

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Troy vs Kentucky

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Fiserv Forum

Troy Trojans

Coach Scott Cross

Media Conference



Kentucky was at my previous school. They were extremely talented during that stretch, some of the best players that looked like an NBA team going out there.

They had Booker and those guys. We got him going. I think we're responsible for igniting his NBA career because I think he hit ten 3s in that game or something ridiculous.

Our guys here at Troy, they have played in big games. This won't be our first rodeo. We've played Oregon. We played Arkansas. We've played U of H. So we've played some of the top teams in the country that are in the NCAA Tournament. I don't think our guys will be intimidated. But we know it's going to be a tough game, and we'll just go out there and play as hard as we can.

I think we do some things extremely well as well that they're probably very concerned about. So that's why they play the game. Every year, it seems like a 14 seed wins. So why not Troy?

Q. Knowing Kentucky's history, especially recently their struggles in the tournament against lower seeds, does that give you more confidence coming into the game?

SCOTT CROSS: I wouldn't say -- you can't really base anything on yesterday or last year. I mean, we have shown our guys not necessarily just them, but all the 14 seeds that have won over the past ten years, to give our guys confidence that it can be done.

Doesn't happen a lot. I believe it's like 13 percent or something along those lines. But just knowing that it can be done, I think it gives you a chance and gives the guys a little bit of confidence. They're going to have a definite size advantage. That's part of it.

I do believe our guys are confident and believe in themselves and they believe in each other.

Q. Scott, toughness is a word that I've heard a lot of people use to describe your team. I hope you agree. But as a coach, can you define toughness?

SCOTT CROSS: Yeah. I would say toughness is doing -- you know, both mental and physical. Doing all the little

THE MODERATOR: Joined by Troy head coach Scott Cross. Questions, please.

Q. What have you noticed and observed after watching the tape of Kentucky the last few days?

SCOTT CROSS: Oh, they're one of the best offensive teams in the country, the way they pass the ball, shoot the ball. Very difficult to defend. We're definitely going to go out there and try and be as aggressive as we can and take some things away.

But watching it on tape, it's not going to be easy. This is what you live for and what you dream about, and so the opportunity to go out there and play them, I know our guys are excited and ready for the challenge.

Q. Coach, Lamont Butler went down in the SEC championship. They say he's available for the game. How much does he have an impact for them and impact what you want to do defensively against them?

SCOTT CROSS: I would say he's a huge part of what they do. You know they're way, way better when he's out there on the floor, especially defensively with his toughness defending the basketball. So I'm sure that will give them a boost.

He's a very good offensive player as well, but I think he kind of gives them the toughness and identity that make them better defensively.

Q. The last time you saw Kentucky was the year after you made your first NCAA Tournament berth with Troy. What have you learned since then, and just how do you apply that knowledge now?

SCOTT CROSS: Yeah. So the only time I've played



things, diving on the floor for a loose ball, walling up, getting up and playing tough, physical, on-the-ball defense.

When the other team goes on a run or you make a mistake, snapping back and not letting it affect you on the next play. There are so many aspects, both mentally and physically.

But it's something that we talk about every single day with our guys. And we always say right before we go out, the toughest team always wins. A lot of times, the most aggressive team ends up being the toughest team.

So we want our guys to have that mindset, kind of a hunt mindset. We're not going to be hunted. We're going to go out there and be hunters. That's the only way to be successful. If we're on our heels, we have no chance. If we go out and are hungry, we're tough, we're aggressive, we have a chance.

Q. Coach, a lot of people have talked about the competition within the SEC. But the Sun Belt also had a lot of competition with four co-champions. How do you think it's prepared you for the tournament run?

SCOTT CROSS: It's definitely relative. In our sphere, it's very, very similar. From top to bottom, it's so evenly matched. Louisiana-Monroe finished towards the bottom of the league. They beat South, who was in first place, by a game. They actually swept them. The last place team sweeps the first place team. That tells you how evenly matched it is.

I've kept up with the SEC. I'm a big SEC fan. Definitely the best conference in the country. There's no doubt about it. It's a bloodbath every single game. But it's the same level of anxiety. And you have to bring it every single game in our conference as in the SEC. It's just a little bit different in terms of size and experience and those types of things.

Q. Coach, you mentioned size and that Kentucky has a size advantage. How do you combat that? Is toughness a part of that? Is it more boxing out and mental things as well?

SCOTT CROSS: Both. Toughness, I think, is a part of it. We're exceptionally good at offensive rebounding. I believe we're fifth or sixth in the country. You have to be tough. How are we able to do that? With Jackson Fields, who's 6'8" maybe, Thomas Dowd, 6'7", somewhere in there. The only way to do that is by being tough. You're not going to be a great offensive rebounding team unless you're being physical, gritty, and tough.

Our guys, we've preached it, we've done it. We do a defensive boot camp, weeklong, where we're getting up at 5:00 in the morning, doing 2-on-2 drills without a basketball for an hour and a half straight. It's one of the toughest things they do. Once they accomplish that, they know anything they face in the season will be a lot easier than our defensive boot camp.

Our guys, their minds, I feel like, are trained. They're mentally tough. I don't think they're going to get rattled no matter what the circumstances are. We've had our share of adversity. We've had, out of our five losses in conference, it's been a combined 14 points.

So every single one of those games is close. Down the stretch, we were able to start winning those close games so our guys are used to it.

Q. You returned a lot of your roster this year. Just with this current era of college athletics, how much of an advantage is that, kind of keeping that continuity?

SCOTT CROSS: It's a huge advantage. The year before, App State in our league returned the most guys. They won the regular season. I remember Coach Kerns telling me we had a big advantage because we were returning the guys.

You think it's going to be an advantage. Until you do it, you don't really know. But looking back, now that we're able to be co-champions of the regular season and tournament champions without a doubt, if we don't return that many guys, it's going to be very, very difficult. So that was a huge part of it.

You have to kind of remind the fans and everybody else that that doesn't happen very often and it's probably not going to happen again this year, unfortunately.

I'm thankful for these guys for believing in us and believing in each other. And the beautiful thing is what they set out to do, we accomplished. Now, there's still more to accomplish, but the two major goals that every year you set out to do is win a regular season, go to the NCAA Tournament.

And so our guys, that's what they wanted to do and we were able to do that.

Q. Coach, what do you want your guys to take away from this experience here?

SCOTT CROSS: They've had plenty of time. They enjoy it. We had two days off right after we won the conference tournament. We had Selection Sunday off. That was their

time to enjoy it.

I do want them to kind of soak up these moments here. But when we step foot -- when it's time to practice, we forget about all that. When it's time to play, we're going to work. We're not treating it any different than any other game we've played all year long. And so every other minute, enjoy it, look around, enjoy the police escort, enjoy the private plane. We're probably not going to do that, you know, for a long, long time unless we can get back to the NCAA Tournament.

But I do want them to enjoy those experiences. For me, it's been 17 years. So I appreciate everything. In year 2, you think it's going to happen. Every single year after that. Here we are 17 years later. So it definitely makes you appreciate the little things even more.

Q. I asked your guys about Waffle House and their most recent trip there. What has it been like to see that story blow up this week? I heard they even reached out to you all.

SCOTT CROSS: It's been great. All that is true stories. None of it is lies. I was asking my wife yesterday about it. I was, like, how many times do you think we've went to Waffle House in the six years. She's like at least a hundred. That's with my wife. So you can multiply that by two or three because, like, even our team meetings last year, when we were putting the team together and trying to convince everybody to stay, I was meeting individually with each guy, and I would ask them where they want to go. Probably out of the 11 guys that were returning, probably 9 of them said Waffle House.

I definitely had to watch what I ate the rest of the day because I definitely ate a lot during those Waffle House runs. And then a lot of times after we win, it's the only place open, and we love it there. They're family. So, yeah, the stories are all true, though. None of it is made up.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you and good luck tomorrow night.

SCOTT CROSS: Thank you.

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