

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - McNeese vs Gonzaga

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

Delta Center

Gonzaga Bulldogs Coach Mark Few Anton Watson Graham Ike Ryan Nembhard

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Gonzaga student-athletes.

We'll open it up for questions for our student-athletes.

Q. Anton and Graham, can you talk about the clash of styles, the importance of trying to take advantage of it from your guys' end at both ends?

ANTON WATSON: I think that's been a big focus in our practice, for me and Graham, just being physical inside, just getting to our post moves quick. They're probably going to try to throw some doubles as us or something.

Yeah, two different styles of play. They play a lot of guards, a lot of dribble-drive. Me and Graham are probably going to have to guard a lot of guards and play good defense. I think it will be a fun game.

GRAHAM IKE: Yeah, just going off that, just going to have to be physical, assert our will. We know the doubles will come, probably from the baseline side. Making the right read, taking care of the ball, not getting into too much of an up-and-down pace.

Q. Ryan, about their guards, they bring a lot of pressure, force turnovers. What have you seen on film and what is the key in that matchup?

RYAN NEMBHARD: Yeah, they like to force turnovers. Obviously we got to take care of the ball, not make risky passes, just be 100% with the plays we're making. You



saw they like to switch a lot.

Just be patient with our office, try to take good shots and take care of the ball, yeah.

Q. A little over a month ago you were going into the game against Kentucky considered a bubble team. People were questioning if you were going to make the tournament. A month later, you're a 5 seed. What has that journey been like? When did things kind of click?

RYAN NEMBHARD: I think it's just been a process all year. We had a bunch of new guys that came to the program a bunch of new guys that had to learn the system. It took us a while to figure it out.

Kentucky was a big turning point for us where it just all came together and we finished out the game finally. I think ever since then it's been pretty smooth. Our camaraderie and our chemistry is at a high level right now, and we look forward to taking that into the tournament and two big games this weekend hopefully.

GRAHAM IKE: Yeah, the journey has been pretty fun with these guys, the staff and all. We kind of knew, like, early on there would be some rough patches just with everybody being so new, having different roles. We always stayed positive, it's going to work itself out, and it did.

Kentucky was defensively a big turning point in that. Ever since then we've been skyrocketing.

ANTON WATSON: Yeah, no, kind of what they said. It just took a while for us to really start clicking, figuring each other out, how we play with each other. I think that Kentucky game gave us a lot of confidence and momentum going forward.

Yeah, we just want to use that going into the tournament.

Q. You have a teammate that played here in the state. What has his mood been like and what has he meant to your team and your success this season?

RYAN NEMBHARD: Yeah, I think first, obviously, it's



probably nice for him to get back in town and play in front of people that he knows. I think he's excited to be back at the tournament with a good group of guys and looking forward to getting two dubs. What was the second part of your question?

Q. How has he been for the team?

RYAN NEMBHARD: He's been huge for us, super consistent, knocking down the three ball, doing whatever we need to do to win. Through ups and downs this year he's stayed consistent, next-play mentality. He's just been a huge part of our team.

GRAHAM IKE: To second that, he has been a huge part of our team. He's been playing so many minutes. Just to see the level he's playing at, it's amazing honestly. I'm not sure, I haven't really talked to him about how he feels about coming here. We've had a talk talks about him playing in Wasatch. It will probably be enjoyable for him to be back here.

ANTON WATSON: Yeah, I would just say Nolan has been a good leader this year, especially from seeing him the last two years I played with him, just the way he stepped up, the way he's fought adversity. I think he's done, like, the best job I've ever seen him do this year.

Yeah, I'm proud of him. I think he's happy to be back in Utah, especially since we're in the tournament. Can't complain about that.

Q. Ryan, you guys ran up against All-American guards, good guards along the way. What do you make of Wells' game, his style?

RYAN NEMBHARD: Yeah, obviously he's a really good player. We watched a bunch of film on him. Coaches gave us a lot of film on him. He's playing at a really high level right now, shoots the ball, well, scores at the rim. He'll be a tough cover for us.

I think we have a pretty solid plan. We are going to go in there confident like we always are. We played against good guards all year. We have a good bunch of guards over here. We'll take our guards over theirs.

THE MODERATOR: We'll excuse our student-athletes.

We are joined by Coach Few, have him make an opening statement, then take questions.

MARK FEW: Well, hey, we are absolutely ecstatic and overjoyed to be back in the tournament I think for the 25th straight time, which we certainly don't take it for granted up

at our place, in our program. To me, that's one of the greatest things we've done during this entire run, is to qualify and be part of the greatest sporting event in the world for 25 straight years.

Again, I was so proud find our guys. There was a time this year when that thing was a little bit in jeopardy. They fought like crazy last four or five weeks of the season and put us in great position to get here again.

We're fired up.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Looking at kind of how the season played out, you obviously had some key transfers you brought in, new parts, at what point did it feel like it really clicked and these guys figured things out?

MARK FEW: I mean, I think probably mid January is it started kind of coming together. I think kind of lost in all this, especially when you have guys that are leaving for the NBA and you have an iconic player like a Drew Timme, who is a huge entity in every facet of your program, there's a real adjustment period I think that even I underestimated.

The best thing I can say about this group is they hung in there, kept working, stayed together. They're a very tight-knit group. Staff kind of figured out best schemes, best actions, things we can do defensively with the group, rotations. Then they started understanding how to play together.

You have to remember Graham Ike didn't play the year before, he took the entire year off. Ryan Nemhard was new coming in. Guys were playing different roles. We obviously 11ed on Anton Watson a lot harder. He's been fantastic all year. There was a real adjustment period.

We switched up our lineup a little bit then, too. Played the three bigs with Ben in there. We've been kind of rolling with that ever since.

Q. We're having a Dan Monson love-in this week.

MARK FEW: As well we should. As well we should (smiling).

Q. I want your thoughts. Have you ever seen anything this weird? Also, your thoughts about him as a coach and a guy.

MARK FEW: Wow, we could be here all day with all that.

First of all, just couldn't be happier. I mean, my wife



actually filmed us the last seconds, I mean, it was excruciating, the last 30 seconds of the Big West championship game when they won and our whole family was there going crazy. Just absolute pandemonium. I think he's got so many friends in the profession. Obviously families are close. So fired up.

Obviously when he got sent here, I mean, it's a tough one because he's playing another member of the family in Tommy. We had a great night last night. I tell you, some of those things that are probably every bit of pig of moments in your career. We had my whole family, the Lloyds, the Monsons, all the people that worked for us that are intertwined over the years. We were able to get together for dinner last night. It was great.

He's a great coach. He's led three different teams to the NCAA tournament, multiple occasions. He's an unbelievable guy. He's the sole reason why I got into this profession. He got me into it, gave me the opportunity. So my career never would have even happened if it wasn't for Dan Monson.

Hey, I think it's a story worthy of a Disney show or something, man, the way it's playing out. I'm hoping it's a lesson for all those athletic directors out there to maybe take pause once in a while and realize these jobs are hard and sometimes, when you got a good guy there, hang with it, so...

Q. Also related to Dan, your thoughts about how he's handled this. Seems to have made a bit of a ripple and statement in itself the way he's dealt with it.

MARK FEW: It's been unbelievable. I'm so proud of him for that. I mean, I watched how he's handled it. I just admire how there's no bitterness whatsoever. He's just handled it in a real, real classy way.

I mean, I can't say the same maybe for Long Beach State. It's ridiculous. Health insurance, things like that, when you lose your job. Everybody out there in the real world gets an extended deal with stuff like that for a while and everything. I don't want to get into the weeds on that stuff.

It's been remarkable. It's something I think we all can take a lesson from as coaches to kind of, hey... He's grateful for the experiences he's had, feels very, very blessed to have had all these years coaching college basketball, which I feel the same way about my career.

Q. This kind of seems like a little matchup of styles. You with three bigs, they got their star guard Shahada. How do you see that playing out?

MARK FEW: Yeah, hey, listen, Will has done an incredible job building this program up. To get 30 minutes. Then when you start watching them play, you can see why.

Very, very opportunistic defense that can turn you over. They like to run like we run. They can really convert turnovers into baskets. They do a great job with that.

Their defense is extremely disruptive. It's not what you see every day. They'll switch everything, swarm to the ball. You'll see them doubling our posts really, really hard tomorrow. Kind of page out of the Chris Beard when he was at Texas Tech. We dealt with it there. Even when we played Baylor a couple times. Texas. Our guys have dealt with it a little bit. Very good there.

Spread you out at the other end. Those guards are lightning quick. They have some nice three-point shooters. Shumate inside reminds us a lot of -- we have a really good player in our league called Jonathan Mogbo who is really, really athletic, explosive around the rim, dunks everything. I think our guys are kind of used to that.

We're prepared for quite a battle. It's going to be interesting, a little bit of contrast in styles.

Q. What has Nolan meant to your team? Considering that he played his high school basketball here, have you seen any extra anticipation for him here?

MARK FEW: I mean, I don't know about that. He's excited, like our whole team is, to play in just the NCAA tournament. Obviously the fact that we're a little bit somewhat out west here, it's easier for his friends and family to get through.

Nolan has had a really good year. He's grown up a lot. He's done a better job of being more even-keeled. Sometimes last year he was an emotional roller coaster based on performance. He's leveled off a little bit as far as being there for us night in and night out, irregardless of how his offense is going.

There's been some huge steps leadership-wise and just kind of mental growth-wise.

Q. What you were saying before about the guys you've worked with. Before you moved up to a 5, there were some projections that you and Boise State would be a 7-10, Long Beach and Arizona in the 2-15. Were you worried about that?

MARK FEW: No, my kids were all over that stuff.

Look, you don't want to have to play friends in this deal.

It's hard. You got to remember, I mean, my kids and Leon's kids were basically raised together, as were mine and Tommy's kids. We have overlap of people working for us. We're all big fans of each other's programs. Great friends, all that.

Yeah, some of those brackets were like, Whoa. Heck, you got Tad, Billy and Leon playing tonight. All have connections with me and us and Gonzaga and all that.

Yeah, we seem to be the ones that luckily were unscathed and escaped the Gonzaga family feud or whatever we're calling it, so...

Q. You guys having played BYU as often as you did, does that help you at all playing here in Utah?

MARK FEW: I mean, not really. No. Man, they've had a heck of a year. They've been just exceptional. Basically the same team that was in our league last year. They've done a great job just on the national spectrum, but also just grinding it out in that league night in, night out.

The only thing I'd say is we're very used to what we did today. We stay in Salt Lake when we play BYU, so we're used to kind of practicing at Utah, hotels, restaurants, everything around here.

Q. Those of us who covered Tommy the last few years kind of got a feel of who he is. Who is the Tommy you inherited many years ago?

MARK FEW: Again, I mean, it's a funny story. That was one thing, when Dan and I were going through the transition, was last little piece about two or three weeks in. I called him, Mons, what the heck is the deal with this guy? He said you told him he could be a grad aide here. It was unbeknownst to me, and he's just kind of hanging out.

He explained that he did. At that time Gonzaga wasn't as resource-rich as we are now. So I said, Great. I mean, then it just turned out to just be the greatest gift ever, right? Tommy's had a huge impact on our program and on us. Obviously the relationships, our wives are best friends, our kids are best friends.

Q. You're probably not surprised of his success?

MARK FEW: Not at all, no. Not at all, no. Not at all. Yeah, he grew during that time obviously a lot. Now he's implemented a lot of the same kind of style, style of play, everything we do down there. It's been such a seamless transition there. It's been really, really impressive.

Q. When Tommy got the job, he was supposed to play

at your place his first season. That was postponed. Do you think that game will ever be played?

MARK FEW: Who knows. I don't know. I mean, like I said, I don't like playing friends, especially ones that are that close, that close to the program. At this point in my career, I don't know why we'd put our wives and kids through that.

But who knows.

Q. There's anxiety out there about tournament expansion, all these things, whether it helps or hurts smaller schools. Do you have any thoughts on the entire discussion?

MARK FEW: I mean, like I started this press conference with, I think it's the greatest sporting event out there. I really, really do. So, I mean, that gives me pause to want to change it. If it's not broke, don't fix it.

But I also think everything around us is changing so fast. I read some comments from Coach K the other day that I thought were really wise, just like maybe take a pause and let's see where everything's going before we just start changing and overreacting. I kind of agree with that. That would probably be the most prudent thing.

I also know that sometimes if you're not changing and adapting, you get left behind. I think we have to be very cognizant of what's going on, not overreact to everything.

We certainly, in my opinion, overreacted a lot in this NIL and transfer stuff. Now we're in a messy spot there. I think we just got to take a deep breath and wait and see what happens.

Q. There's certainly messaging or concerns that there is a few power conferences making decisions that will impact everyone. How do you feel the non-power conference programs are represented in that conversation?

MARK FEW: I mean, I feel great. I talk to Greg Sankey all the time. Hey, first of all, I think he's a great leader. I think he's very cognizant of that. I think he's cognizant of what's going on, the effect of basketball, how the tournament is.

Again, I think this thing is so great and so big, I think cooler heads will prevail and will do everything and anything to keep this thing as close as we can to what makes the special. If we have to make some tweaks, we have to make some tweaks.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

MARK FEW: Yep. You got it.

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