

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

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Dallas, Texas, USA

American Airlines Arena

NC State Wolfpack

Coach Kevin Keatts

Michael O'Connell

Mohamed Diarra

DJ Burns Jr.

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are ready to begin with the Wolfpack of North Carolina State. One question for Coach, please.

Q. The fact that this game is Duke, the rivalry, what does that add to what's already a monster game?

KEVIN KEATTS: I know it's a rivalry, and we're down the street from one another, but when you get to this point -- I was sitting with a group of friends as we were watching the game. Of course, everybody in the room wants to know who you want to play. And I just said, hey, when you get to this point, you are blessed to be here, and you'll take the opportunity to play whoever you get a chance to play.

Luckily, we have played Duke a couple of times, so we are a little bit more familiar with those guys. But they're playing really good basketball, and they're doing a great job with it. It's not one of those things where we were just rooting for one team or the other.

I know for a lot of NC State fans it was going to come down to they were hoping that it would be very similar to '83 and playing Houston. But unfortunately, it didn't work that way.

We're excited. We know that when you get down to eight teams left in the entire country to play in the entire basketball, everybody is good, and even though we played them 18 days ago, it's a different team, and we're a different team also.

DJ BURNS, JR.: I honestly feel the same way. I don't



think that he left anything unsaid.

Q. You play for a coach who started as a D-III player, coached prep school, and he's grown in his life to the point where he's a champion and provides for his family, provides for y'all. Speak to that to playing for Coach Keatts. Does that inspire y'all and the impact he's had on you guys?

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: I would say it just speaks to his dedication throughout it all. He never -- he started at a lower level, so to speak, but he's always had a confidence in himself that he is going to rise to the occasion and take the next step in life.

When you are playing for a guy like that, it gives you the confidence when you are out there it doesn't matter if you are, quote, unquote, playing a better team or better competition. You're just going to go out there and fight and do what you have to do, and it can work out.

MOHAMED DIARRA: That inspires me because I got the same way that Coach Keatts. I come from nothing, and he inspires me a lot. He never quit. He's got a winner mentality and we got the same thing in us. So, appreciate you, Coach.

KEVIN KEATTS: Thank you, Mo. Appreciate you also.

DJ BURNS, JR.: Man, yeah, I feel like it kind of plays into the way that our team was built. A lot of us come from other schools, not necessarily at the highest levels. He's the same way.

We all fought to get here, and I think that that's why it's so important to us, and that's why we have such a sense of urgency.

Q. DJ, which do you enjoy more, backing a guy in and scoring or getting the double-team, firing out and having somebody else score? Yesterday most of those assists, the look that you were giving the crowd and everybody else kind of suggest that is you had a lot of fun doing that.



DJ BURNS, JR.: I would say that's part of the game. I like them both equally. I like all plays that amount to winning. So I don't really have a favorite way to do things. As long as we win, I'm fine.

Q. How much fun was that last night, though?

DJ BURNS, JR.: Last night was really fun. You're going to double-team, I'm going to do my best to make you pay. I'm glad we got that done.

KEVIN KEATTS: Tied his career high in assists. Pretty good.

Q. Just talk about how different you see your team from the time you played Duke in the regular season until the time in the tournament and then from then to now.

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: I think the whole season has kind of just been growth. From the beginning of the season until now we've been changing as a team and growing. Our chemistry has been getting better. You learn more about each other, and that helps you on the court.

The first time we played them, obviously we didn't do things the best. But we learned from there and continued to grow. Played them the second time, it worked in our favor. From then we've still been growing as a team, the chemistry has been growing and our confidence has been growing in each other.

Probably the same for them too. Obviously as they've been winning games and playing together, you grow stronger together.

For us it's been a journey of growth, and it's been great to this point.

DJ BURNS, JR.: I would say I think it's pretty obvious that both teams are playing really good basketball, a lot better than the first time we played each other, and especially to this point now. I think it will be very interesting.

Q. This is for Mo and DJ. Talking to Flip outside, he said one of the big things that led to them losing that second game was you guys creating those second-chance opportunities and being more physical down low. How important is that going to be tomorrow against this Duke team again?

DJ BURNS, JR.: I would say it's going to be very important. They're a team who can really go at you and be aggressive as well. So I think that will be one of the key things is who is more aggressive in the post.

MOHAMED DIARRA: Yeah, I would say we have to create the same opportunity. If we have to matchup and we can crash the boards and go out there and we're going to do it. And that's why we played so great last game. And we're going to do the same thing.

Q. I know this might not be where your head is at, but how cool is it to be in the Elite Eight with the women's team as well? And then just for the players, what kind of relationship do you guys have with the women's team?

KEVIN KEATTS: I think it's cool. What a unique story that you have two programs that's playing at the same -- literally, yesterday, played at the same time -- and both made the Elite Eight.

And Wes and I are really, really close. When you think about our paths, we kind of started in a similar path, and obviously started at the D-III level and mid-major when he was at Chattanooga and me at UNCW. And for us to be here and living the dream with the opportunity to coach great ladies and great men and teach them the right way, it's great. I mean, it really is.

Their players and our players, they're connected. They come to our games. We go to their games. We celebrate with them, and they celebrate with us. It's really like a family affair when you think about the two basketball programs.

Not just that. I think our whole athletic department is kind of bonded by the respect that each team has for one another. But when you talk about they have a common thread, we're basketball players and coaches.

And it's really a special deal. If you were able to be around our campus and see the support and just that we give one another, you would say it's great. It's amazing.

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: I think Coach kind of hit it on the head, the idea that the whole athletic department, all the teams are pretty close, and we all kind of support each other as a whole. No matter what sport it is or who is playing, people always go out and support or just viewing the games and stuff. Whenever you see each other around campus, we always congratulate each other or stop to talk.

I think we're pretty close to the women's team. We're pretty happening they're winning the games, and hopefully they can keep going and win it all. We just support them along the way.

MOHAMED DIARRA: Yeah, the team is great. The women's team is great. They play good all the time, all year long. I want to (indiscernible) to show them to the Elite Eight and play at the next level.

DJ BURNS, JR.: I would say, I love what the women's team is doing. They just played a great Stanford team and took care of them. Man, they've been doing their thing all year. They did what we were trying to do in the regular season as well. So they did their thing.

We were just talking to them last night -- over the phone, of course -- but man, we're all close. That's what it's all about. It's not just them. It's the whole athletic department. It's like a little family.

Q. Sometimes we talk about March Madness, and there's this notion of a Cinderella. Do any of you have a strong reaction, either positively or negatively, to this idea that NC State is a Cinderella in this tournament? And what's the reason for your answer?

DJ BURNS, JR.: If that's what you want to call it, that's cool, but that's not how we feel. I'll just leave it at that.

MOHAMED DIARRA: Honestly I don't know what that means (laughter), so I don't think about it.

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: I mean, yeah, we'll go whatever label, but at the end of the day we know we can win games. We know we can compete with a lot of people. So I don't know necessarily if we want to run with that title, but it is what it is.

Q. DJ and Coach, DJ, you've been on this team, this is your second year now, and it seems like all of this national attention is finally swirling around you right now. Yet, you know, you've been sort of doing your thing as a big guy, muscling your way through the paint for a long time now. Why do you think it's taken this long and maybe this stage to really become sort of like this darling of the NCAA Tournament in some ways?

DJ BURNS, JR.: I think honestly it's because no one expected us to be here at this point but us. Yeah, I guess in everyone else's eyes it is a Cinderella story, so they're going to pay attention now that we're winning. When we were losing, it didn't really matter.

KEVIN KEATTS: I tell these guys all the time, March is more players. I mean, how many times have you went into March, and you really didn't know a player, and you came out of March and said, man, he is pretty good?

DJ Burns has been around for a long time, but his personality, his play has really opened eyes of a lot of folks around the country.

March is not about the coaches at all. Players make plays in March. And that's what's happening with this group. A lot of our guys from Michael to Mo, to DJ, the national audience might not have known who they were, but they do now because obviously the way they're playing and how far we have gone as a team.

Q. How much did you guys know about the 1983 team and Coach Valvano before you got to NC State? And what did you learn or hear as you stayed at North Carolina State?

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: Coming into NC State, you know a little bit of that, but I didn't know the full in-depth and details. But as I've been here throughout the whole year you learn more about it through the basketball program itself or people, like the fans giving you insight. It's been cool to learn a lot more about it as time has gone on.

MOHAMED DIARRA: Before coming I don't even know about the team, so it was fun to learn. We meet them (indiscernible) times this year, and that was really cool. They shared their experience, everything, and we love it.

Q. (Off microphone)?

MOHAMED DIARRA: Yes. Yeah, yeah.

DJ BURNS, JR.: Yeah, I had known a little bit just being a basketball fan, but most of my knowledge prior to coming here and learning and meeting some of the guys myself would be the "30 for 30." That's probably the extent of my knowledge prior to.

Q. Kevin, you didn't grow up far from Greensboro, just up Route 29. What would tomorrow be like in the Greensboro Coliseum with Duke and State playing in the Elite Eight?

KEVIN KEATTS: If it was in Greensboro? Oh, man, you're trying to take a dig at Boenheim, huh? (Laughing).

No, listen, Dallas is a great place, and I'm not going to -- obviously we're going to -- I think we're going to have just as many fans here as we would have at Greensboro. You know, my heart -- Greensboro is Greensboro. I grew up in Lynchburg, Virginia, watching the tournament in Greensboro. It was such a special, unique place.

It's funny, I was thinking about it last night. Like, man, we both could have just flown home and played this game

somewhere -- probably at the PNC would have been a good idea.

It's going to be a great opportunity whether we played in Greensboro. Would it have been great at Greensboro? Absolutely. But they're not hosting the region this team, so we have to play it here.

The folks of Dallas have been great. NC State, I hope we treated the Dallas folks great, and I hope they all come out and wear red because we would welcome them to do that tomorrow.

Q. Mohamed, I believe now seven straight games with double-figure rebounds. Your average for the regular season was half as many as you've been averaging in the tournament. What has been the difference? And how have you managed to maintain your stamina considering the fast and everything?

MOHAMED DIARRA: I just grab the ball all the time. That's who I am. My team know I'm a good rebounder, and I'm going to crash all the time. But (indiscernible). I just anticipate and get a rebound (indiscernible) I can. That's it.

THE MODERATOR: We'll excuse our student-athletes. Questions for Coach, please.

Q. Kevin, how would you describe the challenge of differentiating your program at a time and in a location where so much of the attention goes to Duke and UNC, and yet, you guys have a tremendous history, tremendous fan base and tremendous expectations?

KEVIN KEATTS: I think like any place, you have to carve out your own space. I'm into "Shark Tank," and I watch that all the time. And they talk about having shelf space, and how do you get your product on the shelf and everything else.

The one thing I've always -- when I took this job, I never wanted to be compared to Duke or Carolina. It's just not who I am. We do things a little bit different. And we want to -- obviously I try to be get our guys to be the best version of themselves and our program to be the best version of ourselves.

But we've done a good job. When when you think just over the last couple of years in general, we're one of three teams that have made the NCAA Tournament -- Duke, us and Virginia in the last two years by themselves.

Now we're on this nice run because we've carved space out. And we're doing things our way and not trying to be

someone else.

I thought about this. We have two milestones that has not happened at NC State in a long time. The ACC championship since '87, the Elite Eight since '86. I think I'm right with when I say that.

We've done a good job. We're champions, and that's something that you want to strive to be, and we still have an opportunity to win another championship and another tournament.

This is great for our fan base because I know obviously they get involved with it as much as anybody. But I love where we're at and love what we're doing as a program.

Q. Jon said earlier that he reached out to you after you guys won, and that you actually called him back, and you guys had a conversation. You get a lot of congratulatory texts and messages. Why did you call Jon back, and what did you talk about?

KEVIN KEATTS: Last night when I got to my phone, I probably had 500 text messages. I responded to each one. That's just who I am. But I have a lot of respect for the coaches in our league. I shouldn't even say just our league; just around the country.

If somebody is going to take time to reach out to me, then that's the least thing I can do is reach out and talk and have a conversation.

I thought it was great. Through this run I've had plenty of our coaches in our league and coaches across the country reach out. We're a small fraternity.

I know there's a lot of competition on game day. We're going to -- everybody is going to go at each other. But throughout that I think it's important that we do talk about our conference, we do talk about different things that we go through. And I thought it was great for Jon to reach out.

Q. I'm going to ask you what I asked the players. What do you sense is really different from your team's meetings with Duke in the regular season, to the tournament to now?

KEVIN KEATTS: We've become a stingy team on the basketball team. Our defensive numbers are so great. You think about last night just in general, 4-for-31 against a very good Marquette team who can shoot the ball behind the 3-point line.

Our deflections are up. I try to chart -- we try to get 40 deflections a game. I try to chart them every game, and

our deflections are up.

Our ball-screen coverage has become better. I thought initially we established ourselves against Marquette in the first 10 minutes on the defensive end, and then we got going offensively.

I think it's just our defense has improved. And our guys are connected more on the defensive end than we've been during the regular season.

Q. Coach, a question about Michael O'Connell and the qualities that he brings to the team. Since you have gotten on to this winning streak, I believe he's played at least 30 minutes in every game. Can you describe what it is about his game that you think is so important to have on the court to win?

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, he is playing with so much confidence. Like, Michael, in the regular season, would go through a game and didn't care if he took two shots. And now, going into this postseason, we've asked him to do a little bit more. He's a great distributor, but we've asked him to score the basketball, and he's done that.

You look at his numbers. I think the two most -- three most important guys in the postseason that have added something to our team is Michael, Mo and then Ben. All of those guys have added something that we didn't have regular season.

I also think he's found his voice. It takes a little bit of time for transfers to come in and find their voice even though he is an older guy. And now he's coaching on the floor. Everything that I envision of him being a point guard is what's happening.

He scores when we need a basket. He passes it most of the time to get everybody involved. And his leadership in the locker room and during timeouts have been really huge for us. I think that's the biggest steps.

Q. I was struck watching warmups yesterday just looking at the body language of your team versus Marquette. You guys looked so loose and excited. Obviously there's a sense maybe of playing with house money and not this is a -- every game is sort of a bonus. At the same time as you get further along in the tournament, the expectations do ramp up. How have you been addressing that aspect of this tournament run?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, it's weird. We are loose. We listen to a lot of music. I mean, we were going to go through a walk-through this morning, and I've learned so

many -- and I grew up in an era where there were great rappers, and we had great rap songs; I know I got a bunch of them -- but I've learned so many different songs, different rap songs than I've ever seen.

Here's the other thing about it -- we just don't listen to rap, too. On game day, coming back from shoot-around, we put on gospel music, and we're blasting that just as much as we are the rap songs. They know every word to each one of them. We're loose.

The house-money thing, we don't look at it as house money. We didn't come here to say, hey, you've won enough and just go out there and play, and you have nothing to lose. We do think we have something to lose. We came to win. So we don't count on that.

I understand, obviously that's where it looks when you come in as an 11 seed and you're in the Elite Eight. But honestly, these guys are here to win.

Q. You said a couple of minutes ago you thought Duke was a much different team than when you played them a few weeks ago. Why? What do you see different in them now that you didn't maybe see a couple of weeks ago?

KEVIN KEATTS: I think the veterans. Flip, I call him a veteran because obviously he is a second-year guy, but he's playing much more aggressive. I think more earlier in the year he was more outside-in. Now he is more inside-out. He is scoring in so many different ways and playing great.

You look at the way Jeremy Roach is playing, he's playing like a guy who has been in the league, who has been around for a long time, a guy who is obviously playing in the NCAA Tournament at a high level.

Their older guys are helping the young guys. They just are. They're doing a great job. I think that's the biggest difference in those guys. The other one, as a team they're a better defensive team than I've seen even two weeks ago.

Q. Obviously it works both ways, but strictly from your standpoint how much of it is an advantage with the quick turnaround? Is it to prepare for a team that you've already played twice in the last month as opposed to somebody you're seeing for the first time?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, I guess you're right, it works both ways. It probably helps both teams because we have such a short turnaround, and we're familiar. Jon is like me: Can we put in 20 different plays today? No. Everybody at this

point you're going to be who you are.

I think it helps that we know each other. You think about what we had to go through in the ACC Tournament, we didn't even have the one day in between to prepare.

It's almost weird because when we got to the NCAA Tournament and we won our first game, I'm thinking we're going to play the next day, because we're so used to playing, and then you realize you have a day in between. It helps.

I told you guys before at the beginning of this, when it comes to March, players make plays. I mean, as coaches we pull a lot of strings and substitute guys and try to put them in great spots. But you see so many story lines where guys who are just making plays.

Q. If you don't mind, sir, I have two questions. My first, I asked them about your background -- D-III player, the prep, Louisville, the national championship. So much of this prepares you in life for this moment. How much of it are you drawing from that? And just how meaningful has your past experience to help you get where you are now?

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, I want to be an inspiration. You never want to hide from where you came from. I spent a lot of time at prep school, at Hargrave Military Academy, and started off as an assistant a couple of years. Got the head job. Left and went back to college and came back for eight years, so I had a total of 12 years.

During that time, it wasn't a national media thing. I could call timeouts. I could draw up plays. I could make practice plans. If I made a mistake, nobody cared. It just wasn't -- but I could lean on that because it helped me get better.

Then obviously my experience of going on to be assistant coach, I was fortunate enough to be a part of the 2013 national championship team at Louisville where we climbed on the top of the nets and cut the nets down.

I worked for a great coach in Rick Pitino who challenged you every day. And we would do scouting reports, and I couldn't have any paper in my hand, and I had to remember 30 plays and present it to the team.

That's also helped me because now I can remember, if I'm in a huddle, I can remember a play that back in the Big East when Pittsburgh ran a play five years ago, and I want to present that play to my team, I can do that stuff.

My experiences is at the high school grassroots level, being an assistant coach, and then going to UNCW when I

had my first job as a mid-major has paid off so much.

I hope that I'm inspiring a lot of people because you don't have to be just a Power Five player to be a Power Five head coach. There's other ways to get there.

You look across the country. Some of the best coaches in the world have come from the same path that I've traveled.

And I love it. I think it's great. If I can share with any inspiring young lady, young man to work hard and get where you are, you are sitting here looking at hard work. I drove the bus at Hargrave. I pumped the gas. I swept the floor. I washed the clothes. I did this, the good Lord, put me in this spot, so I'm glad to be here.

Q. So much of NC State is based on history and heritage, and that's an end-all, be-all of the Wolfpack. Obviously you're aligning yourself with the great teams in the past. But are you sort of trying to find that balance of, hey, let's create our own history, let's create our own mark on this university?

KEVIN KEATTS: No, I think history is great.

We do have great history. What I'm learning is we've got great history, but it's been so long ago. I mean, you think about this when we won the championship, and we're reminded that it's been 37 years. Then obviously we go to the Elite Eight. We're reminded of how long it's been.

I hope that history gets a chance to repeat itself because this team deserves it. I love this group. They've already etched their way into the history books by winning an ACC Championship. We're going to hang a banner. And those guys in the locker room are going to be the reason why that banner has been hung. It hasn't happened in 37 years. The Elite Eight, they're going to be remembered for that.

As we move on, I do hope history repeats itself because we got great history. It's just been a long time.

Q. Before the ACC title run there was a lot of speculation about what would happen with the team next year, whether you would be the head coach. How did you dispel and confront those speculations? And how do you feel about coach turnover at all levels in sports?

KEVIN KEATTS: I think if you watched us over the last seven years, I don't think that you would feel that way. Here's why I say this. When I took over this program, they were coming off of four wins and five wins in the conference. By the way, when I did my first opening --

right before practice, I did my first press conference -- it was mentioned that the FBI is investigating us.

I went through four years of not getting a recruit, losing recruits, not knowing what the NCAA was going to do to us.

And we did it. And our staff -- we walked the program through it as champions and never complained. We started off our first year after taking over the program, we went straight to the NCAA Tournament. Should have went back to next year when we were 33 in the NET and got left out. Then we had a year when they didn't have the tournament.

So we've had some of those bad lucks. And it's now paying off at the end because at the end of the day we have built a program, but year one, two and three were not year one, two and three of normal years because of the scrutiny that we had.

Anybody who has had a new program while they were going through that NCAA investigation -- if you remember the FBI agent came out and said we got your playbook. Anybody that was a new coach, they had to go through that. If you were a sitting coach during that, you were able to keep your culture and everything else. But we played musical chairs a lot because of that.

I know it's a long answer, but I never worry about that. I poured everything I have into my program, into my kids. To be honest with you, I just relied on my faith. And I left everything in the good Lord's hand.

Whatever was going to happen was going to happen, but I was going to make sure that I did everything that I could and did everything right by those young men.

Q. Is there anyone in the athletic department close to the program at the school or at the school that was there in '83, that's still at North Carolina State that you have met?

KEVIN KEATTS: Dereck Whittenburg is on staff in the athletic department.

Q. (Off microphone).

KEVIN KEATTS: Other than them? God, that's a tough one. Maybe Bobby Purcell, who is head of the Wolfpack Club. He just retired a couple of years ago. We have some great guys who work around our building and do all of the dirty work and the great stuff that makes sure that everything is fine for us who may have been there. I don't know if there's anybody else.

I bring up Dereck Whittenburg because on that air ball that he shot, he's been getting NIL since he shot that air ball. He says it was a pass.

What we did not know is that NIL started a long time ago. The guy hasn't paid for a meal since he shot that. He has been --

Now, don't report that because some of that may have been a violation if he was still playing back in the day, but I think we're past the time. I don't know.

Q. What have been some of Casey's most valuable contributions during this run? And how gratifying was it to see him go back home and win the ACC Championship?

KEVIN KEATTS: I'm so happy for Casey. When he transferred here, what a tough transition. He went from a great program with Tony Bennett, which is a low-scoring, hard-hat, great defensive team to a team who runs, who does it a different way, who has more freedom a little bit. Not saying either one is better than the other, but he adjusted.

He stuck with us a little bit. He's done a great job. He's brought some defense intensity and brought some senior leadership to us.

I'm happy. I joked with him in DC. I was, like, man, you're the last guy standing from the DMV. At that point it was him and Armando Bacot. I said, whoever wins that game is going to win the DMV. You can explain to some of these guys later on what DMV means. Most of them won't know that part of it.

Q. How much has it added to this experience of the last two weeks to have your son in the locker room?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, God, it's a wonderful deal. I never would have thought that. Coming up I was that dad that would go to the high school games, and I would sit by myself because fans are crazy at high school games. Parents are crazy. And they would talk trash, and then everybody would look at me when the referee would make a bad call because I was a coach, and I wouldn't respond. I just would look straight ahead.

I never really tried to coach him at the games because I knew all eyes would be on me to figure out, could I validate whether it was a bad call or not. I did most of my coaching when he got home. We would sit down and talk.

I love both of my kids. It's great. We talked about what



was he going to do for college. And he said, I wanted to kind of go to NC State and stay with you. And secretly that was a great deal because I was so pumped about that. I loved it. And it's great to have him around. It's just great.

It's hard to describe unless you have a son who has played for you or a daughter who has played for you, but he brings a lot of value. He's smart.

I don't know what path he's going to take. I'm going to do my best to convince him not to get into coaching or tell him about that stuff.

But it's special. It's really special. The problem with it is I get more time to see him than his mother, and he lives in the same -- we are right there in the same area. And he doesn't come home, and she complains to me -- who, by the way, he loves to death.

But once those kids go to college, I don't care if they're 10 minutes away or five hours away, they're going to stay away unless they have to come home for the dirty clothes or something like that.

But it's special. It means everything to me.

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