

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

Sunday, March 23, 2025

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

Alabama Crimson Tide

Nate Oats

Aden Holloway

Grant Nelson

Chris Youngblood

Media Conference

Alabama 80, Saint Mary's 66

NATE OATS: Yeah, that's a tough team. We knew they were tough. We got up on them 13 at the half. We knew they weren't going to go away. They came out in the second half, they were scoring on us a little too much.

I thought our guys, though, after they made a little run there, I thought our guys answered. We played well on the offensive end for most of the game. We had too many turnovers. They had zero turnovers at the half. We were able to turn them over six times in the second half, which was big, helpful.

We were up 10 on them on the glass at the half, and they're the second best offensive rebounding team in the country behind Texas A&M. We've happened to play both of them. Houston is obviously up there, too.

I thought our guys did a really good job. Cliff had eight defensive rebounds. He had a double-double 11 and 10. I thought our guards did a pretty good job finding him. We had six guys scoring double figures between 10 and 13. I really want -- Sears is not up here, but I thought his energy, his positivity when he was on the bench with the two fouls, how hard he played on defense even with the foul trouble I thought was huge, but we had other guys step up and be able to score.

It's tough to guard us when you've got six guys capable of getting double digits, and that's not even counting multiple guys that have scored it well for us that didn't get to double



digits.

I thought we had great leadership tonight, showed a lot of toughness. We said the tougher team is going to win this one, and that's one of the tougher teams in the country.

Our guys really stepped up and met the challenge there tonight.

Q. For Grant or Chris, you guys kind of started off the night really strong and then kind of gained more momentum as the game went on. What was the key to starting strong early?

GRANT NELSON: We emphasized that. We knew we had to come out -- I feel like we've been slept on -- there's a lot of people saying things about us like we're about to lose this game. So we knew we had to come out and bring energy. I feel like the starting group kind of got us going, and then everyone came in and did their job, and I feel like down the line, everyone had a really solid game.

Q. Chris, you had the three-pointer in the first half near the corner that looked like it clipped the glass. Can you walk us through that one?

CHRIS YOUNGBLOOD: Oh, man, you're right, it did hit the glass, but I was leaning a little bit, so it happened to go to the right a little bit. But hey, the ball was going in today. Not complaining at all.

Q. Grant, Coach talked yesterday about the importance of rebounding because of how they crashed the glass. They got some rebounds, but you guys held them to nine second-chance points. What was the key to that point of the game allowing you guys to get out and run?

GRANT NELSON: We made it a point of emphasis for the guards to get in there and strip down when they did get an O-board because we knew weren't going to hold them completely from getting O-boards. So we emphasized that. We know we've got tough guards who can come in and get rebounds, and just people making physical plays and blocking shots and getting steals.

Q. Grant, you guys -- Coach and you guys talked



about rebounding and stuff going in, and it felt like you guys were motivated to have a better response, but talk about the rebounding. It felt like, overall, against that team, the second best in the country in rebounding, you guys beat them on the glass and that was huge in your win tonight.

GRANT NELSON: Yeah, we knew we were capable of it because we've done it against all the best teams who crash the glass. We know we've got to bring it. We've got to bring it more often, even against teams who don't crash as hard or teams who aren't as physical. But I think if we do that, we'll win a lot more games.

Q. For all three of you, talk about guys who really chipped in these two games here, Mo D had a couple games here in Cleveland. I know he's been a spark plug all season. Can you speak about him and what he's brought these two games in Cleveland?

ADEN HOLLOWAY: I would just say he's brought straight toughness and just hard playing. Even hit some threes, too, which have been big for us. Just shout out to Mo. That's my boy. He's been playing really good these last two games.

GRANT NELSON: Yeah, I've never seen him hit an off the dribble step-back three, so that was pretty cool. He's been playing hard. He always does, so it's good to see shots fall for him.

CHRIS YOUNGBLOOD: Yeah, all season, Mo has been a key to our winning success all season. You win championships with players like Mo because he's hitting threes tonight, and he might get six offensive rebounds in seven minutes. We depend on Mo a lot for other than just scoring. You've got rebounding, steals, all the blue-collar plays. So Mo has been a key to our success all season.

Q. Guys, getting back to the Sweet 16 where the program has been here, what do you think about the experience and what's going well for this team heading into the second weekend?

ADEN HOLLOWAY: I would say I don't think we've played to the level that we are capable of playing these first two games. We've been fortunate enough to come out with two wins, but we've got to turn it up this third game to come out with a win in the Sweet 16. That's what I'd say.

Q. Alabama had six double digits scores, which is one less than the number of Saint Mary's players that had quality minutes tonight. You mentioned it earlier, but how important was the usage of depth tonight?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I thought we wore them out, particularly towards the end of the first half. Like you said, they kind of play a seven-man rotation. Hardaway played just under two minutes, and then that was it for their eighth guy. So, seven guys played the bulk of the minutes. Saxen played over 39, Erik played almost 37, Marciulionis over 34, Ross over 34. So four of their starters were over 34 minutes.

If you look at us, we didn't have anybody over -- the most minutes -- Labaron led us in minutes with 28 and seven seconds, and nobody had over 27 minutes really. And then we played, what, nine guys double-digit minutes. We got a lot of contributors.

At the end of the first half, they finished the half 1 and 12 from the floor. I thought we kind of wore them out. Then they had to call time-out there in the second half with nine minutes and change, if I'm right. It was probably a smart time-out. He's coached a lot of games, got to rest his guys, and he got a media time-out a minute later. I thought we were able to get into their lack of depth a little bit, and with the pace that they typically play, I don't think that ever really affects them.

But we looked at possessions, I think the last time they had a 70 -- I think they've only had two 70-possession games all year, and one was against a non-Division I, and one was against Akron the third game of the year in November. So we were about to get it to 70, not 80 like we like to get, but against a team like that, you're kind of winning the tempo war if you can get it to 70. The first team over 80 on them in over 100-plus games.

So I think our depth, our tempo did get to them, but they're tough, they're physical. They ended up with 15 O-boards, which is way too many. But their offensive rebounding rate was 36 percent. That's a lot higher than what we wanted, but we ended up winning the second-chance points.

So I did tell our guys going in, just because you give up an O-board -- like in our practices, we give points for O-boards. But there's no points for an O-board in a game. There's only points if the ball goes through the rim. We're going to give up some O-boards. We're not going to pitch a shutout. They're that good. Once we give up an O-board, we've got get a stop.

Chris Youngblood got in there, got that steal late. I told our guards we've got to have all of you in the mix. We need you getting rebounds. If they get it, we need to have you stripping their bigs after they get it. Labaron ends up three steals, six defensive rebounds. Can't say enough about our guards making tough plays, I thought, helping rebound. I thought we did a good job with some of that stuff.

Q. Do you think this team is even better equipped from a personnel standpoint and a depth standpoint to reach a Final Four, even more so than the team that actually did it last year?

NATE OATS: Yeah, for sure. We're definitely deeper with more guys available. I thought Derrion Reid was great on Friday. Didn't work out to play him as many minutes this game, but we have guys 10. I'm comfortable playing double digit minutes. Grant Nelson was hurt. We got away without playing him hardly at all. Darrion was part of that, being able to not play Grant until about seven minutes to go in that game.

Whether it's injuries, foul trouble, just depth to wear teams out, guys just not playing well and you need somebody else to step up, I definitely think we've got it. No doubt, they stepped up big from last year's run, even today. They went two bigs a lot. Two seven-footers out there.

So he didn't play as many minutes maybe as we normally would have liked him to do because we played Aiden Sherrell, Cliff and Grant a lot of minutes, and Aiden and Cliff don't really play together much. Tonight we did a lot more. Mo's minutes weren't what we like to get him, and I'm sure they'll go up moving forward. But shoot, you look at what he did in 15 minutes, he had 10 and 5 in 15 minutes.

We've got guys that have efficient games, too, like Derrion Reid scored nine points in, what, 10 minutes or so on Friday, whatever it was. Guys are able to have efficient minutes and play efficient in their minutes, which I think is big, as well.

Q. Cliff has had a good season but seems like he's really been a difference maker the past two games. Is something clicking with him or the matchups are working out well for him?

NATE OATS: I hope something is clicking with him because when he's playing really well like he was tonight, we're a different team. I thought he was great. Trevor Morse, he's got 11 double-doubles on the year. I think he's more than capable of having a double-double every game out. He played 25 minutes and had 10 and 11 with two blocks, even had two assists tonight.

I thought he was really good and did a good job kind of challenging their -- their bigs are good. They're big. They punch in the post a lot. You kind of look at what they did. Saxon had a good game. He had 15 and 5. He shot 7 of 12 from the floor. Wessels was only 3 of 9 from the floor. I thought Grant, Aiden Sherrell, Cliff kind of affected those

two guys a little bit, but they're good, they're big. They're tough.

Q. I know you're still sort of in the moment, soaking in this win, but the last two games have been really defensive minded, physical kind of teams that you've faced, but now you're going to face BYU in the Sweet 16, a team maybe a little bit stylistically like you guys. Do you find it refreshing after going through kind of a grind of the last two games to see a team that's maybe stylistically maybe a little bit more like you guys?

NATE OATS: They're definitely way more stylistically like us, like you said. I've actually gotten to know Kevin pretty well. I've gone to the Suns training camp a couple times when Monty was the coach and he was the assistant there. And he's great. I've kind of been interested to follow him as he got into college. He's done a really good job there. I've watched him a little bit here and there.

But I haven't dove in totally. I don't know that I want to say it's refreshing to go against somebody that plays like us because I think we're really tough to guard, and we've led the country in scoring the last two years. I don't think anybody is saying it's refreshing to play Alabama, whoever is running the defense for the other team. I mean, in a way, maybe it's not such a smash mouth game like playing football out there like some of these teams, but they're not easy to cover. He's running great sets. They've got shooters all over the place. They're good.

We're going to have to really lock in and coaches are going to have to really do a good job getting our guys ready and then our guys are going to have to execute the plan is whatever we decide to put in and we're going to have to make adjustments to it because I'm sure he'll make adjustments.

Yeah, I'm looking forward to playing in the Sweet 16. It's great. It's the first time in school history we've been to three straight Sweet 16s.

I would not use the word "refreshing" to play against an offense like BYU has. That's probably not the correct word.

Q. What do you think about that connection that Mark and cliff had on a couple of those alley-oops. I think he's leading the NCAA Tournament right now in dunks, and for you and Mark to continue your winning in Cleveland, we talked about your amazing career records here. Just continuing that?

NATE OATS: Mark is 6-1 now Cleveland and I'm 11-1? I've been here a few more times than Mark so I've had

more opportunities than he had. I thought Mark played great. He doesn't get in foul trouble much, so it was a little tough with him getting in foul trouble. That's why his minutes were down. 26 minutes; he's usually over 30.

But I thought he kept his attitude great. We pulled him in, took him out, played him. I think he's been looking for cliff. He's finding him. He really just cares about winning. A lot of the guys that can score it at the level he can score it at get frustrated when they're not scoring. Mark has been moving the ball, just being a really good team here in Cleveland. Whether it's being in Cleveland or what, he's made three straight Sweet 16s as a player, so whether they sent us to Spokane or Birmingham, it's now 6-0 in the first week of the NCAA Tournament. Cleveland has been good to him. So has Birmingham, so has Spokane. Let's hope we can head to Newark and play as well as we did in LA last year because that was good for us, as well.

Regardless of where they send us, we're going to play two really tough teams coming up, and we've got to be ready for them. I thought Sears has been great here this weekend, and we need him to be great again next weekend.

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