

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - NC State vs Marquette

Thursday, March 28, 2024

Dallas, Texas, USA

American Airlines Arena

**NC State Wolfpack**

**Coach Kevin Keatts**

**DJ Horne**

**Casey Morsell**

**DJ Burns**

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by the head coach of the Wolfpack of NC State. Questions for Coach, please.

**Q. Why weren't you guys better this year?**

KEVIN KEATTS: I think we had our moments. If you look at our team in different segments, you would say, man, you were good. We started off the ACC season 5-1, and then I think we had a couple of rough spots.

It's weird. We brought in eight different guys, and I think it took a little longer than I thought. We played well early and then in between I thought we were just okay. Then we kind of found our stride once we got into March a little bit. It's weird. It's a good question, but like I said, we had some moments and then we kind of turned it around, but when you look at our 20-game schedule, every game that we lost probably outside of one or two, we were in it. We had to clean up some of the things we didn't do well, and then obviously we got better.

**Q. Do you think that in the current transfer environment that we might see more teams like yours that don't really get it all together until the LAST possible minute?**

KEVIN KEATTS: Absolutely. You think about it. Here's the difference in my team last year and this year. We had a bunch of transfers the previous year, but we had an opportunity to play a foreign game, which gave us ten



practices. When you get those ten practices, they mean a lot in the summertime. To go over and play against some national teams and everything else, I think that really helped that team.

When basketball starts and you got a bunch of new dudes, it takes a long time, especially when it's from your guards. When you have returning guards, I think it makes a lot of difference, but in our situation we lost Terquavion Smith and Jarkel Joiner, and that was 34 points a game for us. It took us a while to get to where we are.

**Q. You have a center who looks like a left tackle, a point guard who was a Lacrosse All-American, a forward who is fasting for Ramadan. Is this as unique a team as you have ever had, and how did it come together?**

KEVIN KEATTS: DJ Burns would think he is a tight end. You can't say left tackle. That isn't right.

It makes for a great story, and it does. When you look at teams that are in the Sweet 16, you always try to figure out how did they get here? We got here because we're very unique. I want you to think about this.

We've got a traditional old-school back to the basket post guy who can score. Most teams don't have that. We're starting a point guard who is a legitimate point guard. Most teams have kind of a combo guard, as we've had in the past. Then we've got a lot of good pieces around. We've got a 6'1" combo guard in DJ Horne who can really score the basketball.

I think one of the things that's helped us out is because we're different, it's actually helped us. How often are you going to play against a post guy that's a lefty with a great touch that can really pass on the double-team.

Michael O'Connell has become a scorer. You look at him in the early games and you think, man, he just is a passer, passer, passer, and his numbers don't support it. Give our assistant coaches a lot of credit. I think the development of some of these guys late in the year has really helped us become a good team and has gotten us to this point so far.



**Q. You mentioned the importance of the experience of guards with Marquette. They have been together for three years, Kam Jones and Tyler Kolek. What kind of a challenge do they present?**

KEVIN KEATTS: Those guys are really good, and I'm trying to figure out which one is better, and I know that's not fair to them, but they complement each other in different ways. Both get to the left hand really good and talented. That's a major challenge for us because in order for us to have success, we have to do a good job of controlling those guys and they play extremely well. They play extremely well together. They're older. They understand they have played together. That's something that you can't substitute.

So the top of our scouting guard is those two guys, but when I say that Marquette is so much more than just the guard play. They've got good play all over the floor.

**Q. You guys lost seven of your last nine regular season games. I think it's fair to say probably on the hot seat entering kind of the postseason, you guys go on a crazy run. Five wins, five days in the ACC Tournament. What changed for you guys?**

KEVIN KEATTS: You know, what changed, it's weird. Like I told you, it's so many great story lines. What did you say? Seven of the last eight. Seven of the last nine. Then we won seven of seven. The crazy thing about it is every game that we have won of our seven was elimination games. If we lose any of those games in the ACC, we don't go to the NCAA Tournament, and then your two teams to get to the Sweet 16, you lose them, you go home.

What changed? We got smarter. We got the same players who are playing with a little bit more confidence, but when we went back -- and let's start with the ACC -- and we went back and looked at every team that we lost to, it didn't have a lot to do with them. It was more about what we didn't do, understanding scouting reports.

We had segments in each game where I thought if we play well enough, we would have won the game, but breakdowns and everything else. When we talked about going into the ACC Tournament and this tournament, it's let's limit our mistakes and stay locked in. A lot of them was, you know, transition defense, ball screen coverage, things that you could clean up, and things that you don't want to have Major League problems where you just can't play. We didn't have that problem because we were good enough to win games. We had problems that you could solve.

Honestly, to their credit, we grew up in scouting reports and our film work became better, and we understood what we needed to do not to beat ourselves.

**Q. Luke was asked after the ACC Tournament what he saw in this team, following this team. He described it as unwavering. How would you describe this team and their resolve down the stretch of the season?**

KEVIN KEATTS: I haven't had time to really reflect on what we've done because I'm so much in the moment of it, but I was sitting in the bed late last night after watching film, and I was, like, man, do you know we won five games in five days against five national champions? It was weird because we got stronger and better in each second half, and we looked like one of the fresher teams. We looked like we had two or three days rest.

This team just believes. The energy is high. We are having fun. We talked about going to both tournaments, the ACC and this tournament, and having a lot of fun. We've been able to stay in the moment. What I mean by that is we never look past the next opponent. If we're fortunate enough to move on, we are.

We talked about being together, trusting. Our culture is what we call ARTT, A-R-T-T. Accountability, Relentless, Toughness, and doing it Together.

Any time in this stretch where we didn't feel like that we were providing in our culture, we talked about that. We leaned in on it and we've done a good job with it. All of the heavy lifting has to go to those guys because they've helped make the switch, and we just pulled the right strings.

**Q. Back to the topic of transfers, a year ago at this time you guys were home. You obviously made a lot of transfer moves. How do you feel that with the portal being open this time of year while you're focusing on the game and trying to deal with that knowing you have a lot of roster turnover coming?**

KEVIN KEATTS: I don't like it now, and I can't even say how I liked it last year because of the fact that we probably were recruiting.

I will say this, I do know that the portal has to open at some point. If I was a new coach taking a job somewhere else, I would love for the portal to be open right now. If I was at home, I would like for it to be open. I'm in the Sweet 16, so I hate that it's open.

That being said, I think we have to get small windows. Maybe keep it open two or three days out of the week, and

certain days maybe closed, but I do think it's a little unfair for teams who have worked their butt off to get to a certain point, and for me, example, I have no choice. I lot of the recruiting part of it, but I have to concentrate on Marquette. Any other time I have to get on the phone and try to figure out who can we replace, you know, DJ Horne, DJ Burns, Casey Morsell? And I'm doing it right now. I don't like it at this moment. I don't want to sound like a hypocrite, but right now I don't like it. I wish there was a way we can look at it and try to figure out, is there another option for that?

**Q. What tells you that the team from the last couple of weeks, the one that's won seven in a row, is really who you are and not the team that lost seven of nine ahead of that?**

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, I don't think you can win seven games in a row in college basketball if that's not your identity. I think that's what tells us who we are.

I go back, too, and think about this now. You go into every game knowing that if you lose, that you're packing up and your season is over. It's probably going to be a long time since someone goes in on a Tuesday in the ACC Tournament and wins a championship on Saturday. I hope it is because it's a fun experience, and hopefully someone else will be able to do that.

The other part of it is going into the tournament we were a 10 seed in the ACC. NCAA we're 11 seed. If you watch us, we don't play like that. Our guys believe. We don't look at numbers. We just believe that we earned the right to be here.

A lot of teams because of maybe the NET and also they're good teams, they're here, but we had to do it the old-fashioned way. We had to earn it. We had to go through our tournament. It's almost like my days at UNCW. In order for me to go to the tournament, I had to win the CAA Tournament, and we did it, and that was three days in a row.

So I go back and look at it like, to your question is, you just don't accidentally get hot and win seven games in a row with the type of teams that you play. I think we had in that stretch maybe three or four top-25 teams, maybe even top 10. We responded well.

**Q. What shoes did you bring to Dallas? Are you mixing it up?**

KEVIN KEATTS: Not mixing it up. I have the same shoes that I wore, and I have some really shiny shoes. It's in honor of the referees, so they know to give me good calls because we both got shiny shoes is on.

To the Wall Street Journal, that's pretty good. I saw someone send me a picture or screenshot of DJ Burns on the cover of it. I don't know what it was, but shout out to you guys for that.

**Q. Kind of in that vein, one thing I'm curious about, NC State is a proud program with a history of kind of going on these magical runs in the tournament before. Obviously the 1983 team probably stands out as being one of those teams that's just iconic in March Madness history. Is that something where you've been sort of educating this current team on the history of that or have any of the players from that year reached out and tried to talk to the guys?**

KEVIN KEATTS: Our players from '74 and '83, they have been on campus through my tenure, including this year. Look, I can't say enough about them and what they pour into our players. They've been in practices. We've honored them, which we should. We should continue to do that.

Any time those guys are around, David Thompson, Monte Towe, everybody who has come through, they've done a good job. I get text messages from Sidney Lowe, Thurl Bailey, of course Dereck Whittenburg works there. They are so excited about what's happening. They're always sharing their experience about '83 and how great it was and the magical run.

I think our guys listen to that. They do. We try to focus on being who we are now. It's a little bit different than when they went through, but it's certainly paying off for us.

**Q. You told me recently that the offensive improvement over the last seven games has to do with caring and sharing. Can you break that down?**

KEVIN KEATTS: Oh, yeah. I think when we -- guys like Michael O'Connell has really helped our team. He was a pure point guard. What he has completely done is allowed everybody else to be themselves. DJ Horne, we need him to score the basketball. Casey Morsell, we need him to score the basketball. DJ Burns and Mo. We get Michael in there, who is starting to look for offense a little bit more, but more as a pass-first guy. I think that's really helped. DJ Burns has helped. His ability to pass on the double teams -- I mean, the guy may see more double teams than anybody I remember in recent history. People are doing it different ways. They're trapping post-to-post, guard-to-guard, guard-to-big. He's finding people.

So we have shared the basketball, and we went from taking good shots to great shots because of our ability to

share the basketball. I think that's really helped our team.

When you get into any type of postseason, bad shots crush you. In our situation, we haven't done that. These guys are completely playing together, and they really have shared the basketball. So sharing is caring, and caring is sharing, too.

THE MODERATOR: All right, Coach, thank you so much.

We now have our student-athletes. We are joined by our three student-athletes from NC State. DJ Horne, Casey Morsell, and DJ Burns. Questions for our student-athletes.

**Q. You guys lost seven of the last nine regular season games, going on to win five games in five days at the ACC Tournament, and now you are in the Sweet 16. What changed? What helped you guys turn things around here?**

DJ BURNS JR.: I would say our defensive mentality. I think that we've been playing way more together. Teams aren't able to just drive our gaps like they were, and they aren't just able to straight-line drive us like they were. I think we've tightened up in that aspect for sure.

CASEY MORSELL: I agree with DJ. I think another big key for us is that we're not beating ourselves. We're not our own worst enemy. We're clicking, but the defense is one of our biggest priorities, but we're kind of holding teams to one shot, one and done, and just doing different things so that it makes it tough for the opponent.

DJ HORNE: I agree with both of them. We're not beating ourselves, and the defensive intensity has increased, and I think that just plays into the focus level and just the connectedness all together for our team and our program. It just increased. That's what translates to these wins.

**Q. For all three of you. You all three transferred in at different times. What was the experience when you first got to NC State and then as a transfer, how did that impact how you would welcome in the rest of you guys as you came in?**

DJ HORNE: Being from Raleigh, I was a little familiar with NC State, but never in the program. So coming here, I had known some of the guys in the program, so it felt a little bit better coming in from day one. Now that I'm here I would say it feels a lot different. Especially with all the recent success we found and everything. I would say it's been great.

CASEY MORSELL: I would say coming in -- this is my third year here, and when I first got to State, our season

was very unsuccessful. We only had four wins in the conference. I feel like after that season we've just gotten better and better, last year having a tournament appearance, finishing sixth in the league. This year advancing this far.

The fact that we've gotten better and better since I've been in Raleigh, it's just been a great journey. It's been a roller coaster in terms of emotions. A lot of ups and downs. Raleigh is in a great position now that this is my last run.

DJ BURNS JR.: I would say my experience when I first got here was a little different. I was playing behind (indiscernible), and it was my opportunity to be patient. When I first came here, I asked God to give me the opportunity to learn patience, and he put me right into it immediately when I came here. I think that it's paid off now, but it was definitely a different experience from these guys coming in.

**Q. You have been outscoring opponents by 34 in the tournament so far down in the paint. What kind of challenges do Oso Ighodaro and David Joplin present for you?**

DJ BURNS JR.: They're two guys who have the ability to shoot as well. I forget how to pronounce his name, and I'm not going to do that and say something crazy. They both bring the presence being as tall as they are and as long as they are. They are really good at doing the things that they do, like rolling and dunking the ball. The floaters in the middle, they have a lot of good players, and a lot of good pieces together. Their bigs, they kind of bring them together.

**Q. Kind of going off that question for any of you guys, when you are looking at film of Marquette and watching games, just what kind of challenges do they present?**

CASEY MORSELL: I would say they test your defensive awareness. They do so many actions. One of the different things they do is they use the five man as a ball handler. They set screens. They cut. They do different things on the perimeter with the five man.

I feel like everyone is going to be at some point going to guard the perimeter. We're just going to be a lot of different actions and rotations that we kind of got to be aware for that they do.

**Q. I'm curious if any of you have any superstitions like your coach with the shoes that he's been wearing every game. Is there anything you've been sticking to the last few games as you've been on this hot streak?**

DJ BURNS JR.: Pretty simple for me. I just use the same playlist. I've added songs to it, but I've had the same play list from high school that I listen to specifically before games.

DJ HORNE: I would say just before the game I like to pray, so I keep that very consistent.

CASEY MORSELL: I mean, I guess I do both. I got the same play list, and I pray before every game, so that's pretty much what's been my routine.

**Q. DJ Burns, the tournament every year seems to create fan favorites through personalities, and you have exuded that on camera, just looking from afar. Do you sense that at all, and do you feel like you are becoming a fan favorite? Kind of related to that is any NIL opportunities come out of what you all have done so far in the tournament?**

DJ BURNS JR.: Yes, sir. I'm not going to speak on the NIL thing just because there are still some things that need to be finalized before we speak out on it, but as far as the whole fan favorite thing, yeah, I have definitely noticed it.

It's been kind of crazy going from having almost zero media attention to a camera following you around all day has kind of been -- it's been cool, but you know, definitely noticed it. Hard to miss it.

**Q. I would like all three to comment. When you are ACC Tournament on Tuesday, you haven't had the season you wanted to have, does it really enter your mind that you could go on a run like this, or are you just kind of looking at one game trying to stay alive? How do you mentally process that when you are down to that literal last chance to do something?**

DJ HORNE: I just feel like we came into that tournament with new life. We knew that it was a new season basically for us to go in there and make something happen. Just looking back over our whole season, we knew that we were a good team, and a lot of the teams that we had in our path to get to where we wanted to get to, we've battled with a lot of those teams. We knew that we could compete and win those games.

CASEY MORSELL: That's pretty much what it was. We went into this postseason with the approach that it's a new season. Even in our meeting before we went to D.C., Keatts wrote on the board 0-0. He is, like, every team is 0-0. That was the mindset and the approach we went down to D.C. with.

Every game was its own championship literally. We didn't really look ahead. We never looked past anyone. Even three, four games in, until it's done, then we'll sit there and enjoy it. That's the same approach we've had in this tournament.

DJ BURNS JR.: I would say, yeah, I thought we could do it the whole time. If you look back at the teams that we played to get to that point, Louisville we played them and took Syracuse to some close games. We had already beaten and went to overtime with Virginia. Close games for the most part against Duke.

So we knew we could do it. It was just a matter of doing the things that were necessary to get the job done, and I think we've taken that momentum and kept it rolling.

**Q. Casey, following up on that, how do you think that mentality that you've had to carry since then helps now that the stakes are quite a bit bigger?**

CASEY MORSELL: I would say just don't change. I feel like we've been in so many positions. We've been tested so many times throughout this run that it's been easy for guys to kind of fold and fall into the pressure. It hasn't happened. Whatever teams or whatever happens or even on the outside, we just have to kind of keep that same connection for the rest of this tournament.

**Q. Can you guys each break down the incredible chemistry that's developed on this team over the last seven games and explain it?**

DJ BURNS JR.: I don't know. I think it's always been there. I don't think that we treat each other differently now. Everyone is paying attention because we're winning. That's what winning does. It's going to seem like you're a little closer together when you are winning.

Don't get me wrong, we're still building great memories, but I don't think that too many of us -- I think we mixed well from the team we got together. I think by November we had a pretty good chemistry going.

CASEY MORSELL: I agree with DJ. We've been very close throughout it all, throughout the good time and the bad. Just because the results don't show up on the court doesn't mean we weren't close. Just trying to figure everything out. There were a lot of new faces, a lot of new people trying to adjust to the program, to the culture, and it took time.

The fact that we're finally starting to click, it's great. It's great timing.

DJ HORNE: I just agree with them. Coming in I felt like from day one the vibes were always there on and off the court. Like DJ was saying, you win like how we've been winning anywhere. It's going to bring anybody closer together. I think the main thing we'll take from this is just learning how to win and learning how hard it is to win as a team so that after it's all said and done with us, you can kind of set the foundation and hopefully keep that here at NC State.

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