

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Morehead State vs Illinois

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

CHI Health Center

**Morehead State**

**Kalil Thomas**

**Riley Minix**

**Drew Thelwell**

**Jordan Lathon**

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We have Jordan Lathon, Drew Thelwell, Riley Minix, and Kalil Thomas. Questions, please.

**Q. This is for Riley. I want to go back to something you said at the Selection Show. You talked about this being a Cinderella moment, but if you all were to win, it would not be an upset per se. Could you comment on that again?**

RILEY MINIX: Yeah, I just feel like going into every game when we're playing together, we're having fun. We trust each other. We feel like we were made for this, and we're all older guys. We've been here before. We've played basketball a long time, and we know how we play. We play off of each other. We feel like going out there we have a chance to win every game.

**Q. For any of you guys, you play a pretty tough nonconference schedule... Alabama, Purdue. How did that prepare you for this game, do you think?**

THE MODERATOR: Drew first, and then Jordan, please.

DREW THELWELL: I think just getting used to the size factor. A lot of these teams are big, and we're kind of a big team too, but I think just getting used to that, getting used to the speed definitely is going to help us tomorrow.

JORDAN LATHON: I will say just challenging ourselves, and trying to not make things easy for us will help us when we get in the game like tomorrow.

**Q. Building on that nonconference schedule prep, you played three Big Ten teams during your nonconference schedule. A lot of times conferences have their own kind of personality as far as their teams and their approaches. How would Illinois stack up or compare against the style you saw against those other three Big Ten teams?**

THE MODERATOR: Kalil, you're up followed by Riley and drew.

KALIL THOMAS: Well, you know, the Big Ten Conference is a great conference, a competitive conference. A lot of good teams.

I think the teams that we got a chance to play against, the Purdues and the Indianas, like, that was a great test for us. It definitely will prepare us for tomorrow and have us to the point where it's want so much of a shock when we get on the court against those guys. It will be more just another game.

RILEY MINIX: I feel like going back to what Drew said a little bit with the size factor. I feel like getting to play those guys, we're not intimidated anymore. We played three of them from the Big Ten, as you were saying, and we just go out there and do what we do.

We know we were in the game against Indiana, and we feel like earlier in the season we didn't have things figured out, but where we're at right now we're very confident, and we feel like we can play with anybody.

DREW THELWELL: I think they're going to have to go into this game honest. We played Indiana, and we were up pretty big at one point and let ropes go. They're going to look at that and think this is a formidable team. They're not going to go into the game like it's an easy win. I think we'll be ready for them.

**Q. Guys, beating Clemson last year in the NIT, especially for Drew, you had to dig out of a hole early. You got behind. You came back and won the game. How important is it tomorrow to not play behind the 8-ball and to get off to a good start and not have to rally?**



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DREW THELWELL: I think we started off 10-0, actually, but again, we had guys. We went into the huddle in the media time-out, and we didn't flinch. We knew what we could do, and we proved that.

Starting off tomorrow we definitely have to start off strong, and we have to make sure we gain a lead for sure.

THE MODERATOR: I'll have Jordan answer that question as well. How important is it to not get in a hole?

JORDAN LATHON: Kalil, you want to take that one? You played in that game, so I would rather Kalil get that one.

KALIL THOMAS: Yeah. Especially in a time like March when a team gets confidence, if they get up big, it makes the game a lot harder than it needs to be. I think for sure we had a few games this year where we had some slow starts, and this is not the time for that. We need to make sure we're on our A-game tomorrow.

**Q. This is for Drew and Jordan. Beginning of the year you lose Mark Freeman, who was preseason OVC Player of the Year. What did that do to you then? How did you recover, and then to see Riley become the OVC player of the year?**

THE MODERATOR: Jordan you're first and then Drew please.

JORDAN LATHON: It was tough. It happened in a pick-up game, and we didn't really expect it. We was hoping he could come back, but we always had the next-man-up mentality. Having somebody like Riley come in and be another Player of the Year for us was huge. I think we just kept our confidence and kept believing in each other, and that's really where it starts.

DREW THELWELL: I always say this. Mark is like my older brother, so it really hurt me, and I was really sad about it. I knew that these guys right here, it was just always next man up. I knew that some nights it's going to be J2's nights. Some nights is Riley's, and some nights it's going to be Kalil's. I knew we had something special with Riley that not a lot of people knew about.

**Q. For anybody up there. Having seen Illinois on tape, do you guys feel like there's a pace or a style that this game has to be at for you guys to get a W, or do you guys feel like you could play any kind of way and maybe come out of this thing?**

THE MODERATOR: Jordan first and then Kalil, please.

JORDAN LATHON: I think in a game like this you don't really want to play their style. We want to play our style and do what got us to this point.

I think if we trust in each other and trust in what the coaches tell us and follow the scouting report, I think we'll be right where we want to be.

KALIL THOMAS: We definitely can't let them control the game. We have to be the aggressors from the jump and try to, like he said, make the game our game. It's a lot harder when they get to play confident in their style of play.

**Q. After you won the OVC Tournament Championship, Coach Spradlin used the term "faithful" to describe this team, a faithful group. I know faith is an incredibly important to at least a couple of you. Drew even getting baptized before starting postseason play. Talk about the importance of faith in the context of where you are right now.**

THE MODERATOR: Riley and Drew please in that order reasonable doubt.

RILEY MINIX: I would just say this has been a dream come true, and we wouldn't, none of us, four of us, one through 15, everybody on our team, we wouldn't be here without God.

He's the reason. He's our strength. He's what keeps us pushing. He's what brought us together and has allowed us to love each other. Without him, none of this would be possible.

So I feel like we're a very faithful group, as Coach P was saying, and we pray before every game. We trust in him every chance we get, and it shows on the court.

DREW THELWELL: Going off of that, I think all the guys up here can say we give all the glory to God. I hope that when we play tomorrow we can show everyone in the world that we're playing for him and something bigger than just basketball.

**Q. Talk about the specialness, and any of you can elaborate, of being here, taking it all in, but at the same time you have a basketball game to win. How do you balance that being your first trip to the NCAA Tournament?**

THE MODERATOR: We'll go to Jordan and then Riley and then Kalil.

JORDAN LATHON: I think it's a special moment. I think we're all happy to be here and proud to be here. I think it's



something that we knew that we could accomplish. I feel like with us we don't feel like we're done. We don't feel like we're finished or we accomplished what we set out to accomplish. I just think having that hunger, having that will to win is going to help us tomorrow.

RILEY MINIX: I feel like, as I said earlier, it is a dream come true. All of us as children dreamed of being at this moment and at this stage of the highest level of basketball, but at the same time we don't continue to think of that. We continue to think of the brother next to us, the teammate next to us that we play for.

A big motto that we've brought into this, our conference tournament, is just having one more day. That's what I feel like is continuing to push us and allowing us to compete at our highest level without pressure. It's just we want to play one more day together. We love each other, and we're willing to do whatever it takes to have just one more day.

KALIL THOMAS: I think the biggest thing is definitely the one more day piece of it. I have been having so much fun, I just don't want this to end. I think the balance of trying to have fun, which basketball is supposed to be fun.

I think it's a balance of having fun, but then at the same time we have to lock in. Like you said, it's another game, and it's one of our most important games.

It's cool, but like you said, just one more day. That's the push.

**Q. Inside Johnson Arena there is a huge picture of Demonte Harper in 2011 getting the shot to beat Louisville. In your dreams, since you mentioned dreams, to be a part of March Madness doing something like that, but also making a run and being the next double-digit seed to do something great, how often do you think about that, or do you just kind of put it to bed and say, we'll let the game play out?**

THE MODERATOR: Jordan, Drew, and Riley, please.

JORDAN LATHON: I would say I think we don't think about it too much. I don't feel like we do. I think we just try to approach the game like we approach any other game and just believe in what the coaches tell us.

We have a great coaching staff, and we have a great team. We have a team full of guys that come to work every day and don't complain, and they show up. You'll see it tomorrow. Just the energy that we have on the bench is contagious, so I just think going into tomorrow with that same energy and that same belief in one another, we don't look at it as seeding or a number or ranking. We just look

at each other and believe in each other.

DREW THELWELL: I'll go off of that. I 100 percent agree. I think we're going to play for each other. I am going to play for Riley, Kalil, and the rest of my guys, and J too and Coach P. I'm going to give everything I got and leave it out there, and whatever the result may be is in God's hands.

RILEY MINIX: I would just say that was a great year that they had, and they made -- that was our first win in Morehead State history in the March Madness tournament, and that's amazing, but this is our year. We're just trying to do it how we want to do it. There's no pressure on living up to those expectations. It's just playing together, trusting each other, and then living with the results at the end of the day. We know we're going to leave it all out there, but it just goes off of that. Whatever happens happens.

We're here to compete. We're here to win games, and we don't plan on doing anything short of that.

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