

# 2024 NCAA Wrestling Championship

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Kansas City, Missouri, USA

T-Mobile Center

**Coach Brian Smith**  
**Coach Neil Erisman**  
**Coach Kevin Dresser**  
**Coach Brandon Eggum**

Media Conference



BRANDON EGGUM: Welcome. We're excited to be here as a program. We're happy we're able to bring all 10 of our athletes and compete. We had a good season I think, dual meet wise. And we have a lot of new faces in our lineup that have developed really well over the years. Looking forward to the next few days here battling against the best.

NEIL ERISMAN: Excited to be home. I grew up in Kansas City. Kansas City was the first time I've seen the championships. I think it was 2003 at Kemper Arena. It's good to be back home seeing family and friends.

We had a great season. Seems like not just a short time ago we didn't have a program, and now we're bringing five guys to the NCAA Tournament, winning the regular season Pac-12 championship and putting three conference champions.

It's been a really incredible season for us. We've had a lot of things that have made us really grateful and humbled us in the process. I'm excited about what this weekend brings and the direction that we can go from here on.

BRIAN SMITH: I was just looking something up. It's the 11th time since I've been the head coach at Missouri we've had the nationals in the state of Missouri, so I'm kind of spoiled that we get to have it. And the growth it's meant to our program when you host a national tournament, just the publicity the draw, the media and the young kids -- Neil was at the national tournament in 2003. I don't know what age he was, but I know where I was.

It's amazing the impact it has on the youth and the community of wrestling and the growth it caused in our state, and how our program has followed and grown. And we're bringing 10 guys here again. It's special so it's good

to be home.

KEVIN DRESSER: Thanks for having this. I may be the only person from Ames, Iowa that has never been in this building or the Power & Light across the street. It's a neat venue.

And I tell you what, the fans are going to have a great experience here. This is a great place to host the NCAA Championships. A beautiful building inside.

Iowa State, we qualified nine athletes. I've said all year long, this is a really good team and now it's time for them to show up and prove me right. We've had a great season and a great championship couple weeks ago. I know our athletes are excited like all our competitors here. That's what I've got.

**Q. Neil, this is a question for you. You said you were humbled in the process, in the five years since you've had your program. Could you talk about what were some of those humbling experiences? And how tough has it been and what recommendations would you make to any other new program, especially in a so-called non-wrestling state like yours?**

NEIL ERISMAN: Historically I wrestled at Oklahoma State and we won a lot. I was fortunate enough to go to Carolina, and we were winning a lot there. You win one Division I dual meet in three years that will humble you pretty quick.

And little things like not being able to completely throw a lineup year one. And then just in the recruiting process, just a lot of student-athletes that didn't choose your school, that chose others.

There's just a lot of different situations that when you start from scratch, it's completely different than rebuilding that you have to go through. And getting your head kicked in for so many years and keeping a smile on your face and celebrating the little things, that will humble you real quick. And that will make you grateful for these types of moments.

I would say that that's a combination of a lot of tough times,

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a lot of tough situations that got us to this point.

**Q. (Off microphone).**

NEIL ERISMAN: That's a tough question, absolutely, during the middle of it, you've got to have perspective, you gotta have a strong foundation in your life to continue to live on to go through that.

So absolutely, I would recommend it. This is very much a great sport for new programs. If you can come in with a strong message, a strong value system and be able to communicate effectively, you can grow pretty quickly, I believe.

**Q. You've had got five years, fifth year in the program. Tell us how it feels -- you have this many qualifiers and the eyes that have been on the program this year, you've had some awesome upsets as a dual team, you've had several Pac-12 champions, won that championship. What's that felt like to you, what's that felt like to, I guess, in the recruiting sense and also just as a team culture as well?**

NEIL ERISMAN: It's unbelievable, it's a lot of fun. We've had a great time this year and there's been some years where we were trying to make it through the season.

I'm really happy for my guys that they get to experience this. There's guys that have been here since the beginning. I was standing on tennis courts painting pictures in thin air of what our facility was going to look like. And those guys are going to be here at the national tournament today.

I'm very excited about my young guys but I'm more happy for my older guys and what they went through and the perseverance and the tenacity that it took to stay the course says a lot about their character and how they've developed. So I'm just super happy for those guys right now.

**Q. Fresh off Big 12 championships, positives and negatives to take away from that tournament individually? One guy in particular, Casey Swiderski, he's been a guy you've had to control emotions. What was the message to him going into the championships?**

KEVIN DRESSER: I don't think it's any secret that JC is a high-energy guy. He gets fired up pretty easy. He's pretty young, only in his second year in college. He's a true sophomore. I think that losing in the semifinals was probably perfect for him. I always say you're either winning or learning, and he learned a lot there.

He learned that he had to change his style, his approach to the match. And then when things got tough, he's continuing to learn that he's got to control his emotions.

Has he mastered it? Probably not. But we've got to keep that fire, but we've got to keep that fire in the right place. So we'll all get to see how he progresses the next three days. But I think he learned a lot. I think probably losing that match in the semis might have been a blessing for him right there.

**Q. Talking to Yonger Bastida back at media day, he thought this team could have five or six All-Americans. And asking Derek St. John later in the year, he's, like what they saw from (indiscernible) he felt, maybe we could have more. Could you talk about the confidence this team, how it's grown throughout the year and trying to get that team trophy you guys have been striving for since day one of the season?**

KEVIN DRESSER: I think we have nine individuals that have a lot of confidence, but we have to keep in mind there's a lot of guys that are weighing in right beside them that have a lot of confidence too.

I always say to do really well at the NCAA Championships you have to do two things. One, you have to be really good as an individual. And you have to have some breaks sometimes. You've got to win those close matches. Sometimes you've got to get those guys in black and white on your side. And you have to have a few breaks.

But I think if this team can get some breaks, they can really be happy with what ends up Saturday night.

**Q. Brian, you talked about the impact of this tournament on the area and the state. For the Elams to come back and have this spotlight, what's that mean for you and your program?**

BRIAN SMITH: It's a pretty cool story. I was in the Grand Canyon, and it was after season. And I think I knew the committee was coming out with the places they were going to be. And I came out of it and my phone started to blow up like it normally does anyway when I don't have it on.

And I saw, hey, that's awesome. I'm like, what is so awesome. And I had to look it up. I saw the year we were getting in Kansas city. Of course, because of damn COVID I had to figure out, would Zach still be eligible.

I figured it out and those were the first two people; I texted them together, Zach, Rock -- Zach's senior year will be in Kansas City. They were very excited about it.

I've known them since they were, I think, four and five years old. We were doing camps and clinics out here for his dad. And it's just the relationship I have with them, they're very special young men.

I know the impact they still -- they're doing camps all over the state. Kids know them and love them. This will be fun for those young kids to be at this type of venue -- beautiful, packed house -- seeing the Elam brothers, going out there and doing special things.

**Q. What are your conversations like with Keegan and the buildup? How do you get the best out of him here?**

BRIAN SMITH: You don't have to push him too much. He loves to be in the practice room. That's what I always say, that's what makes him special, the way he trains. It's not just during the practice, it's what he does after and how technical he is and breaking things down in his preparation. He's just a special one that's fun to coach.

And it's fun. Like, when we get to wrestle David, they're both that way. I think Coach said it to me one time, Kevin said it to me one time, after they had a great match, it's like we're kind of lucky to sit in the corner with those two and the way they compete at such a high level, and fans get to watch it.

**Q. Could you give us your perspective of what the team learned from the Big Tens? And in your mind what would it take for your group to have a strong performance here at nationals?**

BRANDON EGGUM: For us, the big thing we'll just have some of our leaders come through. We've got three sixth-year coming back. We've got Patrick McKee at 125, who's a couple-time All-American. We need a guy like him to go out and perform and have the tournament that he's capable of having.

Isaiah Sells, winning the Big Ten Championships, that was important in a lot of ways. I think it's as tough to win that tournament as it is this one. It's extremely competitive. He's had a really solid, consistent season. We'll need points from him.

Michael Blockhus is a guy that we pulled after that first round at the Big Ten Championships. He's had an amazing season. We knew it would affect his ranking a little bit and it did. But he's a guy that believes, he's 100 percent that he can go through the bracket here and do great things and win a national title.

We thought it was more important for him to be healthy

than to battle through that. And it affected his seed a little bit, but I know he's excited for the tournament.

And then we have some other young guys that have competed really well. So the big thing is just keep getting better. Try to focus on performance versus winning, is a big thing we talk about.

I think like everybody, you look at the bracket, you find a million reasons why you think you're in a tough spot. But it's one match at a time. Just be excited and compete. And that's what we're going to do.

**Q. Neil, with this being the last year that ASU is in the Pac-12 wrestling, I was curious what you hope for the future of Pac-12?**

NEIL ERISMAN: We actually have a one-year waiver with the Pac-12. So the Pac-12 will exist for at least one more season. We hope to see kind of where the landscape of college athletics goes to make better decisions for wrestling in the West.

It's important that we keep wrestling in the West, and we allow more regional competition out there by not disbanding. But I think we're all going to do what's best for wrestling first and then try to focus on us afterwards.

**Q. I know you are on the Kansas side but you're still in KC. Just how have you seen this area grow in wrestling? And how do you use that to your advantage in recruiting?**

NEIL ERISMAN: I've got a lot of relationships here, mainly because I wrestled with everybody in this area, and I did grow up watching Coach Smith grow his program, and it's been unbelievably impressive with that and the different clubs in the areas and guys coming back.

Wrestling has really exploded. It's always been great here. There's always been a lot of great talent, a lot of national champs coming out of this area and World Team members and things of that sort.

I think that this place is, if you don't know already, it's a hidden gem for wrestling and recruiting, and there's always talent coming in and out.

**Q. Michael Blockhus came back to you, had an opportunity to get in the ring. MMA, UFC is continuing to grow. What are the positives of wrestlers doing both in and out of season as a collegiate athlete?**

BRANDON EGGUM: I think the one thing is the training is real similar. I think that was the big reason for Michael to

make the decision to come back and compete. After last year's NCAA championship, he became an All-American. His first, initial instinct was as he was coming back after he took a few weeks off, and he started thinking about his long-term dream which was always to get into the MMA.

He changed his mind. He some opportunities. He decided he (indiscernible) to go. He went and fought in August, and I think he just realized in that process he still felt like he was missing something. That was a chance to win an NCAA title.

So he called us up and said, hey, I'm looking at coming back. We were obviously thrilled to hear that. And talking through the process, he just felt like the training that he would go through this season would keep him in a position that was really positive to be ready to go right back into MMA and fight. I believe he might have a fight that's as quick as April, as soon as the season is over.

So I just think there's a lot of positives. It does give another outlet for guys that compete in this sport, another opportunity for them afterwards to go earn money and continue to compete and do something that they're very good at. And a lot of them have shown in the world of MMA that the wrestlers have had high success, maybe the best.

**Q. Seeding is always a question or a topic when we come to these tournaments. But the fact that this year when guys get injured or cannot wrestle at conference tournament it really seems to drop them down a bit. Do you like how they're handling seeding now? What recommendations, what suggestions would you make?**

BRANDON EGGUM: I would just say that I think there needs to be a human side of it a little bit more involved because I think there are situations that are strange where you see guys fall into spots where it doesn't make sense, I guess, from that side of it. So I'd like to see like some changes. I think it's necessary.

I know it's never going to be perfect, and every year this is something that, people look at the brackets, they're always talking about that situation.

And you look at it, we had Blockhus. Sparks runs into Carter on the front side there, too. And I look at a guy like him, everything he's accomplished and where he drops, depending on where his health is, that's pretty drastic in some cases.

NEIL ERISMAN: I'll defer to the wisdom in the room. But I'll just say there's no easy match, regardless where you're

at. There's no situation that's ideal. Some of these coaches have been through a lot more seeding processes than I have, and so you definitely want some accountability there to make sure it's being done right and that we get the best spots. But in the end, it is what it is, and you've got to show up and wrestle.

BRIAN SMITH: I remember one year I thought the world was against me. So I took the wisdom of my mother and stopped complaining and I got on the committee. And when you're in that room -- I was in that room for four years -- you learn a lot about the seeding. There's no deals being made. There's like all you guys claim or people in chat rooms claim -- I laugh about it. There is a system and a computer spits it out and it shows where they can go and then you argue about certain things.

I was kicked out of the room a lot of the times because my guys were up for seeds. I walked around the NCAA offices a lot. I almost got the wooden triangle memorized because I would be out there a lot during some of those years.

But it's a very fair system, and I know they're trying to do their best. There were times when we used a eye test and I don't know what went on in the room, but to me it seemed like it went away from the eye test a little bit, but if that's what they're going to do, it would be nice to know that in the beginning of the year as a coach, that we're going straight by the computer or straight by this, or we're going to use some judgment on it -- because I remember when I was in there, we had a seed, Kyle Snyder, with six matches. And we used an eye test and said, probably should put it this way. Maybe I shouldn't even be saying these things, but it did. And it worked out pretty good.

But there's nothing you can do about it. So the wisdom of my mother, just figure it out and know it and do the best you can.

KEVIN DRESSER: I think Coach Smith nailed it in terms of, first off, it's a tough job for those people in the room. It's kind of like being an official, everybody gets mad at the officials, but until you put those shoes on and those stripes on, it's not an easy job.

So being on that committee is not easy either. I would say the one thing Brian just said, though, is that I think there's got to be an eyeball test. I was exactly thinking, when you asked that question, about the Kyle Snyder situation was, is they obviously kind of used common sense. So I think there's got to be a common sense factor, not just go completely 100 percent off numbers, because there's a couple there that look kind of funny just -- because you hit a guy like Carter Starocci too hard, Carter is going to wrestle everybody in the building and out in the parking lot.

For the rest of the competitors, it probably was something that probably should have been looked at a little better.

**Q. Coach Smith, you mentioned it a little bit about David and O'Toole kind of just being able to -- they're guys that don't really need the motivation. How much do you think that rivalry in a sense has been able to drive them to reach new heights in their competitions and over the last year or so?**

BRIAN SMITH: I mean, anytime you have a great rival like that that pushes you and is really good, I mean, they've beaten each other, so you know you can't just show up to the mat. You've got to be prepared. And it's not like a week of preparation. They're preparing for each other the minute the match is over.

And you know when you're going on the mat against David, you're going to have the best effort, the best prepared. I know the coaching staff over there, it's a great coaching staff. He's got to be ready. And so it's the mental side of it, too, that it's just, man, I did this and it worked this time but now I've got to be ready for the next.

It makes it fun, but it's great for the fans, too. These match-ups end up -- but right now he's focused on his first-round match-up. And we'll focus -- if David's there, we'll be there. If we're there -- that's this tournament. You can't really worry about match-ups. You've got to worry about the one that's in front of you.

**Q. I think a short answer from all four of you would be, NIL, is it a positive or negative for our sport specifically?**

BRIAN SMITH: Positive because I have a lot of young men that are out there, they're still paying off loans, debts from college because we were limited to 9.9, and I can see the money they can make now actually working and making a decent amount of money working camps or getting free food at a restaurant and things like that that were illegal.

And I explain this to our football staff that we're at 9.9, you're at 85, guys on full rides. And they're like you have 40 guys on your team. Yeah, do the math.

So for our sport, it really helps. Yes, is it more work on us, of course, but wrestling coaches know how to do that work. When the rule first became -- I said wrestling coaches are the most prepared because of regional training centers and all these things we've been raising money for. So we just make a shift, now we've got to raise money and doing things for that and going out and trying to find it.

But for the student-athletes, definitely takes a little stress off their lives with having money to pay for school and having a little extra finally. And so I think it's a good thing.

BRANDON EGGUM: I was going to say I see the positive side of it for the kids. It's great that they can make money and do those things. It's tough, you see some programs like our program, we lost a number of guys. We've been really fortunate that we still have 10 guys here today, which says a lot.

And that's without having a guy like Gable Steveson come back this year. You can imagine how strong our team was or is at that moment. But I've seen some other programs, and some of those teams really got ripped apart.

So for those, your heart feels for in a sense and you hope that they can continue to build so it's not too hard of a negative effect on those programs so they can get back to where they need to be and continue to have a wrestling program.

NEIL ERISMAN: I would say I'm a little torn. I'll let you know after the tournament how I feel, and some of the people already circling our program. Obviously there are a lot of positives in it, but when you're a program like our size, we're kind of primed for the picking. This is where I have to step up and make sure that we're doing what it takes to take care of our guys and show them they're valued here.

I think that's going to be the next big piece is athletes need to feel valued more than just the dollar sign in your program. I think that's what we're doing well, and we're going to do our best to compete at such a high level at that level of NIL if we can and hope for the best there.

KEVIN DRESSER: It's a tough game, it really is. I like it that the athletes are getting paid because wrestlers have always had to kind of take a back seat to the football and basketball money. So the competitive side of me looks at it like when I was an athlete.

Boy, it would have been nice to get paid and get paid handsomely if you're really good. Right now they're going to get paid handsomely. It forces you as a coach and a program to jump in, what level you're jumping in at.

If you want to win and you want to win at a high level, you've got to jump in at a high level financially. And a lot of kids are going to get pulled a lot of ways in a week. They're going to get pulled in directions and they're going to have all sorts of people calling them up.

And it's going to be a crazy 40, probably I think the portal

will open, what, today? Yesterday? Today? It's going to be a crazy, let's give it three days to get a tournament over, but instead of 45 days, it's going to be a crazy 40 days, I'm just telling you all, it's going to be a crazy 40 days.

And there's just different levels of it. And it forces you to be in places you don't want to be sometimes on the asking side and on the giving side.

So it's really going to be different. It changed a lot last year with dollar amounts, and it's going to change even more this year in terms of the dollar amounts and volatility. It's going to be interesting. I'm not saying I'm liking it. I'm just saying unfortunately this is the space we're in, and you either play by the rule book or you get run over.

But it's not a game -- I can say as a coach that doesn't have a lot of years left on my resumé -- that I'm excited to play.

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