

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - UC San Diego vs Michigan

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Denver, Colorado, USA

Ball Arena

UC San Diego Tritons

Coach Eric Olen

Hayden Gray

Aniwaniwa Tait-Jones

Tyler McGhie

Media Conference



the team?

TYLER MCGHIE: Yeah, so I started my first year at Western Carolina as a Division I, and I transferred down to D-II in Oklahoma, Southern Nazarene.

I think just for all of us, we have a chip on our shoulder. Just like Hayden was saying, Niwa was saying. We're going to play our hearts out every game like it's our last.

ANIWANIWA TAIT-JONES: Yeah, I started at Division II, Hawai'i Hilo. I learned a lot of things. I'm grateful for the experiences I had and I think that helped me mold into the player I am today.

But yeah, a lot of us starting in D-II means we were overlooked, so we're going to come into this game with a chip on our shoulder and play with something to prove.

HAYDEN GRAY: I started at Azusa Pacific, Pac West Conference; played against Niwa a handful of times. We had some fun battles.

It was huge for my development as a player, being able to come in and start as a freshman, log a lot of minutes, and it's helped me become the player that I am today for sure.

Q. You guys' first year of eligibility here you made it to the big dance. What's that mean, and are you guys embracing that Cinderella role?

HAYDEN GRAY: Yeah, it's awesome. We grew up watching this tournament. It's the best tournament in sports. To be able to do it in the Nuggets' arena on such a big stage, it's a blessing.

Regarding the Cinderella role, I think we have what it takes to make that happen, but we've just got to take it day by day and just keep the same process that we've had.

Q. Going back to last year, I think all of you first years at UC San Diego and you weren't eligible for the conference tournament or the NCAA Tournament; how much were you thinking about that last year to get to what you wanted to do this year?

ANIWANIWA TAIT-JONES: Yeah, I think it sucked not

Q. What were your first impressions of Michigan when you saw the film and found out who you were playing?

TYLER MCGHIE: They're a big team. We know they just won the Big Ten championship. They're really hot. They have a great coach. There's a lot of things. It's a really good team. We're just going to prep the same way and be ourselves.

Q. You guys are not the biggest team; do you think that can work in your favor, people look at you guys maybe in warmups and overlook you at all?

HAYDEN GRAY: Yeah, I think that can play to some of our advantages. We want to get out and run. We're still going to be a physical team, and I think we kind of like being overlooked. We've been overlooked a lot of the season, and it kind of helps us play with a chip on our shoulder.

Q. Your background in rugby, the Big Ten is known as a physical conference. How much will that help you body up and take on that physical nature that Michigan has in the Big Ten?

ANIWANIWA TAIT-JONES: Yeah, I think it'll help a lot. I'm a physical player, so yeah, I think, like Tyler was saying, we're not going to change too much. We're just going to keep doing what we're doing and just play our game.

Q. Can you all tell the story of all you guys' journeys from D-II to D-I and how that factors into the identity of



... when all is said, we're done.®

being able to play in postseason tournaments last year, but in the recruiting process, Olen, that was the first thing he said to all of us. We knew it coming in and we knew it was a two-year process, and look where we are now.

I think it worked, and yeah.

Q. Bryce spent four years building the foundation here and then transferred out. How much was he a part of what you guys were able to accomplish this year even if he want on the team?

TYLER MCGHIE: Yeah, I think Bryce was really important to our program. Just the toughness and hard work that he put in with Olen and us, as well. He was great for our school.

Q. You guys force a lot of turnovers and do your zone thing. When you see a team like Michigan has struggled in the turnover department, do you start licking your chops a little bit or do you have to make sure that it's like, we can't get too excited about it and keep doing our thing?

HAYDEN GRAY: Yeah, I mean, there is that turnover differential, but it's the same approach every game. We're going to be aggressive. We're going to go after the ball. We're going to be physical.

If they turn it over, they turn it over. If they don't, we'll get stops other ways.

Q. You guys haven't lost a game since January 18. How do you keep the momentum going and keep that win streak alive?

ANIWANIWA TAIT-JONES: You know, I'm going to repeat it again, but we're not going to change much. Olen is still going to talk about the same stuff, write the same stuff on the board. We're just going to execute the plan that the coaching staff has for us and play hard and leave it all out on the court.

Q. Going back to what you were saying before about people overlooking you and kind of looking at you guys and saying, how can these guys be any good, do you get that sense? Can you put into words -- do you get that sense when you're on the court that people are thinking that about you, and do you take as a sign of disrespect or do you take it as a sign of motivation?

TYLER MCGHIE: Personally for me, I feel like that's happened my whole life. I feel like I don't have the best-looking basketball body (laughter), but I feel like it's fuel. It's fuel for sure. It makes me want to play harder,

just prove people wrong.

ANIWANIWA TAIT-JONES: Yeah, for sure. It's extra motivation for us. Like Ty was saying, I'm the same. I've been overlooked my whole life. So just having that extra motivation and having that extra chip on our shoulder definitely helps.

HAYDEN GRAY: Yeah, I think we've all been overlooked. I know I didn't have a Division I offer out of high school. I know Niwa didn't, and I know Tyler did but then they told him to go D-II. I don't think it's a sign of disrespect. We look at it as more motivation. But yeah, we know what we're capable of for sure.

Q. Clearly you guys are going to try to do things the way you've done them, but this is a different test. This is the biggest stage, a bigger team. I think you guys have played five top 100 games all year and three of them were against Irvine; where Michigan, every single game they've played in the calendar year but one has been top 100. While being yourselves, is there the recognition that you'll have to play your best game or bring your A game?

HAYDEN GRAY: Yeah, we know we're going to have to play a good game for sure. That's a talented team. They're a big team, Big Ten champs. But we're not going to back down from that. We only get this opportunity once. We're all seniors, so we're going to leave it all out there and hopefully the result is a good one.

Q. In December you guys went on a two-game road trip, Idaho, Utah State, both at elevation. This game will also be at elevation. How did that road trip build you guys' confidence for playing a game in this environment?

ANIWANIWA TAIT-JONES: Yeah, I think it helps for sure. Utah State, the elevation was -- we were high up in the mountains there. It was hard to breathe. Come in here, it's a lot of the same stuff. We're about to practice. It's hard to breathe up here. I think going to Utah and playing there definitely helped us for Denver.

Q. There's a lot of people that maybe think you guys might be a little bit underseeded, a little bit underrated. Is that something you look at or are you ignoring all the outside noise about where you might be placed in the bracket?

TYLER MCGHIE: No, I don't think so. I think we were just waiting on the matchup, and whoever is in front of us, we're going to scout them, do everything we've been doing, and approach it the same way.

Q. The Michigan campus for much of basketball season is covered in snow and freezing. What is your campus like?

HAYDEN GRAY: It's pretty sunny. Some days, like once a month, you might get some rain. But we love San Diego. I know I'm from San Diego, so I try not to take it for granted. Yeah, even coming here it's a little cold outside. But it's not too bad.

Q. You guys are discounting the marine layer that you're not going to talk about. But for Niwa, I think you hadn't tried basketball until you were maybe 14 years old. What made you switch, and was it just a natural breeze-through progression? Was there any -- is there any similarity of basketball to rugby since we don't know the rugby game here too much?

ANIWANIWA TAIT-JONES: So I grew up playing soccer and rugby back home, and I never really picked up a basketball until I was 12, 13, and that's because my dad played a little bit. It was honestly just picked it up playing for fun with my friends, and yeah, I've loved it ever since.

Then I started playing competitively when I was 14, and yeah, loved it ever since.

Yeah, man, I just love the game. I mean, rugby is a lot different. I carry a bit of a physicality into basketball. I like to bang bodies and do all that.

But no, I love the game of basketball, and it's very fun when I get to go out there with these two guys.

Q. When you watch film of Michigan, can you tell on the film how big they are? And how do you try to simulate that in practice with two seven-footers on the floor?

HAYDEN GRAY: Yeah, we know how big they are. We just played Irvine and they had a 7'1" big dude, really good player. You can only do so much in practice. We don't have that size.

But we're throwing out looks that we think we're going to see, and we're just going to approach the game the same way and just be very physical.

Q. Dusty May said he met you one time and has a lot of respect for what you've accomplished. What do you know about him and his program?

ERIC OLEN: Yeah. Dusty is a fantastic basketball coach. Obviously he's accomplished a ton. He's taken a team to a

Final Four in this tournament.

Yeah, hopefully my team can overcome the coaching disadvantage that we have. (Laughter).

Q. Dusty had mentioned that he'd been planning on studying your team this off-season regardless if you'd been playing or not. Can you give some insight into what makes UC San Diego a worthwhile team to study for another coach?

ERIC OLEN: You know, I'm not sure. I think that we play a way that's maybe a little bit different than a lot of the other teams in college basketball. We don't have the traditional front court. We play with a little more five-out spacing.

So there's some -- I don't know, maybe a little bit of uniqueness to us, and obviously we've had a little bit of success playing that way. So maybe it's worth taking a look at to see if there's -- everybody does that, right? The same thing that -- that's why he's such a good coach is that I think he's probably continuing to learn and grow and look at different things.

I think we do the same thing. We're always looking at other teams and programs, from all different levels of college basketball, professional basketball, are there things that other teams are doing that make sense for us, something that can help us, just a concept we can incorporate that can improve our team.

Maybe next year we'll have a player on our team that's different than our current group. So that's a scenario where maybe we're going to go out and look at other teams that have that type of player and how do they use him, how do they put that person in position to be successful, how do we incorporate that into what we're doing.

I think everybody is always trying to learn and evolve in this and trying to keep getting better.

Q. Talk about the role that each of the guys of your coaching staff plays into the collective coaching mentality that you guys instill into your players and how you guys instill such creativity and confidence into the team.

ERIC OLEN: Yeah, thanks. I'm glad you guys could make it from the UC San Diego student radio. We want everybody on campus to enjoy this, so we're fired up that you guys are here. I appreciate the question.

You know, our staff is doing a great job. My coaching staff does a fantastic job of getting these guys ready to play. I

think all the things that we're talking about and the unique style that people maybe want to look at how we're doing it and see if that works for them conceptually. Our staff is a big part of that. They put in a ton of time and deserve a lot of credit.

It starts with Clint Allard who's kind of our defensive coordinator and has done a fantastic job this year. A big part of why we're sitting here. You guys are asking me questions is the progress that we've made defensively, and that all starts with Clint and the job that he's done defensively.

If you look at the last couple years and where we've been defensively to where we are this year, I think he's done an outstanding job of, again, tailoring our schemes to our personnel. We don't have the biggest team in the country. But we're pretty versatile. So we switch a lot.

I think our staff does a really good job of evaluating what our players do well and trying to find ways to put them in situations to be successful and sort of not being stuck in any one lane or concept from that standpoint.

Yeah, so Clint, and then Sam Stapleton, Steve Aldridge have done a fantastic job on the defensive side of the ball all year long, both in the preparation and the teaching.

The other side of it, Tom tank wits is our offensive coordinator. We've done a good job offensively, so if we take a good shot or we have a good possession, he probably had his hand in it in terms of getting guys prepared, understanding how other teams may try to take things away or limit those things and then try to find solutions for guys and counters to what the defense is doing.

Mikey Howell is another guy on our staff who does a great job helping with the offensive side. He played for us, so nobody is more familiar with how we play than Mikey. We set a lot of ball screens. Nobody has operated in more ball screens for us than Mikey Howell who's our all time assist leader.

He has such a great understanding of what we're doing, does a great job of teaching the guys and helping them play with anticipation.

Yeah, that group of people and our coaching staff is a huge part of why these guys are playing really good basketball and how we've gotten to this point.

Q. We're running a story on Marshall, and he talked about how he generated fan support when you guys played at UC Irvine and got some of your fans in the

building. What's it been like to see your fan base grow because of students like Marshall?

ERIC OLEN: Yeah, that's been one of the more rewarding parts of this. Obviously we're excited for our players and all the success they're having and them getting to go through this experience is great.

But to see how this team has resonated on campus and in our community is another really rewarding aspect of it.

I've been here for a very long time, so I can remember back 20 years ago when there weren't a whole lot of people coming to the games, to now where we get a few hundred students on the road. We've got kids lined up a couple hours before the game to get in, and so to see the support -- we've said for a long time, if we put a really good product on the floor, we felt like our campus and our community would support great basketball.

That's proven to be true, and so it's really been a rewarding aspect of this season, is to see how this team has resonated in that way and what it's done on campus. And yeah, so that's been cool.

Q. A former player here is Bryce Pope. Curious after four years after your transfer to Division I, how much he helped build what you guys have done today, and also if NIL as a whole will incentivize more stories like him who help build but then aren't necessarily there to see the end product?

ERIC OLEN: Yeah, so Bryce was a huge part of our program through the transition and actually just had a question about the transition in a different interview setting not long ago. But we appreciate the guys who helped us go through that, like in a really significant way.

There was no postseason eligibility for four years. That's a very long -- that's a career for people. So for the guys who signed up to participate in that, like they worked just as hard as this group. They poured into what they were doing every day just as the guys who are getting the benefit of it this time around, and they helped us elevate the program.

Like we improved through that process. They helped us learn a lot about how to compete in the Big West and how to put ourselves in position. They're a huge part of it.

I know we've got some alums coming to the game. I hope they're all watching and they feel just as much a part of it as these guys because that's not easy to put in all that work, not have any postseason at the end, so we respect and appreciate what those guys did for us in a really significant way.

Q. One of the more obvious storylines is the size discrepancy. I just wonder your thoughts and if you've been able to sleep trying to think about Vlad Goldin and Danny Wolf and some of the challenges they present.

ERIC OLEN: Yeah, for sure. Yeah, my initial reaction was how the Big Ten Tournament champs with all those Quad 1 wins ended up as a 5 seed for us.

But you just play whoever you get, right?

Yeah, so obviously there's a size discrepancy. But every game we go into, regardless of opponent, our approach is very much to try to identify any advantages that we have find relative to the matchups, both offensively and defensively, and see if there's a way for us to amplify those advantages, and then the opposite side of that would be identifying our disadvantages in different matchups and trying to find ways to mitigate those as much as possible.

So it's sort of the same process with a bigger version of it. We'll try to do some things that put them in difficult situations on both sides of the ball and try to avoid those difficult situations for us because they obviously exist.

But that's a big challenge in a matchup like this, but it's also kind of what makes this tournament fun is you get to see contrasting styles match up, teams from different conferences and things like that.

We're really excited about the challenge and the opportunity, but yeah, we certainly -- there's some obvious physical advantages when you start the game, and we'll do our best to mitigate those the best we can.

Q. I believe I read that UCSD recently opted into House revenue sharing. What are your thoughts as you try and build this program on how that development and the way collegiate sports are changing might help mid major programs. Do you feel like it'll help level the playing field? What are the benefits and drawbacks that you see to this new system?

ERIC OLEN: I think a lot of it is to be determined. I think it's hard to predict the future in this day and age of how it's going to affect everybody.

I think -- I hope there's a way that we can get to a place where we're able to consistently, or at least semi-consistently, have players like Niwa, Ty and Hayden return. I think that's harder and harder all the time, and I think that there's a lot of things that go into that. It's not

just the NIL.

I think the way teams are selected for the tournament is factored into that, because if you're in a one-bid league and you have guys who have dreams of playing in this tournament -- like we were fortunate those guys wanted to come back. But there's another team in our league who had a similar thing, like really good players coming back, they had a fantastic team, you know, and we're here and they're not.

But those kids returned -- all those kids, right, from our team, from other teams in our conference, teams at our level, they can go and get more compensation at other places.

Trying to find guys who want to stay and be part of something special, play together, accomplish things in a team environment over some of the things that are out there, those are difficult decisions for guys based on their backgrounds and their experiences.

Everybody has to make the best decision for them. We certainly understand that.

But I hope there's a way that college basketball in general can keep mid-major guys in the programs and -- like those three guys coming back have changed our program. So I hope that there's a way that we can continue to find paths for that, but it's certainly a question for college basketball in general that I think we're all going to sort of navigate together in the coming months and years.

Q. Michigan has a fair amount of tournament experience, their coaches and their players. How much of an advantage do you think that might be for them, and how do you offset that and get your players prepared to play on this level, on this stage?

ERIC OLEN: Yeah, I mean, I don't know how much of an advantage it will be. We talked earlier, I think certainly it's an advantage from -- their team has an advantage with their coaches having done it and advanced really far. Myself and my staff will work hard to do the best we can.

I think that my team has a really good idea of who they are and how they want to play, and their approach to how we go about it has been pretty consistent all year. So we're going to just try to keep doing what we're doing and take that same approach.

We've been playing in big games for a long time because as a one-bid league who's trying to put yourself in potential at large consideration or win your season but you're only one game ahead, we've sort of been in a can't lose any

game for two months. Every game has been huge for us, and I think that has prepared us hopefully for this. I thought it certainly prepared us for the conference tournament, and we played well there.

So my hope is that that will just continue and our guys can just focus on the things that they can control and not allowing external factors to influence their performance and just continue to play good basketball.

Q. The players were just talking about when people look at them, they don't look at them as real big basketball players, and Ty was talking about his body. What's your perspective on that? Is that a little bit of a superpower that other teams may be standing on the sideline looking at your players and think, how can these guys be any good and they go out and play like they're really good? What is your perspective when you see that?

ERIC OLEN: Yeah, I think there's, like, a little bit of a fun aspect to that. I think when we take the court, when we line up for the jump ball, I think that'll be a good photo. (Laughter).

But I also think that that brings a little bit of a chip on their shoulder, and I think that our program, myself, our coaching staff, we gravitate towards guys like that. I mean, if you look at the experience on my staff, a lot of those guys have Division II experience. We've got six Division II transfers. We don't look the part.

Yeah, I think we embrace that a little bit. I know that our guys are constantly wanting to prove themselves, and this is another good opportunity, great opportunity for them to try to do it again.

Yeah, I know that they embrace that. They like that. It's kind of fun.

But at the end of the day, once the game starts, it's not really going to have any impact. We'll play the possessions as they come, and our guys will compete really hard and we'll just see what happens.

But yeah, it's kind of fun, and they joke about it, and I do think it's something that drives them a little bit, and there's a chip on their shoulder. But at the end of the day, you've got to play the game, and we're excited about the opportunity.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.