

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Yale vs Texas A&M

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Denver, Colorado, USA

Ball Arena

Yale Bulldogs

Coach James Jones

John Poulakidas

Nick Townsend

Bez Mbeng

Media Conference



Q. John or any of the players, the level of confidence after achieving a win like you did a year ago against Auburn, how much does that carry over realizing it's a year later, but ironically against a 4 seed again from the SEC?

JOHN POULAKIDAS: Definitely brings us a lot of confidence. Obviously Texas A&M brings a different challenge that Auburn brought last year, but the fact that we know that we can play on this stage honestly with anybody in the country is something that carries us to working hard, and we're excited for the opportunity tomorrow.

Q. How much of an emphasis have you guys been putting on rebounding with scouting A&M, and what you guys have noticed they can do on the glass?

NICK TOWNSEND: Yeah, absolutely. They're a great rebounding team; No. 1 in the nation offensive rebounding, so it's been a huge point of emphasis for us. I think we're all dialed into it. I think our coaches have done a good job preparing, and now it's just about going out and fighting with them and executing tomorrow.

Q. John, you said that looking at A&M, it's different than Auburn, so what's different about preparing for A&M as opposed to preparing for Auburn last year?

JOHN POULAKIDAS: Like Nick said, Texas A&M obviously builds their identity on what they can do on the offensive glass and also what they can do on the defensive

end. Their box scores for an SEC team are fairly lower in point average, so we see that their defense tries to muck things up with their switching and its chaotic nature, if you will.

So our coaches have been doing a good job preparing us for that, seeing what good teams did to combat that type of defense.

Q. I'm curious if any of you guys have gotten a chance to talk to Danny Wolf on the other side. There's a potential you could face him in the next round and I wonder what that might be like.

JOHN POULAKIDAS: Yeah, I spoke to Danny a little bit. We're all kind of anticipating that the committee might have put us against each other in the first round, just for the nature of the game and obviously the competitive spirit that I thought Yale versus Michigan might bring.

But Danny is our brother. He's had a great year, and we're all super proud of him and what he's been able to do at Michigan this year, and hopefully we'll meet up in the second round.

Q. Last year I think you guys had five players averaging double figures coming into the tournament; this year you've got three players named to the all-ivy first team. What is it about this culture that ends up producing such a versatile multiple attacking threats and why does that make you guys dangerous?

BEZ MBENG: Coach Jones has harped on a lot about the next-man-up mentality that Yale has been so effective at. I think it just goes to show how good they are at recruiting and finding guys who sometimes lurk under the radar, so yeah, I give credit to the coaches for that. We have a lot of guys who are ready for that opportunity. Y'all see that -- you guys have seen that throughout the year, and that's going to continue to show, so credit to the coaches for sure.

Q. Is there a team y'all have faced this season that you feel like is similar to A&M, the style of play that they have, the way they go after things?

JOHN POULAKIDAS: I don't know if there's a team that

plays similar to A&M, but I thought the Ivy League this year played at a faster tempo than we might have been used to in years prior and sort of playing at that pace definitely, I think, definitely prepared us for this challenge.

Obviously like I mentioned before, we know the SEC plays a fast style of play, and yeah, exactly what I said, I think we're ready.

Q. James, as you guys have looked at A&M, how much of an emphasis have y'all put on rebounding in particular, and what do you see from A&M that you feel like makes them so good at rebounding?

JAMES JONES: Well, we feel that we're a pretty good rebounding team, too. But looking at Texas A&M, they are tenacious. They are physical. They're strong. They go after the ball like no one I've ever seen -- nobody I've seen in a long time. Boxing out is going to be truly important for us.

If you're able to win a rebounding battle against Texas A&M, that's a great recipe for success because they put so much emphasis on getting second and third shot opportunities.

Q. It's obviously no secret that Ivy League schools have been competing in a different atmosphere than everybody for a long time. I think maybe it's been exacerbated over the last couple years. I just wanted to get your thoughts on staying competitive and doing what you do and whether the arena that you're in this week where you're going up against a big team from a very big school means a little bit more because of the widening difference between an Ivy League school and an SEC school?

JAMES JONES: I'm perplexed, actually. I don't see a widening difference between us and anybody else. I think that you started the statement out by talking about how the Ivy League has been very competitive in these areas, and I feel that we can continue to be competitive in these areas, given the parameters that we have.

Texas A&M is a really good basketball team. Buzz does a tremendous job with them. But this season, we went out and we played at Purdue. I think we lost by seven points, and it was at that point I thought to myself that we were good enough to win our league and get to the NCAA Tournament, that if we played a team on a neutral court like Purdue, we'd have an opportunity to win.

Matchups are important in how matchups go. Some matchups are better than others. But we feel like we can compete with just about anybody that we line up against,

and hopefully we can prove that tomorrow.

Q. You've probably touched on this with that answer, but I'm going to push it a little bit more. Why do you think that teams like y'all last year and I guess it was Princeton two years ago that had a nice run, that Ivy League teams have had maybe more success in this tournament that people may not realize?

JAMES JONES: Yeah, because people don't think we're any good. Nobody gives you any credit for being any good. If you read the name on the chest and you see an Ivy League school, you're supposed to be X, Y or Z, but it's a misnomer. It's not reality.

We feel like, again, we can be competitive and the teams in our league can be competitive against a lot of teams in the country. Now, are we the best team in the entire country? Well, we're going to have our opportunity to prove that, but we certainly feel like we can compete with anybody, and I think that's what's really important.

I saw the line, seven and a half point line in the game tomorrow, so it's one of those things that the people that are actually betting on the game and think about it that way feel that Yale can be competitive. So we want to go out and we want to try to do our best and prove that we belong where we are.

I think the history of college basketball doesn't speak very well for us and who we are and what we've done. I took the program over at Yale in 1999 and there were 315 teams in the country; Yale was ranked 313. So we're no longer the 313th team in the country. We're a little bit better than that, and we just feel like we can compete with everybody else.

Q. As you guys are sharing a lot of confidence, when you look back maybe at the wins that you had against Baylor and last year against Auburn in the NCAA Tournament, are there any common denominators that you're carrying into this season?

JAMES JONES: It's hard to contrast and compare from year to year. I think going into last year when we played Auburn, I was trying to look for an avenue to be successful.

I thought Auburn was seeded down. I thought they could have, should have been a 1 or 2 seed. They were really so good last year, as they are this year, especially with their statistics.

I was trying to find an avenue that we would be able to be successful, and I don't know that we went down that avenue to win that game. In the back of my mind I wasn't

saying, I think John Poulakidas needed to go off and have 20 points for us to win.

But I just feel like them playing us and trying to compete, we're better than people think we are, and I think that's kind of it. I look at the tournament, the teams that we've played, the only team that wasn't very competitive was I think the 2020 team or 2021 when we played against Purdue.

We were 19-12 and we won our conference championship and we were not the best team in the league that year, and we were able to win the conference tournament.

But most every other year we've been about the best team in our conference, and when you are, you're pretty good.

Q. How would you compare the high stakes of these tournament games with kind of high stakes Wall Street stuff, and do you feel like your NCR Corporation work prepared you for your career at Yale?

JAMES JONES: No, it didn't. It didn't. Well, the only thing it did do, it started to -- sales is similar to coaching in a lot of respects, recruiting. You have to be able to sell yourself or whatever product you're selling and I have a great product in Yale University, so that makes it easy for me.

Those were some great times and I have great fond memories of that, but it's a whole different ballgame now.

Q. Doing something on fathers and sons. How did your son end up playing tennis for Villanova then perhaps playing basketball for you or whatever?

JAMES JONES: Oh, God. My son, he never grew to the stature that he would have to be a great college basketball player. He's probably about 5'8" and he's got a great basketball mind. I've got to admit when he was 13 years old and he was at my day camp he was killing dudes and I am thinking to myself, there is no way I am paying for college because of what he's been able to do on the court.

But he just never grew to the point where he'd be a college basketball player at this level. But tennis was something he took to at a very early age. He was five years old when we put a tennis racket in his hand and it was like a fish to water. He was very good at it. We do what we do best, and he's doing what he does best right now.

Q. One of your former players Danny Wolf, what's it been like bet on himself, kind of make the jump up and have the success he's having this year?

JAMES JONES: All these jumps up, huh? Hey, listen,

Danny is a tremendous player. He did a tremendous job for us and his stats are very similar, what he did for us and what he's doing now. Only thing he is not doing is shooting his free throws as well as he did for us.

He's a tremendous player. His usage is higher for Michigan than it was for us. But I've been watching him, following Danny all year. We've communicated all year. Great kid, great young man, great family. Couldn't be happier for him. I'm sure he can't be happier for us.

A lot of people telling me, I'm sure the guys from the NCAA, they put those two teams, maybe you'll play them in the second round. Yeah, I think that was the last thing on their mind, Danny Wolf playing against Yale in the NCAA Tournament.

It would be a lot of fun if we got to that point, and that would mean we actually won a game in the NCAA Tournament again, as did they, so I'm voting for that.

Q. We're seeing the coach carousel start to move around. You've been at one place for a really long time. What has kept you at Yale? Why have you decided that that's not something you'd pursue?

JAMES JONES: Well, no one has pursued me. That's probably the bigger issue. I've been at Yale for 26 years, and there hasn't been a job that's better than Yale that's come calling. Yale is a tremendous place. I have a great relationship with my athletic director, our president, and the student-athletes that I get a chance to coach every day are second to none. So it's a brilliant place to coach.

I leave work every day, can't wait to get back. I wake up every morning and can't wait to get there because it's such a great place. The people around it make it so special. But like I said, no one has come a-knocking.

Q. Your defense has been solid all year. A&M has a tendency to sputter at times offensively, but they have one guy who can go off whenever he wants in Wade Taylor. How do you go about defending a fella like that who can just get hot and alter the course of a game?

JAMES JONES: We've played against a few guys like that. Xaivian Lee in our league is a bucket waiting to happen. Kino Lilly is a bucket waiting to happen. Xaivian, his NBA Draft stock was really high last year.

We have a young man on our team by the name of Bez Mbeng that does a great job of guarding guys one-on-one and being able to get through screens. We feel pretty confident that Bez will be able to make it difficult for him to score.

Now, obviously he will, but what we want to do with a great player, you just want to make it difficult. You don't want to give him anything easy, and we're going to not try to give him anything easy tomorrow.

Q. People always talk about coming to a region like this, the altitude and the elevation. Have you felt that, and what's your thoughts about having to play where you're over 5,000 feet above sea level?

JAMES JONES: So here I'm going to tell you a story. I'm 11 years old, and I fall off my bike. I chip my front teeth. I cut my chin. I got cuts all up my arm. I got a scar on my wrist and one on my shoulder when I was 11 years old.

First time in my life somebody asked me if I'm okay, I said, no, I'm not okay. My mother came home, she looked me up, she looked me down. She goes, you're all right.

At that point, I knew I was going to be all right with just about anything. You're talking about coming out to the altitude, I don't feel it. I don't. I've been out here, I come out to Colorado every year with USA Basketball. We play Colorado. I don't feel it personally.

Now, again, I'm not the guy that's playing, but I've worked out and I've run in this stays and I haven't noticed any difference in how I feel.

Now, my trainer and her assistant have done an unbelievable job in making sure my guys have oxygen, altitude sickness and doing all those things to prepare them, but I don't think twice about it, to be honest with you.

Q. You've been to the tournament, I think, five times since 2015, 2016, now. Do you learn something new each time you go? Is there something you learned from last year specifically that you hadn't picked up on in previous years?

JAMES JONES: You know, there's always something different with the way this goes. It's just a wonderful, unbelievable experience that you have that you're able to share with your community. Yale Nation, we have our cheerleaders and our band here and people that are part of this.

It's just a great opportunity for them with the hardworking effort that our coaching staff and my players have put into it. There's always new to learn. I'm not certain what it's going to be this time, but there's always something new. But I'm enjoying every second of it, to be honest with you.

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