

# NBA Western Conference Finals: Lakers vs. Nuggets

Tuesday, May 16, 2023

## Darvin Ham

Los Angeles Lakers

Game 1: Pregame

**Q. You had identified against Memphis transition defense and Golden State the three-point shooting as the first things in the scouting report. Where do you start with this Denver team?**

DARVIN HAM: I think same thing, they're an opportunistic transition team, but they do it really efficient, get a lot of good stuff when they do run, and it's just us and our defense. That's the way it's built out. Being great in transition, being great in pick-and-roll, off-ball actions, post-up, isos. It's just the way our defense flows.

But again, definitely nothing has changed from one series to the next. That's how we approach it, knowing whether it's Joker in trail playing that five out and looking for opportunities, back-door passes, his ability to stretch the floor, flip it to a quick pick-and-roll, and even off the rebound, him being able to throw those touchdown passes. We've got to be alert and we've got to be on point as soon as you miss a shot.

**Q. How would you describe the difference and challenge for AD when Golden State's primary player would be Steph and in this case Jokic, and just the differences of what he has to do in a series like that?**

DARVIN HAM: Just doing his work early, trying not to allow him to get easy catches and try to push him off his spot. It seems like every spot on the court is his spot, but he can operate from pretty much anywhere.

But again, doing his work early and make sure he's not fouling, showing his hands, playing a good legal brand of defense, one-on-one defense. He has the knack for getting guys in foul trouble, and he's very, very crafty with and without the ball in his hands. That's going to be a huge one, just not, A, staying out of foul trouble, having himself available in the game.

**Q. You guys were faced a little bit with this against Steph after he had I think it was 12 assists in Game 2, but how can you work a defense to stop a playmaker?**



**Can you take Jokic's passing away? Is that possible?**

DARVIN HAM: No, I just think you have to be ready to give it multiple efforts and it starts with you being in position early. So many times, whether it's a disappointment lag or you're upset about a shot you didn't make or a whistle that wasn't blown, you have to have a short memory. We've talked about since day one having a next-play mentality, and then in the half court everybody communicating and covering for one another.

I think he's highly efficient, when he's aggressive; he'll score the ball. He's highly efficient when he's making plays for his teammates. You're going to have to do a little bit of both. I don't think you can shut any one aspect of his game down and expect to be okay. You just have to come in and have a great initial defender on him and the other four guys being ready to pitch in and just do their job, and again, being early to your spots, because if you have to play catch-up they'll kill you every time.

**Q. Darvin, you've obviously been around this league for a long time. What has impressed you most about Joker developing into the type of player that he's turned into?**

DARVIN HAM: He just goes about his business, and the way he's taking care of himself. We were talking about it today in the coaches' meeting. I think he's one of the most highly conditioned players of his caliber in our league. He has a funny little run, bounce when he runs, but that kid is in shape. If you watch him play end to end, side to side, he carries a huge load, and he's able to do it.

Just the work he puts in on his game, the way he cares about his teammates, the way he tries to get his teammates going and the unselfishness that's interwoven into his game and just his personality, he's a great kid. He's a really, really great -- all the interactions I've had with him he's been nothing but great, positive, funny. But you can tell he's serious about winning. He's a serious competitor.

We're going to have our work cut out for us, no doubt.

**Q. Over the past few years there's been an increased emphasis in African-American coaches. You've been one of them. Over the past few days, Doc Rivers being**



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**fired, Monty Williams being fired, successful guys, Stephen Silas, Dwane Casey, similar situations there. Do you still look at the bigger picture, you've got to be twice as good to stick around, or do you not look at the bigger picture with those situations?**

DARVIN HAM: I mean, I don't think so. I mean, Coach Bud got fired, too. Each individual, like we have a saying, each game is its own entity. I think that the same goes for NBA franchises. I'm not there every day; I'm submerged in Laker business and how we're progressing and trying to accomplish the goals that we've set out for ourselves.

But just the whole theory in whole, I think it's different now, man. I think the pressure from public outcry, be it television or social media, fans in market, I don't know, I mean, it's unfortunate because you're looking at some of those guys that got let go, highly, highly, highly capable, competent and winning coaches.

It's just a different day. I think we've come into a society where it's microwave, it's knee-jerk, and then the players. The players, if they really want a guy, they have to step up. If there's any inkling of "I don't know, I'm 50/50," then that gets the trigger pulled that much quicker.

I wish those guys nothing but the best. I've interacted obviously with all of them, and nothing but positive feedback, and my exploration of what it's like to be in this seat for the first time, and I wish them nothing but the best, but it's unfortunate that it ends like that, like after having success and just the lack of patience sometimes is overwhelming. It is what it is.

Obviously it was great to see the hiring process benefit people of color, but outside of that, it's a volatile, volatile -- I think it's the most volatile aspect of employment within the NBA is being an NBA coach, hands down.

**Q. We saw in Game 6 LeBron kind of go to the bully ball that we know he can do, targeting guys in the pick-and-roll and kind of just controlling a game that way. He hasn't done that as much through the first couple rounds, kind of sharing the ball more with D-Lo and Austin and Dennis. Do you feel like the further you guys advance in the Playoffs, you kind of need more of that from him, and is this maybe a series where we could see that more?**

DARVIN HAM: Well, I just think he's done an excellent job of picking his spots. He's allowed the table to be set for those other guys, and those guys have an opportunity to put their fingerprints on the game, and as the game wears on, he's great about the timing of, now let me go dominate the ball. But he's able to save up energy to be able to do

that because of the type of talent that we have around him and AD now. Guys that can play-make for themselves and others in D-Lo, Austin, Lonnie, Dennis, Rui. It takes a huge load off of those games, so now that they can be more strategic about when they're really assertive and really interjecting themselves into the meat of the game.

**Q. Taking you back to when you got the job, in your initial conversations with LeBron, was championship part of that conversation? And now that you guys are eight wins away from it, have you seen any change in demeanor from him?**

DARVIN HAM: No, I just think we both agreed that if we come in and have a focus of trying to get better every day and being consistent at that and everyone taking their craft seriously, from players, coaches, everyone in the building, front office, everyone really on the same page, locked in, trying to figure out how can we be the best versions of ourselves in the short term and how can we get better in the long term. I don't think -- we had a shirt, Rob [Pelinka] had some shirts made that had "chip" on them, like chip on our shoulder, and I think it really says a lot to where we started and where we are now.

I just think the competitive hunger is the biggest change that was made early on, guys being more competitive than they were last season, and just getting the group more competitive, more together, and we were able to tweak the roster, and it just all came together. Just the skill sets fit, the new guys coming in, the young guys, this hunger, this energy, this positive energy. It just fit with what we were trying to do and what we were trying to put around Bron and AD.

I don't know if the word "championship" was used early, but we knew if we worked properly, if we took our jobs really, really seriously, which you have no choice but to do when you're working for this franchise, championships are a foregone conclusion. You know that's what you're working for. You're not winning a division or just making it to the Playoffs. Those are huge accomplishments, don't get me wrong, but with this franchise, it's like, we're all in. It's all or nothing. Be it right or wrong, that's just the reality of the situation. I wouldn't have it any other way.

**Q. Darwin, from your playing days, how did you feel the altitude here and see how it impacted others, and did it factor in at all into your game planning or scheduling?**

DARVIN HAM: No, I just think you get that first run, you feel it a little bit, but once you get to your second wind, that second burst of energy is good, and I feel like you're fine all the way through.



**Q. I assume you won't tell us who's starting or will you? Who's starting?**

DARVIN HAM: No. [Laughter].

**Q. In a broader sense then, what's been the push-pull like since you guys closed out Golden State in trying to decide between Dennis and Jarred, potentially the two starting lineups you've used? What do you like about Dennis, and what do you like when it's Jarred?**

DARVIN HAM: I just think when it's Vando, it's different things you can do defensively. It's not so much coverage where you can switch more. He brings an energy to the game. They both do, really, but his is more paint oriented.

With Dennis, you have an opportunity to increase your pace. You may try to hide guys on Vando. I don't think you can do that with Dennis, and even Vando with his offensive rebounding, his quick secondary and third actions, going immediately into a DHO when a guy is playing off of him, that's a weapon we need to explore more.

But they both bring different intricacies of how they need to be guarded and how the rest of our group gets guarded when either one of them are on the floor. But defensively, again, they both lock in, and it's going to be either one of those two that's always guarding the most severe perimeter threat, be it point guards or small forward.

We're blessed to be able to have the option where we're just not depending on one particular guy. We have a plethora of guys really that we can throw at different people, but starting first and foremost with those two, it's a huge advantage to have.

**Q. Darwin, I wonder as you and the staff decided how you want to handle Joker, what tape did you focus on the most, and is there any chance you go as far back as that Conference Finals matchup a few years ago?**

DARVIN HAM: We looked at some different segments of when we played them in the regular season here. Our team was completely different, and we looked at a little bit of their playoff stuff. We pulled from a little bit of everything and came up with one unified thought, an initial coverage, a counter coverage and an escape plan, which I'm pretty sure we'll get to the escape plan with this guy.

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