

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Final - Alabama vs Duke

Friday, March 28, 2025

Newark, New Jersey, USA

Prudential Center

**Alabama Crimson Tide**

**Coach Nate Oats**

**Mark Sears**

**Grant Nelson**

**Chris Youngblood**

**Labaron Philon**

**Clifford Omoruyi**

Elite Eight Pregame Media Conference

NATE OATS: Yeah, I thought our guys came ready to go last night. Fun game. But I woke up this morning and reminded them the job is not done. So while it was fun last night, we've got to get locked into Duke, and Duke is obviously really talented. I think these guys have been good being able to get locked into a scouting report, getting themselves ready to go.

We had a good practice, tried to make sure that we're going to keep them fresh.

Duke causes issues on both sides of the ball. They're top 5 in the country in offensive and defensive efficiency. We've got to be really locked in on both sides of the ball.

They've got multiple first-round picks, multiple lottery picks, so there's plenty of matchups we've got to be concerned with.

Obviously everybody is going to look to Cooper, and he's a super talented player and really good. We're going to have to try different things and see who kind of becomes maybe our best matchup there and see what we can do.

But they've also got some other really good players that are going to play in the NBA a long time. They have one of the best rim protectors in the country in Maluach -- I believe I'm saying it right. But he's extremely good.



It's hard to score them at the rim. They've got Knueppel who shoots it really well and Sion James and Proctor who shoots it great. They're good, got length everywhere. That's why they're good on defense. We're going to have our hands full.

But we've played against tough teams all year. I think we've played pretty well. In our last regular season game, we were on the road at Auburn, Auburn played these guys tough, we played Kentucky, Kentucky beat this team. It was a long time ago.

So I think our league has got us ready for it, but we're going to have to play well.

**Q. Mark and Chris, specifically how does going against the SEC schedule and some of the best teams in that league, how does it benefit you even if Duke's roster and their style might not replicate with the teams that you've faced?**

MARK SEARS: Yeah, like you said, especially our last seven games in the SEC really prepared us for games like this. The SEC is really talented and this team is really talented. Like I said, the conference, it really prepared us well, and I feel like we're battle tested.

CHRIS YOUNGBLOOD: Yeah, just to piggyback off of what Mark said, we've played in a lot of meaningful games against a lot of good teams. We understand what it takes to win it. We've lost some close games, too, so we understand the value of each possession in high-level games like this. So we'll be ready.

**Q. Grant, Chris, how difficult is it to prepare for, like your coach said, a matchup with Khaman, especially with his size and what he can do?**

CHRIS YOUNGBLOOD: You know, we've got a great coaching staff that gets us prepared and a great game plan for how we want to attack that. We just listen to them, the easy part. The fun part is go out there and execute it and live with the result.

GRANT NELSON: Yeah, we know they've got a lot of dudes with height, and I think they're big man's standing



reach is like 9'8 or something crazy. We know we've got to be patience when we get in the paint and obviously keep that in mind for everything.

CLIFFORD OMORUYI: Just watching a lot of film about them, we know -- we're going to have the patience advantage and also being able to move the ball. They jump for everything and try to block every shot, so just got to be patient with them.

**Q. For any of the players who want to chime in on this, Coach Oats, of course his background before basketball is being a math teacher. Of all the players here or even anyone else on the team, who do you think is the best at doing math and the subjects that Coach Oats taught, algebra, statistics, geometry?**

MARK SEARS: I'd probably go with Max.

LABARON PHILON: I'd say Max, too. Sometimes I don't know what they be seeing, but they just pull it out of nowhere and know where the numbers go.

CHRIS YOUNGBLOOD: I'm going to say Jarin Stevenson. He's a guy quiet guy but he's smart. He would understand that, too. He's a smart player.

GRANT NELSON: I'd say Max and then Cliff. He was going to school to be an engineer for a little bit.

CLIFFORD OMORUYI: My top two I'd go Max, me, then Jarin.

NATE OATS: Max is studying to be a doctor, by the way. Scharnowski got a little time last night. Smart kid.

**Q. You had a really nice night from beyond the arc last night. Superstitions, habits, what do you do as best you can aside from trust the game plan, but take us into your intricacies of how you will try and duplicate or try and get close to having the kind of night tomorrow that you had last night from three-point range?**

MARK SEARS: Yeah, basketball, it's all about finding a rhythm and having that momentum, and once you come off the game that we had, the momentum is going to carry over to the next game.

LABARON PHILON: You know, I work out with these guys a lot, especially these two alongside of me, and I just get to see the confidence they have and how they go into games, and I just try to put it in my own ways. But just watching them from a workout standpoint, I know what they give, and I know what type of shots they're looking for.

For me, it's really just trying to find them in the right spot.

CHRIS YOUNGBLOOD: You know, you don't really want to force it. They know we shot great last night, but you just focus on the game plan and naturally it'll come because of the way we play, the pressure we put on offense, on the defense. And we play selflessly, and the shots will naturally come.

GRANT NELSON: For me, I think it's just getting these guys open, just doing what I can do to get them the best shot.

CLIFFORD OMORUYI: Getting guys open. We see them in practice and they can shoot the ball, so we've just got to get them open.

**Q. I know you guys haven't all been around to follow the ascension for Alabama for the last five, six years, nine years, but do you get a sense that football is always king at Alabama, and are you guys treated now as the big men on campus, too, by fans in town, other people? Do you feel like you're on equal footing or have kind of surpassed them in some ways as far as how people view the two programs?**

MARK SEARS: No, I'd say we're a championship school. Football, they've got 18 National Championships, and we're still trying to reach our first one. So it's no comparison there.

LABARON PHILON: I feel like our side of it is definitely, like, there. But football-wise, like Mark said, those guys have built a great foundation program. But Coach, he's getting there. By the time it's all said and done, he's going to be one of the greatest.

**Q. You got the extension approved today for Preston. How important was that for you and how has that role increased in demand in college basketball lately?**

NATE OATS: Yeah, I mean, he's really the one managing the roster, putting it together for next year. I think he's the best recruiter in the country. Alabama is showing that they're going to put the resources into being an elite basketball program. We need to keep Preston around. He's highly sought after across the country and likes the Alabama family, likes it here. We wanted to make sure we kept him here, so that was big that we got that done.

I've known him a long time. It's a pleasure for me to get the opportunity to actually work with him. He started recruiting my kids when I was a high school coach back in Detroit. He's from Saginaw. He sent a kid, E.C. Matthews

to Rhode Island to play for Dan Hurley that Preston recruited and our relationship -- he had even been recruiting kids before E.C.

I've known him a long time. I love working with him. I'm glad the school values him like I do, and it's good to have him around with us proving forward.

**Q. You have the No. 1 strength of schedule in Ken Pom. How does that prepare you for a matchup like this?**

NATE OATS: Yeah, I think we've had it back-to-back years now, if I'm correct.

Look, Duke is No. 1 on Ken Pom. We have played other very good teams. I think if you kind of go down that list, we've played Houston who's up there, Auburn who's up there, Florida who's up there, Tennessee, and then I think we're sixth if you're going off Ken Pom. I think I looked at it not too long ago. This is the only one we haven't played that's ranked ahead of us.

We split with Auburn. We beat Houston. I cost us that game at Tennessee there at the end of the game. So the players played well enough to beat Tennessee on the road at Tennessee. Florida, we did not beat.

Gives us another opportunity to play one of the best teams in the country. I think playing those other teams has prepped us to play a game of this caliber. Obviously they're different. Nobody had Cooper Flagg. Nobody has got the rim protection that Maluach has. But those other teams did things well.

So you've got to put your individual scouting report together, but there's an intensity and a focus and a level of preparation that comes with playing teams of that caliber, and we've done that before and I think we've been right in those games and done pretty well in most of them.

**Q. I know obviously you've got -- you're the highest scoring team in the nation, so we all think maybe it would lead people to think you don't really worry about defense too much. Could you set the record straight? Or is that the truth?**

NATE OATS: No, listen, so we definitely don't want that to be the truth. We do care about defense.

This is my sixth year at Alabama. We've been top 3 in the country in defense two of those years, and those years we happened to win the SEC regular season tournament in both. We're top 30 in defense this year if you look at the efficiency metrics.

We really try to base the program on effort, toughness. That's why we give the blue collar points out, give out a hardhat award.

There's more to being a great defensive team other than just playing hard, having some toughness about you. You've also got to execute a game plan, and we've got to do that against Duke.

I think the better our defense is, the better our offense is. We're not a program that -- I know we just broke Loyola Marymount's record for threes made in a game, but they kind of pressed and gave up lots of lay-ups and they were okay with giving us points because they just wanted to get points.

And that's not the way we play. We don't press. We try to have a sound, solid defense. We've got an NBA guy running our defense in Brian Adams this year. Before him it was -- Charlie Henry was with me my first four years. He came out of the NBA. We try to prep our guys for the NBA on both sides of the ball.

But we've had games where we've had really good defensive performances. We haven't had a 40-minute where we played great defense for the full 40 against one of these best teams in the country, and we're going to probably need to do that against Duke, in my opinion.

But we've shown we're more than capable of being one of the best defensive teams in the country. We've just got to do it on a consistent basis night in and night out. A lot of programs would trade place with us, we're still top 30. We're just not top 3 like we've been a couple of years.

**Q. Just curious from an opposing coach's perspective, how does Duke change defensively when Maliq Brown is available and when he's not, sort of in your scouting?**

NATE OATS: Yeah, honestly, I've looked at their games lately and he hasn't played much here lately, so I haven't seen him play a ton, and I know he's got a shoulder injury from what I've read.

He's definitely switchable, can move, athletic. A little different. Maybe not quite the same level of rim protection maybe as Maluach. I don't know if anybody is. I think he's got like a 9'8 standing reach, kind of crazy. I told our guys he jumps about that high to dunk the basketball.

But Maliq can move, from what I've seen in some of the games, like very athletic.

I guess they've got different options that they can go to. Patrick is also an option. Most places all three of those guys would be starting, and they've got the luxury of having all three of them, going with different options. But we'll see what they decide to go with.

And we have different options ourselves. But they know what they're doing over there on that coaching staff, so we'll see if they decide to use them against us on the lineups we roll out there.

**Q. Just wondering, if during the recruiting process if you guys ever engaged with Cooper at all or if it was fairly certain where he was going, and also if you guys have been studying the tape a little bit more frequently if your impression of him has changed at all based on what you thought earlier in the season?**

NATE OATS: Yeah, we never engaged with him. Didn't think we were going to be able to get him at Alabama. I think some other schools tried. I think it was a heavy Duke lean from everything I heard from early on. Finishing second place, you may as well finish 100th place, so there's no point in going after that, in my opinion.

No, we didn't. Everything I heard about him was great, though. Unbelievable kid, super hard competitor. As I've watched the film, I think his IQ -- obviously you know he's talented. You see the highlight reel plays and how athletic he is, and he plays hard on both sides of the ball, unbelievable defender.

I think one of the things that stands out is he's really good in kind of pick-and-rolls. And just his IQ, if you help, he's going to find where the help came from, he's going to find the open man.

He's as good a passer as he is a scorer, and we all know how good of a scorer he was. He makes it hard to guard because you can't really load up on him because they've got shooting around him. If you don't load up on him, he's hard to guard one-on-one.

We're going to have to do our best. But he's also one of those guys that -- I mean, you're not going to hold him down to 10 points. That's just not happening. Well, let's hold him in single digits; he's going to find his way to score some buckets. That's just it.

What you can't have is him scoring 25 and getting eight, nine, ten assists and picking up all these fouls. You're going to have to decide what you want to do, and some of their guys you'd better not help very far off because they can really shoot it.

We're going to have to be on top of our game plan with them and have a couple different options. Because I think if you just do the same thing with them all the time, he's smart enough to figure it out pretty quick.

**Q. You were actually just tapping into what I was going to ask. From an objective scouting standpoint, what do you think is the most difficult thing to do, to hold Cooper under his averages or to not allow Alabama to get what it wants from the three-point range?**

NATE OATS: Ooh. Well, I haven't played Duke yet, so I don't know how difficult it's going to be to hold Cooper under his averages. Some teams have done a good job.

I'll say this: If you want to take the three away from us, you can take the three away from us. I'm going to say it's harder to hold Cooper under his averages because there's a way to take the three away from us.

Now, we've shown -- somebody sent me a stat we would have won the game last night even if we didn't make a two. Just based on threes and free throws, we win the game. But we've also played where we've scored almost 70 points in the paint too for teams that are just dead set on.

So when people ask me how many threes do you want to get up, well, it depends on how you want to guard us. If you're going to guard us and not let us in the paint, let's get 51 up and we should have had 52 if Holloway had gotten his foot behind the line on the one.

If you want to completely run us off the line, build off every drive, we'll try to go score 70, 75 points in the paint.

For sure you can take away our threes by guarding us a certain way, but then you are going to open the paint up on that. I'm guessing it's going to be hard to keep Cooper under his average. I haven't played him yet, though, so you'll have to ask me that after the game.

**Q. I want to ask you a question about pace of play. Obviously BYU wanted to go up and down with y'all. Alabama is No. 1, I think, in possessions per game, Duke is like 280th. Can you speak to what you expect in terms of pace of play?**

NATE OATS: Yeah, I think part of Duke's is they don't play as fast as we do, obviously. You just gave the numbers. Part of it's their defense is pretty good. Teams take a while to score on them. So the better your defense is, the longer those possessions go.

Offensively they're a little bit more deliberate at times.



They want to make sure that they get in the same actions. We're a little bit more free flowing.

They probably run a few more sets and we probably play a little bit more in a flow.

Shoot, they're good in transition, though. Like just because their tempo is not top 100 or whatever -- what is their tempo, 274? Just because it's down in the low 200s doesn't mean they don't get out and run in transition when they get opportunities to. They're still scoring plenty of transition points. Our transition D has to be elite. You see all the highlights.

What they're not going to do from what I've seen is typically run on makes. They'll set up and run something. Where we're still trying to play in the flow and run off makes, they won't. They will opportunistically run and you'd better make sure you're back because they've got athletes and shooters that will take threes. But they're not going to run every single time on every shot whenever they can like we do.

**Q. I want to take you back to when you were interviewing for this job with Greg Byrne. What needed to be done to create sustainable success in this program? Because you could argue that this program has never had as good a run as this. When you were thinking about taking this job and what Greg thought this basketball might become, what needed to be done and what has he delivered on and you delivered on?**

NATE OATS: You know, I think the athletic department at Alabama is as good as any in the country. I think resource-wise, I believe there's six different sports that have won National Championships. They're going to make sure the athletes are supported, that the coaches have the resources they need to win, and they've done that. We're in the middle of building a new practice facility. It's going to be as good as any in the country, in my opinion. New offices, training rooms, strength, all that stuff.

They're supporting us with financial resources. Someone just referenced Preston Murphy. I think he's top 4 now in the SEC in assistant coaches. They've given us what we need to in that regard.

I think one of the things -- we put in a style that kids want to play in. So obviously to have sustained success, you need to have good players. We had pretty good players when I got here. Coach Johnson was here before me and had done a pretty good job recruiting talent. Our second year after the system had got in, we got enough pieces around it.

But the main guys that we won with that first year -- Alex Reese was here last night, he's playing in the NBA right now. Had a stretch big, Herb Jones has been starting in the NBA since his rookie year. John Petty leading three-point shooter in Alabama history. They all fit us very well.

And we walked into that group, we were able to take that group, add the pieces to it, get it going pretty quick. What we've been able to do maybe better now than they had in the past is recruit nationally, which before they kind of recruited a lot more geographically. Pettway had gone and we got Jaden Schackelford who was from California, so he did a little bit, but not to the extent we've been able to do now.

Coach Hodgson who just got the job at South Florida was able to do that a little more. Preston Murphy now is recruiting all over the country. We're going and getting the best players that fit our system from anywhere.

And I think that's what you've got to do to sustain the success. And they've put a program in place and allowed us to do what we need to do to build a program that recruits want to come play in. We've done a study, we've done a better job in proving guys' NBA draft stock than anybody in the country since we've been here. And that's a lot of what recruits are looking for, and that's what we've been able to provide.

And I think it's helped us -- putting an NBA system in and recruiting NBA talent has helped us kind of sustain the success over the five years now, I guess it what it's been.

**Q. I want to ask you about Jarin Stevenson. Given he played such a role in you getting to the Final Four last year with his game against Clemson, he's had kind of an up-and-down sophomore year, what's your assessment of how he's played this year and is he somebody you can count on in a game of this magnitude?**

NATE OATS: Yeah, I was just talking to somebody about that earlier today. He didn't play particularly well in the Sweet 16 game last year against North Carolina. I was hoping he would play great. He's from Chapel Hill, would have been a great story, but wasn't meant to be that way.

Just encouraged him, he comes out, he goes 5 of 8 from three and scores 19 points as a freshman. That's -- Jarin was supposed to be a senior in high school, supposed to be freshman year in college. So last year as a kid that's supposed to be a senior in high school, he scores 19 in an Elite 8 game to send us to our first Final Four in school

history.

I don't think he's afraid of the moment at all. Has he struggled a little bit? Yeah. He's a pretty quiet kid and he's gone through some slumps as any players do. Shoot, some of the best NBA players go through shooting slumps.

I think he's more than capable of going 5 of 8 again or doing something great. We're going to need him to be great.

Duke has got size everywhere. His athleticism to guard -- I'm guessing maybe you watched our game when we played at Carolina earlier this year. He did as good a job as anybody on RJ Davis when we beat Carolina at Carolina.

He's capable of being one of the elite two-way guys in the country with his shooting ability, his finishing, his strength, his athleticism on offense, and then how he can guard guys.

We just need to keep pumping him full of confidence. He's a kid that he doesn't even know how good he is. When you talk to him, he has no idea. I mean, I think he should be a long-time NBA player. We've just got to realize he's young and pump him full of confidence and get him going because he could be an X-factor for us for sure.

**Q. Nate, you got into pretty good depth about all the different ways that Cooper Flagg can hurt you. I want to ask you about a couple of the other guys on Duke. Kon Knueppel, how are the ways you see him as a threat?**

NATE OATS: One of the best shooters in the country. We tried to recruit him. We did a pretty good job, and it wasn't quite good enough. Because I'd like to have his shooting ability in our offense. But they have it.

Now we've got to figure out how to guard it. He doesn't miss much. He gets his stuff off, actions, he gets his feet set, but he's also a strong physical driver. He's got good size, can get downhill, and he's a super high IQ guy. He's very good. There's a reason he's going to be a lottery pick this year.

**Q. I want to ask you about Maluach. You mentioned his rim protecting. What are other things you think he does well?**

NATE OATS: He's a lob target. Cooper likes to find him in ball screens going to the rim. When he's kind of down in that dunkers area, if you will, behind the backboard, guys help up, they find him on lobs. He's done that well for them on offense. The biggest thing is protect the rim, makes it

impossible to score at the rim when he's in there.

They've got top 5 offense and defense, and he kind of anchors that defense, so he's been elite for them on that end all year.

**Q. Back to Cooper, obviously very versatile, but what do you think is the biggest strength of his game, and as a coach, what's the first thing you would try to take away?**

NATE OATS: I mean, I think his strength is his versatility because if you try to take one thing away, he can go to something -- I'd like to say, well, let's keep him from getting to the rim because he's such an athletic, strong downhill driver. Well, he's shooting in the high 30s, 36, 37 percent, whatever it is.

And then say, okay, well, he's actually better off the dribble than he is on catch-and-shoot, so what -- do you go under on pick-and-rolls. Well, he's shooting almost 40 percent on off-the-dribble threes. You go over pick-and-rolls, he gets downhill. He gets downhill, he throws lobs, he finishes at the rim.

Look, there's a reason he's going to be the No. 1 pick in the draft. I mean, I think you're going to have to mix it up because he's so versatile and you're going to have to try to keep him off balance a little bit. Because if you give him the same dose of everything for 40 minutes, it seems like he's got a pretty high IQ; he'll figure it out.

**Q. Yesterday you talked about how you built up Sears' confidence in terms of his shooting struggles by telling him that there is a thing called regression to the mean. Now, when you go out and you have a record-setting performance like you did yesterday, is there any worry that that regression to the mean might come back to bite you in terms of your shooting?**

NATE OATS: Well, I think he shot 44 percent last year, if I remember correctly. So if we go on the last seven games -- he was 5 for 35. What did he go yesterday, 10 for 16? So that's 15 for 51. So he's still got some room to go up to get to his 44 percent he was last year.

Let's plan that he was down and now the regression back to the mean started and he's continuing to head up that way. That's my hope.

But I hope maybe Duke thinks the other way, that he's going to be back -- hopefully they treat him like a 14 percent shooter and go under every ball screen. That would be ideal.

**Q. Since you've been hired, not even compared to really the football program, but how have you seen in your own program the perception, the popularity, the mood around town, around campus change with you and your players now that it's an elite program?**

NATE OATS: Yeah, I mean, pretty much every game is sold out. The student sections are camping out for big games. We don't play in front of empty crowds. When I first got there, non-conference, shoot, while football season is still going on, it's hard to get half the place full. Now that we lead the country in scoring, back to back years, we've got a winning program, we've won four SEC Championships between the regular season and the tournament. We've been to a Final Four. Don't have an issue selling the place out.

The crowd support is great. People around town are supporting us. People are stepping up in big ways.

It's a sports community. It's a sports state. The whole state of Alabama gets behind the Crimson Tide, and we sense that everywhere we go, and I think we see it.

And shoot, the Roll Tide is kind of across the country, a lot of Alabama fans. And now a lot of that's based on the football program and what they've been able to do throughout many, many, many years. But all those Alabama football fans are turning into basketball fans and a lot of them already were.

We just had to resurrect them, bring them out of the woodwork. And they're there, and they've come and they're there now, so it's been a good time for us that way.

**Q. You put on your math teacher hat just now talking about Mark Sears' shooting over the past few games. So many student-athletes at the college level and the prep level saw your game yesterday and have seen your teams play at Buffalo and seen your teams play here and will be attracted to your style of play. But a lot of those student-athletes and people their age would probably be turned off if they knew your background in math and learning all of the subjects that you taught. When you were a teacher, how did you impress the importance of the algebra and geometry on students then, and how would you address that to your student-athletes and teenagers who would be turned off by math, especially during a fraught time in education and public education in this country?**

NATE OATS: That's a good question. I've got three daughters. Lexie is a junior in college, so I've had to help her on some math stuff through college.

And then Jocie is 15. She's a sophomore. She's a pretty good student but does have the question when am I ever going to use this in real life. Sometimes that's not the point. She needs to stretch her mind a little bit and learn how to do it, and who knows when you'll use it.

Some of the math I taught and learned, I don't use anymore. But some of the stuff I need to learn a lot better and you never know where life takes you, so it's always good to stretch your mind.

Then I've got 12-year-old Brielle, of course, in seventh grade, not overly excited about math but trying to get her a little bit more excited about it.

For my students, I try to make it as applicable as you can. Not everything you teach is applicable to everything in life. You just make the point, look, man, I like math because it's a puzzle. There's a right answer at the end. There's no subjectivity. I thought this paragraph sounded great. This paper -- one teacher grades it an A, one teacher grades it a C. In math it's either right or wrong. There's a lot more objectivity to it and it gets your mind thinking in ways that it needs to get better at.

Just learn the material. I'm going to help you learn it. Different people learn in different ways. Try to motivate them to learn. We do some math lessons with our guys. We go through their shot reports every year. I go through efficiency numbers.

It's actually amazing now that you've got the transfer portal going. We don't go to very high level math at all, but it's kind of amazing how little math as it applies to basketball, some of these guys actually know when we get them.

I do put my math teacher hat on occasionally and get up on the whiteboard and start -- expected value on a shot, how you get that? Expected value on free throws, all that stuff. So we go through it a little bit.

**Q. Because of the success you've had in the last five or so years, the expectations have skyrocketed. The second weekend of the tournament is sort of the bare minimum for the program now. How do you deal with those rising expectations moving forward, and does it add any pressure to re-load your roster to a top-5, top-10 level every spring?**

NATE OATS: Yeah, for sure. I don't think we'd want it any other way. If you're at a program with no expectations and you've been there six years, it means you haven't been doing your job.

We came in, we turned the expectation level around. They're supporting us like a top-10 program in the country. When the administration supports you like a top-10 program in the country, there's an expectation level that that's how you perform, and that's how we want to recruit.

Now, in a one-game elimination tournament like the NCAA basketball tournament is, that doesn't mean you're going to make it to the second weekend or the Elite 8 or the Final Four every year. Sometimes it doesn't work like that. There's very good teams that get upset. There's still very good teams that had a great year.

But we want to be in the discussion for a team that can make a Final Four every year. We've been that for the last few years running now. The recruiting has got to stay at a high level. That's why it's a good thing we got Preston on a three-year contract that came out today because he's, in my opinion, one of the best if not the best recruiter in the country and we'll have the talent. We play a system that guys want to come to.

But yeah, when you get the players that we've got and you've won at the level we've won, that's the expectation level, and I think that the players understand what they're coming here for. They're coming here to win championships. They're coming here to compete against the best. We've had the No. 1 strength of schedule in the country the last two years in a row. We've led the country in scoring the last two years in a row, but we've also won at a pretty high level.

Somebody gave me a stat, in Power Five schools, I think we're fifth in the last five seasons in wins and Duke is third, so we're right up there. We don't have a National Championship like some of these blue bloods have, but we're in the last five years competing with a lot of the blue blood programs for wins, championships and all that stuff, and I like where the expectations are.

Whatever -- you call it pressure, whatever you want. The expectation is you win. That's what we expect around here now. We're not going into this Duke game -- I know we'll be underdogs. I know they're the 1 seed. We understand all that.

Our mindset is we go in, we do what we need to do with the game plan, and we're going to get the win.

Now, it's a lot easier said than done, but we're not going in there just hoping we can play with them. Even when I was at Buffalo and we played Arizona, I laid it out, this is what we're going to do, and when we do this, we're going to win the game, and that's what you do.

I think you lay out the game plan; if we execute these things, you keep it as simple as you can, but it's got to be a game plan that when these are executed, you win the game. That's the expectation going into every game no matter who we play, and we've played the best teams in the country since I've got here.

We've been able to beat a lot -- shoot, we've got 13 wins against AP ranked teams this year, which I think is tied for the most with two different Duke teams and a UCLA team for the most in a single year. We've beaten really good teams this year. We have opportunities to beat some more and we didn't do it, but we've got another opportunity in front of us tomorrow.

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