

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Gonzaga vs Purdue

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Detroit, Michigan, USA

Little Caesars Arena

Purdue Boilermakers

Matt Painter

Zach Edey

Braden Smith

Fletcher Loyer

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. Welcome back to the interview room at Little Caesars Arena for the Midwest regional. We're pleased to continue our press conference with the Purdue Boilermakers. From your left to your right, we have Braden Smith, Fletcher Loyer, and Zach Edey.

Q. Zach, how much different is this team from last year's group, and how have we seen that so far in this tournament?

ZACH EDEY: On paper obviously it's very similar to last year's team. But like the things how we run our offense, how we play defense, everything about our team is completely different.

Obviously they became sophomores, so like kind of their body gets more used to it. The game slows down for them. They understand more things.

Then the addition of Lance and Cam has really given us like a pop.

Q. Can you, first off, just talk a little bit about your basketball journey to kind of getting to this point, from Toronto many years ago, and what kind of contingent are you expecting here in Detroit playing so close to home?

ZACH EDEY: I'm not sure kind of what type of contingent there will be.



My story has kind of been pretty well documented. Obviously I got into the sport late, picked up an offer from Purdue pretty early or pretty quickly, came here. It's been a great four years.

Every year it's been really, really good the way it's progressed for me. It's helped me kind of like build up my confidence, build it up, like understanding of the game and everything, to now where the point I'm at now. It's been everything I could have asked for.

Q. For all three of you, you came in as freshmen with a lot of talent, but Zach, obviously your footwork, your leadership, your passing, both Fletcher and Braden, your leadership skills. I'm going to ask you to talk about the adversity of last year and this journey, and how did that help kind of spin this team's identity?

BRADEN SMITH: We've seen almost every situation possible. We've been through it. It's happened to us. So I think just after everything that happened last year and applying to this year, we kind of understand how to handle those situations.

Obviously it helps. Me and Fletch maturing a little bit and kind of figuring out how things go as time goes on. So I think that helps a lot as well.

We've got a lot of guys that enjoy to compete and enjoy the game of basketball. So it just makes us fun and easy for us.

FLETCHER LOYER: It's been difficult. It's been a long season. It's been a lot of time since last year. We got a lot better as people, players, and teammates.

I think that everything we went through with the summer, a lot harder workouts, we were pushing each other a lot more, going to Europe together. There was just a lot of different things we did to kind of stick together and be ready to go come March this season.

ZACH EDEY: Yeah, kind of what Braden, what both of them said, we've been through a lot together as a team, as



a unit. I think, when you go through things as a group and as a unit, you understand kind of how to deal with them. So there's no situation that we can really be put in that we haven't been put in before. There's no style of basketball team we have to play against that we haven't played against before. So I think we're really well prepared for everything.

Q. (No microphone).

ZACH EDEY: It's definitely a good rule. It's been called for me a few times. It's kind of a hard thing, like it's a hard thing for the ref to judge because there's so much like obvious tangling up that happens on rebounds. It's a good rule obviously. And I think it's been used correctly.

It's just a tough call for the refs to make obviously.

Q. Whoever wants to answer this one, obviously Gonzaga is a team you faced earlier this year. I know that was a long time ago, the very start of the year. How much can you take from that game into this one?

FLETCHER LOYER: It has been a long time ago, and we've learned a lot since then. We play differently. They play quite a bit differently.

But watching the film, those two guards can go. You see that. You see how they attack pick-and-rolls. You see how they attack in open space. Really just us seeing that, seeing what they've done recently as well, but continue to try to play in our game. We don't want to play into their hands because they like to get out and really go in transition. So just stopping their guards and limiting their bigs is really important.

Q. For Braden and Fletcher, how much different is this team with Zach being able to play in space defensively better than he was able to do that a year ago?

BRADEN SMITH: Yeah, he's worked his butt off this summer. I mean, just seeing him in the gym. He really put a lot of time towards it. We competed against each other this summer a lot. There was times where he was guarding me and he did an unbelievable job.

I mean, he really puts a lot of time and hard work into it, and it's obviously showed this year. It helps us a lot because, when they get those switches and he has to guard a guard in the late shot clock, like he's able to do so.

Q. Any of you guys or all three of you to talk about Lance and how much of a difference he's made to this year's team compared to [last year's], and not taking anything away from last year's team, but just that

difference he's brought to this team this year.

BRADEN SMITH: I think not necessarily the on-court stuff, but off the court, just how he is as a person. He's super joyful. He's always smiling, and he always just brings energy to the team.

Kind of just seeing that and having him on our team just kind of gives us a boost as well and just makes us want to play harder and just enjoy kind of just the time of being together.

Q. (No microphone).

BRADEN SMITH: Yeah, we're all here at the crunch time ending here. So we're just playing our best basketball, and I think, just as we've progressed and kind of understood every situation that we've been through and we've played against, we're able to be ready to play for anything and understand everything.

They're obviously a great team and they've changed a lot as well, so I think we'll be fine.

Q. Zach, could you talk a little bit about the importance of your family and how they've been a part of your journey getting here.

ZACH EDEY: Yeah, my mom's obviously kind of changed her whole life just to be there for me. She's lived in Toronto her whole life. As soon as I got to Purdue, she got an Airbnb and stayed up there with me. It's been great for me. I just have someone in the stands who I know and who I recognize.

This isn't even the country I'm from, like I'm not, obviously Purdue is like a family to me, but my real family, it's my mom and my dad and my brother. Just to have my mom there for me like every day, every game, good or bad, how I was playing as a freshman, how I'm playing now, and she's there supporting me the same way, and that's really big for me.

Q. For Zach, do you have people coming down from Canada? It's obviously right across the river.

ZACH EDEY: No, tickets were a little bit harder to find for this game. I think they're happy with watching just from Toronto.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, guys. Appreciate it.

Welcome back, everyone. We're pleased to be joined by Purdue head coach Matt Painter. Congratulations on advancing to the Sweet 16.

MATT PAINTER: Obviously excited about being here, competing. We know we have a tough opponent in Gonzaga, who we played earlier in the year. They have a great front line, great guards, just great players in general, Hall of Fame coach.

I think the experience of playing them gives you a reference point, like it gives them a reference point, but I think it means very little. I don't think either team played very well in the game. I don't think either team shot very well in the game. So they had a lot of open looks that they don't normally make in that game.

So we're going to have to do a much better job defending them. We're going to have to do a much better job of taking care of the basketball. We were very fortunate to turn it over as much as we did and we were able to pull out the victory.

Hopefully we can shore up some of those things by looking at film, and they can shore up some of the things in their game also. They had a fabulous year, and they've been very, very successful for a long, long time.

Q. I asked Mark this question as well. You two guys have been consistently successful in a very changing landscape of your sport. How have you managed to adapt without compromising what makes your programs what they are?

MATT PAINTER: I think for us we struggled, lost a couple of years in a row, like nine, 10 years ago. We didn't need to do a better job in recruiting. We needed to do a better job in evaluating.

At that time, we made some adjustments. Just we had to do a better job of digging in and getting -- obviously you can see talent, but what comes with talent? You want production. You want guys that are growing.

For us, we wanted people that wanted to get their education at Purdue, and we wanted that balance. I think that's where we've gotten -- we've had really good balance where guys want to be at Purdue. It's not just the recruiting and you get them. It's building a relationship, and you don't always have to be buddy, buddy with every single guy, but you have to be honest with them, and that's what we've tried to do.

Just be as honest as we can and be a truth teller, and I think that's how we've really sustained a lot is by getting the right people in the room, getting the right players, right combination of a person and a player.

Q. Look back at the game back in November, how are they different now, but also how is Purdue different now?

MATT PAINTER: I think they're different in just looking at obviously how they start, inserting Gregg into the lineup and Anton Watson's kind of durability and his ability to guard different people allows him to be bigger. Gregg has great size, but his skill level shooting the basketball really helps him. He's competitive.

Stromer coming off the bench instead of starting. He still gives them that punch off the bench where he can shoot the basketball. He goes to the glass, just like Gregg does.

Just quality players. He just kind of found the right mix. But they can play big, and they can play smaller. I think that flexibility for them has been really good.

But more than anything, they've got really good guard play. Your guards have to play well. Your guards have to take care of the basketball. Nembhard and Hickman are two of the better guards in the country. I like their combination. I think they have a little bit better combination. It seems to be fluid for them.

But the thing with Gonzaga, they can beat you in a lot of ways. Those guards can break you down. Those bigs with get on the glass. Graham Ike can score on the block. They bring in Braden Huff, who stretches the defense also. So you've got a lot of skill, you've got a lot of size, but you've also got playmaking guards. It gives you a recipe for success.

Q. We all know how mad this event is, and I think while basketball has been really good to you in life, it's been really mean to you sometimes too. I wonder how you process the latter. What's your method for processing when it's mean?

MATT PAINTER: The game doesn't always love you back, but you've got to understand that going in. You're going to play a game, and one team's going to win and one team's going to lose. When you get used to winning a lot, the expectations that you raise and get it for your program makes it even harder than that.

We've been beat up a lot, or I've been beat up a lot for the people that have beaten us. We're the higher seed, we should win, this and that. I always say that takes away from your opponent. That's not fair to them. Like they've earned it. We didn't get cheated out of anything. Somebody beat us.

So I think for us, the most important thing to do and what

we've always tried to do is be honest with ourselves in evaluation no matter how your season ends so you can hopefully make those corrections. But you can't correct your team or you can't correct your players unless you correct yourself.

So that's what I've always tried to be no matter what it comes from because everybody has an answer, right? You listen to everybody, you listen to nobody. You have to be honest, and you have to understand things, and you can't be stubborn too.

For us, I just kind of looked at it as our skill level had to be better, but we had to have improvement from people. I felt like we had some guys that could have shot a lot better for us the previous year. But it's their first year, they just didn't shoot well. I believed they would shoot better this year, and they did.

We had to add quickness and athleticism. I think we've done that in Cam Heide and Myles Colvin, and then Lance Jones has really given us a punch. Now Braden Smith makes improvements. Mason Gillis is as solid as a rock. Trey Kaufman-Renn gets more minutes, and he can score the basketball. So just the combination of things, we felt we had to make those kinds of improvements.

We also didn't want to run from everything. Some of our losses aren't on our players. Last year's is on our players. We've had other losses that way, and I think it builds up. We've gotten to the second weekend a lot, but we've only advanced to the Elite Eight one time. So we've raised those expectations, but like I said, just trying to be as honest as we can and then get to work.

We can still outwork people, and we can still be better together than other people, no matter who they sign.

Q. We're in this supposed era of positionless basketball where everyone can do everything no matter how big or small they are. Obviously you have a kind of an exceptional 7'4" kid. Is there anything about positionless basketball that can still fit in to what you do, or do you throw it all out?

MATT PAINTER: No, we take the best players that we have, and we circle around them, no matter who they are. We were in the Elite Eight five years ago, and we didn't have a real post-up option. Trevion Williams was just a freshman, and he backed up. We had a 7'3" center that was a diver, and he wasn't really a low post guy, even though he'd get a couple baskets here and there that way.

So we just try to take our best players, and that's where we start in recruiting. I always tell guys, they always want to

know where they are, and I tell them, if you're one of our top two or three scorers, here is how I see you. If you're not one of our top two or three scorers, then you have to fit around offensively those top two or three scorers.

You just start off right away in recruiting, you can't tell 12 or 13 people here's going to be your role. It just doesn't work that way. There's a lot of guys that do that because they want to sign good players. I'd rather get that trust right away or I'd rather lose the player. I don't want to get somebody on false pretenses. Then you can build from there, and you can grow from there and then you can just be honest with them about it.

I like the positionless deal. It's something I'm not away from, but I just happen to have Zach Edey. I'm a fool if I don't anchor it around him. We've learned through the years with our size, Carl Landry, JaJuan Johnson, Caleb Swanigan, A.J. Hammons, Isaac Haas, Trevion Williams, Matt Haarms. We've learned a lot. You learn from your players because of how people deal with it and how people go.

But he's kind of the exception to the rule. He can really move. He's so physical, and he's skilled. What probably separates him is his unselfishness and his competitiveness. He's a very, very competitive player. Big guys will take some plays off; he doesn't take plays off. He runs, and he does everything. He's a complete player. But the unselfishness, I think, really separates him because, if you double, he's a passer, and if you don't, he's a scorer.

Q. Matt, it feels like momentum is pushing us toward an expanded tournament. If that happens, how do you feel about it? What should that look like if the tournament expands?

MATT PAINTER: I would rather it stay the way it is, but I've also been in a lot of those committees where I think it's important to shut up and listen to other people. So I'd love to sit in the room and listen to the why. I think that's part of collaborating with anybody, which head coaches have really been kind of left out of that equation when it comes to collaborating about what's best for the game.

I'd rather see the room change. I'd rather see that. If you look on committees, whether it's the executive committee, the D-I council, the Rice Commission, go on and on and on. There's no current head coaches sitting in those rooms. It doesn't mean we have to stir the drink or make the decision, but just listen to it from our vantage point, no different than if you listen to a student-athlete from their vantage point or a former player or an athletic director or media -- whatever. Everybody has an opinion from where they sit.

I think, if we can do some things of that nature, we'll improve that game, but we'll also improve our selection process.

Q. I asked your guys about him, but I want to get the coach's perspective too. What does Lance Jones do for this team that, maybe not taking away from last year's team, but brings differently to the success that this year feels, maybe a little different?

MATT PAINTER: He's got a great competitive spirit. He comes to practice, comes to games. He's excited about playing. He chose Purdue, didn't talk about name, image, and likeness one time when he made a decision. His thing was winning. His thing was getting into the NCAA Tournament, trying to win a Big Ten Championship, and that jumped out right away.

From just a practical standpoint, his athleticism, his quickness, he gives us another ball handler. He gives us another defender, a guy that can guard a point guard but also can guard off the ball. So that flexibility really helps us and it really helps Braden Smith.

Q. Obviously Zach Edey's come a long way since he first arrived on campus. Can you talk about his evolution as a player and kind of where you see him kind of fitting into the rich legacy of this sport? Second question, NCAA looking at limiting prop bets around athletes. Can I get your comments on that and how you see gambling affecting your sport over what you've seen the last season?

MATT PAINTER: Zach's evolution really starts with hard work and improving his body. So each year he's gotten better from a physical standpoint. I think his experiences with the Canadian national team has been very beneficial for him. When he played in the 19 and unders, he made the all tournament team, he played a lot, he got that experience.

Now with the World Cup, with the national team, he didn't play a lot, but you get -- you have to see how the sausage is made. A lot of people just see great players from Canada, and it's just like it's magic. No, they've had to work really, really hard to get there. And for him to be able to see guys that are on that team, how they work every day, how they handle themselves is gold because that's what you want.

Like a lot of people don't understand about being a pro. Being a pro has nothing to do with athletics. There's pros in this room. There's school teachers that are pros. Who comes early, who stays late, who's there. The guy I played

for, Gene Keady, called it a company man. Learn to be a company man and do what's best for your company and things will work for you individually.

Your second question? Oh, the prop bets. Any time you're talking about an individual player, you're just asking for trouble. You're just asking for trouble. Hopefully they can eliminate that and that's not part of the process.

But overall betting, that's where we are. That's where we are. It puts a lot of athletes, a lot of coaches in some difficult positions where 99.9 percent of the time it's probably not going to be anything, but there's always -- and there's been a lot of examples where they have been, whether that's a referee, whether that's a player. We're going back in basketball a long, long time there. There's a lot of things to jump out.

Sometimes it doesn't happen for 10, 20, 30 years, but we have all those examples where they do. So any time you do that, you're going to have to govern it. And how do you go about things of that nature? Hopefully it's something that we can protect, so we can protect the integrity of the game.

But hopefully we don't have those prop bets. You just don't want individual names. This player here gets seven assists, you get money, this and that. Because you're dealing with really young guys at 18, 19, 20 years old, and you don't want that outside influence to affect them and affect their eligibility.

Q. You talk about being a truth teller with your players, and I wonder when there's such like a clear-cut point of success for fans and for everyone, it's just everyone just talks about the Final Four. How do you approach that with your guys? Has that been something you've developed and learned about of what to say, what not to say, history lessons, things like that? How do you deal with that whole kind of just thing?

MATT PAINTER: Well, your expectation is your best season. So this is my 19th season at Purdue, so if we don't win the Big Ten or go to an Elite Eight, we had a bad year. It's harsh, but it's the way it is.

So you just want to keep moving that bar so like -- you know, some of the guys that get treated unfairly, I'd love to be them. I'd love to be someone who wins a National Championship and goes to Final Fours and then you go to a Sweet 16 and like what the hell happened? I'd love to have that issue, right?

But that's what we're working towards. We're working

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

towards being able to be a program that can consistently get into the tournament and advance and have those long runs but also not lose our soul in the process.

Q. Six years ago in this press room, I said the NCAA Tournament is a book and each team has their own unique chapter. This year in 2024 Purdue has a unique chapter. What is it going to take to get to Phoenix?

MATT PAINTER: For us, I think it starts with taking care of the basketball. I think a lot of times people want a good catchphrase or a cute answer. We're 25-0 this year if we have 13 or less turnovers. That's held true for us.

We're a great offensive rebounding team. Overall by the numbers, we're a great rebounding team. I think we could be better. So if you can control that possession war and then you have the first or second best three-point field goal percentage in the country and then you have Zach Edey, you just keep giving yourself a chance.

And what I mean by keep giving yourself a chance is, if you're taking quality shots, and now some of the -- like before when we have those turnovers and it gets past that, like you just reflect back on the game when you lose and you're just like, just get the ball up to the rim, right? Because he's very good at soft misses. When you get long misses, that's not him. That's going to be a guard, right?

If you take really good shots, you're going to have more soft misses. So if you take him away from things and you want to full front him, he is in rebound position. So if you can have soft misses and you're around him, he is in perfect position, and he's going to get that. Or he's great at the tap-backs.

So like from a functional standpoint for us to be able to win two games here, it's like winning the first two games of the season for us or the two games in the middle, like nothing changes for us. Nothing changes for us from last year. We've just changed personnel. We've tried to be more efficient, and we just tried to be better at what we do.

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