

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Longwood vs Houston

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FedExForum

Longwood Lancers Coach Griff Aldrich Michael Christmas DA Houston Walyn Napper

Media Conference

Q. DA and Michael, what does the fact that this program was here a couple of years ago in the NCAA Tournament, what does that do? What does that experience do? Has it changed the approach and mindset this time around?

DA HOUSTON: Last year, or two years ago, like you said, we were here. It was good for the experience. Now that it's the second time around, like I said before, I don't want to just be here, I want to actually get a win, a couple wins, a few wins, as many as I can get. The approach has changed, but at the same time, still soaking in that experience.

MICHAEL CHRISTMAS: I know for me, because I was on the sidelines watching, it's a different experience for me for sure. But I'm kind of used to the atmosphere of it since we already went through it.

As far as the approach, I want to get a win just like DA said, not just only a win, maybe a couple of wins. I guess that's the different approach for it.

Q. DA, when you turn on the film for the first time on Houston, what did you notice? What did you take away from it?

DA HOUSTON: Well, obviously their physicality and toughness. That's something they're very good at or that's a skill they have. That's what stood out to me the most, just the physicality and toughness.



Q. Houston has a lot of toughness and physicality, and has one of the best defenses in the country. With your offense firing as it has recently against teams like UNC Asheville and High Point, what is your offensive approach going into this game, going against a really good defense?

WALYN NAPPER: First of all, we just have to execute. Don't get caught up into the pressure because they'll pressure a lot. They blitz ball screens. They take away back actions, the rolls. We just have to be calm under pressure, execute at a high level, play together and drive for a teammate and just execute overall.

MICHAEL CHRISTMAS: I would say execute and don't get, what's the word, don't get worried about their pressure so much and just stay calm and do the game plan.

Q. What's it like playing for Coach Aldrich? And how much and in what form does like his non-basketball background come in when he's coaching, the lawyer in him or the business background?

DA HOUSTON: I've been here for three years. When I first got here, he told he was going to challenge me not only on the court but off the court. That's really the biggest thing, where that background comes in.

We were getting prepared for the real life outside of college. And I feel like that's where I really developed as a man and my character.

Q. I know you guys said you're just focused on getting a win, but you are a 16 seed going up against a 1. Is there a feeling of playing with house money and just letting it loose because there are limited outside expectations?

WALYN NAPPER: Honestly, we don't really get caught up into the ranking of the numbers of who is 16 or who is 1. At the end of the day we're all college athletes. We all play D-I. We all earned this opportunity.

We know what we have in our locker room. We know the guys that we have. We know the coaching staff that we



have. We're not just going to say that just because they're No. 1 we're nervous or anything like that that. We're just going to go out and play.

We'll compete at a high level. We're tough, both mentally and physically tough. And we have the right game plan. We have the right guys. And we're just going to go in and compete.

Q. Walyn, you heard me ask the guys about the experience of being here. You've not been here. What is it like for you and what kind of advice or leadership have they given you off the court in terms of this stage?

WALYN NAPPER: It's always been a dream to make it to the NCAA Tournament. And for it to finally happen in my last year as a senior, it's special, not only for myself but the community back home in South Carolina, my family.

Playing with this team has been special over the two years. Last year I came in not knowing what to expect, but the brotherhood that we have, I'm glad I'm here. I'm glad I have these teammates, this coaching staff. It's just been a special year for us all.

Q. Walyn, you had success on the court. Obviously two of the last three semesters on the dean's list. Could you talk about that journey and how you got to that point?

WALYN NAPPER: I have to give a shoutout to Coach Griff and Coach Ronnie, he's my academic coach. They've been pushing me since I got here at Longwood to be good not only on the court but off the court -- in the community, around campus, just being respectful.

When I came to Longwood I wasn't really the best student, but I always wanted to push myself to be better, not only for myself but for my family. Do it for my mom, really.

But it's been a good journey. I always say you have to find the beauty within the journey. It's not about the destination or the time. Just me just sticking to the journey, just sticking to it, just making sure I get my grades, just to grow into the young man that God created me to be.

Q. You mentioned the 16-1 seeding. You have a coach who was an assistant coach on a 16 that beat a 1. Has Griff talked at all about, Coach Aldrich talked at all about that experience, Virginia, what it took for UMBC? And is there any motivation for you guys in that and last year and what happened with Purdue?

DA HOUSTON: I mean, he's spoke on it a little bit. Not

too much, but what he has said when he's talked about it is just the execution side of it, the details, which are important in the game of basketball. That's really (indiscernible) hear him speak on that too much.

MICHAEL CHRISTMAS: I would say the same thing. He just mentioned how they executed the game plan going into the game and played hard.

Q. For those of you all who have been to the tournament before, did going back, was that an expectation for you? Or considering all the teams that, like, don't make it, is it still kind of a pinch-me type of thing?

DA HOUSTON: In the summer, we got a pretty new team. We got a lot of new people. Me personally, I'm not going to say me personally, the team overall, we had that confidence that we could come back here. Even when we had our low points in the season we still had faith in each other and that belief. And I feel that pushed us to where we're at today. We always had that expectation and belief.

MICHAEL CHRISTMAS: I would say the same thing. In the summer, we came in. We knew what the angle was, but we knew it was going to take a long journey. Throughout the ups and downs that we had throughout the season, we still kept that in the back of our mind. And that's how we ended up here today.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Griff Aldrich.

GRIFF ALDRICH: Just really excited to be back in the NCAA Tournament. It's been a really incredible journey with this group this year, ups and downs. It's not been a linear path, but it's been one that's been really rewarding.

So we're really excited to be back here, not only for this group of guys but for our university and our community back in Virginia.

Q. You are back, and it was only two years ago, so you've got some guys who have the experience. Has that changed the approach, some of the "wow" factor? Do you see your team handling this situation better because there's some experience there?

GRIFF ALDRICH: I don't know. I think in today's world, two years ago we had transfers back then, some guys who have been in the tournament but were in the tournament for the first time with Longwood. So I think that maturity helped a little bit.

I think with this group, it's probably the closest, most tight-knit group that I've been around as a team. And I

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

think there's a real connectedness that has helped avoid distraction.

I think the last month of the season they were really on a mission to be playing the best basketball that they could. And I've really seen that carry over into, post tournament.

Q. This Houston team is a very good defensive team and one thing they lack is height. You guys have an advantage over them in that. How will you look to exploit that advantage to possibly pull off another 16-1 upset?

GRIFF ALDRICH: They're not a tall team, but what they make up for in lack of height they make up for intensity and their competitiveness. And they're long. Francis is obviously a really long defender. And Roberts should probably be on their football team as well.

I think, yes, while we have height, they constantly double the post. It's one of the trademark signatures of their defense, so we'll be selective. That will be an important part of our offensive scheme. And we'll need to execute well.

Q. Coaches across the country talk about when the transfer portal opens in as it relates to the NCAA Tournament. It impacts you guys in a lot different way. What has this last week been like for you balancing it? And what are your thoughts on the transfer portal opening when it does?

GRIFF ALDRICH: I think I would say you're exactly right. I think it's a challenge right now because we are, we're trying to prepare but we're also having to be mindful of -- recruiting is a huge part of this profession and our jobs as coaches is bringing in the right talent.

It's disappointing because you want to really enjoy and be present in this moment, but literally down the hallway I was just talking about recruiting with two assistants.

So that, I think, does take away. This is such a complicated mess -- and I think that's the right word, mess -- because there's competing factions and considerations that have to be taken into account.

But it really does need to, it needs to be addressed. And I think it will continue drive good people out of the profession, out of coaching.

And I don't think the portal, while really good in many instances, I think culturally it's transforming college athletics. And I don't think we're doing our young people a service. We're doing them a disservice.

One thing we preach and Houston clearly preaches is toughness. It's hard to preach toughness when the culture is just move along.

And obviously there's countless good stories and good reasons for kids to transfer. But we really need to have a thoughtful and quick, in my view -- I say quick, over the coming year or two -- solution to how we're handling this because I think we are transforming the landscape and not necessarily in a positive light.

Q. For those mostly in Memphis who may not know your story, why get back into coaching basketball? Maybe in the real world you could have made a heck of a lot more money than you are at a smaller program. How much did you kind of weigh that in your mind? And how much does what you did in the past influence what you're doing now?

GRIFF ALDRICH: I'll take the last part first. I think what I did in the past informs everything I do now because in the private sector, we really tried to build Longwood like a business. We try to identify our competitive advantages. Try to find out where our weaknesses are and create solutions where possible.

So I think the past has been a real advantage and has been fun to try to build a little business in the form of Longwood basketball.

Why did I get into coaching? My faith. I was working in private equity, but also coaching AAU. And I think God was taking me on a journey personally where he was revealing to me that my identity wasn't just in what I did day to day.

And there was real freedom when I realized that my identity is supposed to be in Christ, that I got the opportunity to start thinking about, well, what do I want to do.

It was really my wife who was the one who encouraged me to explore college basketball as a 41-year-old. And just happened that Ryan Odom, now VCU head coach, just got hired or was about to get hired at UMBC. And he was kind enough to bring me along to kind of help him in an administrative role. And so that's the journey.

Q. I'm curious if anyone was critical when you made the switch and said you're crazy, who has now come back two tournament bids in and said, okay, I was wrong.

GRIFF ALDRICH: Yeah, most people thought I was crazy.

I think a lot of people didn't understand it. A lot of people thought it was too much risk.

And in fact I just got an email from a colleague in the private-equity world earlier this week saying, well, I think you were right.

But again, I think that's where I go back to the freedom of you get to do what you want to do rather than what you think people think you ought to do. And so it's been a fun journey.

Q. You played a large part in putting together the first-ever No. 16 seed to knock off a No. 1 seed. Is that something you talk about considering you're a 16 going up against a 1? And what do you say to them -- what do you take from that experience, I guess?

GRIFF ALDRICH: Well, first off I was the director of recruiting. So I wasn't a huge part. But I think more than anything -- we've addressed it with the team very, very briefly. But I think each team has its own journey.

I think there's some really important elements of that team, the UMBC team that won, which is, number one, they believed. They believed in themselves. They had experiences early in the year. They were a very confident team. Very similar to our team. They were connected. They really enjoyed one another.

And for us we want to be Longwood, not a UMBC repeat, or Fairleigh Dickinson repeat. We want to write our own story.

And I think these guys have some really compelling characteristics. Their character and their resiliency. And then their chemistry is really strong. We'll see how far it takes us.

Q. Griff, having been in the city of Houston, wondering if you had any thoughts on where the state of maybe the program was when you were there and what you've seen and what Kelvin's done?

GRIFF ALDRICH: It's really incredible. I lived in Houston for a while, for quite a while, and the transformation of Houston, the University of Houston, and in particular the basketball program -- I remember going to games and I probably could have sat on the bench there were so few people there at times.

Now it's a principal element of the Houston fabric. The way they've done it, to make it a national program and the consistency with which they've done it is really impressive. So I think what he's built and his whole staff has built is

something special.

Q. Did you know Kelvin from AAU at all?

GRIFF ALDRICH: No. The players I was coaching weren't being recruited by Kelvin, sadly. Just being around, I actually coached a bunch of the kids at Yates High School, which is right across the street from U of H. And we lived right near there.

I got familiar with the Sampsons, and very down-to-earth, wonderful people. And Kellen and I have probably developed more of a friendship over the years and super happy for their success. Just hope it's not that successful Friday.

Q. What has Walyn Napper brought to this program? And in particular this year, what has his role kind of grown into?

GRIFF ALDRICH: Walyn is a special story. He's a young man -- I'm his first coach for two years in college. Some of that is his choosing. Some of it is, I think his first juco, they shut down athletics.

But Walyn came to us, and we challenged him even on his recruiting visit that, do you want to grow? Do you want to change because we're going to push you extremely hard off the court as much as we do on the court.

I'm not sure he knew how hard, but he might rethink his decision. But that's been a consistent theme for him, is he has had an internal desire to grow as a man. And I think it's been a really hard transformation on many days.

But he has fought and has remained steadfast, and he's an extremely bright young man. And I think my hope is that his eyes have been really opened up, that when he stays the course and remains consistent, that his potential is exceedingly greater than maybe what he expected.

To answer your question about what he's meant to us, I think he's been the key to the turning point for us in conference. He and DA -- Walyn's sense of purpose elevated significantly probably in the last month.

And I wish I could say that I uncorked some magic coaching strategy, but the reality was their sense of purpose elevated significantly over the last month.

It's always been a talented team. And we've struggled to try to unpack that. And I think Walyn has really taken hold of the team and led them both through example but also by holding people accountable as a leader. And I think the guys have sensed and seen his purpose and determination

and they followed.

Q. Anybody who spent time in our fair city has a sense of pride of H Town. You have three players on your roster from Houston. We know how much time you spent there. Can you speak to the bond that you and those guys share and also maybe the uniqueness of drawing the Cougs in the tournament?

GRIFF ALDRICH: I was surprised when we got Houston. But Houston is a place where my three kids were all born. My wife is from there. I coached AAU there for over 10 years. So our network of connections has run deep.

It's obviously a great basketball town with a lot of talent. And it's made a lot of sense for us to recruit.

We've got several alums who have played and are now back in Houston -- played at Longwood, I should say, and are now back at Houston.

So there's a special affinity that we have for Texas and Houston players. And I think it's been a mutually beneficial thing. I think the guys who have come to Longwood have been able to get out and see a different part of the country and expand their perspective and represent Texas well in the great commonwealth.

Q. On Szymon, you're talking about a guy who came to basketball kind of later. What's been the biggest thing you've seen from him that made you want to go get him? And since he's been here, what's the thing that's kind of stood out?

GRIFF ALDRICH: Szymon is a unique blend for us at our level of a 7-footer who has skill. But Szymon is also athletic and can move. But he spent his first three years at Utah State more in a reserve role. And the special thing for him, which we really cherish and want to promote at Longwood, is development and growth. And Szymon is a great example of that.

The biggest thing, when you haven't played -- I think so many people miss this in the transfer-portal world is that guys who haven't played, they kind of have to get their sea legs back. And sometimes it's an up and to the right and they just blossom. Other guys it's one, two steps forward, one step back. I think that's been Szymon's journey this year.

But, again, similar to Walyn, he's really grown and developed. I think he's really learned a lot about himself over the past year or the past season -- his strengths, areas where he is maybe prone to weakness. And I think he's really tried to address those to the best of his ability.

And he's playing the best basketball of the year right now. So I'm excited to see him go up against the Cougs on Friday.

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