

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Final - Texas Tech vs Florida

Friday, March 28, 2025

San Francisco, California, USA

Chase Center

Texas Tech Red Raiders Coach Grant McCasland Federiko Federiko Kevin Overton

Elite Eight Pregame Media Conference

GRANT MCCASLAND: Any day you're still practicing and playing in March is a great day. We are thrilled to be in the Elite Eight, and I would be lying if we didn't say we expected to still be playing. And a lot of belief on this team.

Last night was a phenomenal college basketball game. Man, it's such a blessing to still be competing in the NCAA Tournament. And we don't take this lightly.

So we are excited and thankful to be up here with these two guys. And we would not have won last night if it wasn't for Kevin Overton and Federiko Federiko, a.k.a. Fede Two Times.

Q. What was the process like of just getting over last night, getting to bed last night, obviously a late game, a lot of excitement, how do you regroup for the big game tomorrow?

KEVIN OVERTON: Just accepted that we won, celebrated for a little bit and once you go to sleep and wake up it's on to the next game, and just focus on the next team.

Q. How much of a game like that is knowing that you have the ability to do it but also just believing in your mind that you can kind of just do it if you just keep pushing through?

FEDERIKO FEDERIKO: I feel like everybody coming into the game had the mindset that we're going to win, we're going to win. So it showed on the court.

KEVIN OVERTON: I think it's our mindset every game,



every practice. Coach Mac does a great job reminding us we're going to win the game. Regardless of the adversity that comes through, we're going to win the game. So with that mindset, you just keep playing.

Q. Both of you transferred in in the offseason. Wonder if you could both tell the story of why Texas Tech was appealing, what that process was like to decide to come play in Lubbock?

FEDERIKO FEDERIKO: I would say the staff. My first visit here it was super, like, they took me in like -- I had a feeling like I belong here. And the personalities just around, like, Darrion and Chance, everybody on the team, honestly.

KEVIN OVERTON: Definitely the staff. Coming from where I was coming from last year, I wanted to put myself in the situation that just made me better and made me uncomfortable. And I think that's what Texas Tech did for me. I knew a few people on the staff.

And then obviously knowing Mac's background helped me decide, yes, I want to come here and get pushed. And that's the reason why I came.

Q. I imagine once the game starts in the tournament you kind of get lost in the game. But is tomorrow any different knowing what's at stake, the fact that you're only one step away from the Final Four? Does that enter your mind at all leading up to it or can you lose yourself in the task at hand?

KEVIN OVERTON: It's definitely one game at a time, one play at a time. You don't really think past the game you have in front of you. I think it's just we focus on what we have, like you said.

But we know why we're here. But we're not thinking about the Final Four. We're just worried about one game at a time.

FEDERIKO FEDERIKO: Just trying to go 1-0.

Q. Coach called Darrion the heart of the team. What is it about him that makes him the heart of your team?



KEVIN OVERTON: I would say unselfishness unconditional. I've seen him on his worst days, he's still with us. He's mad at himself but it's because he wants to help us so much is why he's so hard on himself.

So I think to play a game like he played yesterday, not being able to make shots early or struggling early, but to keep the confidence to make those shots down the stretch I think is why he's the heart of the team, just that confidence and his will to go win for us.

Q. I know it's been kind of a quick turnaround, but how much scouting have you done on Florida? And what are some of the challenges you anticipate in the game on Saturday?

FEDERIKO FEDERIKO: I mean, we went through some players. I feel like their size is one of them things. And they're aggressive, super aggressive.

KEVIN OVERTON: I'm familiar with the team. Obviously we haven't watched the details of it, but we know enough as far as the players and the scout. And we'll just do more, learn more about them as the day goes through.

Q. What's your favorite thing about JT that has nothing to do with basketball?

GRANT MCCASLAND: You're going to get a good answer now. Be careful.

KEVIN OVERTON: His swag, his off-the-court, his personality is kind of nonchalant, but when he gets on the court you see the complete opposite, so I think it's good balance for him. It's just funny to see.

FEDERIKO FEDERIKO: Nonchalant and he locks in as soon as we get to the court.

GRANT MCCASLAND: I'll let these guys handle it. We'll talk after. First time I met JT, he was sitting on a couch. And he said, "What's up coach?" I was, like it's, yeah, this is going to be different than you think, my man. (Laughter).

Q. What does Coach McCasland mean to you and how has he mentally prepared you for tomorrow's game?

FEDERIKO FEDERIKO: It means a lot for everybody here. He keeps us accountable on everything, honestly. Yeah, keeping us accountable, everything. He'll have us ready for tomorrow.

KEVIN OVERTON: Personally, for me, it's just my focus on the right things I think has been, all year for me has been my challenge, especially being coached under him,

not an easy guy to play for all the time. But he keeps me on the right things. And I think that's what I can appreciate is I came here to be uncomfortable, and he's done that for me.

Q. You've probably told this story before, but kind of reset it for us. The story of recruiting JT. Obviously he tested the NBA waters, started at New Mexico. Walk us through the process that allowed him to join the program?

GRANT MCCASLAND: We've watched JT since he was young. Actually didn't make his team when he was younger. I got a chance to watch him as a sophomore and junior on one of the best teams in the state of Texas.

And he played for a great summer team. But they didn't throw him the ball very often. He always had to go rebound to score. And he's always had a real workman's-like approach to the game. He just goes out there and competes. He never was like the best player on his team. He was always a role player.

Even at New Mexico, you know, he rebounded, and offensive rebounded to score. And they threw him the ball some but he wasn't a focal point of offense.

In recruiting him he really had that mentality. It wasn't like he was telling you what he needed or how he was going to score. I think a lot of people had expectations for him. I think he just wanted to be on a team.

I think he was looking for a relationship with people that he knew. And he had a great relationship with Kellen Buffington, our GM. Buff's an unbelievable guy that everybody loves.

It was an easy interaction initially because he knew Buff. When we first started recruiting him, I think our challenge to him was what we wanted to push him because he tested the draft waters and he led the combine in rebounding, which is unbelievable.

But we wanted to challenge him to be a focal point, to be a more dynamic player, to be a guy that we could count on, that we could go to, and obviously ended up being Big 12 player of the year.

But the initial reaction -- my initial encounters with JT, he was so casual, I was, like, this guy's going to have a hard time being a player of the year or being a focal point. Because they said it, the guys said it, he's really laid back, super laid back.

He just doesn't ever -- he's fun to be around because he's

funny and he's truthful. I mean, he doesn't ever say what he doesn't believe. If he says it, it's honestly what he's thinking.

But he also, when we got him on the court and he played in the summer and the first time we played five-on-five, he was ultra aggressive and competitive. Like I said, when we lost to Saint Joe's early in the year he had a double-double, 28 points or something. He was so mad in the locker room that we lost the game. I was, like, we've got something for this guy.

For as casual as he was in the recruiting process he really turns it on when it's competitive. That's what the guys were talking about.

In the recruiting process, I think he trusted people around him, and I'm thankful for that because it's not easy making these decisions when it's short processing, you're testing the NBA draft waters and you're trying to pick a school. He actually never even visited campus. Made a decision without it. But that just goes to show you how influential Kellen Buffington was in the process.

Q. When you evaluate guys in the portal, is there an overarching characteristic or personality trait you look for to make sure it's the right fit. You can watch them on tape but as far as fitting in the locker room?

GRANT MCCASLAND: We rely on our guys a lot, who knows him. We had recruited some guys that we had already had a part of our team and they had known JT. When we bring guys on campus, Fede said it when they were talking about made you choose, and it was Darrion and Chance.

We really ask a lot of those guys to get to know them -- and someone that we wanted as a staff, they've come to us in the office and said, he's not a good fit for us, Coach. All he did was talk about himself and how he was going to get shots. There's not a spot for him.

We listened to them. And the people around him is a big evaluation in the process of figuring out who we want as part of our team and making sure that they have the same heart.

So I tell you, when I meet with them, I meet with everybody -- trainer, coach, whoever you think is influential. We all sit around the table and I tell them honestly what I think we can do and how they'll play for us.

So as long as they can hear the truth, and K.O. addressed it; he just holds people accountable. I want to be honest, up front with what I think the expectations are and hold

them accountable to what we tell them that we believe in.

If everybody is on the same page with that then we can do it. If somebody says I think he should start and he should play the point and he's a forward, I'm probably, like, this ain't going to work for all of us.

Q. A little bit at tumult at Tech when you got there, which is not unusual when there's change. What you did you focus on to create stability quickly?

GRANT MCCASLAND: Well, the first thing that we tried to do as a staff was to listen to them and do more time listening than I did talking. And just tried to be around the guys and the people that were important to them and the players in our program and the people that were important to them so I could hear honestly what they had to say.

And I think a lot of times you can go into these rooms and you can have a lot of answers for people, but honestly in taking the job -- I played in the Southwest Conference and played in the Big 12 against Texas Tech. And then my first job was for James Dickey as the director of basketball operations at Texas Tech.

So in '99, I'd been there and had a relationship. It was always something that would have been a dream to be the head coach of the Red Raiders. But it wasn't something that I was passionately trying to pursue because I just loved the job I was at. That's what I wanted to do.

When we took over, and knowing how great a job, all these coaches -- and I reached out to a lot of them. Chris Beard gave me some great advice. He said, I would listen to those guys and see what they have to say. I listened and I went in there with the approach that I wanted to hear the heart of the guys that were there.

I'll tell you one thing that was consistent across the board, nobody wanted to leave. And with a lot that was going on -- and I love coach Adams; I just talked to him before I came up here about Florida, and he didn't give me anything; he didn't want to hurt the SEC -- but those guys are awesome. And they built it into, I think, one of the premier college basketball programs in the country.

I really wanted to give those guys an opportunity on the team to tell me what they really thought. And they love Texas Tech. They love living in Lubbock.

So once that was true, then I had to decide, who was going to stay and why. And then it had to get back to did it fit us and did it fit the way we wanted to play and did the heart of the people on our team really want to win, or did they just want to play good so they could get a pro opportunity?

And that's what I basically got to the bottom of. And that's the cool thing about being a Red Raider. When you get to Lubbock and you live in Lubbock, it changes your life. It's, like, one of the best places you'll ever live. It is the best place for us. That's what the coolest part was.

What I had to get to the bottom of was just who really wanted to win. And the guys who stayed wanted to win. The guys we've added, their heart is they want to win more than they want to play good.

Q. If you look at the makeup of both the guys that were sitting on the dais here with you and several of your other players, and also the team you're going up against, a lot of these guys are players that kind of needed a few more years to mature and maybe -- they weren't Cooper Flagg coming out of high school per se. Do you think that's going to be more the norm in college basketball. We've seen it get older and the teams that are making deep runs tend to be the ones with veteran leadership. But do you think that that's going to be increasingly the norm that if these players that maybe broke out on the mid-major stage and then transferred to a program like Texas Tech?

GRANT MCCASLAND: If you look at the teams that had the most success in the Big 12 -- and I'll only speak to that -- let's say Houston, for example, who is still playing, they returned the most on a roster in our league. And Arizona, who was still playing, returned a large majority of their roster. Even though they started at other places.

So, one, I will tell you, I think it's more difficult now than ever to have returners that commit to being somewhere and building a team. I do think that that's extremely difficult.

But the programs that are able to do that are the ones that have success. It's not necessarily the mid-major guys that come in and can help you because of their experience. It's their experience on your roster that allows you to be elite.

And that's what you see with our team in Darrion and Chance and Kerwin, but it makes it difficult because Chance isn't playing. But it gives opportunities for other guys to step up. But Chance's leadership, we would not be where we are, even though he's not playing, because of him.

To me, the most important factor isn't just getting the experience of someone that's played and then you get the benefit of being coached and playing. I think it's the experience of your team together that actually is the greatest separator going into the next season.

Q. I have my own theories about this, but could you explain why you think it's so hard to have the continuity in this era of college basketball?

GRANT MCCASLAND: Well, one, everybody's trying to figure out how to position themselves, and with the ability to transfer every year and there being no way to hold people to a team that gives you a chance to build it, it's just so many people pulling at them, trying to figure out what's next.

No one's trying to figure out how to be great where they are. They're trying to figure out what's next for them to be great.

It's not to say that those aren't valuable things to consider, but when it's just that easy to move teams -- I think everybody should have the opportunity to move if it doesn't fit and if circumstances are that way. But I'm just telling you, when you're trying to build a team to win, it's very, very difficult.

I'm thankful that we're moving in this direction. So I'm welcoming all of it because there needed to be significant change in our sport. I believe that with all my heart. I mean, we were way overdue for the things that are happening right now. It's just there's not a very good structure to build and make this something that's sustainable over time. Where we are right now is not it.

Q. You were talking about the transfer portal which gives and takes away. But if you could make a couple of suggestions to add some guardrails to it, what would they be?

GRANT MCCASLAND: Man, I'm just trying to beat Florida, to be honest. But the truth in regard to that, there has to be a way for us to be able to help guys follow through on commitments within reason. And I'm sure there are ways to do it.

But this feels like it's moving more to a pro model, if you will, in some way, shape or form. And how do we help bring some longevity to the opportunity that we have of keeping people on the same team for a shorter amount of time. I don't know what that looks like. I don't even know what the answers are to it. I'm not smart enough to figure it out. And I'm thankful that there's people that are much more intelligent than I am at this.

But I think for the long run, I love the opportunities our guys get to make money off of their name, image and likeness and their opportunity to play because I see it changing families, Federiko Federiko being one of them. We had a

coach that went into his apartment back home in Finland who said that his parents got furniture in their apartment. That's awesome. And for me something like that, who Fede is just looking out for other people. I mean, this is what it's about for me. How do we help people help their families and help improve their lives in a way that's real.

But when I comes to our ability to keep some continuity, there just has to be a structure that helps us build some momentum and build some character within our teams to grow and continue to handle adversity in a way that's real and helps them when they step out into the next opportunities.

Q. How powerful is adrenaline going into a game tomorrow versus playing an emotional game late into the night, into overtime? And how do you handle practice and rest going into this match-up on Saturday?

GRANT MCCASLAND: Ultimately I think your practice throughout the year is what prepares you for this. And you can't do anything in one day that's any different that's going to make that big of an impact.

But we will get out there and we'll move around today. We'll stretch. We had several guys that played close to 40 minutes or over. So I think our ability to get rest is the most important part, and that's what we've done with our team.

But, you know, this adrenaline takes over when you play in these games. And there's enough time in between games, it's not like conference tournament where you turn around and play in less than 24 hours. I think that's huge for us. We would prefer more rest. But with our team, there's enough grit in our locker room to be prepared for the next one. And adrenaline is sure a huge part of it.

Q. What's the status of Chance for tomorrow?

GRANT MCCASLAND: No change in regard to how we're approaching it. We'll get him out there at shoot-around in a few minutes and see how his body responds, and give him the opportunity if he wants to compete and see what he can tolerate. And hopefully we'll get him back in some way. But it's hard to say until we get closer to game time and he warms up and see how he feels.

Q. That one possession you guys had, about a minute left, when Federiko got four offensive rebounds on one possession, how do you assess that, his want-to on that, and how do you describe your team maybe?

GRANT MCCASLAND: So our first year at Tech, our staff,

we were playing at the University of Houston. If you know anything about University of Houston, they're one of the best offensive rebounding teams in the country.

We're late in the game. We got down double figures. And I was walking onto the court after I called a timeout to watch the faces of the players as they walked back to the bench to see who really wanted to keep fighting, because they are so physical that they break teams eventually with their physicality.

Not everybody likes that discomfort. Not everybody likes the adversity that comes with playing teams that are that physical and put that much pressure on you in a real way.

There were some guys dropping their heads, some guys who probably wanted to win but didn't know how it was going to work out.

And that's what I love about Federiko, because when you look in the eyes of these guys, when we're down 13 points with four minutes and whatever seconds left or you're down 16 points with 12 minutes left, whatever it was, guys like Federiko are not fazed.

Honestly they see the game as how we can win. He was in the timeout -- he doesn't do it often; I can only count on one hand the times he's actually communicated in a real way -- but he communicated how he was going to guard the ball screen differently and how he was going to make sure that we limited the opportunities of them making 3s.

When Johnell Davis made that 3 off the ball screen at the top, he was the one in coverage. I thought to myself, like, it's the same look I'm looking for when I'm walking on the court when it's difficult, when we were losing at Houston our first year.

He was not fazed. He was finding a way to win. He told the team that.

So that possession was just like that whole will to win, and Federiko is such a great example of what our team is about. It doesn't matter what odds are stacked against you or how physically talented the other team is. We're going to find a way. And did Fede find a way on that possession to win us that game.

That really gave us the life that we needed to say that we are going to do this -- not we can do this, but we are going to do this, and this is how: Beat them on extra effort plays. And Federiko's possession where he got the offensive rebounds -- and he actually ended up scoring it at the end. It wasn't like he dished it to 3. He scored it, which rarely happens for him, but for him on that possession I couldn't



be happier for him.

Q. For those of us who haven't seen Darrion a ton, what do you remember about the first time you saw him? If you look at his body, it's different -- you're usually looking for long, lean players. And he's sort of built like a linebacker. How has he used that to his advantage and how has he evolved as a player since you first saw him?

GRANT MCCASLAND: He was the first player that committed to us, and he was the first guy that signed with us. And he believed in us first. When I watched him play, there were two parts of it that really stood out to me. One, he was a 3-to-1 assist-to-turnover guy. As a true freshman, he led Nevada in rebounding. I mean, who does that. He shot one of the best percentages on their team from 3. So just feel for the game.

But I got a phone call from a guy named Pierre Jackson that played point for us when I was an assistant at Baylor. And Pierre lived in Vegas, would play pickup games. He called me said, hey, Coach, I hear you're recruiting one of my guys. I'm like, who? I didn't know who he was talking about. He said Darrion Williams. He said I love playing with him.

If you know Pierre Jackson, he doesn't like to play with anybody that doesn't pass. NBA guys hate playing with guys in the summer because it's just usually whoever gets the ball is who keeps it. But that said to me that Darrion Williams knows how to win. Like, how many guys know how to make pros happy and find a way to keep them on the court because if you win you stay?

When I watched him play for Nevada, he was a role player, but he made the most impact. Why? Because they never took him off the floor. As coaches, we have guys that we trust, and you can say you trust somebody, but you know how you know somebody trusts somebody? They play them the whole time. Honestly, that was him.

So when he got on our roster, he doesn't dunk. He doesn't. He doesn't go anywhere super fast. And he's not going to go out there and bully you by the way that he competes. He actually lets the flow of the game come to him.

But I told people, he's our best player. And we had talent running around him that everybody thought was -- but I genuinely believed he was our best player, and here's the reason why: Because he wins.

You saw it at the end of the game. He missed a 3 and he ran in there and got a jump ball. It's like that. How do you

teach that? That doesn't have anything to do with jumping. Doesn't have anything to do with being able to shoot. Doesn't have anything to do with dunking on somebody. It has to do with your will to win and your understanding of what the team needs.

And that's my greatest compliment to him. What I saw on film was he was willing to do whatever it took to help the team win. If I felt we could lean on anything, it was that. That's what we started the program with.

I had a family member of a significant player on our team telling me we were making a huge mistake recruiting him because he was not talented enough to play in the Big 12.

Darrion Williams isn't just talented enough to play in the Big 12, he's an All-Big 12 player that's got our team in the Elite Eight.

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