

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

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Denver, Colorado, USA

Ball Arena

BYU Cougars

Coach Kevin Young

Richie Saunders

Mawot Mag

Trevin Knell

Media Conference

Q. Trevin and Richie, what do you take from last year's NCAA Tournament game, and how does that motivate and drive you guys this year?

RICHIE SAUNDERS: Definitely a lot of us on the team, it was our first time with this opportunity, and we got freaking smacked. We take a few key things right there is we've got to come out and be the aggressor.

We've been around the block now it feels like as a team, and a lot of guys have been here in this spot before. Just with having all the confidence in the world and all the focus of just getting the job done and being the tougher team, that's my takeaway.

TREVIN KNELL: I'll just double down. We're excited, excited to be here. I feel like we're battle tested so I feel like that's the difference. Mo has been in the NCAA Tournament. We have a lot of veteran dudes out here.

It's going to be awesome to go out there and play again with our band of brothers and play our brand of basketball. I think that's something that we've really got to double down on going into this game.

Q. Mo, growing up in Australia, how much did you follow March Madness, and what was your experience like at Rutgers playing in March Madness?

MAWOT MAG: Going back to Australia, I was a young kid. I started playing when I was 12 but I was also a kid that was watching it on TV. At first I didn't know what it was



because I wasn't very familiar, but as I got to our group, learning about the game of basketball, I kind of knew what it was and how big it was.

In regards to my team at Rutgers, it was tremendous. I went there as a little boy and I left as a grown man, so I learned a lot. Played a lot of games over there, and yeah, great overall experience.

Q. I don't know how much you guys hear all the noise surrounding you guys' matchup, but a lot of people picking the underdog against you guys. You guys are battle tested all year. Do you hear that noise and does it affect how you prepare for the game at all?

RICHIE SAUNDERS: It has no effect on us. We're here to play basketball and play our own basketball.

Q. Richie, obviously everyone is making a big deal that your great grandfather invented tater tots. How has that little nugget of information resonated in the Saunders household?

RICHIE SAUNDERS: It's hilarious. I don't know where that came out of. It came out of nowhere. My great grandpa founded Ore-Ida, which founded the tater tot. I don't even know how it got started. Maybe Tyson knows. I don't know where it came out, but we've had a lot of laughs just in our house and had a lot of tater tots.

Q. Trevin, you're a super senior; this is your last ride in college basketball. You've been on a lot of BYU teams over the past few years. What makes this team different from the rest that you've played on?

TREVIN KNELL: Yeah, it was super interesting. I was telling some of my teammates, even the coaches, that once our name popped up on March Madness, I was excited. I felt like it was such a different feeling than previous years.

Like I said, I think we're battle tested. I'm super proud of our team, like how the season started to where we are now. I feel like we're one of the hottest teams in the country. We're playing our brand of basketball. We're trusting each other and trusting God and just doing our thing.



So I think it's super fun to be able to play that way. So we're super excited for our matchup against VCU on Thursday.

Q. For any of you guys, how much has playing a pretty pressure heavy group of teams, especially down the stretch, helped to face a team that does hang its hat on the defensive end and likes to press, as well?

MAWOT MAG: I feel like it's very great. I feel like you play to win and also playing great teams down the stretch of the season is what you want. I feel like every team in March Madness going to be a good team no matter what seed they are, so I feel like we're battle tested and I feel like it's great. I'd rather play them early rather than late, so I feel like it's a great experience for everybody.

Q. Trevin, you mentioned one of the hottest teams in the country. You guys were on a huge win streak before Houston. Was there a turning point in the season where you feel like things really clicked for you guys or a moment or anything where you felt kind of a shift there?

TREVIN KNELL: Yeah, I would say when we played at UCF, we kind of -- UCF is another pressure heavy team. They're really athletic. We kind of just turned the ball over a little bit in the first half and Coach Young really challenged us going into the second half.

I think that's when our momentum kind of shifted. I think that's when our mindset shifted of, hey, we have to play our brand of basketball but we have to be the tougher team. We can't let guys knock us over and we have to be the first team that punches.

I think that was the biggest shift, and then obviously the one at West Virginia was huge.

Q. Does that experience, thinking back again facing another pressure heavy team going into this matchup, do you think back to that UCF team and get a little bit of confidence that that's where that shifted for you guys playing a similar sort of style?

TREVIN KNELL: Yeah, I feel like every Big 12 team is pressure heavy. We played Houston, Cincinnati, all themes pressure heavy. They rebound really well. I think VCU hangs their hat on the offensive rebounding side of the ball.

I feel like we're battle tested and we have resumes, we got statement wins that can help us challenge VCU in a different way.

I think it's going to be a great matchup, and I'm excited to play a team that's the caliber that VCU is.

Q. Trevin and Richie, how excited were you when you realized you were going to be playing at elevation against a bunch of teams that are not from elevation, knowing what kind of advantage it's been for you all season? I think it's 17-3 this year at elevation, 7-6 at sea level?

TREVIN KNELL: Knock on wood. I think the elevation was huge. I think we're really excited. It's closer to home. We're hoping to get a lot of Cougar fans out there. But yeah, I think it was huge for us.

RICHIE SAUNDERS: I don't really have much else to add other than we're happy that we're close to home. There's going to be a lot of blue in the stands.

Q. Richie, you guys have been a really confident team, especially the latter half of the season. The loss to Houston and the way that game unfolded nick your confidence at all?

RICHIE SAUNDERS: I hope not. It shouldn't have. Not for me personally. I'm sure that's how it was for the guys. You take your losses and you learn and you get back up. That's what we've done all season. 1-3, lose at TCU, same thing. Other stretches, stretch of losses, do the same thing.

We have to figure out how to build yourself up and keep going on, exactly what we did at West Virginia, tough little stretch of losses. That's what we've done all season. Just because we lost that one, we learned, and we're grateful for the opportunity to respond.

Q. Kevin, do you have any fond memories of this building as an NBA coach with the Suns? Do you even remember what your record was in here?

KEVIN YOUNG: I don't remember the record. I know the last go-around in the Playoffs, they obviously got the best of us. But yeah, I think the year we made the Finals we swept them in the Playoffs. That's always been my fondest memory of playing here.

I also have nightmares trying to guard the Murray Jovic two-man game, which is, I stand by, one of the hardest teams to guard in all of basketball. So I'm glad we're not having to deal with that.

Q. Can you assess your team's readiness level going into obviously the most important game of the

season?

KEVIN YOUNG: I'd say high. Interesting just talking with some of the guys that were in this very similar situation last year, just picking their brains on some of the things they learned, trying to get ahead of some things that they felt like on a team and individual level were mistakes from last year. So picking their brains.

But I think that's what's great about the Big 12. You go through a lot of battles throughout the course of the regular season, even the postseason. So I think our guys are ready. We have a mature group and are definitely relying on their experience, as well.

Q. First impressions of taking a building into a tournament venue, being on the podium with your name, seeing the logos, and having that experience for the first time?

KEVIN YOUNG: It reminds me of I was in the background, obviously, but it's not like the NBA Playoffs. It's more like the NBA Finals. That's just what it feels like where everything is amped up. There's more media.

I'm big on reference points both with our team and even me as I've gone throughout my career, so that's kind of what it feels like. It's exciting, honestly. This is something that as a kid was a huge fan of this tournament. I think I've made this comment before, but every year in the NBA, every March would roll around, you're watching this stuff from afar, and always like, man, I bet it's just so fun to coach in March Madness.

So here we are.

So it's a little bit of a surreal moment, to be honest with you. But I'm just really excited for our players to be able to experience this with the group of guys that we have.

Q. Kevin, I'm sure you talked about this at length, but you mentioned trying to guard the Murray-Jokic pick-and-roll. What kind of stylistic differences have you seen and adapted to in terms of bringing your knowledge of the NBA game to college this year, and is there any aspect of preparing for Game 5, Game 6, Game 7 of the NBA game that you can apply to a one-game series in preparing for March Madness?

KEVIN YOUNG: Yeah, I think in general, the NBA and college thing, there's more physical -- there's a lot more contact that's allowed in college. That was a huge adjustment for me. I was kind of crying about it a lot early on in the year, and then I just had to embrace it and figure out ways around it.

I think the spacing is a lot different in college and the NBA.

Then to the second part of that question, one thing that I always -- when I went back every year, went to go back and read my notes from my playoff prep in the NBA, it was as a coach, you get caught up in that how are we going to guard Murray, Jokic and all these different schemes and stuff like that.

But year after year, it came back to rebounding. It came back to making quick decision with the ball, and it came back to playing together. That's stuff that definitely we rely on, those lessons in this type of environment.

Q. What are your thoughts on this VCU team as you've scouted them throughout the week?

KEVIN YOUNG: Really impressive. Coach Odom does a really good job with their group. I think there's a lot of experience across the board. They've got a guy that they can trust in Shulga that can make plays when they need them and just kind of be the quarterback of their team.

He's unique because of his size. He's able to get to his spots. He never really gets sped up. So been impressed with him on the tape.

I think they have a very clear identity of how they want to play. They want to pick you up. They want to get after you. They want to turn you over. They want to offensive rebound. They've got multiple guys that hit the glass. For me, they have a clear style of play and things that -- for us, ironically, it's a lot of things that we've talked about against some of the better teams in our league, in the Big 12, that have a lot of similarities.

So going back to the reference points and so forth, being able to reference at Iowa State or being able to reference at Arizona or whatever the case may be. I do see some similarities with this club.

But it's a really good team and they're super well-coached, and it's going to be a tall task for us.

Q. I think you're 17-3 this year at elevation and you're 7-6 at sea level or close to sea level. How much of an advantage is it for you guys to be sent to an elevation venue for these games versus teams that are not from elevation?

KEVIN YOUNG: Definitely I think it's more of an advantage than a disadvantage for sure. For us, going back to VCU's style, I think we have a pretty distinct style how we want to play as well. I don't think it's a secret we

want to get out and run just stylistically, and then you tack on the elevation to that, as well. I think that's definitely an advantage for us.

Honestly, when I was in the NBA we would come here, we'd go to Utah and everybody would make a thing of it, and I'm like, okay, after about the first -- once you catch your breath, I think that stuff goes out the window personally. I don't think the players ever think, man, we're at a mile high, whatever, we're going to lose the game.

So I just think that it's a lot of noise, to be honest with you, especially after that first kind of wave and they get it out of their system.

Q. Just following up on the differences between the NBA game and the college game. Why do you think the college game has not evolved into what the NBA game has? Is it just there aren't as many good three-point shooters, or why isn't the spacing the same and the reliance on the three the same as it is in the NBA?

KEVIN YOUNG: That's a -- we could be here for hours answering that question. But I think there's a lot of things. I think the rules, number one, the defensive rules as it relates to the -- first of all, the lane is way bigger in the NBA. You can't park anybody in there.

So just on that alone, it's going to give you a more open lane. Then you park shooters around that type of spacing.

Where in the NBA, most teams are playing with four guys who can all shoot from three, some five. In college, not every team is constructed that way. I do believe it's a roster construction thing.

I don't think every team talks about shot value and shot profile the way that they do in the NBA. There's a lot more -- I don't know what the numbers say, but I would venture to guess there's a lot more long twos that are shot in the college game versus the NBA.

I also think, like I said, the way that the game is officiated, it's harder to create advantages in college than it is in the NBA, one, because of how it's officiated, but two, it's skill level.

In the NBA, respectfully, a lot of coaches looks like geniuses because you draw up a play and a guy like Kevin Durant comes off a shot; no matter how he's guarded he's probably going to make it. In the college world you're not afforded that luxury. There is a talent discrepancy. That is part of it.

But I think more than anything, it's the rules and it's how rosters are constructed, and I think I'm seeing it more and more. I think we're seeing it more and more. More college teams are getting more constructed like NBA teams.

But I think it'll trend that way, but we'll kind of see how things evolve.

Q. Mo has had a really interesting year, starting as a role player, limited minutes, entering the starting lineup. Feels like as he's taken on a bigger role as a starter your season has turned around and you guys have caught fire. Talk about the value Mo brings to this team and what you've seen from him this year.

KEVIN YOUNG: For me it was a real lesson about just how valuable having guys that have been through the fire are. His personal case, he wasn't healthy when we first got him. It took him a minute to get his sea legs under him.

But having a guy that can just his assignment every night is to guard the other team's best player, that's freed us up, I think, in terms of how we sub our group. It's allowed us to go a little bit deeper, which I think our depth has really been something that's been a huge benefit for our team, and he's been a big part of that.

There's a large trickle-down effect by putting him in the starting lineup, and it kind of has sort of gave everybody else a bit of a place holder, and it's gave a lot more experience and toughness on the defensive end.

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