

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

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Newark, New Jersey, USA

Prudential Center

Alabama Crimson Tide

Coach Nate Oats

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

NATE OATS: Great to be here. Appreciate it. It's good to be here in New Jersey, New York area. We've got a few players on our team from here. Naas Cunningham is redshirting from right here, New Jersey. I think Cliff lived here for about eight years, and Mo Dioubate from right across the river in New York, playing some really good basketball for us.

Really good to catch up with Jahvon Quinerly, one of the better players to come out of New Jersey recently that won a lot of games for us at Alabama.

It's good to be here. Good to be back in the Sweet 16. It's not easy to get here. We are fortunate to be here. We've got a really tough game in front of us in BYU. A lot of respect for what Kevin has done in year one there, getting them playing one of the more modern styles of basketball in all of college basketball.

He was an NBA assistant for a long time. I know him a little bit, been to some Suns training camps when he was an assistant. I think they've done a really good job.

I think since maybe February 12th -- we looked up -- they've got the No. 1 offense in the country. And they play in a good league in the Big 12 with some really good defensive teams.

To do that, they've got to know what they're doing. They're playing well. Richie Saunders has been playing really good basketball for the last month, month and a half. I think double figures in 11 straight games and shooting over 50 percent from the field, 43 from three. Doesn't miss much at the free-throw line. He's obviously really good. He's having a great tournament. We're going to have to do a great job on him.

But they've got other players, too. They've got shooters.



Their bigs play really hard. The whole team gets on the O-boards well.

There's a lot going. Our defense is going to have to be elite but our offense is going to have to be really good, too.

We've got some guys playing well on the offensive end. Labaron is leading the entire tournament in assist-to-turnover ratio, and he's playing really well for us on offense. We need him to be elite on both sides of the ball for us.

Cliff is scoring is well, shooting 87 percent from the field, averaging 14-8 with two blocks. And then Mo Dioubate -- kind of two of our New Jersey, New York guys in Cliff and Mo -- playing well for us. Mo is leading the tournament in three-point percentage. He hasn't missed yet; he's 4 of 4. He's been put a lot of work in. It's good to see the work paying off on his shot. He's rebounding it well. He's averaging 14 and 8, similar to Cliff, and shooting 80 percent from the field.

Hopefully, we continue to play well on offense, but our defense is going to have to be at an elite level with BYU. They're in transition, they're good in the half court, they're good on the boards. They're pretty much good at everything, they're great in pick-and-rolls, so our defense will get tested against these guys on Thursday.

Q. You probably heard all 16 teams in the tournament still are Power Four schools. You used to coach a Cinderella. Do you think that this year is kind of the future or a one-off?

NATE OATS: That's a good question. When I was at Buffalo, we won a couple tournament games. We never made it to the Sweet 16, though. At that level you've got to upset two teams really to get where you're at. And my last year at Buffalo, we were a 6 seed, won our first game over an 11. And then that was the year we ended up playing Texas Tech with Beard and they went to the championship. It's hard.

There's still obviously room for upsets. They've had upsets in the tournament. You're going to have upsets every year. My guess would be you're still going to have some upsets. But I did see somebody made the point, like, anybody that



gets really good at mid-major level, it seems like, there's just a lot more rev share, NIL money up at the higher levels. It's going to be harder for -- I don't know that I would have been able to keep my whole team together at Buffalo in today's day and age.

But I will say this, though. The other side of that is a lot of these high major teams are going not all in, but a lot more in on the transfers with the portal, which means there's a lot of freshmen that are not getting offered at the high major level that would have used to get offered that now are ending up at mid major schools. And some of them are really good.

Those mid major schools, they're going to have to do a really good job of evaluating talent coming out of high school. Then you're just going to have to do it with some younger guys, I think.

I think it's still going to be done, but might be a little bit harder. I think you'll still see some Cinderellas coming through. But I haven't put a lot of time into that. I've got a really good offensive team in BYU, I've had to put a lot of time in. That's my two cents on something I haven't thought too much about.

Q. Are Cliff and Grant healthy?

NATE OATS: Yeah, for the most part. I talked to Grant. He says he was at 90 percent, but then his point was I've been at 90 percent of the most of the year. I don't know who is at 100 percent this point of the year. Cliff is for sure healthy. Grant is pretty healthy. Not 100 percent but close enough.

We've got everything about as close to 100 as you're going to be able to get at this point of the year. And Grant is probably the furthest from that, but like he made the point to me, he hasn't been better than 90 for the last month or so. I think we'll have our full roster available for us to play this game.

Q. You talked about defense in your intro, and I asked the guys this. It appeared to me last year in the tournament, once you guys got in, there was a lot of talk about your defense and it seemed like you guys took it up another level. Do you feel the same thing happening this year?

NATE OATS: I'd appreciate it if you guys put a lot more talk out there about how our defense isn't good enough to win this game so that we can show our guys that nobody believes in them like last year.

Yeah, our defense wasn't any good last year. I think we

weren't even in the top 100 in defense. It was pretty easy to show our guys that our defense isn't good enough. We struggled there at the end of the year. Finally got the guys to wake up after we lost the first round of the SEC tournament, then lost at the end of the regular season.

I think this year our defense is significantly better. It's still not where we'd like it to be. It's going to have to get significantly better to make another Final Four run. Because the next two teams we play, if we're fortunate to even have a second game, BYU has got the No. 1 offense in the country, I think since February 12th or something like that, and then Duke and Arizona are two of the best offenses in the country, as well.

You've got four of the better offenses in the country. I think all four of us are top 25 in the country in scoring. And look at efficiency metrics and stuff, you've got four really good offenses in this region. For those people that like watching good offensive basketball, you've got four good teams here.

I think a lot of who's going to come out of here is who plays the best defense, and some of these other teams have had better defensive stretches than maybe we've had.

I think we've got to get our guys' attention, which we have, and we're capable of being a great defensive team, and that's what we're going to have to do over these next couple days if we're going to get out of this four-team bracket here.

Q. There's seven SEC teams in the Sweet 16. Can you just talk about how the league prepared you and the other teams to get here, and will it be a failure if an SEC team does not cut down the nets in San Antonio?

NATE OATS: Yeah, so the SEC was obviously the best league in the country this year. Kind of established early in November, kind of kept it up throughout the year. For those that question whether they could make a tournament run, we've got seven teams here left.

The teams we played throughout the course of January, February, early March were really good. You look at our last seven games of the regular season, nobody played a seven-game stretch anywhere close to that throughout the country at any point during the year.

I think that stretch, as long as you're able to keep your guys mentally engaged -- we went 3-4 in that stretch, with one of the wins being at No. 1 Auburn, we lost on a buzzer beater at Tennessee, lost to Florida, who's a No. 1 seed. You look at some of the teams we played -- Auburn No. 1 overall seed, Florida No. 1 seed, Tennessee 2 seed.



There's some very good teams in our league that I think prepped us for it. A lot of really good coaches in our league. When you've got to go against these coaches every night, you get sharpened up. When your players got to go against the best players in the country on a night-in/night-out basis, they're used to having to bring it every night.

I think that the league prepared all of us. You saw different styles. You look at the teams that have made it. Tennessee is different than Auburn, it's different than Kentucky, different than Ole Miss. We're different than all them.

I think you get used to playing different styles. BYU is really good. Tennessee -- sorry -- Kentucky, similar but different than BYU. So I think we were able to play Kentucky three times.

But BYU does it different than them. They're similar in they both are five out, but I think BYU plays a little faster, and they've got different personnel, obviously.

I think it got us ready. Would it be a failure if one of them didn't cut down the nets? In a one-game elimination tournament, there's a lot of variance that goes into that. I don't want to call it a failure. I think it's been an unbelievably successful season. We could end up with six out of the last eight teams if things go great. We're guaranteed at least one in the Elite 8.

But no matter what happens from here, I think we've had an unbelievably successful season. We need to try to keep our league at the level it is. Obviously it's going to take a lot of work. Administrations, coaches, everybody is going to have to continue to put the resources that are needed into basketball.

Hopefully one of the SEC teams cuts down the nets. I'm hoping we cut it down, but if it's not one, I still think it's a pretty good year for us.

Q. Has Houston Mallette traveled with the team during the NCAA Tournament?

NATE OATS: Yeah, Houston is with us now. Houston had a non-basketball-related injury that kept him at home. He was unable to travel with us for the first two rounds. He's been with us now. We got him a -- we came right here from Cleveland. We got here Monday, he got here Monday, as well. He took a commercial flight.

He's one of the best kids I've ever coached in my life. I want him with the program. He wanted to be with us. He

just health-wise wasn't able to make the first two rounds. Although he's back with us, he'll be on the bench with us. He's obviously not playing; he's redshirted this year. But he's back with the program. Thanks for asking.

Q. Across the four teams here in the regional, there's about a dozen or so kids born outside the United States that are either starters or key contributors. BYU obviously has a handful of those. When you look at the influx of international players, where do you see them influencing the schematics of basketball most at the collegiate level in the last few seasons?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I think -- are all four starting centers born outside the -- I believe Duke's, ours, BYU's starting center is too. Is Arizona's? Then obviously BYU has got Demin. And I'm going to miss some if I go through it. I'm more focused on BYU now.

I think with the different NBA academies throughout the world that they've started -- and shoot, you've seen the European influence for probably 20 plus years now, it's trickled down to the NBA, down to our level. Very good players all over the world.

With the NBA allowing now the rev share and the NIL, you're probably going to see it more, in my opinion, because financially they'll be able to come over here instead of staying at a club team over in Europe or wherever it may be.

Cliff has been great for us. We've had guys here in the past. We'll continue to recruit overseas. We don't have as many as some of the other teams. But you look at a guy like Demin -- we've recruited some overseas guys and haven't got too many -- but shoot, he's a 6'8" point guard that sees over everything that's probably going to be a lottery pick. If you can get a guy like that in your program, it makes a lot of sense.

I think go find the best basketball players that are eligible to play college basketball wherever they may be across the world, put together the best roster you can every year. That's where college basketball has gotten, and I think it's going to lead people to Europe, Africa, wherever it may be in the world to put together the best team they can.

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