

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

Saturday, March 21, 2026
Morgantown, West Virginia, USA
Hope Coliseum

James Madison Dukes
Coach Sean O'Regan
Peyton McDaniel
Ashanti Barnes

Media Conference

Kentucky 71, James Madison 56

THE MODERATOR: Coach O'Regan, go ahead.

SEAN O'REGAN: I'm proud of our effort. I thought we battled. I thought we had a really bad start, a really bad quarter but I give Kentucky all the credit. They made us have a bad quarter. Their length was really bothersome and I think it affected our ability to make shots early. It affected us on the glass as well.

I give them a lot of credit. They were ready to go. They were not nervous. They didn't take us lightly. They were on every set we called. They had a game plan. They did not take us lightly. I give them a lot of credit. It's too bad we got off to a bad start because you work all the way to get here and you want to play well and our start was too much to overcome.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for our student-athletes?

Q. For both of you, I know it's a quick turnaround but could you both reflect on your JMU experience? Not many people spend as much time at one school anymore as you two did. To play for Coach O and make it back to the NCAA Tournament, what was the whole experience like?

PEYTON McDANIEL: I think it's hard to put into words how much JMU means to me and how much this team and this coaching staff and Coach O means to me. I feel like I poured everything I possibly could into this program and I think they gave it right back to me.



From the start, freshman year, Coach O poured everything he had into me and never gave up on me and the journey that we've had together, being able to win a Sun Belt Championship my last year, make it to the NCAA Tournament, I couldn't have asked for a better experience, a better program. I'm happy to be able to call JMU my moment and this team my family.

ASHANTI BARNES: I have to say the same. One reason I came to JMU was it was a family-oriented team and I'm glad to say I made it to the NCAA Tournament and we won a Sun Belt Championship.

Q. Ashanti, I want to talk a little bit about you coming back from the locker room after you were injured. How did you feel the rest of the game and why was it important that you did come back?

ASHANTI BARNES: I just knew my teammates needed me to come out on the court and help out with everything, so I just put my injury to the side and knew I had to get it done.

Q. Even if it wasn't the result you guys wanted, saw you guys at the beginning of the game in the huddle getting your teammates hyped up. I'm just curious what the message was before this game from you guys.

PEYTON McDANIEL: Yeah, I think the message all year is staying together no matter the score. We weren't playing the score. We knew we had a bad first quarter but we weren't trying to separate. Staying together is what got us a championship and what got us to this tournament, so we knew no matter the score, that's what we had to do.

Q. Ashanti, he asked you about the injury. You weren't the only one who went down on that end of the court. Was there any issues with the court or anything? Or was it just kind of bad luck?

ASHANTI BARNES: Yeah, no, I just tripped.

Q. Now that you guys are leaving, there's a lot of young players on this team. Is there a message that



you're kind of leaving them with now that your time at JMU is over?

ASHANTI BARNES: Just stay together because this moment isn't always -- nobody gets this moment always so just stay together and you'll make it here.

PEYTON McDANIEL: Yeah, I think this is the goal every year, obviously. It's the standard like you're trying to win a championship every year, you're trying to get back here. I'm really happy we do have a strong, young core group that was able to experience this now so you understand what it takes to get here and trying to keep getting back here every year.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, thank you.

We'll take questions now for Coach O'Regan.

Q. Coach, I asked Coach Brooks about your all's dynamic. He said that it was actually hard for him to sleep last night knowing that he had to go up against his alma mater. Can you touch on that and maybe in your mind how you felt about it leading up to this game?

SEAN O'REGAN: Yeah, two things here... one, if there was one team I would prefer not to play, it would have been then, not because we're scared of Kentucky's players or anything like that. It's more for me, root for him. He's a mentor of mine. He does a great job. I watch his offense. He does an unbelievable job, so I root for him and I'm going to root for him as of tomorrow.

It's tough. It's tough and how it was set up is tough and I understand why and it's all a positive, right? In the end it's not my personal preference that matters, it's that -- and I said this in my first -- everywhere you went in Harrisonburg and around Harrisonburg, people were talking about it and that's why they're doing it, right? It added an element for me.

But, look, if I'm going to lose in the NCAA Tournament there's nobody I would rather lose to than Kenny Brooks. That's real. I don't want to ever lose but if I'm going to have to lose, okay, let it be him and let him -- he's had some amazing teams over the years. This is as good as any of them. If you put Key back in the lineup for these six games or eight games or whatever she missed, they don't lose five of six and they're not a five seed.

It was a tough one today and it was almost one of those moments where, like, I didn't want to look at him. Let me just coach my team against this blue team that we're playing and not look at him after our pleasantries were

exchanged at the beginning.

Q. They were moving the ball pretty quickly in transition. They were moving the ball around a lot on offense. What kind of challenges did that present for you defense?

SEAN O'REGAN: Early on, I thought they were really great. They were brilliant. Our doubling the post I thought was good all game. I didn't think that hurt us at all. I thought it was the other parts. Transition defense really hurt us. We were not making shots. They were able to push. Not ideal to be in that situation and they generally don't push as much on makes.

But you saw the first quarter, you miss ten shots, they're zipping that thing around and it's going in. It was a big thing and it's all related, right? We had 12 turnovers at the half. It's hard to defend those live ball turnovers. You're not in good position. I think we're an elite half-court defensive team but we weren't especially early. I know at the half, they had 16 points off the turnovers. Looked like they ended with that, but it affected us.

It's a high-level SEC team. You make a mistake and there's Hasset in the corner burying a three. You don't have much room for that. You don't have much room for mistakes. It hurt us. Ball movement hurt us early, but I wouldn't change our game plan. I wouldn't change what we did to attack. I thought we did a good job on Strack on the most part, but 14 rebounds isn't half bad. She's an unbelievable player, man.

Q. You talk about those turnovers and obviously, like I mentioned before, there are times when people just fell down. On the other end, early on, you were getting hands on passes and not -- they weren't turning into turnovers. Were you happy, I guess, with the way you were playing defense, the way you were taking care of the ball other than maybe some of those kinds of things or was it really an issue for you?

SEAN O'REGAN: What I categorize it as, I just think this environment, NCAA Tournament, this environment is relatively new for us, right? So we didn't get to go last two years. I know there's players on our team that have been to the NCAA Tournament but we don't experience this environment that often. You want to be ready for it, you want to have your kids ready for it. You want to go attack. Kentucky has, right? They got to play two games last year at home. I believe the year before I think two games, I'm not exactly sure. They've also played in the SEC. They've played at South Carolina. They've played at all these places that have the buzz in the building. I thought there was a great buzz in the building today.

I think there's a little bit early on you're a little, like, not even nervous, you're excited. So you're maybe moving too fast and I think that's where maybe uncharacteristically, Barnes' first layup goes in, usually and it rims out, okay. Bree Robinson drives to the middle and it's like, it's just an excitement because you want this so bad and I think that affected us.

Getting knocked down, honestly, I feel like we weren't ready for the physicality they gave early. They were really, really physical with us early and not in a cheating way, but they were real physical. I felt like we needed to match that physicality, which I thought we did a much better job of in the second half. That's why I think a little bit of the falling down, some of the turnovers and stuff like that.

You can go back to the play-by-play, right? I think of Barnes' layup and I think the first time, the first possession for Kentucky, we double Strack, she throws it out and Zakiya gets her hand on it and it's like if we get that steal, we start the game 2-0 and we're pumped, right? And maybe that calms us down a little bit. It turns out, not even thrown out of bounds, it's off of Z and they get another chance at it.

I just think there's so many factors that go into it, but, no, I just think the excitement affected us. Once we settled in, and, again, it's easier to play from behind and Kentucky, it's harder to play from ahead. I'm not saying we beat them in the second half. That's not really it for me. It's more of just that excitement of wanting to do really well I think affected us in a negative way a little bit.

Q. You touched on what else I was going to ask about. Ironically, the last time JMU was in the tournament, two or three years in a row, you were working for Kenny. You've been so close, be it COVID overtime losses, snubbed on Selection Sunday.

SEAN O'REGAN: Broken hands. That was a good one.

Q. So close to maybe being in the tournament five, six years in a row. How much different does it make for a program where everybody just kind of has that? Even if you make it last year where you were so close to come into this one?

SEAN O'REGAN: Yeah, I think it would help a lot. I think -- let's say we can make it next year, you have a different calm to Z and to Bree and the people that have come back with it, right? And let's say we made it last year, I think Barnes and P, I don't think they were even -- it wasn't drastic, but, of course, it's experience, right? And so Kentucky has that. Strack is experienced. They won a

game in the NCAA Tournament. Not just play but won a game. Those kids are experienced with it. Even Boone. I know Boone didn't get to play the whole time when they played at Kentucky last year, but been to an NCAA Tournament recently.

That's the hope and, again, it all matters. Match-ups matter, right? I think that's a big thing in winning games in the NCAA Tournament too. Our match-up for this one was basically an All-American center against our freshman Grace McDonough, right? It's not an ideal match-up for position by position for us. That's a big challenge for Grace. I think that matters, but I do think experience would have mattered and helped us some today for sure.

Q. Coach, you talk about that experience. I know the dust is still settling but right now you're set to have seven players return that were in 20 or more games. With that core you have this that locker room right now, what has you so confident in that group that they would be able to use this year as a building block and take that next step moving forward?

SEAN O'REGAN: Just believe in them and I believe what P has taught them and Ashanti has taught them and even Regina has taught them. Everybody's going to see P, everybody's going to see Ashanti but I think Regina taught people how to be an absolutely call me up, hey, you need me, I'm ready? You don't need me? I'm not stirring up dust. I think that has value, too, right?

You've got, I would say out of your -- you have a good amount of returners other than P and Barnes and G out of your top nine, right? You've got six and so I know Kylie's on there. There's other people, Jemma. But, you know, your starting point guard of two years in a row now returns in Zakiya Stephenson, I mean God willing, right?

Bree Robinson, same thing. All-Defensive team, has played a ton of minutes over two years returning, God willing, okay? And we keep saying that. Grace McDonough started all year long and went through ups and downs and you know how proud I am of Grace McDonough of coming out here in an NCAA Tournament game and not being scared and getting nine and six against -- not match-up wise with Strack, but you can tuck tail and run in these situations and she didn't. She didn't. She's got a post move against -- she can do this.

I think what it does is it grows your confidence for when we're working, April, May, June, July, September, October, taste it. Taste it. And when we're working and when you don't feel like working sometimes, remember this and this is where we want to be. This is where we want to get back to. That's what gives me confidence, that group and that

drive that we'll be able to formulate from this. Once you taste it, man, you want to come back here.

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