

# National Invitation Tournament: North Texas vs UC Irvine

Monday, March 31, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

## UC Irvine Anteaters

## Russell Turner

## Ofure Ujadughele

## Andre Henry

### Semifinal Pregame Press Conference



RUSSELL TURNER: Yeah, thanks for that question. Because I do have a really special team that I'm excited for the fans of Indianapolis get to see, and everybody else who gets to watch us across the country on the ESPN platforms.

This group is veteran and unusual for college basketball now because we have so many guys who have been with us at UC Irvine for such a long time like these two. Ofure has been here six years, he's in his sixth year at UC Irvine. Andre is in his fourth. We have several other veteran players who have stayed with our program and our university because of, I think, the quality of their experience, and the fact that we've continued to excel on the court and in the community and in the classroom.

So there's all sorts of special elements to this group. They are really connected. They are the best defensive team we've had in our history at UC Irvine, and we've had a lot of good ones. We're a team that's survived a lot of adversity. Andre experienced a season-ending injury in-game, along with another one of our players, Langston Redfield. We had two an-game season-ending injuries earlier year this season along with another one, Akiva McBirney-Griffin that happened this summer.

But these guys have shown resilience and togetherness, a different kind of toughness and you know, all those things have come together for us to experience 31 wins now, three wins in the NIT where we earned the opportunity to play at home. We've won the most games on the road in all of Division I Basketball.

So we've got a few things that we're proud to show people in this opportunity and looking forward to that.

THE MODERATOR: Obviously every conference is difficult. You go through a grind. You see people. You prepare people year-in and year-out. Could you talk about maybe what you see from North Texas that maybe reminds you of anybody and how that maybe helps in your preparation?

RUSSELL TURNER: Thanks to all of you for being here. We're really excited from UC Irvine to be here in Indianapolis. That was an incredible welcome we got last night at our hotel. The hospitality here, the basketball history here, I'm very familiar with it, and my guys are getting more familiar with it.

We're just excited to be here and compete and represent UC Irvine.

**Q. The NIT knows North Texas really well, and we know them for being a tough, tough team, but you guys also have a lot of toughness about you. How does it feel going into a matchup that's expected to be as defense-first, as physical as tomorrow night's is going to be?**

ANDRE HENRY: I think it plays into our game plan perfectly. We are a tough, hard-nosed team, and I mean, this year we've proven that we can gut out wins and we find ways to win. So we are looking forward to the matchup and it should be a great game.

OFURE UJADUGHELE: I want to first say, thank God for this opportunity to be here.

I think defense wins championships, like we are always are on the board for every game; North Texas is known for that, but so are we. I think it's going to be a very physical game, and I think we're just going to follow the game plan, and we're going to execute.

**Q. You've been in the NIT numerous times but what's so special about this group in particular and the success you've had so far this year?**

ANDRE HENRY: It's funny you say that because they actually remind us a lot of us. They are a team that puts their hat on defense just like we do, and they play very physical inside and they don't make anything easy on offense. You've got to come to play when you play against them.

I think we'll be ready. I mean, we play against us every single day in practice. So it's nothing we haven't seen before. So we'll be ready.

OFURE UJADUGHELE: Yeah, like Dre said, we play against each other every single day and it's a dogfight out there every day in practice. I think we'll be definitely prepared, and yeah, we know a couple of their guys, familiar from playing in Big West previously. We're ready for the challenge.

RUSSELL TURNER: North Texas, one of their leading scorers Atin Wright, is from the Los Angeles area. Played in our conference at Cal State Northridge before he transferred, ended up at North Texas. So these guys all have familiarity with him. They played against him. Both you guys played against them, didn't you.

OFURE UJADUGHELE: He was on AAU, he was on the younger team.

THE MODERATOR: How did the three games leading up to getting here and being tested and being stressed, how do those help you in terms of getting to be able to reach your postseason dreams, which is always for everybody, play for a championship. How did that help you, those experiences that you went through in those three games?

ANDRE HENRY: I mean, we knew going into it, it wasn't going to be easy. I mean, every team we played, everyone in this tournament has every -- on any given night, you can get beat.

We had to know coming into this tournament if we didn't bring our A Game we were going to lose. We wanted to continue the special season that we had. So honestly, I've got to give credit to the guys for truly just locking in for the NIT and giving it all. I mean, we didn't want to go home.

So I think the guys played like that.

OFURE UJADUGHELE: I think our nonconference schedule being tough year-in and year-out prepares us for times like this, and playing against the really talented players that we have. I think that preparation that we have going into every single game, it helps us, and I think we've been battle tested.

You know, we've come from behind and still won games. We've grinded and gutted out wins. So I just think it's a testament to how tough we are as a team and our mentality going into every single game.

THE MODERATOR: Talk about your experience last night. As I said, was sitting there as a spy watching you walk into the most famous steakhouse and a certain menu item that they have. Andre, if you could start, just talk about your experience and what you'll remember from going -- it's not Del Taco.

ANDRE HENRY: So we went to St. Elmo last night. First of all, the food was amazing. Some of the best food I've ever had in my life.

But honestly, the biggest thing that stood out to me when we went in there was I've never met any single person here, from the instant we walked in, everyone started clapping. That was, honestly, that just shows the community and the basketball within the city.

That was pretty awesome, walking into a restaurant where no one knows you, and people are standing up giving you a standing ovation. I mean, that's pretty cool. I've never been anywhere where that's happened. That was an amazing experience.

Obviously the food, the shrimp cocktail, I don't even like shrimp, and I ate that. It was pretty good.

OFURE UJADUGHELE: Yeah, I think St. Elmo's was a special night for me. I called my mom yesterday and I told her, I was like, "I think I may have had one of the best meals of my life," and I truly meant it.

But yeah, like Dre said, the hospitality was just amazing. I made a joke to our guys like, "Are we League?" I felt like we were like an NBA team that walked into a restaurant like we were some type of celebrities.

But no, the hospitality was amazing. The shrimp cocktail did catch me by surprise. I think if anyone is down there, you saw a lot of us coughing on the first bite but an amazing experience that we're so lucky and blessed to be a part of.

THE MODERATOR: It's 6:35 in the morning for you, I know that. So enjoy your day, and we look forward to seeing you tomorrow night.

**Q. Wanted to ask you about your conference play. Great run in conference. Tell me about the style, the teams, 20 games, grueling schedule. What was that like?**

RUSSELL TURNER: Yeah, the Big West had a banner year this year, and our team's success was a big part of that, especially our success in nonconference play where we played a really difficult schedule, mostly on the road. Found a way to win a lot of tough games against tough teams.

But UC San Diego also had a banner year, an historic year, and credit to those guys. They were terrific in their first year of eligibility for the NCAA Tournament as a Division I team. We watched them be great, first at the Division II level where they won a national title during the time I've been at Irvine, and now they have made the transition. And they were really good last year, and through the transfer portal improved their team to an even greater degree this year, and are worthy adversaries, for us, and a worthy champion of our league.

I think there were also a number of other teams that improved in our league this year. Cal State Northridge at times was a top hundred team in an incredible job done by Coach Andy Newman there, assembling a roster and getting that team to play at a really, really high level.

UC Riverside was also very good. Won over 20 games on the season. Had big nonconference wins before our season started. And then UC Santa Barbara is always a team under Coach Joe Pasternack who has competed at a really high level.

So we had those five teams were excellent, and in an 11-team league, you're only going to be as strong as the ones at the bottom.

Cal Poly this year had a great turnaround story. They had been a team that was struggling for a lot of years. In fact, were known for consecutive games' losing streak, and then got hot at the end of the season and was playing really good basketball.

So lots of good performances in the league. A lot of different styles. I think the coaching in our league is outstanding. Two of the coaches in our league have now moved on to bigger or better jobs. But there are others in our league who have won in, say, tournament games. Jim Les made the Sweet 16 at Bradley. Coach Barnes at Bakersfield also has taken a team to the Sweet 16, and Coach Eran Ganot won a game in the NCAA Tournament.

There's really fine coaching and players in the Big West, and we just don't quite get the exposure across the country because of our location and time situation that maybe other leagues get. But the quality in this league this year in the Big West was exceptional.

**Q. You mentioned that this team has a lot of continuity, and how unusual that is in today's college basketball. How has your program been able to pull that off? How have you been able to get guys to stick around?**

RUSSELL TURNER: What is the Barking Crow?

**Q. It's, to my knowledge, the only NIT blog out there.**

RUSSELL TURNER: Okay. That's why I asked. Great to have you. And I've got to check that out. I haven't seen it yet.

We've had continuity I think because of the quality of guys that we have and the quality of experience that we offer.

Have you ever been to Irvine? Irvine is a pretty good place. Our university is growing and excelling. We're an interesting community to be a part of.

On the basketball side, we've continued to excel and we expect to win. We recruit guys who expect to come into our program and have to earn their way in a program that's based on a pursuit of excellence, and there's an expected accountability for everyone.

It's also expected in our program that if guys grow and improve, they are going to get a shot, because we play a lot of guys. We play deep, and so that allows young players to develop. That's one of the great stories about this year's team, when we had the injuries that we had, and we had some of the attrition in the transfer portal that we had last year, guys in our program were ready to step forward. We've had that for a number of years, and so there's belief in our program. I think that there's authenticity and opportunity, and those two things have been powerful for us in maintaining our continuity, both with our players and our staff.

We've got it good. There's a lot of places that have it good, but we're doing it with a level of stability in our program that's different now, and I'm grateful for that.

**Q. You may have just answered it but for you personally, what keeps you coming back to coaching every year?**

RUSSELL TURNER: Well, coming back to coaching, I mean, hey, it's an incredible honor to be a part of helping young men improve their value. And I say it intentionally that way because the game's now changed. There's more emphasis on basketball value for players, and we're helping our guys improve their basketball value. They see

that. They are growing into that.

But coaching's always been about helping young men become more valuable through their education, through their character development, through their leadership development, and through many other things that we get to be a part of that are really special that you don't experience in other realms like you do in a basketball locker room or as a member of a basketball team over time. We get to do something that's just really special. It's especially rewarding, if you can do it well, and I think we're doing it well.

I think that we're getting validation from that with the continuity that we have, and with the success that our players move out into the world from Irvine and exhibit as members of the communities they join and as leaders in different parts of their lives.

So it's super rewarding to get to do what I do.

**Q. It's going to be a defensive matchup tomorrow but what else sticks out about them, keys for you guys personally?**

RUSSELL TURNER: Got tremendous respect for them, for what they have accomplished over time, for the record they have in this tournament. They have obviously played a style; had a formula for success that's sustainable, and that's what I feel like we've also tried to do.

Their tempo is more deliberate than ours. It's more controlled than ours, and that indicates a level of buy-in from their team that's really impressive. All the best defensive teams have to have toughness and buy-in and intelligence. I think that's an underrated part of defensive excellence in teams that the most astute fans can recognize.

North Texas has been more aggressive in the way they have defend. And by that, I mean, they have fouled a lot more than we have and I admire that aggressiveness. You know, we try to walk that line, too. We have been really effective by not fouling and being an aggressive, physical team that does so demonstrably within the rules. And so it will be an interesting contrast in some ways on that element alone because that's one of the places where we differ most, along with tempo, from them in terms of our style of play.

They are also a very balanced team offensively, like we are. They like to attack matchups, which we understand. That's a lot of the way that we also coach on both sides of the ball.

So I do expect this to be a good matchup, a good game, a close game that will be decided by the players, and who can make more plays. You know, that's the type of thing that we have asked our guys to buy into for a long time here.

We just came off an overtime game where there were a number of different singular plays that could have been the difference, and tomorrow's game will likely be the same type of game.

**Q. I know it's a long time ago and everything has changed in college basketball, I feel like a long time ago, although it's six years, the 2019 team where you went 31-6, went to the Tournament, not asking to you compare, but just want to know what it was like for you that year with that historic season, and now you've got a chance to become the all-time winner in this program this season in history. What's it like from that year, this year? Tell me a little bit about it. Because you've been the constant there for that time.**

RUSSELL TURNER: That 2019 team was special and we kind of knew that in our nonconference schedule that year, as well, because we played and won some big guarantee games that year.

We knocked off some really high-level teams that season; the type of team we couldn't get to play us this year. We played some really good mid-major teams this year, almost all on the road.

But that team in '19 gained momentum as the year went on. We also had a transfer point guard, and it takes time for that to get itself all the way worked out, a little bit like this year's team. We were excellent defensively with our versatility in that year's team, just like we are this year.

I think in 2019, we were known for our balance offensively. This year's team is also known that way. I think this year's team has more passing talent which makes us veterans some ways offensively than that team was. But both teams were exceptional, unquestionably.

Yeah, you can't really compare the two or pick one above the other. But to be in position where we have 31 wins again like that team did is not something that's easy to imagine. In 2019, we generated belief that created momentum, and I think we've also done that this season.

I think these guys believe that we can win. We've shown that in the NIT, being down in the second half of every game, and coming back to make the plays that we needed to make when the chips are down and the game is on the line. That's what I know this team can do.



**Q. You have played for and worked for some incredible coaches, Hall of Fame coaches can. Given your intelligence and I say that sincerely, how did your philosophy evolve by playing for a Tony Schaefer, working for the other guys, and yet still saying to yourself, this is how I want to play? How did that formulate itself over time?**

RUSSELL TURNER: Man, there's probably a long answer. I'll try not to bore you with a long answer. But I'm glad you mentioned Tony Shaver.

Tony Shaver was my coach at Hampden-Sydney who played for Dean Smith at North Carolina. He recruited me at Hampden-Sydney College who had not been to the NCAA Tournament when I went there. We went my first season as a freshman.

So I took them to the NCAA Tournament as a player, like I've done with UC Irvine as a coach. That's a special journey in itself. But I couldn't have imagined learning more from Coach Shaver than I did off the court as well as on the court. When I say "off the court," you know, he's the type of coach that fueled my desire to also be a coach because of what a great impact he had on me and on many other guys throughout his career.

To be able to then work for Dave Odom at Wake forest was an incredible stroke of luck that had to do with the rules at the time. He hired me because I was so young and was available to work for very little, but gave me the opportunity of a lifetime to coach basketball in the ACC, which is where I had grown up, which is what I had most wanted to do, be a part of basketball in ACC at the time. We had a young guy named Tim Duncan on the team, and so that was an incredible set of experiences that came along for me with that.

I said at the time, Dave Odom was great. He's a two-time ACC Coach of the Year, two time SEC Coach of the Year. Hopefully will be a Basketball Hall of Famer. He could not have been more different than Tony Shaver was in many ways about his basketball style.

So that education for me was eye-opening as a young guy. And then I followed my wife's career to California. She's a doctor, and wanted to do her residency out there. And I hooked on with Mike Montgomery who is a Hall of Famer and probably is as different as Dave and as Tony, as those two were different than each other. And so that was a third immersion experience for me in basketball that is invaluable; that I'm just so fortunate to have.

We were No. 1 in the country for the first year I was at

Stanford and also No. 1 in the country any last year at Stanford four years later. Both those teams also won 30 games, which you know is rare air.

Then Mike took me to the NBA, and there's no basketball environment where you learn more than the NBA because of the excellence throughout it, both on the coaching side and the playing side. And I was coaching in the NBA where every NBA player knew more about NBA basketball than I did, and so there's a humility that you have to live through in that time that's been amazing for me to have experienced.

Then I hooked on with Don Nelson who may be the most interesting basketball man of all time. He told me when he, I thought figured for sure he'd let me go. But he told me he'd keep me around for another year, but I'd have to find something else after that season. So I say he hired me and fired me in one sentence. But then I stayed with him for four years. And he came to rely on me and pushed me hard and forced me to work harder to make it in the NBA than I ever could have imagined being required to work. But that was the greatest blessing.

And we had more fun with Nellie than you could ever have. I'm so grateful for that because having fun is a big part of why we have continuity at Irvine. And I don't know that I ever would have been able to experience that without him.

So there's elements of all four of those guys, and even more coaches for me going back, that I'm grateful to have experienced.

And sorry for the long answer. You got me going down memory lane.

THE MODERATOR: You killed it. We are done, folks, thank you so much for getting us through, and we just wish you the best of luck tomorrow.

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