

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Drake vs Washington State

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CHI Health Center

## Washington State Cougars Coach Kyle Smith

Isaac Jones

Myles Rice

Andrej Jakimovski

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: The Washington State University Cougars are with us. With us is Andrej Jakimovski, Myles Rice, and Isaac Jones. We'll go right to questions.

**Q. Isaac, when you look at the sort of long strange path you have had to get here, is there a message about persistence? What do you make when you look at that?**

ISAAC JONES: I would say all glory to God. I don't think I'm here without him. It's a story of perseverance and never giving up. That's how I look at it.

**Q. Myles, it's been six or seven games since you made a three last. I'm wondering if you've been able to pick up on any trends or you're hesitating or anything like that and how do you get that turned around?**

MYLES RICE: No. I just have to trust my craft and trust the work that I put in, because the same threes I was making at the beginning of the year, middle of the year, and versus the last six games, nothing has really changed. If you are making shots, you have to trust your craft. If you are missing shots, you have to trust your craft.

My teammates believe in me. My coaches believe in me. Washington State fans believe in me. They tell me to shoot all the time. It's only going to be a matter of time before one drops, and I believe that the first one I hit is going to be a big one and when we need it. My teammates have trust in me, so I'm going to keep shooting.



**Q. Andrej, how is the shoulder feeling?**

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: It's better. Definitely the couple of days off helped a lot. I think I'll be ready to go tomorrow.

**Q. For you in particular, you've been here all four years. Had a couple of seasons the last two where you guys maybe got close, but not quite there. Has there been kind of a moment where it's felt a little surreal that you are finally at the tournament and you finally did get here after the two NITs?**

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: Yeah, but I think we made all the necessary steps to make it to the NCAA Tournament. You know, my last two years, we made it to NIT twice and then we made it to Final Four of NIT. So this was the year that -- it's supposed to be a special year for us, and we are ready to make it even more special, so yeah.

**Q. Myles, now that you're on the bigger stage, more people are learning about your personal story. Can you take a moment to reflect on the journey that you've had from cancer treatments to now playing in the NCAA Tournament?**

MYLES RICE: Yes, it's just a blessing. All glory to God. He doesn't put us in situations that he knows we can't handle.

Like I said, I'm just grateful to be here, to be playing alongside these teammates, for this coaching staff, for these fans. And being able not just to be a basketball player, but be -- have my testimony be an impact to some people's lives that I may not even know and just continue to inspire each and everybody that knows about my story and in the years to come for people to find out about my story.

At the end of the day it's just a blessing. I'm just super grateful to be here.

**Q. What more have you picked up on Drake and what's the scout on them right now?**

THE MODERATOR: Let's go to Isaac and then Andrej.

ISAAC JONES: Very talented team. Offensive



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juggernauts. They're pretty good. They have great players. They play as a team, and they get good shots.

We just have to limit their shots, limit threes, no second-chance points, and out-compete them.

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: I think we have to stop their best scorer, best player. So got better as a team, play good defense, and making score hard on us and that's it.

**Q. Myles, Greg just asked about the three-point shooting. Does it kind of feel like for you that when one finally does go down, it's going to kind of open the floodgates, and you'll be back to shooting the way we saw you shoot earlier in the year?**

MYLES RICE: 100 percent. Once I see one go in, it's over with. Like I said, my teammates they believe in me and see me work on it before practice, after practice, every day. It's not like I'm just not working on it. Like I said, their confidence helps me. My coaching staff, they believe in me and tell me to take the right threes and when to take them. They have the utmost belief in me.

I have the utmost belief in myself as well. It's all about trusting your craft. When I so see one go in, it's going to open the floodgates for many more to come.

**Q. Isaac, I know you're not big on shooting threes in games, so I'll ask Andrej about this. When you've had droughts before like Myles is in right now, what kind of mindset do you take into that? How do you break out of that?**

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: Just like Myles said, you just have to keep doing what you are doing. Just get in the gym, get shots up, work on your craft. You can't make every shot.

If you see the one goes in, you're going to keep shooting. That's it. Just be confident in yourself. That's the main thing.

**Q. I want to ask Myles' teammates, what has it been to watch him go through that journey, and what have you learned or think other people could learn hearing his story for the first time now that you are on this stage?**

THE MODERATOR: Isaac, you are first, please.

ISAAC JONES: It's amazing. It gives you hope. As you said, God wouldn't put you through something you can't handle, and he's a testament to that. His whole life is a testimony, and just blessed to be his teammate. There's nobody else I would want by my side in this situation.

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: I would say it's special because we've been together for three years, and just to see him go through every treatment with a smile on his face, it just makes you appreciate even more what you are doing.

It's special, and he has a special story for him, and we're going to keep supporting him and make it even more special.

**Q. Andrej, you touched on the shoulder, but do you feel like yourself out there? How is that limiting you, if at all, when you are playing?**

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: I just have to play through it. I had a different tape job every game, so we just trying to find the most comfortable tape job and get the shoulder ready to move.

I'm going to have pain, but I'm trying to just don't focus on that and just play the game the right way. That's it.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, gentlemen.

We have the head coach of the Washington State Cougars. We're going to ask Kyle to make a statement on his team, about being here in Omaha, and then go to questions. Kyle, please.

KYLE SMITH: Excited to be here. It's been a wonderful season. Being a 7 seed and not having to completely sweat it out on the bubble was nice. But we have a really good group that have really propelled this program over the last three years making consecutive NITs and finally graduating to where we're playing in the NCAA. So really excited.

**Q. What more have you picked up on? I know you said you watched their game against Indiana State, but what more have you picked up on them in terms of film?**

KYLE SMITH: They're a well-coached team, put together. We would call him Baby Bird. You know, little Larry. Tucker DeVries, and kind of plays -- even though he doesn't bring the ball up the floor all the time, but it's almost like they're put together a little the Dallas Mavericks with Luka. He averages 3.6 assists, and he's a really good scorer.

And then they have really good guys that fit with him as far as guys that can bang threes and guard their position and they share the ball. So they're a pretty complete team. They're used to being here. I think this is their third trip the last four years.



It will be a tough game. Their center is good too. Big body. A little bit like the last center we played, Lampkin from Colorado. There's not a lot of holes, and this time of year that's what you expect. There's going to be good teams.

We have a size advantage, but they're the No. 1 defensive rebounding team in the country as far as the percentage they give up. That tells me they're really, really good habits, really well-coached.

**Q. Doing a thing on Isaac, when you look at the path he has taken to the NCAAs, it is not the customary route that talented players take to get here. Does that develop, do you think, a sense of character and appreciation? What do you see out of him?**

KYLE SMITH: He is an unbelievable story. He's grown a little bit, obviously, and he's just grown as a person. I haven't been around a guy that's more humble. I always say he has one speed. He's the same every day. What you see is what you get. He is a pretty subdued guy. I think that's probably why -- he is just not a guy that's going to pump out his chest much. And he grew up in the junior college ranks. COVID probably had something to do with just how a lot of guys -- Jaylen Wells probably slipped through because of that.

He's a big relationship guy. That's what brought him to Idaho actually. They had recruited him for 15 months, and he felt really comfortable. We got in there late and weren't able to beat Idaho. That's reality. It's just our fortune that we got him one year. Would have loved to have him two. But he's just -- I mean, he's a pretty simple guy. What you see is what you get. His faith is really important to him. I think that keeps him grounded.

I believe his mom is a pastor and dad is really -- they're in Spanaway. And just a great story. He's really appreciative, and it's a good match too. We're really thankful to have him.

**Q. There were some quotes going around on social media yesterday about you on, I think, sports radio in Seattle talking about working on a contract extension and love Pullman and so on. Is there any more context you can add to that about what the future holds after the tournament concludes?**

KYLE SMITH: Not really. I'm just waiting to see what they're presenting and that stuff. We'll figure it out. We have a good program. We need to be treated as such. Those things will handle themselves.

**Q. Kind of following up on that, obviously your name**

**has kind of bubbled up for some other jobs around the country. I guess when you are here at the NCAA Tournament trying to focus on what you are doing here, how do you manage that when you have some outside noise where your name keeps coming up?**

KYLE SMITH: You don't follow anything. To be honest, everyone says they bury their head. I do. I just try to stay in my room. I got my Beats. I'm ready to pump in my gospel. I go gospel, country, hip-hop, whatever. It's hard these days. I was telling someone that I haven't been to -- last time I was at the NCAA Tournament was 14 years ago. It was almost pre-social media. Everyone is asking, how do your guys stay focused? I said, they don't, but you try to do the best you can. Just the fear of missing out and rumors and gossip.

It's part of what brings the excitement to the deal, but we owe it to these guys to give our best effort and do that. And they've been awesome all year. So that's what we try to do.

**Q. Myles has not made a three in over a month by now. Have you been able to pick up on any tendencies that are leading him to miss, and, two, as he has been in a drought, have you noticed defenses are guarding him any differently?**

KYLE SMITH: No, I think it's a fatigue factor, probably mental a little bit. Probably playing too many minutes. I put it a little bit on us.

And that light has gotten bright for all of us. We were competing for a Pac-12 Championship. I'm telling you, we were getting different coverages and different things. You kind of got to go through it.

Like I said, honestly against Colorado -- and that's usually a tell when he has a bad decision, and that's when I need to probably, hey, get over here, get rested up, get back out there. You get these long medias and you are, like, hey, he is going to be rested.

I said, it's hard to take him out, but he probably -- a little bit of that. Probably fatigue. He is a first-year player playing both sides of the ball.

I think he'll break through, but we've been pretty good even though he hasn't. It's bonus. Make a couple, and I think we can run away from some people.

**Q. First time in 16 years making the NCAA Tournament. How are you guys handling the attention/mentally prepare?**



KYLE SMITH: Like I said, I'm not sure because you really can't -- we talk about it to prepare them, but you have got to experience it. The days get a little long in doing stuff like that. They separate you from your team.

But we talked about it and told them to kind of get in, and I'll let you know tomorrow night at 9:06 how we handled it.

It's been a while. It's been a while for all of us, for me. But it's exciting to be here and honored and just humbled. It's awesome. I told the international guys when we recruited them, it's like World Cup. World Cup every March for us, and that's how people follow it. Everybody has a bracket.

Until you're in it, you don't really know, but it's awesome to be in it.

**Q. Just to follow up on a quote from earlier. One thing that was mentioned was sustain success and being able to find a way to do that. In kind of your eyes, what are those values and priorities to sustain the success even with moving to the WCC next year?**

KYLE SMITH: Basketball, I've said it's not like football that you have to be in a conference and finish the Final Four. They're expanding as well. There's 68 teams that make it every year in the program.

I think we made a name for ourselves. Two NITs, now an NCAA. You can tell by the recruits. They're hanging in there. They want to hear what you have to say instead of begging them to come.

I think that part, it's the branding of our program, basketball. And it's pretty neat. WCC has one of the most marketable teams in the country. We used to call them Duke West. There's another one that I worked at that was pretty good. Of course, Santa Clara is coming on in a big way. San Fran is not bad either. There's a bunch of them.

I like the fact that it's a basketball -- there's no football there. So it's very basketball-centric and exciting moving forward that you can keep building on that.

**Q. I'm curious about Andrej's shoulder. What is his rehab. Not rehab, but just getting that right. When he is out there, does he look like himself to you, or how has that changed the way he plays at all?**

KYLE SMITH: What did he tell you? I didn't hear his answer. He is a tough kid. He is going through it. I kind of heard his answer, and he probably knows better than me, but I honestly don't know.

I notice he got hit in the Washington game early in the

game, and that was Senior Night. And I was, like, man, let's see if this guy can get it done, and the last couple of minutes pulled him out of there. I felt like the last -- in the conference tournament, I felt different. I felt like he was okay.

The back-to-back might have been a little much, but a lot of things happen in those back-to-backs where you turn around quickly, and he missed a layup early in the game. I don't think it had anything to do with his shoulder, but it could have. He wouldn't say really if it did. That's the kind of guy he is.

**Q. Joe Yesufu was around the team earlier. Is he going to be on the bench tomorrow? Do you have an update what the future looks like for him with the medical redshirt?**

KYLE SMITH: I don't know. The medical redshirt I think it's probably a possibility with the NCAA. Those things seem to be -- they're empathic or sympathetic to a guy that has an injury like that. Yeah, if we got enough room, he is always welcome on the bench. He's our guy. He's our teammate.

It's good to have him back. He's really a light bulb of a personality. He made an amazingly big imprint on these guys over the summer and early in the season. Even though he is not contributing on the court, he is still well thought of and beloved.

**Q. It seems like the better Isaac plays, the quicker and more double teams he's seeing. I think he spun out of one for a dunk against Colorado. Have you noticed kind of an uptick in those and how can he kind of manage those the best?**

KYLE SMITH: That's a good question. I think he's really such a pleasant person. He's really unselfish, and he wants to score. He likes to score, but he makes the most -- usually makes the right play out of the double. He's had -- a little tricky when they've done the triple and they'll come get his ball off the dribble and get it to the guard.

See more of it, but like I said, he's pretty unselfish. We've talked about our shooting woes. They've got to knock down some shots and take some heat off him. And we're anticipating Drake doing something like that, and I don't think that's what they want to do and what they normally do. But we're anticipating them watching film and saying they'll do something to try to get the ball out of his hands or stop him from operating down there because he's that kind of player. He's pretty darn good.

**Q. You mentioned your international guys. What's the**



**philosophy in terms of you and your staff in recruiting international guys? How do you sell Pullman, Washington, to guys who may not know Eastern Washington, and why do you think it has been important to build the roster around a couple of key international players?**

KYLE SMITH: Yeah, well, it's been a little bit that my previous stops have had international contacts and recruit the globe, and it's been building those relationships. You get a place like Pullman where there's just not a big population, we have to go a long ways just to see -- a local high school game for us is Spokane, and there's probably one prospect every year. So we have to do that.

Have you ever been to North Macedonia? Probably looks a lot like Eastern Washington from what I know. He doesn't know any better. He's good. That's great.

I think they're humble and appreciative, and it's funny how things have changed over the last 20 years with international guys. For someone like Andrej Jakimovski to come over here or Rueben Chinyelu and become leaders in a basketball program, that was never happening 20, 25 years ago. Now he's a fourth-year captain. It's been really a big part of the success of the program.

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