

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

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

PPG Paints Arena

Texas Red Raiders

Darrion Williams

Kerwin Walton

Chance McMillian

Coach Grant McCasland

Media Conference

MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes. Darrion, can we get an update on your status? You knew it was going to be asked, and are you expecting to play tomorrow.

DARRION WILLIAMS: Yeah, I'm expecting to play. I'm taking it day by day, but I'm expecting to play tomorrow.

Q. How about getting to play against NC State?

KERWIN WALTON: Yeah, it's the most exciting time for the year for us. This is what we prepare for all season long. Everything we've done in practices and all the games we've played has led us up to tomorrow's first game. So we're all excited to be here.

Q. For all three of you guys, what's the challenge in playing a team like NC State that just went on a hot run through the ACC tournament? Obviously they're kind of riding the high of that but also playing five games in five days, I'm sure there's some level of exhaustion that comes along with that.

KERWIN WALTON: Yeah, they've done things that most people will say is very tough. Everybody that's in this tournament is here for a reason, so to me every team in this tournament is good. So we gotta be prepared. And we've been doing a whole lot of practicing and a whole lot of preparation. So we're going to be ready for tomorrow.

DARRION WILLIAMS: Just approach it like any other game. They're going to come in excited. They're not going



to come in and just let us win the game. So we're going to have to come in and beat them.

MODERATOR: Chance, do you want to add onto that?

CHANCE McMILLIAN: What Darrion said.

Q. Kerwin, you've had a little bit of experience against NC State in a previous life of yours. Does some of that kind of animosity towards the Wolfpack carry over from your days at Carolina?

KERWIN WALTON: Yeah, I remember playing these guys a few times the first couple years at Carolina. It's always been animosity between the two schools. But it's a whole new environment for me so it's going to be a little different game, different feeling, but at the end of the day we're going to show up and show up to win.

Q. All three of you guys have been here before. What have you learned from those past experiences that you can take into tomorrow and going forward?

CHANCE McMILLIAN: I would say we just have to stay together, because the past few games I've been up here, I would say the biggest difference is the team staying together. So our togetherness should help us.

DARRION WILLIAMS: For me just making sure everybody is coming in being ready to play. Last year I got blown out from the beginning. So I think it's just being ready to go from the jump.

KERWIN WALTON: They said it best. We've done a lot to be here. So I think for us we have to make sure we play hard and play smart and play together.

Q. Every year every team is different. We'll start with you, Kerwin, and work your way down. What makes this team specifically special?

KERWIN WALTON: For us, I think it's just the tenacity and grit that we play with. We've had a lot of games that we came down big and we kept clawing and fighting back to get into it. We play for each other. That's like one of our



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biggest strengths is just us being able to claw out of anything and I think that's going to take us very far in this tournament.

DARRION WILLIAMS: I think just the togetherness we play with each other for. We play for each other the whole time. Nobody is worried about themselves. Everybody is trying to win, and no matter the situation in the game, we feel like we can come back and win.

CHANCE McMILLIAN: I would agree with Darrion because we do play for each other and we do care about each other a lot, which will help us on the court too. Because we mess with each other off the court, too. So on the court, it's just natural. Like, we all are one.

Q. Kerwin, you mentioned earlier about your past life, the animosity between you and NC State. But with that experience of playing NC State previously, how much does that help you guys in preparing for a team that there isn't a lot of history with? How much can you carry over from facing them previously and knowing what they do on offense and defense, even though this is a different team from the ones that you've played?

KERWIN WALTON: Yeah. They got some different guys on their squad. But I'm pretty familiar with like the ACC and their play style a little bit. So it's not going to be like something that's completely new to me or something I haven't seen before. But Coach Mac has done a whole lot to help us prepare. He told us he didn't know anything about NC State before Selection Sunday. But he knows everything about them now. So we've done a whole lot to get to this point and be prepared for it, so I think we're going to be well acquainted with them.

Q. What have the coaches told you about NC State? What have you seen on film, number one. And number two, DJ Burns is a tough match-up inside. Each of you give your opinion on how you'd like to handle him.

CHANCE McMILLIAN: We have watched a lot of film. We know right now they're on a role right now. So they're playing for each other right now. And for DJ, you're just going to have to see that tomorrow.

DARRION WILLIAMS: Yeah, they're playing really well as a team. Obviously they won five games in five days. So just gotta play better than them tomorrow.

KERWIN WALTON: I think the game is going to be dictated by us and how we approach. That's one of our biggest focuses right now. We know DJ Burns is a really good player just like everybody else. So we're going to have to always be locked in for everybody. They're a hot

team right now, so we're going to be really on edge tomorrow.

Q. For all the guys, starting with Chance. What has Grant McCasland brought to you guys in his first year out? What a great run you guys have had. What does he mean to you and what has he instilled in you guys?

CHANCE McMILLIAN: He means everything to me. He continues to give us lessons off the court. I really do appreciate that. And he really emphasizes about us like a bunch of like team stuff, like we need to care more about each other. And I felt like during the year we continued to do that. So I appreciate him for that.

DARRION WILLIAMS: Yeah, Coach Mac, I mean, me and Joe talk about. He's more of a life coach than a basketball coach sometimes. He teaches you a lot about how you should move throughout your life. He means a lot to me. Me and him have a pretty good relationship. We talk. He asks me a lot about how I'm doing outside of basketball. So it means a lot to me.

KERWIN WALTON: Yeah, he values the well-being of us more than anything outside really. To us we're like his extended family. And we all share a common goal, is winning. That's all he talks about every practice, before and after every single game. Even in the summer before, first time I met him, the main topic of discussion is how we're going to find a way to win a national title. I think that's kind of what's made him such a great coach and a great person.

Q. Chance and Kerwin, being the two seniors out here with this possibility of it being it for you guys, does that add a level of motivation to succeed this weekend and next weekend?

CHANCE McMILLIAN: For sure it does. It does have me on edge, and it makes me want to -- or it allows me to bring that fight, because like it could be it for me. So I'm telling my teammates to like fight hard and do whatever you can to help us win because I don't want to go out sad.

KERWIN WALTON: Yeah, I mean it's going to be a big deal for both of us, including our other seniors, Joe and Warren. Like those guys, this is their last, last year and we play for them. We play for each other and we always like have our best interests at heart. So I think it's going to be very important for us to make as big of a statement as we can.

Q. Darrion, you're kind of the young guy up here right now. You got some older guys on this team. What have you learned from some of the older guys

throughout the season, just kind of the wisdom, whether it's basketball or life?

DARRION WILLIAMS: I mean besides certain things in game situations, I think the biggest thing is don't take it for granted because soon enough I'll be a senior, be in the same spot as some of these other guys, and it goes by fast. So just enjoy the moment and don't take anything for granted.

MODERATOR: Any more questions for the student-athletes? All right. Thank you.

Q. Grant, what's the challenge in facing a team like NC State that's coming off of five games in five days? So there's obviously some exhaustion that comes with that, but they're also a team that's riding a hot streak. How do you kind of square those two things?

GRANT McCASLAND: Yeah. Well, I can tell you, in watching NC State compete, you can just tell they've found the right group of guys with the right roles. And that's kind of what -- that's why you play a season, because it's how do you finish the year is the most important part, and everybody wants to talk about like maybe a stretch even for us where we've been hurt. But, man, I really have a lot of respect for not just the way they've identified roles, but the way they're competing. I mean, if you saw the loose balls and the rebounding that they were coming up with at the end of the game, I mean their effort is just tremendous. And so this time of year, you got some teams that are playing together and finding a rhythm offensively and then you have some teams that are like competing to win. And watching them play, you could tell not only have they identified what they want to do offensively and defensively, but they're just really finding the extra effort plays that really win you games. And I have so much respect for how they're competing as a team, and there's a reason why they won and it's not just offense and finding the right guys. It's the way they're getting rebounds and the way they're competing defensively.

Q. Coach, obviously the Big 12 is a very competitive conference, arguably the best conference within the NCAA. Is there a team that you went up against this year that kind of matches up with now NC State plays?

GRANT McCASLAND: Yeah, great question. No. NC State -- that's why the Big 12 is such a great conference in preparation. If you can handle it without getting everybody hurt it's awesome. And that's been the issue with our league right now. As you can see, it's widespread.

NC State does remind me of a couple of teams in our league and do think it's a cross of a couple of them and

we've identified that. I hate saying anything other than that. But from a team standpoint, though, I think they have that inside out approach that I think gives you a chance to win every night. And they've got great play making on the inside, which is unique, and then they also have guards that can make plays. And not many teams have both. And to give them credit right now, they've identified and found a way to utilize both of them across different parts of the game. And they're extremely difficult to defend, having watched them on film.

Q. You've had some success in this tournament before, but kind of a different setting during the COVID era. Not a lot of fans involved there. How different is this all for you this time around?

GRANT McCASLAND: Yeah, well, the unique part about the last time we were in the tournament, we played Purdue in Indianapolis. So actually for a COVID game, there was quite a few people there and the energy in the building was great. Such a joy to have the opportunity to play in the NCAA Tournament. And when you get to this point, if you can't create your own energy as a team and find a way to be motivated by how you compete for each other, then you're going to go home early if you're looking for an external -- and we've been a part of great -- we've got one of the best home court -- I think is the best home court advantage in college basketball at home. And then we've played in some of the best road environments, and both of them, I can tell you this, if you can find a way to compete for your team, it gives you the best chance to win regardless of where you play.

Q. Coach, how has Warren looked the past week, and what would you say his status is for tomorrow?

GRANT McCASLAND: Yeah. If there's one question I've been asked more than anything, it's how is Warren Washington. And I think, you know, we tried to play him a month or so ago in the UCF game, and I felt like he was great in practice, then we got out there and he made one move in the game and you could tell by the look on his face he wasn't quite ready. I am encouraged by the fact that he's continued to improve. We have had him involved in practices, but I just don't think you know to what extent he's going to be able to go until we get out there. And I do think he'll be a game-time decision, and we'll just have to see how he warms up and see if he's able to play.

Q. You have been here before, obviously, during the COVID season, but you have been here, and you've won here. What have you learned from that first time around that you can apply towards tomorrow in advancing in this tournament?

GRANT McCASLAND: I'm thankful I got to be a junior college coach at the age of 27. And didn't know what I was doing. And we made it to the national tournament in junior college, won a couple of games, beat the number one team in the country, lost on a tip dunk at the buzzer. And I think the one mentality you gotta have going into this, and I didn't have that the first time around, is you gotta find a way to win every game. That's obvious. But you gotta compete and can't just be excited to be here. I mean, there's a lot of fun that goes with this, but I think the focus has to be like you play this to win it, and told our guys, like we're going to join the NCAA Tournament to win it. And that's the mentality going into it. So how do you approach it every day to try to get the best? And the way you do it I think you better improve this time of year, you better find a way to improve and keep improving. So in today's shoot-around, we're going to try to get better and every opportunity you get, you try to get better, and the first media timeout, we better figure out a way to get better. And then you play it all the way to the end.

I'm thrilled because this group has embraced it. They love each other, which I think is the most important aspect. But you approach every opportunity with the purpose of trying to find a way to improve, and that allows you to win.

Q. You talked about NC State's interior, play making especially led by DJ Burns. How unique of a player is he and do you have to prepare any different for a guy like that that can score but also pass out of the post?

GRANT McCASLAND: Yeah. What a match-up problem. I mean, DJ Burns is one of those guys that I don't think there's an answer for. I think over the course of the game, you just have to learn what gives you the best opportunity that night. And there's no way to replicate what he's doing, neither in practice. So you just gotta rely on your team defense and activity to find ways to disrupt it enough to where you hope that you can create an advantage at some point. But I'll tell you what, I mean NC State, you can start with Burns. He's obviously such a load because he can pass and he can score, but I love what they're doing with the whole roster. Middlebrooks has really made some big impacts on them with his activity level and his movement and then D.R. has been a problem with his rebounding and ability to make threes and he's defending multiple positions switching. So I just think that whole combination, group of forwards is really a great set of problems, and they all present something different.

Q. Coach, I just talked to the players, and they've talked about what you've instilled in them. Darrion said you're more of a life coach than a basketball coach. Can you just talk about what these guys mean to you?

GRANT McCASLAND: Yeah. And I've told several people this, and I'm going to try to be as clear as I can. College basketball is beautiful, because there's such great interest on your college campuses. And we had students lined up in tents all through our campus for one of our home games. Just the opportunity to be a part of this experience really is something that you have to be grateful for. But what makes it special with all the pressure that these guys have on them to perform every day is who you get to do life with. And I can tell you, there's nobody I'd rather be a part of this journey with than our group of guys and our staff. And I just -- when you love the people you're with, when you come in to practice and you come into the building, you can do hard things together when you love the people you're with. And that's what I love about this group, genuinely. Before we came over here for practice, there's two tables full of guys. It was after lunch. We were finished. They could leave any time they want. None of them had their phones out. And it was like, they were all laughing and hanging out. And if you can tell me, like, this is what it's about, I would point -- of all this, the great arenas, the venues, the games on TV. If I could just video that table and those two tables of our teams sitting there all talking without their phones out, I would tell you this is what it's about. And their opportunity to do life together and to realize that their relationships will carry them forward through some more difficult things than what this tournament brings. And I'm so thankful that they love each other and that they love this journey, and I do think it teaches a lot about life more than just basketball.

MODERATOR: Any more questions for coach? All right. Thank you, coach.

GRANT McCASLAND: All right. Thank you all. Wreck 'em.

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