

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - James Madison vs Kentucky

Friday, March 20, 2026

Morgantown, West Virginia, USA

Hope Coliseum

**James Madison Dukes**

**Peyton McDaniel**

**Ashanti Barnes**

**Coach Sean O'Regan**

Media Conference



down but we also have to just play our game and focus on what we can control, too.

**Q. The flip side to the experience question is you start Grace at center who this is her first experience of anything like this. They obviously have a dominant center. How do you expect that you guys are going to guard, without giving away too much, how are you going to guard her? Are you going to guard the five a little bit? What's the game plan there?**

**ASHANTI BARNES:** I think just sticking to our principles like this is a regular season game and having each other's back. We're not leaving Gracie out there on an island guarding, so it's everybody guarding together.

**Q. Is it kind of nice for either of you guys that the regional is in Morgantown which is kind of close to James Madison so if you have family and stuff they can make the trip pretty easily?**

**PEYTON McDANIEL:** Yeah, I think it's cool. Definitely closer than when we were at Ohio State, so hopefully we can have some JMU fans here tomorrow.

**THE MODERATOR:** Any other questions for our student-athletes? All right. Thank you, ladies. Good luck.

We would now like to welcome the head coach of James Madison, Sean O'Regan. Sean, if you could start us off with some general comments about making it into the tournament and then maybe talk a little bit about your first round match-up tomorrow with Kentucky.

**SEAN O'REGAN:** Sure. We're just really excited. The goal for us every year is to play in this tournament. Obviously whether that's the luck of an at-large bid or winning the conference tournament and ultimately our goal will always be to win the conference tournament.

Really, really happy our players get to experience this. After two years of some pretty significant heartbreak, I think it's great for us to finally bust through that wall. That part I'm really excited about. They get to experience this. And, you know, we'll be about business here but we're

**PEYTON McDANIEL:** I think that we really relayed on leaning on each other and our defense and our rebounding to lay the foundation for those wins and I think we've been able to continue to build off of that each game.

**Q. When Kentucky was in here earlier they really emphasized the experience that you two, in particular, have. How comfortable are you with just everything that goes into this being a little bit different than your regular season type of game? And how much does your age and maturity help you going into something like this?**

**ASHANTI BARNES:** We can't be too comfortable coming into this game knowing that they're a good team. We just have to stay together and be poised and know that we're coming to win.

**PEYTON McDANIEL:** I think our experience with some of the teams that we have played earlier in the season will definitely help us, especially the younger players, but knowing that the two of us have been here for a couple of years, we know that we're ready for this moment.

**Q. Looking at Kentucky, they have a really, really strong defense, one of the best in the SEC. Is that kind of what you guys saw when you scouted them? How do you kind of -- without revealing too much, how do you prepare for that?**

**PEYTON McDANIEL:** Yeah, they're a great team. They do, they have a great defense. They have a few good players who have a big emphasis for us right now. We know that we have to do some things to try to shut them



going to enjoy it as well. That's the first thing.

Second thing is you're obviously looking at a really, really talented tough team in Kentucky that I've got a massive amount of respect for and certainly have watched them throughout the year with Kenny Brooks being a mentor of mine and somebody who I owe a lot to. We're excited and we're going to game plan. We'll have the details ready and we'll be ready to go, but certainly an uphill battle with the match-up for sure.

**Q. Kenny kind of talked about your relationship with him. Has this been the first time you guys have met in the NCAA Tournament?**

SEAN O'REGAN: Definitely the first time in the NCAA Tournament. We only met one other time and it was a post-season tournament, WNIT. It was at JMU, he was at Virginia Tech at the time. But, yeah, we talked for the ten years he's been gone, we've talked on and off for those years and there's not a team I watch more in college basketball right now if I've got a night off from watching film. There's no team I watch more than Kentucky.

If you're really looked into the details, you'll see some of the same plays because I have stolen a lot of his plays throughout the years and that's okay. I have gone to see him practice at Virginia Tech. We've sent one of our assistants, Kayla Cooper Williams to watch him work out Clara Strack early this year because Grace McDonough has the makings of that. She's not quite there yet, of course, but that was my idea. Can we give grace some of what he's given Clara Strack?

A lot to it, and I know that's going to be a piece of this story line, but really for me it's about our group of players and group of young women that get to experience this for the first time. I know that's going to be part of it, but it's a cool thing, man. I wish we weren't playing them in the sense of I want to root for him to go to the Final Four. I'm sure he was going to root for us to make it through as many rounds as we can. Now it's like we got to go toe-to-toe, which isn't ideal, but it's okay.

**Q. You said you watched him a lot. What stands out to you about their team? I know they're really good defensively just like you guys.**

SEAN O'REGAN: Yeah, in a way -- and look. They're a different level throughout the course of the year. Being in the SEC, it's crazy but if you really do look at the stats, we're a similar style team. Field goal percentage is almost the same, they shoot a little bit better from three, our rebound margin is almost the same. There's a lot of similarities in that.

I think they're really good defensively. I think they're really, really good offensively. I think his half-court man offensive stuff is genius. That's why I take so much from him, as much as I feel like we can execute. That's the focus for us, being able to guard them in the half-court, because it's what we've hung our hat on all year.

And what made us successful in the conference tournament and throughout the last nine games of the Sun Belt we had people in the 50s, point-wise. That's obviously where we spend our time and diving into watch him, man, he's got some really, really good stuff offensively. There's a lot of weapons. So it will be a challenge for us for sure.

**Q. I was asking some of the players but a obviously Clara Strack requires a lot of attention. You mentioned their three-point percentage, though, too. Are you able to play her straight up? Do you try to throw different things at her from different directions, or does their three-point shooting make that kind of tough?**

SEAN O'REGAN: No, I'm not going to tell you what our plan will be, but, yeah, that's what makes Kenny Brooks Kenny Brooks, right? You got a post presence and he's had a post presence for a lot of years in a row now going back to Liz Kitley at Virginia Tech. Even Regan Magarity at Virginia Tech. He's had a post presence for years and what do you do when you have a post presence? You put shooters around them, right? That makes a lot of sense.

If you're going to decide to throughout a double, which we watched a lot of SEC games. Not many people did. She required a lot of attention, but as far as double-team, true double-team? There wasn't a lot of people that did that. That says a lot about the danger of those two kids.

Asia Boone and -- I'm forgetting her name right now, but they both made more three pointers than Peyton McDaniel. Both of them. So that's the level of three-point shooter. It's going to bother me until I say her name, but that's okay. You see what I'm saying? So it is a danger. Oh, by the way, they've got a point guard I think is borderline All-American too who can come up ball screen. Where do you find the cracks? That's what we've been working on as a staff.

The fun part for me is it's not a crammed one-day prep, two-day prep. We've got some time to think. We have got some time to really dive in and watch film. But Strack, you can tell -- I wouldn't be surprised if he told his team she needs to touch every time down the floor. That's the level of involvement she is in the offense as far as usage of touches or anything like that. She's certainly a big piece of this.

**Q. You guys are on a 12-game winning streak. How do you make sure your team isn't complacent? Is it order now with this type of setting and the NCAA Tournament?**

SEAN O'REGAN: Yeah, I think we're all eyes forward. I don't think we're resting on any of that stuff. I think all that does is just give us confidence that I think we have really understood what it's going to take for us to win games and it's our defense and if we can lean on our defense, you can go and have a bad shooting night or a night where the ball just won't go down for you, but it keeps you in games if you're playing defense.

We had a great lesson with that when we were at App State. We only put up 60 points but we held them to 53. We were able to win the game. That's what it is. I don't think our team -- I bet if you asked our team how many games we've won in a row, I bet half of them wouldn't know because what we've talked about a lot with our players is that you don't get any points for that, right? It's a 0-0 game when they throw the ball up tomorrow. That's the most important thing for us. Eyes forward, figuring out how we're going to game plan.

I think they will all be excited. This is a new experience for every one of them -- I take that back. In a JMU unit form, it's only Peyton McDaniel coming back. But Zakiya has NCAA Tournament experience. Bree and our other Bri McLeod, they've all done this NCAA experience, but in a JMU uniform, there's only one.

I think that is excitement. I think they know the challenge ahead of them. I think we'll go be ready to attack.

**Q. I don't know how many times you have been to Morgantown. What do you expect from the atmosphere tomorrow? I know they sold out a couple thousands of tickets. What are you expecting from tomorrow?**

SEAN O'REGAN: I was actually hoping for some help. I hope West Virginia is rooting for us a little bit more than Kentucky maybe. I don't know. I don't know. You have been to Morgantown twice and I have not come away with a win. Actually, three wins. I was a manager with the men's team at JMU. We played down here one time as well and lost. You have been here a couple times. But, no, I know this place. I know it will be packed out.

I really do hope -- I know it's one ticket for both games. I hope everybody shows up and it's just a great atmosphere. I just want this for our players. They go to experience this how many times, right? I want them to have a

memorable experience. Even a couple years ago we went to Ohio State, it was memorable. It was packed. Yeah, we lost the game but they'll remember that. They'll remember those 12,000 people or however many was there and it was a great experience and they got to see a game. We battled just like I hope we battle tomorrow.

**Q. I know we hardly ever have a conversation where the game Kenny Brooks doesn't come up and whether you're playing Kentucky or not. On his side of things, he seems to not really want to talk too much about his past and everything. I know you're in different situations, but what is it like for you? We asked them before but now that you're on the eve of it, what's it like to face him again?**

SEAN O'REGAN: I'm with him in a sense of, like, I really don't want it to be all about that, right? I don't. There's so much time that's passed. Yeah, he's a JMU alum. I lean on him for a lot of things. He's there for me in a lot of ways. Again, it's too bad we got to go face-to-face, right? You know what I mean by that?

But, no, it's going to be surreal. The last time we played, we're literally calling the same play. I'm not joking. We're playing -- I'm calling open. I don't know if he has this play in still. We don't anymore, but, like, I'm calling open, I look down there, he's calling open. That's a little bit about what it is.

When I'm watching him play, I'm recognize that action. Yeah, I remember when I went down to Virginia Tech and stole that play for him then. That was five years ago or whatever it was. But it's surreal, man. I guess if you're in this business long enough, you're going to go against friends or mentors or whatever, right? But it's certainly elevated. He's a legend around Harrisonburg. He's a Waynesboro native. I took my daughter to AAU practice at Stuarts Draft. I had a dinner at The Fishin' Pig.

People are talking about this because -- and I think that's why the NCAA is no fool putting this match-up together, right? Because there's a buzz about it, at least surrounding Harrisonburg to me. There's a buzz about it. I'm getting my haircut and somebody is sitting in the next chair is like I think they did that match-up on purpose. Yeah, of course they did. And there's a buzz about it.

It will be surreal but I really do want this to be about, in the end, Peyton McDaniel, Ashanti Barnes, Bree Robinson, Zakiya Stephenson, Grace McDonough. I couldn't remember her name before, Amelia Hassett, Asia Boone, okay? I remember Amelia. Don't be mad at me! But that's what this thing is about is that group. That's the most important part for me is making sure our players get the

experience they deserve.

**Q. Coach, earlier Coach Brooks was talking about how he thought that you guys should have been a higher seed than number 12. Do you feel that as well? Does that motivate you guys and change your game plan at all as you go into this match-up?**

SEAN O'REGAN: It's funny, I would say the same thing about them. I think he should have been a higher seed. I'm looking at their team and one of our assistants asked, hey, we played Ohio State a couple years ago, is this team better than Ohio State? And I said yeah, by far. I know they had some injuries, but you would thank you that's taken into account. I think he should be hosting.

Now, as far as us, I don't know. Last year I spent so much time figuring out or trying to figure out where we should be and where we stacked up and our net and our quad wins and da-da-da. It exhausted me and we didn't get in. This year as far as the selection process, I was just like, man, I just really didn't want to be a 13 or below. That was it. So 12, cool with me. 11, great. But I just didn't want to be a 13, 14, 15, 16 and have to go against somebody on their floor. That was my main criteria. Where, who, all that stuff? I was like, man, it doesn't really matter.

Kentucky, now, is a team that, again, we're going to give it our best tomorrow, but granted if they get past us, they could make a run. They're very well-equipped for that in a really, really tough league. I mean, the toughest league in the country.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions? Coach, thank you very much.

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