

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Omaha vs St. John's

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Providence, Rhode Island, USA

Amica Mutual Pavilion

St. John's Red Storm Coach Rick Pitino

Media Conference



all the time and it was 1987, so a long time ago, but it was a fun time. It was a sad time. It was every emotion that you could possibly feel, both positively and negatively.

Providence, though, when I was at Kentucky, I would take my family for two to three weeks to Newport in the summer to vacation, and we did that, like, for a long time.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up to some questions here.

Q. You mentioned you lost in the first round before, but one of those times was as the better seed that Morehead has taken. What do you remember about that day compared to some of the other rounds?

RICK PITINO: I talked to my team about that game and showed them. I said, one of the things that happens in any basketball game is the three-point shot at the buzzer, and that game, I believe, if my memory serves me well, I said to my team, whatever you do, don't let them take a three. We'll go into overtime, run them off the line. Sure enough, came off the court, we backed up, not wanting to get beat and gave up the three. My point to them was about how important it is to make sure you understand time and score and what you have to do.

Q. Coach Self and Coach Calipari felt like this might have been preordained by the selection committee. Do you buy into that at all?

RICK PITINO: It really doesn't matter. They're great coaches, but I'm just concerned about Omaha because this team is... their point guard will be a top-four point guard in the Big East. They have the Player of the Year in the power forward spot. I'm just excited to be here regardless of who's coaching. It doesn't matter to me. I'm very concerned about the talent we're facing.

Q. When you saw that the draw was coming back here to Providence, you have been back with this program playing in the Big East, but do some of those memories pop up again here?

RICK PITINO: It's one of my favorite coaching stints of all time. It was certainly magical. I still talk to all the players

Q. Welcome to Providence. Kadary played in this tournament three years ago, a long time ago with Syracuse. What do you think it means for him to have another chance now in his last year? And you talked about it before, but how much has he grown and evolved since last year, and obviously since his freshman year?

RICK PITINO: I don't know anything about his freshman year, but he's grown just this year from a good practice player to a great practice player in great shape, terrific basketball player. You have to ask him that. I can't speak for him.

Q. Coach Pitino, you are a Hall of Famer, you have accomplished pretty much everything that can be accomplished in coaching. You're 72 years old. What keeps you motivated at this point? Why do you want to keep doing this? What do you have to prove?

RICK PITINO: First of all, I have been blessed for a long period of time. 50 years of coaching... 50-plus years of coaching, and I think I look at it this way: I know -- I don't know if God will bless me with two, three, four more years, but if he does, it's going to stop. So why not have a blast? Why not get the most out of it? Laugh, have fun, get great experiences.

Early years it wasn't like that trying to move up the ladder. You're trying to accomplish certain things collectively with the team yourself. Now I don't have to move up the ladder. I don't have to look for another job. I don't have any dreams of coaching elsewhere, so it's just fun. You have fun with your guys. It's laughter, it's all the great things, but I do know it's coming to an end.

Q. Do you let yourself enjoy it more now than you did at Providence or Kentucky or the Celtics or Louisville?



RICK PITINO: Without question. I revel every single day in all of it. Being part of the NCAA Tournament is what college basketball is all about.

A long time ago when I started coaching, college basketball and college football were even. The NBA and NFL were even. Today, a bad Saturday football game, not even a top power four or five opponent, will outdraw an NBA playoff game. But this is our month. This is what college basketball lives for, March. So it's exciting.

Q. Rick, I know that you talked to us a little bit about trying to recreate the tournament experience in your last four games. There isn't that much NCAA Tournament experience, but with players like Smith and Scott and a lot of them, they've been trying to get to the NCAA Tournament for their whole careers. Smith and Scott, it's their last chance and they finally make it. Is there some measure of reward for you that you brought them in here and they're getting it?

RICK PITINO: Without question. To go through a career and not be part of March Madness is really difficult to any athlete, especially at the major level. So for these guys to see Madison Square Garden packed and they're not from New York, they don't know what Madison Square Garden really is about, and then to experience that the entire year, to win the Big East, to win the Big East Tournament, sold out Madison Square Garden louder than I have ever heard it, even as a Knicks coach, was an amazing feeling to them, and now they get to experience March Madness. It could be RJ's last year, too. He's never experienced it. It's wonderful for them.

Q. Rick, how do you get the guys... Saturday was such a high for you guys. How do you get them to move past that and refocus, knowing you can't afford slip-ups or a slow start, that this is now it?

RICK PITINO: I think you have to look at the whole body of work the entire year. When you lose four games by a total of seven points, you're bringing it every night. I think there's only one game the entire year that I was just a little disappointed in our performance, and I believe that was the one at Butler. Outside of that, they bring it all the time. We have been behind a lot, we have never panicked, just get on to the next play, make the comeback and do a lot of good things.

I don't think that's any concern of mine at all. Omaha is more of a concern than that.

Q. Rick, you mentioned this being fun, and does the fact that you went through what you went through with the Celtics and then came back, does that make going

through the changes that college basketball and college sports are going through, do you have a different appreciation and maybe less frustration than some of the coaches that are trying to adapt to it because you went away and came back?

RICK PITINO: When I went away to Greece after being... any time you get fired, it's always a traumatic experience, but even more so when I went through it, it was more traumatic. Felt a little betrayed in a lot of areas, but I took off for Greece by myself. Never been to Greece, didn't know the Euro league, didn't know anything about it. I stopped hanging my head that night because I had to coach against CSKA, and then I had the most wonderful two years of a learning experience of my life at 65, and became the Greek National Coach.

And I look back on it and say there's always a silver lining in every cloud, you've heard that expression many times, and for me it was a major silver lining. It rejuvenated me. It stopped me from being bitter at all. Just said, let's get on with it. It's just adversity. You can look adversity square in the eyes and piss all over it if you're smart. So don't hang your head, pick yourself up, get on, become the best Euro league coach you can possibly be and move on. Then I came back and tried to be the best coach in the MAC conference I could be. So it's been fun. It's been a blast.

Q. You've talked in the last couple of weeks that the regular season was phase one and the Big East Tournament was phase two and the NCAA Tournament is phase three. Is there something you need to see different from your players, whether it be their intensity or focus to be as successful in phase three as they were in phase one and phase two?

RICK PITINO: I just hope they play like they played in phases one and two. One thing I will say about our team, and it's exciting for me, is I have seen is the improvement -- remember, you guys mentioned about RJ being a three-star athlete, and here he is a Second-Team All-American. He's First-Team All Big East. Zubly is a non-player at Kansas. Now he's First-Team All Big East. That's obvious, but I see tremendous improvement in Ruben Prey, in Vince and in Lefty. That's exciting for me to see. Those guys that don't get all the publicity really improving and getting a lot better.

Q. I think this is tournament game 76 for you, maybe, and I wondered while we're here talking about long resumes and mining your memory, what's in there about Boston U versus LaSalle at the Palestra, I believe, game one.

RICK PITINO: It's funny because Pat and Chuck, 30 years

ago, they were covering. I feel like I'm a hundred, but...(Laughter)

I go back so many years in those first rounds and you look, I know I was in Omaha's shoes right now, but they're really, really good and there's very little difference. Back then there was a lot of difference between the upper level and those teams. Today there's not a whole lot of difference. You may look at, because you don't know them, but then when you watch film and say that point guard could be one of the premier point guards in the Big East. That power forward, a hell of a basketball player. It's been the teams that are not a one seed, two seed, three seed, but they can flat out play.

You look back on those days of the Palestra or being at BU and you're going against -- there's only one coach I considered a rival in my whole career, and I have been blessed to coach against Frank McGuire in his last game, coached against Dean Smith. Only one I had a strong rivalry with and today I respect him as much as anybody in the game, and that was Jim Calhoun. We hated each other at BU and Northeastern, hated each other. And there were 300 people in each arena. He goes on to coach at Connecticut, I go on to coach at Providence and we hated each other there, as well. Today I don't think I respect any coach as much as Jim Calhoun. Looking back, it was funny at that stage of BU versus Northeastern.

Q. Do you feel like your team has played its best basketball left or do you think there's another level to reach?

RICK PITINO: In order to get where we would like to go, we have to improve. There's a lot of great teams out there and in order for us to beat Omaha and keep on moving on, we're going to have to improve.

Q. Rick, along those lines, when you think about the improvement of your team, it's nothing new that your group evolves throughout the course of a season. You've said before that this team has defied certain laws of the game. How much do they make up for it and in what ways do they make up for all that?

RICK PITINO: I forgot the young lady's name in the last game of the Big East who does the sideline reporting, really nice --

Q. Kristina Pink.

RICK PITINO: Okay. She came up to me and said what do you attribute being such a great offensive rebounding team? I said we miss a lot. (Laughter) She started hysterically laughing and I started hysterically laughing.

We are not as bad a shooting team, three-point shooting team as our stats indicate. I think we're much better than that. We just went through some games where we're one for 23 and I pick up the stat sheet and we win by 14 points. So it's a possession game, forced turnovers, assists, getting your offensive rebounds because you have to generate possessions if you're not a great shooting team and this team has done that.

Q. Rick, Aaron just told us he has a torn tendon in his thumb but he's able to through with it.

RICK PITINO: He's actually shooting better with the torn thumb. I wish he would've torn it long ago.

Q. As he looked fine to you in practice? What is his toughness and his overall presence meaning to this team?

RICK PITINO: He's been very tough and I'm not being facetious when I say he's been shooting the ball much better since that's occurred. I've got tough guys... Zubly is tough, Aaron, Kadary shows toughness at times. Vince and Ruben are very tough. For the last five to six weeks, Sim, believe it or not, for the last five to six weeks, has been the best practice player. A few games he takes himself out with foul trouble, but he's been our best defensive and offensive player.

Q. Rick, in terms of chemistry and cohesiveness, you guys have a lot of that. What do you think that stems from? And how much are you impressed by the way these guys have each other's backs?

RICK PITINO: The beginning of the year, we were not the most connected team in the Bahamas at all but that's going to happen to all of us every year. Next year we'll have about six or seven players returning and that'll be a major benefit. First year I took over, we had 14 new players and this year we have four new starters. It takes the bad thing. I have always said I don't mind the NIL. I don't mind the portal. The thing that's difficult for a coach is to get players connected offensively, defensively and bonded because they're all new to each other. It takes time. By January we were a very connected team. We bonded very well and I think those losses early on made us bond, so that was a good thing.

THE MODERATOR: Time for one or two more.

Q. Rick, with all the post-season experience that you have, how are you advising your players to handle this? Because the lights are brighter here.

RICK PITINO: I think with all of us who have been through

this a lot. We don't necessarily have the formula for success. What we do know is what not to do, making sure you don't apply a lot of stress to your team. Making sure you understand how important everything little thing from a scouting standpoint and then the unexpected. You're going against a team that hasn't played 1-3-1 or 3-2-zone the entire year? You better expect them to play that. You better come up with ideas. What will they do? We're the team that's the two seed and what would that team -- if I was back at Boston University right now, what would I be thinking to play against that two seed to confuse them to get them so I could equalize that talent?

Q. Rick, I know that you like to shoot down the premise of the question, but -- (Laughter).

RICK PITINO: Do I really do that?

Q. You've had a remarkable amount of success at winning two games in a weekend and I know that you're very focused on Omaha, obviously, but can you give us an idea about what it takes to be the team that wins two games in a weekend and what might be going on behind the scenes?

RICK PITINO: I think the first thing you do is don't think about the second game because I think all of us in this room, if we knew who was going to win, I wouldn't be coaching and you wouldn't be writing. You have no idea who is going to win Kansas-Arkansas. Two great coaches, great talent, you just focus on what you can control and that's Omaha. Our respect for Omaha is off the charts. They can really, really play.

There are certain teams I have seen sometimes in scouting that had a lot of weaknesses that you could exploit. I don't see that with this basketball team. The best thing to do is take care of preparing the first game, pay no attention to the second game at all because I have not seen Kansas or Arkansas at all this year. I have seen a lot of teams play, but I haven't seen either one of those teams play. I have now on tape, but I haven't prior to that. I couldn't tell you who the better team is. I think they're both outstanding. Kansas was a pre-season number one in the nation. Arkansas has been really, really hot of late, so two great teams. They're going to do battle.

Q. Rick, looks like you were over at Rhode Island College this morning, saw Coach Walsh post the picture of some of the banners he put up there. What was the experience like, and was Coach Walsh telling any stories there?

RICK PITINO: No, he was just signing autographs and taking bows the entire practice. I asked him to practice but

he said I have to finish these autographs and I will get right with you.

No. Omaha is his scout. He's a brilliant coach. To be quite honest with you, he's overqualified to be an assistant. He should be a head coach. He has a brilliant mind for the game. Works his tail off, major asset for me, both at Iona. I have, I think, one of the better staffs in all of college basketball, just a fabulous staff. My New York Knick ball boy is my associate coach. He played for me, he was an assistant coach with me. Why he stays around me I don't know, but he's brilliant. Ricky Johns, Taliek Brown.

I told my team this... do you understand what March can do for you in life? Some of my players in Lexington. I don't know if they're working, they're living a good life. Taliek Brown is a coach right now with us. He got a tremendous opportunity, Kimani from Connecticut recommended him to me, but if he didn't win the National Championship at UConn I never would have hired him. I wanted someone my players could look at, look up to and say he went through it, won a National Championship at UConn, this would be a great influence on my players. If you have that type of run in March, you become part of basketball history. And it's more than just March Madness, you're part of that winning fiber forever at St. John's and this team will be remembered for a long time at St. John's. If we can continue on and on, it will be an awesome thing for all these young people.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach.

RICK PITINO: Great seeing everybody for the last 50 years.

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