

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

Friday, March 29, 2024

Los Angeles, California, USA

Crypto.com Arena

Alabama Crimson Tide

Coach Nate Oats

Aaron Estrada

Grant Nelson

Rylan Griffen

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference

Q. Aaron, can you talk about Grant's play a little bit? And you had a really good game as well. Seems like it's obviously do or die at this point for you and your basketball career as well. That's got to be exciting to be in the Elite Eight now.

AARON ESTRADA: Grant's performance yesterday was historical, I feel like. And by the numbers, too. He was the fourth player to have 24 points, 12 rebounds and five blocks. That's super big-time for him. I'm happy for him.

He kind of took over late in the second half like we needed him to. Everybody on our team pretty much knew he was capable of that. And just, like I said, just to see it happen in March, probably the biggest game of his career throughout his college career so far. I was really happy to see that from him.

And for myself, I just tried to stay aggressive and just take what the defense was giving me. Yes, it feels good to be in the Elite Eight.

Q. Rylan, you put great defense on RJ Davis, ACC Player of the Year, First-team All-American. What was your mentality going into the game with that?

RYLAN GRIFFEN: Don't just let him get going. It was a team effort, I feel like. It was just me. I feel I got help from all my teammates. Made it hard on him. He's a great scorer. I had to study a little extra for him.

But just knowing that he's the ACC Player of the Year and



taking the challenge, knowing that, I think they pretty much beat us in every other category. He just had a game that he normally doesn't have. So I feel like that held him back a little bit and we were able to get the win.

Q. Are you always up for the challenge to do that?

RYLAN GRIFFEN: Oh, yeah, I just guard whoever Coach puts me on. I'm ready to guard whoever they put me on.

Q. Grant and Rylan, the last two games have been really tight until the final minutes. You finished strong both times. What allowed you to do that?

GRANT NELSON: I think all the preparation up to this point, especially our non-conference schedule had a big part of that. We scheduled playing against some of the best bigs and best guards in the nation.

I think even though we lost those games, we learned a lot. And I think like this is the best time of the year we can come together, and we have these past two games.

Q. The tight games, the last two, you finished up strong. What's allowed that?

RYLAN GRIFFEN: Just staying together, being a team. We have already been through adversity before. Like he said, those six losses we've already seen adversity multiple times. So we know how to handle it a lot better.

And it's win or go home now. Back then, it was, like, we knew we were going to be playing another game. Now we either fix it right now or the season's over with and we'll be in the locker room sad. So just knowing that and playing for each other, helping us close these games out.

Q. You played Clemson before. What do you remember about that game, it was in November? When you're preparing for tomorrow night, do you go back and look at that game or do you care more about the recent games recently here in the tournament?

GRANT NELSON: I think there's a lot to learn from the last time we played them, like, I think we fronted the post a little



too much. Gave them too many angles, their bigs. And then we let their shooters get hot.

So I think we've got a lot to learn, but also I mean that was the beginning of the season, and I feel like a lot has changed for them. The same with us.

We're definitely going to make some changes on the scouting report. And I think we're going to do our best to do what we can to stop their best players from getting hot.

Q. Alabama is primarily a football school. Everybody knows Alabama as a school that's winning national championships on the football field. Now as basketball team, you guys have something to do with that -- no basketball team at Alabama has ever done before. What does it mean to have the Crimson Tide make its first Final Four in school history?

RYLAN GRIFFEN: It would mean a lot, just be probably legends on campus. They always say where legends are made. Making the Final Four would be -- we would be a historic team in Alabama history. Being a part of that would be great.

It's not going to be easy, for sure. Like Clemson is a great team. So in order for us to get that, we're going to have to work really, really hard and play really, really hard and a really, really good game tomorrow. Focus on the game first and then all that other stuff comes after.

AARON ESTRADA: I kind of just agree with what Rylan's saying. We're more so just trying to focus on the game right now. Just look at the history behind it and everything after that.

Q. Aaron and Rylan, about Grant, what does his game do for the team? How does it open up things for everybody else?

AARON ESTRADA: I think Grant is a very versatile player. He showed yesterday he could shoot the 3 off the dribble, off the catch. He can take it in the post. He can drive. So I think for us and our offense it kind of just opens it up for everybody else, especially when he gets going because we have so many great shooters on our team.

So if they did start doubling or helping or whatever they wanted to do, we have a counter for it in every aspect.

Q. Rylan?

RYLAN GRIFFEN: For Grant, it's definitely like playing with Chuck the first year, Grant a different year. They're two different bigs defensively. Grant is a great mobile big.

He can switch on the guards. Like yesterday he switched onto RJ Davis, made two big plays, tattooed big stops.

That's something that wasn't Chuck's strengths but it's Grant's strengths. We play to Grant's strengths on defense. He's a big-time defender. He had five blocks. He's in the company with Tim Duncan a lot of other hall of famers. He's been great defensively lately, and he's got a big challenge tomorrow, but we know he's going to meet the challenge and accept it.

Q. For Trelli this was kind of a homecoming, back to California. Hasn't been able to play. What have you said to him, and where is he at mentally?

RYLAN GRIFFEN: I talked to him. He said he wants to play. But he also wants us to win. So he doesn't want to do anything -- he's handling his business with the doctors day-to-day or whatever. He's just watching right now, but he's been a great coach on the sidelines.

He's not playing, and, of course, he wants to play, but he's been a great coach on the sideline for us and getting us hyped and being a great teammate. Even though he's not playing, we still feel his presence all over the court.

Q. You already talked about playing Clemson earlier this season. Is there any or a little bit of revenge factor in this game? Or is it all more what you all can accomplish reaching a Final Four?

AARON ESTRADA: I think as us being competitors, there's definitely a revenge factor. Nobody wants to lose to a team twice, especially who you think you can beat. So I think that's just going to add even more fuel to us, and it's going to make us play harder.

Q. Aaron, when you entered the transfer portal, you're a two-time conference player of the year, was there any difficulty in adjustment where one night you can be the guy who is putting up 20, and another you need to be the guy who is the defensive stopper. Was it difficult at all going from being the guy that your team was focused around to being part of the whole sort of overall the five?

AARON ESTRADA: I don't think it was difficult. I think I adjusted pretty well. And I would say I'm a winner at the end of the day. I just want to win. So whatever the team needed me to do, whether to score that night, rebound, get assists, play defense, I'm going to do it. I think coming to Alabama was an easy adjustment for me.

Q. Grant, what's life been like since last night? Are they partying at Devils Lake? Are you getting bombed



with text messages? What's happening?

GRANT NELSON: A lot of love coming from Devils Lake and North Dakota as a whole, which is amazing. Even before this game just making it to the tournament and winning the first two games I've been getting a lot of love even though I feel like I didn't perform how I should have. I feel like I let my teammates down. But, yeah, a lot of love from North Dakota.

Q. Grant, just that first match-up against Clemson, what kind of match-up problems does Hall and Schieffelin present for you?

GRANT NELSON: They can both get rebounds, which hurt us last time. They're both physical, and I think our scouting report wasn't perfect. We didn't follow it how we should have. We got a lot of adjustments to make. We're still kind of learning our role defensively as a team, and I think we've grown a lot especially in these past three games. I think that will help going into this game.

Q. What happened in the last Clemson game that you'd like to see a turnaround? You mentioned the rebounding. Any other facets of the game you'd like to reverse?

RYLAN GRIFFEN: I would say we need to just guard the post a little bit better and we can't let the shooters come off of screens as easy as they did and hit 3s. They were playing as good as anybody in the country at the time when they beat us.

And they had a little fallback, but now they're back to playing like that team that we played earlier in the season, and so we've just got to make adjustments from that game. I think that's a good game to go back and watch because it was against us; we already played them already. We should use that to our advantage.

We lost, so we obviously made a bunch of mistakes. So just watching that game and make sure that we don't make those same mistakes and we come away with a win this time.

Q. Rylan or Aaron, Clemson, they really slowed down Arizona, made it more of a grind-it-out kind of game. I know you played a real high octane offensive game last night but against GCU, it was a more scrappy, physical game. Can that game prepare you guys for what you'll face against Clemson?

AARON ESTRADA: Yeah, I think it can definitely prepare us, but I ultimately think it comes down to us getting stops. I think that's what really creates our pace, and when we

play fast is when we get stops. If we're able to continue to get stops, we'll be able to run on anybody that we play against.

Q. You all had a pretty good night shooting. Why was that? Did you like those rims? The lighting? What was the reason y'all shot so well?

RYLAN GRIFFEN: We were getting good shots. We shoot a lot in shoot-around. We know we're going to have to shoot 3s in the game. And you know, it's just confidence. I feel like when you shoot a lot of shots in the offseason, during the season and even right now, to shoot these type of shots in these type of games and make them, I think it's just a confidence thing with us. Obviously everybody on the team, we feel like when they shoot the ball it's going to go in. So just everybody having that confidence to be able to make shots.

NATE OATS: We're excited to be in the Elite Eight. Never been to a Final Four at Alabama. Neither has Clemson, I guess. Two schools trying to get to their first one. I think everybody will be amped up, ready to play.

We're trying to get healthy. You guys saw Pringle limping around. He's had a heel bruise he's been fighting through the year and that fired up. He's getting treatment all day. Hopefully we can get him back.

Wrightsell continues to be evaluated by the doctor and trainer. He's day to day. And other than that, other than Cosby being out with a fracture in his foot we should be healthy.

Clemson, we played them in the non-conference. They were good. We didn't play well. They played well. We've got to do a lot better.

They're going to make adjustments from the first game. We're going to make adjustments. They were way too comfortable shooting it. They shot over 50 percent from 3 when we played them at our place. And particularly in the second half they were 8-of-11. We've got to do a better job with their shooters.

I thought we did a good job last night with Carolina's shooters, making sure their main shooters didn't get loose for free 3s.

So a short night because -- or a long night, however you want to look at it, not much sleep, long night, not a lot of sleep. Trying to get ready, but I think our players were locked in when we went through video. And we'll have a short, light practice here this afternoon and try to get them rested. And I think fresh legs, fresh minds is important for



the game tomorrow.

Q. Do you like that you played this team before? Do you think that's an advantage or a disadvantage that they have tape on you?

NATE OATS: They have tape on us. We have tape on them. I don't mind it. We've told our players, from game 1 to game 2, who is going to make the best adjustments. Sometimes we did, sometimes we didn't.

I thought we did play better against Mississippi State the second time around, and even the first time we won both. I thought we improved from the first time we played Tennessee to the second time. Wasn't enough to beat them. But they're a really good team.

Auburn wasn't -- we didn't. So there's some of the times we made better improvements from game 1 to game 2. We're definitely going to need to be the one to make improvements this game because they were significantly better than we were at our place.

We didn't handle their physicality well. I think we're playing better, handling physicality more. North Carolina was a physical team. I thought we did a good job handling that one.

So this is one that I'm glad we played them early so our players have some idea of the physicality and how good their bigs are, because their bigs hurt us a lot inside and their guards hurt us too. We didn't do a good job taking away their best players. I thought Hall and Girard and Hunter all got off on us pretty good the first time.

Q. Talking to the players a little bit about whether they view this as a revenge game, Aaron said, as a competitor, that's part of it. Is that something you're using as motivation for this game? Or is being the first team to get to the Final Four in program history motivation enough?

NATE OATS: We'll use whatever we can at this point, whatever we think resonates with our players. But I think as a competitor if you've got some pride, you got embarrassed on your home court earlier in the year. And you've got a chance to redeem it on a neutral floor. I think that would be a little extra motivation for you right there.

But Clemson's also trying to make their first Final Four. I think they'll be extra motivated. You can't just rely on being motivated because the other team is going to be motivated too. We have to be locked in a scouting report, focused, detail oriented -- things we've been good here at the tournament maybe we lacked during the course of the year

at different times.

Q. I was asking the players about the strong finishes you guys have had the last two games and what's allowed you to do it. And Rylan pointed out, it's not happened within our conference schedule and to learn from that. What has your team learned? How have you been able to put it together the last two games?

NATE OATS: We try to talk through what did we learn from every game. I talked to our players -- when we got here late before the NCAA Tournament started -- what have we learned from the losses, particularly? Like they're not failures if you learn from them. There's lots of things in life that don't go the way you want them to go, and if you learn from it it can be a win even if it was a lost moment.

But one of the big things was our last eight minutes, last 12 minutes of the games, we weren't good in the non-conference. We were tired. We made bad decisions. We folded. We collapsed.

So I took that timeout, about eight minutes we had the media timeout shortly after that. Both those timeouts, I think the energy was, like, we've got to go now. Instead of being down, they made a little run there.

RJ Davis got going a little bit. They took the lead. I thought our guys showed a lot of resilience. We talked to them that sometimes you're going to do things right and the other team will make tough shots. And you've just got to go the next play.

Like, let's quit dwelling on it, not feeling sorry for ourselves, go to the next play. The last play should have no impact on the next play. And I think we've done a pretty good job moving on to the next play, especially at the end of the games, just figuring out a way to get some wins.

Q. You're at of school that's always going to be associated with football, with the amount of success it's had on the football field. You mentioned you have a chance to go to the first Final Four in school history. And this is your second Elite Eight in school history. What does it mean for Alabama basketball and what could it mean to go to its first Final Four?

NATE OATS: We've got two schools like that -- Alabama and Clemson playing in L.A. Most people would think we're out here playing in the Rose Bowl. The basketball Rose Bowl.

I think it will be huge because we came in and Alabama football is obviously the best football program in the country, (indiscernible) college football. In my opinion,

they've got all sorts of national championships. But multiple sports have won national championships at Alabama. The athletic department as a whole is a championship-level athletic department.

We need to get men's basketball up to the level that a lot of other sports are at. So if you could make the Final Four -- obviously winning the national championship's the biggest thing but the Final Four is huge in men's basketball.

If you can get to a Final Four and put yourself on that stage, I think we've been able to recruit some higher level players. Players want to play here. We've won two SEC regular seasons, two SEC tournaments since we've been here. We've won a lot. But we've never been to a Final Four.

So making a Final Four would be very big for the program, would show that we're competing with all of the best programs in the country for the biggest thing. You're trying to win a national championship. Final Four is that step right before winning a national championship, and we haven't been to a Final Four yet.

So this would be the biggest win in the history of Alabama basketball if we can pull it off. And I think our players understand the enormity of the game. And I think their preparation, their effort will match their understanding of how important this game is.

Q. Last night you were talking about the challenges of game planning on a quick turnaround from a Thursday game to a Saturday game. We had the pleasure of having some of your grad students sitting behind us. I think they were the loudest, most locked-in people during that game. What role or responsibilities do those guys have in helping you get ready for a team like Clemson? And in game what's their role? Because seemed like they were hype men, they really knew Carolina's playbook from what I could overhear. Curious what role they have for you guys.

NATE OATS: We rely on our GAs a lot. And they're good. They help with a lot. They help put the scouting, they help the assistant in charge of the scout put the video together. So they're working ahead because I'm not going to look at the next team until we are done playing the current team.

But they are. They're working ahead all the time. They've got everything ready to hand to the assistant in charge of it when they need to. Goes from everything, trying to listen to the video with the sound up, trying to get play calls off the sound. And looking at hand signals to get play calls.

They've got all in their head. They try to teach it to

everybody, but they know it pretty well.

In the course of the game we chart a lot of things, offensive and defensive efficiency. They're charting that. Paint touches, different things we've got -- I get an offensive sheet, a defensive sheet, a blue-collar sheet and the general stats. I've got four sheets of paper in my hand every timeout, and they're responsible for three of those four -- the offensive, defensive and the blue-collar one.

So the GAs, along with our regular undergrad managers, do a lot of work for us.

It's cool that everybody's super invested in wins and losses from your head coach down to your managers, to everybody in the program. I think we've got that. I think it's part of the reason we've been winning at the level we've been winning over the last four years because you've got everybody in the program super invested in winning and losing. And it's nice you're able to sit by some of them that aren't even on the bench and they're super invested in winning and losing.

Q. We talk about your players or how you as a staff help them to understand the moment and deal with everything that they're in right now. But how do you personally manage the moment when it's a new experience for you as well?

NATE OATS: That's a good question. Kind of takes me back to when I was interviewing with Danny White to get my first head-coaching job in Division I. And Keith Dambrot had been running the league at the MAC in Akron, and he made the tournament at Duquesne this year and he's going to retire. He's a great coach.

You asked me the question, when you look down and you see coach Dambrot, look, it's my five players against his five players. It's not me against him. It's the same thing. We coached against some pretty good coaches in our league, coached against some pretty good coaches.

At the end of the day the ball goes up. I'm coaching my five guys on the floor, and I've got to prepare myself to coach the five guys on the floor and the guys on the bench.

And I've done that a hundreds of times as a high school coach. You kind of lose yourself in the game and start coaching.

How do I prepare myself? I didn't have to do all this at Romulus, but I coached a few hundred games at Romulus. And when the ball goes up it's not that much different. There's a few more cameras on me around here and a few more people in the stands. My players need to feel the

energy coming from me. They need to know that I know what I'm doing. So I have to prepare myself so I'm the most prepared coach going in and they know it and they've got confidence in that. I've got to sell them on the fact we're the most prepared team because our guys always go into games with a ton of confidence, knowing we got the scouting report down. They've just got to execute it and play hard. That's what I do.

After the season's over, if we can win another game and you understand that you made a Final Four, there will probably be time to relax and reminisce on it and think about how great it was.

But right now we have got to win another game. This doesn't happen very often -- we only have been to one other Elite Eight in the history of Alabama, that was 20 years ago. You don't want to take this for granted.

I told my players -- Coach Saban calls it rat poison all the time. If you wanted you can get on your phone and look at social media and type your name in and see hundreds of people talking about how great you were.

But it has nothing to do with preparing to play the next game. I told them, if you want to get to a Final Four you've got to be disciplined enough to put that rat poison out, get locked in on what we need to do for the next 24 hours, be prepared to beat this team. Because anything else is a total distraction.

Like, every minute for the next 24 hours needs to go into recovery with the trainer -- and some of that's a nap and sleep; some of it is being with the trainer -- or preparation to win the game. Anything else, if you're not disciplined enough to stay off social media and not waste a bunch of time doing that, I don't know how serious you are about winning.

The same thing goes for me. I don't keep any social media on my phone during the season because I think it's -- nothing against you reporters or maybe it's people out there on Twitter that aren't reporters -- you win a game, you're the best thing ever; you lose a game and you're the worst coach. I can't live like this. I don't have social media on my phone during the season.

I can get on it on the computer if I choose. But you get on it, next thing you know you wasted an hour you should have been preparing for a team.

I've got to be disciplined to get myself ready to play. The players need to be disciplined to get themselves ready to play. And once the ball goes up, we've got 40 minutes of being locked in, super intense.

You can't -- I ask the players, why do you play? Well, why do I coach? I've got this competitive nature about me. You can't match that 40 minutes of competitiveness with anything else you do in life.

I love it. I've got to get myself ready to do it. And I don't think there's much else. I've got to get ready to coach this game just like (indiscernible) coach any other game.

Q. Building off of that, you're talking about kind of your coaching mindset there. Have there been any previous coaching mentors or peers of yours that have reached out to you, maybe a text or something, giving you some words of advice to give you that direction and tell your players like you just said?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I mean, Coach Saban's been good. The whole "next" deal kind of pulled off a conversation with him.

He texted me, the next play, next -- and he doesn't do much texting. I probably shouldn't even say he texts because I think he's not supposed to text.

But now that he's not coaching anymore, maybe he texts. If I wasn't supposed to tell anybody he texts, I apologize to Coach Saban. He did send me a short text. He's good with it. He's been great. He's a resource guy. He still has an office on campus. I'm going to use that resource.

I think he's the best team sports coach in the modern history of team sports and college athletics. Great to have there. And there's some other coaches. I don't know that I'd necessarily have mentors.

Obviously Bobby Hurley hired me. Bobby's been great. I'm friends with Danny. He's doing a great job. I haven't talked to them a whole lot. Danny is trying to get his own team to a Final Four. Doing a pretty good job, looks like.

But talked to some retired coaches. I made a couple of calls before the NCAA Tournament just to some coaches. I called Frank Martin, because South Carolina had, if you go back and look when they made their Final Four run, they were on a down-stretch. They had lost a few. We weren't playing our best basketball going into this tournament. Neither were they.

How do you get your mindset to change? I actually talked to Coach Boeheim, who did it twice at Syracuse, wasn't playing their best at the end of the regular season. ACC Tournament, got on a run, made the Final Four.

I reached out to those guys, and they were great. They

talked to me about the whole thing. But I was a high school coach. And then I coached for Bobby Hurley for two years and then became a head coach. I haven't really worked under -- it's been a long time other than the two years with Coach Hurley. He was great. He's been great to me. And Danny has been great to me.

But outside of those two years it's been a long time since I worked under somebody. It's kind of more older coaches that have been retired that you kind of reach out to or older coaches in the business.

I talked to Coach Izzo. He's been great to me when I was in Detroit. He was great to me. He talked to me about North Carolina just because they just played them. I knew I spent all kinds of times watching them practice. I really looked up to him when I was a high school coach in Detroit. And he was great. But a couple guys here and there.

Q. Ms. Tara)phonic) said Nick Saban sent his first email to her recently. You're clear.

NATE OATS: Texting and emailing.

Q. Technology savant now. I want to ask about, this is your 11th night on the road together. How have players handled that? Is there a benefit to that knowing if you went home early it would be the end of it for you this season?

NATE OATS: I hope they like being with each other. They want to spend a few more nights together on the road in a hotel.

They've gotten close. Leadership has been great. Guys pulling for each other. Shoot, you saw, when your best player all year, Mark Sears, almost sleep walks the 20 points on some nights.

He didn't get to 20 last night. He was as happy as anybody. He was telling me to run stuff for Grant Nelson late in the game.

I think guys get a little closer being with each other all the time. When they get close, and there's that Coach Murphy's word, Coach Murphy came in. Coach Murphy's been texting me with softball. He's been great. Taking on the whole Mudita (phonetic), he explained to our guys what Mudita means and we got shirts made, tried to make it our deal.

I think when you've spent this much time on the road, you kind of get to know each other, pull for each other better. We do this retreat before classes start in the fall in August,

which I think it's like 48 hours where you just stay together in one house.

Now we're not all in the same house. We're in the same hotel, and right down the hall from each other. But it's been good.

Like I said, I hope they want us to keep staying in a hotel together. If we get one more win we'll have another week together next week.

We're going home this time. We're not staying on the West Coast for three straight weeks. Win or lose we'll be back on Easter Sunday in Alabama, and then hopefully, if it's a win, then we'll turn back around and come out to the West Coast to go to Phoenix, if we're fortunate enough to be playing in Phoenix next weekend.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports