

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Oklahoma vs UConn

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Lenovo Center

UConn Huskies

Dan Hurley

Media Conference



maybe schools are just not as patient as they should be with some of the -- some of them are obviously surprising. Of course the other half of that is obviously this is maybe the year that a couple of your assistants get that call.

DAN HURLEY: It's been surprising just, I guess, that I've been able to hold on to Luke and Kimani as long as I have. They're obviously excellent at what they do. I'm always expecting a phone call or text message from one of them saying, hey, I've just been offered so and so job, and I think it's the one I want. Appreciate you.

They're that amazing at what they do. Yeah, and then I just think the sport has changed a lot. This is NIL. You don't always necessarily have to build -- when you're taking over a job now, you're not building a culture and building a program. Because of the transactional nature of NIL and portal, you could bank roll or buy a championship caliber team as opposed to have to build it maybe four years ago, five years ago, eight years ago, ten years ago.

I think with all of this, college coaches are going to get treated like NBA coaches. NBA coaches get hired and fired pretty quickly. I think you'll see the length of college coaches contracts get shorter and shorter as they get hired for new jobs. I don't think you'll see as much hoopla over coaches doing well in year one or year two because I think the expectation now is that you should be able to put together a team now that can compete in year one or year two, or else year three is a must win year whereas before it was probably like years four and five.

Q. Dan, the last couple years, it was very easy to sense being around your team a little bit what you were building to and how good you were. What do you sense this year coming in from this group?

DAN HURLEY: I think it's -- as crazy as it sounds, probably just we're more battle tested, just been through way more. This team has been from getting knocked on our ass at Maui and that meltdown out there, coming back 4-3 and looking at Baylor at home without Karaban playing. Knowing you're going to Texas right after that and then Gonzaga, who at the time was top 10 type of team.

We're looking at our season at that point in the year like

THE MODERATOR: We are now ready for Coach Hurley's portion of the press conference.

Coach, could you give us an opening statement please.

DAN HURLEY: Obviously excited to be here in Raleigh. Thrilled for the opportunity. Obviously impressed just watching Oklahoma, going back watching the nonconference performance. Then obviously seeing the strength of the SEC Conference.

Obviously the level that they played at the whole year, the depth of the team. Obviously Fears is going to be a really high draft pick and is an incredibly talented player. Obviously a ton of fire power around him.

We know it's going to be a really, really challenging game, but excited to be in the tournament, excited for this time of year to be participating in the best sporting event that we do on a yearly basis in our country. Well, Super Bowl. Maybe March Madness. It's close.

Q. As a two-time defending champion, does it almost feel like you guys are coming into this a little under the radar? If so, is that maybe a good thing for you guys?

DAN HURLEY: I think with the way the season's played out, we've been in the news a bunch. We get talked about a lot.

Yeah, we've earned an 8 seed. We're in the 8-9 game vs an absolute dogfight with Oklahoma to try to get out of the first round here and play for a Sweet 16 berth. Yeah, we're ready to play.

Q. It's that time of year again, and you see so many schools now parting ways with their coaches. I was wondering, first, if you kind of see a trend where

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are we going to be .500? I mean, it was -- at that point of the year, it was scary.

Then you've had some other just jarring moments, jarring losses, the meltdown at the end of the Seton Hall game, Alex's free throws at Nova. We just had so many of the -- so many moments that we're not accustomed to or where the team's been the last couple years that were very jarring.

Yeah, but we also battled back from and were able to play really well at the end of the year. I thought end of the regular season, obviously Creighton is a really good team, and we dug too big of a hole in the first half of that Big East tournament game.

But I think we're excited to be in the tournament. I feel like in a weird way it's a little pressure off of us going into the tournament where like we could just go out and let it rip right now. We don't have this huge pressure of expectations. A lot of people don't think we're going to win the first game.

Q. I actually had a very similar question, so you've touched on some of this. But Solo, I guess to bring up a specific player, said it feels like night and day. Last year massive target. You guys were kind of the fascination of the sport, the Number 1 overall seed. This year you jump into an 8-9 game that most people would view as a coin flip. Last year it seemed like there would have been -- a lot would have had to go wrong for you guys to lose a game, and you could gain momentum even if you weren't playing perfect basketball. What's the difference in the feel of like the last hour of preparation for this versus last year?

DAN HURLEY: I think the group is relieved to be at this point of the year. I think as a staff and as players, there's a certain level of just excitement, relief, of just being in this tournament.

Obviously when you're an 8 seed and you're coming in with 10 losses -- when you're coming in with 10 losses and you're an 8 seed, our confidence isn't going to be as high as last year's team that just rolled through people and believed that every game was going to play out that way.

With this group, I think being battle tested, having gone through such a tumultuous season has forced this season to fight hard all year just to be in position to play in the tournament. Obviously we need our best players to come out and play well.

The thing with us is if we could find a way to play our best, obviously a lot of it's centered on the defensive end of the

court. We've been a bad defensive team at different parts of this year. That has really hurt us. But if we could play good defense and start like play this first game, play well, find a way to advance, UConn becomes very, very dangerous when we get out of the first round.

Q. You've already talked about this season, the challenges of coaching while also having your players get texts about transfer and portal. On a weekend like this, is that something you have to worry about, or can you kind of block that out?

DAN HURLEY: That's been going on the last couple years. That's not like a new issue that you deal with. We dealt with that on the '23 team with players during the year being recruited with big money offers off of that '23 team.

Yeah, I don't -- that's not something new that you deal with. I think what we do best with our players is just we're very open and honest and communicating about where they need to keep their focus. It doesn't help you to check out on your team or on yourself this time of year, especially for a team that's got a chance to play in the NCAA Tournament and potentially do some great things.

The thing about this time of year is you don't -- you could have the best regular season. If you do bad this time of year, you're a bum. You're a bum as a player. You're a bum as a coach.

We have not had a very good regular season obviously for our standards of what we're trying to accomplish, but we could change that whole narrative and change the way that we view this season by playing our best this month right here and trying to get on a run. We could salvage the whole year, and we have the capability.

Q. You're playing a team tomorrow that went 6-12 in their conference, and obviously the narrative around college basketball this year has been how deep and rugged the SEC was. What do you see on film just watching that team play the gauntlet of games they had?

DAN HURLEY: Just seeing hard ass games, I mean, just seeing hard games. That league this year, it's just a total monster. It was like the whole league was NCAA caliber, like literally 18 NCAA Tournament games.

You go back, you watch their nonconference, how well they played in the Bahamas, how well they played to beat Michigan. Obviously the Arizona game in the Bahamas, you see what they're capable of.

When Fears is dynamic and able to get wherever he wants



to go on the court, he triggers a lot of things offensively for them with Moore and Miles. They've just got a lot of depth and a lot of weapons, especially at the guard spots with Elvis. They've got a lot of fire power. They're a really, really good offensive team.

That league, it's everything that people have said it was when you get a chance to watch it.

Q. Speaking of leagues, and it might be a little early to ask this, but the Big East is off to a 2-0 start. Last year only three bids, all of them made the Sweet 16. It's early, but does it feel like the league continues to step up at this time of year?

DAN HURLEY: I think our games are so physical, and I think the coaches are so excellent, the teams are so excellent, it's such a grind, our league, that it does, it toughens you up, and you play under such incredible stress the whole year that, when you get to the NCAA Tournament, you're used to playing under tremendous pressure and physicality.

You're playing against excellent coaches, excellent players, again in very stressful games.

In the end, your league is only as strong as, I guess, the number of teams that keep advancing, whether you have teams that actually win the National Championship or we have multiple teams get to the Final Four again, the quality and the strength of your league is based on how the teams perform this month. So I would say the Big East is off to a great start.

Q. Along the conference lines, there's been a lot of conversation this week about what's going on in the ACC and whether or not maybe some type of alliance between the ACC and the Big East would be a good idea. I was wondering what your thoughts were about that and what maybe the future should look like regarding those two conferences.

DAN HURLEY: I don't know if I have any space in my brain for conference realignment. I mean, I've been saying that. I talked to Coach K about that. He's texted me that. We've talked about that. I've mentioned it to people at the Big East. I've talked to Dave about it.

That would just make obviously tons of sense to come up with some way to get -- obviously I think the basketball programs in the ACC could really use that. I think Syracuse has been hurt by losing the Garden, and Pitt's been hurt by losing the Garden. It's harder for them. BC, obviously there's been major advantages from a football standpoint.

I hope I'm not speaking out of turn for those folks, but how cool would it be to find a way to get Syracuse back in some type of ACC-Big East consortium tournament. I don't know if that's a catchy name. But yeah.

Q. Just being in the locker room, it seems like the guys are light and loose and confident going into this. I guess the first part is what have you learned over the last couple years to keep the team light coming into this? And also for Liam in particular, what are you looking for from him?

DAN HURLEY: Listen, nothing could be as heavy for us as Iona in '23. Just coming into Albany with the New Mexico State game the year before -- again, COVID tournament. I have nothing to say about the COVID tournament. That was what it was for a lot of people.

But New Mexico State to that Iona game, that was heavy. There was a lot of pressure on that game. Every game after that, we've just been -- I don't want to say on automatic pilot, but we've been pretty dominant in this tournament where everything felt automated and just total belief and confidence.

I think with this group right here, it's a sense of relief and a sense of excitement about playing in this tournament, that we're in it, I think we're dangerous. I think we're a dangerous team right now. We've got three guys on the perimeter that could go and go get us 20-plus. We've got two centers, if we get them playing together well the same night and get some bench production, like we're a very dangerous team in this tournament.

So I think everyone feels that and everyone's excited.

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