

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Oregon vs Arizona

Saturday, March 22, 2025

Seattle, Washington, USA

Climate Pledge Arena

Arizona Wildcats

Tommy Lloyd

Caleb Love

Anthony Dell'Orso

Tobe Awaka

Henri Veesaar

Media Conference



Q. Caleb, you obviously played against Oregon a few times last year. What stands out about your memories of playing against them, and what defines an Oregon team that you've played against in the past?

CALEB LOVE: They're well-coached, and we know they're a great team. They have a great history in that program. They want to play in a lot of ball screens and things like that.

I think they're well rounded with the guys that they have. They play their roles really well. Obviously, they've got Shelstad and Bittle as their go-to guys, but the other guys, they pitch in where they need to, and we've just got to be ready for every punch that they give us.

Q. Caleb, your career high is 36 points. Just having a game like you had last year, is there any pressure coming into the game this year to try to perform like you did last year?

CALEB LOVE: It was at Oregon, by the way. We lost in the Pac-12 tournament. So that's kind of what I remember most, us losing that game. But it's not if I can repeat the 36 points, it's not like that. I've got to do whatever the team needs for me to do to help the team win, and that's what I'm going to try to do. Most importantly, we have to play well as a group, and we've got to handle our ones individually, as far as guarding and executing the game plan as best we can.

Q. What do you feel like defined Oregon as a team during your time playing against them?

HENRI VEESAAR: I would say they're a great team. They rise up in big moments whenever they need a win. I think it's going to be a great team tomorrow. They're definitely going out to fight. In the Pac-12, we had a lot of battles with them. I think they're a little bit different team than we played the last two years, but they're going to definitely come out tomorrow.

Q. In an interview the other day, Tommy Lloyd called you his ride-or-die. Can you talk about your relationship with him and what he's meant to you?

CALEB LOVE: Yeah, he's meant a lot to me. He kind of gave me a second chance at this college thing, and he accepted me for who I was and didn't have any preconceived notions about me. Our relationship has grown over the past two years, and I respect him as a coach. I respect him as an individual. He cares about you, not just on the court, but off the court, and I appreciate him for sticking with me throughout the ups and downs. And like I said, our relationship has grown, and I'm just looking forward to continuing this thing.

Q. Your fan base typically travels pretty well. This is a pretty big, brand-new venue. Are you picking up that these people are cheering for you? What's the energy and the spirit you feel from the stands because there's a lot of people with Arizona gear on the streets?

TOBE AWAKA: Yeah, I think we, as a team and as a program, are really thankful for our Arizona fans. At McHale they give us such a great home-court advantage, and wherever we go across the country, they travel so well.

I think to all of us up here, it's no surprise that they're traveling up here, as well.

CALEB LOVE: We appreciate our fans coming out and traveling. They've been sticking with us throughout the whole year. Even when we had a tough stretch early on in the year, they kind of stayed with us. On the road, at home, it didn't matter; they showed up and showed out for us. When we got them on our back, it's a great feeling.



Q. Anthony, obviously, you got off to the slow start yesterday, had the back-to-back turnovers, but then hit the three to get on track. How big was that for you to find it, because we've seen in the past, sometimes when you've had slow starts, Tommy will take you out of the game and you won't get back in. But he went back to you, you had the and-1 to start the second half, and then it started to flow for you after that?

ANTHONY DELL'ORSO: Yeah, obviously, it's my first tournament, kind of get those nerves and butterflies out of the system at the start, you know, some things that I can clean up that are easily fixable. I haven't thought twice about it. Just doing what I do normally, knocking down open shots, playing the right role, whether that's shooting, passing, rebounding, all those sort of things. I think that's why Tommy trusts me to go back in, because it's not just scoring that I can bring.

Things happen in the game, and it is what it is, but you've got to bounce back from that. So I was just happy that we were able to bounce back in the second half and get that win.

Q. Caleb, what was working for you guys on that short role that allowed you to get so many players at the rim?

CALEB LOVE: Oh, yeah, they kind of put two on the ball on me on my ball screens, and you kind of just play 4 on 3 from there. We trust Tobe and Henri to make the right play every time. On that backside, you've just got to read the defense and make the right read. We trust in them to do that, and they were doing that play after play.

TOMMY LLOYD: Questions, please.

Q. This is a rematch of the old Pac-12 rivalry that was. What stands out to you about your history in the series and the three meetings last year where you certainly got the better of them during the regular season, and then they ended it in the conference tournament?

TOMMY LLOYD: I mean, first off, obviously we have a lot of respect for Oregon. We've battled with them the past three years, and I know those battles go way before me, as well. I know there's been a good run of Oregon and Arizona, heated battles in game.

It is a little weird playing them in the second round of the tournament because it's a team that you're used to being a conference rival, and usually you wouldn't see that until later in the NCAA Tournament.

For it to happen earlier, it's interesting, but it's a great thing. Anytime you're in the tournament and whoever you're playing the next game, you're excited. Obviously, it's a program and a coach I have a lot of respect for, and I'm sure both teams' staffs probably sat down and watched the film yesterday, and they're like, oh, yeah, that's right. I think there was probably a lot of those familiar things.

Both programs have a conviction in the way they play and a style of play that kind of suits themselves and their personnel. There's probably a lot of familiarity on both sides, but it's a new year.

A new year, a few new players sprinkled in here, some returning players that have gotten better on both sides. It obviously is going to be a challenging game Sunday evening.

Q. In a college era where four-year players are rare and a four-year player being at one school is even more rare, can you reflect on Nate Bittle's growth from when you first saw him as a freshman to where he is now?

TOMMY LLOYD: Yeah, obviously, I saw Nate when he was in high school. He was somebody that -- we knew how talented he was. Just at the time I was at Gonzaga, and we had a good inkling we were going to get another tall, skinny kid named Chet Holmgren. You couldn't take every tall, skinny kid. He visited us, but I think we and they knew that we were probably going another direction. And so, he was a great get for Oregon.

What they've done a great job of is it takes time. It takes time for guys like him to develop. Like a Chet Holmgren is an anomaly. Most tall, thin guys, it takes time. So just to see him develop over the course of a career is awesome for me because I appreciate what it takes to get better. I know how hard it is to get better. I know the patience it takes. I know the hard days. I know the things that go on behind the scenes with the uncertainties that you have to overcome, the reassurances you need from the coaching staff to hang with it.

To see him where he's at now, it's awesome, and obviously, it's an affirmation for me that that's still the right way to do it. I love developing players, and I always have. Hopefully, you're always going to have big guys developing in our program. We have one of them right now, Henri Veesaar, who's on a similar track. A very good player, and he's done a great job. Crazy respect for him for hanging with it and getting better, fighting through injuries, fighting through just physical things. When you're young, you're just not quite strong enough. So nothing but respect for Nate and what he's become as a player.

Q. Just having this one-day turnaround, you touched on it a little bit, but having a one-day turnaround and not having to completely familiarize yourself with the team and having that base knowledge, what is that like?

TOMMY LLOYD: Well, I mean, you might feel like you have -- there's a little more comfort as a coach as you start developing a scout, basically installing a game plan. But what matters is what the players can retain.

In a quick turnaround, you might have all these great ideas, but you also have to remember, last year we played them three times, and you kind of had a buildup over the court of the year. This year, you play them once. The third time or the second time, hey, this worked, that didn't work, you're able to make actual adjustments where the players understand. This one you're going in fresh.

You hope you hit it right, and you hope you make some of the right decisions.

These games come down to -- there's some scouting, there's some scheming, but it comes down to doing what you do well and finding a way to do it within those 40 minutes. I don't know if you can get too tricky this time of year on quick, short turnarounds.

Q. Coach, after a rocky start to begin the season, you really kicked it into gear. I think it was 12 wins, 13 wins in a row. Talk about the resilience of the team and how that prepared you guys for this time of year.

TOMMY LLOYD: Well, I think it's interesting. I think us and Oregon, probably both -- I don't know exactly what their schedule is. Barely can remember what ours was. But we're probably both on the tougher side. They won a few close games, we lost a few close games. But it's a long year, and I knew we had a good team. I knew we had to get better and there was a sense of urgency, but I knew we had a good team.

If you want your team to be steady and consistent, as a coach, you have to be steady and consistent. So we stayed the course. We didn't blow things up or panic, and we had some tough days, and we practiced hard, and we got better, and we acknowledged our deficiencies and tried to overcome them and figured out what our strengths were and tried to accentuate them. It's been an awesome journey. It's been an awesome journey for me as a coach.

You don't get into coaching, especially having done it as long as I have, and expect to win every game. Losing is part of the process. So how you handle that losing impacts

how your season is going to go, and then you get down to these tournaments, and obviously now your back is against the wall, as is your opponent's, because there is no more let's go back and review the film and make a few adjustments. You end up in these one-game scenarios, and that's what you build for, so we're excited for the opportunity tomorrow.

Q. From coaching against him a few times now and then watching him from afar when you were at GU, what defines Dana's teams and him as a coach as you've watched him over the years?

TOMMY LLOYD: Dana has a real ability to get his players to do what he wants them to do. It's that simple. Whether that's directing shots, going at matchups, he has a real certainty in the stuff that he runs because he's run it a long time. I think -- I'm not in his head, but I think he probably has a Rolodex of options he can go through. I want to get the ball to this guy against this matchup on this spot on the floor. I don't think he needs to look at a sheet of paper. I think he knows what he's going to do.

He has a real certainty in what he does. He's not afraid in these games to make adjustments, whether it's on the defensive end or whatever. So he has a great ability in games to give his team a chance to win. If something is not working, he changes, and I've always respected that about him.

Q. You know that Mark won his 16th, 17th, whatever it is, game. You are so locked in right now, but are you able to -- I don't know, send him a text? Are you paying attention at all to what they're doing?

TOMMY LLOYD: I mean, last night I couldn't wait to get out of here, go back to my room and just turn the TV on and I watched, obviously, the Oregon game live on TV and what other games are on. You're also a fan of the tournament. It's something that's been a driving force in your life for a lot of years.

I haven't talked to Fewy since the tournament started. I think maybe we talked the Sunday or Monday after the draw, and that's kind of the last time we talked. Listen, I'm 0-2 against Houston this year, so I'm probably the wrong guy to call. So I'm sure he had other people he could call.

Listen, I don't know their team as well as obviously they do. I mean, listen, I know how good Houston is, but I also know Gonzaga is not scared of that moment, so I am expecting -- what is it, 4:30, something like that? 5:40? So I'm locked in, right? Yeah, there's a chance it'll be on the TV in my room. There is that chance for sure.

Q. Have you figured out a sweet spot on how to balance your roster? I know some coaches don't want to have too many freshmen now. Would you ever have a monster freshman class? Have you kind of -- as things are so fluid, what's the ideal team you'd like to build year over year?

TOMMY LLOYD: Well, I think you have to have some adaptability when you're building a team. I think you have to be able to hedge your bet on certain things. Like, if you do have some young talented guys, are you balancing it with a few experienced guys? So for me, one of the things I've always thought about in recruiting is to be balanced. I've never wanted to rely too much on one specific area, whether that's international players. You guys probably think that's funny, but like for me, a great mix is being 50/50 international and American. So I'm comfortable with that. I know that's more than most people. So I like that.

I obviously love veteran players, and I love the development process with young guys. I even love the development process of young guys that I know aren't ready to play, and watching those guys develop for a year or two kind of from underneath because then, when they finally do rise up like a Henri Veesaar, they have corporate knowledge. They know how the business is run. I think that's really valuable.

To me, it's just having a feel for how that's going to be and just kind of using your gut instinct a little bit. Obviously, one of the things that -- me, and I don't know how it is for Dana, but you have to adjust to it, I think there is just a slight uptick in physicality and athleticism in the Big 12 and in the Big Ten. And if you can't go in and really hold your own in the paint and on the glass, it could be a long year. You could just get physically dominated, and the referees will just kind of shrug their shoulders and look at you and say, well, this is the Big 12.

I think you have to make sure that your teams are built for your conference a little bit.

I just think you factor all those things in. But to me, the sweet spot is in the adaptability and then the feel to make sure you've hedged your bet on a few things. Maybe you take a star freshman and you have a veteran, maybe, to back him up or to start for that kid to play behind, and as he grows over the course of the year, maybe the star freshman takes a bigger role and the backup takes a lesser role, but they support each other. That's kind of how I look at it.

Q. As you kind of alluded to there, both you guys and Oregon are talking about how much better prepared they are because of the conferences they were in this

year. But as a western guy, do you feel like this has had any effect on the culture of West Coast basketball, if there is such a thing?

TOMMY LLOYD: Listen, obviously, I think that with these conferences just spanning, basically, the country, I think us on the west are going to have to fight hard for our place at the table and for our identity because we don't have a league that's basically committed to a region of the country.

To me, yeah, we're going to have to fight. We're going to have to fight. We're going to have to scratch. We're going to have to claw and let people know we're here. How do you do that? You win, and you're successful, and you're competitive, and you play a national schedule. Those are the things that we're going to do to continue to let people know that Arizona basketball is here for it. We're here for it. Just because we're the furthest west team in the conference or one of them in our conference that goes all the way to Orlando and Morgantown and Cincinnati, we're okay out here. We're here for it, and we're going to fight for our place at the table.

Q. Earlier in the season at Senior Day, you told us a story about Grant Weitman and his decision to come back. You said he likes basketball, but he loves Arizona basketball. What does it mean to get him into the game last night and for him to hit a three in the tournament?

TOMMY LLOYD: It's awesome. Grant has done an incredible job for our career. The Weitman family has an incredible legacy in connection with Arizona basketball. Grant's grandfather, Paul Weitman, was Lute Olson's best friend, and traveled with the team and was around them all the time. So his dad, Niele and his uncle, Craig, grew up in Tucson with Arizona basketball fans and now their kids are doing the same thing.

You know, just to have a kid tell you -- because Grant is a really good player. We thought we'd got him an opportunity to go play at NAU because my son Liam was just leaving. There was an opportunity. They needed someone like Grant, and Grant could kind of go there and kind of play the role that Liam played for them. And it was his fifth year and I was like, man, you're a good player. Like, maybe you should reward yourself and go play, get real minutes because it's probably not going to happen here.

He went up there, visited, did the deal, they talked about going, they wanted him, and he came back to my office and he said -- his exact quote was, "I love basketball, but I love Arizona basketball more. So I want to stay one more year and give this a go and see what we can do with this

team".

When you have kids like that on your roster, that care factor, it means a lot. And I know, I made no bones about it, I inherited a special legacy that goes and will go way beyond me. And so, my job right now is just to kind of wrap my arms around it and make sure that those that love it understand that it means that much to me, as well, and the program is in good hands, and we're going to do everything we can to honor those that come before us and make it a better place for those that come next.

Q. 10 years ago today you were here, I was here. You guys beat Iowa to move on to the Sweet 16 with the Zags. This building is in the same ol' place, a lot has happened to you. That was a home game, by the way. There was a huge amount of fans here from Gonzaga. Do you feel at home outside of this place? This has been remodeled, it's different, the energy in this building is different.

TOMMY LLOYD: Arizona basketball fans travel, and I'm sure there are going to be a lot of Oregon fans there, but there might be some fans that wear purple and gold that might decide to root for Arizona tomorrow. I'm just guessing. And obviously, I have a history in the state, as well, and I'm sure there was a lot of Gonzaga fans that bought tickets here early in the season that were hoping the Zags would be close to home.

So I think it's going to be a great environment for both ways, but I do feel at home in the northwest. I do feel at home in Seattle. I grew up here. I spent most of my adult life and my childhood in the northwest. But I was a kid from Kelso. We were kind of looked over. Kelso kids, you're from a mill town, your dad is a carpenter, your uncles and aunts are loggers. That's the way I grew up.

I don't know if we felt accepted in Seattle. That you move to Spokane. Well, got a little chip on your shoulder because you're the outsider. You're the country bumpkin.

Seattle, I love coming here, but I've always -- I loved competing here and I loved competing against Washington because we always had a little bit of a chip on our shoulder going into those moments.

I love the northwest, but I'm telling you, I found a home in Tucson. It's a great fit for me. It's a great town. It's got a lot -- just a little better weather than Spokane, but it's definitely got like a Spokane vibe where it feels more like a big town than a city. I found a great spot, and I'm thankful for that.

Q. Going back to the history of this series and talking

about the West Coast aspect of things, you scheduled UCLA. Have you and Dana talked about scheduling something in the non-conference maintaining the rivalry, main continuing some West Coast identity to the two programs?

TOMMY LLOYD: Yeah, right when the thing happened we might have had an initial conversation, but the UCLA-Arizona thing is easy. It's something that -- especially with Arizona State being in our conference. I mean, UCLA was such a rival down there for so many years, that it was an easy home-and-home to jump on right away, and it made a lot of sense.

Then I think Dana and I and all the other coaches that are involved in this conference probably took a step back and are trying to figure out what is the proper way to schedule with regards to your new conference because you don't want to over schedule, you don't want to under schedule. I'm sure those conversations will spark back up.

Q. The second part is the conversation nationally about expanding this event to 76 and the what the trickle down, what those seed lines will be. As two teams in the power six in college basketball who throttled lower conference teams, many of whom did not get anything beyond the automatic qualifier, your thoughts on what the ratio should be or what the number should be for AQs --

TOMMY LLOYD: I'm going to leave that to a lot smarter people than me.

I'll just say this: I was surprised yesterday with maybe how both our game and their game ended because I felt like the last couple years that these early-round games continue to get tougher and tougher because of these play-in games. These teams, these four teams playing in the play-in games basically now have opened up room for four more teams from major conferences or bigger conferences to get in. So I just feel like these games -- there's been a little bit of a trickle-down. Those teams would have traditionally been your four 16s. So I just think it has gotten harder. I think yesterday was maybe a little bit of an anomaly because I've played in a lot of those games over the years, 1-16, 2-15, 3-14, and they can be tough. I don't know, we'll figure out -- I'm definitely not going to get baited into the question saying, yeah, those are easy games, because I played in one two years ago against this team that's orange and black from the Ivy League, and it didn't end very good.

You're never going to bait me into that, into saying that we should have more major conference teams, because those teams from the mid-major conferences are very good.



Akron had a great year. So did Liberty. Maybe us and Oregon were just overwhelmed with our size a little bit. You miss a few shots early, you end up on the wrong side of it. And it happened. But I definitely wouldn't expect the same result if we played those teams again today. It could be a totally different result.

It literally makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up when people are saying that, because it's coming from a place of ignorance, and it's really disrespectful to say to a coach. To think that I would hide a kid is crazy. So yeah, on that note, thank you guys.

Q. Tommy, last night after the game, Caleb talked about how it would be the defense that carried you guys to make a run and that could be the difference maker. Do you agree with that, and also, how do you carry the momentum from last night's defensive showing into the next game against Oregon?

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TOMMY LLOYD: Well, when we've been right defensively this year, we've been hard to beat. But we've also had some days our defense hasn't been good, and our offense has carried us. To me, you want to be as good as you can on both sides of the ball to kind of give yourself the best chance to win, whether that's your offense carrying you or your defense carrying you.

One of the things I've learned about these tournament games is -- is there momentum? I don't know. I think the moment the ball goes up, it's 0-0, it's 40 minutes, it's two new teams, I don't think you can assume because we played good on Friday night that we're going to carry that momentum into Sunday.

You have to be really careful, and you have to understand that the score is 0-0, the ball goes up, and you've got to go -- anything good that's going to come of Sunday, you have to make that happen during that 40-minute game on Sunday. Nothing from Friday really impacts that.

Q. You mentioned Henry earlier, and I was talking with some people last night, some NBA people, and we were wondering, he's playing so well and he's so efficient. Are you trying to hide him at this point, not playing him a ton? He doesn't start.

TOMMY LLOYD: That's insulting. Who are these NBA people? I've never seen them. Are these, like, sources?

Q. Reporters, other guys that talk. They were saying they had talked to NBA people --

TOMMY LLOYD: Listen, people who say that -- I'll just say this: A lot of people have answers to tests they've never passed. I'm a coach. I'm coaching my team. Anybody that thinks I'm holding a kid back is crazy. But you know what? On a team, you have other players. You have other scenarios, and there's this thing called fouls, there's this thing called fatigue. You don't get to coach a team in a vacuum.

