

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Vanderbilt vs Saint Mary's

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

Saint Mary's Gaels

Randy Bennett

Mitchell Saxen

Augustas Marciulionis

Luke Barrett

Media Conference



that wanted to drive and kick, and drive and cut and hit cutters and stuff, and we were able to neutralize that a little bit. So it'll be huge to key in on their individual players' tendencies because it can seem like they're all playing the same way, but they do have harder tendencies, I feel like, between each guy that we can kind of -- if we were dialing into that, we can guard them pretty well, I think.

LUKE BARRETT: I'd say that's the best example. I say we try to go in every game with that mindset of we can try to break these guys, and -- especially teams that like to score, we know our defense and our rebounding and our effort on those ends can carry throughout a 40-minute game.

So even when a team comes out hot or hits a couple shots, it's probably the most satisfying feeling to get to that last 10 minutes and realize that we've been guarding, we've been rebounding for this whole game, and we're going to do it for 40 minutes.

Q. Mitchell or Luke, can you talk a little bit about Randy and what he's like in a tournament setting? Is it the same as he always is or is there a noticeable increase in intensity? How does he operate in this setting?

MITCHELL SAXEN: I think the same as he always is. He's definitely maybe a little more intense, but it's not like any sort of panic or -- I mean, not that he would ever panic, but it's just wanting everybody to be ready and meet the moment, and you can feel that coming off him.

But as far as the scout and the detail that they put in, it's not any different than normal. We're pretty detail oriented, like all 30 some games of the year.

LUKE BARRETT: Yeah, he hit it right on the head. I think the level of urgency and the level of focus picks up throughout the entire building, and that obviously starts from the top. But we pride ourselves on just being everyday guys and doing our musts every game. That's kind of helping us have a mindset of, yeah, it's a bigger game and it's a bigger setting, but if we do the things that got us to this point, then we're going to be all right.

Q. Mitchell, you're one of the best offensive

Q. Augustas, I'm curious your take on Vanderbilt, what you've learned about them, and specifically about the pace and how you get teams who like to play faster to play your style, your tempo.

AUGUSTAS MARCIULIONIS: Yeah, I mean, we already did a good amount. We have a pretty good feel on them. They have good guards. They like to play fast. They like to play a lot of -- like out of four, just drive and kick, drive, penetrate, kick out. They don't have that many sets, as in we like to play a little more organized. They try to force turnovers, try to run, play fast, transition offense.

I think it's really important that we take care of the ball and don't give them those opportunities and then just guard on our side of the court, just be disciplined, be patient and force them to take tough shots.

Q. Following up on that, Coach Byington of Vanderbilt was here 25 minutes ago, and he was saying one of the things he wants to make sure his team doesn't do is get frustrated by how hard you guys play defensively and how slow-paced you play offensively.

Can you think of some games this season where you can see your opponents visibly frustrated by the way you guys play?

MITCHELL SAXEN: One of the teams that Coach has likened Vanderbilt to that we've played a little bit is Santa Clara, and I feel like our game at Santa Claire, especially 30-0 run in the second half. You could feel it was a team

rebouncers in the country. Take us through when your teammates take a shot, your mindset until you get it and finish it.

MITCHELL SAXEN: I've been here five years now, so I've been in a lot of practices where I hear the coaches yell "crash" as soon as the shot goes up. It's just the mindset of next play, next job that gets drilled into us, and as soon as the shot goes up, I start wedging my way for position usually and we crash for our 3s and 4s as well. It helps having a big that can play 40 minutes like this who's a maniac on the boards as well, and Paul, as well as the rest of our 4s. They make it a lot easier when their guys are worried about boxing them instead of double bucking on me.

Q. Mitchell, I apologize for asking this with Luke sitting right next to you, but I know you guys have been roommates for several years. Any good Luke stories? How do you reflect on his journey from a walk-on to almost a 40 minute a game player now?

MITCHELL SAXEN: Do you have any?

AUGUSTAS: Like a story-story? I mean, sometimes you're just ready to go to bed, and then you're like, oh, somebody just left the apartment, just like Luke going to the gym at 10:30 p.m. That's one that I can think of like my room is right by our door to leave the apartment, and I just hear sometimes it's Luke leaving 10:30, 10:00 p.m. just to go to the gym, shoot. I feel like that's a good example of how he became who he is right now.

MITCHELL SAXEN: I'll be walking down the hallway, he's walking by me and I get a shoulder check all of sudden. It's 11:30. I'm just trying to get some milk and cereal right now. And he's like, let's go, bro.. but it's the same mentality that he takes to the court where he's the first dude on the floor. He's the first guy going and tracking the long rebound. Yeah.

LUKE BARRETT: Yeah, I can't dispute any of those points. I would say it's been fun. I think, with Mitch I'm the little brother a little bit, and he's always lying down and doing homework or something, and I'm the one that's barging into his room. And then Gus is a guy -- I have an older brother, so I've tried to make Gus my little brother and tried to pick on him a little bit. So it's been a perfect dynamic to have us three for sure.

Q. You're one of the most, how we say, the best in shape players in the country, and you are leading the country almost in minutes played. What's your off-season conditioning program look like for you specifically?

LUKE BARRETT: I wish I had some, like, structured. But my goal this year was just so -- like I knew this was the type of player I wanted to be and I knew I would have at ramp-up in minutes. I didn't know I'd play every minute. But my mindset this summer was just every day do some type of conditioning, and whether that's some days, I'd sleep in and wake up and just like run up to the high ceiling or I'd go back -- from Piedmont, near Oakland, or run down to Lake Mary with my friend and run back. Did three or four workouts with him.

It was just get in the best shape I can be, as much as my body can handle, trail runs, running on the track. I knew I was a play hard guy last year and I was play hard in short minutes, so I wanted to be able to transfer that for the entire game. So it was just as much as my body could take and getting into the best endurance I could get into.

RANDY BENNETT: Yeah, we're happy to be here. It's hard to get here. We have a group of guys that have put a lot into having a chance to be here. We're excited. Cleveland has been a great host thus far, great venue, whole deal. We're excited.

Q. The West Coast Conference and Mountain West have both been impacted by the expansion of the Pac-12. A number of Mountain West coaches have been pretty vocal about their future, either in or out of the Pac-12. I'm curious what your thoughts are as far as the impact on mid-majors who may or may not go to the Pac-12.

RANDY BENNETT: Who may or may not go to the Pac-12 other than the teams that have already decided? You know what, I have no idea. I don't think they have an idea yet.

I think from everything I've been told, they've got to get their TV deal straight first and I think they're getting close on that, and then expecting that to be finished by the time -- probably close to early April, and then after that I think they need an eighth football team. I think that's their next priority. Then their third priority is fill out the rest of the league, whether that's programs that have both football and basketball or is that just can they take a basketball-only school like Gonzaga, like ourselves. I don't know. I don't know what they're doing.

Until they know what they're doing, I don't think anybody else can know what they're doing. That's just my candid, honest answer.

Q. I think this is the fifth year in a row you've been top 10, top 15 in the defensive metrics. Was there a switch

in philosophy that has kind of sparked that for you?

RANDY BENNETT: That's a great question. A couple little things. A couple little things, but nothing major. I think on balls, defending pick-and-rolls have become such a huge part of the game, and it wasn't like that. I think we were on the front end in like 2010 when we had Delly and Micky. That's when we went real had heavy to it, not many teams had. And that's grown in college basketball. The last thing you do every time you scout a team is how are we guarding these on-ball situations. Your scout is going to get down to that.

So how we defended those, we've adapted. Teams have really gotten good at it and guards have become good at it, and there's more shooters on the floor, so you're trying to cover both, you're trying to cover the on ball coverage and also not giving up threes.

I think how we've done that, I think a couple things, how we break down our defense at practice has changed, so we've improved.

I think, yeah, from 10 years ago -- we had some teams that were really good, but we have been consistently very good for the last -- really the last five years, but in particular four years. COVID was the fifth year back, and we were good defensively, just could never make a basket. That was a problem.

Q. Curious how as a coach can you manage this tournament setting in terms of the intensity, the nerves maybe? I know a lot of your guys have been on this stage before, but what as a coach do you say to them? How do you prepare them for just the atmosphere of a tournament game?

RANDY BENNETT: The best way to prepare them is the experience they have from having played in it because you're speaking a foreign language to them if you're trying to explain how this tournament is different than the regular season. I just tell them it's going to be a tough game.

But the guys who have played in it, they know. They know the day is different. They know they have a press conference, meaning, they know they have 40 minutes on the court. They know their normal time that they have evaporates quickly. You don't have time. We go from here to practice and just everything is on such a tight schedule.

Then there's the magnitude of the game. The whole country is literally watching the game. So you get -- you normally get 10 texts a day, you get 150. So all that stuff, the best way is the experience. We talk about it, but we don't spend a lot of time on it.

The biggest thing I tell them, you'd better be ready to play because you're playing somebody good. There's no bad teams in this tournament, which is great, and you want to have a seat at the table. So we have a seat at the table, and see if we can keep it.

Q. You've been at Saint Mary's for 24 years. You're creeping up on 600 wins, 11 NCAA tournaments. What does Saint Mary's mean to you, and how would you describe Saint Mary's basketball?

RANDY BENNETT: Saint Mary's means to me -- shoot, I've lived there more than any other place in my life, so it's home. It's just kind of me.

Our program is about good people. I think that's why we've been consistent, why we've been really good is the quality of our kids. Even these like last four years, the leadership of our seniors has been incredible.

We're at a point where the guys try and lead the program to a better place than when they came in, and these seniors have really taken that on and have done it, including these three seniors that have done an incredible job at -- they got to learn from Logan Johnson, Alex Duke, Kyle Bowen, ^ ck Koozy, Toss. They've been able to learn from some good guys, and I think more than anything I can do as a coach and as a leader, if your seniors can do it, you're in business.

I think that's what -- we've just kind of slowly evolved. I don't even know if I had a real plan when I started it. The plan was try and win games.

But as we did that, we've picked up some good habits and some good traditions, and one of the biggest ones is our leadership from our seniors is -- I don't know who's better. It's hard to be better.

Q. Obviously the NCAA Tournament is one of the first ones to be done early in the week. Obviously, you guys are used to it, but how do you feel about that, like the rest, the week and a half layoff? Is it good? Is it too much rest? How do you view that from that perspective?

RANDY BENNETT: I'll be honest, I don't love it. Ours is early. I think we're a really good conference, so I think we should play later in the week.

It's all good. It doesn't matter. I just think I would -- because of that gap, we have nine days for us this year -- the 1 and 2 seeds, we have nine days from our last game until we play in the conference tournament. That's a big

gap. You've got to figure out things to do with your guys for nine days.

Anyhow, it's tricky. Then when you're done, we have nine or ten more days until we play. I'm not complaining about it, but I don't think it's ideal. I think you would rather stay in a rhythm.

It's nice to have a chance to freshen up and get healthy if you have some guys dinged up. But it's just too different. It's too different. It is challenging. You've got to keep your guys focused. Too much time for their minds to wander, especially nowadays. They have things going on, the portal, all that stuff. It starts cooking, and it's a distraction.

Whether you're talking about going into it or not, your friends are, your people are, it's something to talk about. So all that stuff is -- there are more things involved in making that decision than I've brought up. When can you get on TV? When will whatever TV network take your games? When can you get the venue? All those things are factors that will affect it.

But in an ideal world, I wish we were more on the norm on that. I think because we are a good league, I think it would help our exposure and everything.

Q. The NIL, transfer portal, all of that, just how have you evolved? A school like Saint Mary's compared to maybe a bigger school? They've talked about this expansion of the tournament. As a smaller school, a mid-major, what are your thoughts? Do you really believe it would open up more opportunities for mid-majors, or is it more just a grab by the power conferences?

RANDY BENNETT: I think that selection committee, I think they have a tough job. You try and figure out who's the best at -- say you're taking 37 at-larges, you're trying to pick between 35 and 39? I don't think it's possible to get it exactly right. It's going to be in someone's opinion. Unless you just go straight with the numbers, which I'd be for.

But if you don't, if you're going to add subjectivity into it, you're going to -- somebody is going to be unhappy.

So I am all for adding eight teams or whatever they're talking about adding. I think that would help some mid-major team, maybe two of them. A lot of them -- those power conferences, they have good teams. I'm not going to say that -- it's just hard to get in. That's the first thing I said. It's hard to get in this tournament. I do think with where college basketball is right now, I think right now the depth of good teams is the best I've seen it. I'm not saying at the very top it's the best, but you can go pretty deep and

have good teams now. I followed it hard this year because we're trying to -- you want to know what your ^ ck NET is, your Ken Pom is, whatever metric you're following. You just look at those teams, and they're all good, down to like 60.

I think they should add. I hope they add. I think it would help our league. I think it would help mid-majors. I'm not saying it's going to be eight more mid-majors. That's not going to happen. But I think it'll help us get one or two. There were only four at-large teams that made it other than the Power Four and Big East, and that was three Mountain Wests and one in the WCC and we were one of them.

I understand how difficult it is to make it. That's been the case for -- even though we've had high seeds, it's still been the case for the last four years. But even more so this year.

I hope they make that move.

Q. I asked Mitchell to compare Vanderbilt to a team you guys played this season. He mentioned Santa Clara. Do you agree?

RANDY BENNETT: Yeah, we told them that. No, I would agree in some aspects. Yeah, the way they attack you with penetration and they like to play in transition. Santa Clara -- Vanderbilt likes to shoot the three, but Santa Clara averaged 12 made threes a game this year. They remind me a little bit of Loyola Marymount, which tempo-wise, is different but the way they play the ball, force 14 turnovers a game, pretty much play in half court defense. They'll extend it a little bit, but they play that ball hard. And Loyola Marymount does, too. They remind me a little bit of them, too, from our league, but yeah, Santa Clara offensively.

Q. A Pac-12 question. If your administration came to you and said, what do you think about the Pac-12, how would you view that?

RANDY BENNETT: I'd need to know more. I don't know. Things are changing so fast right now. Conference realignment -- these presidents, these ADs, these commissioners, their jobs just got a lot tougher. They actually -- as far as athletics, they're making some decisions that are pretty impactful for a long time. You screw it up, well, the Pac-12 duffed it up, maybe became the Pac-2. They're going to recover, but that's not an easy one, either.

There's other teams -- there's so much money involved that are competing for these TV networks and football is the king. So there's a lot of things involved. You'd better make good decisions. You'd better expand at the right time. Got

to be careful about having bad adds. There's so many things involved now and it's moving so rapidly. I can't get a grasp on it yet. Believe me, I think about it every day.

Q. You mentioned the depth of the sport this season. What do you attribute that to?

RANDY BENNETT: Definitely portal and NIL. I mean, common sense. These guys, as there's more NIL money, which we keep thinking, hey, it's going to settle down, they're going to put some governors on this thing. Well, that's not the case. It's still going.

If these schools have silly money to go and buy somebody's player, it's going to happen.

Now, they'll -- whatever, they'll go find guys from lower-level conferences that will be able to play in their league, and now they're older, and they can just kind of -- there's more teams at the top with deep rosters of older talented players. If they lose some, they can fix it in the spring. The ones that fix it, the ones that fix it the best usually have the most money.

It's pretty much -- we can say all we want. Pretty much gets down to that now.

I think the way you can beat it is -- I think is what we're trying to do is just the culture of your program, player development, and you're going to have to have some NIL. You can't do it with NIL. Three years ago, you didn't know. Well, now you know. You'd better have some NIL in order to keep your players. You don't have to have the most NIL, but you have to have some NIL.

I think that's what's definitely happened, and I can't tell you what's going to happen a year from now.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about the strength of the league this year and having five teams in the top 85, had more opportunities in conference in Quad 1 and Quad 2 than you ever had and how that impacted (indiscernible)?

RANDY BENNETT: No, that's great. Yeah, our league was the best -- the West Coast Conference, I wish we could keep it right as it is right now. But we'll make good decisions and we've made good decisions. But our league was the best it's ever been as far as depth. We had 11 teams, we had Oregon State and Washington State. But it is -- I'd say the NIL portal has helped our league, but the teams in our league, like Santa Clara has a really good team this year, and they lost a game or two that they probably would usually win, and they're sitting there at this podium right now.

San Francisco is right there. So those are teams that could have made it. Oregon State was on track. They faded a little at the end. Washington State had a good team. Loyola Marymount had a good team.

It's tough to do, though. You have to have a good team and then you have to get it done, like, every night. You can't afford to have no-shows.

I'm excited -- it helped us because now you can pick up Quad 1 games in your league, which we were able to do. You get a -- you beat Santa Clara on the road, you get a Quad 1 win. If you get USF on the road, it's a Quad 1 win.

When you can pick them up within your league, it helps. It's not always been the case. It's been more so. To this year, it was the most.

We're headed the right direction. I think our league is a great example of we have to make good decisions. I'm 100 percent for what our league has been doing. But we have to keep making good decisions. You lose a team, you gain a team, whatever. Those have to be -- you don't want to lose good teams and you want to add good teams. Then you've got to make good decisions on your conference tournament and your schedule, how many games, because you can pick up Quad 1 games in your non-conference. That's where you can -- it's like the volume control on whether you can get Quad 1 games. It's hey, how many can you pick up in non-conference.

This year, we have 13 games, and we had six games that were right there, high-Quad 2, potential Quad 1s or a Quad 1.

If you're trying to make the NCAA Tournament as an at-large, to have that opportunity, you have to really be shrewd with your non-conference scheduling. You cannot control your conference scheduling. Your conference is your conference. Hopefully, your conference is good. This year it was good. Washington State and Oregon State helped us with that. But the other WCC schools that are usually at the top were good. So it really helped us.