you have a system that works inside that league. Every job is different. You know, you have to have a strategic plan.

We wanted to be different. We wanted to play fast. We wanted to play a lot of guys. Our NIL, we had an event the other night, we raised \$1 million in one night. Last year we didn't have that, for this year's roster, we didn't have that for the entire roster.

So I think that shows the commitment from our university and the commitment from Cache Valley. The awareness is very real. I think kids like playing in our system. We give them a lot of freedom if you're open. Our whole system is find, create, and keep advantages. We want to be disruptive defensively, but we want our guys to have great confidence on the offensive end.

We're one of the best passing teams in the country. We're one of the most efficient teams. We take a lot of pride in that, making the right play. Tomorrow's match-up will be all about ball security. They're going to come after us in the half court, full court. We want the game to play fast. We want to open this game up. We want to see if we can get up and down with them.

Q. What can you say about the health of the team? I know Karson and Ian are both banged up after the conference tournament. What has their status been like this week?

JERROD CALHOUN: Karson got a shot two days ago, did not practice yesterday. He's feeling really good, so he'll practice today. Ian is progressing pretty nicely. Part of having great seasons, you've got to have some luck, right? Luck is a great part of it. We have a great training staff. I think Brandon Buskey does as good of a job as any strength coach in the country. Dr. Pickett has done a great job, he is really invested in our program, and I think Bret Ritter is maybe one of the best trainers I've ever been around. He spends a ton of time with the guys, a lot of countless hours. Guys do a tremendous job of taking care of their bodies, so I feel pretty good, Jason, about where we are at health-wise.

Q. Coach talk about what this means to you personally being here for the first time as a head coach and playing a storied program like UCLA at a place like Rupp Arena?

JERROD CALHOUN: You have to be prepared for every day, you know. We've really went at this thing for a long time. I've been a head coach for 13 years. You put a lot of time, a lot of sacrifice on your family, a lot of recruiting trips, a lot of individual workouts, a lot of skilled instruction, a lot of meetings. There is a ton that goes into college basketball, especially with the portal and NIL.



It's really -- we'll have a few weeks in May to kinda catch our breath, a few weeks in August so probably about a month total is all you get, you know, in this sport. So to me it's about living in the moment, being present. I shut down social media months ago. I don't take a ton of calls; I'll talk to a few coaches. I just really, really want to pour everything into our guys every day, and we've done that. So personally it's not about the coach, it's about the players.

We've got three seniors. This is their last go. I want to do everything I can in my power to put them into a good position to go make plays and be confident. We owe it to those guys. I think our mindset right now is pretty good. The last two weeks we haven't played great basketball you've got to call it like it is, but it's your full body of work. Our resume was really, really good.

We ended up getting the highest seed in the Mountain West along with New Mexico. We've played good teams. UCLA is a great team, but we've played Saint Mary's, we played Iowa, we played San Diego State, Boise, New Mexico. We've played really, really good basketball teams to prepare us for this moment. So I tell our guys, play green, right, next play mentality, play connected, and put the team over yourself.

Q. Mason was telling us about the depth, anybody can go off. Expound on the depth of this team, different guys, different nights playing well.

JERROD CALHOUN: It really starts with Ian and Mason buying into that philosophy, you know? Every coach has a different style. Some coaches play slow, come play fast, some play short bench, man, zone, I think every team you have is going to be a little bit different. When we started constructing this roster one thing we soon realized is we're going to be pretty versatile, our guards are going to be versatile, we're going to beat teams with speed, we're going to be able to play a lot of guys.

We certainly didn't think Jordy Barnes, he and I laugh about this all the time, would be in our top-ten. He closed those games out at St. Mary's, at Iowa, at San Diego State, so he's a guy that outperformed any of our expectations. So we were looking at about a nine or ten-man rotation, and now we're up to ten or eleven. So we're going to sub early and often, we're going to switch our defenses up.

We're going to play fast, we're going to play slow. Sometimes you have to adjust to the way the game is being played, but I love our depth, and I love that the kids bought into that. In today's environment it's very, very hard to get guys to sacrifice, and when you have a guy like Mason Falslev that's the ultimate competitor, he really

believes in that, it's easy for the other guys to follow it.

Q. Coach, you mentioned Coach Haut. You brought him on because his defense was such a nightmare to prepare for. How difficult is it in the span of four days to simulate it in practice and get ready for it?

JERROD CALHOUN: If there is one coach that can prepare for it, it's Coach Cronin. He actually played it. This originated from Ralph Willard, who worked for Rick Pitino, which Mick worked for Rick Pitino. But he played this at Cincinnati. I think on a one-day prep, it's very difficult. I think obviously UCLA has known for a while they're playing us. He knows the zone.

What he decides to run against it, I don't know. Sometimes teams run their man stuff, sometimes teams run their zone stuff, but there are also things we can do to adjust throughout the game. One thing we have to do, whether you are playing man or zone is guard the ball. We've done a poor job of that lately. Doesn't matter what defense you run, if you don't guard the ball, it's not very good. It's just like football, if you don't tackle you're not very good. It's definitely going to be a challenge and we will see how it plays out tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach.

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