

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

Saturday, March 22, 2025

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

Saint Mary's Gaels

Randy Bennett

Augustas Marciulionis

Mitchell Saxen

Luke Barrett

Media Conference



the only way you can get on the floor on this team. That's what we value. I think for me, I need to play defense to get on this floor and I need to play hard. That's what we value, and that's what he continues to enforce, and all of our coaches continue to enforce. That's what we're focusing on in practice more, in film, in walk-throughs. It's our main priority.

Q. Obviously, I'm sure you know how fast Alabama likes to play. What do you think are the keys to playing how you guys want to play so you can dictate the pace?

AUGUSTAS MARCIULIONIS: Yeah, first thing, just taking care of the ball. I think that's the biggest key because even the game against Vanderbilt they -- in the first half, most of their points were either just a fast break lay-ups or fouls or something in transition. So taking care of the ball would be the main key. And then just knowing personnel and just not letting their shooters shoot the ball and just playing the tendencies, but the most important thing is to not let them push the ball fast. After a make, after a miss, get back on defense. As we say, building the walls, not letting them play one-on-one in transition, bringing the help and taking care of the ball, so these would be the main things.

MITCHELL SAXEN: I would say watching them on film, it's really impressive how relentlessly their guards are kind of attacking, and Sears just keeps on coming, and Philon just keeps on coming in on-ball. It's really about doing a job over and over again in on-balls and helping where you can help because you kind of need to take out the roll on those lob threats. Then their guards can really score it, as well.

Funneling them to their weaker hand a little bit and trying to get them to take tougher shots because they're going to get some shots up.

LUKE BARRETT: Yeah, I think we're obviously going to try to slow them down. I think we've done that to a couple teams this year. But we already talked about they're going to still play fast. They're not going to slow down in the half court. They're still going to try to get their shots. But as long as we're not giving them easy shots, we can force them to take bad shots, and we can use that to our advantage and just clamp down on them and hold them under their average.

Q. Augustas, I'm curious how much you've watched Mark Sears, what you think of his game and how that matchup might unfold tomorrow.

AUGUSTAS MARCIULIONIS: Yeah, I've seen him on TV a couple times just watching college basketball. Today, we did some film. Obviously, he's a good player. He plays with a lot of pace, tries to get to the basket, shoots deep threes. He's going to be a key cover, and he's a good player, so I'm excited for that matchup. I'm ready to compete and I'm excited to play against a good player.

Q. The defensive style that you guys play, sometimes it can be hard to get players that are talented offensive players to buy into that. How did you guys sort of become this sort of -- not grind it out but sort of determined and disciplined defensive group?

MITCHELL: I think part of it's just getting the right personnel, getting guys who can't sit in the stands for 30 seconds every time they're the floor. And a lot of it is just the detail we put into our scouts. We know our jobs completely and know what we're supposed to do in every situation. Then having continuity also I feel like is really big, guys that have been in the program for four or five years like all of us. It just gets drilled into you day after day. We've had consistency throughout our staff and consistency throughout players that has allowed us to just build our habits up to where they're at a really high level.

LUKE BARRETT: Yeah, I think the part about trying to get offensive players to buy into that, I think sometimes that's



Q. Mitchell and/or Luke, Randy mentioned yesterday Jordan obviously had a really good game and mentioned that he feels like you almost have two-point guards with Augustas and Jordan. How much of an advantage has that been throughout the season to have two-point guards out there and how much can that matter tomorrow?

MITCHELL SAXEN: It's a huge advantage. I think if you look across the field right now at a lot of these teams, they have multiple play making guards and you kind of need that. It's hard to play if the other team can sort of trap your guard off on-balls and you only have one guy that can make plays.

That was huge for us to get it into Jordan's hands last night a little bit, and it just gives you more options on offense and makes playing the game a lot easier.

LUKE BARRETT: Yeah, we like to not just score off the first on ball or the first action. We like to try to get in the second action, so when Gus comes out from on-ball and doesn't have anything, we can just swing it to Ross and we're going to go set another one or get into anything else. And then even when Gus gets into foul trouble, nobody flinch for a second because we've seen what Ross can do, and we know he can settle a team like that and score and also make plays for us.

Q. In the last week a lot was made of the fact that you lost to Grand Canyon, you were going to use it as fuel. Now that story is in the past. You won yesterday. Now it gets to you guys did play two games early in your career where you won an NCAA Tournament game and lost the second game. What do you take from those experiences, beating Indiana, losing to UCLA, beating VCU, losing to UConn that might help you tomorrow?

LUKE BARRETT: I don't know, I think it's just going to help us stay very hungry and we're already going to have a huge sense of urgency knowing it could be our last game, it's our last year here, so that's going to help us. But I think that experience, like I think I said a couple days ago, it's not as much excitement to be here anymore. We're very happy with the win last night, but there's nothing about us -- we turned the page pretty quick, and we didn't come here to just win one game. We've done that before. We're trying to leave a legacy on this program, and we're trying to do something special this year, and that's what we set out from the very start of the year. The start of that means winning this game tomorrow, too.

MITCHELL SAXEN: Yeah, I agree with everything Luke just said. We're not here all excited because it's the round

of 32. We're here to win a ball game. It's not David versus Goliath for us. We've been here before. We know that these are going to be really tough games. But they're very, very winnable. We right in the game with UConn who went on and won the National Championship, and then Alex Ducas gets hurt. There's would've's, could've's and should've's and what ifs and stuff, but we don't want any of that. We came here to win a game.

AUGUSTAS MARCIULIONIS: I really don't have much to add. They've said it perfectly. The excitement is gone, and we're just focused on playing a good team in a tough environment, and that's our job, and that's what we're going to try to do.

Q. After the win you said that Coach McConnell reminded you about 2010. I was curious between you guys celebrating on the court to how many times he might have reminded you of that or if he's has calmed down since and is a little more focused?

MITCHELL SAXEN: He doesn't almost have to say it anymore. Anytime Coach Bennett brings how hard it is to do to punch your way through to the Sweet 16, referenced that there was one team, and we'll just be like, who was on that team again? He just gives us a smile, and he's got that swag about him. He was a heck of a player.

It gives us confidence knowing we've got him in our group. Yes, so fun between us.

RANDY BENNETT: Yeah, you're excited to play in the next round of the NCAA Tournament. You get to see teams like Alabama, teams you see in the rankings all the time and you'd like an opportunity to play against those type of teams, and we have that opportunity tomorrow. It'll be contrasting styles of play. It should be a good game.

Q. What do you think of the point guard matchup, Mark Sears and Augustas, and connected to that, if there's any example you can think of this year of Augustas's leadership, poise, his experience showing in helping you guys?

RANDY BENNETT: Yeah, well, everybody knows who Sears is, first-team All-American, so it'll be a good challenge. Gus is a good player, and he's played against good ones the last four years. It'll be good. Sears is good. They have others that are good, too. But he's the head of the snake for sure, and he's constantly attacking.

We'll have to do a good job there. But it won't be a one-on-one matchup. It'll get down to team coverage and how you're covering their team. But they're so big in transition, I think that's a big part of the deal.

As far as Augustas all year, he's continued to improve. Last year he did what he did, and we did what we did. It's hard to have that kind of year again, and he had that kind of year and better. And one of the reasons he's better is his leadership has continued to improve.

I think just being over in the U.S. for another year, the fourth year, I think some of the language barrier stuff was a deal early, but it's cool to see. He's grown. He's grown as a person. He's grown as a leader. But being over here, being in the same program, being here four years, he's kind of taken on more and more responsibility and become a better and better player.

Q. Looking at stats, Alabama leads the country in scoring, and I think Gonzaga is second. Is there a similarity between Gonzaga and Alabama, and if there is, do those three games this season help you for tomorrow?

RANDY BENNETT: There's definitely a similarity. They both score a lot. We'll be dealing with that.

But we've played -- they have differences in how they do it, but they both have a really hard push, and they're both relentless at it.

Alabama shoots more threes, and Gonzaga puts it inside more, but they both have really good point guards.

Yeah, we've seen this style of play -- Santa Clara is that, too. They play that way a little more now, and Santa Clara is even more threes. They hit 12 threes a game. I think Alabama hits 10. I think Gonzaga hits about eight. But all three of them are really a hard push, hard transition, and they'll look for threes all the time.

But yeah, Gonzaga is more -- a little more inside, into the post. Yeah, they definitely go through Ike a lot, so that's the difference.

Q. One more point guard question. Sears is fifth year, obviously Augustas is fourth. Curious your thoughts on that in a college basketball landscape where players don't stay that long, to see two-point guards excelling at this point of their careers. How much does that help explain their impact, that they've been playing the game for that long?

RANDY BENNETT: Yeah, so there's a huge advantage to having older players. You just don't see as many young ones playing big minutes on really good teams now, and that's totally because of the -- well, this group is the last group of the COVID thing. But the NIL is keeping these

guys around, too. They're getting paid better money than they'll get paid when they go overseas and play. So they stay in college. That's the good thing about -- one of the good things about the NIL is these guys stay longer.

The quality of teams, I said this the other day, the quality of teams 1 through 60 has improved. The depth in college basketball now, these teams are good. We saw one the other day, Vanderbilt, they had a bunch of guys that transferred in. They're just all old. You just don't see these teams that have young ones playing big roles very often. If they are, they're probably going in the draft the next year.

This is a classic example, but even like Nembhard in our league, he's a fifth-year guy. These fifth-year guys keep playing and they've played all the way up like Augustas has, they play all the way up. They get good because they get so many reps playing against good competition. I think you just see it more and more, as long as this NIL stays around.

Q. Some of the players talked about that 2010 Sweet 16 team and Coach McConnell being on it. I'm curious, when you get in this setting, what do you remember about that run and how does this team compare or contrast to that team?

RANDY BENNETT: Well, we didn't see it coming with that team. We showed up and we played Richmond in the first round and that was a game like last night, pretty 50/50 game. And then we played Villanova in the next round. We had a little chip on our shoulders. We played well -- we didn't look like we were that good a team, but we were a good team, and we didn't play that many guys, but the guys we played were good and they fit together, pieces fit well. It just kind of happened.

This team, we have a chance for that to happen this year. We've been in this position three out of the last four years to get to the next round. It's hard to punch through, and that's what we're trying to do. Yeah, we've kind of -- like Saxon said, forget about making those guys, let's get a new team we're talking about in that position. It's hard to do, though. Those guys are a special team. In Moraga, Bay Area, those guys are still well known as the team that went to the Sweet 16.

Q. Along with the players, somebody said at this point it's good to win the first round, but the excitement is kind of gone, it's just about being focused on winning. I'm wondering for you, as long as you've been coaching if there's been any times in the past where you've felt that way, with the excitement being gone, just wanting to win, or if there's any difficulty to keeping yourself and your team pumped up and

looking forward to the next day.

RANDY BENNETT: No, it's the same. It's the same. So hard to get in this tournament. I say that all the time. People don't really understand it unless you're in our shoes and have to go through the grind every year. It feels like you have to win every game.

We had to go 17-1 in the league. I don't know if we went 15-3 if we would have made it. It's that tight.

So no, you're excited to be in it, and then once it comes game time, you're excited to compete, and you know you're going to be playing against a tough team in a cool venue. The crowd yesterday was unbelievable. Those things you just -- it's hard to explain to players how special it is, and then they get in it and they see.

Some guys, yeah, shoot, it affects things. The advantage for us is we've had guys who have played in this, and like I said, this third time we've played in this game. So they at least know the feelings, the emotions, the nerves that you will have going into this game.

The first game is different than the second game. Now we're here in the second game. The second game, you already played in this venue. The excitement of just playing in the NCAA Tournament is a little bit gone, and now it's just more the excitement of trying to advance and get to the next round, get to the second weekend, which there's a pressure there and there's an excitement there.

But in no way is it less. It's just as intense as it was the first time, the second time, third time, on and on.

Q. Wanted to ask you a little bit, as you continue to go deeper into the tournament, there's more and more draft picks, NBA pro players. For your five seniors that have been with you for a long time, how does the experience in the West Coast Conference of playing against draft picks, guys like Chet Holmgren against Jalen Williams, Podziemski, how does that impact their ability to play against some of these guys tomorrow like Sears that are going to be draft picks?

RANDY BENNETT: Yeah, I think we play at a high level. We try and do that in non-conference, and then we get to do it in conference. And lately, our league has been putting out some good NBA players, and people -- they might not be as well-known as a Sears, but Jalen Williams is a heck of a player. He's starting for the Warriors. The guys at Gonzaga, Sabonis, keep going. They've had a bunch of them, and we've had some.

I don't spend as much time with our guys talking about --

we've seen these caliber of teams because they kind of know. They kind of know now, if you're winning in our league, you have to beat some really good teams.

Just like the scoring -- these guys score so much and their pace of play -- it'll be tough to defend. It always is and Alabama is really good. We all know that. But it's not like we haven't seen it. We've seen it. You just have to play well on that night and do a good job of doing the things that we do that have gotten us here --

Q. Augustas was just telling me about how you recruited him over Zoom and you were driving around on golf carts showing him the campus, and he was like, I have no idea what I'm looking at. What drew you to him in the first place? You've had guys, Delly and Patty that have gone on from here to the league. Is he a guy that could conceivably make that jump?

RANDY BENNETT: -- well, I'll answer the last part first. I definitely think he can make that jump. We've had a lot of good point guards. He's at the top. He's right there, and we've had some good ones. I've seen him enough that I don't know why he wouldn't make it. He's a little under the radar, but what he's done the last two years has been impressive. He's a good player. He's really good on both sides of the ball. He's a good defender. He's got a nice little gap to improve still.

As a freshman, there was times I couldn't even play him, and we were hoping to play him at that time, and he just had to grow through that. He was really an innocent kid, and you'd think because he's a Marciulionis that it's automatic, hey, this guy is a pro. It wasn't like that. He had to learn how to bring it every night. He had to learn how to practice every day hard. He had to learn how to work harder, develop his skills.

He has, and now he's getting to things you have to do as you become a really good player and lead and run the team and be cerebral and be a coach on the floor. I alluded to it earlier, the language barrier was a little bit of an issue early just because in his country -- he communicates with mostly Americans and Australians, and he wasn't comfortable doing that yet. He hadn't lived over here. He wasn't one of those guys. He lived in Lithuania his whole life and spoke Lithuanian. He could speak English pretty good, but he had to get better there.

He's had to do all those things. I think he's a pro.

I knew his dad. Random thing when he got the job at Saint Mary's, a friend of -- he knew about Saint Mary's, local guy, knew is a ruin ass well because is a ruin ass played at Golden State and moved there for a while before he moved

back to Lithuania. So one day he said, I want you to meet Sarunas, and we went to breakfast, and I met him.

Then Sarunas wanted me to come over and -- he had a basketball academy there that he ran. So I went over there and visited for a couple days and got to know him a little bit. And then when he picked me up at the airport, he had this little one-year-old sitting on the little middle part in the car, and he's buzzing around -- he picked me up. That was Augustas. I didn't know. I was like, this is crazy, he doesn't even have a seatbelt on and he's whipping around these streets (laughter).

Anyway, I stayed in touch with Sarunas with no plan of anything. He's a friend, just a great guy. Then I was reading some of the scouting report at breakfast one day, I remember there's this guy named Augustas Marciulionis on this 16-year-old or 17-year-old scouting report. I was like, that's got to be the kid.

So I called him and found out, that's him. I had no idea he was a player. I called Sarunas and said, hey, if your kid wants to come to college, we'd love to recruit him. That's exactly how the connection was.

He didn't know if he was coming over or not. Then when he got to the point where he had to make a decision, he decided he was. I think his dad wanted him to and he wanted to. But it wasn't like he grew up, man, I can't wait to play U.S. basketball. He was very proud of where he was playing, and he's big in the Lithuanian basketball community. U-17s, U-19s, he's in all that stuff. So he came over, he liked it. We're riding around in a golf cart, and he had no idea about anything about our school. It was kind of funny.

Anyhow, but he was coming to Saint Mary's and went from there.

But like I said, he was pretty naïve. He was just an innocent kid. He's had to go through the things every 18-year-old in the United States would have to go through, only they didn't grow up here. That's what he's done, and he's just a heck of a nice kid.

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