

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

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Memphis, Tennessee, USA

FedExForum

**Nebraska Cornhuskers**  
**Coach Fred Hoiberg**

**Brice Williams**

**Rienk Mast**

Media Conference



which makes it a little bit easier for us to play. I know for myself, I definitely look for him and try and feed him the ball whenever I can during the game.

But it's been pretty special to have him, like have him on our team this year, like an anecdote for -- he was with his national team, but one of the first practices that he was back, we were playing a little 5-on-5, and it was three possessions in a row.

First one he hit just a normal 3. Then when you let him hit one 3, he gets on fire, like, right away. So then he hit a step-back 3. And then right the next possession he got switched, the 5 switched out on him and he took him one-on-one and hit another step-back 3, like, three possessions in a row.

That was the first time that I really saw what type of player he was in person and he's been special this year.

BRICE WILLIAMS: The stuff you all see out there on the court on game days, it's crazy. Like Rienk said, he's definitely a guy who can heat up just by making one shot.

But the stuff he does after practice or shoot-arounds, when he's hitting turnaround, half-court shots, like he'll turn around, he won't look at the basket. Him and Rienk do it every time after shoot-around. But Keisei makes them on a regular -- it's just crazy the stuff he does off camera.

**Q. Both of you guys transferred in for this moment. You set this goal ahead of you at the beginning of the season. But now that you're here how cool is it to be in this spectacle and be in March Madness and see the city and all the hype around it?**

BRICE WILLIAMS: It's new. It's exciting. Like you said it's the goal we set out to do when we transferred here. But at the same time we came -- we wanted to win here. We didn't want to just be here.

So while we're excited, I think we're both just trying to, you know what I'm saying, write history. Put our name down in history with Nebraska and just make a run.

**Q. The opportunity to win Nebraska's first NCAA Tournament game, is that something you guys are thinking about heading into this one?**

RIENK MAST: Yes, most definitely. Obviously going into the season, it's a big goal to be here, and you know that Nebraska's never won an NCAA Tournament game, but now to actually be here and be in this position and have this opportunity, just super excited to go out there and hopefully write some history.

**Q. Brice, the A&M players and Coach Williams were talking about your guys' scouting report of what they thought of you. And they used "pretty" talk about the offense. What have been your impressions of A&M now that you have time to look at them and what jumps out about their strengths and weaknesses?**

BRICE WILLIAMS: They're just an aggressive team. I wouldn't say anything special about them. They just had their identity of trying to out-tough the opponent, and that's the emphasis this week. We just can't get punked, just going to focus on that.

**Q. Keisei has taken the college basketball world by storm the past couple of weeks. I don't know if you buy into "Japanese Steph Curry" hype. But what's it like to play alongside him? Do you have an anecdote that he played in a practice or anything that stands out?**

RIENK MAST: It's obviously special to play with somebody that draws in this type of hype and this type of excitement around himself. He draws a lot of attention on the court,



RIENK MAST: We're not here for just one game. Everybody will say that. If you ask the Texas A&M players, they'll also say we're not here for just one game. But obviously excited to be here. But we don't want to be here just for one day; we want to extend this journey a little bit longer.

**Q. How unique is it -- you've been around Keisei Tominaga, but to know this game is being live streamed in Japan. And to get that kind of reach, is it fun? Do you have some family members who in parts of the world that may be able to watch this game because of him that otherwise would not have been able to -- they would have been checking an app trying to keep up with the game?**

BRICE WILLIAMS: I don't have any family in Japan or anything, but it's just crazy that one guy can draw so much attention nationally, worldwide. It just shows that the game can bring everybody together.

But it's just cool. It's cool that everybody over there can see him play and support him. He's kind of a celebrity over there, I heard. It's all necessary.

**Q. I'm just wondering, we talked to you guys on Sunday and we asked you how big of an impact Fred can have. Now that you've had some preparation, some practices going into this game, he's played in the NCAA Tournament. He's coached in it. Just what kind of help has Fred been during this process?**

RIENK MAST: Just mainly kind of explaining to us, like, how to stay poised during games. These games, most of them will come down to the wire. They'll be one-possession games.

What we've talked about is just staying poised and level headed and not get too sped up or too nervous or excited, or whatever, just staying level headed and staying in the moment.

**Q. You've only been at Nebraska for one season, played for Coach Hoiberg for less than a year, but what impact has he had on your developments not only getting ready for this season but preparing you for the next level?**

BRICE WILLIAMS: What he's done for me, instilling confidence in me. Obviously playing a new position I've never played before at point guard. Kind of running the show. And if whether I make a mistake or make multiple mistakes, he's shown that he has confidence in me, and that helps me have confidence in myself.

He's given me freedom to make mistakes and learn while pumping me up behind the scenes. Just having confidence in myself and my game and that's just propelled me forward.

RIENK MAST: Just obviously he's played and coached at the next level and especially coaching aspect of how he approaches a game. I believe he still approaches the game the same way when he was coaching the Bulls as he is approaching the game now.

So just to learn from him kind of how it goes on at the professional level and how preparations go, and just learning a lot of how he looks at Xs and Os of the game. Just his basketball IQ is enormous. And learning from him has been really good.

**Q. I know you're probably overhearing the stuff but you're the only Power Five team to not have won a game in a tournament. Is that something you guys talk about often? How do you work through that? And what's the motivation to go and win this to get that kind of monkey off the back?**

BRICE WILLIAMS: We talk about it multiple times. We talked about it a lot, kind of just to go along with our season, first it started with the road games. Then once it started coming down to the wire we started talking about we never won.

But everybody talks about how we have a special group, and we don't want to just be, like, some people talk about. We definitely want to get the monkey off our back and win our first one. But like I said, we just want to make a run. We just want to make a run.

RIENK MAST: Obviously everybody's aware. But, like, you can't let it define us too much. You can't go into the game, like, oh, this is like the opportunity of a lifetime. Obviously it's a high-pressure game, but we can't be thinking too much about, oh, we've never won a game here.

It's just, all right, this is one game that we have to win. And we can't be too caught up in the history of it all. We've just got to focus in on the moment.

**Q. There are many great shooters these days, but what people say about Keisei is different. They say best show on TV or fun to watch. Why do you think Keisei is that kind of player?**

RIENK MAST: He's very unassuming. He's 6'2", not too athletic. But when he goes out on the court he plays with the type of swagger and type of attitude that is almost

unmatched.

And the way he shoots the ball, how Fred teaches us to shoot, with holding your follow-through and sticking your shot and all that. It doesn't really matter for him, as long as it gets out of his hands clean and he gets a somewhat decent look, you know this thing is going in more times than not. That's something I personally have never seen other than with Keisei.

BRICE WILLIAMS: Probably the degree of difficulty. None of his shots are open. None of his shots are like wide open. They're all usually fading away or super, super quick release. But I would probably just say the degree of difficulty and how much he makes those difficult shots, how often.

**Q. Brice, coming off the Big Ten Tournament and your strong performance in that one-and-done environment, how does that impact your confidence coming into a similar situation but obviously higher stakes?**

BRICE WILLIAMS: The pressure was definitely on. And, you know, in those games it was a lot of different crowds. It was a lot of different people rooting for you, a lot of different people rooting against you.

But heading into the tournament now, that was a neutral site. So we were basically on the road. All we had was ourselves pretty much.

For us to play how we did, I know we gave up the last one, was the noise, but we still played pretty good. We looked at one another and played for one another. And that was good heading into the tournament now where everything is a neutral site again. It was encouraging.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Fred Hoiberg.

FRED HOIBERG: Want to say how excited we are to be in this opportunity right now. When we put this group together we thought we had a chance to be here. I give our guys all the credit in the world for continuing to buy in, be very professional throughout this entire season regardless of the circumstance.

Whether we won, whether we lost, we generally prepared the same way, and these guys have been extremely coachable. And I'm really excited for them to have this opportunity.

**Q. Just an opinion, do you think the uniqueness of your systems maybe give you an advantage in a situation like this, your systems on offense and defense?**

FRED HOIBERG: Well, I don't know about that. I think at this time of year obviously it's, the importance is how your team is playing and how they're hanging in there together when you've been through as many battles as we have.

And I know this, we're playing a hot team. We're playing one of the hottest teams in the country right now that came off a five-game winning streak. And their loss, their lone loss in that stretch, to Florida, was as good a 20 minutes that they had played all year. They had a 20-point lead in the first half against Florida in that game. I know we're playing a hot team.

That being said, I really do like the way we're playing, I think our guys have done a great job of sharing the ball. We found the right guy, whoever has had it going. And this team has been very selfless all season long.

We've had a good week of prep. I'm sure A&M has had a great week of prep as well. And you've got two teams playing really good basketball squaring off tomorrow.

So, again, we've all got our unique systems. A&M is a very unique system on both sides of the ball, and I know this, whatever offense they're running, we have to be tied together. Defensively we've been pretty darned good with the exception of the Illinois game. We had a lot of miscues in that game.

And offensively, I know we're going to have to play with pace. Whatever defense they're in, we just have to go out and continue to share it and continue to move. And we've had the benefit of playing a couple of teams that have played multiple defenses. Michigan played a lot of them. I was really pleased with how we moved in that game, whatever defense they were in. And that's what it's going to take for us tomorrow to have a chance to win this game.

**Q. I know Keisei was recruited by Coach Billy Gillispie. What memories, things stick out to you, and in working with Coach Gillispie, is there any part of his coaching that you see Keisei develop?**

FRED HOIBERG: As you know, it's not easy playing for Billy. He's a very demanding coach, and he does a phenomenal job. So the fact that Keisei played under Billy, I think, is a huge benefit for us.

I remember talking to Billy in the recruiting process and just talking to him about how he enjoyed coaching Keisei, and he loved him. He said, the thing I like the most about Keisei is his competitive spirit. I can yell at him. I can get on him, and he never snaps back at me. He's just got a smile on his face.

I said, Coach, it's because he doesn't know what you're talking about. He can't understand you. As he's gone on -- he had the added benefit, there was a Japanese trainer (indiscernible) Ranger, and that helped him learn the language a little bit. When he got to Nebraska he had got a girlfriend and that really helped his language.

Listen, the thing with Keisei, I'm so proud of his growth over the last couple of years. His first year at Nebraska, there were some games he just couldn't play. He just got overwhelmed by physicality.

Now he doesn't back down from anybody. I don't care who it is. He's going to go out there. He's going to give you an effort. He's going to make contact with you, and the way that he is guarded, his ability to create separation, has been absolutely phenomenal.

I'm just proud of him for everything that he's done to make him the type of player that he is right now. And obviously there's a lot of attention. He's getting a lot of it. It's important, as I've talked about with the team, to really try to limit the distractions this week. There's so much noise, social media with everything going on.

The team that limits those distractions a lot of times are the teams that move on at this time of year.

So it's important. We love it. He's getting a lot of attention. But he's always had that. He's played on the world stage. He helped his national team at Japan accomplish something that's never been done before. And that's what we're trying to accomplish here at Nebraska.

**Q. When you were recruiting him from Ranger, what were the things that stood out that he was doing at that level, and saying, okay, let's see how we can bring this up to the new level?**

FRED HOIBERG: Shooting from half court. That was the thing that I liked. He shot 44 percent on shots over 25 feet. He just has always had that range.

The thing that I loved was his confidence. You see him out there playing with a joy and a confidence and a swagger. That's why he's able to play against more athletic, more physical players, is because he plays with that drive and he plays with that joy and confident swagger every time he steps on the court.

It's not just games. If you saw him in practice, he's the same guy. And that helped set the tone for our guys every day.

He's just been a joy to coach. I've said this multiple times. He's going to go down as one of my all-time favorites.

**Q. You talked about distractions earlier. What has it been like for you and your staff having to balance the transfer portal opening up this week and prepping for the NCAA Tournament and the overlap that's been there?**

FRED HOIBERG: It's not a lot of fun. I'll be honest with you. It's, I know, a big part of the job, and you have to be on top of everything early in the process or you won't have a chance.

You want to be preparing obviously 24/7, but you have to be on top of that. And our staff does a good job with it. I think there's, what, 500 names in there already. You have to be ready for it.

But at this time of year, for us, for me, it's all about doing everything I can to prepare the team and put a game plan together to give us a chance to beat, again, one of the top teams in the country here these past six weeks.

And we'll worry about that. When this journey ends hopefully not for a while, we'll get on top of it, but our staff is doing a good job right now keeping everybody in the loop on what's happening on that front, at the same time staying very focused on the task at hand.

**Q. You've obviously had a lot of success on the NCAA Tournament stage. Is there some secret to winning an NCAA Tournament game?**

FRED HOIBERG: Well, you've got to be tied together. You have to fight through adversity. This is the biggest thing at this time of year is you have to find a way to stay together when things aren't going your way.

And I can promise you tomorrow night, at some point, that's going to happen to us. And what will define our success is how we handle that adversity.

I'm confident, our group has been through a lot. We've been through a lot of highs and lows, and I do think we're playing as good as we played all year right now. So hopefully we handled that well.

We did not handle it great at Ohio State. That was the one time I thought that we really kind of got away from it. But we learned from it. I think we've grown and gotten better.

Defense and rebounding this time of year is critical, and we're playing the best offensive rebounding team in the country. And they're so good at getting into your body and

hitting you first, and if we allow that to happen, it's going to be a long night.

They average almost 18 offensive rebounds a game. That's a crazy number. 44 percent of their misses they get back. Their offensive rebounding percentage is historically good. So, for us, we have to find a way to battle them. We've got to guard the ball. And we have to finish off possessions.

**Q. What does the contract extension mean to you? And considering where things were for you just a couple of years ago, to have that long-term stability now, how much of an advantage is that going forward, building this program?**

FRED HOIBERG: I appreciate the leadership believing in us. That's first and foremost. I've talked a lot about how much we've loved our time in Lincoln. For me, with our family's ties, with both grandfathers working at the university, one as the head coach for nine seasons in basketball, the other one, sociology professor for 20 years.

Spent a lot of time in Lincoln growing up. My parents are graduates of Southeast and also University of Nebraska. My dad got his Ph.D. at Nebraska. I was born in Lincoln.

We absolutely love it. And it's kind of cool how life has come full circle. And very likely my career is going to end in Lincoln.

I just am really appreciative of the belief. And we're going to do everything we can to make this a consistent goal for this team to be playing at this time of year on this stage. And there's no reason in the world we shouldn't have that with the facilities, with the fan support.

We absolutely love it. I'm appreciative, my staff, getting taken care of. And hopefully we're here doing special things for a long time.

Again, but it goes back to the leadership. I haven't met Troy since he got the job. I know I talked about this. He used to ref my high school games. Sounds like he's going to be out there today. I'm looking forward to getting together with him and hopefully building it together with a guy that I think has great leadership skills.

And also the president as well. Just really excited about it. And hopefully we do some great things here long term.

**Q. Wade Taylor had some pretty high praise for you guys, but in terms of slowing him down and the opportunity to go against a great player like that, what's your approach to him?**

FRED HOIBERG: He's playing at an unbelievable level. Preseason player of the year and certainly that's how he's playing right now. But his degree of difficulty on his shots -- you see those early shots he made in the SEC Tournament, pulling up from 28, 29 feet on the first couple of minutes of the game and just setting the tone, over length, contested, if he's hitting shots like that it's going to be a tough game to win. That's who he's been here these last couple of weeks.

But it's their whole team. Their guards are playing at a high, high level. Their bigs know their roles. Garcia's ability, he has 153 offensive rebounds. That's incredible. We think Juwan Gary is a good offensive rebounder. He's got 61.

So these guys pose a lot of problems. And the way Taylor is playing right now, he's the head of the snake. It starts with him. I'm so impressed with his overall game and how the team is playing as a whole. We'll really have to be on point to give ourselves a chance to win this game.

**Q. I assume C.J.'s good to go? And also Eli, could he play if you had to play him?**

FRED HOIBERG: C.J., he's been back on the practice court. It's good to have him back. He struggled a little bit that first day, kind of had him in and out. But he's been fine the last couple since we've been down here in Memphis.

Eli practiced for the first time two days ago, and he was in for about half the reps. Today he was out there a little bit. He's still got some soreness in that ankle but he will dress tomorrow and he will be available if we need him.

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