

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Duquesne vs BYU

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Omaha, Nebraska, USA

CHI Health Center

## BYU Cougars

## Head Coach Mark Pope

### Media Conference



MARK POPE: Before we jump to the Big 12, I always used to say it was terrifying, just the prospect of it. After the 18 games, I totally concur with that assessment. It's terrifying, but it's also awesome.

As a competitor, it's what you dream about is the opportunity to play against great, great teams every single night. Listen, there's a lot of great teams around the country in all different conferences at all different levels. It just so happens the Big 12 has a bunch of them stuffed together in the same collection where you see them every single night.

I'm really proud of my staff. Those guys have been at it for the last two years trying to prepare and figure out how we could carve out just our own little niche in that league and find a way to survive. We'll continue to grow in that process, but I'm really proud of what the staff and certainly our players were able to accomplish this year in our first year and hope to continue to grow in that way.

**Q. How would you assess the preparation, readiness of the team entering this moment that they've been chasing for years?**

MARK POPE: Yeah, we feel good. We haven't changed a lot. We really don't believe in reinventing the wheel rolling into the tournament because this is what we've been preparing for all season long.

I think our guys are loose. I think they're full of energy. Certainly they're going to feel all of the juice that comes with playing in this tournament, but I think they're pretty prepared to deal with those emotions.

I think we're just so eager to kind of race out and kind of jump in the fray of this tournament and see what we can do. I feel like our guys are in a good spot.

**Q. Regarding Clark and Dae Dae Grant at the perimeter, obviously the offense largely goes through them. From a defensive standpoint for you guys, how do you best account for those two, and then in terms of the inside game that they also add, what do you look for for them? Coach Dambrot has said they're an outside-in team, which is not what he usually has.**

THE MODERATOR: We'll ask Head Coach Mark Pop to make a statement about his team, and then we'll go to questions.

MARK POPE: We're grateful that everybody is here. The hospitality has been unbelievable. Being here in this great City of Omaha, home of so many worldwide and national figures actually. The team is excited to be here. Had a good practice this morning. We are really excited about tomorrow playing against a great -- nothing short of a great Duquesne team. Can't wait to get it going.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

**Q. Mark, with Aly fasting, coming out of the Big 12 Tournament, is there any adjustments being made? Did he learn something from that as far as making sure his body is right for this that maybe he was able to get out of the Big 12?**

MARK POPE: I think we're getting more comfortable with the schedule, more comfortable with the diet, more comfortable with the first thing he eats in the evening ask kind of how he rations it out. I think in general this is his first time where he has been in competition during Ramadan. I think he has just become way more comfortable with it.

He's had a little bit more juice every day. He's adjusting to it. I'm super proud of him. He's an incredible example of faith and devotion, and he's feeling better every single day.

**Q. Now that you're beyond the 18-game slate of a Big 12 schedule, as you made your transition from the West Coast Conference, how would you describe that? Take me back to what you thought was most important for you and your staff to get you guys prepared for something like that.**



MARK POPE: Those two guards, I have no idea how to slow them down actually, so we'll just see if we can do our best. They're explosive. They score at all three levels. They make plays for their teammates in huge ways.

They can make plays off the bounce. They can make plays off the catch. They can make plays cutting.

Against Dayton, for example, Clark just put on a clinic the last six minutes in terms of the ways he was able to attack from the top of the key. He was able to attack and get downhill and score on his own, able to attack, get downhill, suck in the dunker spot, and earn his teammate a layup, get in the lane, make a second move, and kick it out for three. Made a step-back three in that space.

In four and a half minutes he kind of showed the whole collection of what you would ask from a point guard and was probably better on the defensive end in that game than he was on the offensive end.

They have a really, really special back court. Both those kids are really special, but maybe even more of a defining feature of the team to us is their physicality at every possession. They challenge every single pass, every single catch, every single bounce. They move bodies. They're relentless. They're in a stance for 30 seconds every single defensive possession, all five guys.

As good as those guards are, what Coach has done in terms of getting his team to buy into the physicality and the consistency of effort and kind of ball-hawkishness DNA of that team is pretty special. It's a terrific team.

**Q. Mark, a lot of people are talking about the clash of styles. How do you think you have fared against kind of these grinding, slow down teams throughout the course of the season?**

MARK POPE: Yeah, it's hard to characterize teams because Duquesne will get out and run. When they have opportunities off steals, off misses, off opportunities, they get out and run as good as anybody in the country.

Clark getting to the rim on his own, we have so many clips of him dribbling through a whole team to get to the rim.

Dae Dae is most dangerous, actually maybe as a catch-and-shoot three guy in transition. They'll push the pace a lot.

I think the reason maybe sometimes the game feels a little slower is because they're so relentless on the defensive end. They're so physical. They're so scrappy. They're so

dialed in.

Hopefully we've seen some teams that play like that. We've played against some great defensive teams. We certainly have some that we've played against in our league and in our nonconference, but they definitely pose a challenge for us.

Certainly the pace of the game is going to be something that's going to -- we're going to have to deal with the pace of the game. Pace of the game is not just running up and down across half court. The pace of the game is also in the half court against a really, really physical defense that's going to kind of hold and scratch and claw and try and slow down cuts. It's being physical enough to actually finish your cut and get through cuts and not be slowed down and not take the easy way out on a cut.

So the pace of the game is still going to be a massive point of emphasis even if that doesn't mean we're flying over half court every 15 seconds.

**Q. First up, I do count you among the nationwide and worldwide luminaries from Omaha just so you know.**

MARK POPE: I appreciate that. Have you looked at the list? We all know the list, right?

**Q. You and Warren Buffett primarily.**

MARK POPE: Warren Buffett, the Godfather, Malcolm X, Bob Gibson. The list of Omaha, I'm telling you. Fred Hoiberg.

**Q. You have a tournament-worthy team that didn't get to play in 2020, and you had a COVID version in 2021. How maybe refreshing or invigorating is it to be in a fully-loaded March Madness experience with your team?**

MARK POPE: We're really grateful for these guys to get a feel. I have two players on this team that were in our COVID year NCAA Tournament team. If you guys remember, it seems like it was a decade ago, but going to Indy and being in that hotel and being tested 17 times a day for a week before we could even get out on the practice floor was a different experience. It was necessary, and we're so grateful for all the precautions that were taken and for the opportunity to actually go compete, but I'm happy for those guys that they get to come feel this because this is the way it's supposed to be.

One of the beautiful things about March Madness is sharing it with -- we got to the hotel last night, and there's a big contingent of BYU faithful from the state of Nebraska



and visiting states that was gathered at the hotel. All of that is part of -- it's a part of what makes March Madness great. I'm glad the guys get to enjoy that.

**Q. In this day and age when betting on games is talked about just widespread, I saw one report, and everyone says you're the overwhelming favorite. 83 percent chance you're going to win. How do you handle that with your players?**

MARK POPE: Well, we were also picked 13th in the Big 12, so sometimes the people that are the smartest just aren't that smart, right? That's why these games are really brilliant because you get a chance to step out on the court, and you just drop your heart and soul and everything you have on the court, and that's where magical things happen.

I don't think Duquesne spends any time listening to prognosticators because clearly they know they're a great team. They just won their tournament from a 6th seed. Certainly our guys have been fueled by maybe outside voices questioning what they can do or what they could become. I think that's the beauty of athletics.

We get to get on the floor and settle it, and that's why all of us that are going to jump into this arena tomorrow, not just us and Duquesne, but everybody else, loves this opportunity to go prove that we're something that people don't think we can do.

So I think it's awesome for fans. I love all the media coverage. I love all of the excitement about the games and all the prognostications. We live a little bit of a different life in the arena, and we just get to go fight it out and see what really is going to happen.

**Q. Just following up on something about Aly. How are you feeling about how the NCAA handled it? Would you have rather had a night game as opposed to an early game with his diet and Ramadan?**

MARK POPE: We're a pretty faithful organization. I think the NCAA -- I wouldn't expect them to kind of address this issue for us at all, which is fine.

I think part of the built-in part of faith is that you kind of press forward with your acts of devotion, and it's inherent in that that you have faith that God's will is going to be done.

I don't think Aly is asking for any hand-outs. I don't think any of our players in their faith walk are asking for any accommodations or handouts. I think that kind of defies the point of it.

One of the beautiful things about acts of devotion, which all

of our guys on our team are incredibly familiar with, is that you kind of put your offering on the altar so to speak, the figurative altar, and then you trust that God's will is going to be done, and that's pretty special.

I think Aly definitely lives in that space, and he is a believer. We've said this a lot. We're a team full of believers, and so we're not necessarily looking for unique accommodations.

**Q. I don't know how to transition away from that, but I did want to ask you about your point guard Dallin. I tried to pull up some numbers to look smart here, and I'm surprised he is not playing 36 or 37 minutes a night. Just how has he performed on this stretch of the season for you, especially when it feels like he doesn't come off the court so much?**

MARK POPE: Dallin is like so many of our guys, has put together a really special season, and it hasn't been perfect, thank goodness, because that would be so boring.

He has a unique ability to raise up in crucial, key moments and settle our team and make big plays. What he's done in terms of the ball control point guard facing what he has faced all season long, knowing that he is such a key guy to our roster with teams trying to attack him has been extraordinary.

For him to do it as a sophomore, you know, and still a very, very young player, it really is incredible to watch him and our other players grow. Even from the beginning of the season, the growth you've seen, and certainly from last year the growth that we've been able to see, and Dallin is certainly on that train too.

He's had a terrific year, and he's really hungry to find some way to put together a great performance tomorrow and try and keep playing this game.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

