

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - NC State vs Texas Tech

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

PPG Paints Arena

**NC State Wolfpack**

**DJ Horne**

**DJ Burns**

**Casey Morsell**

**Coach Kevin Keats**

Media Conference



CASEY MORSELL: No, not really. We're kind of a new team, and our approach heading into the postseason is it's a new season. One of the things we always talk about in our meetings before the tournament starts is that it's zero and zero. Everybody's record is zero and zero. And we took that approach as if it's a fresh start. And that was the foundation for us to get momentum.

**Q. DJ, is it weird going on opposing sidelines at this time and do you have any kind of stories from your time together at Arizona State?**

DJ Horne: You know, it's always cool to see your friends and everything that you know you played with in the basketball world. So being able to play against them, even though I don't know what their status will be tomorrow, it'll be good to see those guys again knowing that we were just here last year.

**Q. On your ACC tournament run, you obviously beat a couple really good teams, Duke, North Carolina. Do you sort of think that that gives you a bit of a leg up going into the NCAA tournament that you kind of faced off against a one seed and I think Duke's a four, just kind of already going through them, I guess?**

CASEY MORSELL: Yeah, for sure. I think one of the great things about the tournament is that we faced all different types of adversity, whether it be injuries, just different schemes that we played against. So we're definitely going to use those lessons that we learned from the tournament heading into this March Madness run.

**Q. You guys are a different team than you were at the end of the regular season. I'd like each one of you to comment on what you think this team is doing best right now.**

DJ Horne: I would just say I feel like we're really connected right now. And I think everybody's on the same page of what is expected of us, or expected of each and every one of us. So I would just say the connectedness.

DJ BURNS, JR: I'd say our defense. It was kind of good

**Q. Obviously you guys were a high seed in the ACC tournament, ended up winning it and now you're here. Do you feel like a chip on your shoulder coming into the NCAA Tournament, which you guys weren't necessarily in the conversation for heading into the conference tournament?**

DJ HORNE: I felt like coming into this tournament we definitely have a lot of confidence. All along, we knew we were a good team. We just had some ups and downs throughout the season. So to be able to pull it all together for a great conference tournament run and ultimately winning it, definitely coming into this with a lot of confidence.

**Q. DJ Burns, you just really exploded in the ACC tournament. I feel like all over social media people were just talking about you. What's it been like since that happened?**

DJ BURNS: It's been kind of crazy. The exposure that you get playing at this level is really unmatched. And I didn't really realize it until after that game how big it could possibly get. It's truly been a blessing.

**Q. You ended the season on a four-game losing streak. You were here at Pitt right before the ACC Tournament. You're obviously coming back a team with a lot more confidence. Is this a bit of a full circle moment that you're now on this stage compared to maybe where you were two weeks ago just down the street?**



towards the beginning of the year, but I think that after we had the four games going into the tournament, we decided that we weren't going to be that team who -- you know, we decided to leave that defense in the past and really step up. I think our guys have been doing well, attention to detail and just stepping up.

CASEY MORSELL: Yeah. To piggyback on what they said, I mean I think we're not beating ourselves as much as we did in the regular season. You know, we're kind of just kind of outplaying teams, but we're not shooting ourselves in the foot.

**Q. You guys all being graduate players and you kind of follow these older guys. For all three of you, how much is the driving force behind the ACC tournament run and kind of where you're at now, where this is it for us. We need to do something with this opportunity in front of us?**

DJ Horne: I would say just knowing that this is all of our last year. We came into this, especially the ACC tournament, with a lot of desperation. I would say for myself personally, I just didn't want the season to be over and going into the tournament, I felt that from each and every one of my teammates.

DJ BURNS, JR: I would say the same. It was big for me that we don't go home, you know. The way we were set up to be a part of the tournament, we most likely would not have made it without it, and we just decided that we were going to go out and fight, give it everything we got and we got the job done to make it here.

CASEY MORSELL: Yeah, it's big just because, yeah, I mean just you work so hard all summer. I'm sure every team does. But this group, like I said, has faced a lot of adversity, and our record from the regular season shows that. And the fact that things are starting to click and things are starting to get going, it's a great story that we all value. So we're definitely going to do our best to make it a fairytale ending.

**Q. I know each season is different, each team is different. Was there ever any conversation after Saturday about the history you did achieve the first ACC championship for NC State in 37 years?**

DJ Horne: Yeah. We talked about it a little bit, but just with how fast everything's been kind of moving the past couple of days, having to get ready to get up here for the tournament, I don't think we've really had a chance to process it all. But the city has shown a lot of love, and I think over time we'll see more like just what we did.

**Q. I'm just wondering what each of you guys think about how this team came together during the week last week. Can you talk a little bit about that? Did you feel something different happening during that run?**

CASEY MORSELL: Well, I mean, yeah. I mean, it was taking it one game at a time, just focusing on going one and 0, you know. And I think trying to mute out the noise and distractions leading up to the game. There were a lot of negativity outside of our locker room, and just focusing on the task at hand and whatever happens at the end of the season happens really. So our backs were against the wall. We embraced the underdog mentality, and the rest is history.

DJ BURNS, JR: I'd say we used it as motivation going into -- the disrespect that we were getting, our coach and us as players, every night, when we lost those games, just complete disrespect. And we took it personally, and I think that that's kind of what the driving force was. Some of those teams that we played against, they had disrespected us as well and we were just tired of it, honestly.

DJ Horne: I'll just go back on what I said about issues being connected and everybody was honest and just focused. We felt like we all understood what our roles were and we were just going to go out there and execute that every night, and then having the monkey on your back of if you lose a game you go home and this is it. I think that was something that definitely motivated us.

**Q. There's teams that you have obviously deep ties against, the challenge, you don't know anything about these guys you're playing tomorrow. There's not that connection, that emotional edge. How do you rebuild it for your guys?**

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, that's a really good question because one of our motivating factors in the ACC is we almost was like on a revenge tour against that collection of group that we beat. We were 2-6, and we were trying to figure out, all right, how do we clean our stuff up and get better and not make the mistakes. All of the games that we played were really close and we knew we should have won most of those games. But Texas Tech is different. I mean, we haven't played them. They are well coached they can score inside out. They play with a certain physicality. So I kinda gotta trick them and tell them I think it's somebody else. Maybe we point out that it's another team in our league and they're very similar to that.

It's one of those things where when you get to postseason you gotta be perfect because it doesn't take -- sometimes it's a five minute stretch, sometimes it's a ten minute stretch, sometimes it's as easy as missing baskets and you

can go home. So hopefully that experience of winning those five games will help us as we move forward.

**Q. Coach, I was just talking with Mo in the locker room about how he's managing Ramadan and everything through the tournaments. What does it say about his commitment both to his religion and to you guys in his resilience that he is managing two pretty high emotional things at the same time.**

KEVIN KEATTS: I mean, it shows his maturity at a high level. At my age, I couldn't do it. And he's doing it. Obviously his faith is very special to him and obviously the same thing can be said about his team and teammates and he's handling it like a champion and playing well and understanding what he has to do and my hat goes off to him for that.

**Q. And when you see the late tip time, are you like thank goodness, we don't have to worry about the gel packets everything in the middle of the game?**

KEVIN KEATTS: The late tip time is great for Mo and our entire team. Like when I'm sitting there for Selection Sunday, and you know your name is going to be called because you get an automatic berth because we won the ACC. But I'll tell you what, I was asking for a Friday or I was asking for a late start on Thursday, and the Lord answered my prayers for that.

**Q. I'd say a couple weeks ago lot of people probably wouldn't have assumed that your team would be here in this position now. Do you kind of find that the guys sort of have a chip on their shoulder because of that or maybe even like a freedom in being here when a lot of people assumed that they wouldn't have been?**

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, I don't think our guys listen to what other people thought. And we kind of kept it in our locker room. And chip on their shoulder, possibly. But I don't think it's because people didn't think we could make it here. Like, it never crossed our mind in the locker room. We have always stayed as a close-knit group. And we knew -- you know, think about this. We went one game from going 500 in our league. We were right there. I think what really threw people off is that we had a really strong back end of our schedule, Florida State on the road. Here, Pittsburgh on the road, and then you got Carolina, Duke on Saturday-Sunday. And it threw everybody off because they're like, man, they're a good team. They also think nobody ever factored in that in our league we had the third toughest conference schedule. So we were battle tested going into that. But I think our guys just knew that some of the games that we lost we could have won.

**Q. What was the scouting aspect like for you for looking at Texas Tech because they've been playing without their big guy for a while. He might be back and they kind of changed how they do things without him. What did you look for in terms of getting ready for this game?**

KEVIN KEATTS: Are you telling me he's back? No. I think when you get to this situation to a tournament you prepare for everyone. And you have to at times prepare for two different situations. Doesn't change the fact how good those guards are, and how well they've been playing defensively and everything else. But when you get to a tournament situation and it's one and done if you don't take care of business, you have to prepare for every situation and you've gotta prepare for every young person playing. And that's what we did. We locked in and, man, he's really good. He made some talented -- but to their credit, they're really good with or without him also.

**Q. Kevin, we just talked with Cal and Greg Kampe and they were both advocates to not expand the NCAA Tournament. What are your thoughts on that, especially as a team that, without an automatic berth, you may not be sitting here today?**

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, I totally disagree with them, and not just because I just want to disagree with them. I think there should be some expansion. I just think it's too many student-athletes that do not get the opportunity to play in postseason. When you look at football, they don't have that issue. You can make a bowl game in under 500 now, and the experience of -- you know, we talk about the student-athlete experience, and the only thing that really, in my opinion, that has not changed is expanding the tournament. And I don't have a number. I don't know what that should be. But I do think we should give more schools opportunities to be able to get in the tournament. All of our conferences, all of our Power 5 conferences are going to 17, 18 teams. And so when you think about that now, like let's say us for the ACC, which I think is really not fair, we're getting 5 out of 15. If we get 7 out of 18, it's not a pretty number. And so in my opinion, when I was at Mid Major, I thought I should have an opportunity. I was at UNCW, we had won 28 games, and if I didn't win that championship game, no matter what I did, I wouldn't have the opportunity to play in the tournament. So somehow we gotta figure it out, and I'm not saying you gotta load it up with High Major teams. I'm saying that more student-athletes, in my opinion, should have the opportunity to play in the best postseason tournament in college.

**Q. With the postseason experience, are you surprised, then, that there are a number of teams that are**



**declining NIT invites that were not invited to the NCAA Tournament? Is that just having any kind of postseason experience matter or is it specifically NCAA Tournament postseason experience?**

KEVIN KEATTS: And I know this is going to sound funny. I think it's a trickle down for what happens in football, and I think we're finally getting it in basketball. You go to bowl games, and if they're not in the playoffs, I mean how many teams show up at a bowl game without most of their good players? I think what happens in basketball now, and I hope it's not a trend, but now everybody's eager. If you don't make the Big Dance, and because you can transfer right away, most people are saying I'm going to get into the portal so I can figure out what my new opportunity is. So I think it's -- I think we're getting a little bit of what football has had and not playing in the biggest bowl games, and because of the transfer portal, people are jumping in right away.

**Q. Coach, you could arguably say that DJ Burnes was a very underrated big and we all got to see him shine in that ACC tournament. How has that been watching him take his game to new heights and people starting to recognize the player that he really is?**

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, just to see how much he's gotten a lot better in a lot of areas. He could always score the basketball. Defensively we've had a lot of work to do, and I think he's gotten better in that area. He's starting to rebound the basketball. But since he's gotten to NC State, the one thing that he's become, and his numbers really reflect that this year, is he's become a really elite passer. And we run a lot of stuff through him because he demands a lot of double teams and everything to be able to pass the ball out. But he's also a prideful young man. He didn't make First Team, Second Team, Third Team Or Honorable Mention in our league, and that's nothing -- because when people don't make it, you always say who should come off the list? I think there are some really good players that made it, but he didn't, and I think that bothered him a little bit and I think it helped him throughout the ACC tournament, obviously being the MVP.

**Q. Coach every year, every team is different. What makes this specific group special?**

KEVIN KEATTS: I think this group is different because we can do it in different ways. We have the ability to score inside. We have the ability for those guards to really play well. You know, on any given night one of these guys can lead us in scoring. It happened at least four times in the ACC tournament. Last year was a really good team. Our team was really good. But we had to go as Terquavion Smith and Jarkel Joiner went. And if those two guys didn't

play well we wasn't going to win. We can have games now where one of our best players might not have their greatest game but somebody else can lead us.

**Q. So having your NCAA Tournament game in Pittsburgh in an ACC city obviously you didn't play in this arena, but you played in this city just a couple weeks ago, do you sort of think that familiarity is going to help you guys?**

KEVIN KEATTS: No, only if we played in the arena. The way our guys travel, and I can't remember -- I do remember. Pittsburgh was a late Saturday night game. And we got in and then after the game, we got out. Sometimes these guys don't even know what city they're in. But if we were playing a game at Pittsburgh I think we'd have an advantage, but it's better than last year. We had to travel to the West Coast, and obviously it didn't work well for us. Our conditioning wasn't good because of the altitude and everything else.

**Q. Kevin, I asked the players this earlier. What do you think this team is doing best right now?**

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, I think one thing we're doing really, really good is that we've been locked in to the scouting reports and understanding our jobs. And we talk about a lot of times, do your job and do it at a high level. And we're starting to complement each other both offensively and defensively, kind of knowing where we should be and finding the right person at times and all of this stuff is end of the year maturity things, like things that we -- our ball screen coverage wasn't very good at some points in the early season. And you could tell because we've had so many transfers, that now we're starting to click and we're clicking at the right time.

MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

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