

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

Saturday, March 30, 2024

Los Angeles, California, USA

Crypto.com Arena

Alabama Crimson Tide

Coach Nate Oats

Jarin Stevenson

Aaron Estrada

Mark Sears

Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference

Alabama - 89, Clemson - 82

NATE OATS: I couldn't be more proud of a group of guys. We challenged them at the beginning of this tournament that we're going to have to pick up our defense, and our defense got significantly better.

And they've just been all about winning. I mean, nobody really cares who's scoring the points, and get a little frustrated and they just keep playing together. I mean, I've got multiple guys telling me to keep other guys in the game. And there's been no selfishness in this four-game run.

And different guys have stepped up throughout the deal. I mean, Jarin, shoot, season high in the biggest game of his life, hit big shot after big shot, made tough play after tough play. He grew up tonight. Shoot, 19 points on 11 shots is pretty efficient basketball. Super proud of Jarin.

And then Grant stepped up for us against Carolina, had the best game of his career. And Mo Dioubate, the game before that, had the best game of his career. We had different guys stepping up all the time.

And obviously Mark has been scoring at a really high level for us all year. He struggled early in this game. I knew it wasn't going to keep going the whole game. He was able to hang in there, hang in there. Kept getting stops.

They got up 13 on us. And after that we went on a big run to close the half to have a three-point lead.



And they made some runs on us in the second half. And it seemed like we just hit timely 3 after timely 3, whether it was Jarin or Rylan or Mark. Mark hit one, felt like it was from half court. And it was big 3 after big 3.

And Rylan's not up here but his defense on -- the last two games, RJ Davis and his defense on Girard, he's been really locked into these shooters that we know they're going to have actions for.

And Nick Pringle's leadership over these last four games has been the best Nick's played since he's been here.

Truly proud of these guys. We're going to enjoy it for a night, go enjoy Easter Sunday back in Tuscaloosa. And then figure out the plans when we're going to Phoenix.

Q. Jarin, you air balled a 3 in the first half when you guys were, like, 1-of-13 from long range. As a freshman, what gave you the confidence to keep on going and obviously turn things around in that second half?

JARIN STEVENSON: It's mainly just practice. I knew just from practice I can knock those shots down. I'm just focusing on the next shot. Even though, yeah, I air balled one or two 3s, just focusing on the next shot, really just helping me shoot better.

Q. To do something never been done in the long history of your program, what are you feeling now?

MARK SEARS: Just feeling a lot of emotions. Being from Alabama, the state of Alabama, and to do it with this group of guys, it's amazing.

Q. Coach talked about Jarin stepping up tonight. You've had different guys doing this the last three games. How big was he for you guys?

MARK SEARS: Like Coach said, he grew up tonight. We don't win this game without him. When Girard was going off from 3, Jarin hit 3 after 3 after 3 and kept us in the ball game. He was huge tonight.



AARON ESTRADA: I agree with Mark. Jarin, he grew up tonight. I kept telling throughout the game, I think he passed only one 3 I threw to him. I said, just shoot the ball. Be confident. You're built for this. You put the work in. He was shooting them and he started making them.

Q. Aaron and Mark, what does this say, a Final Four about the coach that's sitting next to you. He's a big-name coach but this is another level now. What does it say about him as a coach?

AARON ESTRADA: It's evident. He's just a great coach all around. He lost a lot from last year. Starting with the coaching staff. So just for him to rebuild a group like he got us, I think, like I said, it just goes to show how hardworking he is and how much of a competitor he is as well.

MARK SEARS: He gave us all the confidence in the world. When you're playing for a coach like this that he wants you to shoot open shots, if you pass up a wide-open shot you're going to hear about it when you go back to timeout.

Just playing for a coach that gives you the freedom within the system, it's something you would love to be around and play for.

Q. Mark, can you walk me through what it's like when you're in the moment when those 3s are going down? I could kind of see you. I know you're not looking at us in particular, but you're looking towards the crowd. You're blowing kisses, making all these faces. You're really enjoying the moment. What does it feel to be in that moment?

MARK SEARS: Even though it's intense we play the game because we have fun with it. To be in those moments you dream about it as a kid, and just to have fun with it because you remember, even though it's a business to go out there, we still gotta have to have fun with it.

Q. Mark, your mom told me a couple things. One, that you wrote down your goals on a yellow sheet of paper and that has followed you over the years. Could you tell me about that? The other thing she said was when you were struggling, you were at Ohio and just couldn't find your way back. She said you had the vision you were going to take the long road and it brought you some inner peace. Could you tell me about what those two things have meant to you getting here?

MARK SEARS: Coming out of high school, I wasn't highly recruited. My parents, they kept encouraging me to never

give up and stay focused, put God first. I just put the work in, trusted God, and now I'm here. That's really all I can say.

Q. Jarin, the first game you played against Clemson, PJ Hall was able to do things against you. This time he was 6-for-14 and he fouled out. What changed in the mentality with him?

JARIN STEVENSON: Just working on my post defense and physicality. I'm working with Coach Dud, he taught me a few things, different things and holding my ground in the post and what to look out for. He taught me a lot of things. And working out with Hen, too, our strength coach. He got me stronger and ready for this moment.

Q. Your coaches talked a lot about mudita the last few days. How have you seen that vicarious enjoyment at work tonight?

AARON ESTRADA: I think that the mudita thing was probably the best thing that happened for this team, honestly, just because we have so many pieces on our team, and it's hard to be consistent at this level without any support.

Just knowing that you have your brothers behind you and everybody in our program behind you, I think it just helps on a mental level. And ultimately that helps you just play better down the stretch, I think.

JARIN STEVENSON: With my two air-ball 3s, my guys had my back. They wanted me to keep shooting. Every time I went to the bench, the guys are high-fiving me and having my back and cheering me on.

And every time I was on the bench we locked each other's arms and clapped and chant defense and stuff like that. I felt like it was there today.

NATE OATS: I was distracting him. He wants to talk about mudita. I was telling him that he was the Most Outstanding Player of the tournament.

MARK SEARS: Mudita, ever since we first heard of it when conference play started, it really stuck with us and really changed our season around, because we started out 6-5. And we heard the word mudita, and that changed our season around, because you could see it on our face cheering for others when they're succeeding even though we're not succeeding.

It changed us around. It really helped us win this Final Four because of mudita.

Q. What's been a memorable moment so far just going on this run?

AARON ESTRADA: I would say for me, personally, just making the tournament. I've been in college for five years, and this is my first NCAA Tournament. So I would just say the whole experience for myself is memorable.

JARIN STEVENSON: There's a lot of memorable moments so far. Again, I love Mo-D going off against Grand Canyon. That was very memorable, him getting rebounds and points, stuff like that, crashing hard.

And the last game with Grant Nelson, shooting the ball, knocking down shots, getting rebounds, hitting that and-one, put us up. I thought those were memorable.

MARK SEARS: Mine would be Jarin, he stepped up tonight. And we don't win this game without him making those timely 3s. And just seeing him do that and him maturing and growing up, that's really a memory. And being able to cut down those nets when the confetti came down and that's for sure another memory.

NATE OATS: J-Smooth, that's his nickname. He was smooth tonight.

Q. Aaron, when you're down 13, thoughts at that time in the first half? It's a long way to come back.

AARON ESTRADA: I think I credit our coaches and just like I said the whole mudita thing and next-play mentality. I think that, like I said, that was the best thing that probably happened to our team because, like I said, when you hit adversity in the game, it's easy to fold.

And when we're telling each other we've got each other's back and we're good and things like that, I think ultimately it just helps us go harder and play better.

Q. When someone like Nate Oats comes to you and says come to Alabama -- I know there's a lot of things; we can do this, we can do that -- but it happened. How does it feel to have it come true in the first year here?

AARON ESTRADA: It feels really good. I believed him from the first time I spoke to him, honestly. I believed the vision. The work was evident. He had the No. 1 seeded team in the country -- No. 1 in the country for a good portion of the year. I had no doubt. I think it was pretty easy for me to make my decision to come here.

Q. Aaron, after the UNC game you said that the haters were kind of your motivators for that game. Coming into this one, a little bit more swagger. What was the

motivation this time?

AARON ESTRADA: It's the same thing, man. They counted us out, really, from the very first game. And like I said, I've been doubted like my whole life, under-recruited, looked upon. And I think that it just added more fuel to everybody really.

They actually showed an edit before this game, too, of what everybody was saying about us. And I think that really, like I said, just fuels our fire even more when we play.

Q. Mark, how have you grown since you finally arrived here back at Alabama? How have you developed and what are your expectations?

MARK SEARS: Coming to Alabama, my expectation, I pretty much achieved most of them and just to be able to do it and being from the state of Alabama means the world to me.

Q. What I was asking Jarin about PJ Hall from the first to the second game, what the game plan was to fix what happened in the first game.

NATE OATS: We brought more doubles. We didn't double him enough the first game. We tried to front too much the first game. Gave him too many angles. We didn't want to front him. We wanted to stay between him and the rim, make him score over somebody.

He had the one when he spun baseline and got an angle. It was actually Grant Nelson's fourth foul. We didn't want him to do that. We wanted to keep a body between him and the rim, make him shoot over us.

They shot 18 non-rim 2s. They made 9-of-18, that's pretty good. But we were 1.29 on offense. We were 1.17 on D, 9-of-18 is just a 1.0, which if that's what they're going to be, even though that's a good percentage from non-rim 2s, it's enough for us to win. We thought our offense would be good enough.

We kept him from getting downhill, getting angles, brought doubles at appropriate times off of appropriate people. We weren't able to do it quite as much as we did with Carolina and Bacot, because they didn't have as many non-shooters out there.

We changed the game plan up from the first time because it wasn't very good the first time. This coaching staff didn't do a very good job getting this team ready the first time.

Our players weren't tough enough, but the coaching staff

needed to do a better job. We did a better job this time I thought.

Q. Given your journey, what's this mean to you to be at this point?

NATE OATS: I mean, it's surreal. You go back 11 years ago, and I won a state championship at (indiscernible) back in the Detroit area. It hasn't been that long. And Bobby Hurley gives me a chance. Obviously the Hurley family has got a lot of respect for high school coaches. Their dad's a hall of fame coach. And I caught a few breaks.

It's ironic I get to coach against Danny. I don't know if "get" is the correct word because they've got a pretty good team. But I'm in the Final Four and get to go against Danny who helped me get in this thing -- obviously Bobby is the one who hired me. But the two of those guys kind of came into college together and have been great to me the whole time.

But when I was a kid, a big basketball fan -- I'm going to date myself -- you had VHS tapes. I had every one of those "Shining Moments" labeled on a VHS tape so I could go back and watch that thing all summer.

Then you start to grow up in the coaching profession and you just want to be at the Final Four, be in the hotel lobby so I can see the big-name coaches that are there.

And somehow I caught enough breaks I'm coaching in one, which is unreal. Give hope to a lot of high school coaches tonight, that's for sure.

But I don't know if it's truly hit me yet. Probably won't hit me until after the Final Four is over because I'm going to enjoy it tonight and we've got to figure out how to beat UConn. They went on a 30-0 run I heard tonight. Is that correct? That's unheard of in the Elite Eight. That's crazy.

You guys at The Athletic wrote an article about Danny has the formula figured out. His formula is working out pretty well. I'm going to have to figure out that formula myself here soon.

Q. A little bit of a full-circle moment. We were in Birmingham. I asked you about being the 5 seed in the SEC going into the preseason. Obviously underdog going into this. What did you tell your players throughout the season to never give up, because you guys weren't the 1 seed going in and everything like that?

NATE OATS: I'm going to be honest, the last time they

picked us the fifth best team in the SEC we won the whole thing. So my plan was to win the whole thing. But didn't happen. We lost the game against Tennessee at home, which I thought we had a chance to win that. If we would have won that, we would have won the SEC again.

But they weren't far off because we finished tied for fifth -- tied for second, tied for fifth. There was a four-way tie there. We ended up with the 3 seed.

But for a team picked fifth, and really -- we haven't been healthy for a while. Like the last time we were fully healthy we beat Texas A&M, who has a really good team. Shoot, they almost beat Houston when Houston was healthy. We beat them by 25.

This turned out to be a pretty good team when we were healthy. For us to win these two games to go to a Final Four without Wrightsell, who was playing unbelievably well, as good as any guard we have, shows a lot about the character of the team. And Wrightsell was as good of an assistant coach as we had on the bench these last two games. He's been great.

But this team has come a long ways, the program, the staff. I've got three brand new assistants. I'm happy for the three assistants that left that helped lay this foundation for other people that have moved on that laid the foundation.

To be honest with you, some previous coaches, we walked into a pretty good talent pool. Avery did a pretty good job getting talent here. We were able to win in our second-year with the talent he brought in -- Herb, Petty, Reese.

So you don't want to ignore the fact that a pretty good foundation -- Greg Byrne knows what he's doing -- gives us everything we need to succeed. And here we are, in the school's first ever Final Four.

When I got the job, I thought before I ever took the job, Rick, my agent and me talked, and he said, look, they've got all the resources you need to be able to win at Alabama. We need to go get this job. I trust him. He knows what he's doing.

They do have all the resources you need to win. We put together a few good teams. You just need to keep knocking on the door.

Last year, overall No. 1 seed, we should have been in the Final Four, doesn't work that way. The best team doesn't always win because it's a one-game elimination tournament. You've got to be hot at the right time. And we



looked like we were not hot at the right time losing, what, four of our last six going into this tournament.

But our staff was good. We looked at some other teams that were similar to this. Syracuse did it twice. I called Jim Boeheim on that Sunday, like, what have we got to do? I talked to him, maybe it was that Saturday.

I called Frank Martin. South Carolina made a Final Four run when they weren't hot at the end of the year. I asked him what he did. I tried to pick the brain.

I called Coach Saban. What have we got to do. And he kind of gave me the "next" idea -- next, next, next.

So guys bought in. We can make this run. Other teams have done it. We have the capability to do it. We've got to get back to playing great defense -- or start to playing great defense; I don't know if "back" is the correct word.

But we can have the No. 1 offense in the country; we had it for the majority of the year. Let's put a top-20 defense together and we can make a Final Four. And I think we did that.

Q. How do you feel the run you guys have made now reaching the Final Four has vindicated the system that you run?

NATE OATS: That's a great question, because a lot of people question, can you win big in March shooting all the 3s you shoot. How many did we shoot tonight? For all the naysayers, is 36 too many?

16 out of 36 ain't bad. 48 points from the 3-point line ain't too bad. So, look, it's not -- here's the thing people don't understand: We're not trying to shoot 50 3s, we're trying to take the most efficient shots we can. So we're 1.29 today.

Our effective field goal percentage was pretty good. We took two non-rim 2s. We didn't finish at the rim as well as we should have. I thought we blew some easy layups we should have made in the first half.

Our analytics company -- got a third-party analytics company we use, they were here with us for this run -- they told me at the half, we were winning the game by 11 on expected value, expected points. Just keep doing what we're doing.

I told the guys that. The guys expected value, we're winning this game by 11. We've just got to make -- they're taking tough shots and happen to be making them.

We've got some easy layups, and we're missing them. We

have to finish at the rim and just keep doing what we're doing. We shot up and made a few 3s in the second half. 10-of-15 at the second half ain't bad.

I think you can win playing this way. They win playing this way in the NBA. We've just proven you can make a Final Four run.

And you know what, UConn is a pretty good team and they play similar. They play through the post a lot, but Danny is big on offensive efficiency, playing the right way, getting the right shots. Their defense is a lot better than ours. We have to figure how to beat them. But I think more college teams are starting to play more efficient style basketball like we've been playing.

Q. When you share a sports department with the greatest football coach, perhaps, in college history, I think it's obvious, or natural, that you might be overshadowed, your team, your program. So what you did here tonight, first I want to ask how much did that nag at you over the years, and what your team has been able to accomplish tonight, forever changes the perception, perhaps, of your program and the school's basketball program?

NATE OATS: When I came to Alabama, I knew it was a football school. There's no denying it. But somebody asked me that a couple of years ago. I think it's a championship school.

The whole mudita thing, I'm going to pick the brain of all the ultra successful coaches throughout the department.

We've got multiple coaches, current coaches, that have won national championships, whether it's men's golf, women's golf, softball. We've got Sarah Patterson retired from gymnastics, she's huge basketball fan, her own season tickets, won multiple championships in gymnastics.

But Coach Saban -- I'm a big football fan. I came to Alabama loving the fact that I was going to be able to work in the same athletic department as arguably the best -- maybe not even the best football coach -- the best coach of any team sports in modern history, or college sports, anything, and I didn't want to bother him. But I certainly picked his brain when it was appropriate.

I went and watched practices. I sat in on staff meetings. I shadowed him for a day. I went on road trips with him to see how they operated. I tried to learn as much as I could. It never nagged me or bothered me that football was huge at Alabama. I loved it. It's better for recruiting. It's better for everything for us.

I tried to learn from it. And different people would make comments. Football, football. But only 18 national championships behind them. We have a few to catch up. Let's just keep grinding. Let's get to a Final Four first, and let's put ourselves on a big stage.

I love the fact that he's still got an office at Bryant-Denny. I love the fact he's willing to talk to me. He talked to me before this run, texted me during the run.

Before I got the job at Alabama, I've got, like, a practice schedule. I had it in school, style sheet and different tabs, and quotes is one of the tabs. You pull quotes up for the day. I had regular quotes and I had Saban quote. And every Saban quote, it was lined with them.

Then I got here, should I use them as much as I used to use them because he's actually coaching next door, is that going to bother our basketball players that I keep using the football coach's quotes?

I still use them. They're pretty good. I still get more and add them to the list. It never bothered me. I love the fact that we're a football school and we're going to try to add another sport to the championship school level because I think we're knocking on the door there.

Q. To go back to what you were talking about with modern basketball a minute ago. Clemson's coach came in and said, hey, it looks really pretty if a team like you plays fast, makes a bunch of 3s, but it could set up a coach for second-guessing if those shots aren't going in. I'm curious, you guys hit your run about 10 minutes in. But let's say that didn't come. Is there ever a moment with your season on the line where you're potentially flinching or thinking about a plan B, and what's the key to getting your players to stick to the disciplined shot selection when they're not going early, because it's easy to say the numbers say this, but it's not as easy if you're feeling a game slipping away?

NATE OATS: We don't ever want to second-guess the plan, but the plan does involve, we have a layup package in there, if a team's going on a run, how do we try to get an easy layup. We've got post-ups.

You saw we posted Grant yesterday. Posted him today again. He got in there, got fouled. Nick got fouled off his post-up.

We've got some different options to get efficient shots. They don't always have to come flying up and down taking quick 3s.

Quick 3s are efficient, if you get them from the right shooters. There's other efficient shots too. We've got different packages to get efficient shots.

Guys come in the summer. We teach them how to play efficient. We don't eliminate inefficient shots from their arsenal right away. I don't want guys second-guessing themselves.

We gradually educate them as to how to be the most efficient player. Brandon Miller became pretty efficient, moved from, like, projected 23rd pick in the draft to the second pick in the draft.

When we got him all summer and fall, over a third of his shots were non-rim 2s. By the time we got to conference play, 12 percent of his shots were non-rim 2s throughout all SEC play.

He learned how to play efficient, and it moved his stock way up in the draft. We will educate the guys, and they stuck with it. We were 1-of-2 on non-rim 2s.

I'm not telling our guys not to shoot them. We probably shot two appropriate non-rim 2s. Aaron was 1-of-2. He's a really good non-rim 2 shooter. And sometimes it's the appropriate shot.

But we do have a package that we can get appropriate shots. We don't want to feast on inefficient shots.

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