

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Colorado State vs Maryland

Saturday, March 22, 2025

Seattle, Washington, USA

Climate Pledge Arena

Maryland Terrapins

Ken Willard

DeShawn Harris-Smith

Jordan Geronimo

Media Conference



DeSHAWN HARRIS-SMITH: Just that they love to share the ball. Everybody on their team is talented. Everybody gets everybody involved. They can run their offense through a lot of guys on their starting five. So, we've got to come out and be ready to guard. Just like any game, come out, bring the right intensity, be locked in, be positive with each other.

JORDAN GERONIMO: Yeah, they're a good team that shares the ball really well. They also shoot the ball really well. We just have to defend the three and continue to be physical and being the dominant team that we are.

Q. For both of you, what kind of pride to you take as reserves coming off the bench and bringing that energy and spelling the starters so we can get some rest?

DeSHAWN HARRIS-SMITH: Yeah, I feel like everybody that comes off the bench knows that's kind of our job, to go out there and score and do the little things that it takes to win. Obviously, we've got a talented starting five that can put the ball in the basket. Our job is definitely to come in there, grab rebounds, play defense, stuff like that.

JORDAN GERONIMO: Yeah, we have players coming off the bench who knows their role on the team, and like DeShawn said, we all know what it takes to win these games, all the little stuff, whether it's rebounding and bringing the energy like most players off the bench do. We all try to do it together and contribute for a W.

Q. Jordan, you obviously played with DeShawn last year. How have you seen the transition from starting to coming off the bench?

JORDAN GERONIMO: He's handled it really well. He's really mature about it. He brings the same energy every day in practice and for the games, and he's always the guy on the bench first to be cheering, standing up. So the energy, it's always consistent with him, so that's great.

Q. For either of you guys, what's the scouting report on Colorado State? What have the coaches been stressing in film? Anything you're looking at in particular?

Q. How would you describe Derik's game and how it's evolved this season, and what's it like playing alongside him?

DeSHAWN HARRIS-SMITH: I feel like everybody calls him baby Jokic because he definitely plays low post, gets everybody involved. He's my roommate, he's probably my closest friend on the team, so I love playing with him, being part of his journey, stuff like that. He's just a joy to be around, always got jokes to tell, everybody making everybody smile. Real nice kid to be around.

JORDAN GERONIMO: Yeah, Derik is a great basketball player, as you guys already know. He plays at his own pace, and I've played with a lot of talent in my time in college, and Derik is a special one.

But he's always laughing, great attitude. He's a good person to be around, and I'm also glad to be part of his journey and see where he gets to go afterwards.

Q. DeShawn, do you know why Derik and Ja'Kobi pull up their shirts when you score baskets?

DeSHAWN HARRIS-SMITH: No. I think it's some inside joke they've got going on they haven't shared with the team.

Q. They don't tell you?

DeSHAWN HARRIS-SMITH: No. That's between them two. I don't know what joke they got going on.

Q. For both of you, you guys probably heard Kevin



make his comments the day before the game. Is there a part of you that at the time was I don't know if Coach wants to make that stand, or did you appreciate that you sort of took that stand for you guys?

DeSHAWN HARRIS-SMITH: I feel like everybody wants their coach to just be honest and blunt with him, and I feel like Coach Willard is a same guy y'all see when he gets up here. That's the same way he is with us. I really respect his transparency and just him always being honest, and I feel like it was good that he voiced his opinion because I feel like everybody wanted to hear. I know the media wanted to hear, so he just gave y'all his response.

Q. Jordan, you guys were talking about what you've seen from Colorado State on film. Them being a 12 seed and the run they've been on, you probably don't need any extra motivation at this time of year, but have the coaches stressed that this isn't your typical 12 seed and they've been one of the top teams in the country the last month or so?

JORDAN GERONIMO: Yeah, I believe whether they're a 12 seed, 14 seed or whatever, it's March, it's win or go home. Other coaches stress that we can't take anybody lightly, no matter what seed they are or what their name is. We're all going in with the mindset of playing hard and winning because it's survive and advance at this point.

Q. You mentioned DeShawn's leadership last night. How has that shown through in his transition from becoming starter to guy on the bench, because it seems like you have to be even more selfless in that role?

KEVIN WILLARD: Yeah, I think, obviously, going from a guy that was starting, playing a lot of minutes even as a freshman to his role this year, sometimes kids need that a little bit. I think he's really -- he's continued to work hard. He's continued to have a great attitude in practice.

But I think -- I actually think him sitting on the bench and seeing the game and seeing the guys has actually helped him dramatically. He's one of the smartest basketball players -- I've always said he's probably a little bit too smart because he thinks a lot, but I think sitting on the bench and seeing what's going on has helped him evolve as a player and as a person.

Q. As far as being healthier, Jordan and DeShawn, what do you expect from the bench now that you have all the guys that can be part of the rotation?

KEVIN WILLARD: Yeah, those guys have been critical for us all year, if you think about just the energy they bring, the

defense -- Jordan with his defense, Tafara with his length, Jay has an unbelievable ability to get his hands on the ball. Just for them to continue to come in and change the game from a defensive standpoint, that's really been critical for us.

Q. Taking a step back on Derik's journey here, he was a guy, if I'm correct, you started recruiting on day one of taking this job. How much were you thinking while you were recruiting him that -- what were the stakes for you and how you viewed the need to get him to Maryland, and has it played out beyond what you might have even expected?

KEVIN WILLARD: Yeah, I mean, I've talked about this a lot. He was so highly touted and being on that team with Cooper and Liam and the young man at Georgia -- I forget his name, I apologize, it was really important because he was from Baltimore, and he was the next big thing from Baltimore. We really wanted to keep him in state and not make a recruiting splash but just make a statement about keeping kids home.

I thought we had done a good job in the first class of doing that.

Then people talked about having the pressure of having the McDonald's All American and having a kid that was the MVP. We just looked at it as a great opportunity to have a great young man and a phenomenal player.

To his credit, he has worked really hard. We had a kid -- we had a recruit on a visit early on, in early November, maybe late October, and the kid was making fun of Derik, about he didn't play well in practice, and Derik is like, wait until you try to do this; this isn't easy. To Derik's credit, he struggled a little bit in practice early but stuck with it with a great attitude. He's got that infectious personality, was so positive, and he's just -- he's a top-5 draft pick. I think he's definitely exceeded my expectations.

Q. The balance on the core of your roster, I'm talking guys who have developed over a long period, transfers, obviously, and an elite freshman, is that a repeatable model, or are things just more fluid than that?

KEVIN WILLARD: No. I think that's -- we've talked a lot because right now it's the portal season, so we sit down every day for two hours and just see who's going in, what we're doing, and I'm already mapping out what I want to do next year with the guys on our roster.

The freshman model is difficult because if you're going to bring a freshman in and pay a freshman, because you

have to pay them, you'd better make sure what you're paying them is going to equal what they're giving you, because no one -- no CEO in their right mind would pay someone out of college a million dollars and not have -- for him not to have one sale, develop and work him, and then all of a sudden, he leaves and goes someplace else.

So the balance of the fact that you do have to -- we have a budget. We have a -- I know exactly how much money we have. I know how much money we can have.

The portal is easier to work with because it's a proven asset. You're taking someone else's salesman that has a history of sales. It might not be in your company, might not be in your business, but you can see what he has, so there's a history there.

With freshmen, there's very few freshmen that can come in and affect this game at a really, really high level like Derik did. I think if you look at this year, I think there was seven guys that are doing what Derik has done.

It's a balance. Can it be done? Yeah. I love Chris -- Chris is coming in as a freshman. He's going to play minutes. Actually, I love him, so that's the reason we're bringing him in. But you really have to balance the fact that you just can't pay someone that you're not going to play. You don't have unlimited funds. You don't have -- you're a GM, and GMs don't go out and pay someone a million dollars and they don't play. It just doesn't work that way.

I think the model is constantly evolving. When you get rid of the COVID year, the sixth-year kids, you add the fact that we go profit-sharing, and you're going to have so many more schools with money. It's gotten extremely complicated to putting your roster together. That was a long answer, sorry. I'm tired.

Q. To follow up on that, now with NIL, the portal, rev share, all that, you work 365 days a year. What is the appeal of continuing to coach in college as opposed to going to the NBA?

KEVIN WILLARD: That could be the best question I've ever been asked. I do think you'll see a lot of college guys go to the NBA. I don't know how -- the one thing, I spent four years in the NBA, and those guys, you have to earn their respect as a coach. The NBA is the elite of the elite, and if you look at the guys coaching in there, they're usually guys that started as either former players who have done it and know the game inside and out and see the game on a chess level, or it's guys that started as a video guy, did advance scouting, then was an assistant. And when you go become a head coach, the players have such respect for your journey that you took to become a head

coach.

I look at guys that have gone from college right to NBA, and it's really hard either to gain that respect on the NBA level.

The great thing about the NBA is you have a GM, you have a salary cap, you have long-term contracts, you have summers off, you stay at four seasons, you travel great, you eat great, you get to stay an extra night in New York.

So there's so many benefits to the NBA. It's the best of the best on everything. I lived there for four years. You land, there's a -- you don't worry about your bags, they just show up in your room, stuff like that. You're not out on the tarmac putting them in the back of the bus with the managers.

The appeal of college, for me at least, is that you still have a chance to really impact a young man's life. Like, you don't have that in the NBA. You're not impacting LeBron James.

But I got to impact Derik Queen this year. I got to impact all these kids' lives, whether they like it or not, through our discipline, through our work ethic, through everything we try to do as a program, we still impact young men's lives. So for me, that's still a huge part of what we do in college basketball.

Yes, there's money, yes, there's NIL, yes, we have no rules, yes, it's mayhem. But at the end of the day, when you run a really good program, and I think we run a really, really good program, you have a chance to impact young men's lives.

Q. Going back to the portal, it feels like a lot of teams have brought in as many new guys as you did, might have missed on a few just in terms of evaluations, what they expected a player to do and what they did. Whereas, it feels like everyone brought in, at least from outside expectations, really met those. Are there things you feel like you valued more or less last off season than other coaches that led to that success?

KEVIN WILLARD: No. I think I've talked about this. When I first got this job at Maryland, we were selling hats at tailgates and football games. That was NIL. Then from year one to year two, I was behind. The game just totally changed. It just went, poof. We lost Hakim Hart to Villanova, and when I found out what I was making, I was like, that's our total payroll. We have to get with it.

I knew we had Derik and Ju. I changed my mindset halfway through last year about how I want to play and how



I need to develop a roster. It's no longer bringing in four freshmen, developing those four freshmen, letting them become sophomores, bringing in four more freshmen, letting them develop. And next thing you know, I have conference player of the year, year after year, and we're building it that way.

I had to adapt so quickly, and then I think we did a good job. My staff and I did a great job of just saying, okay, how do we want to play? Who's out there? What type of attitude do we want -- there's so much that goes into it. So the portal -- you can still miss on the portal. I don't think we missed on the portal because we were really specific on what we wanted, and we got great kids. That was really the main thing is I wanted to be around a group of great kids, and these guys are a great group of young men.

Q. Obviously, you want to be here right now, but how much, if at all, of an impact does it make on the portal when you are still playing as it opens?

KEVIN WILLARD: Like I said, we had a two-hour meeting about it this morning. We spent last night on Colorado State and really kind of breaking them down. And this morning, we spent an hour and a half on Colorado State, and then we spent two hours on the portal and the roster.

Everybody has time. It's what you have to do. It's just part of the job now. I'd much rather be playing than being back home in College Park doing it, to be honest with you.

Q. In this era where a player like Julian Reese is more the exception rather than the norm in terms of staying at a school for four years, have you noticed, has it become more incumbent for head coaches to be in front of their program, kind of be the face of the program?

KEVIN WILLARD: You know what? I hope not. I think this game is still all about the kids and their opportunity. I know it doesn't seem that way.

I watched how excited Derik Queen was on Selection Sunday. I still think this sport eventually will figure out a way to make sure that these kids -- because this is their opportunity. I'm a head coach; this is their opportunity to make it. I go back; it shouldn't be about the coaches. It really shouldn't be. It should still be about these young men and developing these young men and giving these guys the best opportunity. They're 21 years old, I'm 49. My job is to make sure they can get to 49.

Q. Have you felt any obligation to be the face of this Maryland program?

KEVIN WILLARD: I don't think anybody wants this face anywhere. (Laughter).

If you go to the XFINITY Center, I'm not on one wall, and that is on purpose. No. No. No. I would much rather have Derik Queen smiling and Julian Reese smiling, and everyone getting to know them and everyone remembering them. My job is -- no, absolutely not.

Q. I wanted to ask you, you had kind of hinted about kind of diversifying styles of play, meeting your team where they are. When you started, say, at Iona as a head coach, was there a defined style of play you wanted to play, and now through all these experiences, do you feel like you can play any way?

KEVIN WILLARD: Yeah, I'll answer that two ways. Yeah, when I got the Iona job I had worked for Rick Pitino for 10 years, so I thought I was Rick Pitino. You go in there and I ran the same practices and ran the same plays. And when I got to Seton Hall, I still thought I was Rick Pitino until I walked into the first meeting and I saw Rick Pitino and Bob Huggins and Jim Cahill, and then I realized, unfortunately, I was Kevin Willard.

I will say this: The Big Ten has made me evolve as much as anything. I look at Matt Painter and what they did and the fact that the Big Ten I think is 9-0 now in this NCAA Tournament. The Big Ten has forced me to evolve as a coach. When you go up against different styles of different coaches, the level of players -- you look at the freshmen in this conference and how good they are top to bottom.

Yes, I've evolved as a coach dramatically in 19 years as a head coach, but the last three years in this conference I've had to change even more. To win 14 games in this league, we talk about it as a staff, like, that's crazy, and to do it in the venues that we have to go on the road with, with the players and coaches.

I've evolved as my hairline has evolved.

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