

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Arkansas vs Texas Tech

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Chase Center

Texas Tech Red Raiders Coach Grant McCasland

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

GRANT MCCASLAND: What a fantastic opportunity for the Red Raiders to be in San Francisco and to be playing in the Sweet 16. Our guys are excited to be here and play a tremendous opponent in Arkansas. And I know Coach Cal has the Razorbacks playing great basketball and we know we'll have to play our best in order to put ourselves in position to win.

Q. What stands out about Coach Cal that made him so successful? And what's it like going up against him?

GRANT MCCASLAND: The biggest thing is their team's improved. If you ask me about anybody, I would say how resilient are you when things don't go your way. That's the biggest compliment I could give this team that Coach Cal -- seems like he always believes in them and gets them to believe in themselves and figure out a way as the identities change in these programs, with some players being available.

And they've had their obvious difficulties with injuries, but they found a way to get better and found a way to not only get better but play great and win. Starting 0-5 in SEC play and to pull such a string of wins together to put themselves in this position is really awesome to watch.

Q. There's obviously a lot of interest here with Chance McMillian because he's from the Bay Area. What's his status? How have you been able to win games without him? And how has he been as a teammate who cannot play?

GRANT MCCASLAND: Chance McMillian, I said this earlier in the year, he's remarkable. I mean that in every way. He has allowed us to coach him and to tell him the truth, but also to give him the path that we felt like gave



him the best chance to be the best player and gave him the best chance to help our team win.

He's embraced it. He's told me several times, after practices, during tough moments, like, Coach, keep coaching us hard. Like, stay on this team and I will not let you lose the locker room.

And nobody says that. I mean, he's in the 1 percent of players that really want that, that can say it and then live it.

And one example of Chance just being an awesome teammate, we'll go into the gym and we get these shoot-around opportunities in new venues. He's the first guy that goes right to the block, does his form shooting and then works his way out and gets to the free-throw line on both ends. He's just got a real disciplined approach to his game.

Some guys will go in the gym, shoot 3s from half court when they start. Everybody's got their own way. But Chance really does give himself and maximize who he is. And that I have such a tremendous amount of respect for.

And he's taken the same approach as he's not playing. That's one thing about this difficulty that he's going through, I mean, he's preparing to play every game even if he can't. And at this point we're hopeful that he will play sooner rather than later.

But it's honestly out of my hands, as you know. But I do believe we're getting close. And before it was hard for me to say. Now I honestly do think we're getting close.

As to his availability, it's going to be a game-time decision. But he's been remarkably resilient and he's been as good as a guy on the bench as he was as a player, because of his belief in what we're doing.

And every timeout I'm on people, and you've got plenty of clips of me jumping on guys, he's behind them telling them to hang in there because that's what we need. And that's what allows our team to win when he's not playing.

Q. You talked about Arkansas' turnaround. I'm curious, when preparing for them, do you go back and watch the film from maybe when they were in that 0-5



start just to see things they struggled with, or are they such a different team now you have to throw that away and focus on maybe the recent weeks?

GRANT MCCASLAND: I think as it pertains to us, we're more looking for identifiables that are similar to what we do so that we can have some crossover in regards to tendencies.

They are significantly different in a lot of ways, and I think that's just the confidence that some guys play in and other guys having to step up into roles that we know.

But at this stage, you prepare for everything. I don't say that to be cliché. I just mean it. I know it looks like they may have some guys that weren't playing that may play. And they may have a pretty significant piece that may play.

So in order for us to be the most prepared, we've looked at everything. But we've spent a majority of the time on the more recent guys that have played and how they're playing and the rhythm and flow at which they compete. Man, they're playing great basketball.

Q. I was hoping you could answer a bigger-picture question about the NCAA Tournament and why you think it resonates so strongly with American sports fans. I know you took a North Texas team here. You're in Wichita and now you're in San Francisco. Four sites last weekend, four sites this weekend. It seems like it spreads around the country and reverberates almost more than any event. Beyond the gambling component, what's it like for you and your players to be on this journey?

GRANT MCCASLAND: How many times do you have a bracket, if you will, that a three-year-old can pick what's next? I mean, that's what makes this awesome is there's so many different ways to cross over picking a bracket, whether it be colors or mascots -- and I think that first-round interest and as it rolls into the tournament, you can see there's more identifiable teams that people across the America want to see them compete against each other.

The one-and-done component that football's finally figuring it out and that basketball has had figured out for a long time, I think is the most beautiful part of tournament and competition that people love to pick and to see how it will turn out.

It feels like sometimes in the early rounds, the less experience you have, the better you do.

It's changing, though. College athletics is changing. That's changing, too. I'll be interested to see how it is moving

forward, but what a great game, first and foremost. And secondly, there's nothing like a tournament where you have this many teams competing at one time for a national championship. There's nothing like it.

Q. JT Toppin was kind of quiet in the first game against North Carolina Wilmington and really showed why he is the Big 12 player against Drake. Can you just talk about how important he is to this team?

GRANT MCCASLAND: Yeah, I've said this several times. We had our first few practices with JT and Darrion Williams and Chance McMillian being the leaders with Kerwin Walton, returners on our team, that we put a lot of faith in. And Darrion Williams being an all-conference player that returned. JT jumped over the top of him in our first workout, grabbed the ball and dunked it. He turned around and looked at me and I looked at him and I said, yeah, it's going to be a good fit.

Then we played St. Joe's in a tournament at Barclays earlier this year. And JT played really well, but we lost the game.

In the locker room there was no one more upset than JT Toppin. I will tell you that combination of his talent but also his love to win and his competitiveness, our team has really believed in.

I think moving forward, specifically in the NCAA Tournament, JT's unselfishness and his ability to pass, I think, is his most underrated attribute for our program and our team. He just does not force difficult shots when he probably could. And sometimes he should. But he does really care about his teammates and he's always making the right play.

Man, his competitiveness, his talent, are two really important things. But I think his ability to pass and make the right play is what separates him.

Q. I want to give you a quick opportunity to react to the news of your prodigy Ross Hodge new head coach at West Virginia. Obviously your feelings about it and also him joining the Big 12?

GRANT MCCASLAND: As much as I love him now he's the biggest pain in my butt. No, Ross Hodge is like a brother. And just take basketball out of it. He's just one of my best friends. I just love him because I think a lot of people want to be in college athletics because of these opportunities, playing in the Sweet 16 and what people think is really important. But Ross Hodge is a guy that loves his wife. He loves his daughter and his son. And he loves the guys that he gets to be around every day.

I just respect him because I believe that he cares about the right things. If there's anybody that I believe can win at West Virginia, it's Ross Hodge. I say that because we're going to have to play against him, too. But I honestly do believe that.

I would say the same thing about a guy like Ben McCollum, who we played against. If people asked me who I would hire no matter what job was open, those would be the first two guys I would mention for any job in the world.

I'm thankful that on our staff, I think we've got several guys. Matt Braeuer is going to get the opportunity at Stephen F. Austin and Jeff Linder could coach anywhere in the country.

We've got another guy in another guy in Luke Barnwell but Achoki Moikobu on our staff. He's going to be a head coach at the highest level some day.

And I just respect people that make decisions that aren't based off of money and that aren't -- they don't make decisions based off of what they think other people believe will win. Ross Hodge is convicted about loving people, hold them accountable and telling them the truth. And I think that is the separator in this time because then you will see he will win in the Big 12.

And it will not be what other people think. It will be at the highest level. I'm not looking forward to playing him, but I am looking forward to going on this journey with him because I love him. I love him because of who he is as a husband, who is he as a father and as a friend.

Q. In the West Regional, the other three teams, Arkansas included, are top 70 tempo teams. You're obviously much more deliberate, slower paced, but even more so you're better at getting your opponents to play even slower than you play. Do you relish this now that it's you against these three faster teams?

GRANT MCCASLAND: I think what we've shown is we can do both. I think that's an important part of winning when you get into these games. And it's finding a way. And for us, especially because of limited numbers and our involvement in trying to make sure we play inside/out, it's really been beneficial for us to control tempo.

But if you think Elijah Hawkins can't play with tempo, and Chance McMillian making 3s and Christian Anderson is about as good as it gets in the middle third -- so Darrion Williams being a big part of what we do, I think, is such an important part of making sure that we get the right shots and that we guard at a level that gives us the best chance

to get stops so that we can play in transition.

So I would think that we're a team that can win in a lot of different ways, but these tournaments, with the way you have medias and the way you have such a break in the action for longer stints, it's hard to play as fast as teams want to and to be able to play possession basketball, I do believe gives us a great chance to win a game.

Q. I was wondering about taking this journey with Chance and Darrion, specifically because they were the first two guys to come with you from the outside and say I want you to take me here and then having them be on this stage now, kind of keeping a promise, so to speak. What's that mean to have these guys along with you?

GRANT MCCASLAND: Yeah, no, it is awesome. I can tell you, the heart behind both of those guys, in a world where everybody is asking what you can give them, both of those guys wanted to know how we could win.

And both of them, Darrion Williams and Chance McMillian -- Darrion being the first -- both of those guys' investment in winning from the beginning and not asking what they're going to get out of it, I think, says everything about not only who they are as young men, but who they are as teammates and as basketball players.

If you watch the way they play, they play the same way that they live their life; it's like unselfish. How do you make other people around you better and how do you care more about the success of others than you do about the success of yourself? And that's, honestly, why we chose them from the beginning is because they're winners and they've always gotten better.

And, honestly, neither one of them have been thought as the best players on their teams at every team they've ever been on. Even though I felt like they made the biggest impact, that's kind of what I think separated our program is their genuine heart to help other people. Those two guys don't only play that way, they live that way.

Q. You took UNT on a great run in the NIT. Do you feel like that has translated for you in the NCAA Tournament, and what did you learn from it you can apply to this year?

GRANT MCCASLAND: I'm thankful because I got the opportunity to be a junior college head coach at 26. We lost on a tip dunk at the buzzer, what you would consider the final eight teams. And from that moment on, I said I'm never playing to be happy to be in a tournament. Like, you're going to play this thing to win the whole thing.

Then two years later, in 2007, we won a national championship in junior college, which is a difficult process because you've got to win your regional to even make it to the NCAA Tournament, then there's 16 teams. You've got to win four games in four days.

That team won a national championship. It was the first one since Mookie, Spud, Ricky Grace at Midland College. Spud Webb, that was a pretty good team, 25 years.

Got to do it again in Division II where we went to the Elite Eight twice and won the CBI our first year at North Texas, which was a wild journey. We actually played here in San Francisco against San Francisco in the championship of that.

A lot of tournament experience to just tell you that you better love your guys and you better believe that you have put yourself in position to win, but you better keep getting better over the course of the game and have a resilient approach that baskets and possessions don't determine the outcome but the consistent fight that you show over the course of the 40 minutes is the ultimate determining factor with where you win.

We believe in that. We're going to do it. We're going to put ourselves in every position we can to respond the right way to things that are difficult. And I think that's what winning in these tournaments is about. I sure am thankful for all the people that have invested time to put us in this position so we have enough experience to know how to advance.

Q. What makes this team so special to you? And what do you feel is the key to beating the Razorbacks?

GRANT MCCASLAND: We've said all along that we've got a great offensive team. We felt like our strength was our ability to shoot the basketball and the ability to score and the greatest areas of improvement would need to be our defense and our ability to rebound.

Those areas, our guys have just believed that we can improve and get better, and that's been a consistent emphasis. And I think that's the thing I'm most thrilled about with this group, is that we've grown in those areas and we've improved.

Then the thing about Arkansas is they've got a lot of talent. They've got a couple all-conference preseason guys. They've got guys that have projected to be NBA players and, man, they were picked fourth in the SEC going into the season. There's nobody denying that they have plenty of talent and just respect the fact that they can leverage

you in so many ways. They can leverage your on the glass. They can block shots. They can defend. They can score in transition. They can make 3s.

There's just a lot of different ways they can beat you, and to be able to fight them on every possession is going to be extremely important to give ourselves a chance to win.

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