

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Saint Mary's vs Alabama

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Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

Alabama Crimson Tide

Nate Oats

Grant Nelson

Chris Youngblood

Derrion Reid

Media Conference



he sees it on the court and off the court when he's on the bench with us, and stuff like that. So just being able to have a leader like that in our senior squad, fifth-year squad, is good for us young guys.

CHRIS YOUNGBLOOD: Mark is a big-time competitor, as you see in the way he plays. He kind of sets the tone like competitive-wise. If he's on, he's a point guard, so naturally we follow.

Q. For any of you, what's been the emphasis on adjusting to Saint Mary's pace?

GRANT NELSON: Yeah, they obviously play a lot slower than us, so I feel like they're going to try to slow the game down. But we saw yesterday at the beginning of the game when they played Vandy, where Vandy pushed the pace early and they got off to a good start. So we're going to, obviously, try to play our game of basketball and push the pace on them.

CHRIS YOUNGBLOOD: It's way easier to play fast when you're getting stops, so the key is focus on getting stops and make sure we take care of the glass because they're a great offensive rebounding team. So the key is getting stops and taking care of the glass, and it's easier to play fast where you're playing off stops.

DERRION REID: Pretty much what they said, getting stops and taking care of the glass. The last team we played got one up on us on the glass, so just not thinking this team can come in and beat us on that.

Q. Do you guys think y'all's defense gets overlooked because of the way you play at, and how would you evaluate how you guys are defensively even maybe compared to last year?

GRANT NELSON: I mean, we definitely have our flaws defensively. I feel like the O-boards, especially these last couple games, have really killed us. But I mean, I think we do have a solid defense, and when we lock in, I feel like we're one of the best defensive teams in the country.

That's kind of been here and there, but I feel like now is the time when we need to lock in fully and make every possession be the possession that's going to win the game

Q. Grant, yesterday, was the plan for you not to play, and did you go to Coach -- when did you sense it was time to go to Coach and be like, hey, man, I can do this?

GRANT NELSON: The plan the whole time was if I felt good, I'd go. I thought it kind of got to like a stretch at the end where I felt like I was feeling good enough, and I thought the guys needed me a little bit. So I went, told Coach, we kind of made eye contact and I said I'm good, and then he just sent me in.

Q. Grant, are you able to talk about your status for Sunday?

GRANT NELSON: I mean, I'm feeling pretty good, so I'm sure it's going to be the same -- like where I'm pretty much questionable, and it's going to be day-to-day, but I'm going to see how I feel, and it's going to be a game time decision. But I'm going to stick with my rehab plan, and it seems to be working.

Q. Chris or Derrion, how would you convey the impact Mark Sears has on this team, not just in scoring and passing, but leadership, poise, and as part of that, sort of the point guard match-up tomorrow against Marciulionis who maybe doesn't get the national attention of Sears, but is obviously an accomplished player?

DERRION REID: Mark is a big part of our team being a point guard on the floor and off the floor. He tells it the way



pretty much.

CHRIS YOUNGBLOOD: Like Grant said, we definitely have our flaws. We're not perfect, but we have all the capabilities that we're long, we're athletic, we're fast, we're strong, got big cliff down there to anchor our defense. Obviously, you play fast, you get more possessions, so it's more possessions for you to make flaws on defense, but it's something we'll take care of in the future.

DERRION REID: I definitely think our defense gets overlooked with the pace we play, and that's one thing show y'all. Honestly, all the media talking about, we don't have defense and stuff like that, just something for us to prove wrong, honestly.

Q. Obviously, played a tough schedule in the SEC, but is there anybody comparable in terms of their slower pace and size that you guys have faced this season?

GRANT NELSON: Yeah, Houston, they're not in the SEC, but that's probably the closest we've played, just how physical they are and how hard they crash the glass. Texas A&M, they crash. I think they're No. 1 in O rebounding rate and same area as No. 2. Definitely those two teams. But I don't know if we've played a team that has played us slow offensively, like tried to really one the clock.

Q. Any example you can think of in Mark's game this year where his leadership, his poise, being a fifth year senior, helped carry you guys a tough time?

GRANT NELSON: I think it shows every game, the way he starts get ballot early, when he's getting the ball out of his hands early in the game, I feel like the rest of the guards start to follow. You saw it even this last game when he had 10 assists, and he was throwing a pass to cliff that kind of carried over to Labaron. Labaron was throwing crazy lobs. I think it shows every game. When he's on and he's locked in, the rest of the guys really seem to follow.

Q. Listening to Saint Mary's the other night postgame, they talked about wearing teams down. What's been the message to this team of keeping that effort for a whole game and really crashing the glass and getting there?

GRANT NELSON: Yeah, like I said, we know they're crashing hard every single time, and we've played teams -- Texas A&M, Houston, who crash just like them. We know what we've got to do to win. We've got to be extra physical, extra tough. I think the rest will take care of itself if we really try to focus on that going into this game.

Q. Did Nate Oats ever make any point to use the career highs that were scored on you guys this season as motivation for the defense?

DERRION REID: Most definitely (smiling). We'll come into Nate's practice here, I'm not going to say his name, but such-and-such had this, such-and-such had this. We'll hear it all through practice. We take pride in our defense and stuff like that. So we just feel like we need to change something, like upgrade the defense or just go even harder or make sure no more players down the line get their career highs on us.

CHRIS YOUNGBLOOD: Yeah, I think it started at Mississippi State when the point guard did what he did to us. He's like, well, and another career high. But it's been a theme all season. But the big thing, we won the game, so you've got to take it in perspective. Although they had career highs, whether it's offensive rebounding career highs, points, anything, but yeah, it's been a voice all season.

GRANT NELSON: Yeah, kind of what they said, but I think that has something to do with how fast we play, and it kind of gives them a lot more possessions. Yeah, pretty much what they said.

Q. How much of an emphasis this year was it to prove that last year was not -- four takes make the Final Four every year and once in a while you get a one-off or a team that doesn't have a big pedigree make it. How much of an emphasis has been there to make sure this is sustainable?

DERRION REID: I would say he doesn't harp on it really much with this team. He wants to put it in the past. But obviously we want to go even farther than they did last year.

CHRIS YOUNGBLOOD: Yeah, you know, as soon as the ring ceremony ended for last year's team, he wanted to stop talking about it because it's a whole new roster, there's like four or five players from last year's team. So this team hasn't been to the Final Four yet, this group hasn't, and we're trying to do more than a Final Four, but win a National Championship, so that's been the talk all season.

GRANT NELSON: Coming into the year, I knew we were going to be just as good, if not better, and I feel like we've proven ourselves to be better than last year's team. I've got a lot of confidence in us in this tournament going in and making another deep run, and hopefully, winning it all. .

NATE OATS: They're good. I've watched enough film.



This is going to be one of the tougher teams we've played. They've got the No. 2 offensive rebounding rate in the country behind Texas A&M. We've played A&M. They do it differently. It's like if they get in trouble with scoring it, they just go with two bigs. They go 6'11", 7'1", and just kind of mash you on the O-board. We did not rebound it very well at all against Robert Morris. It's a little concerning.

We have rebounded it well against some of the better offensive rebounding teams in the country like Texas A&M and Houston. But there's been times we haven't rebounded it well at all.

I think defensive rebounding is going to be a big key. You obviously need to get them to miss in order to have a chance to defensive rebound, so our defense has picked up. It wasn't where we needed it to be against Robert Morris. We need certain guys to step up. They've got one of the best point guards in the country in Marciulionis. He's smart, crafty, skilled, back-to-back Player of the Year in that conference. There's good players in that conference.

Shoot, I don't know how many guys in that conference have been back-to-back players of the year, at least at the guard spot. We're going to have to do a good job on him. We're going to have to do a good job on their bigs. They're a very good defensive team. They guard people well. They slow the game down. They're not interested in getting into any kind of running game, and I don't know that you can really speed them up on their offensive end.

It's hard to speed up Marciulionis. He operates at his own pace. He's good. He's skilled. Everybody acts like it's going to be a battle of tempos. Outside of gambling, and I'm not sure that I want to start pressing gambling, that's not really our style on defense, you may not be able to speed these guys up on their offensive end, but what you can do is eliminate two shots, three shots. And then all of a sudden, you have a 25 to 30-second possession turn into a 45 to 50-second possession, turn into over a minute possession. That's when you're going to have some problems.

If we can limit them to one tough shot as much as possible and then off the defensive rebound, get out, and we will run. Everybody in the country knows we run. But we've got to make sure that when we run, we get quality shots, too, because this isn't going to be an 80-possession game. That's just not how a game with Saint Mary's is going to work. They're good. They're tough. But, shoot, we're down to the round of 32, and most of the teams left, all the teams left are good.

We've played a lot of good teams. As a matter of fact,

we've played 13 of the 32 teams left. So including our self, we're almost at half the teams we've played. We've played a lot of very good teams in the SEC. It it's not like we haven't played good teams, but this team is good. So we've got to be ready to go.

Q. You talked about the physicality and what you can do to handle Saint Mary's. Against Vanderbilt, it seemed like they really they got into Vandy's legs as the game wore along. How much in your depth, compared to maybe even what Vanderbilt has, help you to kind of weather some of that being able to kind of come within waves of players?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I hope it comes into play. They're not as deep as us, but they also don't play as fast as us, so they don't need to be as deep as we do.

Provided Grant is healthy and he's planning on playing. We were trying not to play him, only play him in case of emergency. And Robert Morris was very good, and we needed to play him there at the end. So if Grant's playing and we've got our full 10 guys that we've had. You know, Derrion looked good. I thought in his minutes Mo Dioubate was good in his minutes.

I think eight players this decade to have a double-double in under 22 minutes in an NCAA Tournament game, which is pretty impressive. So Derrion was pretty efficient in his minutes.

We can get into our depth, and we may need it because they've got some frontcourt depth. They kind of start with -- I'm going to pronounce his name wrong, Murauskas, No. 23, they start with him, very skilled forward, but they then go big with -- they're starting center moves to the 4 and they bring in a 7'1" guy. So our frontcourt is going to have to be good, deep, because we're going to have to stay fresh on those guys to be able to rebound with them.

Yeah, I hope our depth comes into play, but their team has kind of played with this rotation all year, and it's like their eighth man, I think, played three minutes Friday. They're comfortable playing seven guys. We're going to play all 10 of our guys. Now, how much each of them plays, I'm not sure right now, but we'll definitely use our depth, I just don't know to what extent yet.

Q. You mentioned this in your opener, but you've had to adjust for slower opponent pace a couple times this season, but not in this short of a window. How has that been emphasized so far?

NATE OATS: Yeah, honestly, like when we play these slow teams, there's not really an adjustment, to be honest

with you. We're going to try to push the pace, they're not. We just can't let them get multiple shots on multiple possessions. The emphasis is going to be on rebounding. If they're going to send their 3, 4 and 5 every time, some teams will be afraid to get in a running match with us, so they'll send four guys back, three guys back. They're not -- they send their three, four and five every single time, pretty much no matter what.

So if we can defensive rebound, we can get some run-outs on these guys. So it's not as if we've got to prepare, we've got to rebound, and we know it.

We can't get frustrated with their slow pace. We may be lucky to get over 70 possessions. We've had multiple games this year where it's been 80 possession games in 40 minutes. They're probably comfortable playing closer to 60 possessions in a game sometimes. They're a low-possession team. They're very methodical, they're very deliberate, and they're very good at what they do. What they do, they do really well.

Can you take them out of what they do? I think some things maybe, but that's going to be difficult to do. You're just going to have to force them to take tough shots as much as possible and rebound the basketball. That's going to be a big thing is our rebounding.

Q. You mentioned Marciulionis. What do you think about that point guard matchup and the contrast between him and Mark, and I'm also curious what you remember about Marciulionis's dad as an NBA player?

NATE OATS: Yeah, every time I think of Marciulionis, I think of Sarunas. Steven, our SID, said Augustas, and it was, who are you talking about? It's been Marciulionis in my head the whole time. His dad was really good. I loved watching his dad play. He could really shoot. He's crafty. He's skilled. He's tough. I loved watching him play.

Yeah, Augustas is good. He's talented. I think you're talking about the matchup with him and Sears. Sears is a little smaller. Sears had a chance to score more points because we play as a faster points. If Marciulionis played in our pace, he'd probably score more points, but he's very good at what they need him to do. He finds those bigs on rolls. He carves you up in your pick-and-roll coverage. We're talking about what pick-and-roll coverage to play on him. There's no great pick-and-roll coverage for him because whatever you use against him, he's going to exploit it to some point.

He's smart. He's tough. He's crafty. He hits big shots in big games for them, and he knows how to run their team, and it's hard to get him out of his rhythm.

You can tell he probably grew up watching a lot of basketball, watching his dad and all the NBA players play. I don't know the kid at all. I've watched him on film, and I have a bunch of respect for him. I think he's a really good player.

Q. I want to ask you about the process of scouting the Vanderbilt-Saint Mary's game on the fly like this. Is it something that really confirms your advance scouting when you take a look at that game or does it put a twist on the scouting report?

NATE OATS: No. I mean -- so we have three guys that kind of get the scouting reports together for Coach Adams going in and Coach Adams once he moves on it, he locks in with that guy. So going in the tournament, we had Christian Pino get it together for Robert Morris. And then Ben Potts already had Vanderbilt during the course of the year, so he took Vandy again. And then Brady Gulka (phonetic) kind of got ready for Coach Adams on Saint Mary's.

We spent -- Coach Adams spent more time on Saint Mary's than he did on Vandy, since we had already played Vandy. So we spent more of our time on Saint Mary's, not necessarily because we thought they were going to win, although we knew they were very good and had a good chance to win, but we knew Vandy was good, too, but more because we weren't as familiar with them.

So we took more of our time from Sunday night to today on Saint Mary's. Once we got the Robert Morris scout down -- I don't think the Robert Morris scout was wrong as to why it was closer than it should have been. Our players' sense of urgency to execute it and just rebound the ball was where we were off.

I think once we got the Robert Morris scout in and comfortable there, more attention was turned to Saint Mary's in this particular instance just because we were unfamiliar with them. I think we've got a pretty good feel for them.

But they're not complicated in that they don't run 50 different sets. They're complicated in that they're extremely good and it's hard to take them out of what they do. So they're simplified but good at what they do, and it's going to take some toughness. If we come in soft, we're not going to have a chance to win this game.

I think we've got a good feel for what they're doing. We're going to continue to study whatever little nuances and little details will help our players be more ready for it. But yeah, I think right out of the gate Sunday night, we get the

assignments. We met as a staff quickly. We assigned it. We got everybody on the same page. We got the Robert Morris in.

By Tuesday, I think Coach Adams had moved on to Saint Mary's while still with the teams on to Robert Morris, and I think he's got a pretty good feel for what they're doing. And on our offensive side, those guys do a good job, too, with Adam and Ryan.

Q. With Mark being in a little bit of a three-point shooting slump lately, can that be offset by what he was able to do distributing the ball yesterday with the 10 assists?

NATE OATS: Listen, I've got a lot of respect for Mark late in the year this year because there's times during the past with his shooting slump, he would have been ready to kind of feel sorry for himself, not fight through it. Well, I think he's done an unbelievable job showing how competitive he is, how much he wants to win, how tough he is mentally because yeah, he's not making shots at the level that he's used to.

But he's still got -- like you said, 10 assists, which he got the ball moving, he only scored three points in the first half, never quit playing hard, stayed super locked into the defensive end, kept leading the team, and he ends up getting, whatever it ended up being, 20 plus whatever points.

To have a 20-10 game and the three turnovers he had were three travels, one of which he actually traveled, one which he got tripped and fell on the ground, and one which he did not travel. He really should have had 20 assists -- I'm sorry -- 10 assists and one turnover. I thought it was a pretty impressive night for him. We need him to keep doing the same thing because there's no guarantee. We've tried to build this team with the expectation there's no guarantee that we shoot the ball at a high level.

We've got to build the team to win when three-point shots aren't dropping, him getting downhill, getting to the free-throw line, distributing the ball to our bigs, I think was big, and it's what we need to keep doing. Hopefully shots start dropping here for everybody pretty soon.

Q. I asked this to Mark Byington the day before he played Saint Mary's about, is it easier for a slower-paced team to slow down a fast-paced team, or a fast-paced team to speed up a slower-paced team?

What you said earlier, that the slower-paced team has the advantage in that regard. I'm good at asking dumb questions, so I'll ask a dumb one. Why is that the case?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I don't know that it's a dumb question. I would say this: It depends on how the fast-paced team gets their pace. Like, if you're a pressing, trapping, running team, I think you can speed the other team up.

Now, it's like, what are you willing to give up on defense. Are you willing to give up open shots and lay-ups and that to get the pace going? You can speed anybody up. I can trap you. If I don't get a turnover in the first trap, you get a lay-up. Well, we can play 160 to 150. There's high school teams and JUCO teams I've seen. But I'm not comfortable giving up lay-ups, open shots, gambling to get the pace going.

We're going to try to be solid on defense and then run -- we play fast not to just play fast for entertainment. I think it's the most efficient way to play fast because early in the clock you can get great shots and we want to take those. They don't want early shots. They play at the pace they do, and you'd have to ask Andy is an unbelievably great coach why they do what they do. Maybe what he's able to recruit. I don't know.

But maybe they like to frustrate other teams with their pace. We can't get frustrated.

We're not even going to try to speed them up. We're just going to play fast on offense every chance we have the opportunity to play fast on offense. Like it doesn't -- maybe occasionally you can speed them up or try to speed them up with -- we're not really a pressing team with a press or a trap or whatever, but it's not what we do. We've never done it. We've still got the No. 1 tempo in the country, and we haven't really tried to speed anybody up all year on the defensive end, if you will. It's just, can you get stops, get the first rebound and get out? Because they are sending three, and I do think we have better athletes.

So if they're going to send all three and we can get out, we can definitely get numbers on them if we can rebound.

Now, if they're mashing us up on the O-boards, and they're getting all their misses, it's hard to run on them. That's why just defensive rebounding, our guys tough enough, can we get the first rebound on their misses to get out. That's going to be the key to this game.

Q. You've been someone that's had his name brought up in other coaching openings and things like that. I'm curious what you thought about how Will Wade handled his situation this week?

NATE OATS: I've gotten to know Will when I was at Buffalo. I played him when I was at VCU. We obviously

competed in the SEC and played him in the championship my second year. He had really good teams.

Look, I'll say this: I actually thought he handled it well, and I actually brought it up to somebody the other day. The noise is out there. Leaks happen, whatever. It's out there that he's getting the job. You may as well address it with your guys.

Here's the thing. When I was at Buffalo and I took the Alabama job, none of that stuff came up until after the season and that was super great because I wouldn't have wanted it to. But if it's going to come up and you've already been offered a job and you've come to some type of agreement or it's out there and it's leaked. I think he's got a way of being honest with his guys, and I think his players, obviously with the way they performed in the first game -- I don't want to speak for that program, but from what it looked like, they're playing hard for him. He's got them in the right frame of mind.

I personally, on my end dealing with my players, I'd rather be honest with them all the time. What's the point of lying, trying to cover stuff up? If it's out there, let's just be honest. I was afforded a better opportunity, you guys helped me get there, and in their case for those who got eligibility level, he's helping them get a better opportunity. There's ref share, there's NIL, all this.

Those guys, whether they stay there for the next coach, whoever it is, the more they win, the better their NIL is going to get, everyone is going to want to help them out a little more if they hit the portal or whatever. They're doing better. The further you go in this tournament, the bigger your name gets, the better your NIL gets. It's win-win on both cases.

Let's everybody be honest with each other. Let's play hard. Just because I'm not coaching here next year has nothing to do with how hard or how much I'm preparing to help you guys win the game this year, would be something he would have said. But I thought he handled it well, being honest with everybody. There was no sense in lying about it. We all get better opportunities the more we win. We've got a saying in our program, when the tide rises, all the boats rise. In their case, when they're winning, everybody is winning when they're winning.

Q. What made Grant such a good fit for you guys?

NATE OATS: You know, we like playing spread, a lot of space on the floor, five-out or four-out, one-in with driving lanes open, and he's 6'11", skilled, plays better on the perimeter, can attack the rim. Great athlete. I mean, when we do different competitions not on the basketball floor -- I

think he's got the best time in the shuttle run in the history of the NBA combine when he did it two years ago.

With the pace we play at, with how open we leave the floor, he's 6'11", they can go back and forth between the 4 and 5, he can attack the rim, offensively it made a lot of sense. Defensively when we want to put him at the 5 and really stretch the floor out, he can guard other teams' 5s well. He rebounds it well. He had a clip a couple games ago, he grabbed a defensive rebound, pushed it up, one, two dribbles, guard tried to take it, wraps around his back, behind the back, finds Youngblood in the left corner for a wide-open transition three.

I don't know how many 6'11" guys in the country can do that, but him rebounding, pushing the pace, him playing on the perimeter on offense -- we can be big on defense, play him at the 4, because he's a skilled enough player to play the 4 for us, allows us to have good defense, keep him at the 4 with some size. And we can play him at the 5 some, too. I think he's been a really good fit overall. He's had some injuries through both years that have kept him from maybe progressing as much as you would like to have seen, especially with his shot, maybe because he hasn't been able to put as much time in outside of practice trying to rest. Like even now, he can't do that much, trying to make sure he's ready to go. But I hope he gets a chance to play in the NBA. I think he's got a chance. I think that skill level at his size, maybe he has to climb up a different route, maybe he's got to be a two-way and get there that way, but I think he's got a chance if he can stay healthy and really get his shot down.

I think he's been a great fit. We run an NBA offense. He's a skilled big that NBA teams are looking for, and we're looking for guys that make sense in an NBA offense, and he's that.

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