

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Gonzaga vs Kansas

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

Delta Center

Gonzaga Bulldogs
Coach Mark Few

Anton Watson

Ryan Nembhard

Graham Ike

Nolan Hickman

Ben Gregg

Media Conference

Gonzaga - 89, Kansas - 68

THE MODERATOR: Joined by head coach Mark Few along with starters junior guards Ryan Nembhard and Nolan Hickman; junior forward Graham Ike; senior forward Anton Watson; and junior forward Ben Gregg. We'll open with an opening statement from Coach Few.

MARK FEW: Just an awesome performance by these guys and the rest of the guys in the locker room, especially that second half of defense. We talked at halftime. We had to bear down here and start getting some stops. Our offense was clicking really, really well. To their credit, not only did they get the stops we needed, but we also shored up the glass, which was a problem in the first half.

Couldn't be more proud. As I told them in the locker room, it's incredible. Nine straight Sweet 16s. What these guys have been able to do, especially in lieu of where we were earlier in the year, but all the ones that came before them that set this thing up, it's a testament to all the great players that came through this program.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. We'll open up with questions for the student-athletes, please.

Q. Question for all five of you guys. The man sitting to your right right there is a legend of the game. He's



made 24 straight NCAA tournaments, nine straight Sweet 16s, as we just said. He's been a part of March Madness in every season since he's been a head coach. Does it add pressure to you guys at all, or does it motivate you to play at a high level?

ANTON WATSON: I'd say it definitely motivates us. As a team, we know how the coaches, how they want us to be Zags and they just represent the school. And we want to represent them too, and yeah.

We just play hard. They got the plan for us. They set it up for us, and we go out there and play and we just get the wins, and it feels good.

RYAN NEMBHARD: I agree. It's super motivating, knowing how long he's done it for. Knowing he's one of the greats to coach the game. And we love playing basketball, playing for Gonzaga. We love getting wins and moving on. We look forward to the Sweet 16.

GRAHAM IKE: Like they said, it's definitely motivating. Not much pressure, just the Zag way. He's been teaching us since we stepped on campus. It's been great. Ultimately, happy to be back here, man.

NOLAN HICKMAN: Yeah, man, like the last three guys said. He's the GOAT. That's a nondiscussion. But yeah, man, we know our legacy. We know the history of the Zags and try to come out every game and represent the history behind it.

BEN GREGG: Like everybody said, it is motivating. All the streaks are unbelievable that we have going on. We come out at the end of the day, and they give us game plans, and we've got to execute those. All these streaks will keep on being alive.

Q. When you look at the defensive effort that you guys had, starting in the second half, Kansas missed 23 of 27 shots to start. Obviously, they were shooting pretty well in the first half. What kind of changed defensively at the start of the second half where they just went from the way they'd been shooting to just ice cold like that?

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ANTON WATSON: Yeah, I think just going into halftime, we all know that first half wasn't our best defense, and we knew that they were going to get tired eventually of us applying pressure and us sticking to our plan.

Yeah, we started rebounding, we started getting stops, and that created that momentum and got us some runs.

Q. For Ryan and Graham, last April you each announced on the same day you were transferring to Gonzaga. I imagine this is what you envisioned when you decided to come here. Can you detail the acclimation process for each of you as far as how you got acclimated in the program, got to know the guys and help the program get back to where it is today?

RYAN NEMBHARD: I think it was easy to get acclimated with the guys in the summertime. They're super cool guys, easy to relate to. They're hoopers who like to hoop, like us. When you start playing games, you how to play with each other, learn the system. It's a new thing we have to adjust to.

I think we've done a pretty good job of that. It wasn't pretty at first, but we started figuring it out, and I think we're playing good basketball right now.

GRAHAM IKE: Like Ryan said, it was easy. No-brainer, coming here with these guys. The way these guys enjoy themselves on and off the court. Just what we do, make great runs like this during this time. It was super easy listening to these guys, seeing how they do things the Zag way, it was pretty great.

Q. Ryan, some of the offensive numbers were off the charts. I think you guys were shooting 87 percent or something deep into the second half. Why -- it seemed like the pick and roll was successful tonight. Why did that work so well? I know you want to talk about a record, but you passed Perkins for the single season.

RYAN NEMBHARD: It's an honor, first of all, to get that record. There's so many great PGs and players who went through the program. It's an honor to have that record. The coaches prepared us really well. Gentry sent me a lot of clips last night of the low two-man, and we knew it would be here late. You have guys that are such good players like these guys up here, it's easy. All you got to do is get them the ball, and they'll put it in the hoop.

Q. Graham, yesterday you were pretty confident. You guys put together a good plan for Dickinson. What was that plan? Do you feel like you executed it well? You dealt with foul trouble. How big was Huff down

the stretch in the first half?

GRAHAM IKE: First off, B-Huff came in and made a great impact on the game. Both ends of the floor. He was playing his tail off. Super proud of him and the growth he's made the whole season.

Yesterday, we put together a great plan. I thought we executed it well. Staying mostly on his body, trying to stay physical the whole game and definitely getting him off the glass.

Q. We talked about the history and all the success of this program has had for you. To wear Zags across your chest, each of you, just what the university means to you and how you would describe the culture of this program.

ANTON WATSON: Yeah. It means a lot. Especially me growing up in Spokane, around that area, seeing the culture as a young kid and how close-knit everyone is. It's the reason why people want to come here and play. The coaches, they win. And players, they win here.

So, yeah, I think it's just amazing. It's an amazing school, amazing city, and I love it. Shout out to Spokane. It doesn't get much love, but that's my city.

RYAN NEMBHARD: Yeah, man. I would say it's one big family. My brother came here. He loved his time here. Shoot, I'm loving my time here too, man. It's the best school in the country for me, personally. And I'm just enjoying my time here, man. I love representing the Zags.

GRAHAM IKE: It's a great honor to wear this jersey and be a part of something like this. Great family-oriented environment. That was felt from my visit. Ultimately, that was one of the main decisions why I came here. It's been a pleasure, man.

NOLAN HICKMAN: Yeah, wonderful group. Man, it's just a family all around, the culture that we got. It's undefeated. Every single day, we come to practice knowing that we're just trying to get better, and we got a lot of basketball head of us. So it's been an honor.

BEN GREGG: This has been my dream school my whole life. I grew up watching these guys forever. Watching the greatness of Coach Few and all the players that have come through here. So to be able to have Gonzaga on my chest is an honor for me. That's why I lay it out on the court every day because it means so much to me, and I want to win for these guys.

Q. Nolan, I understand you had a traveling supporter

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section here, a couple of your coaches from Wasatch and some families coming up to support this weekend. How did it you make you feel, so many familiar faces here in your kind of adopted state? Did it translate to how comfortable you were on the court? You looked really comfortable, going 7 of 11 and hitting from 3 like that.

NOLAN HICKMAN: That's love. I appreciate you thinking I looked comfortable out there. It's always a blessing to see my family in the stands. I make sure I look up and make sure they're there before the games and everything.

But seeing my ex-coaches up there, my former coaches, it's always dope seeing them come back and show love. They got their kids here and everything too, man. It's a blessing, man. Yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations, gentlemen. Good luck next week.

Questions for Coach Few.

Q. Coach, Graham talked a little bit about the impact of Braden Huff off the bench. Graham was in foul trouble early. Braden has 11 points for the game and impacts Kansas defensively. How has he grown and what does he add to the team?

MARK FEW: He's grown throughout the redshirt last year and this year. It's been hard for him adjusting to what kind of minutes he's going to get. But whether it's five or 25, he does an amazing job because he changes the game when he comes in. It's nice to have two different players.

Obviously, you know, Graham can pick and pop. But Graham can facilitate and he's just one of those bigs we've had over the years, if you think back. His ball just goes in. And it's a luxury to have. He's been a great teammate. And to your point, I mean, his defense has grown as of late, which has been a huge key for us.

Q. Mark, the level that Ryan is operating the offense. What do you think? And Ben Gregg got the bruises and bumps. What's he doing through that?

MARK FEW: Ryan's been at the highest level for the last eight weeks, feels like. Just got our throttle all the way down and making great decisions. Just managing these games masterfully.

Yeah, how about Ben? Ben's really hurting. His ankle's bothering him. He's getting treatment 24/7, late into the evening, early in the morning. Look at his line, he goes 6 for 6, 15 points, three assists, no turnovers, nine rebounds.

I mean, all on just straight hustle and guts. I mean, he's Mr. Zag. He grew up watching the program and dreamed to play here, and he plays like it.

This group really feeds off. The staff and I have figured that out and that's why we put him in the starting lineup. We loved his bump when he came in as a sixth man. Putting him in the starting lineup made the rotations generate more minutes for him, which has been huge.

Q. Can you detail the recruitment process of Ryan and Graham when they were in the portal. Any memory that comes to mind when you find out they both decide to come to you on the exact same day?

MARK FEW: Again, Ryan is -- look, you know, he's part of our family. He was coming to watch his brother play way back when, you know. That time got really tight with some of our players and even tight with my own kids, my eldest too.

Obviously, Andrew's got a big piece of my heart, what I feel about him and what he was able to do at our place and the type of person and player that he is. So that was different than Graham.

Obviously, we never met Graham. Once you start talking to Graham, you knew how mature he was. He's really, really, really driven and focused in all parts of his life. He's probably one of the most focused and organized guys I've been around.

And he needed that so it's kind of two different recruiting situations. Graham really needed a plan and loved that we have plans for our guys and come through are with those plans.

I just know the way it was going, it was exactly what we needed this year. I knew those two, those were the two guys we went after. If you can get your top two choices, you're in pretty good shape.

Q. With this being the ninth straight Sweet 16 for you guys, does it get harder every year to make it? The second part is do you enjoy this a little more in past years because of this season?

MARK FEW: Oh, great. Hey, it does get harder. It's always hard. I think that's what people need to understand. Sometimes you gotta just take a step back. Whether it's making -- I think we've been to 26 straight. I mean, the thing that people don't realize, we qualified for the COVID year. We won our tournament and we're sitting around waiting to see where we were sent.

So we were in that tournament. We didn't need help with at-larges or anything.

But, yeah, the Sweet 16 thing, we don't take it for granted at all. I'll say it again. I think it's the greatest sporting event in the entire world. It's so exciting and so, just, awesome to be a part of it.

Probably even better than that is being able to take your groups through it. To your point, yeah, mid-December or late December, this was looking like hey, maybe it wasn't going to happen, you know.

These guys, I give them credit. They remained coachable the entire year. They stuck with it, stuck with it. They believed in the program and the staff and what we're trying to do. Lo and behold, we finally figured it out.

Q. Looking at the second half defensive effort, one thing that really stands out is Hunter Dickinson only had two points, one rebound, and a turnover in 12 minutes after having a huge impact in the first half.

What did you guys kind of do to adjust to him in the second half and contain him?

MARK FEW: Well, first of all, Graham wasn't in foul trouble in the second half so we were able to keep Graham on, in which he did a great job defending him. We changed our ball screen covers because it was pretty pathetic in the first half. So we had to change some things there.

And just did a great job of making his shots hard, not giving him any easy ones. We still gave up a couple 3s. They were right on. They just kind of popcorned out. By and large, we took away his easy ones.

Q. Coach, you said late December. I mean, what was the alarm level? You've seen a lot over the years.

MARK FEW: I mean, it wasn't crazy. It was just, hey, listen, if we don't get going and playing better on both ends of the floor and figure this thing out, then it's probably not going to happen. We've got to figure this thing out. We did, and we did it probably in the hardest of ways, right?

I mean, we went on the road and won at Rupp, which is not an easy place to do that. Obviously, at St. Mary's. And San Francisco, I think, is a heck of a team. They're good enough to play in this NCAA Tournament. For us to beat that team three times was quite a feat also.

So we knew we had to finish strong. We did that. We've just always impressed upon them, you know, we get in this thing, we know how to win in this thing. This is not a new

thing for our program, for the staff and for the players that are in here. I think they really bought into that and believed that. Especially the new ones.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. Congratulations and good luck next week.

MARK FEW: Thank you.

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