

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Creighton vs San Diego St.

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Dickies Arena

## Creighton Bluejays Greg McDermott

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Head Coach Greg McDermott with the Creighton Blue Jays joining us now.

And, again, we'll take questions in the room and follow that up with questions from ZOOM, if there are, in fact, any.

Coach, if you would like to begin with an opening statement.

GREG MCDERMOTT: Well, we're thrilled to be here. This probably wasn't in the cards in the middle of November or middle of December, maybe even in the middle of January. But this team has just continued to improve. They've continued to develop an unbelievable connection that I think is the -- the biggest reason that I'm sitting here today.

We've been through a lot of adversity over the course of the season. And it's brought this group closer together. And they've -- you know, they've figured out ways to win.

We had to kind of reinvent ourselves at the start of the season. We had to do it again when we lost Ryan Nembhard for the year. And this group continues to impress me with their attention to detail and the way that they play for each other. So we're excited to be here.

Obviously, we've got a heck of a challenge with San Diego State. There's a lot of really good defensive teams in the Big East that we face on a nightly basis. And they look like the West Coast version of those teams.

We're going to have our hands full, but we're certainly excited about the opportunity.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll start with questions here in the room.

Again on the left.

**Q. Mac, how do you help guys manage their emotions going into a stage like this?**

A. You know, it's an incredible stage. But so is semifinal night or final night at Madison Square Garden. So, you know, we just experienced that a week ago. And, you know, they handled it with flying colors.

So I don't -- I really haven't had to worry about it. You know, I think they're -- I think this is a grounded group. I think they understand who we are and what we have to do to be successful.

But, you know, I think what we went through, you know, last week and to play, you know, Providence on Friday night, which was essentially a road game for us at Madison Square Garden and win and then go to the wire in another road game against Philadelphia at Madison Square Garden and lose in the last couple of minutes, I think that prepared us for anything we're going to see this week.

THE MODERATOR: On the right.

**Q. Mac, in this day and age of transfers, I'm sure it's tough to, you know, find guys that fit the culture of your program to go along with the talent. How have guys like Hawk and AOC embodied the culture you guys have here at Creighton?**

GREG MCDERMOTT: Yeah. You know, we decided last spring with the new transfer rules, you either -- you know, to use an NBA term, you either build through the draft or build through foundation -- or through free agency.

And, you know, we chose, for the most part, to go through the draft. And we signed a five-person freshmen class. That was one of the best recruiting classes in our history. And, obviously, those guys that have played have certainly lived up to that billing.

But the addition of Alex last year, knowing that -- you know, the plan was he was going to sit out last year until they changed the rule. And we knew we were going to lose Mitch and DJ and Denzel. And we were going to need some experience to fill that void. That's why Alex is here.

And the experience that he was able to gain last year, even though it was 10, 12 minutes off the bench, really prepared him for the role that he needed to play this year.

But, you know, he had been someone in his career that had played a limited roll off the bench, was more of a spacer on offense. And then you got a guy like Keshon Feazell who was at Mississippi State, didn't play a significant role there, went to McNeese, didn't play a significant role there, and now he's back with us and playing a backup role to Ryan Kalkbrenner. And their perspective, because of the experiences they've had in their career, has been awesome for our young guys as they go through the peaks and valleys of trying to figure out how to be a successful college student-athlete.

And then you bring Ryan Hawkins into the picture who's had one of the more decorated careers at any level in college basketball. And him being able to share what worked for him at the Division II level and bring it to our program, bring the daily work ethic, the daily energy, the consistent leadership, those three have been remarkable. I couldn't have asked for better pieces of the puzzle than Alex and Keshon and Hawk.

Because they've all brought different things, they've all brought a different perspective from where they came from. And I think they are hugely responsible for the development of the young players in our program. Because they've been there to listen, they've been there to mentor, and it's the reason that you've seen RII and Trey and Arthur grow at such a rapid pace.

**Q. Kind of like Bradley who can and will pull up from anywhere on the court, what's the challenge of defending a guy like that.**

GREG MCDERMOTT: Yeah, it's hard. We see guys in our league that are running off screens and they're out in transition attacking. But Bradley is one of the better isolation players that we have faced this year.

He's got a -- you know, a lot of tricks in his bag, being able to shot fake and jab, and shot fake and job. You have to stay disciplined to try to make his shots as difficult as possible.

And also understand, he's going to make some difficult shots. He's a hard shot maker, and he's blessed with that ability. You know, we've just got to keep him off the free-throw line. You know, he shot a fair amount of free-throws. I think that's really important, find him in transition. But, you know, he's one of the better guards we have faced this year.

**Q. You guys were in the Sweet 16, you've won games in the tournament as a program four times since 2012. Is there, like, a key ingredient or something that you can pinpoint that gets you over the top as a program, not just getting to tournaments, or winning tournaments -- or tournament games?**

GREG MCDERMOTT: Well, it starts with good players. That helps. And, you know, it takes a little good fortune. Because the reality of it is -- as we sat there on Selection Sunday and we thought, you know, we're probably in that eight, nine seed, seven, eight, nine seed range and you looked at the possible opponents, it's like, well, they're good and they're good and they're good and they're good. Everybody's good. You have to have your A game.

And part of the reason I really like this team is I think this is the best defensive team we've had. And I think defense travels.

You know, last year's team we won a really close game against UC Santa Barbara in the first game. We made a couple of free-throws late in that game. And they missed a shot in the paint on the buzzer, and then that allowed us to get to the round of 32 and win that game against Ohio.

But, you know, our program has gotten better. We've invested in the program. The administration has been terrific of providing us the resources necessary to kind of -- you know, to get to a point where we can be successful is one thing. And then to maintain it, it takes a heck of a commitment, as well. And we've been fortunate that the University administration, the athletic administration and our community have bought into that and helped us stay relevant at a very good college basketball landscape.

**Q. And when you are winning games in the NCAA tournament, do you notice how that manifests itself in terms of maybe in the living room of recruits or how does the conversation change when you're winning games?**

A. You know, it certainly helps. You know, we're blessed to have incredible attendance of the top five of the country several years in a row now. So, you know, that's -- young people want to play in front of big crowds. And we're able to provide that on a yearly basis; so that's really helped us.

But there's no question success breeds success. And, you know, we've finished in the top four in the Big East, which is, I think, one of the best basketball leagues in the country now six years in a row.

So, you know, we've been able to stay relevant. And when you're relevant in a league like the Big East, you can walk



in any living room nationally and have an opportunity to recruit those young men.

THE MODERATOR: We'll go to a question on ZOOM from Matt Demoranus.

Matt, go ahead.

**Q. Mac, you know, you guys have talked a lot this year about process and patience and not getting caught up in the results. But by all accounts, the locker room, you know, after Villanova especially, was pretty emotional. It just doesn't seem like your guys are satisfied with just making the tournament. Do you get that same vibe?**

GREG MCDERMOTT: Yeah. And, you know, actually, Matt, I was -- I don't know if pleasantly surprised is the right way to say it. The emotion in that locker room after that loss to Villanova was incredible.

As a coach, I probably wasn't quite ready for what I encountered when I got in that locker room. And, you know, the guys had -- they were well aware that we had been in that championship game three times and weren't able to kick the door down.

So I think they really wanted it for our program and for our fans, you know, to be the first team to win a Big East tournament title.

So it was extremely emotional. And -- but as I've said many times this season, this group really cares. So in hindsight, I should not have been surprised by what I saw. Because I really experienced it all season long. You see it when Art got hurt, you saw it when Kalkbrenner got hurt at UConn, when RII went down. The genuine concern and care for their teammates, like, this group is pretty special in that regard.

So I'm really confident that they're not just satisfied to be here. I want them to enjoy the experience, I want them to look around, I want them to smell the roses. Because, you know, there's 250, 60-some teams across the country that would love to be here, and they're not here. And we're one of the fortunate ones.

So you have to enjoy the experience, and it's my job as the coach to make sure they do that. But they're not satisfied just to be here and play this game Thursday. We're here to try to advance.

THE MODERATOR: Back-left.

**Q. Two things: Are these two programs kind of**

**similar in the sense that -- I mean, you guys, obviously started in a major conference and have sustained success for a long time and kind of win with culture as much as anything else?**

A. You know, we're similar. And the sense is -- their coach has been there 16 years and I'm on 12. So we've had two coaches in 28 years. And I don't know how long Fitch was there before Dutch took over, but there hasn't been a lot of changes. And I think when that's the case, you have an opportunity to sustain success.

But, you know, I've known Coach Fisher and been on trips with him and Angie and tried to teach him to play poker in the back room somewhere on these strips; so I've known him a long time.

And as a result, I've gotten to know Dutch. And they just do a terrific job with their program. And you know what you're going to get, you know it's going to be very disciplined, hard-nosed, playing basketball the right way. And we'd like to think that we're that type of program as well.

**Q. And you mentioned something earlier about building through the draft and through freshmen. And Dutch talks about that a lot, that it's tough to maintain culture with a bunch of transfers who aren't familiar with it. Maybe could you elaborate a little bit on what you mean and what you think about that?**

GREG MCDERMOTT: Yeah. I think you have to bring in the right transfers. And, you know, generally speaking, transfers are usually looking for something that they don't have when they're moving to the next spot; so they have some high expectations. So you've really got to kind of dig deep and find out what's at their core and how important is winning versus team success.

And we've been fortunate with this group, with Alex O'Connell and Keshon Feazell and Ryan Hawkins that they're about all the right things. And not only have we been able to maintain the culture that we've had, I think they've helped us build our culture, you know, because of the examples they've set for all the young people in the program. And we have a bunch of them.

So you have to take the right people. And we've been lucky that we've been able to do that. And I think San Diego State certainly falls into that same category.

THE MODERATOR: Back right.

**Q. Coach, when in the season did you realize that this team is special and that you guys could go on a run?**

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

GREG MCDERMOTT: I would probably say that the game at UConn. We came off a really difficult loss at home to Xavier. We were up 17 at halftime, got outscored something -- 32 to 2 or some crazy run to start the second half. That's a tough one to bounce back from, when you have your building so energized and you totally take the air out of the building because of your performance.

And then you go into a place where, you know, we're the only team that beat UConn at UConn with Cazenovia this year with their full lineup. And we did it without Kalkbrenner the last 15 minutes.

So when that happened and I saw the team kind of galvanized right in front of my eyes, that second half, that last 15 minutes, and rather than using it as an excuse, they took it as an opportunity. And we had some -- we had a lineup out there that hadn't really played together and found a way to win a gutsy, grind it out game against a really good UConn team. And I think from that point forward, that told me what we were capable of. And that was our job as a coaching staff to try to keep them healthy and keep them fresh.

Because as we lost, guys, certainly your bench becomes really thin. And way Jeremy Anderson, our strength coach, and Ben McNair, our trainer, have communicated with me on managing practice time to get us to the finish line is a big reason that we're here.

THE MODERATOR: One more on the left.

**Q. These low-scoring, slow-paced, a game like Villanova brought fights, wrestling match you called it in Omaha. What does it take to win those games?**

GREG MCDERMOTT: Well, first of all, you better match their intensity and discipline defensively. Because you -- it's going to be hard to find an open shot. And if that's the case, you better make sure it's hard to find an open shot on the other end, as well. And you really have to do your best to try to avoid in a game that's probably going to be low scoring.

You can't have a 12 to 2 run against you. You know, that can be very difficult to come back from. So, you know, we have to keep pace. And, you know, we play at a little faster tempo than they do. We'd like to try and impose that will on them a little bit. You know, with the longer TV time-outs, we should have enough in our tank to do that.

But, you know, it's going to be a physical game. And some people, it might not be pleasing to the eye. To me, it's beautiful. Because it's two teams that really understand

who they are defensively. And I think both teams do a pretty good job of trying to take away what the other team wants to do.

So who's going to be able to get to that second and third option and be successful with that I think is probably in the long run going to determine who wins the game.

THE MODERATOR: We can do one more.

**Q. Mac, given the challenges you face with this team this year, having such a younger dealing with these injuries and the way you talk about them, has this been one of your more enjoyable seasons as a coach?**

GREG MCDERMOTT: No question. And I think you hear Coach speak about this is the best and this was the best and this is my most fun. But this is a first time in my career I've been really part of a team that had O'Connell and Feazell and Hawkins who are 23/24 years old, and then you have 18 and 19 years old. And you don't have really have much in between. And just to watch the dynamic and develop in terms of their relationships has been so much fun to sit back and watch.

And, you know, you've got to mentor and you've got to stick your nose in there and make sure they're thinking about the right things. But this time has been so responsive to my coaching staff. They've been responsive to each other. And, you know, as the season has gone on, as you listen to -- as you listen to the questions that the freshmen are asking now compared to November and December, you can see how much more they understand what we're trying to do and how we're trying to do it. And that's been awesome to see from a coaching perspective.

So this has been a very, very rewarding season. Because a lot of times, when you have as much adversity as we've had, Shereef and RII, and those were our two-point guards to start the year, and we don't have either of them right now. When teams are able to overcome that and not stay where they were, but to improve, from a coaching perspective, it doesn't get any better. It probably signifies that you -- our staff is doing something right.

And the way they're going about it, they've learned, they've listened. You talk about adversity and how to bounce back from it. But when it happens, can you really do it? And to see it happen in front of your eyes and watch them respond from it, it's been really incredible and an awful lot of fun. So that's why I hope we can extend this season. I'm not quite ready to be done with this group yet.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you very much.



GREG MCDERMOTT: Thank you.