

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Montana vs Wisconsin

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Denver, Colorado, USA

Ball Arena

Montana Grizzlies
Coach Travis DeCuire

Joe Pridgen

Brandon Whitney

Kai Johnson

Media Conference



Q. For all three of you guys, first time experiencing March Madness. Brandon, being here for five years, has it sunk in now that you're here in Denver and going through all the motions?

BRANDON WHITNEY: Yeah, this is what I dreamt of when I was younger, to be in this position. I tried to do it for four years before this and finally got it this year.

Yeah, I think it's settling in.

JOE PRIDGEN: To go off that, it's everybody's goal who plays college basketball to get to the NCAA Tournament, to be here, and it's a dream come true.

KAI JOHNSON: Like he said, dream come true. I came to Montana to get here and now we're here. It hasn't settled in yet, haven't seen the court, but yeah, it's big time for sure.

Q. Brandon, what led to this buildup to get here? Obviously you mentioned the last few seasons wanting to get to this stage. What enabled this team to get over the hump, win the conference and get here?

BRANDON WHITNEY: I would say that this whole thing started in the off-season. We had a bunch of different guys from different places come in this year, so we had to get everybody on the same page.

Just coming together and talking to each other, the coaching staff did a great job of challenging us every

practice.

Q. Just curious your thoughts on John Tonje with Wisconsin, one of the better players in the country the second half of the season. What will be the challenge in defending him?

KAI JOHNSON: Yeah, he's a great player. We know that we played a lot of great players this season. We know it's not an individual effort, it's a team effort helping stop him. Just not leaving our guys out on an island, whoever it may be guarding him. Just making it a team effort to stop him and stop his attacks at the rim.

Q. Kai, when you look at the first game against Oregon back in November, obviously that was a Big Ten team but the team has changed drastically in the last five months. Where would you say you've seen the team change the most?

KAI JOHNSON: Yeah, you said it: We're not the same team we were back then. I think for one, we didn't have a Malik Moore. We didn't even think he was playing this season. So having him is huge.

But just as a team, we've changed how we run our offense, how we share the ball and how we play defense together and not just individually. I think as a collective, we've just grown tenfold since then and we're a completely different team.

We're excited to play another Big Ten team for sure.

Q. Question for Joe. Earlier this year you said to me that your favorite memory would be winning the Big Sky Conference. Now that you're here do you think this has replaced that?

JOE PRIDGEN: No, it's up there, though. Winning the Big Sky Conference was special because I got to share it with these guys and the rest of my teammates. What he was saying, we came together in a special way and we were able to put it together, having nine new faces, so that's probably still my best memory.

But this is definitely up there.

Q. Now that you've delved into Wisconsin a little bit more, what stands out about what they do really well and what's going to be an important matchup tomorrow?

JOE PRIDGEN: What stands out most is that they don't beat themselves. They're a pretty good shooting team and they shoot the ball well at the free-throw line. They don't really make a lot of mistakes on the offensive end; they play hard on the defensive end.

I think going into the matchup, we've just got to be a little more physical and just pick up our pace a little bit, and I think we'll be fine. We've got a lot of talented guys on our team, and I think that'll show.

Q. What does Coach Travis bring to this program? What are some characteristics of his coaching style and approach that has led to the success not just this year but in his tenure?

BRANDON WHITNEY: Travis is a great coach. He's had a lot of experience. He's been here before. I think he's brought that on to this team. His intensity every day on the court, off the court. Just letting us know what it takes to get to this point. I think he's done a really good job of that.

JOE PRIDGEN: I'll add a little bit to that. A lot of stuff off the court. He cares about his players. He takes the extra time to get to know people individually, what they need.

Me personally, I came from Boston, Massachusetts, across the country out to Montana, and he was able to make me feel right at home. I think he takes his job off the court just as serious as he does on the court, and I think that translates.

Q. Any particular stories, anecdotes from this year that summarize Coach Travis and his effect on this team or his coaching style?

JOE PRIDGEN: Yeah, I'll share a personal one. Early in the year, my mom is a single mother. Was having a lot of father issues coming here, just trying to change my lifestyle. I kind of expressed that with him early on in the season because I didn't want him to think I was being a problem or anything like that.

He took care of me, no sweat. Called me into his office, had a conversation with me, gave me some advice just for my manhood and just how to go forward, being a father of my own now.

So yeah, he kind of just took me under his wing in that aspect, and from there it's just been a lot of the same, just

a lot of love.

Q. Brandon, the two losses in conference early on when it was Idaho State and Northern Colorado. Teams in the past few years haven't quite been able to bounce back or there's been one win are, one loss in conference play. Why was this group able to overcome some of those losses?

BRANDON WHITNEY: I think overall we're just a tougher team than we were last year. After that game we kind of had a conversation, and ever since we had that conversation, I think all the guys took it the right way and put it on to the court, and we've just been on a roll since then.

Q. Kai, how do you balance enjoying this moment and soaking it all in and having a good time but also staying focused and trying to keep it as routine as possible?

KAI JOHNSON: I think when we're not doing any team stuff, it's easy to hang out with the guys and keep it light and kind of soak it in and be like, we made it to our goal.

But then when it's film or practice or we're in the locker room, we're locked in because we know that we're still playing, and we want to win.

I think it's easy for us, and I think that's why we're so good is we enjoy each other off the court and like to have a good time and hang out with each other, but then when it's go time, it's go time, and I think everyone kind of knows that.

Q. Travis, you guys have navigated with nine new guys like you have the transfer portal. What has been the challenge with that, and what has allowed you guys to adapt so well to become an NCAA Tournament team?

TRAVIS DeCUIRE: The first thing I'll say is to have success with so many new faces, they have to want to be successful together. They have to want to win. So I'll say we hit a home run in that regard in terms of the character of the young men that we brought in. Coachable, common goals.

We were able to get them all on one page in terms of where we were trying to get, which is here right now.

The difficult part about that is they were all good players for someone before we brought them in, and they all have individual strengths that led to their recruitment. So you have conversations with guys about role and opportunity and development, and at the end of the day, this is what

you'll look like as a player, and you show them a field of former players.

When they get here, it's an individual decision. We've watched film. We've had conversations with the young men that we recruited. We've had conversations with the coaches where they've come from. But we really don't know them. We don't know them as players. We don't know them in adversity. So we have to get to know them.

The difficult part for us this year was we didn't become a team until January. We weren't healthy. We had a lot of injuries. With guys not playing together, not practicing together, we didn't have great chemistry. They had chemistry off the court. They all liked each other. You'd see them coming and going from the facility with someone different each time that wasn't always their roommate.

So I knew we had a chance, but we needed time.

So we found ways to win games even though we weren't a good basketball team, but we won enough games to have confidence and belief that we could figure it out at some point in time.

Then adversity hit on the court. This team suffered a lot of adversity off the court, but it happened on the court. Our worst home loss in my tenure. We go on the road and have another tough meltdown in the second half against an opponent in conference, and I think the film and the experience of failing got everyone's undivided attention, and then we became a basketball team.

Q. Coach, just being here -- when you see a guy like Brandon Whitney be here five years, as he talked about how rare that is, speak to getting a chance to see him in this environment and how he's helped lead you guys to the tournament this season.

TRAVIS DeCUIRE: That's what it's about. Brandon Whitney stands for what college basketball once was. You see a lot of coaches retiring and moving on through success, and a lot of it is based on where this game is headed.

Me, I still live in the past. I still believe in program as opposed to teams. I still believe in the development of a young man. I still believe in graduating 100 percent of my young men.

That culture I think is a part of the reason that Brandon stayed with us. The hard part, which is why I respect Brandon as much as any player I've ever coached, is that his role changed.

We brought in a lot of talent, and for a young man that has averaged 10 points a game and shot 50 percent from the floor for four consecutive years, to look up and know that he's going to get fewer shots and have the ball in his hands less than he has for the previous four seasons is tough.

To see him commit to that and come back when he knows that he could have done other things, he could have left for money, he could have left for maybe somewhere that might have a system that allows him to do the things that he wants to do for the entire game as opposed to portions of the game.

He didn't do that because he wanted this.

To see a young man in his 20s commit to something that's not guaranteed is hard to find these days. Most of the kids on our team, they cook with a microwave. So that's how they live their daily life. So if something is not guaranteed, most of the time it's hard to get them to commit.

He did that. To have him stick around and break records -- I think he's played more games than anyone, more minutes than anyone in the history, Big Sky player, things like that that will stick and show longevity is important for college basketball.

He stands for what college basketball is supposed to be about.

Q. Joe was just up here talking about you two's relationship and how you took him under your wing as he's been a newer player in the program, new father. What has that relationship meant to you and how have you seen him mature as a man as well as a player in your program here?

TRAVIS DeCUIRE: He said he likes me? (Laughter).

No, these young men are individuals. I came up in an era where every coach I played for looked at the team and said, there's 15 of you and one of me, so it's easier for you 15 to figure me out.

As life evolved for me, I counseled for eight years, and I learned quickly that counselors that were having success with the young men and women that they had at 13, 14, 15 years old as opposed to the ones that were struggling, and the reality is they looked into their history, they looked into their background and understood why they are who they are, why they make decisions the way they make them, and then they treat them the way they need to be treated based on who they are.

So that became a part of how I learned to coach. So Joe is

in a unique situation, a lot like Aanen Moody was for us, and I learned a lot from having Aanen Moody, a young man that was married with children.

I learned how healthy they are in the locker room. We think as coaches we're role models, but the reality is they're not really paying attention to us if we're not into the things that they're into.

If we're not listening to the same music, if we don't speak the same language, they're not really paying attention. But if you put someone in the locker room that is, they pay attention.

So I think that he has been as important to me as he might have said I am to him, and what I mean by that is he's a leader in our program. He's our toughest player. He's our competitor. He sets the tone with who we are in terms of our characteristics on the court.

But also I think it's important to have someone in your locker room that has something going on in their life that's important outside of just playing basketball and just going to school.

To have someone that gets up in the morning and changes diapers and might not go to bed when he's tired every night but still shows up to practice every day and doesn't complain is healthy.

So I am benefiting from having him on this team way more than he is. But he's been a pleasure to coach. He's an incredible young man.

Once again, I'm going to say the same thing I said about Brandon Whitney. He stands for all the things that you want college basketball to stand for.

Q. You kind of just touched on the edge and the toughness Joe has brought to this team. What is it about the mentality, the makeup of this team that you're not maybe worried about the bright lights, the big stage and the intimidation of playing a bigger opponent?

TRAVIS DeCUIRE: They're not afraid. You want your team to play with confidence, and when you get in a tournament, it's play your best game, play as hard as you can, be you. You have to have confidence to do that. The fear factor is what takes your confidence. If you're concerned about your opponent, how big they are, how fast they are and how good they are individually, you might not bring your best game to the table.

We've never been concerned with our opponent. We've

played good opponents. We've played teams that have been No. 1 in the country this year. We had one point where three teams we had played in November were undefeated in December.

We've played tough competition. I think the most important thing for us is to remember how we got here. We grew as a team. Our aggression, our cohesiveness has made us a good team.

So the lights are going to be bright today; tomorrow they won't. They'll be normal. We just need to be ourselves.

Q. You guys haven't played since Wednesday and Wisconsin played just this last Sunday. I asked the question of rest versus rust; how do you think you guys will respond?

TRAVIS DeCUIRE: I like the schedule for us because I feel like we're on a normal schedule really, a Thursday game. So our preparation this week was just like a conference game. Monday we get after it pretty tough, Tuesday, tone it up, Wednesday clean it up, go out and play.

I think for us, it's normal. For them, I think you can flip it and say there's an advantage. They're fresh. They're fresh in terms of they've been in combat mode and they haven't had a celebration and a relaxation, so maybe they kept their edge. We need to find it and make sure ours is still there from the time off and the water showers.

You can find an advantage for either team. I think it's just whoever is focused, confident and probably gets off to the best start in those first four minutes probably sets the tone.

Q. You mentioned that coaches have been moving on and retiring because of where the game is headed. Do you think with that unknown of what roster you're going to have coming back next year -- not specifically for you but for a lot of coaches, there's going to be more incentive to look at other jobs because you don't know for sure what team it is that's coming back for you?

TRAVIS DeCUIRE: I think that that would lead -- if you're thinking that way, and obviously that's a negative thought process, I think you're leaning more towards retiring or something else more so than the next job; because if you take another job you're more likely to have to fill more spots than you would if you stay where you're at.

Last year, last spring and summer was the toughest spring and summer I've ever had. It was the most recruiting we've ever done.

I can't recall any time off until August, which was three weeks right before school starts and all the guys were on campus.

It's hard. This thing has gotten very difficult. At a place like Montana we fund raise in May, so a lot of coaches that they take vacation in May right after the guys are in finals week or right after finals week.

We don't do that; we work through May. So it gets difficult on us a little bit. But when you're trying to win and you believe in winning and you enjoy what you do, the wear and tear is worth it.

So for me, I don't see it that way, but I do see a lot of guys walking away or talking about walking away.

Q. Is there anything you can take from those appearances in '18 or '19 that apply to this year's team, or is that a different chapter?

TRAVIS DeCUIRE: Yes and no. It is a different chapter because I have a different team, and these guys are built different than those guys. The '18 and '19, those two trips were pretty much the same team with the exception of one guy.

I think when I look back, it's always how do we win. We jump up 10-0 on Michigan, we got all the momentum and foul, foul, Michael Oguine, who was our hottest player at the time is sidelined and power goes out and we sit for 15, 20 minutes and get cold and then the game starts over.

So you look hindsight, well, what could I have done? Maybe you let it rip. Maybe a guy picks up two fouls in the game. What are we saving him for? Let's go.

So the only thing I would carry over from back then is let it rip. There won't be any second thoughts during this game tomorrow.

Q. When you look at Wisconsin, you played a Big Ten team earlier this year in Oregon. Kai mentioned that team for the Grizzlies was a completely different team than then. What stands out about Wisconsin and how do you like the way your current team looks?

TRAVIS DeCUIRE: I think they would say the same thing. I think their coaches are going to say they're a different team than they were in November and December, too. When you look at stats and things like that.

I think we are different than what they've seen. The Big Ten, they play a different style of basketball. There's not a

lot of shooting on the floor. There's probably one or two good shooters on the floor for most of the teams.

Defensively the way they play, it's just a different style of basketball. So I don't know. I'm not 100 percent sure. I know this: I know they're a good defensive team. I know they don't beat themselves. It's typical to what you'll find in the top half of the Big Ten every year, is they're well-coached and they play a certain way.

They're going to guard the ball screen this way. They're going to guard off-ball screen this way. They're going to guard you out of bounds this way. They're going to be physical and they're going to rebound the ball, not turn it over, and go down and get a shot for their best player.

They do it for 40 minutes, and it's our job to figure out how to get them out of rhythm and keep them from getting the shots they want, and get good shots for ourselves, which is that's very difficult to do because they're one of the best defensive teams in the country.

It's a good basketball team. They're probably better than a 3 which has happened with us every day, and we're just going to have to play our best basketball. I think the team that shows up and is closest to play their best basketball wins tomorrow.

Q. What do you hope the fans watching tomorrow take away from watching the Griz?

TRAVIS DeCUIRE: I hope they walk away with a lot of respect for our program. I feel like this program has earned respect for 50 years. You're talking about two Hall of Fame coaches, Jud Heathcote, Mike Montgomery. You're talking about guys like Blaine Taylor, Stuart Moore, Wayne Tinkle, Larry Krystkowiak that moved on and become all-time winningest coaches at new places.

So the University of Montana has been a staple in college basketball for 50 years, and nobody talks about it. So for us every time we get on this stage, it's an opportunity to earn that respect and demand that respect. We just need to go out and play good basketball and create that conversation because all those people I just named deserve respect in terms of their impact on college basketball nationally, and it's never discussed.

So it's my job, while I sit in this seat, to create that narrative and sustain it, really. So we've got to go out and play good basketball for that to happen.

Q. Significant this year that you became the all-time winningest coach at Montana. For you talking about the coaching tree that you just described, what's the

significance for you of being able to represent that coaching tree of being now the all-time winningest coach here at your alma mater?

TRAVIS DeCUIRE: Just continued opportunities. It's just another chance on the big stage to go out and perform and represent all those guys I just named. That's my job. I tell my guys all the time, your job is to make the players before you proud.

As anyone that's ever put on a uniform for University of Montana, when they turn on the TV and watch a game, they should be proud when they're done watching you play, win, lose or draw.

That's my job as a coach is the guys I just named, when we're done tomorrow, whatever the score is, it's my job to have them stick their chest out and be proud of University of Montana basketball when the game is over.

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