

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

Friday, March 21, 2025

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

## Saint Mary's Gaels

## Randy Bennett

## Jordan Ross

## Mitchell Saxen

Media Conference



Saint Mary's 59, Vanderbilt 56

**RANDY BENNETT:** Tough game. Really tough game. We didn't -- I didn't think we played very well offensively first half. Fortunately, our defense kept us somewhat in it. Then second half, we started playing a lot better offensively, quit turning the ball over. A lot of their points in the first half were off -- I think eight of ten of them were off our turnovers, like straight transition pick-six baskets. So once we stopped doing that, we were able to get back in the game, and these guys to my left really played well. Jordan and Austin really played well in the second half when we needed to come back and get back in the game, and it happened, and we got the game and were able to hang on against a good Vanderbilt team.

**Q. Describe what that second half was like, especially on offense, given the way you guys struggled in the first half. It seemed like you consciously became more assertive, not only shooting, but trying to get in the lane and create stuff?**

**JORDAN ROSS:** Yeah, Gus got in foul trouble, so we needed someone to play-make and get downhill, and yeah, I just started to be more aggressive.

**Q. Mitchell, you obviously had some big plays there late, but you had a three with about 5:50 left in the first half. It was your first three in 158 games. That was your second game in your freshman year when you hit that three. Talk about how nice it felt to get that off.**

**MITCHELL SAXEN:** Definitely felt good considering how we were playing at the time. That kind of helped keep us

in it for a little bit. But yeah, end of shot clock, threw it up, and got a little lucky. Better to be lucky than good sometimes.

**Q. Mitchell, you've talked about guys who we don't necessarily in the media see coming to the forefront for the team, like Luke, for example, and how you guys saw how good he was in practice, but we didn't see it, but we finally saw it this season. Jordan hasn't been a main guy for the past month or so, to be honest, but what have you seen in practice that let you know that with Augusta in foul trouble you were okay Jordan?**

**MITCHELL SAXEN:** He's heck of a player for a long time. Just because he has a couple down games, we're not down on him at all. He knew he had to play a little better, and he approached practice like that. He approaches everything we do like that. Had a heck of a game tonight. So we're not surprised by any means. If somebody gets in foul trouble, it's next man up, and he came and made plays tonight.

**Q. Mitchell, could you feel you guys' size and physicality start to wear on them over the course of that second half?**

**MITCHELL SAXEN:** For sure, for sure. That's one of the things we really emphasize, playing hard for 40 minutes and rebounding, and we weren't quite up to that standard in the first half. We didn't do a lot of things well in the first half. It wears down a lot of teams, and you can kind of feel that. Their box-outs don't get as tough, and we just started breaking them down. And it's huge having guys like Harry off the bench for that. You have a little depth there, and you can just keep going.

**Q. Mitchell, can you talk about sort of the mood at halftime, just the demeanor of the team? Obviously, you didn't play the way you wanted to in the first half. Then when Augusta picks up his fourth foul, it's not just anybody in foul trouble, it's the two-time conference Player of the Year. How did you guys emotionally weather that?**

**MITCHELL SAXEN:** I mean, the mood definitely wasn't great at halftime, but I don't think there was any doubt from anyone that we were going to win that game. We knew we

had to play better. We knew we had to move the ball a lot better and get better shots on offense. That was where the main problems were. We just talked it over. We're a pretty composed group, and put that into action in the second half.

If somebody gets in foul trouble, it doesn't matter whether it's Augusta, doesn't matter whether it's me, doesn't matter whether it's the seventh guy off the bench, it's next man up. We got players 1 through 15, so we're ready to go.

**Q. Mitchell, you have got the most games played in Saint Mary's history, so you've got a pretty good sense of Saint Mary's history. Where does this win rank?**

MITCHELL SAXEN: It's up there, man, but to get one really up there, we've got to go get the next one. I'm tired of hearing Mickey McConnell say, I was on that Sweet 16 team. It's time to put another team in the history books for us.

**Q. Guys, there was a point in the game after they took their lead, you held them to four points in nine minutes. Obviously, this defense has been a calling card all year, but what about that moment caused you guys to lock down on the defensive end?**

JORDAN ROSS: It's something we hang our hats on, something we practice every day through our stations, our drills, our habits. They were starting to hit tough shots. We just stick to what we're doing because our defense is going to hold up.

**Q. Jordan, for all the attention your offense might get, you obviously had a tough defensive assignment on Edwards and he seemed to score a little bit in the first half but you pretty much held him down a little bit after that. What was that assignment like, and how important was that to the outcome today?**

JORDAN ROSS: Yeah, he's a great player. He made some tough shots. He has great moves and stuff. But after I kind of figured out to stay down and get past the screens and just use my length over him, he was able to (indiscernible).

**Q. What were you like at halftime?**

RANDY BENNETT: I was pretty real with them. We weren't playing well. We had six turnovers. I don't know, 22 points or something, whatever it was. Not many. I didn't think we played well. Some guys got called out a little bit. Augusta, one of them, and he still didn't play well until the last 10 minutes, whenever we put him back in, and then he played well.

We were close to being good defensively. We weren't there on the boards, but I do think a big part of the rebounding for us is attrition, and we just keep coming, keep coming, keep coming. We're throwing 275 out there, 255. Paulius is long, and we eventually wore them down. We went with Harry and Saxen a lot in the second half, and it helped us. Just for that, we need to find a way to score, but it helped to quit turning it over, and we did that, too.

I thought Jordan Ross was terrific on a night when Augustas wasn't his normal self, and give them credit. They had a good game plan for guarding him, but we did a good job of putting the ball in Jordan Ross's hands so he could play through those on balls, which sometimes he doesn't get to because the ball is in Augustas's hands. When he needed to, he did, and it made us good. That was a long-winded answer for what I was like at halftime.

**Q. Following up on that, you're down 12, Augustas has four fouls, Jordan has been a very good player, but hasn't done that much lately. What's going through your mind at that point and what did you see in Jordan that you thought would give him the opportunity to fulfill what you might expect of him?**

RANDY BENNETT: Well, first of all, I had no option. It hadn't happened. But I had a lot of confidence in Jordan, just the way -- we have two point guards, and Augustas, two-time Player of the Year, so the ball is in his hands more.

But I think when the ball is in Jordan's hands, he's good, too. He can really get to the basket. He's kind of funny, he knows when he has to go, and he knew he had to go.

I was wanting to put Augustas back, I think it was like the 14-minute mark, I was willing to put him back at 12 if it wasn't going well, but it went well. Mikey Lewis came in and his plus-minus is always good. It was again tonight. We were down 12 when I took him out and put Augustas back, we're down 2. So he went up plus 10 for that stretch without scoring a point.

He just stretches the floor, and he did a good job defensively, Mikey did, and together those guys did a good job, and we got Harry in there and we started playing well. We started scoring. We were really good defensively, and we came real big on the boards.

**Q. Obviously, they've been playing together all year at this point, Vanderbilt, but do you put any stock in the continuity that you've had on this roster showing up in games like this?**

RANDY BENNETT: Oh, for sure for us. For sure. These guys, that's why we're good. We have these three seniors, and they've been playing in our program. They laid the foundation last year in April on what this team was going to be. There happened to be three good ones, but the other guys returning, too, helped lay that foundation.

For us -- I don't know on Vanderbilt. They've been together all season. I don't know where they're at. Their coach knows that. I just know for us, it's definitely an advantage.

**Q. Randy, you mentioned Harry and Mitch together. How much of an advantage is that against teams? I imagine that's a look, 7'1" and 6'10", not many opponents see throughout the season. How instrumental was that today and throughout the season?**

RANDY BENNETT: Oh, we're No. 1 in the country in rebounding, so that's what that does. And tonight we were plus 13. We had one offensive rebound in the first half and we had nine in the second.

It's just a contrast in styles. They'll go down size and play with one big and they'll put 5 at the 4 and just kind of stretch you out. Because we have Saxen, we can guard that stuff better than people think. We have two 5s out there, Mitchell can guard 4s, and he can do a good job on them, and he did. That's kind of when we came back. Mitch was at the 4, Harry was at the 5, and we had to guard their downsized lineup with our big lineup, and we were able to do it and get back in the game.

And then it got down to, basically, a one-possession game, and we were able to hang on.

**Q. There's obviously an East Coast bias in basketball, thanks to us. How big is this win for the WCC, the West Coast Saint Mary's, and what do you expect from Alabama since you're playing two SEC teams in a row?**

RANDY BENNETT: Yeah, so it's a huge win for Saint Mary's and for the West Coast Conference. Yeah, both our teams advanced. They're both in the round of 32. There's not that many -- we had two that got in and they both advanced. Those two teams were very good this year.

That's a big deal. It's a big deal for the league. It's a big deal for all the schools in the league. It's something to sell.

Yeah, obviously for Saint Mary's college it's big. It's big for our program. It's hard to get past the first round.

Then Alabama is -- we all know Alabama. They were in

the Final Four last year. They were supposed to play in this upcoming game last year and we didn't get our job done.

The SEC is good. It's fun to play these guys. Yeah, a good opportunity for Saint Mary's, a good opportunity for the WCC.

**Q. Randy, going back to your defense and just the way you sort of could lean on them a little bit, could you sense sort of their legs going out as the game went along? Kind of the physical -- you guys' physicality kind of taking it out of them?**

RANDY BENNETT: You know, I could sense this: Like their pressure early was good and they were showing with their 5 hard and kind of taking it out of our guards' hands. Augustas just didn't play well early. He didn't handle that. But as the second half hit, we just kept -- and Jordan Ross might be better at that. We started putting him in, and it just wears you out. It wears those guards out. They've got to constantly run into those screens and they go over and even their 5s got to extend and show and stay until we give up the ball. It's hard to do for a 5 man, just a hard show, basically trap for 40 minutes.

I did feel that. I thought we were getting what we wanted towards the end, the last 10 minutes maybe. Like we were going to get downhill on them. Then they got to rotate and going off on the boards and then the payoff happens because we don't make it -- you get fouls, and if you don't make it, you can get that offensive rebound a lot of times, and that's exactly what happened in that game.

Fortunately, we had Jordan Ross to do it. If we didn't, it would have been tough without Augustas.

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