

National Invitation Tournament: North Texas vs UC Irvine

Monday, March 31, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

North Texas Mean Green

Ross Hodge

Jasper Floyd

Atin Wright

Semifinal Pregame Press Conference



How would you describe these three, this NIT experience, and where you feel that the team is right now?

JASPER FLOYD: I would say we feel really good. You know, we get another opportunity to play basketball together. Get a chance to win a championship together. And that's all you can ask for at this time in college sports. You know, we're thankful.

Focused on beating UC Irvine first, and that's what you've got to do. You've got to win the first one in order to win a championship in anything.

ATIN WRIGHT: I feel like not a lot of us have been this deep in postseason. So I think we're just grateful to keep playing with each other. So I think our minds and hearts are always in the right place.

Yeah, we're just trying to win.

Q. You played against Irvine I think three times, maybe more, 15 points a game. What do you remember about playing them just stylistically, or anything come to mind?

ATIN WRIGHT: I know they are very well-coached. They have a great coaching staff. Their players listen. And they are always good.

So yeah, when I was at CSUN, we had played them, and I don't think, never, never beat them. But yeah, really good coaching staff for sure.

Q. I wanted to ask you about your preparation in the off-season and during the year with this group clamping down defensively. What have you guys worked on, and how have you become such a unit to become one of the best defensive team in the country?

JASPER FLOYD: That's huge credit to the coaching staff. We drill that every day. That's our identity. They forced us, and we have been willing to listen to them and following their instructions. We hold each other accountable. They

ROSS HODGE: Really excited to be here. Super thankful to still be playing basketball at this time of the year. My first time to Hinkle Fieldhouse. Kind of always been a bucket-list type of destination for basketball lifers and the history of this building. Just really thankful to be here. Super excited. Getting ready to play a great Irvine team that can challenge you in a lot of different ways. So we'll have our hands full with those guys.

We talk a lot about it with these guys this time of year. You're just fighting for one more plane ride, one more bus ride, team meal, one more opportunity to compete together with a group that we love being around and being with.

So just really, really excited and looking forward to tomorrow night.

Q. I understand that it was a bit of a hassle getting in last night with the storm. How is that affecting your preparation for tomorrow?

JASPER FLOYD: Yeah, that was kind of crazy but we're blessed to be here. Very thankful. That's all you can say. Just very thankful to be here and land safely. Get here safely.

ATIN WRIGHT: I never really experienced anything like that being on a plane. I've been on a plane a lot of times but yeah, like Jasper said, just blessed to be on the ground. But I don't think it has any effect on anything, honestly.

ROSS HODGE: It wasn't that bad.

THE MODERATOR: Every season has different pockets where you're maybe playing great or not playing as well.

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hold us accountable, and it's worked out really good fours.

ATIN WRIGHT: Yeah, ever since June, like Jasper said, Coach has been on us and drilling it in our head, and it's kind of like second nature now.

Yeah, I mean, we just been listening to them for so long, and now we just got it down pat, honestly.

THE MODERATOR: Talk a little bit about, you're from the American Athletic Conference. Is there any team that maybe you've seen or played during the year that might be a good comparison and has helped you in your preparation in such a short, quick turnaround?

JASPER FLOYD: Yeah, the first team that comes to mind is Wichita State. They have a big big in the middle that plays good drop coverage. You know, we haven't really watched too much of their offense but that's the first thing that comes to mind for me.

ATIN WRIGHT: I would honestly say Wichita State, too. That's a good comparison.

Q. A couple crazy days for the program. What's your focus like to be in the NIT Final Four at this point?

JASPER FLOYD: We're really focused. Like I said, we're really blessed to be here. Landed safely.

But one thing on our minds is beating UC Irvine, and we've been blessed to be in this position, and we're ready.

ATIN WRIGHT: Yeah, honestly, just really blessed to, like Jasper said, be in this position. Everybody is ready to play.

Q. Your focus is getting through the tournament, and then the new job and everything, what have you seen from your players?

ROSS HODGE: It's such a unique time period in college athletics with the transfer portal and the amount of turnover that you have kind of each year.

So really what we've done all year is we've tried to just -- you hate to say you're looking at everything like year-to-year but in some ways, you are. You're trying to give everything you can to that group and that year, and then honestly we all take a step back and everyone kind of has to evaluate what's best for them.

Go back to like last year, but that's what we did with Aaron Scott and Rubin Jones and Jason Edwards and C.J. Noland and John Buggs; those guys gave us everything. And you kind of sit back and you evaluate what's next.

I don't think that's been any different in this situation. We talk about trying to be where our feet are. We are certainly right here.

The nature of college basketball, you're going to spend -- this time of the year, whether you're returning to the program that you're coaching or in my situation, taking a new one, there is an element of what's next that creeps in.

If you look at our roster this year, of our eight heavy rotation players, six of them are seniors. And then quite honestly, two of them, you know, you don't really know if they were intending on coming back or not.

So you're going to be recruiting and in the, portal this time of year, anyways but I think we have done a good job of kind of compartmentalizing, and when it comes time to be where our feet are, we've done that. This group is a mature group, and we're here and we're ready to play.

Q. 2023 NIT Champ, now be being in this Final Four situation and trying to get back there, what's special about this group, and last year, bet willing a ton of injuries, so now getting back to where you've been before, I guess.

ROSS HODGE: This group, in particular, really from the moment they got together, the chemistry, the belief in each other, the sacrifices that they have been willing to make.

Even we were laughing about it last night when we got back to the hotel. There's seven tables in our -- we have like a big room, space, where we're eating our meal and there's legitimately seven tables, and somehow all 14 of these guys managed to cram into just two of them. They really do like each other. They love each other. They play for each other.

To get back to this place, you know, to be able to kind of scrape yourself off the mat after you lose in your conference tournament, I think it shows a lot about these guys' character and resolve that they have.

Like Atin and those guys both said it, you could hear the thankfulness and gratitude in their voice to just really be thankful to still be playing with each other.

Q. I know you're trying to cap it off here with a title, but I wanted to ask you, overall, what's your feeling and how would you sum up your time and what you've done over your eight years now at North Texas?

ROSS HODGE: Yeah, it's been incredible, man. You know, from the time, Coach Mac, Grant McCasland, I was

guttled for those guys the other day, man. I was just sick for them and the way that game ended.

We took over a program that was in a tough place, you know, and done a lot of things that have never been done there before. You know, been part of championships and championship runs. Really kind of experienced life throughout those eight years.

You end up going through kind of like every situation you could be in. You have staff members that have children. You welcome children into the program. We lost a staff member in a fatal car crash, Nelson Haggerty.

So yeah, you're just -- you go through life. You experience life. It's been a great ride, man. It's been incredible for not only me but our family.

And then you think about all the players and everything that they have given, that's really kind of where your mind and your heart goes is you think about the players.

THE MODERATOR: Similar to what I asked the players, the AAC teams that maybe reminds you of what you'll face tomorrow and how that conference prepared to you make such a strong run in this tournament.

ROSS HODGE: Yeah, I thought those guys had really good answers. You can listen to those two guys talk and then you go figure out why we're still playing because those are your guards.

I thought it was really accurate, the Wichita State comparison, especially on the defensive end because they had Quincy Ballard in the middle, and is just such a unique shot blocker with size that they can kind of funnel things into. You know, that's probably the most accurate.

There's a ton of great coaches. Obviously being familiar with UAB, watched that game intently, and that game could have went either way. So yeah, Irvine's really good. Really good.

Q. You've coached at a lot of different levels, a lot of different teams, a lot of different tournaments. Is there a team from these last 20 years that this group reminds you of?

ROSS HODGE: No, not necessarily. You know, this group's just unique. The time period's so unique. That, in my opinion, is kind of what make this is group as special as it is; that you were able to assimilate a relatively new group of players in a short amount of time, and get them to care about each other at rate they care about.

I think that's awesome about this group, especially the seniors, they didn't really approach their time at North Texas as kind of like a skip in a lake where you just throw a rock and it skips and they are kind of like, I'm in and I'm out. They really took ownership in the university. Connected themselves to the community, and really poured everything into and took ownership into a program.

Even though they were here a short period of time, they have etched themselves into the history books in the University of North Texas.

Q. Seems like it's been a wild few days for and you for the program. Can you talk about that experience over the last few days?

ROSS HODGE: Yeah, I certainly don't want to minimize the plane trip last night, but I also don't want to paint a picture that we were all clutching each other and holding each other for dear life thinking that we were goners or anything like that.

I was glad when we got on the ground, though. Everyone was glad when we touched the ground. But it wasn't -- it wasn't that bad.

As far as the rest, we got back Tuesday night from the game in Stillwater. Obviously the news broke on Wednesday. I think having the time period off from that game and not playing for a week gave everybody a chance to wrap their heads around, you know what was taking place and the change that was going to be ensuing.

You know, Wednesday was an off-day for our players and Tuesday we got back doing some individual work, lifted and did the same on Friday.

Then once we got back to getting on the practice floor on Saturday with this group, there really was a familiar feeling. There wasn't anything that was awkward or out of place. I have a tremendous staff.

Again, talked about having an incredibly mature team. They understand the landscape of college basketball, and once you get back into prep mode and game mode, that's when it feels the most familiar for everybody, and that's kind of where we are now.

Q. I wanted to ask your reaction to the hiring of Daniyal Robinson that was announced yesterday, and considering your time with the program, what you built at North Texas from a basketball sense?

ROSS HODGE: I've had a chance to know D-Rob since, shoot, I was a young junior college coach. That's where



we first met and he's a friend. I have a ton of respect for what he's done at Cleveland State and followed him in his career, and I have no doubt in my mind he'll continue to do great things there at the University of North Texas in that program.

As far as my time, I haven't had a ton of reflection time, if we're being perfectly honest, to kind of like look at the totality of everything we've done.

But yeah, just I think about the people. I think about just the incredibly talented staff that we had. Again, I think Coach McCasland is one of the best coaches in the country. Matt Braeuer just got the SFA job. Jareem Dowling is an assistant at Kansas State. James Miller is the associate head coach at Oklahoma State. And so many other countless staffers and people that have impacted my life in a major way.

And then when you look at the run of players that we've had and their commitment to the program, you know, that's what I'll remember the most.

Q. Do you feel like this news about you getting the West Virginia job has motivated the team even further in this NIT run? Do you sense any added pressure with everything happening?

ROSS HODGE: No. I don't think they need to be any more motivated than you are. If you're playing basketball on April 1st, you have a team that is extremely motivated. Their habits are really good.

And so I wouldn't say it's added any added motivation and/or pressure if we're being honest. I mean, like I mentioned before, if you look at our heavy rotation guys, six of them are seniors. I think they care about me deeply and they care about each other, as well. But you know, it doesn't really impact them either way.

So I don't think it does that, motivates or distracts, if we're being honest. I mean, it's a mature group. They have been where their feet are all year long. Like I said, it's easy for seniors late in the season to kind of be starting to think about, okay, what's next for me and my professional career.

In this time period, let's just be honest, if you have good young players, they are getting recruited. They are not getting recruited while the season is going on.

So it's been a message that's been consistent way prior to my situation, and now I get an opportunity to live it out in front of them and walk with them in that journey.

And this is a group that's really committed to finishing this out. We know how thankful we are to continue to be playing, and we love each other and I love this group, and we're going to give everything we have to each other to finish this the right way.

You know, the problem is, Coach Eustachy, who I worked for for five years, he would say sometimes the problem is who you've got to play and where you've got to play them. And we're playing a great Irvine team, one of the best teams we've played all year, and we'll have our hands full with that challenge.

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