

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

Friday, March 21, 2025

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

Alabama Crimson Tide

Nate Oats

Mark Sears

Mouhamed Dioubate

Media Conference

Alabama 90, Robert Morris 81

THE MODERATOR: Coach, congrats on the win. Please start us out with an opening statement.

NATE OATS: Yeah, I thought Robert Morris played hard. They're a good team. Their effort was great. They ended up with 16 offensive rebounds. We only had five.

You've got to give them a lot of credit. We knew they'd play tough. We shot a little higher percentage, there was more offensive boards for them to get, but we didn't do a good enough job keeping them off the glass. You look at a kid like Dickerson, he had more offensive rebounds than our entire team combined.

A little disappointed in our offensive rebounding, but I'll say this, our guys were resilient. We said coming into this tournament that we're going to welcome some adversity. Hopefully, it's not self-inflicted. I thought tonight some of it was with the rebounds we gave up, but whether it's missed shots, whether it's referee calls, who cares what it is. If we face some adversity, let's welcome it, let's handle it with the right attitude.

I thought Mark did a great job. It wasn't going great for him. I think he only had three points at the half, if I remember right. He had 19 in the second half, ended up with 22 and 10 assists. Things weren't going great.

Maybe in the past, he wouldn't have been as positive as he was, but I thought he was aggressive, got downhill, got to the free-throw line, drew 10 fouls in the second half. He ends up with 22-10-5. He didn't shoot it particularly well.



When we won a 5 from 3 in the past, maybe those were games where he gets a little frustrated, doesn't play as hard as he does on defense. But that wasn't the case tonight. I thought he competed really hard, and that's what we're looking for out of our leaders.

Mo had some possessions that maybe weren't the best for him, and he ends up with a double-double. I thought he played well. There's a lot of guys you can point to that had good play. We got good minutes out of Derrion Reid. I mean, for him to come in and, just over 10 minutes, get nine points, four rebounds, I thought was pretty good.

We were hoping not to play Grant, but I think it was a four-point game and Grant, about eight minutes to go, he stood up, like, hey, put me in, and we had to go.

I trust him. He shows up big in big games. He came in, and we went on a run right away. I think we outscored them 32-23 from there, and he made some big plays, starting with that loose ball right out there off the free-throw line. He had the dunk, and thought he made some good defensive plays. He got some rebounds. He ends up with three rebounds, five points in seven minutes.

We were hoping not to have to play him. We did. I think he'll be all right. We've got to get him a bunch of rehab because we're going to for sure need him no matter which team plays. They've got a lot bigger front court, whether it's Vandy or Saint Mary's, either one.

Q. Mark, can you speak to what Coach mentioned about contributing in other ways, maybe than three-pointers in a game like this where you've got 10 assists, you knock down 11 free throws and got it done other ways?

MARK SEARS: Yeah, he always talks about finding ways to win when things are not going well, and in the first half, things weren't going well. So I just really trusted my teammates, and I was just making the right read, trying to create open shots for my teammates, and then it just -- kept playing the right way, and then the game repaid me back.

Q. Mark or Mo, what kind of teammate is Grant, encouraging y'all throughout the game before he came



in, and he was willing to step in when the game got close at the end?

MOUHAMED DIOUBATE: Grant is a positive teammate. He always uplifts us. He's one of the leaders, one of the seniors on the team. When things start going well with Grant, he always speaks up, and that's what we need on this team.

Q. Mark and Mo, how much does tournament experience come into play, especially in a first-round game where there might be some adversity in the second half?

MARK SEARS: Yeah, you know, the game, as it got down to the wire, it started getting loud in there, and we know we had a lot of experience at that last year. So I think we showed our composure and resiliency of not getting too high, not getting too high and we stayed with that throughout the game.

MOUHAMED DIOUBATE: We've been here before. We've been in these positions all season and last year. When adversity hits, Oats, he told us just stick together. So we've been here before, so we've seen this before. So yeah.

Q. Coach, you talked about before this tournament your leaders needing to step up, showing how bad they want to keep playing together for each other. To see Grant say, put me in, Mark give you 19 in the second half, how big were your leaders today?

NATE OATS: They were huge. Mark kept saying, we're not losing this game. You're playing like there's no game tomorrow if we don't win. He kept saying it in the huddles. And you could he had a sense of urgency about him in the second half. He got to the free-throw line -- three wasn't dropping, so he got in, he got fouled, he converted some tough lay-ups. I thought he played pretty hard on defense the second half.

Then for Grant to -- playing wasn't the plan. He said he wasn't feeling all that great this morning. Trainer Clark said he was going to be available, but ideally, we don't play him. A lot closer than anybody anticipated, they're a good team, they played hard. We didn't play as well as we had hoped, and Grant was like, we're not going home, put me in.

Those two guys have been through it. They've been to a Final Four before. They wanted to make sure we were still playing on Sunday, and they stepped up big for us in the second half, both of them.

Q. Nate, you mentioned Dickerson in your opening,

and I know yesterday you seemed prepared for him and well aware of what he could do and how he could alter a game. Was he as advertised for you guys, and what do you think was the difference down the stretch despite his output for you guys?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I mean, he had 25 and 9, and six of those nine were on the offensive boards. Hard playing.

We didn't do a very good job, to be honest with you, keeping him off the glass. He got some downhill drives. He hit the one three. We kind of played him like a 5 and kept our 5 on, so we ended up -- he was 1 for 8 from 3. But everywhere else, I think he was like 10 of 14 from two.

We didn't do a great job, but you've got to give him a lot of credit. That's a hard-playing, athletic guy that gave everything he had. Got two daughters here, Jocie, my middle one, she's a sweetheart, but she goes, Dad, I feel so bad for the other team. 3 never came out of the game. He played so hard. I'm like, yeah, but somebody has got to lose, and it didn't need to be us. She felt bad he had to play the whole game, and it was nice for us he finally did foul out. He didn't have much foul trouble, and then he picked up three there late. But man, he's a hard playing guy, so I've got a lot of respect for him.

Q. Coach, can you speak to the way you were able to score at the rim with the bigs? And can you tell us exactly what point in the game Nelson told you to put him in?

NATE OATS: About two seconds before he went in. He stood up down there and said, hey, Coach, come on, put me in, I'm ready. I'm like, go. It wasn't going well, and I could see by the look of his face, you put me in, I'm going to make some stuff happen. I trust him. Been through a lot of games with him. He's won a lot of games here.

I thought our front court did a good job converting off the -- we ended up with 25 assists, program record for the NCAA Tournament. I felt like our pick-and-roll offense could kind of get the roller behind their ball screen defense. I thought we did a good job of that early. We probably should have gone, stayed in it more. Mark just kept saying, playing more pick-and-rolls, get more pick-and-rolls. He did a good job. I thought Labaron did a good job. Labaron has it eight assists, no turnovers. Mark has two assists. The two of them have 18 assists, no turnovers, that's pretty good out of your two starting guards. I thought they did a good job finding the bigs. Cliff did a great job finishing. Dioubate, as usual, does a good job finishing. Both of those guys are good finishers. But we needed all those points.



It was more Mo in the second half, cliff in the first half, but we needed both of them to play big for us.

Q. You talked in your opening about how they had 16 offensive boards compared to y'all's five. What are the bigs, the guards, everyone going to need to do on the glass moving forward if you're going to have success in the tournament?

NATE OATS: Vanderbilt plays hard, we've played them before, they can get there and cause problems. Saint Mary's is huge in the interior. We've got to be better. I'm going through circling everybody on the front court that had zero O-boards and I've got four guys that play the 4 and 5 for the most part that came up with a zero tonight. That's not good enough. We've got to do better.

Then on the other end, shoot, we've got to box out. We've got to go hit somebody when a shot goes up and go get it. That's the stuff we've been stressing, and we're more than capable of, when we've played some of the best rebounding teams in the country, Houston, Texas A&M, Mississippi State has been traditionally great on the glass, we've out-rebounded them. We keep saying it when we know we need to do it, we do it at a high level. We tried to stress we needed to do it tonight and we got out-rebounded by Robert Morris. These guys got to step up every game because if we continue to let this happen, we won't be playing for too much longer.

Q. Coach, was there anything Robert Morris did to surprise you guys? It seemed at some points like maybe your guys overlooked Robert Morris a little bit.

NATE OATS: I mean, I would hope our guys are mature enough not to overlook them, but I do agree with you that based on the energy when the game got tight in the second half and the energy previous to that, it wasn't quite the same. I think maybe jumping on them early, getting up 10 right out of the gate, maybe they thought it was going to be easy.

You try to tell them -- I tried to explain to them, I was in the MAAC for six years. We went to four tournaments when I was there, three as a head coach. I told them what our mentality was. They got nothing to lose. They're out there playing with house money, if you will. They're playing free. They're letting it go. They're having fun.

We can't let a team -- we're a better team, we know that, obviously. We're a 2 seed, they're a 15. But better teams don't always win if they don't play harder than the other team.

We told them that. I think Mark got a sense of urgency

about him. Shoot, they took the lead on us in the second half with about seven to go or whatever it was.

You've got to give them a lot of credit. I mean, we tried to tell our guys how good this team is, and there's 15s beat 2s, not just once or twice, multiple times. 16s have beat 1s now. We've got to come ready to go. I guess the good thing is, there won't be anybody ranked lower than a 10, I don't think, moving forward. All these guys -- Saint Mary's are a really good team. We've already played Vandy. They play in the SEC, best conference in the country this year. I hope we don't overlook anybody. I'm disappointed with the effort at times. Proud of the guys for the effort there to close them out late, but yeah, I don't want to say we overlooked them, but it certainly looks like it with the effort at times in the game, especially on the rebounding side of it.

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