

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Bryant vs Michigan State

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

**Bryant Bulldogs**

**Phil Martelli, Jr.**

**Rafael Pinzon**

**Earl Timberlake**

**Connor Withers**

Media Conference

**Q. Earl, I'm curious when you look at this Michigan State team, what do you notice about them on film and what do you see in Michigan State this year?**

EARL TIMBERLAKE: I think when we won the Big Ten Tournament, they're big, they rebound, and they get on a run. That's what I see.

**Q. One of the things that we've heard about you guys is you like to run at pace. You like to run and score at a high volume. How does this game translate when you've got two teams that want to push the pace and maybe see how you can test each other in transition?**

CONNOR WITHERS: Yeah, we're going to try to just play our game. We like to play fast. We know they like to play fast. So, we're going to do what we do. We played a couple teams like that throughout the year that's tried to push the pace on us, so we've got an idea how that's going to go. Obviously, not to their level, but we're going to try to push our pace and get back in transition and slow them down a little bit.

RAFAEL PINZON: I think the biggest thing is getting back in defense. Like Connor said, we played some teams that played fast against us, so we kind of know what we have to do.

**Q. Give me one word to describe Coach Martelli.**

EARL TIMBERLAKE: That's a great question. One word? Disciplined.



CONNOR WITHERS: One word is kind of hard. I could do two words: Players' coach.

RAFAEL PINZON: I'll say toughness.

**Q. Connor, when you say "players' coach," what are the sorts of things you see from Coach Martelli that makes you say that?**

CONNOR WITHERS: He listens to us a lot, so he's not afraid to -- like, he always says, we're out there playing the game, we're the ones on the court. So, he'll come to us, ask us, what do you see? And he'll trust us, and he'll listen to us and stuff. Not a lot of coaches do that. He might not always agree with us and do what we think, but he's going to take our input and actually evaluate that and take that into account when he's making decisions.

That, and he's always joking around with us. He's a younger coach, too, so he's able to relate to us and stuff like that. He tries to go and freestyle rap and stuff like that at practice sometimes. I'm not going to say he's good, but he's a fun guy to be around.

**Q. Looking at you guys' paths to Bryant and of course you're the veterans on this team, what does it mean for you to be here together, to have this moment together?**

RAFAEL PINZON: It means a lot to us. You know, I know Earl made the tournament before, but Connor and I didn't make it before. Feels good, man. It's a relief to just make it in my last year, so it definitely feels great.

CONNOR WITHERS: Definitely agree with him. It feels great to do it, and especially, it feels great to do it with this group of guys. We've been around each other a lot in two years. We hang out every day with each other. We're really close. So just do it with our brothers. It's really special.

EARL TIMBERLAKE: Like they said, it feels great knowing all we went through was for something. It definitely feels great to do it with this group of guys.

**Q. For Connor and Earl, you guys don't necessarily have a lot of size depth in the paint, but you've got size**



**across the board. How has that worked for you guys this year, having bigger guards, and how has that helped translate to what you want to do on the court?**

EARL TIMBERLAKE: It shows we're very versatile. Like you said, we've got a lot of size depth all around, so we can do a lot of switching. We can also help each other out.

CONNOR WITHERS: We've got a lot of positional size, so what we may lack at one position, we've got an advantage at another position, so we kind of try to play to our strengths, and that's it.

**Q. What's the one song that best describes Coach?**

CONNOR WITHERS: What's that one song he's always singing?

EARL TIMBERLAKE: He's always singing a song from 8 Mile, Slim Shady or something.

CONNOR WITHERS: Papa Doc. He's always free styling that one.

**Q. What does it mean to be able to bring Bryant back to this stage and to be in the spotlight and to kind of represent the school?**

EARL TIMBERLAKE: It means a lot. Definitely, like, the school pulling for us, knowing that we're doing this for the school and the program, it means a lot, definitely.

CONNOR WITHERS: Yeah, I love Bryant. Brought me out of the transfer portal. I owe a lot to them. They brought me in and really embraced me. It feels good to be able to give them something back and finish what they brought me here to do.

RAFAEL PINZON: It definitely means a lot. Working out during the summer and the off-season, I didn't want no personal accolades. We always wanted to just win as a team and go to the tournament as a team.

We got it done.

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: It's different being on this side of it. My son is sitting right there, and I've sat in that chair quite a few times with my dad and watching him up here. It's a special thing. It's special to be in the tournament.

We talked about back in June with our guys -- last year was a good year, and we won 20 games. We were 11-5 in the conference, finished tied for second in the conference, lost in the semifinals and had a lot of people come by and say, good year, good year, good year.

But I told them at that time, like, we're not chasing good, we're chasing great. This is great. Being in this tournament, being on this stage is great, and the way these guys have handled themselves from that day in June until now, they deserve to have great, and I'm really proud of them, really happy for them that they got that.

**Q. Obviously, you've been around the game a very long time. Your dad is a very successful coach, as well. How much did he mold your philosophies and really turn you into the man and the coach that you are right now?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Yeah, I'm glad you said that. More the man than the coach, to be honest with you. Because that's what he is. With him, it's always about people. Yeah, we're coaching basketball, but we could be doing anything in life that it boils down to people.

I've kind of been quantifying it. I don't know if it's a real number or not, but I'd say 80 percent, maybe it's 85 percent, maybe it's 90, I don't know how you quantify those things, but it's an awful lot.

They've been asking me, like, what are the similarities. I say, okay, I could list however many things. There's probably three times, four times, five times as many -- I don't even realize I do that are him.

I've been fortunate to be around a lot of really great people, obviously he's at the top of that list, that have helped me along this way and this journey, and I'm very thankful for each and every one of them.

But my dad is a big part of that for sure.

**Q. I know your dad had obviously the last however many years at Michigan, so he kind of got a little bit of taste -- but you guys have known Tom as a family for quite a while. How would you quantify that relationship, because I know he's talked pretty glowingly about you even back a year or two ago when you got the job?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Yeah, Coach Izzo is a champion of coaches, and again, he gets it; it's about people.

I could go through -- when I got the job last November, he called and reached out. We talked on Thursday as we were preparing for our championship game. We talked on Saturday after we won our championship, and they were on their way, I guess, back after they had lost in the Big Ten Tournament. When Phillip, my son there, when he broke his arm at our camp two summers ago, three

summers ago, Coach Izzo and my dad must have been on the road recruiting, talking about -- he must have said something about how Philip broke his arm. And one day a package shows up at the door, and it's a bunch of Michigan State stuff.

Usually Phillip -- there's quite a few days where he's walking around with a Michigan State basketball T-shirt. I'm not sure if he's got it under his Bryant shirt over there or not, but that's special. Like, there's not a lot of people that do this. There's great coaches all over the place, but a great coach who's also a great human being, it's kind of a unicorn. You don't see that a whole lot.

But he has set a great example for me and a lot of coaches throughout the country of how to do both of those things.

**Q. To kind of piggyback off that, as a coach, what do you admire about Coach Izzo, and what's allowed him to have such sustained success?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Well, he's real. He's just a real guy. Like, there's not -- there's no fake. There's no fluff. There's no, okay, I'm going to be this guy in practice and then that guy during the game, or I'm going to be this guy at home, and I'm going to be this guy in the office, or I'm going to be this guy when the cameras are on and this guy when the cameras are off. He's the same person.

Those times where he's reached out and I'm talking to him, it's like I'm watching him do this. It's like the same exact person. I think that consistency and just that realness, that genuine -- like, this is who I am, and for better or worse, this is who I am. That's something that guys like that, him and others that I admire, that's who I'm trying to follow.

**Q. You haven't played a team maybe of this level since St. John's in December. After playing so well for a couple months in your league, how do you prepare your guys for this? And then you guys play with great pace, which is not something Michigan State is necessarily afraid of. Do you worry at all that that sort of coincides with what they prefer?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: I mean, yes, but like, we have to be us. We're not the type of team that's going to, like, all of a sudden flip everything and be something different. We have to be us.

There's adjustments to be made in there with that, but we've done this thing for a long time now together over this last year a certain way. Again, if we went and changed a whole bunch of things this week, it would probably work in bigger detriment, to be honest with you, for our guys.

They're locked into we need to be who we need to be. We know what the things are that we need to do, the keys, the focus, and we try to simplify that as best as we possibly can. I just told them when we finished our practice off-site here, the plan is simple, the execution is hard. The plan for the game is simple. But the execution and going out and doing it play after play after play, that's what's going to be hard. But I think our guys are ready for the challenge.

**Q. We were talking to Andy Toole earlier and he was saying what makes this tournament special is the mid-majors. Just want your thoughts on what the mid-majors mean to the NCAA Tournament and what that carrot means for your guys to have an opportunity like this as they go through off-season?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Yeah, it's huge, and I'm happy for Andy. Super congratulatory to him. He's a really good friend for a long time. I haven't seen him yet, but I don't know if we'll cross paths with our two different time slots, but that is the NCAA Tournament.

I think when you go out and about, and if you just randomly grabbed somebody on the street and said, talk about the NCAA Tournament, one of the first things, if not the first thing they're going to say is, the little guys, the upsets. You find these random places -- like, there's a ton of people probably in this room that didn't even know Bryant existed four days ago, five days ago. Well, now you do, and that's special.

Certainly, we all see Michigan State on TV. We all see Alabama or Marquette, see them on TV over and over and over again. And I get that, they've earned that. But now you're seeing Bryant. You're seeing Robert Morris. You're seeing those schools, and you're like, okay, who are they? What are they about? Because there are fascinating stories throughout this thing.

I could poll 15 guys from that locker room and bring them up and tell you their story, and you'd be like, man, that's great. Like, I could write a feature on that. Like, 15 guys. So, times that by the number of teams in this tournament and the number of schools that don't get that shine all the time.

I know we're probably headed towards expansion and towards whatever, but the way it's set up, whatever that expansion looks like, but the way it's set up right now, we can't lose that. That's the fabric of this tournament. That's the essence of this tournament.

Anything else would be doing a disservice to all the student-athletes, all the universities that are out there competing their butts off, again, for us, from mid-June until

now nonstop.

It's what we all love about it, right? We've loved about it since we were kids. That should not change.

**Q. I'm curious, you come from a family of coaches and I'm sure you knew the sacrifices and what goes into this profession, but I'm curious when you reflect on your career and you look back at all the coaching stops you've had, how much do you appreciate this moment that you've been able to have with this group of guys?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Oh, it's big time. It is. It's a struggle. I didn't know if I'd ever get an opportunity as a head coach. You sit there and dream about it and you work really hard for it and you never know if it's coming.

So there is. What I really appreciate, and I told this group, we had a practice -- we played at UMBC on a Thursday. We drove up to Newark, New Jersey, for a Saturday game at NJIT, drove from Baltimore to Newark. We got in at 1:00-something in the morning. We have practice at NJIT that afternoon, and their joy to be in the gym after -- you could make the excuse, played a really hard won, won a really hard game hard Thursday night, got in super late. Their joy and excitement to be in the gym and to be around each other, like, I'm getting a boost of energy just thinking about that because every time we're together, that's what it's like.

To hear their joy and their laughter and their trash talking each other and their jokes, that is what's super special. This group, they have found that connection that is just -- it's something different. It's just a different level. I've been around it where you've had good teams that had really good connection, but didn't go to that next level. This team went to that next level, and again, they got what they deserved winning a championship because of it.

**Q. Can you confirm if your dad is cheering for you or Michigan State?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Well, Coach Izzo joked with him last week about that, about if we get matched up, it's going to suck. You're going to have to root against your son.

I'm pretty sure -- I've been swayed pretty close that I think he's rooting for us. But he should be in the building right now. They were on their way as we were pulling in, so pretty sure he's rooting for us. Pretty sure.

**Q. How would you rate your rap skills?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Ooh, my rap skills? Just all right.

Just all right.

**Q. What does Bryant mean to you?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Ooh, that's a great question. Bryant is just a wonderful place with extraordinary people. It is a welcoming place. It's a place that brought my family in with open arms when we moved here, and Phillip was going into third grade, Marra was going into first grade, and Nate was just born. And now, Phillip is in ninth grade; Marra is in seventh, and Nate is in first grade. Our family has blossomed in our time at Bryant, and it's because of the people.

I could go on and on and list name after name after name, you know, President Gittell and his cabinet, and Bill Smith, our athletic director and his administrative team, our board of trustees. It's just a really, really great place.

When I was coming up to take an assistant job, I didn't know much about Bryant. We had played Bryant when I was an assistant at Delaware, but I had never been to campus. I had never seen it. But what I wanted to know was the people.

When I got here, I said, man, this is, like, top of the line people. And I've been around some really good places, but this was top of the line.

I am forever grateful they gave me a chance. There weren't a lot of people banging down my door. I had a one or two interviews for head coaching jobs, obviously, didn't get them. But they believed. They gave me a shot. Here we are.

**Q. You mentioned sitting in these rooms when your dad was doing this and, obviously, you played in the tournament as a player. As a head coach now, is there anything so far that you've realized about this experience that maybe you didn't recognize or appreciate before?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: It's a lot. It's a lot. Poor Tristan, every time he tries to get my eye on something, it's what? Now what? What is it? But it's an awesome thing. I wouldn't trade it -- when we were leaving the office -- or when I was leaving the office at like 1:00, 1:30 Sunday night into Monday morning and the assistants were still kind of wrapping up work after the selection show, I said that to them. I said, like, we're going to be tired, we're going to be exhausted. We're going to work really hard this week. We're going to probably do more this week than any normal week. But this is the good stuff. This is the good stuff. We've worked really, really hard to get to this point. We've worked really, really hard to earn an opportunity to

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®



work really, really, really hard. That's what it is.

I wouldn't trade it for anything. I really wouldn't.

**Q. I'm wondering, obviously, your dad and Coach Izzo have been on, I guess you would say, the back nine of your career, and your dad stepped away. As a younger coach right now, having that bridge of seeing the way it used to be to where it is now, where do you feel the game is headed with all the NIL changes, with talk of expansion, big, bloated conferences? I'm wondering from your perspective as a coach, where is it headed?**

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Well, the game is the game. The game is the game. Michigan State is going to play Bryant tomorrow night at 10:00, which will probably be closer to 11:00. So, the game is the game.

Now, all the other stuff, yeah, it's ever evolving. It's ever changing.

I'd be guessing if I said I knew exactly where it was headed. I don't think any of us ever really know.

But there's still a market for having a great game and a great product and great college basketball out there. Again, does it look different than it did five years ago, 10 years ago, 20 years ago? For sure it does. But it's just different, and we have to find the things that we need to stay set in that, hey, these things can't change. But knowing that, there's things around us that are changing that we have to adapt to.

Is it more transactional than ever? Of course it is. But there was always a transactional nature to this. It didn't involve NIL. It didn't involve some of those things, but there was. But I still think there's a major need for the relational part, and that's what we focus on every day. We're just focused on the relationship piece.

You hear coaches talk about, well, I know half my roster is in the portal and this and that. Yeah, we're probably all dealing with that. But I don't think it takes away from the relationship piece. That's something that, again, goes back to my dad, of like pour into your guys. That's what I see. I see just pour into them, get the best out of them, and yeah, there could be hard conversations a week, two weeks, a month from now where it becomes more transactional.

Either way, from the player side or the coach's side it can be transactional.

But I do think there's some of those things that we still have to stay steadfast on. That relationship piece still matters.

The pouring into people piece still matters. Understanding that the game is still the game. We go out there, there's no dollar signs on that floor. There's no, well, that guy makes that much money, and my guy doesn't, so that guy wins. Uh-uh, doesn't matter. They go out there and I don't know what their team gets. I.

Know it's more than whatever our team gets. But that doesn't matter. You just have an opportunity to play and compete, and the score is what will matter at the end. Those are the numbers that will matter at the end of the night.

I do want to make a quick -- I want to thank our conference, America East, our commissioner, Brad Walker, sitting in the back. I've been blown away. When we moved from the Northeast Conference to the America East and it's no slight to the Northeast Conference, but the America East, it is run at a high, high, high level and it's because of Brad and his staff.

And the coaching in our league, the coaching in our league is fantastic. Again, I know a lot of people probably -- maybe you saw our championship game and that was your introduction to the America East if you saw that, but the coaching up and down the line, the play is outstanding, and it's because of Brad and his leadership that has elevated this conference, and I do want to make a special thank you to him for his leadership and his mentorship through these last two years for me. Thank you.

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