

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Oregon vs South Carolina

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

PPG Paints Arena

Oregon Ducks

Jermaine Couisnard

N'Faly Dante

Coach Dana Altman

Media Conference



guys see when you look at South Carolina's offense and how you guys might be able to work your defensive scheme against them?

JERMAINE COUISNARD: That they share the ball well, that the coach got them playing very well. They play with a lot of confidence in themselves and just they also, like, what I was like saying, just do different things that I feel like we can adjust to. So I feel like it's going to be a good match-up for us.

N'FALY DANTE: I just talked to my teammates, like let's just play our game. Play defense and go from there. They're a good offensive team, and we just gotta play our game.

MODERATOR: What makes this group so special?

JERMAINE COUISNARD: I feel like we beat just the adversity we went through this year. Like we've been down, knocked down. We're not at full strength but of course we made it work over the weeks of time, and just us believing in each other, that's it and just having the confidence with the team that we have, people in the locker room, people that's here with us. So I feel like that's a big thing for us.

MODERATOR: N'Faly? What makes this group so special that you're part of right now?

N'FALY DANTE: I think everybody is just a special athlete and we just trust each other, and we're willing to do everything for each other to win. So I'm glad to be part of this team.

MODERATOR: We actually have a Zoom question here. See if we can get this to work.

Q. Congratulations for you guys making it to Pittsburgh. What is it like playing in the final season of the PAC-12 knowing you guys are probably off to the Big Ten next year. What was the feeling like playing in that conference for the final year?

JERMAINE COUISNARD: It was fine. I feel like we just

MODERATOR: Questions for our student-athletes.

Q. Jermaine, good to see you again. You've answered it before, but seeing South Carolina on the other side of that bracket, with all the time and history you have in there, what was that like for you? What was that immediate moment when you saw you'd be playing your old school?

JERMAINE COUISNARD: It was amazing for me, just seeing how far the program came and how the coach has done a good job with them guys over there. It was something that we all wanted when we all was there. So it was like we all got what we wanted.

Q. Following up on that, tell me, did you get to talk to some of your old teammates, reach out to Jacobi or Josh at all and be able to say looking forward to seeing you or anything like that?

JERMAINE COUISNARD: They kind of texted me when we went back to our championship, trying to congratulate me, but after Selection Sunday I didn't talk to them at all.

Q. N'Faly, you seem pretty at ease. This is a big stage. What's it been like arriving here, soaking all this in and getting ready to play a game now?

N'FALY DANTE: That's something I wanted to do since I get into college. First time I was there and I was hurt so I don't think there's anything to be nervous about, just do whatever I can for the team to win.

Q. Either of you guys can answer this. What do you



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knowing we did something special, that we made history and just for being like the last team to win in the PAC-12. That's a conference that a lot of great players came from. So I feel like it feels good to us.

Q. N'Faly, you mentioned you have been here before. So even though you couldn't play last time, having that tournament experience, how helpful, if at all, is it to you now to know what you're getting yourself into and know what this stage is going to be like? Do you remember much from that experience that can help you?

N'FALY DANTE: To be honest, I don't really think about it that much. But it do help me, though. I was there when I was hurt, and I think it was a motivation for me to do whatever I can to help my team to get here. Now we're here, we just gotta go. Last time we went to Sweet 16 and we got bigger vision than that. So just hope everybody stay healthy and I know we're capable -- I know what we're capable of doing.

MODERATOR: Questions for Coach Altman.

Q. Coach, in your experience, what's the right balance of kind of enjoying being here but also getting down to business for your guys, and this group in particular? How do you feel like they're handling it and will handle those elements of this experience?

DANA ALTMAN: I don't believe there's an exact formula to that. Every team is different. This is a group, we don't have any NCAA tournament experience. So I want the guys to enjoy it, to relax a little bit, but also let them know we've got a job to do. They handled the conference tournament well. I thought they approached each ball game with a degree of professionalism and were ready to go. I thought the older guys got the freshmen focused and ready to go. So I'm not worried about this group. It's a small group. We're playing eight guys and Gabe (Reichle) and James Cooper are two additional players, walk-ons, are always focused. So they'll be ready to go. Just gotta make sure we execute and make sure we hit a few shots.

Q. Coach, now that you've had a couple of days to look at South Carolina, what sticks out on film?

DANA ALTMAN: Their physicality. They're a very good defensive team, big body. You can tell they're older guys. Share the ball really well. Really like the way they pound the boards. Just a very experienced team.

Q. Sticking with South Carolina, what have you seen from Lamont Paris and the coaching job he's done this year and did you know him at all before he got the

South Carolina job?

DANA ALTMAN: Not really. And we're probably a lot like them. We didn't see them play much, and they probably didn't stay up and watch us. So we weren't very familiar with them. But very impressed with their wins. Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi State, you know, those are teams that you catch every now and then, but, again, very impressive wins, strong conference, and, again, just their physicality and their experience level, I think, gets anybody's attention.

Q. Coach Altman, I apologize because I know this isn't your focus, at least not immediately, but seeing Creighton here with the highest seed it ever had next to their name, knowing what you helped build and the sustainability that Mack has kind of taken off, handed off from you, is there any pride left in seeing the way they've kind of been able to manage that since you left?

DANA ALTMAN: Well, you know, probably as my local media asked me that, and it's probably my ego, but yes. I take great pride in it. Spent 16 years there. Loved working at Creighton, love Omaha. I'm from Nebraska. And Greg's done a great job, unbelievable, moving to the Big East. You know, it is fun watching them be successful, and I about threw my glass through the TV last year when they called that foul. I wanted them to go to the Final Four so bad. You don't spend 16 years at a place, and just because I left doesn't mean I don't love it. So I'm really happy for them. Bruce Rasmussen, who I worked with there for 16 years, Greg, those guys have done a great job. I hope we play them. That means we both won.

But, again, it's tournament time, and I love Oregon. I hope I feel, and the people feel, the same way when my time is done at Oregon. I know I'll feel the same way about Oregon as I do about Creighton. I'll want them to be successful and keep it going.

Q. Just going off that, Coach, McDermott said you will probably have a sea of blue cheering for you tomorrow. What does that mean knowing you spent so much time there and they'd like to see you still succeed?

DANA ALTMAN: They were unbelievable to me in the 16 years we were there. The first three years were really tough trying to get it going. They had three really bad years before we got there, and it took us a while to get it going. But the people stayed with us. And so, again, I left there, and I still love the place. Still do. Still cheer for them. A lot of good friends back in Omaha. My wife and I, Reva, we're both from Nebraska. Spent 16 years there,

raised our kids there. A lot of special feelings, but, again, I'm having those same feelings about Oregon, 14 years into it. Our whole family has moved out there, and we've made that our home now. So two really special places, and I'm just fortunate to spend 30 years at two great schools.

Q. Being here in the gym today, what are the biggest takeaways you want your guys to get from being able to get some shots up and get the lay of the land in this facility?

DANA ALTMAN: Just get a feel. We'll do some live things. We'll probably be different than a lot of teams. We'll do a few live up-and-downs, just trying to get our legs. Long flight yesterday. So we gotta get up and down a little bit and get the energy going again. But, you know, it's going to be a physical game, and our freshmen gotta figure that and get ready for that. Boards are going to be really important. If they get second shots, we're really in trouble.

I just hope our guys are ready for that physicality. But I think UCLA prepared us for that. Arizona is a physical team. We got some physical teams out west also. So I think we're prepared for it, but this will be a different scenario, a different situation, and hope our guys are ready for that.

Q. Dana, when you find yourself here on the heels of winning a conference tournament and just looking into the immediate past, having beaten some tough teams, Arizona, Colorado, does that create a wave at all that you guys can ride in here or are you guys better suited keeping that fully in the past and just focusing on the future as opposed to drawing from those wins?

DANA ALTMAN: I want to draw from those wins. I think we did some really good things. We got the ball to Dante. That was a good thing. No. We want to draw from those things that we did well. We need some more contributions from some of our guys. They've gotta get a few more loose balls, gotta get a few more rebounds. Defensively, some of our guys gotta do a little better job. But no, I want those guys to feel good about themselves coming in. We know we're going to have to play really well. We knew we had to play really well in the three games in Vegas. UCLA was playing good. Arizona was playing good. Colorado had won eight or nine in a row. So we knew we had to play well there. And we know we're going to have to play well tomorrow.

Q. Coach, you mentioned it a few minutes ago about that long flight into Pittsburgh, and you gotta get some of the guys up and moving a little bit more. How does that affect your preparation for tomorrow knowing that

there's a significant travel advantage in South Carolina's favor?

DANA ALTMAN: You know, it's just part of the game. It's part of the tournament. Someone's gotta travel, and so I don't think it's that big a deal because they let you come out -- if we were flying out today, then it might. But we flew out. We got plenty of time. Our guys will adjust. And so I'm not worried about it. I don't think the guys are. We got in yesterday, worked out last night, and had a good night's sleep, tried to get adjusted to the time difference. The guys will get a good workout today. And like I said, being able to come out on Tuesday, getting ready for the Thursday game, I don't think it's a factor at all.

Q. Coach, we saw during the cinematic recap Dillon Brooks had sent you a text after the Arizona game. Now that you've had a couple of days, obviously you're here, have you heard from any of the former players and if you have, any message that you can share?

DANA ALTMAN: We heard from a lot of players, and our players -- that's not only the players that have played for us the last 14 years. Luke Ridnour, Freddie Jones, the number of players that played for Coach Kent and before we got to Oregon. They all follow. Once a Duck, always a Duck.

But, no, Brooks, probably the most vocal, but Chris Duarte, all of them have texted, Payton. The guys that played for us. I've heard from a lot of Creighton players, you know, saying they hope we win one.

But, no, as a coach you take great pride in the fact that those guys want to be part of the program. And they know how important they were to the program. And I remind them every time I get a text from them, we wouldn't be where we're at without them. And when we don't play well they let us know and when we play well they let us know. And that's a good thing because that means they're invested and follow what we do.

Q. As a coach who's been on both sides, you were at a Mid Major when it was a, quote, Mid Major for a long time. Obviously, you're now in a Power Conference. Expansion looks like it's coming. As a coach, as a fan of the game, do you want to see if they get add four eight, some of those split between positions and schools that are, quote, Mid Majors or do you see it as giving it to schools in Power Conferences that might have finished a little further down the ladder?

DANA ALTMAN: I think the committee's got a really tough job. I've never once been negative about any decision the committee has made. It's a tough job. Rob's been on the

football committee. It's a tough job there. It's a tough job on the basketball committee. And I know people that are on that committee. They got great integrity. They want what's best for college basketball, there's no doubt in my mind. So I would never, and I have never, said anything negative about any decision they've made. It's a tough job. We have our chance to prove what we can do during the season, and if they judge that it's not the right stuff, not the right criteria, I just gotta live with it.

So, again, I think it's a really tough job. The people who are on that committee, I know take it very seriously. They want to do what's best for college basketball. And so, again, you can check my record. I've never said anything negative. Been on the wrong side of it, been on the right side of it. Just, you have your chance during the year. If the committee is in your favor, great. If they choose not to, that's just part of it.

Q. Dana, we asked you about Stubbs, but wanted to ask you about Josh and now with Robert McCullum being let go at Florida A & M. How much of the band getting back together will be possible in the weeks and months ahead?

DANA ALTMAN: You know, I don't know. I gotta finish this year, and then I'll sit down with Rob and Eric and talk about our staff, you know, what direction we want to go. We've got so many new things coming in with the portal and the NIL, and now the change to the Big Ten, a lot of change. And so I'm not sure what direction we'll go, but after the tournament, like I said, I'll sit down with Rob, Eric and try to get a direction, try to put the best staff together. I know we have challenges ahead of us. And winning the tournament to get in is great, but we want to be better. We've gotta have a deeper team. We've been really hit by injuries the last few years, and so the depth of our team. And now with travel, the depth of our team is going to be even more important, I think. So we've got a lot of things to discuss, and I've been thinking about them for a long time, wasted a lot of paper writing down a lot of notes. But as soon as the season is over, I'll sit down and talk with the administration and see what direction we need to go.

Q. And you've spoken about Jermaine's impact obviously on the court and it's been very significant. How have you gone about learning, as a coach, a player's background off the court with Jermaine, with him, with his mom, with how he grew up in the neighborhood he grew up in, the things he had to watch and endure, not just about transferring from South Carolina or SAT scores but about life. And are you drawn to players like him who happen to come from some pretty tough backgrounds because you've got a lot of successful guys who happen to have that?

DANA ALTMAN: Well, guys that don't have all the advantages that I did growing up and they need you a little bit more, sometimes you do get a little closer to them. You know, come from all different backgrounds. I grew up in a real little town and mom and dad, and always had money in my pocket, a car to drive. We didn't have much money, but my dad was great. And so you realize that there's so many different backgrounds and so many hardships that guys gotta overcome, and people who just sit there and judge, he should be able to do this or he should be able to do that, they don't see some of the economic backgrounds these guys come from and the tough areas they grow up in, and socially how much difference there is between some of our players.

So, again, you get closer with some of the guys. And some guys don't need you. Off the floor, they got great parents, they got a great background, and some guys need you a little bit more.

Now, Jermaine, he doesn't need me because he's old. You know, he's mature. He's been around the block. But getting to know his mother and his uncle, his family, has been great. And when he does need me, I'm there. But he's a lot different than the 18, 19-year-old freshmen who might be going through some of the things that he's gone through. But he's very loyal to his mother. Raven is great, and just great family. But again, the different backgrounds that guys come from. We got two guys from Mali who are a long way from home. And, heck, Dante hadn't been home for seven years until he went home last summer. I can't even imagine coming over to our country at 14 and not going home for six, seven years.

So you got a lot of different backgrounds and a lot of different situations. And you try to be there for all of them. Some of them want you to be around. Others kind of keep their distance, and as a coach, that's your job to figure that out, because relationships are a big part of it.

MODERATOR: Our last question is going to come from Zoom.

Q. I don't know that this question was asked, but taking on South Carolina, what do they look like? I know you played in the PAC-12. Is there anybody similar to them in the PAC-12? How do you get ready for a team that you've never faced?

DANA ALTMAN: I told the fellows that I think they're kind of a combination between UCLA and Washington State. UCLA is physical, big-bodied like them, but I think they score a little bit more like Washington State. So two good teams that gave us problems throughout the year. So we

know we're going to have to play well, but if I had to compare them to a team out west defensively, a lot like UCLA, and offensively kind of similar to Washington State.

MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach.

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