

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

Saturday, March 29, 2025

Newark, New Jersey, USA

Prudential Center

Alabama Crimson Tide
Coach Nate Oats
Labaron Philon
Mark Sears

Elite Eight Postgame Media Conference

Duke 85, Alabama 65

NATE OATS: Yeah, obviously a tough night for us. Duke obviously had a big part to do with that. They're a great team. They've got great players. Coaching staff did a good job getting them ready. Only one team is going to end up cutting the nets down in San Antonio. It won't be us this year.

I told our guys, we've raised this program to a level where the standard is really high. 99 percent of college basketball players would trade places with these guys with the year we had. But we're disappointed. We had bigger goals, and it's disappointing to go out like we went out.

But I thought our guys stayed together. They kept playing hard. Duke was good. We didn't do a good job attacking their switching on defense. We shot 34 percent. We shot 35, they shot 54. It's hard to overcome that. You get out-rebounded 11-2.

We had said coming into the off-season that if we have a tough shooting night -- two years ago when we were the No. 1 overall seed, I think we shot 3 of 27 from three and lost. But we had gotten 20 O-boards. We've got to figure out ways to win when we don't shoot it well.

The offensive rebounding was a big one we kind of said we need to be elite at, get to the free-throw line. We didn't do any well. We got to the free-throw line a fair amount, but it was not enough.

The O-boards -- yeah, they made more free throws than we shot, so we didn't get to the free-throw line enough.



And the O-boards, we had 10, but they outscored us in second-chance points. We didn't really score off the O-boards. Grant was the only guy on our team with more than one O-board.

We've got to get better. We obviously played two nights ago and it's tough within 48 hours from playing as well as we did to playing as poorly as we did. That's how the NCAA Tournament works in an one-game elimination tournament. You play poorly and you get sent home, and that's what happened.

Duke is as good a team as we've seen all year. We've got some really good teams in the SEC, and they're at that level, and it wasn't meant to be for us tonight.

Q. Mark, what did they do to you specifically and to the team defensively to make you work so hard to get good looks?

MARK SEARS: You know, they did a good job of taking away our three ball. And that's something that we do really well at a high level, and they just did a great job of taking away our three ball.

Q. Mark, with this being the end of your time at Alabama, what kind of legacy do you think you've left over the past few years?

MARK SEARS: I'm just blessed to be able to play for the University of Alabama, especially being from the state of Alabama. Even though this season didn't go the way we wanted it to, I'm just very thankful I got the chance to play for Coach Oats and the University of Alabama.

Q. Labaron, how would you assess the season you had and what are the next steps for you in terms of deciding what your future will be?

LABARON PHILON: You know, it was a great season for me, a lot of ups and downs, but I just try to keep my head up. I haven't thought about anything. Coach did a great job of having me laser focused the whole year and not thinking about the outside noise.

I'm pretty sure we'll just get to that later on.



Q. When you said they took away the three ball, what were they able to do that made them so effective being able to take that shot away from you guys?

MARK SEARS: Yeah, they were just building out. When we would drive, they would build out, and they had a great rim protector at the rim making it hard on us, and they just did a really good job of doing that.

Q. Nate, same question similar to what we gave your players. Can you give us an assessment of how they were so good defensively?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I mean, one is they've got length all over the place. You look at their starting lineup, they've got Khaman Maluach that has a 9'8 reach, he protects the rim at a high level. So the way we want to play -- it's been top 5 offense in the country, we've led the country in scoring the last (indiscernible).

But when they've got a rim protector, it's hard to get rim shoots. At the rim we shot 48 percent, we only made 12 shots at the rim tonight. We were 12 of 25. You know, he made that tough.

We made the point to our guys we're not going to go in and score on him, and we had a few guys still try to challenge him. It's kind of a habit, you can tell them going in. And then he ended up having two blocks. We ended up having more blocks than them, but the way he challenges, it's a problem. He challenges at the rim.

Then they've got Cooper at, whatever he is, 6'9", then everybody else is 6'6" or taller. So they've got length. We tried to match Aiden Sherrell's minutes with Maluach to stretch it. Aiden came out and did what he was supposed to, did what I thought he would do, made two threes. They kind of adjusted, went smaller with him.

Then we tried to kind of match Cliff when they had their smaller 5s in so we could get our roller behind, but then they went to switching. Cliff hurt his knee a little bit there. And I thought once they went to switching the ball screens, we just weren't very good. They switched and we kind of went to iso ball. That's not how we play. We didn't get them out -- didn't get their 5 in the action enough.

You know, it's hard. You've got the one-day prep. I thought we did a good job as a coaching staff of getting our guys ready for all different coverages, but you do that all summer and fall. And then as you go into a game, you target how they're going to guard you and then you prep for the two or three days.

Well, you don't have two or three days going in. You've got

a walkthrough that you don't go live yesterday, so it's hard to prep for them. We still got some decent looks from three and we just didn't hit them. They shot 6 of 13, we shot 8 of 32, so we shot 25 percent from three.

Is that good enough to beat Duke? Yeah, if you do everything else at an elite level and we didn't do that. We didn't finish at the paint, didn't get to the O-boards well enough. We had too many turnovers. We had three turnovers before the first media time-out, which dug us a huge hole right out of the gate. Our defense wasn't where it needed to be in the first four minutes and we turned the ball over three times.

We dug ourselves a hole early, gave ourselves some adversity we had to face. I thought we did a decent job fighting back, but they're too good a team to dig yourselves a big hole. And I think the closest we ever got it from that was six, and then they went on a big run there in the last -- kind of that under-eight media. We had a shot there. I think it was nine-point game with the under-eight media, then they went out on a 13-0 run and the game was over then.

Q. You obviously had high expectations for this team coming into the year. What do you think held back this team from reaching some of the goals, whether it was in the SEC or making a Final Four? I think you said you were disappointed that this team didn't make one.

NATE OATS: Yeah, I'm disappointed. I mean, we weren't supposed to be one of the better shooting teams in the country. If we would have had Wrightsell and Mallette, maybe that changes things obviously a little bit. But injuries happen. Everybody across the country has some injuries.

We adapted and became better on the O-boards, got to the free-throw line better. Tonight we didn't get to the free-throw line, were 11 of 14. They made 19, we only shot 14. One of our ways to adapt to not having -- we still were able to make shots, obviously. Two nights ago we broke the NCAA record, but it wasn't consistent enough, making threes at a high level for everybody. And you kind of look at the guys that made the bulk of the threes two nights ago, and Sears, Youngblood and Holloway only made one each.

What were they, 3 for 16 as opposed to all the ones they made two nights ago.

When those guys aren't making them, who else do you have that can knock some down? I thought Labaron and Aiden Sherrell did a good job with five between the two of them, but we didn't get much help.

Through the course of the year we lost some tough ones. I didn't do a good job with our end-of-game situation at Tennessee. We win that, maybe things are different. We lost the two to Florida. If you're a 1 seed instead of a 2 seed, you don't play Duke. Duke is going to be a 1 seed. You've got somebody else in the Elite Eight. So you kind of look to some stuff could you have done things better? We lost a home game to Ole Miss. They're a good team, but we should never have lost a home game to Ole Miss.

Even if you win the home game against Ole Miss, I don't mess up the end of the game against Tennessee, maybe you're still a 1 seed, even with those two losses to Florida, and you're playing somebody else in the Elite Eight. So there's a lot of things you can look to that I've got to do a better job as a head coach, and I will do a better job moving forward. That we've got to keep continuing to recruit guys that fit our system and adapt when things happen and do better in the regular season and give yourself a better chance with a better seed.

We went to a Final Four as a 4 seed last year. We had a chance as a 2. But it's certainly a lot better. I think Florida is in. They're a 1 seed. Duke is in, they're a 1 seed. So so far there's two teams in the Final Four that are both 1 seeds. We got to do a better job during the regular season try to make sure we get that 1 seed. It's a little easier to make it as that 1 seed.

But you know, there's also -- I don't know if there's been a better run in three-year history at Alabama. No. 1 overall seed, make a Final Four, and then make back-to-back Elite Eights.

While it was disappointing for the standards we've set, most teams in the country didn't set the standards as high as we set them.

Like I said, there was four teams go to the Final Four last year, we were the only one that was in the Elite Eight. The other three either didn't make the tournament, were bounced before the Sweet 16, or Purdue lost in the Sweet 16.

With the standard of excellence we've set across all of college basketball, we've established ourselves as one of the best programs in the country. Are we disappointed tonight? For sure we are, but we've put ourselves up there with everybody else. And we're going to continue to do that year in and year out and keep knocking on the door, keep pounding the stone, if you will, and be one of the teams competing for a Final Four and a National Championship and conference championships in the best conference in college basketball every year, and we'll get

back to the Final Four and win one here soon.

Q. You were just talking about the consistency and the expectation to play this deep into March year after year. Can you speak to how difficult that is from a roster building standpoint in the modern era where the portal is going to make you rebuild a roster pretty much from top to bottom every year?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I mean, everybody is a free agent every year. So you've got to do a really good job getting guys in that are going to be loyal that fit your system that you can build. Because we play a lot different than almost everybody else in college basketball. Some guys take a little bit to adjust -- we play a lot faster than they're used to. We play a lot more open. There's a lot more freedom.

You know, we want to get as many of the guys back that fit how we want to play on our current roster, and I think we're in a good spot with that. You see multiple high major programs across the country getting an entirely new roster every year. That's not how we want to do it.

We'd like to get guys that are good, loyal, fit the program, build them up, and then add in some freshmen. We signed three freshmen that we think are going to be great in our system, big guards that can shoot it, make plays. Going to add in some portal guys, obviously.

The portal has been open for a week. We've got to get on it. We're a week behind a little bit. Preston has been doing a great job during this week while we're prepping for these games. Obviously playing this deep helps with the guys that value winning and value NBA preparation. I think we've got a big head start on guys that want to play in the NBA and want to win.

We'll get guys in the portal coming in this week. I'm sure it'll be a busy week for me. And trying to retain the guys we want back, and I think a lot of those guys understand that they're great in our system. The system gets them more ready for the NBA than anywhere else, and we win.

As far as over the last three years, you look at who's won more, obviously UConn has won back-to-back National Championships, so they're up there. But we're up there with any other program in the country with the level of success we've had over the last three years.

And, yeah, it's tough to build a roster every year, but when you win at the level we're winning, when you develop guys for the NBA like we've done, I think we've got a lot of people that want to come to this program. So we'll get them in, show them what we've got to offer and we'll have a good roster, a roster that's competing for a National

Championship and SEC Championship next year and the years moving forward.

Q. Same question as to Mark. Last game for him. How do you think he belongs to go down in Alabama history and basketball?

NATE OATS: I mean, if you're evaluating players and winning and being the guy on winning teams, I mean, I don't know -- obviously very good players have come out of Alabama. You look back through the history, you're running through all the NBA players that have played for Alabama, there's a lot of talented guys.

We've had Brandon Miller, second pick in the draft. I'm going to miss a bunch, but look at guys like Derrick McKey, Robert Horry, Charles Sprewell, Mo Williams, all those guys.

Before we got here, they had never made a Final Four. They had only made one Elite Eight, and I'm not sure who was along that Elite Eight roster, but that wasn't a team that was all that great in the regular season.

To have all those NBA guys really mainly just go to a Sweet 16 at the most -- so Mark comes in, we're the No. 1 overall seed for the first time in school history. His first year with us, he's the second leading scorer behind Brandon who was the second pick and an unbelievable NBA player right now and two years in the NBA.

Next year we go to the first Final Four in school history, he's our leading scorer. The following year it's his third year with us, he's established himself. I'm not sure where he ended up in school history on the scoring list. Second.

In three years he's second on the school scoring list. That's pretty incredible. He's competing against a lot of guys that played four years.

To be second on the school scoring list and then to go in as a 2 seed -- and we were the No. 1 overall seed, fourth seed that made the Final Four -- and a 2 seed, we won a regular season and a tournament championship in the SEC his first year, make a Final Four, and then do what we did this year and make back-to-back Elite Eights for the first time in school history and he's the leading scorer again. He's First Team All American. Second guy in school history to be a first Team All American. Brandon the only other one. You've got to put him up there with the greats.

Who knows where his career is going to take him. He's going to get a chance to play in the NBA. I think he's done a lot of the stuff the NBA told him he needed to get better at this year. This year he's become a much better decision

maker. His rim reads, his leadership skills, his defensive effort is much improved. He was more efficient last year, but when you come in as a preseason National Player of the Year, everybody has got their defense designed to stop you.

He had to play with a little bit different pressure, a little bit different defenses on him this year. I'm going to put him right up there. We've had some really good players here. We've had guys that we've coached that have gone and played in the NBA. Got a lot of guys currently playing in the NBA. I hope he gets the chance. It's my hope that he makes it on a roster.

But as far as what he's done in college, be hard to match what he's done in that regard in those three years he's been here.

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