

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - South Dakota St. vs Iowa State

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

CHI Health Center

South Dakota St. Jackrabbits

Head Coach Eric

Henderson

Luke Appel

Charlie Easley

Matt Mims

Zeke Mayo

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We have Luke Appel, Charlie Easley, Matt Mims, and Zeke Mayo.

Q. You were the one guy that was recruited by T.J. on this team. Talk to me about how odd that might be and what that experience was like when he recruited you to come to Brookings.

MATT MIMS: It's definitely a little unique. T.J. started recruiting me along with Hendo as well, but T.J. did I would say my junior year.

We had a year and a half before I came to Brookings to really build a relationship. Yeah, I definitely have a unique relationship with T.J. It is a little odd, but I'm excited.

T.J. is a great coach. I learned so much under him my first year here, and I'm just really excited.

Q. This is for Charlie. Now that you are here and Will, I know you all have a close proximity to Omaha. Having grown up in Nebraska, both you and Will, how special is it to be here right now?

CHARLIE EASLEY: It's obviously really special for me and a lot of my teammates because even a lot of these guys



grew up close to here in Iowa. To be able to have all of our family and friends and a bunch of people we grew up with to be able to come out here and support and just kind of be playing in my home state, it's special and something I'll never forget.

Q. This one is for Zeke. I'm sure you have talked about it, but this is one of the best defensive teams in the country. Obviously we saw what they did against Houston. How do you guys kind of approach going up against a team with that defense?

ZEKE MAYO: Yeah, we're just going to continue to play our game and play how we have been. Moving the ball and player movement is going to be really important for us. We're just going on it take what the defense gives us and not try to force anything, take care of the ball, and I think those are some of the biggest factors going in here.

Q. Luke, I'll get to you eventually. Sorry. This is for you two guys in particular. I think we all know the environment tomorrow night is going to be electric with how many local teams are here. How much fun is that going to be for you guys? You are used to playing in front of a pretty rowdy crowd up in Brookings. Charlie.

THE MODERATOR: Which two?

Q. Charlie and Matt.

THE MODERATOR: We'll go in that order. Charlie and then Matt.

CHARLIE EASLEY: Obviously that's the best part of playing college basketball is to come in and get to play in an environment like we're going to play in. We're going to feed off of it, and it's going to be fun for everybody.

We're just going to play our game, and hopefully feed off the crowd as well.

MATT MIMS: Yeah, I would just say growing up all of us have played basketball since a young age. This moment, it's what you prepare for. It's what you live for. It's a dream.



I think, especially playing in Brookings in front of our amazing fans, we just want to really take that energy and use it. We're really excited.

Q. Luke, kind of going off what I asked Zeke, and you Will had big games in the paint for you guys. It's a big reason you guys won Summit League Tournament. How do you approach that knowing the talent they have in the paint and the defense that they have down there?

LUKE APPEL: We know they're going to double, and we know they bring -- they have a guy on that help side all the time. You have to be careful and pick your spots.

Passing the ball to the open guy is going to be a huge factor. Getting these guys wide-open threes will be just a big part of how we've always played. So just continuing to do that and passing the ball with all the doubles I think is one of our big plans.

Q. This is for Luke again. You grew up an Iowa State fan. You said you watched them a lot this season just from a fan's perspective and then getting more in depth on them this week. Not to repeat what others have said, but just in terms of what you saw, what areas do you guys have to be sound to combat their strengths?

LUKE APPEL: I think we really just have to focus on taking care of the ball and not letting them get run-outs and just keeping the game in front of us. Make them make shots and make them make mistakes. Both teams are going to make mistakes. When we make mistakes, just not getting down on ourselves and knowing we can stay in it and just trusting every single one of our guys to go out there and play to their best ability.

Q. Zeke, the last time you guys were in the tournament, a lot of people were picking you guys to win, upset Providence. This time it feels like not many people are talking about you guys. Does it feel more like you guys are underdogs going into this one even though you guys have been playing really good basketball here the last eight games?

ZEKE MAYO: Yeah. When you play a team like Iowa State, who is great on both ends of the floor, I mean, you're most likely to be an underdog. Obviously a 15 versus a 2. It doesn't happen very often, but I know one thing. We're going to bet on ourselves. We're not really worried about the outside noise.

We're going to continue to do what we have been, and I mean, we're going to live with the result. But we would

love to be on the winning side of things. We're just going to go out there and play our game.

Q. Luke, I promised I would get back to you. Kind of the same theme here, being the underdog, doesn't that allow you guys to just relax, throw caution to the wind, and just go, We're just going to go play, have fun, whatever happens. And you've got to know that aside from the Iowa State fans, and there will be a lot of them here tomorrow night, everybody else in the building is going to be cheering for you guys?

LUKE APPEL: I mean, yeah, we'll have a lot of fans here as well. We're not too far from Brookings, and our fans travel great. It's going to be great to see them as well in the stands.

We really got nothing to lose. We're playing the Big 12 Champs. They played phenomenal in their conference tournament. We did as well. I think if we play our brand of basketball and play great basketball, we're going to be right there.

Q. Charlie, I read that your first career college points came in this arena. How cool is it to come full circle playing back here again?

CHARLIE EASLEY: Yeah, it's just kind of crazy that's how it happens. And being back here for one of the biggest moments in my basketball career, it just kind of makes me appreciate the journey that it's been for me basketball-wise and with all my teammates. It's kind of surreal, and I'm going to appreciate every moment of it.

Q. Matt, when we talked to Hendo this week, he said that you guys have found your identity more than you have all season. Is that something you would agree with, and what do you guys think your identity is after the success you've had the last eight games?

MATT MIMS: Yeah, for sure. I think throughout the season we kind of fought through a lot of adversity, whether it be injury or just not playing the way we want to. I think we've definitely hit our stride and kind of found what is going to work for us.

I think our identity is just mainly on the defensive end. Just really taking that effort to want to get stops. We kind of talk about when you get scored on, it's got to hurt a little bit, and I think that's kind of hurt us a little bit if someone has kind of scored on us and we've taken that to heart.

Yeah, I would just say we've been a lot more defensively-minded.



Q. Zeke, we talked about this before the season even started. Now here you are. Game is on the line. I'm guessing you still want the ball, right?

ZEKE MAYO: Of course, but I mean, this is not an individual type of accomplishment for this team to be here. I trust these three guys up here. I trust everybody on our team to go and make a play when the game is on the line.

Q. Matt, you mentioned your kind of unique relationship with T.J. How much added motivation is there to knock him out? Have you talked with Coach Hendo about that, because obviously you've worked with him a lot in the past too?

MATT MIMS: Definitely there's a little bit of motivation. It's kind of cool just to face your former coach. I have a lot of respect for T.J., but at the end of the day, it's either us or them. I want to continue playing college basketball.

I've talked to Hendo a little bit about it, how this is kind of cool and unique. I'm not too sure -- I'm sure it's happened before, but I know it's rare. It's definitely exciting and really cool.

THE MODERATOR: Eric Henderson, Head Coach, a date with Iowa State tomorrow. We're going to ask him to make a statement on his team about being here in Omaha and we'll go to questions.

ERIC HENDERSON: Obviously extremely excited to be here. A lot of familiar faces on both sides I can see.

What a unique and fun matchup that we have. Obviously we know we have our hands full. T.J. does a terrific job, and the Cyclones are playing extremely well. Probably as good as anybody in the country.

We're also playing pretty good. I like our team. We've showed so much improvement this year and the amount of growth. I'm just really proud and excited and really thankful that our guys get to experience one of the best sporting events in the world.

Q. Everyone knows about the relationship with T.J. Is it gamesmanship this week, or have you talked or texted at all since the matchup was announced?

ERIC HENDERSON: Yeah, obviously we've talked and texted a few times. Once you get the emotions out of it, we're both competitive dudes. We both want to win. The respect is certainly at a high level. Yeah, as normal.

Q. Talk about the opportunity for you guys. There's going to be a lot of Iowa State fans, but there will be a

lot of Jackrabbit fans and a lot of noise in the building. How excited are you for that atmosphere?

ERIC HENDERSON: That's what this is all about, right? Our guys, we talk about the student-athlete experience all the time that we help provide at South Dakota State and that we're very, very proud of. To be able to share moments like this with our team and the young people on our squad, it doesn't get any better than that, to be frank with you. We know what Cyclone Nation does down in Kansas City for the Big 12 Tournament, but we also have pretty special environment in Sioux Falls for that Summit League Tournament as well.

We're excited for the atmosphere and the energy that will be in the building. There's no doubt.

Q. Question about William Kyle. A lot of support from the Bellevue West faithful here. Can you talk about the development that you have seen from him especially on the defensive end of the ball being Conference Defensive Player of the Year and his performance in the conference tournament?

ERIC HENDERSON: Yeah, the amount of growth that you've seen from William Kyle the last two years is just really special. You know, it's really rewarding as a coach when you are able to see a young man put in the work that he does and then to be able to reap the benefits of it.

He spends a ton of time in the gym. He's a tremendous listener. He's not afraid to be critiqued, and he wants to get better.

Midway through the year we were able to tweak a few things with how we were guarding certain things, and I think it put William in a lot more comfortable position. Honestly, ever since then the amount of impact that he's been able to have on the defensive end has been tremendous. He's done a terrific job of protecting the paint.

Also, just even his skill development on the offensive end. He's so comfortable with the ball, with his back to the basket. He can play on the perimeter and doesn't get uncomfortable. It's just going to continue to get better and better.

Q. Hendo, your ties to T.J., is there some familiarity in this game? Are you guys doing a lot of the same things you did when he was there? Is he still doing a lot of the same things that he was doing when he was there? How might that impact the game?

ERIC HENDERSON: Well, I think obviously there's some similarities, right, and we certainly do some of the things



when T.J. was at South Dakota State. We still have some of those concepts in play for sure.

We've changed as well, and I think T.J. would probably even tell you that when he was at South Dakota State, we were such an electric offensive team. Now they're probably the best defensive team in the country. He's done such a great job of really just adapting. That's what makes him a great coach. He is not married to one thing. He sees what his players' strengths are, and he utilizes them.

Like I said, I just think he's got great players. We got great players. There's just a mutual respect I think.

Q. You discussed the Iowa State defense, but your defense was excellent during the Summit League Tournament. I know you're a defense guy. What's working well not just in the Summit League Tournament, but during this eight-game winning streak specifically on the defensive end?

ERIC HENDERSON: I think we're a lot more connected at this time of the year than we ever have been throughout the season. We're just helping each other out. We're having each other's back. The trust factor.

We're putting pressure on people, but we're also making them earn everything. So I think that's probably what's been the biggest factor is just that trust and ability to believe in each other, understanding you don't have to do it on your own. If you do make mistakes, which everybody does, your brother will have your back.

Q. Hendo, to piggyback off of that, you mentioned at the start of conference season, noncon, you weren't playing as well defensive as you kind of wanted. Have you ever seen a midseason change that all of a sudden you went from struggling defensively to that kind of being the identity of your team?

ERIC HENDERSON: Well, that's always what the goal is, right? You always want to see improvements with your group. We weren't playing great, but we were fighting. We were battling. We just weren't maybe quite as connected. The pieces weren't fitting together great.

He end of the day who does that fall on? Me, right? I have to make sure that group is fitting together and make sure they're playing in a way that makes them successful. I didn't do a great job, and to be able to make a few changes and the guys to buy into that, and then one other factors, one of the best connectors I ever coached, Matt Mims, didn't play before Christmas.

Obviously the analytics speak for themselves, whatever he is averaging. It doesn't really matter. He brings so much more to the table. He is a uniter. He is a connector, and he wasn't on the floor the first part of the season. We were battling. We had a hard schedule. We were competing. Just lost a bunch of close games. Once we got him, our connectivity, our trust just continued to grow.

Q. All the narrative about Iowa State has been about the defense, and rightly so. They've played pretty good offense the last couple of games too. What are your thoughts on the offense, Hendo?

ERIC HENDERSON: They've considerably improved. It starts with some of the turnovers. That pressure can create a little bit better pace for T.J.'s squad, and they get a few more possessions because they're turning over their opponent so much.

But to your point, even in the half court I think their movement, their player movement, their ball movement has really improved from past years, to be frank with you. You can see they believe in each other too. Those two little guards' ability to get downhill and create opportunities for their squad will be a big challenge for us because they're dynamite at it.

Q. Kind of looking back four years ago, Charlie went into the portal. What did you see in him? What work has he put in over the last few years to have the season he has now as a senior?

ERIC HENDERSON: Pretty special. It was a situation where Charlie -- I knew once he went into the portal, I had a previous relationship with him. We recruited him out of high school a little bit. Never ended up going on him. Probably a mistake, right, which we all make.

I just knew when he went in, he would be somebody that would be a tremendous fit at South Dakota State. He stands for all the right things. His toughness, his ability to just bring the feistiness and just that mantra to your team is incredible. He has the ability to impact the game in so many ways.

He just had a tremendous career. He has been hurt a little bit here and there, but what he fights through to be on the court, man, he's one of my most favorite players I've ever coached.

Q. Hendo, you are the 15 seed this year. Clearly the underdog. Is that something you guys embrace or talk about, or do you not acknowledge that at all?

ERIC HENDERSON: We don't really talk about it that



much, to be frank with you. It really doesn't matter. They call it March Madness for a reason, right? At the end of the day we've all got an opportunity in front of us.

I'll say this about our group. I've said this about all of our groups. This is when T.J. was here, and I'm sure I didn't coach under Scott, but ever since I've been at South Dakota State, it doesn't matter who we're playing. We believe we're going to win the game.

Doesn't mean we always do. Doesn't mean we always will, but we go into that baby thinking, we're going to win this game. We're going to put a plan together to win the game, and that doesn't matter if we're a 15 seed, a 13 seed, a 7 seed, or 5 seed. We feel like we're going to win the game.

Q. We've talked a lot about you and T.J., but this is going to be unique for Matt. He mentioned to you earlier that he has talked about this. Can you kind of share what maybe you have talked about?

ERIC HENDERSON: I think everybody knows T.J.'s ability to build relationships and make people feel good is incredible, right? He's a very selfless person. Mimsy played for him. He'll never forget that. You don't forget relationships that are built on that when it's love and care.

T.J. is one of the best at that. So it is a unique opportunity for Mimsy.

Q. We're here at the home of Creighton. I have to ask about how Greg McDermott has impacted your coaching career.

ERIC HENDERSON: I'm a pretty lucky dude. I played for a tremendous coach in Coach McDermott, the values that he stands for. I was 18 years old and a very vulnerable person going to Wayne State. To be able to have a mentor that stands for what he stands for, I understand I'm pretty darn lucky.

Then I pinch myself all the time for how much Coach McDermott and T.J. have done for me. And now I'm playing where Coach McDermott plays every one of his home games, and I get to coach against T.J. I mean, really? Life doesn't get any better than this.

Q. I'll ask about offense now. In the Summit League Tournament I don't think anyone scored more than 20 points a game. You had multiple guys in double figures. You described the connection on defense. Offensively where is that connection coming from that it's basically equal opportunity even though guys can go off and score 20, 30 points?

ERIC HENDERSON: I think it goes back to that trust factor and belief in each other. Once we were able to really make that happen midway through the year, everybody benefits, right? I really believe that's what it starts with. I think we're sharing the basketball. I just talked about T.J.'s group. I think we're moving the basketball, and our player movement really improved midway through the year as well.

Our guys deserve a lot of credit for that. The amount of belief that they have in our place, our style, and our system and then the energy and effort that they play with. I'm just so proud of our group and our players. We have tremendous dudes.

Q. We're going to get a small picture here. Can you tell me about what you remember playing at Maquoketa Valley and what it means to represent Eastern Iowa in the NCAA Tournament?

ERIC HENDERSON: Obviously I'm a small town guy. I was able to have just some tremendous coaches there. Coach Runquist is a Hall of Famer. Coach Pesco was our assistant coach. I'm actually going back there in April to speak at a deal where they'll be at.

They were tremendous influences on me, and I got many teachers and stuff that I was just very lucky to be where -- to grow up where I did and learn the values that I did. I had some great memories as a Wild Cat.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

