

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Robert Morris vs Alabama

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

Alabama Crimson Tide

Nate Oats

Mark Sears

Labaron Philon

Jarin Stevenson

Media Conference



you started your career down in Athens. What do you remember about that time at OU, and how does what you did there help you grow into the basketball player you've become since getting to Alabama?

MARK SEARS: Yeah, when I was at Ohio, I spent a lot of time developing, and they did a great job helping me be the player I am today. Just like you said, I have some experience coming to Cleveland because we've been there the past two times. One of those times, we had won it all here and the other time, we fell short.

OU, I love it. That's a part of me.

Q. Also for Mark, obviously that was a while ago, playing OU in the MAC tournament here. How far and how different is it now going from being that mid-major trying to break into the tournament to now trying to get back to the Final Four?

MARK SEARS: Still having that chip on their shoulder to want to get back. At the mid-major level, you have to win the tournament to go to the championship, and at the high-major level, you've still got to win games to get a good seeding. When you get in that tournament, you just want to have that competitiveness to make it farther than you did last year.

Q. Mark, obviously coming back to Ohio, you talked about that. But what does this mean to try to go out and start the run you guys are trying to make here in Cleveland? It feels like this is fitting for you guys to try to make a run starting here.

MARK SEARS: We've got a great group of guys. Everybody, they work really hard, and we play for each other. When we're doing that, we're very special.

Q. What have you been telling the newer players on the team how to prepare for the NCAA Tournament, given your experience?

JARIN STEVENSON: Just be confident out there and just be ready. We've prepared our whole lives for this. Just have fun out there, I guess, and be confident.

NATE OATS: We're excited to be here. We obviously played a tough regular season. I think Steven told me 25 of our 33 games have been against NCAA Tournament teams and over half of them against top-25 teams. I think we're battle tested, prepared.

They're all good teams when you get to the tournament. We've got a tough team in Robert Morris that's got a lot of confidence, won a lot of games. They play hard.

I played them a couple times when I was at Buffalo. Speaking of Buffalo, I've been here in Cleveland a few times. We always had our MAC tournament here, so I love Cleveland. We've always had a lot of success in Cleveland. This is a little bit closer to Alabama than Spokane, and we had some good times in Spokane and LA last year. So we're a little closer to home in Cleveland, but we just got out of a good practice this morning. I think our guys are ready. Mark has been through it before, Jarin has been through it. I think our younger guys, the new guys are fully aware of what we have to do, and Mark and Jarin have both had real success in the NCAA Tournament.

We should play off that. They have confidence knowing what we need to do, but we've got to go out and do it. Looking forward to playing the game tomorrow.

And then just kind of getting it started. It's a lot of buildup to it. Can't wait to get out there and get started.

Q. Mark, being back in Ohio, being back in Cleveland,

Q. Labaron, as a freshman, what has this year been



like getting adjusted to everything, and how much different of a basketball player do you feel like you are right now compared to even a month ago?

LABARON PHILON: You know, it's been great, been a great journey. I've been learning things and enjoying things, but just mostly trying to soak it all in and just be there in the moment and just be a young guy.

But as a young guy, sometimes you've got to step up, and that's what this team needs from me. So I'm going to try to be a leader and just try to have everybody on the same page.

Q. Mark, you're one of the notable names in college basketball this year that's using that fifth COVID year. Have you thought about that at all through this season and noticed an impact it's had on you specifically or throughout the sport?

MARK SEARS: Having that extra year has definitely helped because being able to compete at the highest level that we compete at, it's very helpful that we were able to get that year back.

Q. Just wanted to ask you about Mark and your own experiences in the MAAC. How much of your experience as a coach in the MAAC helped give you kind of a baseline of what to expect from Mark because of the competition you were watching him play against while he was at OU?

NATE OATS: Yeah, what he did at Ohio, particularly in his second year, was pretty remarkable. When I got to Alabama, we kind of had our first few practices, me and the assistants that came from Buffalo with me to Alabama. We had quite a few kids at Buffalo that could have played here, really helped us. Kind of looked at what Mark was able to do in that league. That's a really good league.

After you brought it up, I looked on my phone. Mark is 4-1 here in Cleveland, so he's got an 80 percent winning percentage here. It's pretty good. I thought I was good, where I'm 9-1, but he's right there with me. So between the two of us, we've won a few games down here in the arena we're going to play in.

It's a good league. I knew if he did what he did there, he could perform well. Now, I don't think anybody predicted what he's actually done here these last few years, but I knew he was going to be good enough to play for us.

But even from his freshman year at Ohio to his sophomore year, he kind of came in and could score, but wasn't known as a shooter, so he turned himself into a shooter. And

now, he's turned himself into first team All-American.

The amount of work he puts in his game outside of practice on his own in the off-season, and when he came to Alabama, he didn't even go home. He came straight from Athens right to Tuscaloosa because he wanted to get a head start. Just got himself an apartment for a month and just went to work.

It's good to see guys that work hard get rewarded for their work, and I think Mark is a prime example of it, and I think the MAAC got him a great start, got him some confidence that he could play at a high level in college, and he kind of took that, ran with it, and he's done really well for his home state team in Alabama.

Q. How have you and your staff balanced the current season and then, obviously, the transfer portal and NIL and all that stuff going on at kind of the same time?

NATE OATS: Yeah, so it's a good thing for me that I've got one of the best assistants in the country in Preston Murphy. He's handling all the -- I'm currently just locked into trying to win some games. I think the best thing you can do in recruiting is currently win games and show them you develop talent. I don't want our current guys thinking about anything other than winning games. That's what we're locked into now.

We obviously have to run a program and field a team that can be back here next year, and Preston is working on that, but he's in charge of personnel. He's done a good job on the scouting report. He's got these guys ready, and he's also spending some time on doing some of that stuff.

It's interesting, right, the portal is not open for another week, but everybody is already in the portal. So it's a little interesting it works like that.

But good thing for me, I've got Preston on staff.

Q. Nate, just looking at the opponent, Dickerson, for them and the defensive job he does, how important is that to try to neutralize him knowing that the edge he plays with?

NATE OATS: They're good. We played them when I was at Buffalo. I played them twice. I split with them when I was a head coach. We'd played them before when I was an assistant. I mean, Coach Toole does a great job. They play super hard. Spent a lot of time Robert Morris's campus. ^ Ck I worked five star. I was was there every summer. I spent weeks and weeks there. I'm familiar with the program.

As I'm prepping for them, like you said, Dickerson, he was Defensive Player of the Year in the Horizon, which is a really good league. They've got the Player of the Year, ^ ck full GARS, and then the Defensive Player of the Year in Dickerson, and neither of those two are their leading scorer. And then their leading scorer, Kam Woods, is from Alabama, and Mark played with him in AAU growing up and stuff.

They're good. To have the leading scorer, the Defensive Player of the Year in your conference and the Player of the Year in your conference be three different guys I think says a lot about the depth and the talent that they've got, and our guys need to recognize that. I think they do. But specifically about Dickerson, he's just a hard-playing elite athlete that goes and makes a lot of plays. He's really good on the help side, coming over, blocking shots. We've shown our guys video of it. They've got to be aware that he's there. He blocks, steals, effort, intensity. He's good.

Now, we've played some pretty good defensive players in the SEC, as well, but he's good.

Q. Any update on Grant's health, and do you expect him to play tomorrow?

NATE OATS: Yeah. Our trainers are saying he's day-to-day. Just yesterday, he started doing basketball, still workouts. He did not go in our live play and practice today. Grant wants to play. He's a competitor. He played great in the NCAA Tournament last year. It'll end up being a game time decision based on what he feels like in the morning, but if he does end up playing, he won't have practiced anything live up until then.

I think it's looking a little better, obviously, for Sunday than maybe Friday, but there's a chance he could play. They're going to wait to make a decision and see what it looks like tomorrow morning.

Q. Mark, I know you've played with Kam a fair amount. What do you remember about the time you played with him and seeing him as a player?

MARK SEARS: From the time I played with him, he was a big-time scorer. In high school he was really known for his scoring and his big numbers he put up. To go with it now, I still think he's a big-time scorer, so we've got to really respect him when we go out there on that court.

Q. Coach, same thing I asked Mark about him and Grant being those fifth year guy with the COVID year. What have you seen having that experience but also across the sport?

NATE OATS: We've taken advantage of it. We've got four of them. Mark, Cliff, Grant, Chris Youngblood. It's given a veteran experience to the sport. With as many guys that have been going kind of one-and-done in the past, a lot of guys -- and the transfer portal plays a part in it, too. People aren't familiar with their players on their team or in the sport in general. I think this COVID year gave a familiarity to -- everybody across the country knows who Mark Sears is. After what Grant did in the tournament last year, if he didn't have that COVID year, he'd be done. Mark would be done. But everybody those who these guys are now.

Cliff, as well as he's played in the Big Ten, most of the country knows who Cliff is. Now, Chris was doing it at a mid-major level up until this year, but he was conference Player of the Year. Everybody that follows college basketball knows who Chris Youngblood is, too.

We've taken advantage of it. It gives us some experience. You look at some young guys, Jarin is the same age as what a freshman would be. He came a year early, but Jarin had 19 points to send us to the Final Four against and the Clemson Elite 8. He's played great. Labaron is a freshman. So it helps the young guys to have some older guys around them that have been in a lot of games that can settle things down, assure them, give them some confidence.

We've taken advantage of it. I think it's helped the sport in general. Gives them a little bit better face to college basketball. You kind of look across -- obviously, Cooper Flagg is very good and you come across talents like that and there's some other good freshmen. We've got one, Labaron, but a lot of guys that are the better college basketball players have been in college basketball, and people know who they are, and I think it helps college basketball in general. And I think in the long run, it's probably going to help the NBA get a little more polished player become an NBA player, too.

Q. Coach, you talked about Labaron coming into this season, how talented he was, but his competitiveness was what really set him apart. Even though he had veteran guards ahead of him, his team seemed to win every drill, because I know there's competition in every drill you have. Same thing with Jarin. Is it their competitive nature as much or more so than their talent that allowed them both to get on the floor at the level they have at such a young age?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I mean, they're both super talented, obviously, and you can see it as you watch them. But I think Labaron just walked in with the right mindset when he got to campus this year. Kind of walked in like he's got a

chip on his shoulder with a lot to prove, and he did have a lot to prove. He didn't done anything in college yet, a lot of question marks around him.

I think the best way you remove doubt and kind of play with a chip on your shoulder is you just compete, try to out-compete. I think he's got one of the best guys -- Mark is a first-team All-American. He's got arguably the best guard in the country to go against every day in practice and he took advantage of it. He got better by going against Mark. There was a lot of days his team beat Mark's, and I think it made Mark better having a guy like Labaron in there to make him better. Every day in the summer, he couldn't take days off or he's going to lose.

Labaron competed a lot harder than what a lot of people thought. I think that's what got him to the point he's got. I think it's made him, Mark, better, and Jarin came in a year early. I think he made a big jump. He kind of came back, driving the ball with a lot more physicality. I think he's got some confidence knowing he's done it at this level already.

Shoot, he went 5 of 8 from three and had 19 points in an Elite 8 game to send his team to the Final Four when he should have been a senior in high school, which is pretty impressive.

To have the competitiveness that these two young guys have and then to kind of pair it with all the experience we have, I've had a luxury in coaching this team this year, and hopefully, that bodes well for us here in this tournament.

Q. They've talked about the physicality in the SEC this year and how physical it's been. How much of an adjustment coming into the NCAA Tournament are you guys going to have to do dealing with the whistle and the varying whistles you might get here compared to in conference, as well as how much of that physicality that you went through in the SEC prepare you for whatever you might see over this run?

LABARON PHILON: I would say it's all about just finishing your defense, being able to go out and get a stop and just come down with the rebound, and that's something that we try to do every time.

But it can be really hard if you're playing against real physical teams. So you've just got to match their physicality and just try to do more than them.

NATE OATS: Jarin has been one of the most physical players we've had. Mark draws more fouls than about anybody in the country.

Look, I'll say this: It's a great question. I actually

addressed it with our team today, as Labaron fouled somebody in practice today on a blatant obvious one that seemed to me blatant and obvious should get called 100 percent of the time everywhere across the globe in basketball, but didn't always get called in our league.

I just said, look, some of the physicality that some of our opponents have been able to get away with in our league, it's not going to go in this tournament.

I'll say this for the SEC: We've got great leadership, starting at the top with Greg Sankey, but Garth Glissman came from from the NBA, he's given the coaches a lot of data.

The fouling needed to decrease in the SEC. The officials were instructed to call more fouls, obviously right away, out of the gate. In our first exhibition game against Memphis, there was a million fouls called, and I think they tried to -- I'll say this: I expect it to be a much tighter whistle in the NCAA Tournament, and I think we haven't been as physical in the fouling aspect all the time as maybe some other teams in our league. I think maybe we'll have a little less adjustment to the whistle.

But if a team tries to get physical with us in the tournament, we're used to physicality. Everybody tries to get physical with us, stop our offense. We're the No. 1 scoring offense in the country, grabbing, holding, not letting us cut. It's been an effective strategy if it doesn't get called. So I think our guys will be able to play with the physicality and I'm actually welcoming have been a little bit tighter whistle to give them a little more freedom of movement hopefully than maybe what we've had in the regular season.

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