

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Arkansas vs St. John's

Friday, March 21, 2025

Providence, Rhode Island, USA

Amica Mutual Pavilion

St. John's Red Storm
Coach Rick Pitino
Simeon Wilcher

Aaron Scott

Media Conference



like this and to have it against another great team, it's a blessing for sure.

Q. Simeon, y'all's focus was on Omaha the last game, what have you learned about Arkansas going over the game plan?

SIMEON WILCHER: They have an amazing team, extremely athletic, just overall a great team that's going to be a tough matchup for us. Not really like... it's going to be a great game for sure, probably the most athletic team we have played all year and we definitely have our work cut out for us.

Q. Aaron, how much did the gritty style of basketball you played at North Texas help adapt you to the defense you played here at St. John's, and did it help you at all last night when it was a low scoring battle between you and Omaha in the first half?

AARON SCOTT: Yeah, of course. I'm blessed to spend my first three years of college at North Texas. Their identity is something like the same here at St. John's, the grittiness, toughness, all that. I feel like that's my role on this team, to bring the energy. Last night I had two early fouls, two quick fouls. Going into the second half, I just wanted to bring energy to the whole team, get the whole team going. Get turnovers, get out in transition. Our defense makes our offense. That's where we're best. I just feel like that's my role on this team.

THE MODERATOR: Once you're settled here, open up the floor to questions.

Q. Simeon, I know you knew D.J. from high school. Do you have any good stories of playing against him?

SIMEON WILCHER: I feel like it's a full-circle moment. A lot of respect for D.J., big up for him. He's been having a great season. That's great to see. Shout out to him, but we definitely had some really good games against each other. One that I can think about is our TOC, junior year.

Q. What do you think that says about New Jersey that there's a couple tough guards playing in the second round of the NCAA Tournament here?

SIMEON WILCHER: Basketball needs New Jersey.

Q. I'm curious for both of you, just how familiar are you guys with any of the Rick Pitino and John Calipari history, their match-ups. It dates back to well before you were alive, but what's your familiarity there?

SIMEON WILCHER: We see a little bit of the stuff on media and stuff but we don't really dive too much into it.

AARON SCOTT: Yeah, I have seen it on ESPN and stuff, but I really don't know too much of it.

Q. What's the opportunity like to go against another Hall of Fame coach?

SIMEON WILCHER: It's amazing, it's a blessing for sure and just to be able to advance in such a great tournament

Q. New York's about three, three and a half hour drive away, Fayetteville is about 25. What kind of advantage do you think a home crowd will have for you tomorrow?

AARON SCOTT: Last night we had an amazing crowd. It felt like a home game and that could be an advantage. I did see a lot of Arkansas fans, so I know they're traveling, too. So I think it would be a pretty good environment tomorrow and it's going to be a lot of people there, and I do think we have an advantage with our fans.

Q. I'm wondering if you can walk through for me from the time you got back to the hotel last night until you got to the arena what all you've done.



SIMEON WILCHER: So, after the game, kind of your typical coach talks and we had to hurry up, get back to the hotel because it was pretty late. We had film when we got back. Watched film, like our breakdowns and stuff from our Omaha game, and we watched some personnel last night for Arkansas. This morning we woke up, ate breakfast, watched the game again. Got off our feet for a little bit and now we're here.

Q. Vice has been following both Arkansas and St. John's and John Calipari and your coach, Rick Pitino. What's that been like? You have had a successful season but an additional camera, additional people are watching you guys 24/7.

SIMEON WILCHER: I feel like they do, they're like a fly on the wall. You don't really notice them all the time. When you have a goal, that's something that your team can do as a collective, you don't really allow that to distract you or stray you away from what's going on. We love everybody from the Vice crew and they've been great to us all year and it's hard to really notice them when you're going through practice or film or whatever it is that you're doing with the team.

Q. Earlier you're talking about D.J. and your junior year, what do you remember about that game and the significance of it?

AARON SCOTT: In New Jersey they had the Tournament of Champs where all the teams from all the counties throughout Jersey, the winners of their county, they would play in a tournament to see who the best team was in Jersey. Unfortunately it's not around anymore due to the state not really feeling like other teams could compete with teams that could recruit and stuff, which is understandable. Our junior year we were able to play in the last one they ever had at Rutgers. It was a great game. It was an overtime game. Overtime game, great game, great environment. He's from Camden, New Jersey. They go hard for their school and especially for D.J. because of what his pops has done, but just that game, that environment, we almost sold out Rutgers as a high school team. So I feel like that's pretty cool.

Q. Sim, your first experience last night in March Madness, was it everything you expected and imagined it to be?

SIMEON WILCHER: Yeah, just growing up, watching March Madness my whole life and to have this opportunity is second to none. It's kind of crazy to even say that I'm here right now. I give my thanks to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and just ask Him to keep guiding me, keep guiding every step that I take.

Q. You talked about D.J. a little bit. Boogie's home is also not far from here. You had a lot of family in last night and I'm assuming you will tomorrow as well.

SIMEON WILCHER: My parents are kind of -- my brother goes to Texas A&M so my dad is in Denver and my mom is out here. They split up so they could watch the both of us. It's great just to have people that are able to come.

Q. Aaron, what's it been like playing with the pain in your thumb? How was it yesterday and how are you feeling now?

AARON SCOTT: I think -- in fact, Sim told me it's all mental. You don't use your thumb anyway to shoot. Stop thinking about it really helps me. There are probably some plays I shouldn't be doing like reaching in or going for a block with this hand, but at the time, at the moment I'm not thinking about it at all. I'm just playing. After the game, that's the worst part, but it's after the game, not during the game, so, yeah.

Q. You just mentioned your brother plays at A&M. Have you talked to him at all about facing Arkansas? Do you have any tips or a scouting report from him?

SIMEON WILCHER: No, I haven't talked to him yet due to the time difference, and they played yesterday so I want to give him a chance to chill. He's out there with my dad. I talked to my dad a little bit, but, yeah, I'm going to talk to him later just to see anything, any tips on how they went about playing them during this season.

Q. What does it mean for your family to have two sons in the NCAA Tournament at the same time? How proud are you and your parents of that?

SIMEON WILCHER: I'm extremely proud because I feel like we both get a chance to represent our families in this tournament. And my older brother is the reason why I even play basketball, so just to have the opportunity to play in this big event. Well, he's on the other side of the country and we're out here.

It's just amazing. It's something that we both dreamed about doing since we were younger and I can't even tell you how my parents feel because it's hard for them to break it into words, too.

Q. (Inaudible).

SIMEON WILCHER: Yeah, he was my foundation to everything. When I was younger he started playing before me. I watched him and how hard he went at it and

watched how hard he worked. He kind of made me fall in love with the game, too.

Q. How did your parents decide who went to which game?

SIMEON WILCHER: My dad -- well, my mom is working. She's a teacher at school, so coming to Providence was an easier trip for her. My dad, his schedule is a little more flexible so he could take that trip to Colorado without it being an issue.

THE MODERATOR: All set. You guys can head back to the locker room. Thanks for your time.

Welcome, Coach.

Q. Hey, Rick. I'm wondering if you can talk through the timeline of when you got back to the hotel until now.

RICK PITINO: Well, we got back quite late and we watched a little film, had a bite to eat and the coaches went back to my room and got done about 3:45. Breakfast, film, and now here.

Q. You're taking questions in the Bill Reynolds Media Room. I'm wondering if you had a chance to look at the entrance and how much would Bill enjoy this weekend?

RICK PITINO: Yeah, Bill was a special person. We had a special friendship. Wrote a special book together. Spent a lot of time together so it's special to read that.

Q. Rick, you matched up a lot to John's other teams at various stops. I'm curious if you find any similarities from this team compared to other teams that you've played?

RICK PITINO: Nothing that stands out. Very long, athletic. Most of his teams are extremely athletic. This team is as athletic as I have seen. This team is quite extraordinary.

Q. Obviously there's a lot of questions about you and Cal and your history and your relationship. If somebody told you ten years ago when you were at Louisville that you would be coaching against Cal ten years later and you'd be at St. John's and he would be at Arkansas, would you have believed that? What might you think have happened to lead to that?

RICK PITINO: I never have thought of that question and probably will never think of it in the future (Laughter).

Q. I mean, how unlikely would that have been? One guy is at Kentucky, Louisville and now you're at two completely different schools facing each other in the tournament?

RICK PITINO: I don't know, Adam. I don't know how to answer that question (Laughter). I have a lot on my mind. That's not one of them.

Q. Rick, John talked a little bit about you guys shared incubatories, coaches at Five-Star. Can you talk about what it was like to be a young coach with dreams and ambitions?

RICK PITINO: Yeah. Five-Star was the start for all of us. I don't know if we would be sitting here today if it wasn't for Garfinkel and Five-Star. Back then there was no AAU basketball. It was just all the players from all over the country, world, actually, came to Honesdale, Pennsylvania to compete at the Five-Star Basketball Camp. I remember giving lectures and playing against guys like Patrick and Michael Jordan and people of that stature. It was amazing back then, and we all had our start going from Hubie Brown to Bob Knight to Dick Vitale and Chuck Daley. All of them. John was a young counsellor at the time who worked his way up the ladder, as we all did.

Q. Rick, all your players kind of echoed the same thing that you have to avoid another one of those slow starts. What do you think is happening early and how important is tomorrow going to be in those first five minutes?

RICK PITINO: Well, I think they had the jitters a little bit, but I think that's normal in the NCAA Tournament. It's not a real big deal because we were up at halftime.

Q. (Inaudible).

RICK PITINO: I hope we don't.

Q. With the injuries and lack of bodies that Arkansas has had down this stretch, do you think your defense and physicality could give them an issue in this one?

RICK PITINO: We don't have Brady Dunlap, we don't have Jaiden Glover. We have three starters out for the season, three players out for the season. So we're pretty banged up as well, but they're playing great basketball out of the last seven games right now and they played a great game last night. Great game. A lot of different areas.

Q. Coach, Jonas Adoo told us how you recruited him out of high school. How critical has he been to Arkansas' success down the stretch?

RICK PITINO: He's a terrific talent. We liked him a lot certainly, but D.J. Wagner is playing great basketball right now. Davis is terrific, Knox is terrific. Brazile is playing great, Billy Richmond is terrific. They have a great lineup. Their size is what's imposing. Their size, they can step out and do so many things. They're quite impressive, but the SEC has always been, every conference has an identity, and the SEC going back to Shaq days, it's always been tremendous athleticism, tremendous length. Speed. It's always been the MO for that conference.

Q. You kind of mentioned going back in that conference. I know Arkansas fans are very familiar with you, some good memories, some bad. First for you, what do you think about when you think about the Arkansas Razorbacks?

RICK PITINO: Well, Nolan Richardson, we had some great games. Great rivalries. They were terrific. It was exciting to see that style of basketball when the two of us got together. It was great. Certainly I think they're coming back now with outstanding players and injuries are part of the game. They got through it, made the tournament, and now they just beat Kansas.

Q. One of only six active coaches to win a National Championship. You're going up against a guy tomorrow night also in that group. Coach K, Roy Williams, Jay Wright. They're no longer coaching. What still drives you today?

RICK PITINO: I don't know. I just have a lot of fun coaching, mentoring young people. I think it keeps you young being around young people. There's a lot of laughter to it. There's a lot of hard work to it, but it keeps you young. I think if I head to Miami this year and mingle with a lot of old people, I'll feel old. So I think I'll try to stay young a little bit.

Q. Rick --

RICK PITINO: You're not going to ask me any psychological questions, are you?

Q. Rick, I don't think you'd like my rates (Laughter).

RICK PITINO: My expression, very happy, Roger.

Q. You are, was that that Prozac?

RICK PITINO: I took a whole barrel full.

Q. Reading up about John's career, you endorsed the University of Massachusetts hiring him. What did you

see in young John Calipari that you felt like my alma mater should hire this guy?

RICK PITINO: First of all, I didn't like what was being said about him back then because some people were pushing other coaches and UMass was in dire straits. They couldn't come up with the money to pay the coach. They had no budget, nothing. They really fell on hard times. I thought John was the one guy that could resurrect the program. Now, I will say this: I didn't think he could get it to be number one in the country because I know where they came from. It was a remarkable thing. I have always said there's three programs I always remember that just went from nothing to the top and that was Tark in Vegas, Jim Calhoun at Connecticut and John at UMass. You look at UConn today and say, of course, but back then, it wasn't that way. They all got to be number one in the country.

Q. If I could follow up, you said you didn't like the things that were being said about John.

RICK PITINO: No, not so much about him personally -- what happens is coaches endorse their other people and I think he was the assistant coach of Pitt at the time. And so everybody is trying to promote their guy and I felt that he was head and shoulders above everybody else to turn that program around.

Q. Rick, what is it about the fabric of the club that you are coaching right now that you're trying to take to a National Championship that you admire the most, that you like the most? What are the elements of this team that you admire and like and are proud to take on this journey?

RICK PITINO: I guess I'm a little excited, surprised at the season. You never know what it's going to be like going into it because these are uncharted waters. Like, next year's team going into it, we'll probably have more players back this year than we've had in the prior two years, but I didn't know what to expect with this basketball team going into it. I was really excited about last year's team at the end of the year and then suddenly we just kept winning, getting better, fighting, fighting. We had a lot of close games in this building. We won at the buzzer with no time left on the clock. It's just been a great run. We have had a lot of excitement.

The best part about it is you see the players, because it was a prophetic moment for me when I told them about the story about the young waiter who was trying to get on Broadway and I kept telling him, to get on Broadway you have to win. Once you get on Broadway, everybody's going to know your name, and suddenly -- at that point, nobody really knew who RJ was or who Zuby was, and at

the end of the season, they win the conference and Zubly is First Team, RJ is the MVP of the league, Zubly is the Most Improved Player. And now, everybody knows who they are because they're winning, and they're on Broadway right now which is a great feat by them.

Q. Because of all that shared history between you and John, he spent so much of his career being compared to you, I wonder how much or how do you think you two are very similar and how do you think, if at all, you two are different?

RICK PITINO: You know, I certainly have great respect for him, but we're not really close. Everybody tried to talk that way. It was just a Kentucky-Louisville and Louisville-Memphis thing. We don't know each other's wives or children. We're not really close friends. Like Bill and John have a very close relationship. Bill Self and John, I don't know a whole lot about him except he's a terrific basketball coach. At a very young age I knew him well when he was in Coraopolis playing in Moon Township. I have known him well back then, but I don't think we have been to dinner one time in our lifetime.

We're both Italian, we both love the game. I think that's where the similarities end.

Q. Do you remember where you met that waiter? When that was?

RICK PITINO: Well, you have to check the story because it was about a week before I told the story. It was right near my apartment in New York City at a French coffee place.

Q. Coach, apologies if you spoke to this earlier this season, but you talked about earlier back in the Massachusetts day when you didn't like how certain things they were saying about Cal --

RICK PITINO: No, no, they weren't saying anything negative. They were trying to push people with more experience.

Q. With the Kentucky thing this year and him going back into Rupp Arena, you have that perspective of being an opposing coach. I know you put out a video. What led you to do and what do you remember that being like for the first time?

RICK PITINO: It hurt. I realize why today, but it was tough to go in there and be booed by 24,000 people. I felt that it was the right timing for John to try something different, and certainly when you look back at what he did at the University of Kentucky, not only winning a championship

but assembling probably the greatest talent in the history of our game, even to the level of Coach Wooden. I just thought they should really appreciate that, and coming back and you just want people to feel good about what they accomplish and because I went through it -- the one thing you do when you get to be 72, you hate when people get fired. John wasn't fired but other people in the business right now, they're only coaching two years, they get fired and they don't... just thinking about Coach K or Jay Wright or some of the other coaches early on in their career that didn't go real well for them. In today's market, they probably would have been fired because everybody is in such a rush, and those guys are the two legendary names in our game. If you go back and look at their first few years, they probably wouldn't have survived today in this climate.

So it's different today, certainly. I don't know if it's better or worse, but I wish that young coaches would -- if you're going to hire young coaches --

I will never forget this story. It's an amazing story to me. Some of you will remember Lon Kruger and the meat hook, and the two great guards they had at Florida. And all of a sudden they were going to be decimated and go from the Final Four to having no players at all. Billy Donovan was at Marshall. He had two decent seasons at Marshall but he didn't go to the NCAA. I believe he went to the NIT the second year. Jeremy Foley was the athletic director's name, and he said he wanted to interview me. I said, Billy, you don't always have to listen to me. You're not working for me, but do not take that job. They are decimated. You will be fired. Just wait for a great job. You'll hit it big some day, kid. He said, I got you, Coach. I'm not going to take it then.

I got a call from Jeremy Foley and he said, why don't you think Billy Donovan should take the job? I said, Jeremy, your program is decimated. Everybody is leaving. You're going to be at the bottom of the SEC. He said, let me ask you a question. If I asked you this question that in three or four years, Billy Donovan would be one of the best college coaches in the game, what would you say? I said, undoubtedly, I'd believe it a hundred percent. He said, okay. So you think it's going to take at least two years before he could turn it around? I said, yes. So he said, well, how about I give him a six year contract instead of a four year contract? Will you call him up and tell him to take the job? And I said, yeah, I could. He said, I'll give him a six year contract.

So I called Billy the Kid up and I said, Billy the Kid, take the job. That guy is a good man. He'll stick by you. And the rest, obviously, was history. But he got a long time to prove himself, and today it doesn't happen that way.

If you're going to invest in a young coach like Billy Donovan or whoever, you have to give them time to build this thing. I don't know why I'm saying all that, by the way (Laughter).

Q. It's a good segue, Coach, because when a story like that happens, I know you're out to beat the opponent in front of you tomorrow. You know on this side that's the psychologist in company, not exactly what we do.

That being said, you and the program that are playing tomorrow agreed to do this Vice docuseries. If this wins an Emmy, do you get an extra cut here?

RICK PITINO: It's kind of funny the two programs with Vice are doing this. It's been a lot of fun for us. They're great to work with. It's been a lot of fun. It was supposed to run out and we have one more episode now because of the tournament, which is great. So the fact that we're meeting each other is interesting.

Q. You said that the journey of this season, you couldn't have even foreseen 31-4, and the 4 are by seven points. Has this been the most surprising season of your career?

RICK PITINO: Yes, only because I didn't know what to expect. Every year I have been coaching, I sort of have a feel for how good we're going to be and we didn't know about RJ's development coming off shin surgery. You didn't know, how would Zubly now do as a starter? What would Aaron be like from North Texas? Kadary coming from Seton Hall, you knew he was going to be good. Unless you win the National Championship, it's going to come to an end. So hopefully we can keep it going.

Q. Question, philosophical, not too deep but teaching toughness. Your calling card for this team is toughness. How do you do that?

RICK PITINO: You have to have tough practices. You teach toughness by never giving up in the game regardless of what the score is. Over the years we have had some amazing comebacks because of toughness, not giving in, to being down in games. That's why when we get down in games, we don't panic. We just realize we're going to come back because we're tough players. You can get beat by anyone, but we're very confident that we're going to fight to the end and we practice tough. We believe in being tough people. We recruit that way. Preach it.

Q. I want to go back to your comments on coaches being fired after two years. That just happened to Tobin Anderson at Iona. I was wondering if you have thoughts on that. Was it too early, potentially, in your

opinion?

RICK PITINO: Well, I don't know what goes into why they let people go, so I would be commenting the wrong way. I just believe that with all situations, if you're going to hire somebody, you got to give them time to develop with young coaches. Tobin's not a young coach. He's been a head coach before, so I can't tell you why he was fired. Don't know anything about it. Haven't followed it really. I just would like to see coaches get their full opportunity to develop the programs today it's not going to happen. What I want is irrelevant. It's just not going to happen in this climate professionally as well as college.

I just had -- one of my assistants was in the Final Four a year ago, and he just got fired. Kevin Keatts. He was in the Final Four. The kiss of death sometimes in the NBA is when you win Coach of the Year and a year later you get fired. I just don't like any coach to get fired unless he was an opportunity to prove himself. This is a very nervous day for me, not because of Arkansas but because my son is playing tonight. I'm a bundle of nerves right now because I will sit there with my grandchildren tonight and we'll watch the game and I know what he's in for because I know Marquette very well and I hope the Lobos are ready.

Q. You told a pretty good story about Billy Donovan. Funny enough, at lunch there was a Billy Donovan bobblehead I was eating next to. I thought researching St. John's seeing who your team is this week, there's an old video of you coaching Billy back at Providence that you probably have seen before and you recounted a story that you have had multiple years, decades of coaching experience. Do you allow yourself to go back and reminisce on some of the good times?

RICK PITINO: With Providence I do because every step along the way there's a job that you learn something from that sticks with you forever. With Providence, what I learned was I never stopped dreaming. If you would have seen the program at that time and the players at that time and then two years later they go to a Final Four, I could never stop dreaming. I could believe anything is possible after witnessing the transformation of not only the players, the program, but what they accomplished and Billy Donovan is the perfect example of seeing somebody transform into someone who is averaging four minutes a game to one of the best guards in the nation, going from an obscure name that nobody even knew about. I tried to promote him to Northeastern and Fairfield and coaches said we got much better at that level, we can't take him and he turned into Billy the Kid and carried us on his back to a Final Four with his teammates. I always learn something from each place and from Providence, I never stopped dreaming. I always believe that anything is possible

because of that Providence college basketball team. His jersey is hanging in the rafters, going in the hall of fame. So many -- I don't think I forget anything about Providence. My only regret is that I didn't have the ability to coach more than two years here.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. Good luck tomorrow. Appreciate it.

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