

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Colorado vs Illinois

Friday, March 20, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Memorial Gymnasium

Colorado Buffaloes

Jade Masogayo

Zyanna Walker

Coach JR Payne

Media Conference



ZYANNA WALKER: Definitely not taking it for granted. We were at a point in the season where we didn't know if we would be able to make it here. Definitely not taking it for granted. Just happy we were able to lock in and get it done.

Q Second question, being part of some successful runs with Louisville and also K-State, what does it take to win in this tournament? I know it's different every year, but what do you feel like it takes?

ZYANNA WALKER: Yeah. It takes a lot. It's a lot to do with some luck, unfortunately, but yeah, it's gonna take competitiveness, the right mindset, every possession like it's the last possession, and all five people on the court at the same time gotta play together.

Q Going off of that, how can you give your teammates that have not been to a tournament advice, and what kind of things have you learned that you can help settle their nerves going into this tournament?

ZYANNA WALKER: Yeah, I really just kind of want to take the pressure off everybody as much as possible. I want everybody to play free, just because that's when you play your best basketball. So kind of just trying to get them in that mindset. And then just, yeah, just making sure they take in the moment, as well, because this is a blessing.

Q This is for both or either of you. You guys had a pretty good upset in the tournament. Like, you surprised a lot of people and you're coming in with a lot of good energy. How are you filtering that down to your teammates?

ZYANNA WALKER: Yeah, just congratulate them for all the hard work paying off, and you see the success that we had in the Big 12 tournament and just try to keep bouncing and building off that. You know, stay confident, but stay humble.

JADE MASOGAYO: What she said.

Q So since you guys played on the glass court, you got so much national attention a couple weeks ago. Now you're on kind of a unique situation here. What do you feel about

Q Jade, I know this tournament is like a huge dream come true for you. Can you just speak to all of us about what it means to you to get here after four years?

JADE MASOGAYO: Yeah, absolutely. Like you said, it's been four years and I've been really trying to chase this dream, being able to play in March Madness. It's really exciting to be able to do it this year because this year is real special to me. This is the best year of college basketball I've ever played. Especially with this group, I love this group so much. I'm just blessed, grateful.

Q One for each of you. Jade, going off of that, you've had two very close misses to this tournament the last couple years. You know, two years ago at Missouri State, you guys lose on a buzzer beater in the conference title game. Last year, this team was one game, really, away. You were the first team out. So does that make this mean even more to you because you've been so close to tasting it, now you're finally here?

JADE MASOGAYO: Yeah, absolutely. I've had opportunities to get to the tournament and we've just been a little bit shy. Just very grateful that my last year I'm able to be in this tournament with all these guys, just play with the most important people in my life, yeah.

Q Zy, for you, you've had the total opposite experience. This is your fourth year in college, you've been to the tournament all four years with three different teams, so this is nothing new to you. A couple questions for you, but first off, do you take it for granted or you appreciate it every single time?

this setup here with the benches behind the baskets, things like that? Either one of you.

JADE MASOGAYO: I feel like it's a little bit different. We've never been able to play on a court like that where the benches are on, like, the baseline and all that type of stuff. At the end of the day, it's just a wooden court. We're all playing basketball. Even playing ground. We both haven't been able to play on a court like that, so it's just pretty level for sure.

Q (No microphone)?

ZYANNA WALKER: Yes.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for joining us.

We are joined by head coach JR Payne from University of Colorado.

Q This is your 10th year with this program, which is a pretty incredible feat, I think. What has it been like when you started, and getting all the way to 2026?

JR PAYNE: Oh, man, it's been a journey. Can you guys hear me? Okay.

Yeah. When we came to the University of Colorado, my children were babies and now they're much older than they were. And so our family has grown-up pretty much in the state of Colorado. Our program, I think, was in dead last place in the best conference in the country in the Pac-12 at the time. So that was another huge challenge. It's a hard thing to build a program from last place. It's even harder to do it in such a tough conference. So our staff was incredible. Most of our staff came with us from our previous school. Very much like a family.

We knew that it would be very difficult to build a program, but we've just really, really continued to recruit the right type of people. We knew who we wanted to be, what we wanted to be about and how we sort of wanted to go about building it. And that's just blue collar, stuff, fearless mentality. I would say our team has gotten better, certainly, over the last few years, but the DNA of our program has remained the same for all those years. So in some senses, ten years has been like an eternity to go from the cellar of the conference to a very now strong program, but in other ways it's gone really quickly because Colorado is an incredible place. For those of you who haven't been there, it is beautiful, it is great people, it is healthy. The university is great.

And so it really has been a blessing all these years. Even the very, very hard years were pretty great.

Q Kind of something that you said about your kids. I'm also a mom, also I think with women in sports we can kind of sometimes shy away from talking about the fact that we incorporate all those things. Every coach here, I believe, has mentioned this today and it's been a really cool part of the day for me and I think other people.

What is it like -- I believe your kids were out here throwing a ball around in the hallway.

JR PAYNE: Probably tearing something up, I'm sure.

Q But what is that like? How does that feel? Everybody has kind of touched on it. It would be great to hear a little bit more to having your kids and family incorporated into the program.

JR PAYNE: My ten-year-old son is here and we're on Spring Break. My older kids, it's harder to miss school and practices and things like that, but honestly, there's no better place to raise a family is in the environment that we've been able to raise them. They're around these strong, incredible, competent, confident, beautiful college athletes who are experiencing and accomplishing great things. I think that's a gift, especially for your girls to grow up around that. It's just a fun environment for them to see what's possible. You know, you can play on a big stage. You can be strong and confident and capable, and so that's been really great.

My son, it's funny, he's out there with our practice boys right now and I don't know if he's more excited for the game or just to hang out with five college guys for a few days. But yeah, it's been really great.

I tell every young coach that asks me, like, how do you do that? How can you be a good coach and a good mom and how can you do it all? And my biggest advice is always, you're not going to be perfect at any of it, but if you do your very best at all of it, you can do it. You can be a great coach. You can be a great mom. I say you can have it all if you want to.

Q I spoke with Desiree a little bit ago on her navigating her Sickle Cell trait and I want to just ask you how, as a coach and as your staff, how do you help support her, especially in those struggles with the higher altitude? What are you doing, you and your staff, to help support her in that?

JR PAYNE: The first thing is we have an incredible strength and conditioning team. Our strength and conditioning coach, along with our athlete trainer and team of doctors are really wonderful. So creating a plan right when she arrived and we learned that she had the Sickle

Cell trait, just creating a plan for what that would look like. It's safety and health above everything. There's certain ways you can get an athlete in shape and keep them in shape. It doesn't have to be running endlessly and then if you're really starting to struggle, keep going. We just don't do that. You know, with some athletes, certainly, you can, but with someone with the trait, it's just not worth the risk.

So she's had a really, really concise plan from the very beginning. When we did our summer conditioning and things like that, she was certainly conditioning, but it was not with us. It wasn't on the field in the heat doing that type of stuff. It really hasn't been that difficult because our team works so well together. She's very aware of how she's feeling and what she needs to do. We also are the type of coaches that, like, we don't really care if you do the running. As long as you're fit and ready to contribute and play on the court, you can get on the bike. It doesn't really matter to us.

I think that combination has worked really well for her.

Q Two questions for you. In general, knowing how difficult it is to get here, what does it mean to you to be here and you're sitting in front of this March Madness backdrop. What does it mean for you to just be here?

JR PAYNE: Our program, it's an expectation and has been for quite some time that we will play in March in this tournament and be able to win games in March. So one, it's the way that we carry ourselves. We train for this. From the very first practice in July all the way through until the practice we're about to have now. And so that's something that I think is sort of built into the program and how we train and compete each day.

But I mean, it's awesome. This is the premier amateur basketball tournament in the world and so for us to be here, being able to do it four of the last five years is really special and also something that our kids expect to do now.

Q The follow up is you mentioned July. This team has been at it for a long time. The things that have changed, you go through two different semesters and the team changes a lot. How much does your team change from July or even end of September when you started actual real practice to where you are now?

JR PAYNE: Anytime you add 10 new players to a roster of 13, there's going to be a tremendous amount of change. The great thing, however, though, is that, as I mentioned earlier, like, our culture and our identity and DNA is the same and who we are. There isn't a lot of wiggle room in that. We're not going to recruit players that don't value hard work and don't value great team work. You know,

those types of things. In some ways we bring 10 new people in, everything is different. In other ways, people assimilate and jump on the train pretty quickly because it's just how we operate and carry ourselves.

As far as the makeup of the team, how it's grown, this group clicked immediately. They were, you know, they just met each other but were almost like long lost sisters, you know, from jump. Like every team in the country, there's a lot of different types of people on our team, but they all value great teamwork and having a great locker room and challenge each other and compete. So I think that allowed us to click very well.

In time, obviously, the basketball has gotten better. If you saw us play, which you did see us play, in early November, we're certainly a more polished ball club than we were at that time. I think if we had another month or two to play, I think we'd continue to get better as we go.