

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

Sunday, March 31, 2024

Dallas, Texas, USA

American Airlines Arena

**NC State Wolfpack**

**Kevin Keatts**

**DJ Horne**

**DJ Burns, Jr.**

**Michael O'Connell**

Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference

NC State 76, Duke 64

THE MODERATOR: We are ready to begin our news conference with the South Regional Champions, the Wolfpack of NC State, Coach Kevin Keatts, and student-athletes, DJ Horne, Michael O'Connell and DJ Burns, Jr.

First question for Coach, please.

**Q. What does it mean to do something that hasn't been done since Jim Valvano?**

KEVIN KEATTS: First of all, I want to say this, man, God is good. These young men in the locker room from day one have kind of believed in everything that I've preached to them and everything that they talked about.

At the beginning of the year, we talked about what are your goals, and I think to a man everyone said we want to win the ACC. Check. What's your other goal? It's obviously go on and compete for a National Championship, and we're still alive for that opportunity.

It means a lot. Our school deserves it. Our players have really worked hard. The fans deserve it. We've done a really good job. When I say we, I always say we. I mean, these young men in the locker room through all the adversity that we have we went through, up and downs of winning games and losing games. They never lost their faith and stayed together. It means a lot. It really does.



By the way, congratulations to our women's team too for making the Final Four. That's really special.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. This is for Michael in particular, and also the other two players. After the technical foul, it really kind of felt like the momentum had shifted. Then Middlebrooks got the steal. Michael, you hit the three. Then there was the foul. How big of a response was that, and how did you guys manage to keep your composure while all that was going on?**

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: Yeah, I think the biggest thing was sticking together. Obviously things aren't always going to go well or things are going to go wrong, but for us to stick together through the tough times and even the great times is going to be huge. Ben made a great play. It shifted momentum quickly, which would have helped for us to keep the lead and keep us going.

DJ BURNS, JR.: I would say in tough situations, you rise to the level of our training, and our coaches well prepared us.

DJ HORNE: I just piggyback off these guys. I just kind of rely on my work, trust the game plan, and fall back on my teammates too to help lift me up.

**Q. This is for DJ. I noticed you were the first person from NC State's team to lead the team out at the locker room, and you were literally skipping before the game even started. Then late in the game, you skipped out to the bench as you checked out. Where does DJ Burns' joy come from?**

DJ BURNS, JR.: I don't know. I guess it's how I was raised. I was raised in a happy environment. I try to take that with me everywhere I go.

**Q. DJ Burns, this question is for you. When you pick up that second foul in the first half, what went through your mind? Obviously it was early in the game. I knew that everybody pretty much knew that you was getting ready to come out to take a seat, but what went**



**through your mind? It seemed like that did something for your game at that point because you was in a complete zone afterward.**

DJ BURNS, JR.: Well, honestly, I wouldn't really say I wasn't too worried about it. Going into halftime, I just knew that the main thing I was thinking, honestly, was that I missed a few shots towards the end, so they weren't going to double-team me in the second half. I just decided when I came back in to take advantage.

**Q. Just real quick, how cool is it to be in the Final Four, but then also have the women's team in the Final Four? First program to do that since 2014, UConn. They went on to win a national championship. Don't want to get ahead of ourselves, but was watching Aziaha and the girls earlier today really a motivator for you guys to get out there and say we're going to do this as an athletic and basketball program?**

DJ HORNE: I'll just say, yeah, it's definitely big for our program. Seeing the girls have success definitely motivates us. I would say we worry about our team right now and just trying to make the best of what we got going right now and taking each game at a time.

**Q. What can you say about the fact that basketball is a brotherhood and what it's like to be on this run with each other and to believe in each other from the inside-out no matter what the outside said?**

DJ BURNS, JR.: I would say basketball is a sport that naturally brings people together. All of my life-long friends, I would say about 95 percent of them are basketball players.

Man, I still communicate with people I played AAU with in eighth grade. Basketball is just something that just always brings people together. That's why we love it.

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: I think building off that, I think it's pretty cool that none of us played together last year. Since the beginning of the season, we've been able to build this chemistry and build this bond and friendship, especially off the court.

Pretty much what he said, it just brings you together. You all have a common goal, and that's winning. And you want to figure out a way to do it together. I think as you try and go through that process, you just grow closer together.

DJ HORNE: I definitely agree with them too. I just think that that's the beauty of basketball. You know you can build these connections, build these memories. I just say personally I'm just glad to be doing this in my last year of

college basketball.

**Q. If you guys could talk to your 10-year-old self, what would you tell them?**

KEVIN KEATTS: You want DJ Burns to answer that? DJ Burns, what would you say to your 10-year-old self? I want to know that myself.

DJ BURNS, JR.: At this point I would tell him, don't change anything, man. Just continue to be yourself. It's going to work out.

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: I was actually going to say that too. Just stick with the process. Obviously when I was younger, there were times you didn't want to go workout or play sports. You just wanted to hang out with your friends or whatever. My parents kept on me and made sure I was working out. Obviously I'm glad I did that. It definitely helped me get here and to where I am at this moment.

Yeah, just stick with it and just try to enjoy it. Enjoy it along the way. That's really the biggest thing.

DJ HORNE: I would just tell my 10-year-old self to just stay down and just understand that everybody has their moment. It comes at different times in different shapes, forms, and fashions.

**Q. What does Coach Keatts mean to you, and how did he have you guys prepared for this?**

DJ BURNS, JR.: I would say, man, he kind of changed the trajectory of what I had going on. I was up in Winthrop and didn't really know how this was going to play out when I put my name in that portal. Honestly, I didn't even at first think I was coming here. For this, it's just an absolute blessing, and I think that man needs a lot more respect still.

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: I can build off that. He's had confidence in me since day one when he contacted me in the portal. Just to play for a coach like this who just has faith in you and pushes you to be your best every day. When you make mistakes, he holds you accountable. When you are doing well, he will compliment you and keep pushing you to do better.

It means the world to be playing for him. It makes the game so much easier when you are out there.

DJ HORNE: I agree with everything they said. My little piece, I will just say Coach gave me an opportunity to come back home and play basketball, and the confidence that he instills in me every day allows me to go out there and do what I do.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Just to know that all the ups and downs we had in our season and when it could have been easy to quit, I felt like he was the main one that kept us all together and kept the outlook on our whole season very positive and gave us a lot of confidence going into that ACC Tournament.

**Q. Michael, I'm sure that Virginia shot that buzzer beater it feels like a lifetime ago, but that's one of the biggest moments of this run. Without that, you guys may never be here. Can you talk about some of the individual moments that have made this really amazing run possible?**

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: I think just throughout this journey everyone has made huge plays. Whether in the moment it might not seem big, whether it's just a deflection or steal, but it changes the trajectory of our run or the game.

One play I always go back to his block came off the backboard, I thought that was huge. There are plays consistently plays being made by everyone that might not be covered or might not be in the stat sheet or might not be all over social media, but everyone has been making huge plays down this run, and that's why I think we're getting these wins, and it's been big for us. Obviously he is playing unbelievable. Both these dudes are. Mo has been killing it. Casey is. Everyone has been playing and has had such a big impact.

When you have a lot of guys coming on the court and contributing right away, you can't really pick the special moment when -- I mean, they're all special in their own way.

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

**Q. Is this by far your best coaching job?**

KEVIN KEATTS: I've had some really good teams. For us, I would say something about all of my teams are really special. These guys are so special. What is it, nine now? Nine elimination games or you go home.

They're tremendous. You ought to see us every day. They make it easy for me to wake up every morning and come to practice and work hard with them because of who they are as personalities.

I would say this, I have learned more basketball from these guys than I learned in my entire career because they know how to work. They're great people. They work hard. It's hard to say if it's my best. You would have to ask somebody else, but I'm sure having a lot of fun with this

group.

**Q. I'm sure that tomorrow morning you're going to start scouting Purdue and get ready, but in the moment now, have you had a chance to pinch yourself and just realize what has happened over these last three weeks?**

KEVIN KEATTS: I haven't. I'm sitting here, and I'm blessed to be here. I'll tell you what we did. We have broken the postseason up into different segments. When we left to go to D.C., we said we wanted to win D.C. We won D.C.

Then we went to Pitt. We say we want to win Pitt. Now obviously in Texas, we won Texas. It gets to a point when you are winning games and like the way we are where you expect to win, and I think our guys now are expecting to win. It's beautiful to watch.

Our defense has been tremendous down the stretch. It's been so great. At the halftime, we talked about that it was 27-21. The difference in the game. Neither team was scoring. They had taken nine free-throws. We had taken three. We made two. They made nine.

I talked about, hey, if you can come out and duplicate your defense in the second half, we will find a way to score, and we were great in the second half too. It's a miracle run, but we're not surprised. We don't come into this tournament saying, hey, let's just try to be here. We came here to win it, and we did. Now we have to move on to our next stage.

**Q. Just what the biggest blessing has been throughout this season with this team specifically as you reflect on this whole run that you've had and the journey you've had, just the blessing you've had with these student-athletes.**

KEVIN KEATTS: I think the biggest blessing is they've stayed true to who they are. Obviously when you go through a season, there are going to be a lot of ups and downs. Number one, you have to win every type of game to advance, but there are going to be some emotions.

We started off 5-1 in our conference. We lost our last four games. They're going to always be some adversity. These guys have strung together games. They've never wavered in their belief. They've stuck together.

We go by our ARTT. I talk about that all the time. ARTT: accountability, relentless, toughness, and together. When things go bad well, we lean on that.

I can't say enough about them. You ought to see them.



These guys are really locked in. They're really a close-knit bunch. The memories they're creating is going to last a lifetime, and that is what makes it really special. Those are the blessings that I see.

**Q. You said a minute ago you can tell your guys are now expecting to win. How can you tell that? What tells you that? Again, I'll have a follow-up.**

KEVIN KEATTS: The focus. It's weird because having a day in between almost seems like it's something wrong because we're so into what we did in the ACC Tournament, winning five games in five days.

They're locked in. They understand -- I think a couple of people asked me that were around the team that hadn't been around the team. Are you guys always that loose, and we are.

I've learned more new rap songs than I ever thought I could imagine, but as I said the last time, you know, we mix it up now. We play a lot of gospel music too, which they scream just as loud when they do that part, of which I'm glad that they know those songs.

It's a loose bunch. They believe in one another. They trust in one another. We had some adversity in this game, and it was at times you thought Duke had the momentum, and we could have folded a little bit, but we absolutely didn't.

**Q. DJ and DJ I think had 35, 36 points together in the second half. You guys shot, what, 70-some percent in the second half. Anything at halftime tell you you could have that kind of offensive turnaround, particularly with those two guys?**

KEVIN KEATTS: We missed a lot of chippies in the first half. We left a lot of things on the rim. I counted myself about five missed layups. My assistant coaches were losing it. I was, like, relax, we're going to be fine. It's not like they're setting the world on fire offensively either.

We talked about defending. We talked about staying to the scouting report, and the ball will go in in the second half.

One of the things, DJ Burns didn't play a lot because he got his second foul, so we knew we had an advantage throwing the ball inside to him. They decided, which some teams do, not to double-team him, and obviously he shot 13 for 19 and had 29 points.

**Q. What did you see in DJ Burns when you recruited him from Winthrop? Obviously beyond the box score. How has he impacted this team? Obviously 29 points tonight, he has been productive, but I think his impact**

**maybe goes beyond the box score.**

KEVIN KEATTS: That's one of the better questions I've had asked in a long time. Typically I play with two forwards, a Ben and a Mo together. When DJ hit the transfer portal, I was like, man, I got to change. He changed me. I've never thrown the ball inside as much as I have in the last couple of years.

Great touch. Great footwork. Last year one of his issues, he could pass the ball, but he didn't have a great assist-to-turnover ratio, and now he is doing that.

It's changed the way I look at post guys now. There's probably only three of those in the country, and I know we're going to play a really good one next week at some point.

I'm looking for some more guys that I can throw the ball inside. I've now found out that I can have a mix of throwing the ball to a post guy and having guard play.

I mean, tremendous personality. I've recruited him since basically when he went to Tennessee out of high school. And obviously when he went into the portal, we looked at everybody in the portal, and we needed some size. He fits the bill.

I'm glad he's here. I'm glad he's on my team. I don't know how you guard him. I'm excited, and I hope nobody figures that out.

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