

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Liberty vs Oregon

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Seattle, Washington, USA

Climate Pledge Arena

Liberty Flames

Ritchie McKay

Media Conference



here in Seattle given your roots here, and also given the Celtics' sale earlier today there's now talk about the NBA expansion kind of potentially coming back up here also?

RITCHIE McKAY: Yeah, thanks for the question. Obviously I played and attended Seattle Pacific, played and attended Pacific university and I loved my experience here. I had a great coach, Claude Terry and my senior year I was an intern for the Sonics, so '86, '87. So literally I went to every Sonics game where we didn't have a game and that was awesome. So the Sonics are still my team and hoping that they come back.

But, yeah, it's been neat. My wife is from here. I still have family here. We actual played Seattle U earlier in the year. This is our second time in four, five months being back in the Northwest and obviously I love it. I've been to Ivar's, been to the Met Grill and got a few other places I hope to hit.

Q. Having now four, five days to watch Oregon on film what makes Nate Bittle so challenging to stop offensively and then defensively what does he do so well?

RITCHIE McKAY: Yeah, great comment because he's way underrated and undervalued defensively. He has terrific anticipation. Like I think his basketball IQ is at a really high level. That's part of the reason why he's a tough equation to solve.

Obviously he can pick and pop, so he can space and is pretty adept from behind the arc. He's also a good and willing passer. Then if he gets you one-on-one in the block, he's got a variety of moves that you got to make a choice, do you want to double him or do you want to play straight up one-on-one?

So when you have that kind of hub in your offense, you're always difficult to guard and same thing at the defensive end. He's a fabulous rim protector and when he's in drop coverage he makes really good decisions. He's complete.

Q. When you're preparing for an NCAA tournament game, don't know your opponent until a few days before, not a familiar conference opponent, how does

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll start with an opening statement and then go to questions.

RITCHIE McKAY: This is awesome. Look at the "March Madness" thing behind me. I mean, it's one of the reasons that we do about it or we do it and we dream about it, having a chance to play in the NCAA Tournament is such a privilege. I know I speak for our guys that we're really honored to be here.

A lot of excitement, of course, on Selection Sunday, and then it's all good up until you see your opponent and then it's like, oh, man. So we're looking forward to an opportunity though and we'll see how it goes.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. What made you go "oh, man," was it the Oregon ranking, was it your history against them, was it their length and Quad 1 nature, what about it was the "oh, man"?

RITCHIE McKAY: Yeah, all of the above. And a Dana Altman-coached team. I've been familiar with Coach Altman since his early days at Creighton and they're always really hard to prepare for, they run a ton of offense, changing defenses. They have hit a stretch I think they have won eight out of nine and been playing really well.

But it's the NCAA Tournament and you're going to play someone really difficult. I just think for our group they will come into the game with an expectation to just compete and give our very best. I don't think they will be afraid, because they appropriate the game accordingly and usually that's with a great sense of gratitude that we get to play a quality opponent, especially on this stage.

Q. How special is it for you specifically to be back up



that preparation look different?

RITCHIE McKAY: Yeah, so we won the conference championship in Huntsville on late Saturday night, then obviously found out who we were going to play Sunday. Just with the rhythm of our guys' schedule, there wasn't a whole lot we could do on Monday. So we really just had a couple of days' prep.

But our guys have done a pretty good job of staying in our own lane. We are who we are and we will run our own race. We have a ton of respect for Oregon, and that preparation is, it's been put into play, but we're more focused on us. Like I think just continuing to pursue the best version of ourselves is, that's what we're trying to do.

Q. Getting back to your roots, obviously one of your former teams is here as well in Colorado State, is that unique to kind of have that, to share this experience with a program you're familiar with and to see where they have come since you left there?

RITCHIE McKAY: Yeah, Niko's done an awesome job. He's got the Rams playing at a really high level. Great dude. We loved our time in Fort Collins and, yeah, I'll be interested and watching how they fare because I think he's got a terrific team. We'll have to watch it on TV because of our own prep, but excited for him and the Rams and hope they're able to keep him, because I think he's a terrific coach.

Q. How did you end up at SPU?

RITCHIE McKAY: (Laughing). Yeah, I actually called them and told 'em that I was available and they didn't seem to respond too quickly. But I went on a visit and fell in love with it, Coach Terry, again, he had played at Stanford, played for the Denver Nuggets in the ABA and then the NBA, and I hit it off with him right away. Rommie Lewis was the assistant coach and there was no place, other place I wanted to go after coming to Seattle. It was in the spring and the weather was great. It was about 68 degrees and had some sun breaks and I thought, man, this place -- and I had prepped a junior college in Mesa, Arizona and it was about 102 when I left and 68 when I got here, a fairly easy decision.

Yeah, I kind of wanted to go to a faith-based school and then Coach provided an opportunity for me.

Q. You guys have been an underdog before this season, what is it about your team that makes it so special and why do they have a belief that they can take down an opponent like Oregon?

RITCHIE McKAY: We've been fortunate enough to play and have a little bit of success against some high majors over the years. So I just don't think our guys worry about what the conference affiliation is or maybe the renown of the different program. We really do have a room that is connected.

We just subscribe to the belief that teamwork remains ultimate competitive advantage, so we try to implement that on and off the floor and I think because of that our guys see ourselves as one and when you play against us you usually have to beat our whole team it's not just a bunch of one-on-one.

Q. A lot of discussions about your guards, but could you maybe speak to the importance of Zach and his fingerprints all over your offense and defense?

RITCHIE McKAY: Yeah, you must have watched us because not everyone knows Zach Cleveland, he gets a little bit undervalued because his scoring average isn't this or that. Like only made third team in our own, and don't get me wrong, our conference is good, has some terrific individual players, but Zach Cleveland is, if he was a baseball player he would be described as a five-tool player.

The thing that I love the most about him like he runs offense and he'll make it up as we go. It makes us a little difficult to scout because he'll find or see a coverage that the defense is playing and he'll say, hey, let's do this. It's amazing how he does it, but his mom was a terrific player and she took Zach to the gym from a really early age and I'm really grateful for Marla (laughing). Because we're the benefactor of it. He's a special player, a special dude.

Q. You speak a lot about this team playing for a bigger purpose the mission of this university, training champions for Christ, what kind of opportunity is it to be on this platform of March Madness to be able to spread that message and the message?

RITCHIE McKAY: Yeah, I mean, again, it's why a lot of us have chose Liberty and have stayed at Liberty. We get a chance to work on a campus that's absolutely fabulous. There's a genuine pursuit of excellence that permeates in and through every different aspect of our campus. We have phenomenal leadership, really feel blessed and honored to be a part of it, like a part of something bigger than myself.

And don't get me wrong, we're not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, we're not better than other places. We just have a uniqueness about us that I think is grand and the pursuit that our guys have in trying to be witnesses for the kingdom, I absolutely love it. Their authenticity I think

is really, really infectious.

So I hope people get a chance to experience them and who they are as people, not just as players.

Q. Can you expand on your three-point shooting philosophy as an approach and how that gets either has to adapt or morph or not, to an opponent that just has greater size than those who you faced during the season?

RITCHIE McKAY: Yeah, really fair question. We get kind of labeled as a three-point shooting team and I get the numbers, but it's not like that's the only thing we're pursuing. I think, yes, we try and recruit and develop guys that can, that have a shooting pro prowess behind the arc because I think it makes you hard to guard. I think it actually gives you a little bit of wiggle room in terms of how tall a guy is. Like I'm not sure there's a big difference between 5'10" and a six foot or 6'1" guard.

So look, I believe like as a basketball player you want to play in freedom. We don't judge the quality of a shot based on whether or not it goes in. We base it on, do you have room and rhythm and is that the best shot that we have on the given instance? So we try and empower our guys to be aggressive from behind the arc.

Q. If I could jog your memory a bit in our pursuit through the record books we believe your record against Oregon previously was 1-5 and that one came in '97 which is only the second year of Portland State, early game in the season, week of Thanksgiving. I'm hoping to jog your memory if anything stands out from that game of nearly 30 years ago?

RITCHIE McKAY: Ouch, nearly 30 years ago, you just dated me. Yeah, 1-5, it hurts. Especially when we were at Oregon State, because you know how big the civil war is. But, yeah Derek Nesland had a very good game that game, we were fortunate that night. 30 years ago was a long time ago, I hope I'm a better version of me from way back then, but always a privilege to compete against a quality opponent and obviously we know the Ducks are that.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports