

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - SIU Edwardsville vs Houston

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Wichita, Kansas, USA

Intrust Bank Arena

SIU Edwardsville Cougars

Brian Barone

Desmond Polk

Ray'Sean Taylor

Brian Taylor II

Media Conference



stuff I've been through, but I just felt like I had to repay him in that aspect. He was loyal to me, so why not be loyal to him?

Q. Either for Ray'Sean or Desmond, for people nationally that will be seeing you guys for the first time or getting to know you, how would you describe your program and the style that you guys play?

DESMOND POLK: For one, us as a program, we're just one family. You know, we stick together. That's one of the biggest things, and that's one of our mottos was, put family into basketball. We live by that and stick by that.

Our pace is we like to get up and down the court and really defend. We pride ourselves on our defense.

RAY'SEAN TAYLOR: Like he said, we're family oriented. That's something Coach Barone always wants to make his program about. It's something we did a good job of making sure we do.

Like he said, we get up and down. We are a scrappy team. We defend, and we just got a lot of versatility. So we can play a lot of different defenses and things like that.

Q. For all three of you, again, have you guys looked at some of the 16 seeds who have beat 1 seeds in past years? Is that something that Coach Barone has showed you guys in preparation?

BRIAN TAYLOR II: The only thing I've seen about historical 16 seeds is probably like the percentage of it occurring. Honestly, that's something that you just kind of got to put far out your mind. That's nothing that I'm banking on of my team being out there and performing. I'm rolling with these guys and what we plan on going out there to do for ourselves, so...

RAY'SEAN TAYLOR: Personally we seen the 16 seeds that have won, whatever like that, but I think it hit close to home, because Fairleigh Dickinson I think they beat Purdue a few years ago, and we actually played them that season and won that game.

It's something we definitely looked at, something Coach Barone has talked to this staff about, so we'll be prepared.

THE MODERATOR: Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Cougars are with us. They are the No. 16 seed in the Midwest region. They are the Ohio Valley Conference tournament champions. They will play No. 1 Houston tomorrow at 1:00.

The head coach that will follow these gentlemen as Brian Barone, the men's basketball contact is Joe Pott. Questions, please.

Q. Congrats on being here. Just want to ask, with this matchup, for all three of you, what needs to happen for you guys to be able to pull one off against Houston.

DESMOND POLK: Houston is a very physical team, so we have to match that physicality and be ready from the jump.

RAY'SEAN TAYLOR: They're one of the best in the country at rebounding. So we've got to get physical on the glass, come down with some crucial 50/50s, and we'll be able to win.

BRIAN TAYLOR II: I'll say just simply staying together. Just kind of doing the things we've been doing all year. Sticking to our roots and sticking to the game plan.

Q. Ray, in this portal era, what made you stick around so long at SIUE? What was so special for you to stick around?

RAY'SEAN TAYLOR: Just my coach always believed in me even when I was at some of my lowest points with the



DESMOND POLK: Yeah, kind of piggybacking off of that, we definitely watched a little bit of the Fairleigh Dickinson-Purdue game. At the end of the day we still have to prepare for ourselves and be ready for what we have to do.

Q. Wichita, one of the closest locations you guys probably could have drawn in terms of being close to Edwardsville. What kind of support are you hoping to have this weekend?

DESMOND POLK: Well, for one, it's big for us because our fan base definitely can travel to it, but it's definitely huge for the team because, you know, we got Ring Malith and Myles Thompson who are from this area and won a national championship here, so it's very big. We know we'll get a lot of support from their home base.

RAY'SEAN TAYLOR: Yeah, it was important. I think most of our families were going to travel even regardless where we played at, but making it easier for them. And then for our school, they can just travel too. We got a lot of people that came with us, so...

BRIAN TAYLOR II: Yeah, our fan base being a lot of families and our community, it was very important for us to be this close. Just a benefit just being this close and families and stuff just being able to come.

Q. Brian and Ray, you guys being cousins, did you ever think as little kids, someday we're going to play in the big tournament together? Talk about that opportunity for the two of you.

BRIAN TAYLOR II: You never really thought that you would kind of be in a position like this sitting right here with somebody like this, my cousin. So it's definitely a blessing. I'm grateful. It's an opportunity. I'm just glad to be here.

RAY'SEAN TAYLOR: It's a weird back story. We actually went to SIU camp together when we were little kids. I wouldn't say we knew we were going to be playing together one day. I mean, when the opportunity presents itself, we're both good players --

BRIAN TAYLOR II: What they call you? Prime D Rose? D Wade? Yeah, we were going crazy that tournament.

RAY'SEAN TAYLOR: But, I mean, yeah, like he said, it's a blessing for sure. Then our families, they're there to support us every game. So we're going to have a blast with it for sure. It was able to lead us here.

Q. Houston has a reputation for many years of their

style of defense and kind of that bruising style. When you prepare for them or looked at the film, what jumps out at you in terms of how they play that defense?

RAY'SEAN TAYLOR: They real physical with their defense. They fly around. They're athletic. That's a credit to them and definitely the foundation they built over there, but at the end of the day we got to go out there and execute our side of the game plan against their defense.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you very much for your time. Best of luck tomorrow.

The head coach of the Cougars is here, Brian Barone.

Brian, please.

BRIAN BARONE: Glad to be here, obviously. Good to see everyone here.

Yeah, my team is a special team. I really believe in these guys. We've thought about it all year that we're going to have an opportunity to be in this position. We have a group of guys that really care for one another, a group of guys that have gotten better all year, a group of guys that have kind of transformed our team through different injuries, but sustained a winning culture.

I think we're going to have a group of guys you're going to enjoy really seeing what we're about. We're versatile and play for one another and are excited as heck to be here. This is a blessing. I'm not going to act like this isn't something pretty darn special.

So we're happy to be here. There's no doubt about that.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Brian, when the Selection Sunday bracket came out, Kelvin was telling us stories about maybe some of the history that you have, your family with Kellen, him with your dad. Can you kind of take us through a little bit of what some of those early memories of being around Texas A&M and sort of crossing paths with the Sampson family when they were at Oklahoma?

BRIAN BARONE: Yeah, absolutely. College Station is home to me. I have a few homes because my dad bounced around, but that was high school and a few years at A&M.

Our first Big 12 game, I'm almost positive, was against Oklahoma, so we had that dang Boomer Sooner in the background. I wish he could have had five guards guarding me because that was a little bit more realistic



when I got into the game. But it was against Coach Sampson.

On a personal level, it's kind of cool to coach against somebody, be on the same sideline that my dad coached against. I think that's something that puts in perspective how special Coach Sampson is and the longevity and his success in this business. There's no doubt about it.

Actually, when I was leaving A&M, I almost went to Oklahoma as well to play for Coach, and the timing didn't work out. I got to know -- and he's always been great to me. When I was up at Green Bay, he was at Milwaukee. We spent time talking about the bubble rebounding and all the stuff you hear about.

Kellen and I have gotten closer over these last few years as well. I just really respect their family so much. They've helped a lot. We've talked a lot about culture, a lot about program, a lot about defense in the offseason, and it's just kind of ironic how now we're here going against one another.

But it's a family that has been very kind to me over the years. Always takes time to acknowledge me when I know Coach has a lot of people he can acknowledge, and I respect the heck out of the Sampson family.

Q. A lot of Kansas connections on your team. I guess just can you speak individually on Myles and Ring, bringing them to the program, what impressed you just about their championship pedigree at Barton last year? Can you start with each of those two players?

BRIAN BARONE: Absolutely. Those two are special guys. I think one of the things about what we did this offseason is we wanted to make sure that we put the right pieces together to become a championship team. That's your goal. That's what you want to do. So why don't you go steal from some championship teams? It's kind of the easiest way to do it.

We did a good job. Ryan Hellenthal identified them early in the recruiting process. We stayed on them throughout the year. Was fortunate enough to watch them at this time last year, and those two guys, they complement each other so well, they complement our team so well. They're high character. They bring so much more than -- they're good basketball players. I mean, tough as nails, versatile, unique. All the stuff you want to say, they help you win basketball games because of their ability. They help you win championships because of the kind of people they are. There's no doubt about that with Myles and Ring.

Q. With Jay Bradley, another guy who is here from

Wichita, what has he meant to your staff and what impressed you about his pedigree and wanting to bring him here on to the Cougars?

BRIAN BARONE: I've gotten to know Jay over the last several years through the recruiting process. He actually worked with one of my assistants years prior.

Jay has great pace about himself. As a person, again, I think that's another thing when you talk about when you are becoming a championship team, you're upgrading your -- not upgrading, but you are enhancing a certain level of person. I think that Jay did that as well.

He's a very good basketball coach. As he continues to be at this level, he's going to continue to impact us in a positive way, so it's fun to have him around too.

Q. I know you have Jo from Houston on your team. With his injury, how did that affect your rotations, and how have you seen him progress? What has been his mindset through his recovery?

BRIAN BARONE: Yeah, Jo is someone that we were counting on heavy minutes, heavy minutes. He's versatile. He was 20-11 at his school. He's always a 20-game winner in his career. High-level person, high-character person.

It was devastating for him and us when he went down against Illinois because you could see his impact. He went into two high major games and impacted those games.

But the thing that Jo hasn't done -- he got down a little bit at one point. He was a little frustrated, but as he went through the process of understanding, hey, we can really be part -- we have a team shirt that's one of Jo's quotes, "The game is for the dogs, and the dogs is for the game." I don't know, it's just kind of something that he said one day, and it stuck.

So he's a huge part of this run for us, and he's really embraced trying to engage and soak in everything for when it's his time next year. I mean, he looks great. I was about to try putting him in the other day. I was trying to see if we could finagle another NCAA rule if you could play someone 28 minutes one game and still get a year back. Maybe you could.

But he's working his tail off and doing a heck of a job. He's a really good person as well.

Q. I also noticed your shirt. Is that the shirt you're speaking of? A lot of writing on there. Tell us about the significance of that one.



BRIAN BARONE: No, that's not that shirt. This is our shooting shirt that we've done all year. We've done it for the last six years. Shortened version of a long story, and I'll be a puddle up here crying if I really get too deep into it, this represents everyone in our program. Every player, from our academic advisor, training staff, just everyone that's kind of in our travel party.

We talk about we always want to put family into basketball, don't take family away from basketball. It was something that one of my dad's players said. My mom and dad did a really good job over his years at Creighton. I had wore a shirt at a game six years ago at the Northwestern game that was one of my dad's shirts, to have him there by my side because he wasn't able to make it to that game that year, the year that I got the job.

This shirt represents, it's their handwriting of everyone who got them to this point. Every person who sacrificed for somebody on our team to have an opportunity to do what we love to do. Like my wife and kids, my brother, sister, mom and dad are on this shirt. We get to know who is on this shirt from the team. We put it on the front of the shirt because we want to be in the huddle and we want all those people who are with us this whole path, this whole journey to be in there in those late-game situations.

That's kind of my aggressive coach version of it. The real version of it, we would be up here a while and we would need some Kleenexes.

It's a powerful shirt for us, and it means a lot to us.

Q. Talk about your mindset, the whole "find a way" mindset, that you have brought with you these last six years and the journey to this spot.

BRIAN BARONE: Yeah, you know, it was on the back of our shorts at Texas A&M years and years ago. It's something you hear a lot of different things over the years. You have different speakers. I've been very fortunate to be around people that give you quotes. Unfortunately, sometimes you kind of get numb to them.

"Put family into basketball" is one that stuck. "Find a way" is something that's always been in my head. I think "find a way" goes far beyond basketball. Self-reliant, self-aware, get the job done, don't make any excuses.

We call it FAW Fam, "Find a Way Family." We added the "family" part because at the end of the day sometimes it is a little overwhelming to just try and getting the job done by yourself. Sometimes you can't do it. Sometimes it's okay to make sure that you rely on this shirt, this family to get

through whatever you need to get through.

So that "find a way" mentality is just making no excuse, grinding it, going hard at what you got to go be aggressive at, getting you off the couch some days when you don't want to be off the couch, all right? Whatever it is. I think it's been something that we've said every year. We don't have a lot of one, two, three, breaks other than "one, two, three, find a way." Every once in a while someone will throw something in there. That's been our mentality.

We had the goal to say "found a way" one day. Obviously after the OVC championship we had the ability to do that. But ever since then we've been right back to "find a way" because we have another task at hand.

It's a mentality that goes way beyond basketball for me personally for sure.

Q. With the relationship with the Sampson family, you get busy throughout the season, but have you kept an eye on the program? Secondly, as you go into this matchup, what really stands out about Houston?

BRIAN BARONE: Yeah, 100%. You watch them because I respect how they play, and I respect how Coach coaches. Yes, you identify a few teams that you have relationships with people. What stands out for them is they have an identity. Coach has an identity. They do what they do, and they do it well.

Any time you can have an identity as a program, I think that's where success happens. Obviously they have really good players, right? They can score. They can be very physical, but I think what they do is they all are stars in their role, in my opinion, from my perspective. The guys that needed to be their scorers, score. The guys that need to rebound, rebound. The guys that need to be the glue guys, that's what they do. I'm sure they can all do a little bit more in their own mind, but that's what makes them really, really well coached, have an identity, and really good in my opinion.

Q. If I could go back to the family aspect of things, if I'm not mistaken, your dad made the NCAA Tournament at Creighton.

BRIAN BARONE: Yeah.

Q. With you making your first Tournament appearance, what kind of advice do you think he would give you? Is there a saying that maybe you remember as a player that maybe would apply for your first tournament?



BRIAN BARONE: Yeah, a saying to me I can't say right here. I'm sure he would say some things that would get me in trouble.

I think what he would say is, "Go be yourself. Don't lose what got you here." I really do think that. He would say, "Better box out and better defend." He would 100% be saying that.

You got to stay true to who you are. I really do think he would say that. Know your role. Embrace your role and be a star in your role is something that he would really have a focus on for our team.

Q. Your players were talking about looking back at Fairleigh Dickinson a couple of years ago. You have guys played them and what they were able to do against Purdue. Can you talk about just that team that game and what you have kind of showed this team with past 16 seeds that have got this done?

BRIAN BARONE: Yeah, I think what you want to do is you sit there -- we have a group of guys that believe that we can win a game anytime we play a game. We're going into tomorrow to win the game. That's not cocky or arrogant, but that's how we got here because we go into every game to win the game.

There are things where you want to say, hey, a few years ago we with beat Fairleigh Dickinson, and they make their run, and they were one of those teams. You want to draw on anything that can help motivate, inspire your team to have success.

We've talked about that and shown that. Not a ton, but we have a screen in our -- we have kind of a motivational screen, and we just had some of those games playing, one of which was us playing them and beating them.

I don't know if that's overly needed for this team because we believe what we can do, but it wasn't like it was going to hurt. You do have to reference past history to kind of have that level of understanding that it can be done. There's nothing wrong with that, yeah.

Q. Brian and Ray said they had come to an SIUE camp as kids. Do you remember them way back then, and could you envision where it's all come to today?

BRIAN BARONE: I have to get my camp dates out. If those two players are going to show up in 15 years. That would be really big for me.

I wasn't here when those two were the little guys. (Zoom feed interruption.)

Our families were in it too, which was really special. Just saying good luck in the conference tournament. Brian's dad had this old camp ball that was the old logo SIUE, and it was all beat up. He said, you know, 12 years ago we've had this ball for 12 years, go get 'em, son.

It was really cool because he didn't start here. His path came back here, and he had that ball from that camp to go do something special in that video message. A few hours later we did. It was -- a lot of dots were connecting that day. It was pretty neat.

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