

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Gonzaga vs Houston

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Wichita, Kansas, USA

Intrust Bank Arena

Houston Cougars

Kelvin Sampson

Media Conference



From afar, I've always admired them, always respected them, but also I've been proud of them too because they're good friends and people that I have tremendous respect for. When you are playing Gonzaga, you are playing one of the elite programs in the history of this game, and I really mean that. That's true.

Q. Coach, yesterday Mercy Miller got his most minutes ever in the season. What have you seen from Mercy that allows you to trust him? It was a blow-out and certain situations allow certain guys to play more minutes, but what have you seen from Mercy that's allowed you to trust him to see the floor more?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, Mercy is a hard worker. He's also a great kid. Really good teammate. He wants to be good. I think he realizes that he's playing behind some really talented older guys that can only help him.

He comes to practice every day with the right attitude. As long as he keeps his attitude and his effort at a high level, Mercy is going to be a good player.

THE MODERATOR: Head Coach of the Cougars is here, Kelvin Sampson. We'll start with a statement from Coach.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, excited to still be around. This beats the alternative, but this NCAA Tournament is so exciting for kids, coaches, fans, families, everybody.

You know, as you advance and go from round to round, it only gets tougher, so every team you play is good enough to beat you. Your goal is to survive and advance. If you play good, you have a chance to advance. If you don't, you go home. Simple as that.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Kelvin, just a little while ago L.J. was saying this matchup was culture versus culture. When you look at the consistency of both programs over the last decade or so, what do you think about a matchup like this and being in the second round and really we could see this game being a second weekend Elite Eight-type matchup?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, well, we've only been doing this for about seven or eight, eight or nine years, whatever it is. Mark has been doing this a lot longer, so don't compare us to Gonzaga. You know, we've been to -- if the Poole kid doesn't hit that shot, that's six straight Sweet 16s, right? They're 16, so we don't really compare to them.

They're what every program aspires to be, have that consistency year to year. We've been good in our little bubble, but what Mark has done -- when you do this for a living like we do, you look at Gonzaga. Of course, I remember when Dan Fitzgerald was the coach. I remember when Dan Monson, one of my really good friends. Mark is one of my really good friends. I've been knowing those guys forever.

Q. Yesterday Mike White after the game was here talking about their preparation for Gonzaga, and they mentioned about how they were trying to force skips and forcing their bigs to pass it, and "they made us pay." I was curious if you have noticed the same thing, you and your staff, about Gonzaga's bigs and what has impressed you most about them in reviewing the tape?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, I agree with what you said. They're good at that.

Q. Coach, you were just kind of talking about the relationship you have with Mark Few. I have to imagine that started when you were at Washington State. Do you have a greater appreciation for the program because you were so close in proximity to that and saw it when it was really the building blocks with Fitz and Monson and whatnot?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yes. We were all so young. I mean, Washington State was obviously the hardest, toughest job in the Pac-10. If it would have been a good job, they never



... when all is said, we're done.®



would have hired me. They would have hired a real coach, somebody that was really good. I was 31 years old. You know, my first contract was two-year deal for \$82,000. For you guys that are challenged by math, that's \$41,000 a year. I assume they were doing that and then sort of could go find another guy.

But the guy that saved me -- in this day and age I would have been fired. My third year we lost 18 straight games. I had a kid from Spokane named David Sanders. He had some kind of blood infection and lost him for the year in December before the Pac-10 season started.

Then I had another kid from Snohomish. You can tell I was in Washington State. Most guys don't know of

Snohomish or Chelan, Moses Lake, Ellensburg. See, I'm down with the state of Washington.

We lost those guys. You don't have any depth as you are building the program. You are pretty good one through five or one through six. So those are our two best players, and we lost them. We beat USC on a Thursday at home, and then lost to UCLA on Saturday. Then lost 17 straight, including the first game of the conference tournament.

Jim Livengood was the AD. We didn't have social media then. This was in 1989 maybe. '89, '90. Gonzaga wasn't as bad as we were at Washington State, but they were struggling too. That next year we got it turned around and did pretty good over the course of the next seven years, six or seven years. I was a head coach of a USA team when Dan Monson was my assistant. His dad, Don, was one of the great coaches in that part of the country at Idaho. His best player was a guy by the name of Donny Newman, and Donny was my assistant at Washington State. He loved Don.

Gonzaga was somebody we've always looked up to. When they start rolling with Mons and Mons left and took the Minnesota job, right? Then Mark came in. Now all these years later, it's one of the -- he is not one of the best coaches in our game, he's one of the best coaches our game has ever seen. Mark is a Hall of Famer. Not just Hall of Fame coach. He's a Hall of Fame everything: Father, husband, friend. He's one of those guys that makes our profession look good. Mark is a great guy.

Q. Despite all those challenges you were talking about at Washington State, you were able to go to the NCAA Tournament in 1994, your first trip ever. How often around this (time of year are you thinking back to that team and what was that experience like for a young coach like yourself to be able to get to the Big Dance?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, I still hear from a lot of those guys. Eddie Hill is an assistant at the University of California Riverside.

Mark Hendrickson, we played West Virginia. We played in Morgantown earlier this year, and Mark brought his whole family and his little girl's basketball team and got to spend time with Mark after the game. Last year we played the Veterans Classic in Annapolis at the Naval Academy, and he came over. I actually had Mark speak to the team. He did an awesome job. Mark is an awesome guy.

So I still hear from a lot of those kids. I appreciate it because it always makes my day when I hear from them. I loved that team.

Q. Kelvin, you've been in this tournament before. You know what it takes to make a deep run in it. I'm curious if there are different dimensions about this team this year, the shooting? I know Los's development has been a big key. Does that give you that confidence that maybe you guys have different dimensions that can carry you?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah. Well, there's no substitute for talent. Actually when we were in the Final Four, Gonzaga was in the Final Four with us that year. I think they played -- who did they play? UCLA? We played Baylor. It didn't take me long to realize we weren't as good as Baylor. That might be the best team we played since I've been at Houston. They were that good.

I think the clear second best team in the country that year was Gonzaga. The two best teams in the country played in the championship. I don't think we were quite as good as Baylor. Gonzaga was right there behind them probably. Our team this year we have -- I think we have a really good team. I don't think we're great. It's not -- this team can shoot better than some of the other teams. We have more guys that can make a basket.

But you know, we're like every team. We have to play really good to win. We have to have certain things go our way, but this team has gotten better over the course of the year.

One thing, older coaches tend to try to educate when people ask questions. They try to control the narrative, if you will. I've learned to never overreact to games in November, wins or losses. It's amazing how people put a period at the end of a game in November. They don't matter. It doesn't matter.

We lost three games in November, and I thought all of them were good for us. I mean, honest to God, we tried to



beat Auburn. Couldn't. Tried. They just beat us.

Alabama, we had a chance to win that game.

Probably the game that kind of wish we had back a little bit was San Diego State. Then once we got home, the problem with playing in a tournament where you are going for seven days is you never get to practice. Once we got home and got to where we could practice, our team started improving, especially Uzan. Uzan started getting better.

But I give our players a lot of credit for that. Our players gave him permission to be their point guard, and they encouraged him. They made sure he knew that they believed in him. Sometimes the coaches get way too much credit for stuff. Our program is very much a player-led program versus a coach-led program. Our players, tremendous kids, great character, integrity. We never worry about discipline problems. We don't have any of that.

They do a great job of caring and taking care of our culture, and that's one of the reasons why we've been able to be as consistent as we have been.

Q. You guys played Arizona twice. How many parallels do you see between Mark's team and Tommy's team? Can you kind of draw on those experiences when playing Gonzaga tomorrow?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, not many similarities because their personnel is so different. Both teams are really talented. Both teams really have great size. The Veesaar kid and the Awaka kid. Arizona is big, and they started two fives against us, I think the second half in the tournament, which was a good move because we didn't have Roberts. Roberts didn't dress for that game. We just figured a way to win the game.

I think the difference in the two teams is Nembhard. It's hard to duplicate him. You have a point guard. They have a point guard, but your point guard is not like Nembhard. He has an uncanny ability to get the ball to their bigs when they're open. A lot of guys see that they're open, but by the time the synapses are firing and the ball is delivered, they're not. He gives them -- as soon as they turn, they have it. You can't teach that.

So if I was going to say the difference, I would say they both have great size, they're both really talented shooters, good guards, but they don't have Nembhard. He's a very special point guard.

Q. Kelvin, the ability to get your regulars -- to pull them early yesterday, given that you won't have many

of those opportunities later, how important was that, especially for maybe someone like J'Wan? Didn't you try to get a game with Gonzaga in 2021?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Gon-ZA-ga. It always burns me up when people say that. It's like calling me Kevin. My name is not Kevin. My mother used to say -- people would see my name and say, Kevin. She always used to say, "Don't let people call you Kevin. Your name is Kelvin." That's why my antennas go up with that. Same with Gonzaga. They were our neighbors. It's not Spo-kane or Gon-zah-ga. It's Gonzaga and Spokane.

Q. Did you schedule or try to get one that year when you had an open week or something against Gonzaga?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I know Mark and I talked about it a couple of times. Regular season and scrimmage. I remember Tony Bennett. Tony called about the same time, and he wanted to come scrimmage. I remember saying, scrimmage? Let's just play. That's how we played home and home with Virginia.

I think Mark and I, we were going to go play. I could have this wrong. Did Gonzaga play Baylor in South Dakota or somewhere like that? Yeah, I think they had talked to us about doing that, but I don't remember the details or why not, but yeah, I don't remember.

We schedule enough losses in the nonconference, we don't need another one (laughing).

Q. I know they're on the other side here, but I'm curious of your impressions of Drake and perhaps what you have seen from Ben McCollum in terms of either the basketball they play or the ability to establish an identity in what's been a short period of time?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, I haven't seen enough of them to have an opinion. The only time I saw them was when we were getting ready to play Kansas State. One of the games I looked at on film was their game against Drake. The thing that stood out was how disciplined and how well-drilled they were.

As a coach, you look at the way they ran their stuff and how connected they were, and you can tell. I don't know their coach, but you can tell he's really good.

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