

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Alabama vs North Carolina

Wednesday, March 27, 2024

Los Angeles, California, USA

Crypto.com Arena

Alabama Crimson Tide

Coach Nate Oats

Jarin Stevenson

Nick Pringle

Mark Sears

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We have Alabama head coach Nate Oats.

NATE OATS: Our guys are excited. I thought our practice was locked in. North Carolina is one of the best teams in the country, deservedly so. They've got a lot of talented guys. We've got our hands full.

Our defense has to be a lot better than it's been most of the year. I thought we had a good defensive game against Grand Canyon. Our offense wasn't very good. We're going to need both of them together playing well in order to beat North Carolina. I do like where our guys' heads are at.

Latrell is being re-evaluated by the medical staff every day, and he's basically on a day-to-day basis now. I'm not sure if he'll be available or not. They'll let us know tomorrow. Other than that, we're healthy. Obviously Davin's out.

But I think our guys are locked in. Should be a fun game. North Carolina likes to get up-and-down the floor, as do we. So it's going to be a pretty fast-paced game, I would think.

We're going to have to do a good job on Bacot. We've played some of the best bigs in the country, so we've had some experience. We've played Edey, Ballo, Caulkner (phonetic) back to back. Played PJ Hall at Clemson. Played Tolu Smith at Mississippi State. We've played



some of these bigger guys. Some we've guarded better than others. We will have to have a plan for Bacot.

Then obviously RJ Davis is one of the best scorers in the country. Him and Sears are 11th and 13th, they're right there together. He's super talented.

You can't just have a game plan for Bacot. You've got to plan for Davis. Cormac Ryan hit seven 3s against (indiscernible), he was 7-of-9 from 3 against us when he was at Notre Dame. Ingram just went 5-of-6 from 3 last game. They've got multiple guys that can shoot it, score it inside. That's why they're the Number 1 seed.

We've got our hands full. We know it. I think our guys are locked in and ready to go.

Q. Dioubate had some really good minutes for you the last game. Has he earned more playing time? What do you think of the minutes he's had for you guys?

NATE OATS: No, he has. He's been tough, physical. His attitude's been great. We always know, if we put him in, we can get some toughness. We've got to find a way to get him some minutes.

We like to have shooting on the floor, and it's not one of his strong suits. He was shooting well in practice today. But he's easier to pair with like Grant at the 5 maybe. Then you still only have one non-shooter on the floor.

But like his toughness, physicality, kind of his will to win -- yeah, he's probably earned some more minutes. We've just got to figure out ways to get him. And based on how Wrightsell is, Wrightsell has been cleared to play before and then hasn't played that many minutes. So even if he can play, if he doesn't play that many minutes there going to be minutes available for Mo to pick up.

Q. Today was the day five years ago that you were announced officially as the head coach of Alabama. To look back, and just kind of talk about your five years and how special it's been, obviously the contract extension and what this has meant to not just you, but your family.

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NATE OATS: Didn't realize, March 27th it was, huh?

Q. You were announced that day and then introduced the day after, I believe.

NATE OATS: One week after my oldest daughter's birthday. She didn't like -- it wasn't a very good birthday present for her to move her from Buffalo to Alabama. It's turned out to be pretty good. She loves it in Alabama now. Lexie is a sophomore at the university. Lexie and Jos will be here for the game tomorrow. We've come to love Alabama.

I think we've gotten the program turned around. I think we've been able to do what Greg hired us to do. Let's get this basketball program on a national level, like about every other sports program at Alabama is.

We still haven't gotten to a Final Four. To me, that's kind of the next step. So got to win tomorrow to get a chance to win another game to get to the Final Four. Making a Final Four is not easy. You've got to beat some good teams. You've got to upset some teams.

Somebody gave me a good stat the other day. I think there's been four teams in the country that have been in three out of the last four Sweet 16s. I think it's accurate. I think it's us, Gonzaga, which has made nine straight, which is crazy -- it's us, Gonzaga, Houston, who we've had a series with, and Creighton. Pretty good company.

I think over the five years since we were hired, we've gotten this program to a level that is what Alabama sports should have their athletics at. Now we've got to make another step.

We've got to get this team locked in, really ready to go against Carolina. I'm super grateful to Greg and Dr. Bell and (indiscernible) St. Jean (phonetic) and the whole board. They've been super supportive. I'm appreciative that they gave me a new contract and want to keep me around. In this business, sometimes they don't want to keep you around for very long. I think we've done well enough they want to keep us here and keep this thing rolling.

Q. My second one, we were out here, I believe it was two years ago in San Diego. When you see Cormac Ryan, I know you mentioned it, but, oh boy --

NATE OATS: That was not one of our better NCAA Tournament games. He killed us. I think he was 7-of-9 from three. I think he scored 29 points on us. That was the game that Quinerly blew his ACL out in the first couple

minutes. So it didn't -- he was playing really well for us. That's the only time I've been at Alabama that we haven't made a Sweet 16 that they've had an NCAA Tournament.

They didn't have the tournament my first year, with COVID. And then these last four years we've made a Sweet 16 three of those years. That was the one.

We tried to recruit him when he went in the portal. The kid destroys you like that, it would be good to add him to the roster. We were not successful in our recruitment of him. He picked another pretty good basketball program, and here we go. So we've got to try to figure out how to stop him a second time.

Q. You're back in the Sweet 16 with three returners from last year, and you're facing a program that's got a unique blend of experience and talent. When you look at these two teams, what do you think it is about the composition of players that helped you guys get to this point in this landscape?

NATE OATS: We had three returning players from last year, so it's not many, but we're in the transfer portal when that happens. Those three guys got good experience, Mark and Rylan and Nick.

Then we were able to add in some really good freshmen that have contributed. We talked about Mo Dioubate earlier, and Jarin Stevenson, who's from Chapel Hill. So this is a little bit of a meaningful game for him. Sam Walters has been good for us.

Those three guys, and then we were able to add some transfers that have really helped keep this program at a pretty high level. Estrada has kind of been that do-it-all guard that's been great for us. Had a triple double. Grant's been good for us. Wrightsell's been really good for us.

I think we've got a pretty good mix of a lot of new guys in to keep this program up to where, you know, we're not the Number 1 overall seed like last year, but you don't get Brandon Miller every year either.

I thought we got some pretty good replacements in to keep us at a pretty high level to where we're in the Sweet 16 and we've got a shot to make the second -- Alabama has only been to one Elite Eight ever, and that's the farthest they've ever gone. If we can win one more game, we kind of equal that, and then give ourselves a shot to try to make the first Final Four ever there.

Q. Do you talk to Pringle and say, this is the game? You've got a really good big man to go up against, is



this the game where can show himself? He showed himself last week, but is this the game to kind of bring you guys to the Elite Eight?

NATE OATS: I think Nick's been great in the NCAA Tournament -- leadership, effort, intensity, focus. When he's that way, he's good.

I had a meeting with all of our bigs, first film session we had in Carolina and kind of made the point to them, listen, we've played some of the best bigs in the country. It's great we put a schedule together that you guys were able to test. The issue is we haven't done all that well.

We had Nick and Wague foul out three straight games. We've got to guard the big without fouling and keep you guys in the game, do a better job. I expect those guys to lock into film study and be a little better.

I think Nick's been great the last week. He's battling a foot injury, but at this point in the year, if you're healthy, it probably means you're not playing any minutes. I think everybody is banged up this point of the year.

I think his mindset is right. Bacot is one of the best bigs in the country. If we can do pretty well on Bacot and still have a decent amount of points. I think he's scored over 2,300 points. That's a lot of points in his career. He's a pretty good player.

Q. Coach, it's been discussed locally, but you didn't lose -- you didn't only lose a lot of players, you lost three assistants at this time last year to head-coaching opportunities. I'd just be curious what last April was like for you. And now that you're on the other side, did you ever envision this group, as you're making phone calls and all of this stuff, could be in this position, obviously third straight Sweet 16 in four years?

NATE OATS: It was great in some regards because you get to see your three assistants that have been with you for four years get the opportunity to go be their own head coach, which is why -- kind of the ultimate goal of an assistant. So you're really close to Bryan, Charlie and Antoine. They've kind of been in the wars with you for four years and now they get to run their own programs. I'm super happy for them. But maybe not all at the same time?

If it comes up, we're the Number 1 team in the country, so that helps. We've got a saying, when the tide rises, all the boats rise. Usually with the players to get them to realize, when you win, you all get taken care of. But it applies to the staff, too.

So while I was really happy, it did cause some stress.

Charlie and Bryan had their jobs, and then the day that Pettway got his, I all of a sudden realized, I have no assistants anymore.

We started to make some hires. I talked to Coach Pannone a little bit, but he still had the NBA season going. Talked to a couple other guys in the NBA that maybe wanted to get into college. Talked to Preston, had to sort through some issues on him.

I interviewed a handful of guys when I'd been at the Final Four myself. And then all of a sudden I had to make some decisions. I'm at zero. At least until Antoine left, I had one. To have zero assistants and realize you've got to replace all these players, I've got to get going.

When Pannone said he wanted to do it, that's great. He still had to finish the NBA season. Preston had to wait until his show-cause was up. So I got Claunch in, who had been a head coach, and a think I did really good job.

Although I think I did a pretty good job with the hiring. And now I've got to go hire some more because Claunch already got a job, again, which is great because he deserves it.

I think, to put the roster together that we did speaks volumes to our staff, to our system. To be able to hire the guys in that I did speaks to the level of basketball we've got in this program too. Yeah, and we only had three returning players and no returning assistant coaches.

Now, you're able to put two more guys on the floor (indiscernible) recruit, so Bauman's been with me for a while. So we were able to have one, some continuity with a guy on the floor that's been with me.

I think our staff did a great job. We did a pretty good job hiring, and the administration was great in helping me hire the right guys and keeping this program up to a pretty high level.

Q. I know you mentioned earlier that you guys played one of your best defensive games in a while. How do you guys balance that and maintain that level of defensive intensity while also maintaining the top scorer in offense in the country as well?

NATE OATS: I told them we don't have to forget about offense when we play great defense. You can put both together. The Grand Canyon game, I've had people compare it to a rugby contest, football contest. It got a little rough, physical.

I like the fact that our guys matched their physicality and



stayed in it and didn't quit and showed a lot of character. But, yeah, it would be nice if our offense -- take care of the ball, make shots like we've been.

We're going to need both. I honestly in the past have felt like, when we've played our best defensive games with other teams, even this team, you can get out in transition more when you're getting stops. So a great defense should help your offense in theory.

Now, again, when it was as physical as it was and guys had to get used to the officiating and what was going to be called, what wasn't going to be called, that might have had some affect on the offense.

I think North Carolina is a pretty physical team, though too, which they've got a pretty good defense. We've got to get our offense back, we know that. We're not going to be able to hold Carolina to 60 points. That's not really who we are, and that's definitely not who they are.

We're going to have to get an offense that's clicking like the No. 1 offense in the country in order to have a chance to win this game. So we've made that point. We're putting a little more time in on our offensive side, trying to figure out how to attack them.

Now, they're not easy to figure out how to attack. They've got really good rim protection. They've got good guards. They've got smart players. They're good. But we are putting some time in on the offensive side of the ball too.

THE MODERATOR: Coming up here we'll have student-athletes Mark Sears, Jarin Stevenson and Nick Pringle. Do we have any questions for the student-athletes?

Q. Nick, just one of the best bigs you're going to be going up against. Do you feel like you're ready to rise to the challenge tomorrow on a national stage?

NICK PRINGLE: Yes, most definitely. I feel like our coaching staff, they put a lot of work and time into getting us prepared for moments like this. We played a lot of games to prepare us for this moment.

Six of these teams we lost to previously in the season, so I feel like getting back to that and watching film, having more intent and getting better, mentally tougher, that will eventually help us with our end goal.

Q. Mark and Nick, you guys were both around last season for the quadruple-overtime game against North Carolina. What do both of you guys remember about kind of going through that game and the energy

needed and everything like that? What do you remember about last year's game?

MARK SEARS: That game right there was a war, man. Four overtimes. After the first two overtimes it was like, man, when is this thing going to end?

It was definitely a fun matchup, you know, especially for most of the same players being on the team we're going to go against. So we're looking forward to that matchup, and it's going to be a really fun game.

NICK PRINGLE: I would probably say that was definitely one of the longest games that I've been a part of. I didn't necessarily play that much that game, but I had a role where I had to bring energy and talk up players and make sure everybody was locked in for the right moment.

Q. Mark, when you guys are on the national stage, thousands of people are watching you. They're also watching and learning about your family. There was a thing with your mom. She shoots the free throw with you. What's it been like for your family, that experience, and her being on the national stage as well?

MARK SEARS: They're just soaking it all in. My mama, she's very energetic. She has a lot of passion for the game. It's just a blessing for her to be able to see the outcome of her being so supportive of me throughout the years.

Q. If Latrell is not able to play tomorrow, just how much does that affect the starting lineup and what you guys do?

NICK PRINGLE: I honestly think Latrell will be fine. I think we'll still have a great game plan, if he plays or not. I think he will definitely play. But I think we'll still have a great game plan. We have a lot of great players and a lot of great coaches that can make adjustments and be able to make it happen.

Q. Jarin, I know for you being a North Carolina guy and things like that, I know you considered UNC a little bit. How much did you, I guess, kind of watch North Carolina growing up? And then obviously having the opportunity to play against them tomorrow, just kind of your initial thoughts and feelings about that.

JARIN STEVENSON: I watched quite a bit of North Carolina basketball. I was 10 minutes away from their campus. So I watched quite a bit. I know a lot of their coaches, a lot of their players. Yeah, it's definitely surreal, just a full-circle moment for sure playing North Carolina.

Q. Alabama's never been to more than the Elite Eight. How many times have you guys heard that? And how much do you want to change that and get to the Final Four?

NICK PRINGLE: That's something Coach Oats, he expresses to us a lot. He always preaches the importance of these games. Every moment matters. Every possession matters. The best thing we can do here is lock in, have intent, better our communication, just be the best we can possibly be as players.

And the coaches, they do so much for us to help us prepare for moments like this, like I said. I think the outcome of it will just say the rest of it.

Q. Mark, you've taken a huge offensive leap from last year to this year. What do you think has really contributed to that? And how have you kind of taken on a lead role as a scorer and (indiscernible)?

MARK SEARS: I would say really having that motivation from last year when we were the No. 1 seed and we got upset by San Diego State. And just having that feeling of, man, it was basically disappointing because we were the No. 1 seed and wanted to win the whole thing.

Just having that motivation through the whole off-season, just constantly putting in the work and hours. No matter when I'm tired, just continuing to fight through it and be mentally tough. I just had that mindset throughout the whole off-season.

I couldn't have done it without my teammates right here. They're really great teammates. I wouldn't be myself without these guys.

Q. Mark, looking at RJ Davis and obviously the season he's having this year, when you look at him on film, what do you kind of identify as some of the things that make him either difficult to guard, or what kind of allows him, from your vantage point, to be successful on the court?

MARK SEARS: He's a great player. He's a really great shot maker, tough shot maker. That's something that he's really great at.

Q. For all three student-athletes, what do you think are the keys for tomorrow's game for victory?

MARK SEARS: I'm going to say one would be defensive rebounding.

JARIN STEVENSON: I think just getting out and getting back to our offense. I feel like we struggled offensively these last few games. Just getting back to that, getting out at a fast pace. I feel like that's the big key for sure.

NICK PRINGLE: Something I would definitely say, picking up where we left off last game defensively. It's something we kind of struggled with throughout the year. I feel like last game we showed our true potential of what we really could be.

Just having intent about everything, watching film, and just trying to find ways to continue to grow as a team and allow our defense to lead to our offense. Just play for each other.

We've all got a lot in common. We want the same things. It's just a matter of how much do we want it and what we're going to do to get it.

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