

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - BYU vs Alabama

Wednesday, March 26, 2025

Newark, New Jersey, USA

Prudential Center

BYU Cougars

Coach Kevin Young

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

KEVIN YOUNG: Obviously we're excited to be here. Excited to advance in this tournament, have a chance to keep playing. Obviously Alabama is a great team, super well-coached, and a tall task for us.

We have our guys, feel like we're in a really good mental place, and we're just excited to get to the game.

Q. I thought you had done a masterful job of using your substitutes, and you're as deep as Alabama, really. Seems to me that the pattern has changed in an attempt to improve your defense, I'd say, over maybe the last 15 games or so; is that true? And what is the method to your madness?

KEVIN YOUNG: It's definitely madness because I wasn't planning on playing 11 guys this late in the year. Usually you go the other way. I think it's just learning the group, honestly. It's obviously a new team. College is new for me, so there was a lot of things that just -- the whole season has been a huge learning curve for me.

As it relates to some of the things you mentioned with defense and stuff, it's turned into that, yeah. We feel like Mawot came in and gave us somebody who we can put on the other team's best perimeter player oftentimes. And then Trey Stewart has been able to come in and spell him at times to do that.

So we feel like we've always got somebody out there athletically that can compete with some of the dynamic guards you've got to face. So that's helped.

I think overall, playing as many guys that we've had maybe in the (indiscernible) games, I think it's probably been one of the biggest things that has helped our season in terms of our togetherness.



Everyone has pushed each other in practice and everybody knows they're going to get a chance to go out and help contribute in the game. And I think that in and of itself has really, like I said, brought the guys closer together and gave us some good momentum.

Q. You mentioned the learning curve; what are some of the advantages of your NBA background? How do you think that's helped you in college? How much of the NBA stuff are you able to use, and how much do you think it helps you recruit elite players that you have that background?

KEVIN YOUNG: I think probably where it's helped the most is -- I'm big on reference points. So in the NBA, I was fortunate to be -- pretty much every year in the NBA was on a good team that made it to the Playoffs and oftentimes deep runs in the Playoffs.

By virtue of that, you're putting together 100-game plan for the season. You're part of that and obviously geared towards stopping the best players in the world. So I've reference many of those game plans often with our coaching staff and with our players. I think when you can say, this is how we stop Damian Lillard or this is how we stopped whoever, that gives them the right eyes a little more.

So that's been one area.

I think there's some other areas, too. A lot of the spacing in the NBA I think is a lot different than it is in college. That's something that I was huge on when I was in the NBA. That's helped us for sure.

Style of play, shot diet, things like that, I think that's probably where you see a lot of what you do similar to some NBA operations.

In terms of recruiting, I kind of planted a flag when I got the job and said I wanted to make BYU the best place in college basketball to help guys get to the league. I think we're off to a good start there. I think 3Richie Saunders is a prime example of just our development structure.

It's not just me. I've got our head strength coach with the Bucks right here. I brought a nutritionist with me from the

Suns. Our director of analytics came from the Suns. We've got two guys who were former G-League head coaches on my staff. A couple GAs I played for for a long time.

So our whole operation is basically designed to have a development background. And then when I'm able to kind of tell the story of guys I've coached or experiences I've had, that certainly has resonated with players.

Q. Same topic but slightly different. In this era of college sports, and you've been in the NBA a long time, is there a difference between the way you coach professional players from a leadership perspective or holding guys accountable compared to the way you handle college guys?

KEVIN YOUNG: I mean, I would say at least with the group we have -- I can't speak for other teams -- but it is a little bit easier to hold guys accountable just because they're not opinionated. They don't have as much life experience or basketball experience to bark back as much.

That's not a knock on the NBA. I didn't really run into a whole lot of problems with it, quite frankly, in the NBA. Those guys' approach is they want to win, and if you can prove to the players you can help them win, they're going to listen to you, bottom line. That's what I tried to make my mark on, just being as steady as I could so the guys would believe it and buy into it.

Now, in terms of here, similar thing. Guys want to win. So if you can kind of prove to them that what you're preaching is going to ultimately help them win as a team and then individually help themselves become a better player, then that's how you get the buy-in.

In a lot of ways it's the same. I do think it's a little bit probably easier in college.

Q. Obviously you have driven a lot of momentum since you've been there with BYU, but curious how much credit the donor base deserves to that success?

KEVIN YOUNG: I mean, if you can show me a school whose donor bases don't deserve credit, I'm all ears. That's just what it is. People make a lot of that in today's landscape. But I think anymore, that's the starting point. That's not a separator, in my opinion. It's not. Especially as things are changing even more, that stuff starts getting a little bit more regulated. It's not going to be a needle mover, it's going to be the starting point.

So that being said, one of the reasons I wanted to come to

BYU was because of the fan base, donor base, base in general. I know a lot of people have school pride, but I think BYU is unmatched, quite frankly, just in terms of how much people love the school, what it stands for, and the amount of alumni that have come out of BYU who are extremely successful, much of which still live out in Utah.

If anyone has been out there, you drive south on I-15 from Salt Lake and you just see startup after startup, tech company after tech company, successful person after successful person. And most of them went to BYU.

This place is set up to succeed. I'm definitely riding the wave of a lot of that. But it's so much more than that. What you're seeing, I think anyway in college sports, is you have to have the whole package. You can't just have one part of it. You've got to be able to have the fun. You've got to be able to have a blueprint. You've got to be able to have systems. You've got to be able to have players development. You've got to be able to have a style of play, and that's what we're trying to do is to check all those boxes.

Q. Going back to the NBA, you were one of the rare assistants to take a college job. And if you look in the last few weeks, there are three or four guys who did the same thing. You mentioned the NBA part, but a couple of those guys mentioned that they almost feel like G-League jobs and college jobs are pretty similar now. Since you were in the G-League, does that resonate with you?

KEVIN YOUNG: Well, I'm happy that -- I'm friends with most of the guys that you mentioned, talked to most of them actually. So I'm happy that they're getting opportunities to be head coaches and get some stability for their families. I think that's probably one of the biggest differences coaching in college versus the NBA is the stability piece. They're great jobs for that reason alone, so I'm happy for those guys.

In terms of the G-League, yeah, I was in that league for a long time as a head coach of three different G-League teams, and it was a lot different. I'm actually the old guy in the room a lot of times now because that was the D-League back in the day when I was doing it.

But it is similar because the way you get players is somewhat similar. The type of people you're dealing with is somewhat similar. The year-to-year nature of the G-League back then -- I mean, when I was doing it, it was week to week, your best player would be called up on game day and you'd go out there and play with six guys and have to figure it out. But I think the turnover is similar.

You can draw comparisons for sure to the NBA, the G-League and college, but I think more and more, all those worlds are starting to merge together with similarity.

Q. Kevin, with the exposure that you had to players from different countries in the NBA and the G-League, the backgrounds that those players had learning about sort of what a player is like when they come up through international basketball versus the United States, has that influenced the way you want to put together your rosters at all at BYU, both this year and as you look ahead to future classes?

KEVIN YOUNG: I mean, I don't know if that particular experience did that. I thought BYU was a place that could recruit internationally. There's a lot of international flavor at BYU. Like a lot of students go on missions and come back from a million different countries. Like Egor has joked about how many speak Russian in Provo.

I thought it's a unique place, and so recruiting internationally -- because there's also a lot of connections because of BYU internationally. I could probably call someone anywhere in the world and there's going to be a BYU connection. So that was an intrigue.

As it relates to coaching other European players, we play a pretty heavy pick-and-roll style of play. I think that's where Egor has been really good, clearly he has been developed over there with an understanding of pick-and-roll reads. So that was of interest and will continue to be of interest. That's probably where I'd say that's kind of stood out the most.

Q. There are multiple sports betting scandals in the NBA and college basketball right now, but Utah is a little unique in that it might be the last state to legalize nationwide. Because of that, are your players sort of immune to what's going on? What's your macro view of sports betting in this new environment?

KEVIN YOUNG: It's not really something that's on my radar that much, honestly. I'm obviously aware of -- my take on stuff like that is I just do what they tell me to do and try not to muddy the waters in any way. It was a big deal when I was in the NBA. They'd come in and talk to us for hours about you can't tell people who's hurt, this, that, the other.

Honestly, I'm a little surprised that college isn't more that way. Like starting lineups, as an example. Like five minutes before the game, you find out who's starting. Stuff like that. I think as it relates to just more and more of that infiltrating into college sports, I would think it would become a little bit more regulated like the pro stuff is.

But as it relates to our players, we've had several meetings with our administration that kind of explains how things go there. BYU is not immune to stuff like that. I know there were some things that happened in the past there, but we just try to educate our guys and make sure they're playing by the rules when you come to that kind of topic.

Q. One of your past coaching stops was right down the road both with the Sixers and with the G-League affiliate. I'm wondering when you look back on that time of your career, how formative was it for you, and what are some of the lessons from those specific years that maybe you're still holding and applying now?

KEVIN YOUNG: Yeah, I'd say in a lot of ways, not just basketball. My wife and my oldest son flew on this trip with me, and one of my daughters -- shout-out to Jersey -- she was born in New Jersey. One of my sons was born in Delaware, as well. This is a special part of the country for me on a personal level. A lot of unbelievable memories out this way.

But in terms of my basketball, yeah, I'd say it was probably -- not probably. It was the most important time of my life as a young coach. Brett Brown was the head coach of the Sixers. He's by far my most influential coach that I've worked with and for. Brilliant guy. I don't think he gets enough credit for how good of a coach he is and even better a CEO. I learned so much from him from a leadership standpoint. Many of the things I do now is because of things I learned from him.

That was a unique time going through that rebuild. I got there at the start of kind of the process or whatever, and I saw the whole thing through pretty much. The thing that maybe doesn't get discussed enough during that era was how many really good basketball people came through there. I mean, everyone that I was with there -- there's GMs, there's multiple head coaches. I mean, there's a bunch of guys who have moved up in the world on the coaching side, a couple guys that are on Boston's bench now, have won championships, you go down the list.

Clearly Brett and Sam were the leaders of that, but I think that crew of guys, we're all still really, really close, and we all learned from each other. Super invaluable time for me for sure.

Q. A lot has been made about the fact that there aren't really any Cinderellas in the Sweet 16. Do you feel given the greater influence of booster money and NIL money that we might see a change in the way the tournament goes from here on out? Do you think the

Cinderella is going to be phased out from here on out?

KEVIN YOUNG: I mean, I'd be lying if I said I knew. I'm still so new to this. I don't really know what to make of a lot of it. A lot of ways you could say we're a Cinderella. We were picked ninth in the Big 12 and we're in the Sweet 16.

I know we're in a power conference, but I definitely think it speaks to how hard mid-majors have it because everyone is coming to get their -- it's not even that people are coming to get their players. Kids are smart; they see what's out there, and they think that they can better their situation by going in the portal and maybe going to a bigger school that can offer more to them.

You know, like anything, I think things have a way of -- they work themselves out. People learn whatever the rules of engagement are, people are going to learn how to play them to their advantage, and I'm sure the mid-majors will figure out how to work around the way things currently are.

Just on a personal level, no, I don't think the Cinderella idea is done. I think maybe it's just more of a coincidence this year perhaps, but who knows.

Q. (On Richie Saunders' connection with Ore-Ida tots).

KEVIN YOUNG: I was actually mad it took as long as it did for me to find out about the connection with the tots. I'm a huge tot guy. And then our nutritionist that was with me with the Suns who I brought here, like three meals ago, we finally had tots at the meal table, so I was glad that we finally got those for the whole team.

But what a cool story. And Richie is an unbelievable guy, so I'm happy that his play, number one is kind of what's gotten him in the limelight. And the tots is a huge bonus for everybody.

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