

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

Saturday, March 29, 2025

Newark, New Jersey, USA

Prudential Center

Duke Blue Devils

Coach Jon Scheyer

Sion James

Tyrese Proctor

Cooper Flagg

Kon Knueppel

Khaman Maluach

Elite Eight Postgame Media Conference

Duke 85, Alabama 65

JON SCHEYER: San Antonio sounds great. I mean, look, first, couldn't be more excited and happy for these guys to my left. I think Tyrese and I, the feeling of losing last year at this point, every decision we made, everything we did was to get back here and then have the team have the opportunity to advance to the promised land. To go to San Antonio, to go to the Final Four.

Couldn't be more proud of the team as a whole. Their attitudes the whole season, from day one, I think this group has been different. They make fun of me. I keep telling them, don't change. Don't change, keep being them.

I thought the story tonight against an incredible offense -- and Nate does an amazing job with their offense and the way they play, it's like nobody else. To hold them to 65 points is incredible. Watching them play the other night, they score 113, 25 threes.

I think the biggest thing for us was not to take the bait of getting so spread. Youngblood, Sears and Holloway had 21 of the 25 threes. We want to use our length and size, and these guys did an incredible job. Couldn't be more proud.

I'm going to shut up. I'm going to let you talk to these guys,



and then you're stuck with me afterwards for a little bit. But couldn't be more proud.

Q. Sion and Tyrese, what did you guys do specifically to make things so difficult for Sears to get open looks, and by extension, everybody on their team.

SION JAMES: First of all, it was by committee. We were switching a lot especially in the second half, so Khaman was on Sears just as much as me or Tyrese was. The big thing for him was showing them bodies, making sure whoever was guarding the ball knew they weren't on an island by themselves and making sure Sears knew that he wasn't on an island with our big or whoever else. And I think we did a good job for the most part of keeping him off the foul line where he gets a lot of his points from.

TYRESE PROCTOR: Making it difficult for them, not getting clean looks. I think the start of the first half and then the start of the second half was huge. Just he's such a good foul shooter, so him getting to the free-throw line gives him confidence. So just trying to do our best to show bodies and not foul him.

Q. Cooper, when you don't necessarily have your best offensive game, what was it like to see the rest of the team step up and really lead you guys to victory?

COOPER FLAGG: Yeah, I think it's kind of something that I've said a lot through this whole year is we just have such a talented team. Each night could be somebody else's night. I think tonight Kon kind of stepped up and had the ball a lot. We ran a lot of actions for him. Tyrese was huge for us.

I think it's just having so many talented guys on the team, it's not going to be your night every night. Just don't hang your head, just keep playing hard. Somebody talked about winning the 98 percent and doing all the little things. So not letting the shots affect anything else you do and just knowing that the rest of the guys got my back and they're going to make those plays.

Q. Duke has won five NCAA championships under Coach K. This is obviously Coach Scheyer's first Final Four. What does it mean to you guys to help him get to the Final Four, and what do you think it would mean



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to him and the program if you can go all the way?

KON KNUEPPEL: Coach talked a little bit about being in the Elite Eight game last year, so it's really, really, I would say, a goal for all of us to get to the Final Four for him. Obviously not all of us were a part of that team. We have Tyrese and Caleb who were on that team last year. But just getting there for those guys.

KHAMAN MALUACH: To me, it's a blessing, and it's great to be in this position, doing it with such a special group of guys. I believe all of us it's our first time in the Final Four, and we're ready for this, and we're excited for the next step.

TYRESE PROCTOR: Yeah, obviously being on a journey with Coach, a lot has changed in a year. When we were in the bathroom last year after we lost, I told Coach I was coming back. We both had a vision, and I think just the way we executed and doubled down, the way I doubled down in the off-season, the way these guys had my back, I had theirs, I think it just shows a lot of resiliency, and I just couldn't be more proud of our group.

Q. Tyrese, with a minute left, you had a big-time three and you had a moment with Coach. Was there anything said in that moment or was it just kind of a mutual understanding between you two that this was it?

TYRESE PROCTOR: Yeah, just that I love him. We've been through so much together, and I don't think I could put into words the emotions that we had together. Last year obviously the way it ended wasn't how we wanted. And just having the trust in him and him putting all his trust in me, just being able to lead these guys has been huge.

And it was a collective effort. Like Coop said, each guy stepped up, and we're not done yet, and we want to get a sixth banner.

Q. Kon, Cooper mentioned you having the ball tonight and being in a lot of actions. What was your offensive approach tonight and when you look back on your development this season, what prepared you to step up offensively in a game like tonight?

KON KNUEPPEL: (Indiscernible) action specifically tonight for me. I don't know if that was the plan going in or if I just got a hot hand early. But yeah, just tried to step up in whatever role I need to do for the team. It's not necessarily something I've thought about across the year, but just whenever I had the ball, make the right play and go from there.

Q. Cooper, what does it mean to you to be the MVP of the regional final?

COOPER FLAGG: I mean, obviously it's a big honor. It's a blessing. I wouldn't have been able to do it without the guys sitting next to me and the guys in the locker room. All credit to them, the coaches for putting me in really good situations, spots on the court, giving me the ball in the right spots. And then just allowing me to play free off the ball, on the ball, whatever it was, just letting me be me. And just got to give all the credit to my teammates and coaches.

Q. For all of you guys, this is the standard. This is the expectation at Duke. To know that you're adding on to a legacy, making all of the past Duke players, coaches and the history of Duke basketball proud by adding your names to the list of Duke players who go to the Final Four, what does that mean to all of you guys, and has it even set in yet?

SION JAMES: Yeah, it's awesome because just like you said, it's the expectation almost, because of how it's been here. But it's not a guarantee by any means. Just because we go to Duke or play for Duke doesn't mean we're going to be in the Final Four every year. It's a grind. We had to work from the minute we got here to get to this position. But it's really cool to know that we're following in the footsteps of some of the Duke greats and have a chance to make Duke history next week.

KHAMAN MALUACH: To me, as I said, it's a blessing to be able to have a great opportunity like this, to be able to go to San Antonio and do it with such a special group of guys, my best friends, my brothers. I'm really excited for this, and I'm going to enjoy this win and then move on.

Q. Coop, can you take me through the journey from the beginning of the tournament? A lot of people didn't believe you would suit up after the injury, to now as a team rallying for one another and just coming through this championship, can you take me through the journey?

COOPER FLAGG: Yeah, I think there's a couple different things that go into that. Our training staff Jose and Nick on the medical staff just being really great with me, just working with me and putting a great plan in place, getting me ready to come back for the first game of the tournament.

And for me, it was just -- it sucked being out missing those games, but just the way these guys were able to hold it down, win the ACC Tournament still, had my back, lifted me up, it was huge. Just gave me so much confidence.

To be ready to come back, like I said, the training staff was huge -- played a huge part in that and just getting back, getting right and coming back and playing.

Q. Jon, what did you think of the Prudential Center as a host, and what do you think of them as a potential future host for this?

JON SCHEYER: I thought it was good. I thought the crowd was great. I think selfishly when you get a chance to get back to the northeast, you see a lot of Duke fans, which is amazing. But just the entire setup, everybody here, the help, professionals, it was first class here.

Q. You're led here by your freshmen. The mentality might be an issue because this is a stage that they've never played at before. Is that a little bit of a nagging doubt that you have in your mind, and if it isn't, what about, say, Kon, Khaman, and Cooper really makes them stand out from that perspective?

JON SCHEYER: I think if you were around them every day, you wouldn't have doubt yourself. I'm not saying you do, by the way. I'm just saying for me, they're mature. Age is just a number. And obviously it's different to have three freshmen starting. What, tonight we played five freshmen on a team that's going to a Final Four. I think for our program, we've always thought about doing things differently.

I think the key to this team, one is you bring in the right people as freshmen, but then you have great balance. Tyrese is a junior. Caleb coming back. Sion, Mason, Maliq, that balance is huge.

I think that was really important for us in the off-season to add that in addition to really mature freshmen who are loose, confident, competitive and not fazed by this environment.

Q. At one point I think early to mid-February, Caleb kind of fell out of the rotation. What is it about him that kept him focused, kept him engaged, and how big of a lift did he give to you right in the first half?

JON SCHEYER: Caleb was huge tonight. And to your point, look, this thing is an evolution, and the year hadn't gone the way that Caleb or I had both hoped. But I think the most important thing was our dialogue throughout of just ultimately wanting him to help the team the best that he could, him having an incredible attitude, his family allowing us to coach him.

I had great confidence in him because he had been

stringing together some really competitive, good games. Tonight his minutes were huge. He had a couple baskets, but the three assists, the defense, I couldn't be more proud of him. And that's part of what makes this thing special, too, is the relationship to be able to hang tough when things aren't going as well.

Q. Coach, you followed one of if not the greatest college basketball coaches of all time. With that history comes the pressure of legacy, and legacies begin to take shape in the round you just advanced to. Were there moments where you reflected on the pressure that might come following a legacy like Coach K, and if so, what are the emotions after a win like tonight?

JON SCHEYER: Well, look, as I was going through the interview process, I did my homework. When you look at successions, very rarely is this thing -- do people succeed following -- Coach K is one of one, but following a legendary or a great coach.

I'll tell you, for me, a huge thing was having that year, though. For Coach K to be able to have the vision -- I don't know how many coaches genuinely want to see the program succeed when they leave. And for me, I've always wanted to make him proud. Part of his legacy isn't just the wins. I want his legacy to be how our program continues to be right there as a top program, and that's something Coach K and I have talked a lot about.

So obviously there's a responsibility you feel and a pride. But this hasn't been about outside noise for me because it's just -- I don't know if you can ever win. So my energy has gone into everybody that's in our building, our team, what we can control.

And I just couldn't be more proud and thankful for having a group that's believed in me, us, the support from our administration, just down the line, has been incredible.

I'm really proud of the people that have believed in me and us to get to a Final Four.

Q. How do you plan on getting your team ready for the Final Four while your players are there for the first time, you're there for the first time? How do you plan on getting your players ready?

JON SCHEYER: You know what, I'm already thinking about it up here, and I have to remind myself I should enjoy this tonight and we'll have time to do that. We'll find out tomorrow who we play. Either way, I know it's going to be an absolute battle and a great game.

How can we continue to be us with different distractions and different environment? And so that's up to us to help as a coaching staff. But I know our guys will be excited and up for the challenge.

Q. In previous games this season when teams have done a good job against Alabama's three-point shooting, they usually get a lot of mileage out of pick-and-roll action. That really didn't happen tonight. Can you speak to your interior defense on that topic?

JON SCHEYER: Well, for me, look, Sears is one of the best players -- obviously one of the best pick-and-roll players, as well. We have a luxury to have a guy with Khaman where he can really play different coverages. We have a 7'2" guy switching onto one of the best guards in the country, and he's doing a pretty good job moving his feet. Same thing, we had him in a deep drop, as well, because just trying to protect our paint more and have our guards really fight over. And then Sherrell came in and hit two threes. So we had to change that.

But I think it's a credit to our guys for not getting spooked by the 25 threes, because it can spook you where you're so spread, but obviously where you still have to contest because they can go, like that. So I think it's a credit to our guys.

I'm sure we'll look back and we're fortunate that they missed some open ones, as well. But really I think the versatility for our guys is a big thing for us.

Q. Obviously in the Elite Eight last year, Tyrese didn't have one of his best games. What does it say about the redemption he was able to get today playing the way he did compared to 365 days ago?

JON SCHEYER: I think that's part of what college basketball is all about. Unfortunately I know in my playing career, coaching career, there's -- I failed before succeeding. Again, I don't want to call Elite Eight a failure. Elite Eight is a special thing to be in this game.

But for Tyrese in that moment, I think the maturity that he's shown, his preparation throughout the summer. And we focused a lot of what we do on being ready to be at your best when your best is required. And this isn't a best out of seven. It's a one game shot you have at this.

So a lot of our focus is preseason, summer. During the year has been about winning the mental game, winning the preparation, winning the energy you put into these moments.

Q. Where are you most pleased with Kon's

development throughout the season that then got him ready to step up on a big stage tonight, especially with Cooper not shooting the ball the way you guys are accustomed to?

JON SCHEYER: Well, I think for us, we have multiple weapons, and different teams play us different ways. So depending on matchups, depending on the coverages we're seeing, for me, I feel very confident. Obviously there's a three-headed monster with Cooper, Kon and Tyrese. Sion is such a connector, Khaman is such a connector for us, as well.

But to have their -- the different actions we ran for each of them -- I think with Kon, his versatility is huge for us, and his size. He's able to pass. He's able to finish. You feel he's always going to get off a good look because he has great pivots in the paint and great patience.

Again, a lot of times you have the second defender on him because the best defender usually is guarding Cooper. So I think for us, just understanding how different teams play us.

It's a luxury for me, though, really having four guys on the floor you can put the ball in their hands, you trust they're going to make good decisions, and they can get us into offense. I think that's an incredible luxury to have.

Q. You got a few more minutes out of Maliq tonight. Can you talk about what you saw from him tonight and how he is looking heading into the Final Four?

JON SCHEYER: Yeah, so look, it's an incredible thing what Maliq did, to make himself available for these two with games. The intention was not to play him again. And there was just that moment, Pat picked up the two, I thought it was a long game for Khaman, and Maliq came in and just gave us a good lift.

We need to get him right this week. That's the main thing, just to get him stronger, more stability as much as possible. It's not going to be what he or I would hope, of course, but I think another week will do him a lot of good.

But I'm thankful for him for just his attitude and being available. But we need to get him stronger, healthier, and I think I'm more confident in what he can do next weekend.

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