

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - New Mexico vs Marquette

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

Marquette Golden Eagles

Shaka Smart

Kam Jones

Stevie Mitchell

David Joplin

Media Conference



Q. For Kam, why did you decide to stay after Woj left? What was it about Shaka that made you want to stick around? And what does it say about the direction of the program that you guys have stayed out of the portal and kept this nucleus of guys together for the last few years?

KAM JONES: Yeah, this guy next to me was a huge reason of us deciding to stick with Coach Smart rather than Coach Wojo. Talking to each other every day, why we were committed and signed here. We talked to Coach Smart individually, and we decided we liked him as a person and pretty much told each other we were staying.

Q. Stevie, I'm sure you've seen a lot of film of Donovan Dent over the last couple days. What's stood out to you, or what have the coaches told you about the best ways of how to slow him down?

STEVIE MITCHELL: I think, obviously, the biggest thing at that stood out is how he's a really good player. You can see that on film. You can see that by the stats. We're just excited for the challenge that we have in front of us to guard him, five guys, whoever gets switched on to him, whoever starts on him. It's just an exciting challenge. We're preparing for it, watching film, and have prepared for it all year, going against good players, as well.

Q. Obviously, guys, the last few years you've been a 2 seed, now here you are as a 7. Is there a difference between that? What do you think the mindset maybe is different as a team than last year's groups?

DAVID JOPLIN: No, we kind of take the approach that seeds don't matter. As we've seen, teams we've played, teams we've lost to, but seeds don't matter.

Q. A lot of these NCAA Tournament games come down to free throws at the end. You hit some big ones last year against Colorado. What do you think goes into hitting those clutch-free throws?

DAVID JOPLIN: Just being confident. A lot of games come down to that, a lot of good teams. I thought we made a big emphasis on, not only the late-game shots that were tournament clutch, but earlier in the game making, all our free throws. The best teams in this month make their free throws and they win games that way. Those late-game free throws definitely count, but all of them matter.

Q. What does it mean -- or why did you guys stick together? What you guys have is pretty rare, this sort of stability. What was it about the group that made you guys want to stay? Did you guys take that as -- the fact that Coach didn't go to the portal to look for a bunch of guys, does that say something about the belief that he had in you all as a team?

KAM JONES: Most definitely. I was about to say most of that is because of Coach Smart, the type of coach he is, the type of man he is. We've really taken on his personality as a team, and that's one of the main things I love about this group.

Yeah, we all love each other. We spend a lot of time with each other. It's a very high level, so knowing that Coach isn't just necessarily going in the portal just fishing, that gives us the confidence and the continuity to go after it as a team and come together and make each other stronger.

STEVIE MITCHELL: For me, when I think about that, I think, one, to answer the first question, I feel like it would be impossible to tell anybody, coaches, teammates, each other that we're going to different schools just because of the relationship we have, so much we've been through together, how much we helped each other get through. That just seems impossible.

Then, just Coach trusting us gives us confidence and makes us want to go out there and prove him right really because, obviously, if we don't win, if we lose games, media is going to say something about how he should have went in the portal, how he should have done this, how he should have done that, how we should have done this, how we should have done that. And normally, the only way to end all that is just to win. That's just our goal, being here for the fourth year in a row as seniors, just to go out there, compete and win.

DAVID JOPLIN: Like these guys said, we really rock with each other and Coach also rocks with us, and like he pointed out, it doesn't go into the portal so that belief in us just make us stronger, and every year, every summer, it was our job to get better and to make each other better and sharpen each other's iron. We have 100 percent belief in all of that.

Q. Do you like Coach Smart with hair or without hair better?

KAM JONES: I've always known him with hair. I'm going with hair. He's going to rock it whatever he rocks.

STEVIE MITCHELL: He going to rock whatever he's going to rock.

Q. One word to describe Coach Smart?

STEVIE MITCHELL: Yeah. One word? I would say passionate.

Q. Kam, Coach Dre is back after having his knee surgery. What's that mean to you guys to have him back?

KAM JONES: Man, it's great to have just his spirit, his spirit around. Even when he was watching the games at home, he was calling Coach at halftime and telling him what he sees and talking to us. It's great to have him out there and knowing he's in some pain and to see he wants to be here with us, it means a lot, and it kind of shows the people we have in this program.

Q. Stevie, New Mexico plays a pretty fast pace, so how do you think the way that you guys play defensively can counteract them in transition?

STEVIE MITCHELL: I think defense transition has been an emphasis for us all year. I think we've got a lot of good practice for it going against teams like Xavier who like to push the ball and other teams we played throughout the year that get the ball up the court. But obviously, they're unique to them, New Mexico, so they've got different

players, they've got different personnel. We're just trying our best to learn that.

I think we don't mind -- I always thought we played pretty fast. I saw some -- heard someone saying that them playing fast would throw us off. I'm just excited for the challenge that it will provide.

SHAKA SMART: It's terrific to be in Cleveland. Spent three years of my life in northeast Ohio. I love this area. But more importantly, I'm really excited to be here with our guys, our team.

We've had a heck of a journey so far to this point, and all the experiences we've had, I tell our guys all the time, you've got those experiences in your pocket, so now is the time to pull them out and use them and come together to be our best.

New Mexico is a terrific team. I've known Richard Pitino a long, long time. He actually replaced me as an assistant coach at Florida when I left to go to VCU. He's done a heck of a job. Terrific team, terrific season, conference champions. So it'll be a great game tomorrow night.

Q. 1999 Akron graduate --

SHAKA SMART: Go Zips.

Q. What did Coach Hipsher teach you, what did Akron teach you and how did it mold you as a coach?

SHAKA SMART: I worked with two coaches there, Dan Hipsher and Keith Dambrot. I was actually telling one of the kids my best Keith Dambrot stories, which is my very first day on the job, he took me to meet a young 18-year-old kid and helped Keith put him through a workout. That kid ended up being a pretty good player.

But yeah, this was the most meaningful stop for me, Northeast Ohio, for a couple reasons. One, I met my wife in Akron, which is nothing more meaningful than that. And then number two, when I got here, I was 26 years old, my first Division I assistant coaching job, and I mean, I just didn't know what I didn't know and I had some people that believed in me and gave me an opportunity that I didn't even really probably deserve yet. But I just grew a lot, and from hip I learned a ton about motion offense. He's as good of an offensive coach as I've been around. And then from Keith, I've got a list as long as Santa Claus's list in terms of the things he taught me. He's probably the guy I've been closest with of anyone that I've ever worked with.

Q. How is the prep work in the days before an NCAA Tournament game, how's that evolved for you over the



years?

SHAKA SMART: It's evolved a lot because Stevie has described me as passionate. Sometimes I overdo it. So when I was a younger head coach, I would stay up until 2:00, 3:00 in the morning on Sunday after we found out who we were playing. You're not going to win the game on Sunday.

I think understanding that winning -- there's a lot of things that go into winning, but most importantly, the three guys that were just sitting up here and their teammates, being in a good place, being connected with each other, having the clarity of mind and the freedom to go out there and make plays, because it does feel different as a player, and to some extent as a coach, when you're coaching in the postseason or playing in the postseason. So my job is to help them with that.

So I put a lot more time and energy into that spiritual, mental, emotional preparation for the guys than I once did.

Q. With Coach Dambrot, biggest thing you learned from him, kind of rolling through the punches and being a survivor because early in his career he got knocked down, but also, what's it like seeing Drew Joyce who you coached at Akron kind of develop, too, as a coach?

SHAKA SMART: Drew Joyce was the first player to ever curse me out as a coach, so I'm a coach and he's a player. I'll never forget it. Drew has got a bright future. I was at Drew and Romeo and LeBron's graduation party. There's only one reason for that. It's because of Keith. Keith treated me like a brother from the first day that I ever met him. I've never been around someone that was so sharing and giving.

Again, he's the guy that I've been the closest to in terms of people that I've worked with. It was so much fun.

The biggest thing he taught me, actually, is he would always call people when they were down, like, other coaches after they got let go or people that were going through tough things, and he would always tell me, like, well, everybody calls you when things are going well, but you've got to make sure you check in on people when things are not going as well. He just had a way about that.

Then the second biggest thing, it's the most profound thing ever in coaching. Are you ready for this? Spending time. He would always be like, we've got to spend time with the players. We've got to spend time. We've got to spend time.

It was every day going to lunch where the guys are going to lunch. It was every day finding them, spending time with them. He was very, very hard on them in practice, very hard. So he had a rule. We all had to spend 10 minutes in the locker room with the players after practice repairing some of the relationships because those practices were crazy. I mean, Stevie said I was passionate. His was on a different level.

But yeah, he taught me a lot.

Q. Was it a conscious decision to sort of not dabble too much in the portal the last few years considering the group that you have, and then obviously you're going to lose a bunch of dudes. Is that something that you might have to go revisit here as you head into next year?

SHAKA SMART: It was absolutely a conscious decision. You know, a lot of people have thoughts or want to comment on the different way we do things and ask about it. We don't have time in this setting for me to adequately explain to you why we do what we do, so I'll give you a really short answer. We value relationships. We value growth. We value victory. Those are very basic values.

I think most coaches would probably say that they care about those things, but it dawned on me several years ago well before I got to Marquette that a lot of us as coaches can tend to be hypocrites. When we say we value something but then our actions demonstrate something else.

So yeah, we had a really good group of young guys my first year at Marquette that we felt like could develop into really good players. Three of them are in the NBA right now, Omax Prosper, Oso Ighodaro, Tyler Kolek. I just got off a FaceTime call with Tyler and he said, I can't watch these games because I'm going to start to cry. That's how much I miss it.

That's a message out there for any young player, like this is special. And coaches, too. This is special, being a part of it.

We felt like, yeah -- I remember after our first year, Tyler actually said we've got to go get a big guy. We're losing Kerr. Kerr was our starting big guy. I said, no, Oso is going to be just fine. And he was.

But you bring up a great point. Every year is different, and we've lost -- from that initial core group of young guys, three guys that are in the NBA and then after this season, three guys that have been integral parts of what we've done the last four years. It's definitely going to stress test

our way of doing things. I tend to err on the side of really, really pouring into the guys we have and focusing on them. There's a lot of reasons behind that that, again, we don't necessarily have time to get into now. So yes, we believe in our way of doing things.

Q. We couldn't get this out of Coach Mo. Would you say you're a better coach bald or with hair?

SHAKA SMART: I'm a better coach with better players. (Laughter).

Let's see. When I was bald, Coach Joey Rodriguez and Jamie Skeen and those guys took us on a magic carpet ride to the Final Four. I was bald, but I could have had a full afro. It wasn't my hair. It wasn't me. It wasn't anything about me. That's the thing you learn in March that's very, very humbling is that -- I don't want to say coaching is overrated because it does matter and players need you to impact them in a way that helps them be their best and helps them maybe even be more than they would have been without you, but the teams that come together and make a decision you can see in their eyes, that has very little to do with the coach.

Q. What would you say your identity is right now as a basketball team?

SHAKA SMART: Our identity? Well, this is always aspirational, so I'm not saying that we're perfect with this. But our identities, three things culturally, three things defensively, three things offensively, and they are: Present, connected, desperate; vicious, disruptive, unselfish, fast, decisive, selfless. So that's who we want to be.

Now, when you play really good teams, again, that stresses that. If we were going out here playing against the worst team in Division I, trust me, we would look like that for sure. But the better the team is you play, the harder it is to be the best version of yourself, and New Mexico is a heck of a team.

I think the biggest thing for us is making sure that we pour into the controllable elements of being that identity.

Q. How did you keep Dre involved in the work over the last couple weeks while he's been recovering from that knee surgery?

SHAKA SMART: This is what I like about Marquette. We've got our beat writer writing a story about an assistant coach overcoming a knee injury. I mean, seriously, it says something about the level of, just, detail and interest there is in our team.

Now, if I were you I'd write a story about Kadin Hamilton or Josh Clark or those guys. But if you want to write a story about Dre, which he did beat me the last time we were in this arena, I do believe. I was an assistant at Akron and he was a player at Kent. So go back and look at that.

Yeah, it was tough. Tough injury for Dre, middle of the season, had to have surgery, and as a coach, you never want to be away from your guys. You never want to be away from the staff. So it was a big, just, disruption for him.

We don't have anyone else like him on our staff, so when he was gone, there was definitely a void. So it's great to have him back crutching around, and hopefully, he'll continue to positively impact the guys.

Q. Coach, a lot has already been talked about and forgive me if you've talked about this, but the Kam and Donny matchup, but I don't imagine they're going to be defending each other very often. Can you talk about what Stevie does defensively? I imagine he'll get a lot of Donovan Dent matchup, and also Tru Washington on New Mexico is probably going to be doing a lot of the defense on Kam. Can you talk about those two matchups?

SHAKA SMART: I appreciate you bringing that up because I was just talking to the radio guys about this. A lot of times we tend to oversimplify and fans kind of go by what they hear from the media, but in reality, that's not a two-man matchup that's a four-man matchup because you're right, Tru Washington, terrific defender, does a-a great job request his hands. You can tell that he's been well schooled and he's been very aggressive with that.

Then Stevie Mitchell, for us, is always our guy that we put on an elite guard like Donovan Dent. That matchup will involve all four of those guys, plus their teammates, because when you're out there on the court, there's 10 total guys, and the help defense and the pick-and-roll coverages and those sorts of things really, really matter, too.

But Dent is a heck of a player. I told the guys when we first started introducing New Mexico, understand this, he averages more points per game than Kam and more assists per game, in a league that's comparable. We've got five teams in the NCAA Tournament, the Mountain West got four. So it's a heck of a challenge.

There's a lot that goes into making Dent good. I think Nelly Joseph is a big domino for Dent and the rest of the team. Dent is unquestionably the best player, but Nelly Joseph,

man, I mean, the motor with which he plays and the way he impacts play on both ends of the floor is incredible.

Q. Talking about you having five games in, the Mountain West has four. They're talking about expansion to 76 teams. Who is it going to help the most? Will it help more mid-majors getting that second and third team in or is it going to be shifting back to the Power Four conferences again as far as where the power lies?

SHAKA SMART: What do you think? You know the answer to your own question. We live in a time where the power, if you will -- we use that word now. The power lies with the Power Four in terms of those decisions.

I think that it is very, very, very difficult now, probably harder than ever, if you're not in the top maybe six or seven conferences to make the NCAA Tournament as an at-large bid. So John Groce's Akron team, for example, they're an NCAA Tournament team whether they won in that MAAC championship game or not. Do they make the NCAA Tournament without winning? No. A team like Drake.

Because the way that we've set things up with this system of quads, the reality is, if you're in the better leagues, you're going to play so many more -- look at the Big Ten and SEC teams and how many Quad 1 games that they've played. But if your record is, like, below 10 percent winning percentage, is that better than not playing any at all? I'm not saying it is or it isn't.

You know, it's interesting, the NIT selection committee, I'm not sure if it still is, but has been for many, many years, old coaches. I've always said, well, why isn't the NCAA Tournament selection committee old coaches?

Well, because it's too important for the coaches to decide.

But yeah, I think if it expands, you'll see power conference teams with losing records get in, and not that those teams aren't good, but just that's who has the power right now.

Q. Richard Pitino jumped on the Florida staff in 2009 when you took the VCU job, and he's spoken extensively about the role Billy Donovan has played in the role of his career. I'm curious, what role did Billy have with you and your development as a coach?

SHAKA SMART: He's incredible. I'm lucky, I worked for five head coaches: Bill Brown, Oliver Purnell, Dan Hipsher, Keith Dambrot and Billy Donovan, all five of them impacted me in very, very significant ways. Billy is an expert at the psychological component of coaching. He

really -- he calls it DMM: Disposition, mindset and mentality. He's just constantly thinking about that.

I learned a ton -- my goal was to go down there and be there for like six to eight years because he's a guy that I looked up to ever since I worked his camp in 2000 as a 23-year-old kid.

But I got offered the VCU job, and it was kind of a tough one for me because I didn't want to leave. I didn't even know if I was ready to be a head coach. But it was this unbelievable opportunity.

Billy was great with just -- he didn't hold me back in any way. He encouraged me. He said, if you want the job, take the job. Then Richard ended up coming to Florida, and obviously, Richard has this kind of dual influence of Billy and then his father. Doesn't get much better than that.

Q. You know, you've talked about how much you guys ask of Kam. Do you ever at any time have to talk to him about making sure he's not putting a lot of pressure on himself to produce?

SHAKA SMART: Yeah. Absolutely. I mean, that's the key to this whole thing is, if you're putting too much pressure on yourself, you're not going to be your best. But it's a fine line. It's a fine line because the reason that the best are the best is because they're perfectionists. But one of the things that I've learned over the years is if you're a perfectionist, you need to use just the right amount of your perfectionism and let go of the rest. If you use too much, you'll drive yourself crazy, literally, and if you don't use enough, then you're not going to hold yourself to a high enough standard. So that's the balance that we try to help Kam strike.

I think he's done a terrific job this year. Believe it or not, Kam comes across as very happy-go-lucky and always in a good mood and dancing around and stuff. Kam has got a lot going on up there. A lot. But he's handled everything really well.

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