

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Akron vs Creighton

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

PPG Paints Arena

Creighton Bluejays
Baylor Scheierman
Trey Alexander
Ryan Kalkbrenner
Coach Greg McDermott

Media Conference

Q. Baylor, what has it been like to be in Pittsburgh so far and just kind of get the feel of your last March Madness?

BAYLOR SCHEIERMAN: Yeah, it's been good. We got in a little late last night so haven't really seen too much. Just went to dinner and whatnot. But we had practice this morning. It was good and first looked at the arena. It looks like a great atmosphere and like you said my last March Madness. Never want to take it for granted, obviously. Not everyone gets to be here so I'm just soaking it all in.

Q. Trey and Ryan, when you first walked into the arena, to kind of see the stage, the lights that you'll be under tomorrow, what goes through your mind as you try to kind of soak that in and kind of simulate that in your mind?

TREY ALEXANDER: Yeah, piggybacking off of what Baylor said, you just try to soak it all in. You never know how many more of these you'll have, especially for us two guys up here. But it's just been a great experience for me throughout my college career, just being able to play in the NCAA Tournament for the past three years. So like Baylor said, never take it for granted and just give it our all and be able to leave everything out there.

RYAN KALKBRENNER: Like these two guys said, taking it all in every day. Taking it one day at a time. I mean my first three years of playing in this tournament have been an incredible experience. So just trying to take it in, get the full experience out of it.



Q. This is for Trey. How do you kind of balance that urgency that you need in a game like this with playing loose and free like you do in regular season games?

TREY ALEXANDER: Kind of have the same approach. It's just a lot more at stake, I think, personally. We've been here a couple of times so I know what to expect and I know what type of urgency to bring game in and game out. You try to bring the most amount of urgency you can because you never know what game will be your last for the rest of the season. So we all try to bring as much urgency as possible and make sure we're locked in because you never want to take any game for granted and try to make sure that we leave everything out there.

Q. I apologize for bringing it up again but did the Providence game just kind of reinforce the idea that it's a pretty fragile time of year that you're always kind of 40 minutes away from feeling the type of feeling you don't want to feel.

RYAN KALKBRENNER: Yeah, I mean obviously we have our sights set higher for the Big East Tournament, and when you have a shock like that, it just like you said, reenforces that any game could be your last if you're not careful. So we got an older group, one that understands the stakes at this time of year. So we're really locked in and we know what we gotta do to play a long time like we want to do this time.

TREY ALEXANDER: Yeah, I think that game just kind of shows if you're not ready to play or you're not playing at your best then you kind of can get beat. And I think that tournament game we would have rather lost the first round, then get all the way to the championship and lose. So it was either win it all or lose early so we could get a lot of rest. So we're glad the position that we're in and we're happy that we get to be in this position and be as high of a seed as we've been and we're just excited to get going and get on the stage.

Q. For Baylor and Trey, just general impressions on Akron and Ryan I don't know how much have you scouted Enrique Freeman, but what have you seen of



him?

BAYLOR SCHEIERMAN: They're obviously a great team. They've got a lot of guys that can do a lot of different things and like you said their big man is really skilled, leads the country in doubles doubles. He's a handful down low. And their guards as well do a good job of playing off him as well and can hit shots. So they're a very talented team. And like Trey said, everybody who gets this tournament is really good and you can't think anybody isn't as good as they are. You have to take the same approach as you've done all year. So they're a really great basketball team.

TREY ALEXANDER: Yeah, going off of what Baylor said, they've got a really good team. They've got two guys on the first team of their conference. Obviously Enrique was the Player of the Year. He's had a really good season. We played against Ali Ali last year when he was at Butler. So we know those are two pretty well talented guys and they have some nice quick guards they can get to the rim and shoot a little bit from the outside. So it's going to be fun. They have a really good team, and like Baylor said, everybody at this level is here for a reason. So can't take any team lightly.

RYAN KALKBRENNER: We know Freeman is a super, super talented player. The coach on the team does a really good job of drawing plays up to get him the ball and get the ball in good spots down low. So you definitely gotta be well prepared and really locked against a player like that. So, yeah, just be watching a lot of film of him. I've been watching a lot of film. We'll watch a bunch tonight to be as ready for him as possible.

Q. The custom kicks looked good. What did you guys think of the fresh Js before heading out?

BAYLOR SCHEIERMAN: They were nice. They were solid. Yeah. I'm not going to complain. I don't think I'll ever wear them. But they were nice. Nice addition.

TREY ALEXANDER: I would have to agree.

RYAN KALKBRENNER: I don't know nothing about shoes, but they looked really cool. So I'll take it.

MODERATOR: Once again, please raise your hand to ask a question and a person with the microphone will come over. Questions for Coach McDermott.

Q. Mack, you had said on Sunday night you didn't know much about Akron. What have you learned about them in the days since then?

GREG McDERMOTT: Well, you understand why they're

here by watching them play. Obviously they led the Mac in defense and you can see why. Very physical, defensive team, very connected on the defensive end. And then a rim protector in Freeman at the basket. That makes things tough around the rim. And they're experienced. Freeman, Ali, Tribble and Dawson all played in this tournament two years ago, took UCLA to the wire in a first round game. So not often when you play a team from a Mid Major league are they going to have that kind of NCAA Tournament experience, but very good basketball team. I've known John Groce for a long time. He's been terrific everywhere he's been. And has done a great job with that Akron program.

Q. When you look at Freeman and the way he's able to be effective, what have you, I guess, learned about how he's able to do it at his size?

GREG McDERMOTT: He's elite at creating angles. And he does so much work before the pass is made that his job is easy once he catches the basketball. So that's going to be a challenge for our defense is to make sure we somehow stay between him and the basket, because if he gets you on an angle, it's over. And he's got an incredible second jump. So he gets back to the rim the second time very quickly, which obviously makes him a very effective offensive rebounder. But he's really, really talented. And he's shifty enough that he's got a way of really drawing fouls, and he's -- I don't know who leads the country in free throw attempts but he's gotta be in the Top 10. He shoots a lot of them. But very complete with his game, scores over both shoulders. He shoots it well enough from three that you have to respect that. Just a terrific player.

Q. Greg, John had a guy walk in off of an open campus tryout and become an All-American. That ever happen to you?

GREG McDERMOTT: No. Yeah, that's an incredible story. And I've always heard -- you know, I've heard these stories over and over that you go through recruiting and some parents will tell you that they went to the doctor and their son's growth plates haven't closed yet and they got two or three inches of growth left. I don't think I've ever had anybody grow in my 35 years of doing this. But Freeman's story is incredible. To be from where he started to where he is today is a credit to his work ethic but also to John and his staff for the way that they've developed him.

Q. While I have it here, you've been in this tournament many times before and I know each team has its own experience and its own journey. How much does your experience inform the way you prepare this team?

GREG McDERMOTT: You know, last year, you know, the



guys that have returned -- and we have some NCAA Tournament experience. I mentioned that Akron does. But obviously Trey, Baylor and Ryan were part of this team. Mason Miller played off the bench some. Ashworth played in the NCAA Tournament at Utah State. But those guys last year when they made the decision to come back, we started talking at that point in time about the value of one possession. And it's coach speak. We all talk about it. But when you really -- when you're a possession away from the Final Four and you don't get there, I think it really hits you square in the face.

So that's kind of been our mantra since we've started the season is like this possession really matters. And that only works if your leadership buys into it. And we just haven't had -- I've said it to our local media many times. We've had some practices that are better than others, but we've had 90 some practices and we haven't had a bad practice. And that speaks to the leadership in our locker room when a practice gets off to a rough start, they have a way of kind of rallying the troops and making sure we get something out of it and we get better that day.

So the leadership in my locker room is as good as it's ever had and it's a big reason we've had the success we've had this season.

Q. Baylor and Ryan have both played a lot of collective hoops under their belt at this point. But what have you seen from those guys this year just in their pursuit of continuing to refine their game at their tool box, so to speak, just continuing to better themselves as players even at this late stage in their career?

GREG McDERMOTT: You know, Baylor, Ryan and Trey, I'll throw him in there too because they all had decisions to make last year. Baylor went through the NBA draft process two years ago, decided late in the season that he was going to come back for a second year and really put his mind at I need to develop my body. I need to get stronger. I need to become a little quicker. I want to get my shot off quicker. I want to be able to shoot off on the move a little bit better and Trey and Kalk went through the draft process and made the decisions pretty late in the process to come back and took the information that they got from the NBA on things that they needed to improve on and then they went to work at it. A lot of guys will say they're going to do it and just kind of go through the motions. These three guys have taken it to heart. They've really improved. Trey's ability to be a play maker besides a scorer and assist in turnovers is terrific. Defensively he does a lot for us. And Baylor is one of the best rebounding guards in the country besides what he does offensively for us. And then Kalk is a three-time Defensive Player of the

Year in the Big East. And you have to go to guys like Ewing and Mourning to find people that have done that. So the three of them have just been awesome to coach. There's a lot of joy in what we're doing and a lot of it has to do with how they lead.

Q. Mac, I know you guys know it, but you went to New York with title aspirations. Did getting eliminated early reinforce the fragility of the type of games you're playing this time of year?

GREG McDERMOTT: Fragility. Good word. I mean, the Big East is really good and Providence was playing for a lot. Obviously we were trying to get to Saturday and have a chance to win a championship. And in a game like that it was going to be decided on who makes plays at the end. And we missed some free throws after really shooting well and missed a couple decent looks at the basket.

But once we got home, you know, we treated it like any other game. Let's learn from it, here's what we did well, here's what we need to clean up. And then we had the opportunity to take a day off on Friday, really work on ourselves Saturday, another off day on Sunday and then turn or attention to Akron on Monday. So I think the fact that we lean on some guys for some pretty heavy minutes, that we had a couple days off in there, I'm hopeful will be good for us as we move into this week.

But we were disappointed. You never want to lose in the first round especially. There's a lot of people that came out there to watch us play and they had to sit around without the Bluejays for a couple days. But I like the spot we're in. I think we've had a good week of practice, but obviously we're playing a really good team.

Q. Coach, one of the things that Baylor, Trey and Ryan all talked about given their experience was you can't overlook anybody. Everyone's in this tournament for a reason. How have you kind of instilled that message in the younger guys, who maybe haven't been here before or haven't been here very often?

GREG McDERMOTT: I mean the most important thing is the younger guys have heard it from Baylor, Trey and Ryan. You know, that's so impactful when the leaders of your team are duplicating the message that's coming from the coaching staff. And the other thing is when you watch Akron on film, and we've watched a fair amount as a team, our guys know basketball, and they know that these guys are very talented players. Ali Ali was at Butler last year. So we played against him a year ago. So our guys have tremendous respect for Akron, and the season that they've had. They have 24 wins and a bunch of close losses. I mean this is a team that was an eyelash away in a lot of

games from having won 30 games this year. So they have our total respect. And will we win? I can't say that for sure.

But I know we'll be prepared because of how we respect their program and their players.

Q. Mack, what, if anything, does winning the first game of the tournament do to set the tone the rest of the way?

GREG McDERMOTT: Well, it means you get to stay, number one. But, you know, you have to -- you're going to have games in a tournament, some are harder than others, and you have to find a way. And that's really -- you know, you hear the phrase, survive and advance. And that's really what it's about. Like just figure out a way. And every team that you play has had a heck of a year or they wouldn't be here. Every team that you play have supreme confidence in their ability to win because of the amount of games they've won this season. So you're going to have a hard time having a team not be ready or not be prepared or give in when things are tough, because all the teams that are in the tournament have been through that stuff and figured out a way to navigate it.

So I think the key is you really have to navigate the tough moments in these games and make sure they don't get away from you, because there's going to be some of those because of who you're playing.

Q. Greg, what was your reaction to seeing Oregon on the other side of this bracket, and can you describe the relationship you've had with Dean over the last 14 years, even going back to the COVID season and them coming out to play a couple of games to start their season at your guys' place?

GREG McDERMOTT: Dana is still beloved in Omaha and he always will be. He really did the heavy lifting with this program in the 16 years he was there, taking over a program that there was 1500 people coming to the games. And then moving into an arena with 17000 people and figuring out a way to get people there to watch you. And, you know, it was Dana's work and the way he grew the program in the Missouri Valley conference that allowed us to kind of take that torch and run with it.

I was at Northern Iowa when he was at Creighton, so we competed against each other. I didn't beat him very much during that time. We were in a lot of recruiting battles, but I think since I've moved to Omaha I've gotten to know Dana's family. His family besides being Oregon fans are huge Creighton fans. His dad and his brother would come to all of our lunches, Lyle and Derk. And I just have tremendous respect for Dana and the job that he's done. It's really rare in this day and age of what have you done

for me lately to have two head coaches at a university in 30 years' time, him being there 16 years and me 14. But I think it also speaks to the people of Omaha and the people of Creighton that it's a place you really don't want to leave because there was a lot of special folks there.

But I know Oregon is going to have a sea of blue cheering for them on Thursday afternoon because of the way Dana is respected in our community.

Q. Mack, I know that you coaches in the Big East kind of have, you know, a tight knit group chat, all that. With the way Selection Sunday went down, I know it probably doesn't affect preparation for Akron or anything like that, but do you, Shaka and Dan, do you guys feel like you're carrying the flag for what you perceived to be a disrespect on Sunday?

GREG McDERMOTT: I think we always want to represent the Big East as well as we possibly can, and I think you heard all three of our comments after the selection, how disappointed we were, while understanding the selection committee has a very difficult job. But we think the Big East is really, really good, and deserved to have more teams in the tournament. And we've gone back and forth on some group chats about that.

But I know those other teams are supporting us, and I know that I'm pretty sure that Dan and Shaka are in the same boat as I am. We're just worried about the next game and trying to advance in the tournament and show people just how good the Big East is.

MODERATOR: Any more questions for Coach?

GREG McDERMOTT: Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach.

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