

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - VCU vs BYU

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Denver, Colorado, USA

Ball Arena

## VCU Rams

## Coach Ryan Odom

Media Conference



**Q. I'm curious what tangible benefit in coaching came from the historical moment you were a part of in the tournament?**

RYAN ODOM: Yeah, I mean, obviously what did I learn from that team? I would say probably just belief, having that belief that anything can happen. That particular group had its ups and downs all year. Won its conference tournament in dramatic fashion and then obviously propelled us into the tournament.

They had no expectations other than let's try to win. When they got to the tournament, and obviously within the game, we were able to hang in the game in the first half, and then we had a run in the second and were able to finish it out.

I think that particular group will always be special to me for sure. But how does it relate to now? Not very much. I think this group has forged its own path, and this particular group is a confident group. It's a connected group. We know we're facing a great team that's similar in a lot of ways. They play beautiful basketball.

**Q. Immediate reaction when you saw your name pop up next to BYU in the bracket on Sunday?**

RYAN ODOM: Yeah, I mean, immediate reaction was wow. Obviously spent two great years in Utah and we played one another once down at your place in a tough game.

I had caught BYU several times over the course of the season in the Big 12, and just really impressed with how they play. Obviously diving into it and getting ready for the game here in preparation, even further cemented my feelings about how they play.

And they're a really balanced team. I think it's going to be

a fun matchup.

**Q. By follow-up, can you take anything from that game down in Provo? I know four years is kind of an eternity in college basketball, but can you take anything about the overall style of BYU or anything like that?**

RYAN ODOM: I'm just glad it's not in the Marriott Center. That's an imposing place. I know there will be a ton of Cougar fans here, as well. Not too far of a trip.

No, not really anything from that game. Different coaches, different players. Knell was there, Trey Orr was there. So they have some guys that were still on the team.

But I think we're solely focused on what they've done this season.

**Q. BYU, high-powered offense. What impresses you the most about what they do offensively, and you guys have the No. 1 effective field goal percentage defense in the country. What do you need to do to disrupt their flow offensively?**

RYAN ODOM: Yeah, they're really impressive. You see it right when they block out and they get the rebound. They're very tall. They're very skilled. They attack you quickly in transition. They can put you on your heels and they can rattle off a ton of points very quickly.

So our shot selection is going to be very important on offense to try to limit their ability to get out. Certainly our ball security needs to be tight because they'll turn those into easy baskets just like we do.

But just our transition defense is going to be really, really important in this game. They're a wicked three-point shooting team. They have multiple guys that can knock it down. They can really pass the ball and they're willing passers. A lot of similarities.

I think we pride ourselves on doing that, as well, and so it's not going to be easy, but we're going to have to do it.

**Q. Doing something on sons who played for their fathers. What was it like having Connor play for you?**



**And then you won that WSB most courageous award, too. Just comment on that.**

RYAN ODOM: Yeah, great question. It's a really special thing for -- it was special for Lucia and I to still have him around. Because usually your son, daughter, they go away to college. That's kind of what happens. Rarely do they stay in the same town where they grew up.

To have him with us at two different spots, out at Utah State and then obviously at VCU to finish it up, and he's still finishing right now. He just decided to focus on what's next as opposed to playing one more season. He could have played one more, that COVID year.

But just really proud of his development. Really proud of him receiving that award. He's been through a lot in his life and he has been a very courageous kid. To deal with OCD and mental health issues that have been a part of his life since he was young, probably seventh grade, and to see where he's at right now in his life is really gratifying for our family.

It's been really cool to be able to spend that time with him. He's here in town with us, as is my other son Owen, as well. And Connor's best friend is here that he grew up with. It's just need to be able to share in these experiences.

**Q. When you were in the Mountain West at Utah State, you saw sea level teams come up to altitude and struggle. I saw it all the time. All the sea level coaches will tell you it's really, really hard. How equitable or how fair is it that BYU gets sent to an altitude venue and has to play teams that are basically at sea level?**

RYAN ODOM: Yeah, you won't hear me complain at all about where we get sent in the NCAA Tournament or where somebody else gets sent. It is what it is. We're not concerned about it. We played earlier in our season out in Vegas and then went over to New Mexico, so our guys have experienced it already.

You grow up as a kid wanting to play in this environment and wanting to play in this tournament, and they can send you anywhere to do it. They're in that locker room right now looking at the lockers and looking at the March Madness things that are posted everywhere like this with their name on it, and it's like -- it's a really special time.

We're just going to try to make the most of it while we're here.

**Q. Montana coach was talking earlier about some of the great coaches that have stepped aside over the**

**last couple of years; I'm sure some guys that you look up to.**

RYAN ODOM: Sure.

**Q. With the transfer portal, how have you guys managed to navigate it, and what are the keys to being successful in that area?**

RYAN ODOM: Yeah, I think one of the keys is retention. I think we're here right now because of the guys that we were able to retain, Max obviously being one that had plenty of options to go to the highest level, and these other guys did, too. But they were committed to being together and committed to finishing it out here at VCU.

I think that's the first thing. Maybe I'm a bit naïve, but I still believe that you can have the same type of relationships that we've always had with these kids and you can build a program with a really strong culture while understanding that you're going to lose some kids every now and then.

I don't think the best way to do it is to reshuffle the deck every single year.

I think the way that we've been able to do it with Jack Clark and Phil Russell obviously joining our team and then the group of freshmen, the talented freshmen that we have. It works for me. I've enjoyed it. I know that.

It's been fun to spend four years with Max Shulga, watch his development. These guys that followed Utah State will tell you his first year when I was there I was on him all the time. He didn't get in the game. He had to work his way into a game.

By the end of that year we were injured and he started a game because we were injured, not necessarily because he had earned it at that point, and played really well. So he earned a little bit more time down the stretch of that season.

Then he was a starter the next year on an NCAA Tournament team. Then he's first team A-10. Now he's Player of the Year in the A-10. That's what it's all about to me, is helping kids grow and develop and not always telling them everything they want to hear; telling them what they need to hear and helping them get better.

I'm really thankful specifically with him for that relationship and excited for the ending here with him.

**Q. You know how this time of year works. The teams that aren't here are looking for coaches. That's swirling around. How do you address those rumors,**



**and how do you handle --**

RYAN ODOM: Yeah, I don't want to address any of the rumors. My total focus right now is on this team, this university and doing our best here in the tournament. We don't worry about any of that other stuff.

**Q. You were asked at the start about the monumental upset in 2018. Do you get many calls over the years from other coaches asking for advice, like how did you do that or anything like that?**

RYAN ODOM: Occasionally. Occasionally. And it's not ones that you would suspect. It's like an eighth grade volleyball coach or a soccer team from wherever. There's just an email that's sent, and I always respond and try to do the best that I can to be there and help.

**Q. Just following up to the earlier question. How much more time do you spend on retention than you used to before the portal?**

RYAN ODOM: Yeah, you have to. Right away, you have to talk to your team after the season is over. You try not to do it as it's going because you want everybody to focus on the present and what you're trying to get accomplished day in and day out.

But it's certainly a critical aspect of any program. We're losing some really good players, so we're in a different situation necessarily than last year.

But we have some really talented young guys that we love, and we understand you get to the end of the year -- each team that we're fortunate enough to coach -- I say it every year to our team: This team has one life to live, and let's make the most of this life that we have together and let's enjoy every moment.

Let's lean into the hard times when we have them and understand that it's not meant to be easy. Let's all grow from this experience and try to get closer, while realizing there's only going to be one time that's going to cut those final nets down.

But this particular team has experienced a ton of success this year, and to be able to cut down nets in our own conference and win a regular season is really gratifying for this group. They earned it.

**Q. What are your earliest memories of the NCAA Tournament? Do you have any games or experiences that stand out?**

RYAN ODOM: Yeah, I think it goes back to Valvano, right,

and Whittenburg and just the monumental upset that happened there; just to even make it into the NCAA Tournament and then advance to the Final Four and face these monster teams and find a way to be in it at the very end to win. I mean, what a coach he was. What a motivator he was to be able to do that.

Every year brings a new moment in history that's so special. We're all so lucky to be a part of this.

I'm just really thankful that I'm able to be -- I wasn't able to do it as a player because I wasn't good enough, but we had our own NCAA Tournament experiences at Hampden Sydney with Coach Shaver, and I'm thankful for those and the friends that I made on my teams that still come to games at VCU with us now and that live there in Richmond.

Being a part of a team is something special and playing in the NCAA Tournament is really, really special. I'm lucky to be a part of it.

**Q. What does it mean to watch Max's development on the basketball court but also thinking about what's going on in his homeland of Ukraine?**

RYAN ODOM: Yeah, he's dealt with a lot over the course of the last four years. I can remember when the war first started and we were at Utah State and one of his teammates Sean Bairstow called me and obviously we were all talking to Max at this point, but he was going through it at that time, staying up all hours of the night, really stressed with what was going on. Sean was his best friend there, and he obviously played for us at VCU, as well.

It was like, you just need to make sure you definitely check on him even more than you are.

The community there in Logan was tremendous with him. The students, and folks there did a great job of looking after him, being there for him. His teammates certainly did, his coaches. Then VCU has certainly taken it to another level, as well. He's one of their own now, and he's really proud that he's finished it out here at VCU.

He talks to his parents pretty much every day and has a chance to talk to his sister, as well. So he keeps tabs on what's going on over there. But understands that he's not in control over anything. None of us are. We just have to react and deal with what's going on.

He's done a magnificent job of balancing that along with school and high-level basketball. It's a lot to deal with, and he's done a fabulous job.



**Q. As Luke Bamgboye has gotten better and been able to play more minutes, how does that impact the rest of the team and what you're able to do?**

RYAN ODOM: He's just an impressive rim protector. His timing to block shots is impeccable. I think it allows us to get out and pressure because he and firm are back there protecting our basket. He really runs. He's playing against older guys every night, which is rare that you would have a freshman starting like this in this day and age. Only the great ones can do that.

He's got a really bright future ahead of him.

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