

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Oakland vs NC State

Friday, March 22, 2024

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

PPG Paints Arena

NC State Wolfpack
Ben Middlebrooks
Mohamed Diarra
Michael O'Connell
Coach Kevin Keatts

Media Conference



they're a very talented team. They can score from each level of the court. Obviously, they can shoot really well from three, a few guys that can really get it going and they also have a very good post presence. So just kind of today still watching film, game planning, seeing how we're going to approach and attack. From a defensive standpoint it's going to be huge. If we let them get going, it's going to be tough to get the win.

MOHAMED DIARRA: Yeah, we're going to play against some zone, maybe 98 time at a time. My bad. And yeah, we're going to be prepared for this game and we're going to be stay locked in in what you do.

BEN MIDDLEBROOKS: Yeah, absolutely. I definitely agree with what they said. They're a very solid team. They obviously had a great game the other night. They do run that zone, which we're going to have to be ready for, but I feel like we do what we do and if we keep on playing the way we've been playing, we'll look good out there.

Q. Michael, when you look at having to potentially guard a guy like Jack Gohlke who just went off the other night, what are the challenges that come with guarding and preparing for a guy that gets on a hot streak, and what's it like to watch that film and kind of see all the attention that he's gotten nationally?

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: Yeah, it's definitely impressive. He's obviously a very good player. It's not like he hasn't been doing this or making shots all year. He's very talented. So going into the game, we gotta have the same game plan as what the coaches think we gotta do to take away his looks and not let him get clean looks if anything because he's going to get shots off because he's a great player. It's what he does. So try to limit his touches, limit his looks in that area of the game will be huge for us and just try to force him to take tough ones and get the rebounds.

Q. You guys, maybe all three of you answer this question. This will be your seventh game in 12 days tomorrow night. How are you able to do it? Are you exhausted? You haven't been home too much to settle down, have you?

What is it like to have to guard D.J. in practice?

BEN MIDDLEBROOKS: I can definitely say it comes with challenges for sure but at the end of the day it definitely makes us better. I don't think there's another post presence in the ACC, really in the country, that is much of a force as him. So I think it really honestly has made us part of the players that we are today having to go against that every day.

MOHAMED DIARRA: It's easy. (Laughs). No, I'm playing. Yeah, we compete against each other every day, and D.J. is a tough guy, and we make for him complicated to get his spot. That's why he does so well right now on the block.

Q. (No microphone).

BEN MIDDLEBROOKS: I mean I wouldn't say all that. But you definitely know if we're going at each other in practice, you're going to have a little soreness in your chest after you take all those post dribbles. So I don't know if I ever feel like I'm in trouble when I'm in there necessarily.

MOHAMED DIARRA: Same for me. I think the same thing.

Q. In your study session so far, what have you seen from their zone defense and what have you seen from them offensively?

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: Yeah, I think from offensively, obviously seeing how they played against Kentucky,



BEN MIDDLEBROOKS: I mean absolutely. I mean we definitely -- I don't know about fatigue. We've been hearing about fatigue for a long time. You said we have played a lot of games. I don't see any of my guys getting tired. I don't feel like we've lost a step at all. As far as I definitely do miss home a little bit and miss my dog a little bit, but I'm still trying to win some more games.

MOHAMED DIARRA: Yeah, we tell everybody we gotta compete, like we gotta stay on top of what we gotta do because we're here for that, and we can't complain about like we're tired, oh, we gotta play like seven games in 12 days. Yeah, we're going to stay on top.

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: Yeah, at the end of the day, too, obviously we have a common goal in mind to keep playing the game to end the season, finish the season with a win so at this point even if your body is hurt or you're tired you're not really focusing on it too much because you want to do everything you can to win that next game.

Q. Michael, you guys have quite a few graduate players like yourself, quite a few guys coming in from different schools to make up this team. How much of this run is kind of the benefactor of so many different experiences coming together to know how to handle yourself in different situations?

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: Yeah, I think it's been huge that we have a team full of mature guys, guys that have been here, whether played in March before or they've had experience playing through a lot of games where they're coming to the end where it's a one shot, one possession game and things like that. I think it's just experience is always going to help you out down the stretch especially when things aren't going your way you can have guys that are able to ride on what they've been doing or what they've experienced with other teams or this team they've been with for a while. Definitely helps keep everyone together and keep everyone on the same common goal.

Q. For everyone, obviously this is generating a lot of enthusiasm back home in Raleigh. Now it's starting to become national. Your take on that, how surreal is it to see NC State, they're calling you guys America's team and things like that, and the love that you receive both from Wolfpack Nation and now from the nation itself?

BEN MIDDLEBROOKS: I mean, I would say especially me, back home in Raleigh, the fans' appreciation back there definitely means the world to us. We definitely feel that. When the crowd gets loud and starts cheering for us and we're away from home there's not a better feeling than

that. And I know D.J. Burns, when he gets the ball and the crowd turns up for him and there's nothing more fun than that, just seeing it. I know it's fun when it's on the court, and hopefully as far as America's team, I mean I guess we'll try and keep that going.

MOHAMED DIARRA: We appreciate that, because we need that. We need that. Like you're talking about we're tired, but we got good cheer, screaming for everybody for us, for D.J. Burns. Like they give us energy and we really appreciate it.

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: Building off what they said, I think it's huge since we're not on our home court right now we have a lot of fans that are traveling, and just other fans that aren't NC State fans still cheering for us. I think when we're at these neutral sites and you have a fanbase there for you and getting excited, it helps when you go on a run. It helps you keep it going, and then when things aren't going well, it helps you get you back in the game.

Q. Oakland was pretty clear last night that they don't want to be considered a Cinderella team, that they believe that they can beat anybody. Do you guys feel like you're a Cinderella team and is tomorrow night's game almost a battle of would-be Cinderella teams that could make a run in this tournament?

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: Yeah. I mean, it's kind of like what people have been asking us, too, is how we feel about being the underdog or lower seed in the games, but we don't really focus on that because at the end of the day, we just focus on what we can control and whoever the opponent is we're going to scout for them. I don't necessarily know if we want to be labeled as a Cinderella team. I think we just want to be labeled as a great team that goes out there and competes and gives it their all. At the end of the day, everyone in this tournament is great the seeds can go back and forth. So we don't really focus on the number of the seed or anything like that. We just focus on whoever we're playing and then just controlling what we can control.

Q. What would you say the song that best describes D.J. Burns is?

BEN MIDDLEBROOKS: Y'all got nothing? I don't even know. Mo, you got this one.

MOHAMED DIARRA: I don't know. I would say King of the Galaxy, I think. That's a good one. He loves that song.

Q. Of all the challenges that this team's faced in the last six games, what are you the most proud of as far as being able to overcome those challenges?



MICHAEL O'CONNELL: I think the biggest thing is just sticking together. Obviously the season hasn't been perfect by any means. We didn't win every game and blow out every team. We've had some ups and downs. And I think at times we really could have easily just given in, caved in to what was going wrong and embraced that lifestyle, but I think it's huge for us that we all banded together and no matter what we were going through, we always stuck together and had each other's backs. I think it's been showing on the court at least through the ACC tournament, even when the odds were stacked against us, it didn't really matter. We didn't really care. We were going to go in and just fight with your brother. That was kind of the biggest thing. You want to have their back in the same ways you want them to have yours. So I think that's been huge for us going through that stretch, and even coming into this now when you're playing new teams you haven't played before is just rely on what you guys have been doing all year and making sure you have each other's backs. That's it.

Q. The Pak had some up-and-downs offensively, but you take a look at the last six games all of a sudden NC State is averaging 81 points. So if each of you will just give your take on what's happened?

BEN MIDDLEBROOKS: I would say it absolutely did have a season full of ups and downs, full of a lot of adversity it feels like throughout the season, again, I feel like this is something a lot of people don't really take into consideration, but we were -- when we started out this season, we had half of our team won, half of our team was new guys. We'd never played or been on the court with each other before. That takes a long time to figure out. Obviously, we came out pretty hot but we still had to deal with those issues and things like that and I feel like a big part of the ACC tournament was us coming together and figuring those things out fixing mistakes and issues we had had. And really just kind of like Mike said come together. When we play like that and we're playing together and everything is clicking we're a tough team to play with.

Q. The mental and physical toughness that you guys have displayed over the last six games has been pretty incredible. What's that -- what's brought that sort of to a peak?

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: I think just we know this is it, really. At the end of the day when you lose you go home. So you're kind of just, at the end of the day you're going to go out there and give it your all. Even if things are tough, you're banged up or body's not feeling great or you missed the last shot or anything like that, you're not going to focus too much on it because if you get caught up with what's

going wrong the next thing you know it can be over. So I think just trying to focus on what we have at hand and the opportunity we have in front of us, that helps you look past everything that's going wrong and all the tough times.

Q. All the guys that are playing are transfers. Do you think that this season and particularly the back end when you guys are starting to succeed is sort of a testament to saying, okay, you need to be patient with this, sometimes it's not going to click in the beginning. You got a lot of new guys from different systems coming to a new place and this thing needs time sometimes. Do you think this is a testament to that?

MOHAMED DIARRA: Yeah. Like he say, we have a lot of transfers, and everybody comes from different schools. We build a chemistry all year, so yeah it take a little bit of time. But that's why right now we play so good, because we know each other and we got each other's backs.

Q. What's the challenge in playing a guy like Jack Gohlke? I mean obviously all of Oakland gets really hot, but Gohlke specifically, how do you scheme up defense after a performance like that?

KEVIN KEATTS: You know, I was in the locker room, and I could hear the cheering, and I will say this. I was completely wrong because I know Kentucky travels very well. And so I thought Kentucky was winning the game by a large margin. Because I kept hearing the cheering, I thought it was Kentucky fans. So I grabbed my phone and started looking up the score, and obviously Oakland was winning. So when I got back last night 2, 2:30 in the morning, I popped the game on, started my scouting to prepare to get ready for Oakland, and, man, I don't know that I've seen a shooting performance like that. If I have, it's been a long time. And people are going to say, man, goodness, Kentucky didn't do a good job. They were there. I mean he made shots after shots after shots.

We gotta do a better job. How? I don't know how that is, because he can make shots. But they're so much more than the shots he made. It's a really complete team, and they got great inside, outside presence, well coached, do a good job. And I've told our guys, man, it's going to be as tough a game as you're going to play, because they got an inside out presence. They can make shots, they can score around the basket. And they're unique on the defensive end. And so it's a really big challenge. It's going to be a tough game.

Q. Coach, you guys will play seven games in 12 days tomorrow tonight at venues you're not used to playing on. What is the secret to your team not getting exhausted and how do you keep them engaged for that



long without falling over?

KEVIN KEATTS: You know, when you go to Chick-Fil-A, they never tell you what's in those sandwiches, and it's really good, so I'm not going to give my secret away, because -- no. We -- our guys are -- you know, I'm amazed at them every game that we play, and all the credit goes to them. We spent a lot of time in the preseason and during the season working on our conditioning. As a matter of fact, we've also called one of the best conditioning teams in the country if not the best and it's really paid off for our guys mentally and physically. The great thing about us is we've gotten stronger in every second half, and I just think the buy-in and the energy that we provide through our program and our energy that we give on the bench, I think it really helps our guys in understanding what the opportunity is. And there's really no secret sauce. I just think our guys are in good shape and mentally believe that they should be playing in the game.

Q. Coach, I don't know if you saw any of the videos circulating on social media of NC State students packing the Belltower after last night's game. What does that type of image mean to you understanding the rich history of this program?

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, it means a lot. I mean I love our students. I mean, our students are the best, and we have a unique thing here at NC State. When you win a huge game, we like that Belltower, and everybody meets at that Belltower. It was funny, I saw one video and they were like, when is the light coming on? When is the light coming on? I thought it was great.

You know, when we win, it's not just about our basketball team. It's about our school, and it's about our students. I mean, we're the only team that has three Power 5 teams in the same area within 25 minutes of each other, and it's a lot of bragging rights going around there. And we've had a long history of great basketball, and just to see us playing that well and obviously providing that spark for our entire school and our student body, who has been with us at games and screaming and yelling at those games, it means a lot. We don't just win as a basketball program. We win as a university.

Q. Kevin, you talked a couple days ago about just the number of bids that the ACC got, or lack thereof. What kind of message does it send to the committee each win that you have and each win the other conference teams have in this tournament?

KEVIN KEATTS: The unfortunate thing is it doesn't really send a message. I mean I hate it because you look at the

magical run that we had last year from some of our teams, and I think we tried to tap down on that a little bit this year going into Selection Sunday, and it didn't work. I think as a conference we gotta figure it out. What really bothers me a little bit is that we put so much emphasis on the nonconference. So let's break down most of our teams' nonconference. Let's say you play seven Power 5 and then you play four Mid Majors or bye games or let's say you go six and five at Power 5 versus Mid Major teams, bye games. So that's 11 games. You can't tell me that that should mean more than playing 20 Power 5 games in your league. And you've gotta go to home venues and away. So I think somehow we gotta get out of putting more emphasis on the nonconference, because to me it appears that you can lose a bid in what you do in the nonconference as opposed to how you finish.

So let's use us, for example, you know, our nonconference was okay. We didn't really have the major win. But look how we finished when we went to our tournament. We won five games in a row against five good teams, five days in a row. Now, we didn't put so much emphasis on it. We would have been in the tournament no matter what because the way we finished our regular season, and we didn't have that opportunity.

Think about this, now. You got ten great programs and great coaches that are sitting at home that didn't get a chance to go to the NCAA. And that's just not really fair. Like the ACC is, in my opinion, I'm very biased, is the number one conference in basketball, and we deserve more. Now, we have to do our part. If the nonconference is what it's about, then as coaches we gotta win more games, or we all have to figure out the net. And some people figured out the net and we haven't but I guess winning would solve a lot of problems but I just think it's disappointing because I would love to see more kids get an opportunity. You asked me a great question the other day. I still think that we should expand the tournament because it gives more kids opportunities. Like where everything is about our student-athletes, if that is true, then I know people say, well, we're ruined the tournament. There's still going to be upsets, whether you expand it or not. But it's been the same amount since it went from 64 to 68. When it went to 68, nothing happened. It's still a great event. So why can't we add some more to it, and I think that will really help, because I always say this. Anytime you can help the student-athletes get a chance to experience something, it's always better for our sport.

Q. Kevin of all the challenges that the Wolfpack team has had to face the last six games, what are you the proudest of in terms of being able to overcome those challenges?

KEVIN KEATTS: I think the biggest thing I'm proud of is our guys were able to block out any distractions. You know, the way we finished our season, and it was really tough. We lost four games in a row. And it would have been easy for those guys to say, man, it's just not our season and pack it in. And when we were winning those games at the ACC we were also on Spring Break, and it was warm in DC, and so our guys could have said, man, we lose we can go home, we can go on Spring Break. I think the mere fact that we were able to lock in, focus, not worry about all the distractions and win those five games and then go into the NCAA with a lot of momentum and obviously pull off this, it says a lot about the character of the guys that's in that locker room.

Q. Coach, it looks like you were playing through the bigs last night. Obviously big game from Burns and Middlebrooks. Different team in Oakland. Have you had an opportunity to take a look and see what scheme is going to probably be best to attack the Golden Grizzlies?

KEVIN KEATTS: You know, Oakland is unique, and I think that's what makes them special. They've got shooters. They've got inside presence. They got post guys. They got wings that can play. And so when you get a team like that, you gotta do a good job of defending them. So whether we have to defend them at all five positions -- they don't have a weakness in their positions.

But also what makes them different is they play a match-up zone, and you're not used to seeing that all the time. And with one or two days of prep, it's always tough to have that. And so I think our preparation is sometimes you can go into a game and just prepare for one side, offensively, or on the other side of it defensively, what makes them tough is that unfortunately nobody played us a match-up zone the entire year. And so we have a day and a half, not even that, because you can't even really take the court like that to try to figure out how to be able to score the basketball. So offensively we gotta have a game plan but we also gotta have one defensively also.

Q. Kevin, you have basically everybody that plays other than Breon as a transfer. So sometimes it's going to take time. I don't want to imply there will be more five games in five day winners as time goes by, but do you think there will be more teams in the coming years with the portal where in late February, early March they start to find it and then go on a run, as you guys have?

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, I think it's going to take a little longer than people think. I want you to think about -- and I always concentrate on our league. Our league is so good

that we lose a bulk of our players to the NBA. The guys who don't play end up transferring. And so most of our teams at the beginning of the year look different. So that's one of the reasons why sometimes our nonconference is not the best because we got so many new people. But to get back to your question, I do think that it takes a lot longer than people expect for transfers to come together. And you could see late January, February pushes where guys are good.

My team last year, we were a little bit advanced because we had a chance to take a foreign trip. We went to the Bahamas, and we got those ten days of extra practices in. We were able to play two games. And so that helped this group. We didn't have that -- that group. We didn't have that with this group. So a lot of times it's going to take some time, and it just depends on how many veterans you got back and what their role was when they were on that team previously.

Q. Obviously you guys are still in this so it's kind of a different situation for you, but there's been a lot of chatter about the transfer portal being open right after Selection Sunday. And you guys are going to have to replace some of these guys that are helping you do this right now. How do you kind of balance looking at who's there, how many guys do you kind of dedicate to that and what are your thoughts on when this is open?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah. Man, that's a great question. Thank you for that, because it's been -- as a guy who loves to recruit, it has been a major challenge to balance getting ready for a great Oakland team and then obviously trying to figure out, you know, who can we go after in the transfer portal, and I wish someone is listening that we would push those dates back or change the dates or stuff like that, because it's not really -- in my opinion, it's not fair to the teams who have earned the right to play in the NCAA or the NIT and then some teams that are not playing, they have the complete advantage to be able to recruit and you don't. And so I wish they would completely look at that, and if there was a way that they could tinker with that and change it a little bit, because one of the things I sent to my staff today, I'm so used to playing the next day, I forgot after we won the game last night I thought we played today. I was like, we played five straight days. I considered this a day off even though it's not a day off and I sent my staff a text and said, hey, if you guys need, let's get on the phone with some guys who are in the transfer portal so we can try to get ahead of some of these things, but it's a complete disadvantage that we're in.

Q. Just a moment ago you mentioned last year's team. I'm glad you did that because they're the ones that kind of lifted you up from where it was the year before.

Do you feel like a sense of gratitude to like Terquavion, for example? He stuck it out chose not to read it. Now you have this. Is this season sort of an extension of that decision and those guys of what they did last year?

KEVIN KEATTS: Absolutely. Momentum. Guys like Terquavion Smith who I love who committed to me when I was 15 years old and stuck around the program after we didn't have that great year and to get a guy like Jack he will joiner to come into the program. And people forget how good those two guys were. We lost 34 points from those guys and a lot of leadership and everything else. But when we win a championship like we did this year, those guys were so important to us winning because they gave us momentum and the guy like D.J. Burns comes in and comes back has another year and Casey Morsell, and we were able to add some to it, but the guys from the year before laid a great foundation to get us right back on track.

Q. I have a couple of NIL questions for you. Is there -- is there anything unique that your collective does, and I'm just wondering if you can -- or if it's just something like where you're just coping best practices that's out there. And then also, how does it work between say the football program and your program of figuring out kind of like, you know, there's only a fixed amount of money of like where it goes and some schools I know like Arizona where they're just separated. But, yeah, can you, I guess elaborate on those things?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, our collective one pack does a tremendous job, and here's why I say that. We're not -- I don't have a lot of contact with them like that. It's completely kind of separate of us. Probably because NC State probably because of the state of North Carolina. So I think every state has something different. In our situation we don't have a lot of contact with them but what I do love about them is our guys during the time when they're not in class or basketball wise, they have those guys out in the community, the boys and girls club. They have them at children's hospital. They have them doing a lot of great things. I think that kind of separates us from a lot of people. Now, not saying that other people don't do that, but they are very involved.

As far as dividing the money, I don't really know how that works. I just know as NC State, we need our folks who are a mass collection of people to be able to provide money to help with our student-athletes, and I'm a fan of NIL, because I remember back in the day when kids were going to bed hungry and didn't have any money and they were selling their jerseys at the book store and they never capitalize odd anything else. So I am a fan of that. But I think our collective does a really good job of that part of it.

I don't know how it's broke down. I wish I did. If I did, I would request -- I'd like to get seven million, if I could. It's a joke. Don't print that. I just want everybody to know that.

Q. You said previously one of the differences between this year's team and last year's team is the depth, more guys who you can count on to score and contribute. Last night a good example with Ben Middlebrooks chipping in 21. In a tournament like this in particular where it's natural for these student-athletes to have some nerves maybe have an off night, how vital is that depth where it's not one guy having to carry the load game in, game out?

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, depth can be looked at in a different way. It's weird because we built this team to have ten guys that will be able to play and now we're down to seven, eight, that's really contributing. Last year's team had more numbers to play. What's unique about this team is like last year if Terquavion Smith or Jarkel Joiner didn't lead us it was going to be hard for us to win. I think out of the six games that we played the postseason, I think at least five of them maybe we've had a different leading scorer, and that's a good thing because it's hard to focus in on one guy. You know, Ben was great. He did a tremendous job last night. And what was so special about last night was as Ben was scoring, D.J. Burns was just the most excited guy for him, and I think that's what's made our team really special. They're really happy for the success of their teammates.

Q. Greg Kampe, I just want to know your impressions of him. He's been at the same place a long time, he's coached a long time. Is those things that you would want in your life? Would you want to be somebody that coaches 40 years or spends an inordinate amount of time at the same place. Just your impressions on him?

KEVIN KEATTS: First of all let's just start with the obvious. He's a tremendous coach. I mean, you do not get the opportunity to stay anywhere for 40 years unless you know what you're doing. That's not happening in today's time. Nobody stays, nobody's going to get that opportunity. But he has done such a great job and probably, you know, I'll say this, probably one of the most underrated coaches in the country with what he's done. And you've seen he's put that program on the map, and every two or three years you hear about Oakland and upsetting people, and I heard about them early this year. I think it was -- and correct me if I'm wrong, I think it was Xavier win. Pretty doggone good. And he knows what he's doing. He's put together a collection of really good players. And you could tell his players enjoy playing for him. He runs a system that's really good. And they know what they're doing.

