

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

Saturday, March 21, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Memorial Gymnasium

Colorado Buffaloes

Coach JR Payne

Anaelle Dutat

Zyanna Walker

Media Conference

Illinois 66, Colorado 57

JR PAYNE: Yeah, just we just finished talking in the locker room, and my biggest sentiment with this team, it's always hard when you lose your last game. What I shared with them is this one is harder than most because of the character and the relationships and just the camaraderie of this group. It's almost unlike anything I've ever seen in my 25 years of coaching.

Just really, really beautiful, amazing, incredible group of young women. I'm so blessed to have been their coach. They're blessed for the experiences that they've shared with each other. And it's rare. I just think they really -- they know that and they felt that.

So as far as the basketball game, I thought both teams played really hard. You know, we held them way below their average, as we've done most nights of the year, you know, defensively, but in the end everyone that's playing right now is really, really good. Illinois is really, really good and really talented, and they scored a few more than we did.

So two good teams. I thought both teams really played hard and competed. I think it was a fun game to watch. You know, I'm proud of how we competed and, again, someone has to win and someone has to lose, so...

Q. You touched on the camaraderie of this team. From your guys' perspective, you guys came into the season essentially a brand new team. What do you think allowed you to really come together and get back in the tournament?



ZYANNA WALKER: I just think we really built really good relationships with each other off the court, and so it became like a friendship, like a family. So I think that just kind of went the court and we just built good chemistry from there. It took a little bit of time, but eventually we like got on the same page with each other.

ANAELLE DUTAT: I would say like Zy said, I've never been on the team like this where actually everyone really enjoy each other. I think it took like she said, but at some point translating to the court what I could brought, that chemistry and connection together, yeah.

Q. As primary ball handler, did you notice anything after the first quarter that opening stretch that Illinois did defensively to kind of limit you guys inside? I think Coach Green pointed out it was 16 points in the paint in the first quarter and four in the second.

ZYANNA WALKER: No, I didn't really notice anything. I would just say that they were playing hard; we were playing hard.

Obviously you wish you could go back and change a couple things, fix a couple things, but they're a good team, so I'll give them credit for that.

But, you know, just happened how it did.

Q. Battling inside with Illinois' size seemed to be a factor all night. Can you speak on the chance of playing with some of their bigs?

ANAELLE DUTAT: I'd say we know they're good and I think obviously if we would have done a better job on it the outcome would've not been like this.

But they have great players for sure and they played to their strength to win this game, so...

Q. The last three quarters really every time you guys would get right there they would score a bucket or two. How tough was it to try to get so many -- like string together some stops against an offensive team like



that?

ZYANNA WALKER: Yeah, you know, they were hard guard. They had some good players that were on tonight. You know, they were hitting. We tried to be as disruptive as we could.

Yeah, I will say it was hard for sure just to stop them and get them out of rhythm and stuff.

Q. For AD, we talk about this is your first time in this tournament. Obviously doesn't end the way you want it to, but have you been able to take some appreciation -- take a moment and appreciate what this meant to you to finish off your career in this tournament?

ANAELLE DUTAT: Not right now. Maybe tomorrow I will be more happy about it.

Q. Zy, being in this tournament multiple times and then getting there again and just having this kind of result, is there anything different about this than some of the prior runs or anything about this team that maybe stands out?

ZYANNA WALKER: Yeah, for sure. This is my favorite team I played for by far. It's just like everybody is a family, coaches and players together as one. It's just never been like that for any of the programs I've played for.

Then we're just so close as a team so like, this one is super special for sure.

Q. Do you have any favorite memory from this postseason run? It was a really eventful winter for you guys and then the tournament run. Anything that stuck out again?

ZYANNA WALKER: I would say just what stuck out the most was probably just like the memories we had with each other. What always comes to our mind is our trip to Hawai'i. It was so fun and I feel like we really got close on that trip.

JR PAYNE: Singing on the bus for 45 minutes straight. (Laughter.)

ZYANNA WALKER: Yeah.

Q. AD, your senior year. What can you reflect on in your time at Colorado?

ANAELLE DUTAT: I'm glad I came here and glad I obviously made it to the tournament. I'm really glad for the coaches that I played for, for the people that I met, all of

my teammates. Like Zy said this is a really special team. I've never been on a team like this where everybody really enjoy each other.

So I'm happy -- I'm sad it ended like this, but I'm really glad for the opportunity I had to be here.

Q. You've been to this tournament as we mentioned and you also lost in this tournament. Is there a certain sentiment you're telling the locker room right now?

ZYANNA WALKER: Kind of just, I mean, chin up, chest out; just keep your head up. You know, remember this feeling for next year.

Q. For both of the players, going off something Coach said, obviously this didn't end the way you want; what hurts for more, the fact you lost this game or the fact you don't get to go to practice together again?

ZYANNA WALKER: Oh, yeah, definitely that, like the season is over. I mean, I didn't want this to be my last game with this group, so, yeah, I mean, it hurts.

Then when you look back on it, you just think about like all the success and all the happy memories that we've had.

You can just look at it with your head held high.

ANAELLE DUTAT: I'd say definitely like not even that I'm done with college because looking back I'm pretty happy how my college year went. It's like I wish I had just one more game with them, one more practice, get together.

JR PAYNE: We can still practice.

Q. Coach, just hearing what the players said, what can you say about this team?

JR PAYNE: Yeah, I mean, I just -- as I said earlier, shared in the locker room, I thanked them for showing up every day with a joyful spirit.

What we do is really hard. I think I've said this before. Being a college athlete is really hard. There is so many cool things about it but there is also so many really difficult, physically, emotionally, mentally things that are hard about it.

This group, I'm not kidding, guys, every day showing up with a joyful spirit. They were genuinely happy to be at practice; I was genuinely happy to see each and every one of them and to practice and they weren't all perfect practices. We didn't make all or shots all the time.

But I just am -- I'm sad. Like when you said you don't get to practice tomorrow, like that -- I'm sad about that, you know. I don't think every team is like that.

So I'm just really being thoughtful and like appreciative of the time that we had with them. Jade Masogayo, you know, we only got two years with her, but there were a lot of people trying to talk to her last year to get her to leave and go somewhere else for more money and all the crazy things people do.

She was very loyal and stayed and committed to not just staying as a Buff, but also stayed and helped us recruit this team. She and Tabitha were the two that really helped us recruit this team last spring.

And that took a lot of unselfishness and hard work, and so I don't know. It's just been a great year. Certainly sad that it's over but thankful for the time we had.

Q. You mentioned Jade and her efforts throughout the season. Just tonight to put everything on the line her last potential game, can you speak on this effort?

JR PAYNE: Yeah, I'm not surprised. Jade will do absolutely anything for her teammates. She is one of the most unselfish players I've been around, and so I knew she was going to bring tremendous effort and do everything that she could, including like a big shiner she's going to have tomorrow.

You know, but she played her heart out for her team tonight.

Q. Des was able to get into the paint pretty early on, get some buckets.

JR PAYNE: Yep.

Q. Was that something you focused on, getting the guards inside?

JR PAYNE: Yep, definitely. Yeah, we wanted to be aggressive. We wanted paint touches. Needed our guards to get downhill. Even our post players we were trying to get paint touches whenever and wherever we could. Their defense was loaded up from the weak side, which was smart defensively on their part.

So it wasn't always as easy to do as we needed it to be.

Q. Game-wise, AD hits a bucket early in the fourth quarter; pulls you within one. Then No. 2, Destiny, hits two in a row. It's only five point game. Do you think that was kind of a killer stretch right there?

JR PAYNE: I did.

Q. Guys battled so far to get back to one.

JR PAYNE: I did. Kind of like you mention earlier, we kept getting close but not enough. Close and then not enough.

I thought when she hit those two back to back and it separated back up to five or six, it was -- I mean, I don't think we were deflated, but it is hard to come back against such a really strong team like Illinois.

Yeah, just it's hard to come back against such a good team.

Q. This may be simplifying it, but they had kind of three big scorers tonight; you guys had two. Is that part of it, that you never got that third scorer going tonight?

JR PAYNE: Yeah, I think so. And then the rebounding was too close. We needed to beat them on the glass, and I don't even think we ended up beating them -- well, we beat them by two.

We needed more offensive rebounds and defensive stops and we just weren't able to get it. We were trying all kinds of different things on Parchment and Wallace; just didn't seem like anybody could get it done.

Q. Yeah. And then one last for you. We were talking earlier this week, you get in, you're saying this is kind of house money at this point.

JR PAYNE: Yeah.

Q. Did that feeling change this week as you went through the scouting report and thought, we have a shot to win this game?

JR PAYNE: Yeah, we definitely thought we were going to win the game tonight. We thought we had a good game plan. We thought our team was very well-prepared. We had had some of the best practices of the year this week as far as just focus and the right type of lightheartedness and really locked in and focused.

Again, just credit to Illinois. They also probably were very locked in and like I said earlier, just two really good teams that I thought competed good, clean, aggressive basketball.

Q. Coach, you mentioned the play of Parchment and Wallace and they're forwards and really good tonight.

Did you find it harder to adjust when that was the case, kind of their size combination of size and skill was making difficult on the front court?

JR PAYNE: No, because, I mean, we were guarding them with posts and with guards. As I said, we were trying lots of different things to slow them down.

But they really are that good. You don't average 20 a game without being very, very good in the Big10. So, yeah, we did what we could to make their touches difficult, to contest shots, to be disruptive, but in the end, very good players find ways and their very good players found ways.

Q. Reflecting on the season, especially the latter half, you go on the run, eight of nine, to the semifinals of the Big12 tournament, then just a point short and now the season is over. Do you feel like even though there was that great run that you feel like may be a little bit of potential lost from this team and what it could have accomplished?

JR PAYNE: Potential what?

Q. Loss or I guess some...

JR PAYNE: I don't think we feel disappointed at all if that's what you're asking. No chance. You had ten new players, five freshman, five transfer; you lose pretty much 90% of your offensive productivity. No, not at all.

I think a lot people would look at that and say it's pretty unbelievable what this team did and beat -- how many top 25 teams did we beat this year?

I mean, with some deficiencies on the offensive end, it was pretty remarkable.

Q. With that, how high is the sense of wanting to keep this team together?

JR PAYNE: Yeah, very high. This is the hardest time of the year, you know, because the season is over and now you have to figure out what does your roster look like next year and how can you keep everybody.

We talked about the chemistry of this group, and I feel confident this team wants to stay together and they want to -- sometimes a loss like this is very motivating. I've been in these positions before where, man, your offseason and the next year is very locked in because you don't want to feel this again.

Q. Big picture question: I think throughout the first round there was only three upsets as far as lower

seeds winning. Two were overtimes. How hard is it or is this sport maybe too top heavy? How hard is it for a lower seed to break through with kind of so much the talent in some of those top 30, 40 teams?

JR PAYNE: Yeah, I definitely think it's getting harder because it's no longer about being a great recruiter and finding kids to fit your system and working hard.

A lot of times players or programs with more resources are going to be able to secure talent that is just simply bigger and better than other people.

So I do think that's getting more and more difficult, but I think there has been great competition in the tournament. I watched Iowa got taken down to the wire today against a really great team. Maybe it didn't end up in the upset, but there has been some really great games so far and I know it'll continue that way.

Q. Talked a little bit earlier in the season about the crowd sometimes showing out. You had a bit of a crowd here by your bench.

JR PAYNE: Yeah.

Q. Did you feel that support? Did you feel like the band, you had chip dancing on the sideline.

JR PAYNE: Yeah, yes, absolutely. I mean, we had administrators and alums, and I just would love while I have a microphone to give a shoutout to all of those people that came to support, not just tonight but supported all year long.

We have practice guys that have been incredible all year. Our managers were incredible all year. We have our previous athletic director and our current athletic director. My immediate sports supervisor and my sports supervisor that retired last year along with donors and my son Jax was here.

Just such a great group. That's one thing that's really special about Colorado, is that people bleed black and gold out there. They're not just fans. They really truly love their Buffs and we felt that tonight and honestly we feel it most nights.

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