

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

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Rupp Arena

## UCLA Bruins

## Coach Mick Cronin

### Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: At this time we are welcoming to Lexington UCLA Head Coach Mick Cronin. Coach?

MICK CRONIN: Great. It's great to be here. I just told these guys walking over, I haven't been here since '01 when Ashley Judd came in the locker room, and then I walked out with Coach Pitino to the loudest boo I have ever heard.

It's good to be back in Rupp. I'm honored to be a part of that moment. Never forget that. Of course then he got cheered. He came back for Midnight Madness and got cheered.

Obviously, all seriousness, we're excited to be here. Before you ask, we're used to the travel. It is what it is. It's old hat for us now. So our mind is on the game. Probably helps us that we got a night game, and usually in the Big Ten the team -- or always in the Big Ten the team we're playing didn't have to travel as well.

So our opponent had to travel as well. I think it probably helps us. We are able to adjust today and have a bit later of a game tomorrow, instead of last week where we had a day game after we traveled.

Got a lot of respect for Jerrod. He is a very good friend of mine, Coach Calhoun with the Aggies. So let 'em fly.

**Q. Coach, we talked about ways you prepare your team for this March moment, cutting back on practice, having to play at your best, giving them advice. What other ways you've tried to get them ready?**

MICK CRONIN: Just try to -- I will give you big and small. Big picture, we talk about it in recruiting, you know, it's a responsibility that when you go to UCLA, there is an expectation level. When you have so many Final Fours, 18



or 19, you can't remember, you are at a school like that, right?

A lot of my friends, be it Kelly in softball, Marguerite in soccer, Adam in water polo, since I've been there, there's been so many people I know that have won a national championship. John Savage is a good friend of mine. It's been a while, but he's won one. It's kinda just the way it is at UCLA. So you try to embed that into your players as you recruit them as well.

So they just -- look, you've got to understand the score, right? I would be remiss if I didn't try to -- I understood the score when I took the job. So I think it's important that you impart that on your players as well

On a smaller thing, everything matters. An out-of-bounds play, whether it's offense or defense, could decide whether you go home or not or you move on. So the details that I try to be so demanding on with these guys during the season, there is a reason. It's all for this moment. To try to advance and win this tournament. That's just the way we operate.

We talked about it again today as you're going over, you know, a special situation and how important one detail and one play can be.

**Q. Mick, Bruce and Rick were talking about the SEC --**

MICK CRONIN: Bruce?

**Q. Bruce Pearl and Rick Barnes were talking about the level of investment across the SEC and how that's maybe helped the conference as a whole. What's it been like going from the Pac-12 to the Big Ten, and how have you seen the level of involvement into the men's basketball programs --**

MICK CRONIN: I guess you would have to be more clear when you say level of involvement.

**Q. Investment from whether it be schools putting money into resources, into NIL, things of that nature, roster building was really what they were getting at. How have you seen that maybe as y'all transitioned from the Pac-12 to the Big Ten, how important is that**



## to stay competitive?

MICK CRONIN: Look, I don't think we've met before. I keep it real. The guy with the best players usually wins. There are multiple books with Coach Wooden's name on it, in quotes. In almost every instance of his interviews, he says usually when two teams play, the guy with the best players usually wins.

So right now the team with the most money usually has the best players. Usually. Usually. There have been some teams that have done great in the portal, like us, without the most money. And getting guys like Tyler Bilodeau, Eric Dailey, guys that were not ranked as big-time portal guys by your people that do that, that you work for.

And it's like that in every sport, right? In free agency, guy goes under the radar and becomes a great pickup, like the Dodgers had last year at the end of July. Back to Coach Wooden, the team with the best players usually wins.

So we were in a window where if you had one donor, it could change the world for you, with NIL and collectives, and all rules were thrown out as far as regulating that.

Now we're transitioning to the revenue share model, pending the approval of the settlement and how that's all going to shake out. Will there be NIL, will there not? Is the Deloitte thing going to work? That's going to be challenged in court. It's a wild time to be a coach, my friend.

But the guy with the best players usually wins, and the team with the most money has the chance to get the best players. They don't always do that. But that's just the era we are in. Does that get you to what your answer is?

I wouldn't say it's a per SEC thing. I think it's a per school thing. And you're asking me about the Big Ten. I can't speak to -- because it's all speculation, you know. It's like some agent tells me somebody else offered you a million dollars, well, he's probably lying. He's just trying to drive the price up.

And nobody wants to admit what they spent on their team, right? Nobody wants to admit it. They want to act like they did a great job recruiting, okay? That's just how guys are in our business.

I got problems, but that ain't one of them. I'll tell you exactly what it is. I just don't care. Some people think they need to play cat and mouse with that stuff.

You're going to miss, you're not going to miss. I think it's a per program. I don't think it's a conference thing. I could be wrong with that. Because think of Ohio State football.

Just because they spent what everybody says they spent versus what Illinois spent. But Coach Bielema did a great job. They had a hell of a year. But just because they're in the same league, it was probably like that, right?

I don't think it's a per league thing. And then who knows. Every coach that gets up here is praying that we will have some semblance of uniformity of some way where we all are playing on the same field or at least close to the same field. But who knows.

**Q. Mick, when you think back to last off-season, what was appealing to you about Skyy Clark when you targeted him in the portal, and what has impressed you the most?**

MICK CRONIN: One, I've known him since he was in ninth or tenth grade. So I know what type of guy he is. He never wanted to leave L.A., and I didn't want him to leave L.A.

Things happen. You know, things happen. Our recruiting, it was -- I got a text: Coach, I want to come. I want to come home.

I said, Call me when you're free, and that was the end of that.

I've known him. What has surprised me most about him is his tenacity and toughness on the defensive end. Because when you're watching a guy in high school, you're looking at his talent level and all that. How good he's been on that end.

And then how much he's grown up. Because he's been through so much adversity this year with his father's illness. It's been a huge challenge for him. I'm really proud of him and the person and the young man that he has become.

Look, he's talked about it with Ben a little bit, but I can't tell you how hard it's been for him and his family, for him to be -- I was worried that he was going to need to just take the year off. Obviously, I would have supported him, but we needed him. He's played through it, and he's been a huge part of our success.

**Q. Coach, UCLA is known for its firsts. There was another one this week. You even had a student manager who got an NIL deal --**

MICK CRONIN: How about that. I'm jealous. That's what I just told him. They just told me in the locker room. They were making fun of him back there.

**Q. What were they saying?**



MICK CRONIN: Something about he can't drink certain kind of drinks because he's got an NIL deal. And I was looking around, and they said, no, it's true. And I said, you can't cut me in on it? I'm trying to make all the model money I can before I retire, man. I'm honest about it. Can I get in on it?

**Q. What has Finn meant to this program?**

MICK CRONIN: Finn is great. Jack, Finn, and Trey, I will tell you, my career, I've been blessed with a lot of guys. I've had guys go on to be Secret Service agents. I've had guys go on to coaching. And I try to talk them all out of coaching. Doesn't always work. I think we have placed like five guys since we've been at UCLA that are coaching.

But you know these guys got into UCLA in the modern times on their own. They should not be coaching. I tell them all: You are way too smart. Your credentials are way better than ours. I used to tell them no, and then they go to the assistants who help them get jobs. I try to talk them out. I'm like, I told you no, you don't want to be a coach.

So we'll see how it goes. But Finn is awesome. We've got some young guys in the wings. But when you coach at a place like UCLA, where it's so hard to get in, almost impossible, you get the cream of the crop of students. Our guys reach out to us because they played in high school. So they want to stay involved, but they were the valedictorian at whatever high school they were at -- if you could invest in people like the stock market, I would tell you guys just come to UCLA and invest in all the student managers. You cannot lose. They're so impressive. But they don't need to go into coaching.

I beg them. They can have a much bigger impact on the world. Kind of like when I told Myles Johnson not to play an extra year. He can change the world, go up north, Silicon Valley, write code. And that's what he's doing. He can have a greater impact on our world than me telling him to block shots, working for IBM, doing software and hardware stuff. I just want him to -- if he's listening, Myles, when he comes up with his own idea, I want to be able to invest at the beginning. He promised me that.

**Q. Mick you mentioned the team with the best talent tends to win?**

MICK CRONIN: Tends to.

**Q. In this region, you're among five coaches with I think seven combined Final Fours still looking for that first title. Is that an indication of how tough it is to win when you get to the tournament?**

MICK CRONIN: Oh, yeah. Look, our tournament is crazy. It's one and out, neutral sites, but they might not be neutral, depending on who you're playing, right? Injuries happen, officiating happens and luck happens. You saw the last play of that game last night, right? Alabama State? So our tournament is crazy. There are so many great coaches that haven't been to a Final Four or won a title. It's unbelievable. It really, really is.

It's not like -- that's how people get crowned and they get into the Hall of Fame and stuff like that. But, again, with all due respect, there are certain people that -- just look at the NBA, Coach Jackson. I've read all his books. I got unbelievable respect for him. But when Michael went to play baseball, kinda wasn't the same. I mean, that's just one example, and there can be many, many examples.

I don't know what region we're in, by the way. How about that. I know we play Utah State, and I do know who the other game is, other than that with this pod system -- I know Louisville is here, but I don't know if they're in our region. Are they?

**Q. Utah State, Coach Calhoun was talking about their match-up zone, and he wanted to play fast, how big of a concern are those things? I asked Ian Martinez -- or actually I asked the players how do you combat somebody 7-3, and they said speed. Hearing that, how big of a concern is their ability to play fast and that match-up zone and their style?**

MICK CRONIN: Look, you have to be prepared. I would say -- I played it. I know where he got it, the same person -- Ralph Willard is the father of it, and he is a friend and mentor of mine, from Holy Cross, when he went to it, and I played it at Cincinnati. I can tell you from experience, if a team is not prepared for it, it can mess you up big time. That's number one. Number two, Jerrod is a young guy; he's younger than me, and we're very close, but before these guys all hired analytics people, we all kinda knew when I was starting out with Rick Pitino and Bob Huggins that the easiest way to score was before the defense got back.

I don't know if you need to pay an analytics guy to tell you that. And the faster you run your offense -- you have to use these terms, or you're not a cool, young, hip coach, but if you don't run your offense with precision and cuts like Pete Carril did, they ran it the way they ran it, and if you could slow it down, it's not as effective. So any offense like that.

I would just tell you this, look, I'm a block and tackle guy. The game hasn't changed. Don't get screened. If you get



screened, and they don't get screened, you're in trouble.

If you don't get blocked out, you're in business. You get blocked out all the time, you get screened all the time, you're probably going to lose. I don't think -- you know, but nowadays there's a lot of terms that have to be used for all that type of stuff.

Like practice with intention. How about just practice really hard. I left out the adjective. But now you have to do things with intention. Times change and, you know, you gotta use certain verbiage, makes you look smarter. But Jerrod is a great coach. He's a great young guy. Utah State has been on a run. They got Coach Sprinkle, before that Coach Odom, and now they got Jerrod Calhoun. I don't know how long they're going to keep him, but he's really, really good. Done an unbelievable job there. To come in and do what he's done, you know, when you lose a guy like Great Osobor.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time.

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