

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - UCLA vs Tennessee

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Rupp Arena

UCLA Bruins

Coach Mick Cronin

Media Conference



don't beat themselves.

You gotta match their intensity. I say that with everything they do. The way they screen, the way they cut, the way they go after the ball. They play the game the way it's supposed to be played. So looking in the mirror a little bit with that.

Q. I was doing an archive search this morning and came across some things you said going into the NCAA Tournament in 2021, and they were actually similar to some of the things you said last night. And I'm wondering, is this kind of a "method to the madness" so to speak, no pun intended, building your team up this time of year?

MICK CRONIN: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I think it's late and it's human nature that some teams, getting here is enough. Winning a game or so is enough. At UCLA that's just not what it's about. I say it to our guys all the time. I didn't come to UCLA to get in the tournament, I came to UCLA to win the tournament.

Now, I know that's crazy. You say, why would you put that pressure on yourself? As you know, I'm oblivious to outside pressure. No disrespect to what people say on TV or write in the media. Just doesn't matter to me. I have -- I believe -- I want to try to win a championship. That's why I came to UCLA, and I try to make sure our players know that that's why I want them to come to UCLA, aside from getting a degree from the best public school in the country and grow up as a person.

Those are the things I focus on. So, yeah, I don't remember what the hell I said in 2021, so I'm sure it's similar to, you know, trying to prepare -- we've been preparing all year to play a team like Tennessee tomorrow. And hopefully the Big Ten has helped us prepare for that.

Q. Mick, I was going to ask you something similar. The travel that y'all had to do this season -- you're playing so many games where there are UCLA fans everywhere, but maybe not a ton in some places -- so some road games are very much road games, and that's in some ways what it could be here tomorrow. Is it a blessing in some ways that your team maybe able to handle that better than others?

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by UCLA Head Coach Mick Cronin. Coach?

MICK CRONIN: We lost the LA Times, Ben is back in the locker room. Obviously at this time of year, it's good to be up here. If not I would be -- there you are, Ben, I was trying to stall for you.

Stay a few more days in the Commonwealth is a good thing. Paid taxes here for five years; two Louisville, three in Murray. So, Ben, I got on the elevator this morning, guy's checking out, got all Kentucky stuff on, his two kids got all Kentucky stuff on. I said you're in the wrong hotel, you guys play in Milwaukee. He said, Coach, we just came to root against Louisville.

That is the Commonwealth for you. I mean, I knew what he was going to say as soon as I asked him. So I tried to recruit him. I said you guys want -- to his kids, you guys want to stay? I'll give you three tickets and he said oh, we gotta go. I got him in trouble with his kids. They were asking him to stay. I said I will even give you UCLA stuff.

So I would rather be seen than not this time of year. Too early to make tee times.

Excited to play Tennessee, although I know how hard it's going to be. Obviously we've already talked to our guys, did the first scouting report and explained to 'em that everything will be hard. Catching the ball will be hard, passing the ball will be hard.

You have to do everything with strength and conviction or you'll be running your offense at half-court. Defending their offense is hard. Coach Barnes is a great coach, they got a great four-year starter at the point, numerous veterans. The underclassman that they play is a junior, so, you know, they're just a rock-solid team, coaching, players. They



MICK CRONIN: Two things. You allude to the fans. But the travel is something that we are obviously used to. It's our seventh trip back east, crossing time zones. So we're hoping to make an eighth.

As far as the fans, that's what I alluded to. I paid taxes here in the Commonwealth for five years from 60 miles away, and I told -- that story about the guy in the elevator with his kids is true. I'm hoping that there are some local people that are going to come to the game that couldn't get to Milwaukee and are going to root for the Bruins. I'm trying to recruit the locals. Last time I checked, Tennessee is their rival. We'll see.

I'm being funny but -- fans don't play in games so I'm a big believer -- you've got to be tough enough to not let -- things like that shouldn't matter.

Q. Mick, you mentioned that point guard that Tennessee has.

MICK CRONIN: Oh, yeah.

Q. Zakai Zeigler and Jahmai Mashack, the only team that has two finalists for the Naismith Defensive Player of the Year. What do they do that makes them so effective on the court as defensive players?

MICK CRONIN: Number one, they care. They understand that you can impact a game on the defensive end of the court. And, secondly, they're tremendous guarding the ball and they take a lot of pride in it. That takes toughness combined with their athleticism, obviously with Zakai, his quickness, with Jahmai, his toughness, his athleticism, he's got long arms. I would have tried to sign him, we didn't have a spot back when he was coming out.

We had everybody returning off a Final Four team and Peyton Watson had already committed to us, that was our only scholarship that year. He played high school with Jaylen Clark who plays for the Minnesota Timberwolves. And his high school team literally had the two best defensive players I've ever seen on a high school team in Jaylen Clark and Mashack.

So it's a mindset and a toughness that you're born with. Sky Clark has it for us. He takes a lot of pride in it.

It's a credit to them, and obviously Coach Barnes -- didn't surprise me. We couldn't recruit Mashack because of our situation, no scholarships. But when he went to Tennessee, I knew it was a great fit for him.

Q. Mick, you made a reference a little while ago to the

number of trips you guys have had to make back east. My question is, does it get any easier in terms of players getting used to the process and change in time zones and all that?

MICK CRONIN: I would ask them. I'm hoping so. I think so a little bit. It probably helped us that we got our ass beat by Wisconsin so we had time to rest. You know, usually because we don't want to miss too much school. So if we were to play -- I don't know what day it is, we played on Thursday? We would leave on Wednesday to try to mitigate our missed class.

With this, you have to be here for the media, so we had an extra day to adjust. So it's a little -- yes, I think it helped us, but I think it's a little -- I don't know if you say easier, but you get a little time to -- you get that day to adjust, which we had on Wednesday. So we traveled on Tuesday.

You just can't do that at UCLA. Academics are too important. And you're gone -- it's a two-game road trip in our conference, we do three of those. You can't add -- we're already missing too much class, so you can't add to it. The only thing that's harder is the plane is not the same. Like, the charter flight, we're pretty spoiled.

So when we got our own situation that we charter, we have Wi-Fi, and the seats actually have padding. And we have big-time meals and there's drinks everywhere, and the people serving us love us and they know us.

Not the same on the NCAA plane with the stale -- you get one small bag of stale pretzels, and you can't ask for a drink until an hour into the flight or you get reprimanded.

Q. The equivalent of a school bus?

MICK CRONIN: Yeah, it's like riding the cheese, which is what we used call it when I was growing up in Cincinnati. So it's cheese version. Versus a charter bus, you're on the cheese.

Q. It's a UCLA tradition that finals always come in the middle of the NCAA Tournament. What's finals week this year?

MICK CRONIN: Now.

Q. So you've got proctors and everything along with you?

MICK CRONIN: Yes. Our academic people are here. Some people -- some places are a little bit -- not as strenuous as UCLA, where, hey, take it when you get back. We have a lot of classes where they have to take it online



with the proctors here in the middle of this whole thing. So that's just life at UCLA.

Q. Coach, there's been coaches that have gone up against Tennessee and mentioned after the fact that they're difficult to prepare for because of their style. You mentioned they're kinda like looking in the mirror. Talk about that preparation for Tennessee?

MICK CRONIN: Well, right now we're just -- we didn't get out of here until midnight last night, so we let our guys sleep in and gave them the scouting report. We will have a glorified walk-through and do a lot of film today. I'm a big believer in you've got to have fresh legs, so our preparation will be mostly tomorrow at Transylvania during the day for the game tomorrow night.

Look, the reason they're hard to prepare for is it's hard to simulate their intensity. You can run through your offense and it's easy, until you gotta try to run your offense against a team with two of the best -- not only do you have a great coach who is a great defensive coach, but -- I've been doing this a long time. Your defense gets better when you have two of the best defenders in the country.

And now we haven't even mentioned Felix Okpara and his shot blocking. So their personnel to go with their system is why they're such a great defensive team. That's why they're so hard to prepare for. Your stuff tends to work against certain teams, it doesn't work against them.

As a coach, the challenge is okay what can we do to make sure we get good shots and we don't have our offense at half-court. You gotta be able to get the ball entered. Just getting the ball entered into your offense can be a challenge against. How do you relieve their pressure a little bit so you can put them on their heels a little bit. Instead of their defense attacking you, you attacking their defense.

And it's not easy. I think that's what most coaches are talking about.

Q. Mick, a lot of people talk about --

MICK CRONIN: You know, you look like Wes Rucker. Just like I look like Mick Cronin, especially when I had red hair.

Q. Funny how it works out sometimes.

MICK CRONIN: Isn't it?

Q. One of the first things people always say about your team and Rick's team is those guys play hard. Is

that something that you can identify properly in recruiting, or is it something you have to coach into a guy at this level to get what you need?

MICK CRONIN: I would say -- I'm sure Coach Barnes, he's been around longer than me. He's in good shape, though, for his age.

But, anyway, I'm sure he would share this, that when you recruit, you gotta try to say: Is this guy going to get over himself and let me coach him to become a better player or does he think he's good enough and he doesn't need me?

Because what happens -- in successful programs, you become us. We don't become you. You become us. We know how to win. We understand -- the things that we value, playing without the ball, fighting through screens, an example, which Tennessee is great at.

Physicality, effort, togetherness, you become us. We don't become you. So you have to ascertain whether -- you better recruit guys that are willing to be a part of the way you do things. So it's not a -- if not, it's a bad fit. It's just a bad fit.

Then I would say, you know, no matter how high a guy is ranked or how much talent he has, it doesn't matter if it's a bad fit. We're paid to win games. So you gotta get guys with talent, but also have been raised and have people around 'em that understand that they need to get better, and guys that want to get better.

I call it the Kobe Bryant mentality, because we're in LA. God rest his soul. He was the hardest-working player to ever to play basketball, the mentality of I'm trying to get better at all times. And that's just how he was.

So we talk about it a lot, we talk about it in recruiting, and we talk to our players about it all the time. I'm sure Coach Barnes has learned that over the years as well. I don't want to speak for him, but it's fairly obvious what he stands for and why he's so successful.

Q. Coach, you talk about those little things, fighting through screens, taking pride with your defense that Tennessee has. What do you think about those small things that your team has and what do you think sets them apart?

MICK CRONIN: We try to do the same thing. It's going to be harder against them, though. I'm concerned with the defensive backboard. You've got to be able to not only block out, you gotta go get the ball, which is not easy.

You got a guy like Mashack, who reminds me of Jaylen



Clark, which is funny because they were on the same team for Coach Kleckner in high school at Etiwanda. I saw them play a game together. You talk about not being able to score. You should have seen the poor team playing against Etiwanda when they were playing together. Guys, it's what you do when you don't have the ball.

I give them an A+ grade on that. Even on offense, the way they screen, the way they move without the ball, the way they go rebound when the shot is taken.

If you don't match them in those areas, you have no chance. You have to match them in those areas. Now you got a shot to win. If you don't match them in those areas, you're not going to get good shots. Even if you stop 'em. They're going to get the rebound. So you have to match their intensity and their commitment to all that other stuff that has nothing to do with shooting jump shots.

If you do that, then, you know, you give yourself a chance at least, but it's easier said than done.

Q. I wonder about your assessment of Chaz Lanier who seems to be really --

MICK CRONIN: What a story! Chaz Lanier is just an unbelievable story. I saw -- I don't know when it was, I lost track of time, but they were on TV one day and I'm watching him, who is this guy? Where did he come from? I look up and two years ago, he averaged 4.7 points a game at North Florida. So I texted Matt Driscoll and I said, what were you doing? This guy is a star, and you're holding him back! I'm just kidding.

I'm actually redshirting three players. We have a guard that's redshirting for us that's only 18 years old, Eric Freeny, 6'4" guard. Yesterday I showed him Chaz Lanier's career stats, 1.7, 4.7, 4.7, 19.7, and now All-SEC, and got a legitimate shot at being a pro. I said, this is reality.

Everybody else wants one-and-done. This is who you could be someday. Like, you can't get down on yourself, you know, because everybody -- especially in LA, you know, it's "title town," one-and-done, everybody is used to All-Americans, we've had so many great players. You gotta have some guys that are going to get better every year.

That's really all I know about his story, but I had a lot of guys at Cincinnati like him that got better every year. He's been awesome for them. That's two years in a row they've had a guy, Dalton Knecht and then him, that they've been able to pull that off.

How are you going to replace Dalton Knecht? And they did

it. But he is good. He is really good. So tremendous respect for him to keep his head down, keep working and get better, in a time where most people, they don't want to put the work in. You know, it's just -- we're in an era where it's not really about that.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach.

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