

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

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CHI Health Center

Morehead State Head Coach Preston Spradlin

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're going to ask Head Coach Preston Spradlin to give a comment about his team and then we'll go to questions.

PRESTON SPRADLIN: First of all, we're extremely grateful and excited to be here. This has been an unbelievable experience. We've been here 24 hours. The city is gorgeous. The hospitality has been really first class and very fitting for the NCAA Tournament and 68 great teams to be able to experience this. We're thankful to be a part of it.

We have an unbelievable group of guys, as I'm sure you got a chance to see by talking to only four of them. They're a faithful bunch. Their chemistry is very real. Their connection is very strong. That's evident when we play, and especially throughout the season that we've had.

We're excited to be here. We feel like we're continuing to get better and better throughout the season and hoping to carry that over here into March Madness.

Q. When you see this team and to where you were at the beginning of the year -- and I asked the kids this -- losing Mark, who was the preseason player of the year, to only win 26 games, and to do what you have done, how special did they rally around each other early and then obviously take off?

PRESTON SPRADLIN: That's a great question. I think any time you talk about this season, you'll want to look at the full scope of our journey in order to tell the whole story. I appreciate that of starting off with that question because at the end of the day basketball is the greatest teacher of life. It really truly is. I don't mean that as a slogan. That's very important to how we approach our day as a staff and



as a program. We take that very seriously.

I think as a head coach, I believe your players are going to take on your identity. However you respond to things, whether they're positive or they're negative, is exactly how they are going to respond. So we talk about the response of this team a lot.

You're not making shots. How are you going to respond? You turn the ball over. How are you going to respond? You make a mistake. If you walk in our locker room right now and ask our guys, any of them, what's the most important play in the game of basketball, they will all tell you, The next play.

That's how we start every first team meeting with every team, and we live that out no matter what the adversity is even if it's losing the preseason player of the year in Mark.

Two weeks before the season began we lost Mark, but it was a very much next-man-up mentality. We knew how good this team was with him, but we also had a great belief how good this team could be even without him.

So we had guys step up. You had Andrew Thelwell take over. He is our point guard, but he had to step that up a little bit. He needed to pick up his scoring a little bit in Mark's absence.

Jordan Lathon had to become -- instead of learning everything at the 2 and the 3, he had to become the 2 and the 1. Same thing for Kalil Thomas. All of those guys sliding up the depth chart in terms of their position and their responsibility. That's a great challenge.

They were very fearless, and they did not flinch in that challenge. To be sitting here with a program record of 26 wins, another player of the year, all of that is very special. When you tell the full scope of our journey and of our story, it makes it even more impactful. It really just speaks to the character of our guys.

Q. Preston, just you have played a couple of Big Ten teams this year. What are the unique challenges that Illinois will present you tomorrow?

PRESTON SPRADLIN: They're really good. This will be



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our fourth Big Ten opponent here that we're playing. We fell just shy. We really wanted to win that Big Ten South Division title in those three games, and we didn't get it done. We get another chance to.

All of those games provide you great experience. You look in the first five days of the season. We played at Alabama. We played at Purdue. Then we go to Penn State. Then about five and a half weeks later we get a chance to play at Indiana.

The growth that our team made from the beginning of the season to November to the end of December when we played there was phenomenal. It's astronomical.

We came up just short at Indiana, a game that we could have won easily. Not easily, but one possession, one rebound, one shot away. The message in the locker room after that game was look how far we've come in the last six weeks, the growth that we've had. Let's understand why that happened.

We just focused on how do we get better each and every day, each and every drill, each and every rep, every opponent. That was our focus, and it brought us to this moment sitting here in Indiana's locker room with a one-point loss that hurts.

Stay with it. Keep believing. Keep your focus on each and every day and on each other and just getting better, and when we get to March, we'll be rewarded with another opportunity against a team like this. The belief is going to be that we're going to be ready to finish the job.

Right here we are. Couldn't have written it any better. So we're excited for the opportunity.

Illinois, phenomenal team. Any time you finish second in the Big Ten, that's quite a feat. To win their conference tournament is another great one. They're playing with great momentum. They have great confidence. They had three great performances in Indianapolis where they were down double figures and fought back. That makes them very dangerous at this point in time to go along with the fact that they're talented, big, and physical.

We're excited for the opportunity. They have great size and physicality. Brad does an unbelievable job. A lot of the ways they win games is the same way we do. It's going to be a battle of can we eliminate the easy baskets with these guys? Can we negate how big and athletic they are in transition? Can we keep them off the glass and keep them off the foul line? I feel like if we can do those things, we'll have an opportunity for our defense to really shine. We'll be right where we want to be at the end of this

game.

Q. To that point, do you look at Illinois and feel like there's a style and a tempo that this game has to be at for you guys to be successful tomorrow, or are you malAbell enough that you can play any other way knowing that Illinois likes to get out in transition?

PRESTON SPRADLIN: Again, people always say, man, Morehead State plays slow. I don't know if that's exactly our mentality. We play very deliberately.

We haven't quite had the depth this year due to injuries like guys like Mark and Trent Scott that we couldn't play quite as fast as we would like to. We're going to run when we have our chances, especially you need to do that against a team like Illinois before they get their defense set. At the same time we're not going to try to extend and give them too many possessions because they're electric in transition.

Terrence Shannon, they're going to find him. They will kill their break to get him the basketball because he's that good in transition. We've got to make sure that our offense and our floor balance accommodates to that.

We're going to run. We're going to play as fast as we want, but we're going to have to control the tempo so that it plays a little bit more in our favor than it does Illinois'.

Q. Preston, it's well known the last four years, incredible success. Obviously not only is this team battle-tested, this program is battle-tested. The most Division I wins in Kentucky easily over the last four years. Nine postseason wins. Again, that's easily No. 1. Talk about not just the confidence of this team, but the confidence of the program. You expect to win, and that's a credit to you.

PRESTON SPRADLIN: Well, thank you very much. That means a lot. The state of Kentucky is a basketball state. You don't have to live in the bluegrass to know that basketball means a lot throughout our state.

For us to be at the top in number of wins in the last four years and postseason wins, that's a very impactful stat right there, and we're very proud of that.

Yeah, that's the expectation. That's the expectation when you step on that court is to win every single game, and those numbers are a reflection of the proof that it's possible.

We are a battle-tested group. We played nine games this year without a starter. Eight of those were in conference



play. We went 6-2 without a starter in conference play. So if you look at it and say, wow, what extra adversity have you guys been through and come out on the right side of it, there you go.

This group is not afraid of anything. They're not going to be intimidated by seeding, by a conference or any of those things. We're going to go out and play our game, and we're going to do the things that have gotten us to this point right now, and we're going to do them at a high level and have a lot of joy while we do it.

Q. Safe to say Terrence Shannon and Marcus Domask may be at the top of your scouting report. Is there someone else on the Illinois roster that's caught your eye as you have prepped for them?

PRESTON SPRADLIN: All of them really. They have a lot of depth. They're going to play a lot of guys. Personnel and matchups is going to be really important as to the size, the tendencies, who shoots it, what are they trying to run to get those guys to those certain spots?

I just think they all offer a different challenge. They've got big guys that can shoot it. They've got big guys that handle the ball that don't shoot it. They've got a point guard who is not necessarily a breakdown type of guy. He'll do as much posting up as any of their 6'10" guys will do.

Without naming names and tipping our hat as to exactly how we're going to attack these guys, you have to do a great job with their personnel and applying that, but at the same time the challenge is as fast as they play, you're not always going to get the matchups that you want or player on their player. It's going to be everyone's responsibility to make sure you're closing out tight to the guys that shoot it, you're not closing out to the guys that aren't looking to do it.

It comes to trying to not allow them to play to their strengths, but trying to expose their weaknesses.

Q. This is kind of about the transfer portal era. I hear a lot of coaches at the mid-major and the low major level like yourself talk about, well, if I have a really great player, He is just going to leave me. I know that you have two players, a starting big at Auburn and a starting guard at South Carolina, that have come from your program. I'm curious how you have been able to manage the transfer portal and make it work for you and make it work for Morehead State?

PRESTON SPRADLIN: Obviously the game is changing. The landscape is changing. The rules, you throw in NIL, all of these things. You've got to figure out a way that you can

adapt but not sacrifice who you are.

Each of those guys that you mentioned, we sat in their living rooms with their families when they had very few offers, and we made a commitment and a promise that we were going to take care of their sons and we were going to develop them not only on the court, but off the court and as men and that our relationship was going to be very real with them.

We're not going to go back on that because they got a different opportunity and they're wearing a different color Jersey. There's no bigger fans of those two guys than Morehead State and my family, and that's very real. We stay in touch with those guys.

Being able to navigate the portal, a lot of people will say, hey, is your tactic to recruit a high school kid and say, hey, come here for a year and we'll get you to an SEC school? Absolutely not. Those things speak for themselves. They're there.

If it's a conversation they would like to have, then we'll have that conversation, but we're not going to devalue where we're at. I very much love our community and our program, so we're not going to use it as a stepping stone.

However, we're going to stay committed to those players. You come here, and if that opportunity presents itself that you do become as good a player as we believe that you can when no one else in the country does, if that's the best opportunity for you, we'll help you find it, and we'll support you through it.

Then we've been blessed to be able to attract guys that can come in and fill those voids. It's all about finding value in players, and I think oftentimes people look at their stats. They look at all these things. Those are certainly important, but you look at the guys that you just interviewed here. None of them had these unbelievable Division I stats that jumped off the page. We didn't have to beat out 20 people in recruiting to get them.

We wanted them because we saw value in them that other people did not, and we played them to their strengths, and we developed these relationships with them that allowed them to have evident chemistry and connection on the court.

So when it comes to navigating the portal, that's been our approach. I feel pretty good about the success we've had in doing that.

Q. When you had the interim tag removed, what, was it seven years ago, however long, you said to me, Give



me two or three years, and we're going to win big. Where is the Morehead State program right now in your eyes compared to the grassroots level that got you that job and then you took it tie whole new stratosphere?

PRESTON SPRADLIN: I don't remember saying that, to be honest with you. I'll take it, though. I'll take it.

It was such a whirlwind obviously when all of that happened. We had a complete rebuild. When I got the job full-time, I had three players and one assistant coach. That was it. We had a new staff. We had a new roster. We had to figure out exactly how we wanted to play.

It's a little different when you're given a blank slate and say, here you go, do what you want with it and when you are 29 years old trying to figure out exactly what that is. I was very fortunate the first few years at Morehead that they allowed me to fail and have some mistakes and work through and grow through those. You don't get that a lot in today's college basketball.

Everybody wants to win right now, and I understand that, but as a young coach, I'm very thankful that I had the opportunity to grow through a lot of mistakes and figure out who I was as a coach, what is kind of players we wanted to have, and what kind of program we wanted to have.

But now, yeah, the expectation is to win each and every year. I'm not saying that's easy, but it's certainly welcomed because none of the players that we recruit, Brian, whether they come from high school or they're transferring in via the portal, they're not coming to Morehead State to finish fifth. They're coming here to have an opportunity to play in March Madness and sit at this podium. That's the expectation when we recruit them and every day when we step on the court.

So we don't look at that as a burden. We look at that as a great blessing, and that's where we want to make sure we keep our program.

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