

# NBA Western Conference Finals: Lakers vs. Nuggets

Tuesday, May 16, 2023

## Michael Malone

Denver Nuggets

Game 1: Pregame

**Q. Michael, you said yesterday you guys felt relaxed, there was no pressure, and you guys were just having fun and this was an opportunity. How confident are you that that attitude will be pervasive? That seems to be easier said than done.**

MICHAEL MALONE: Just being around our guys and knowing them the way I do, you get a feel for guys and understand where they're at. I think our guys have been great through the first round and the second round, and here we are back in the Western Conference Finals. But there is no tension in the room. I don't feel guys that are being like overly tight, if you will.

Obviously I think both teams are probably excited to get out there and play. We haven't played in probably five days I think it is. Once this game starts, we'll have a much better idea of all the questions that we have going in in terms of who are they going to start, what are their matchups going to be, how are they going to guard Nikola. That's the best part about Game 1 is that all the speculation is put to an end, and you know exactly what's going on on both ends of the floor.

**Q. Do you have an update on Jamal?**

MICHAEL MALONE: He's still questionable. He's obviously been battling an illness the last couple days. So knowing Jamal, as we all do, I think he'll be out there giving it the best that he can.

**Q. What's the difference in the challenge that LA brings in transition versus Phoenix?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Well, I mean, much is being made of Lakers and their running. I think we're second in the Playoffs, and they're third right behind us. So who can win that battle every night I think will be a big factor in determining the winner of this series.

For us, Phoenix, they killed us in transition, and we did a much better job in Game 6 at their place. But Devin



Booker makes, misses, turnovers, he was getting out looking for his, knowing in the half court he was going to see a double-team most times.

We know LeBron has long been a one-man break. Thankfully we have taken care of the basketball, so we cannot fuel their break, they thrive on that. If we do take care of the ball, just the discipline to not stand and watch but sprint back on the race so they see a crowd. That's going to be a challenge, obviously. That, the paint and then keeping them off the foul line, those are the three areas that we've really targeted in terms of trying to slow this team down.

**Q. Michael, this is a broad question, but if you go back to 2020, that bubble matchup against the Lakers, when it comes to Joker and the player he was then versus the player he is now, he was pretty damn good back then, but where is the improvement and how much different is he from back then?**

MICHAEL MALONE: You know, I got a kick out of his response. He doesn't even remember the bubble and that matchup. We were there for 83 days. I think we've all tried to put that out of our mind.

How has he gotten better? Obviously I think, one, he's matured. I think that the game was always moving pretty slow for him, but probably slower now. He's got two MVPs under his belt since that point in time, and that many more playoff games.

You can go through all the regular season battles you want, but it's the postseason where you make a name for yourself, and I think what Nikola has been able to do in the five consecutive playoff appearances that we've had is just incredible, and he seems to get better every year.

Take, for example, the last round against Phoenix, the odds-on favorite to come out of the Western Conference, we beat them 4-2 and you look down and you see Nikola average a triple-double and a very efficient triple-double.

He's at peace, I think, with himself. He's a father, he's a husband, and he's very comfortable in his own skin.

**Q. Joker has obviously made it very clear that winning MVPs doesn't mean that much to him, but behind the**



**scenes what have you seen from him in terms of what winning a championship would mean to him?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Oh, behind the scenes, it's the work ethic that he has, and I often tell our local media that it's a shame that the fans and the media doesn't get a chance to see him behind that curtain. We all see him when the jump ball goes off, but to play at the level that he plays at every single night and to maintain that consistent greatness is a direct byproduct of his work ethic.

Every single day, whether it's going before practice, after practice, after the game, lifting, his work ethic is off the charts, and I think that is what allows him to be the player he is, and that's also what motivates him to be a world champion and to bring the first world championship in franchise history to Denver.

**Q. This Nuggets team has set the tone in the first two games of each of the previous series. The Lakers have also won Game 1 in each of their two previous series. How much of an emphasis is there on setting the tone this time around and making sure to maintain that home court as best you can?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Well, if we're worried about setting a tone in the Western Conference Finals, then we don't have much of a chance here. We have not lost a home game in the Playoffs, they haven't lost a home game in the Playoffs. We told our team that they went Memphis, went into Golden State and won Game 1 both of those series and wrestled home-court advantage from both of those teams.

But for us it's maintaining the same course that we're on, the same mindset and going out there and doing our jobs to the best of our ability.

We know what we're going to face tonight, a hell of a team with one of the greatest players to ever do it and a bunch of other players around him that are playing at a high level.

But we have to worry about ourselves, as well, and our approach and our mentality, and I have no doubt that our group, in front of the best fans in the world, will go out there and be ready to play.

**Q. Michael, you guys traded for Aaron Gordon a couple years ago. Was there a moment where it kind of clicked and you thought he'd be able to give you the type of defense that he's given you in these Playoffs, whether that was shortly after the trade or I don't know what you thought of him before the trade, but is there a moment that sticks out?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, the moment that sticks out, it stuck out for a couple reasons is we went into LA and beat

the Clippers right after the trade deadline. They were healthy, we were healthy, and after that game, I think, one, we all looked and said, okay, Aaron Gordon just guarded Kawhi Leonard, who's one of the best players in the world, and he did a great job on him, and two, the reason that game still resonates is we all felt we had a real chance to win a championship that year if we stayed healthy.

Unfortunately as we know that wasn't the case and Jamal got hurt soon thereafter at Golden State, which kind of delayed our destiny and our journey to try to be a world champion team.

But I think Aaron showed us at that point in time that he can go out there and guard 1 through 5 and do a hell of a job doing so. First round against Karl-Anthony Towns, second round against Kevin Durant and he's going to have his hands full in the Western Conference Finals guarding the likes of LeBron James and Anthony Davis.

**Q. You're I think the second-longest tenured coach in the West behind Gregg Popovich and over the last couple days, Monty Williams fired, Doc Rivers fired --**

MICHAEL MALONE: Steve Kerr didn't get fired, did he? I heard about Doc, I was going to say don't tell me Steve got fired.

No, Steve is ahead of me.

**Q. Just on the state of coaching with massive expectations, the last three coaches who have been fired have been champions, gotten to The Finals, had the best record. What do you make of the landscape as a whole right now?**

MICHAEL MALONE: That coaching is a crazy profession. The one thing I can say for Monty, who's a friend and who I've communicated with since he got fired, or for a guy like Bud or for a guy like Doc, none of those guys I've been surprised. We all understand the jobs that we sign up for. If you wanted to be -- to have a job where you're going to be secure for 40 years, being an NBA coach is not that job.

Now, there's a reason my father tried to talk me out of becoming a coach. He had lived it with six kids, and he understood the pitfalls of that job. I was just too dumb and stubborn to listen to him.

But it's a crazy profession. I think Monty Williams, I think Mike Budenholzer, I think Doc Rivers are not good coaches; I think they're great coaches and they will all wind up with another team very, very quickly. But sometimes the expectations are unrealistic, sometimes ownership is just impatient or whatever it is, and I feel really fortunate to



be working for the people that I work for because most teams after my third year, and we lost to Minnesota in game 82, I would have gotten fired because three years we didn't make the Playoffs, even though we won 46 games, they would have gone elsewhere.

So huge credit to Stan and Josh Kroenke for having the ability to step back and think big picture and let this thing grow internally and see what it can become.

But we all understand the rules when we sign up for this, and it's unfortunately one of the nasty parts of our business.

**Q. Yesterday you mentioned some of your veterans like Ish [Smith] and DeAndre [Jordan] still putting their ego aside even though they might not be playing as much. What kind of impact has DeAndre had on this team with his veteran experience, and also do you think you might need another big behind Jokic because of how good AD is?**

MICHAEL MALONE: The second question first, if you go back to our first round against Utah, I threw DeAndre out there, whether it was Nikola getting in foul trouble and Rudy Gobert and Karl-Anthony Towns being out there, just having size, physicality and experience like DeAndre has. So I will not hesitate to use DeAndre. He knows that, he's aware of that, and he stays ready mentally and physically.

The leadership that DeAndre brings, him in particular, is he's not afraid to use his voice. If you ask every NBA player and coach who knows DeAndre, he has a tremendous IQ. He's one of those players that knew every opponent's play calls, and he would be able to call it out and help his team. He's the same way even though he's not playing. He's engaged. He's listening. He's involved in the meetings. He's involved in the walk-through and offering his insights.

I think it's invaluable because he's the guy, he's been out there, he's played with these guys, he's played against those guys. DeAndre's voice and leadership have been invaluable throughout the whole season and even more so in these Playoffs.

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