

# National Invitation Tournament: Chattanooga vs Loyola Chicago

Monday, March 31, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

## Chattanooga Mocs

## Dan Earl

## Honor Huff

## Trey Bonham

### Semifinal Pregame Press Conference



getting the win. I think it's a testament to our coaching staff and also our group and mindset going into games and situations like that.

THE MODERATOR: You'll have a rare opportunity this year to play in both historic Assembly Hall and in Hinkle. Talk about the experience, getting to play at venues that are historic in nature in college sports. What's that like for you, and what will you take away?

HONOR HUFF: I mean, as a kid growing up, you always see the Indiana, the Butler, stuff like, teams like that. So especially coming from a mid-major program and being able to play in venues and arenas like that is something that's exciting and exhilarating in a way, and you always want to prove something at that point.

But I take away this great season that we had and the experience that we had to play together, not to where we play, but to do it with the people that I did it with. I'm going to take that away from it mostly than where we played at.

But it's been a great experience the whole season, especially in these two venues in the same kind of area and place has been great. And obviously, hopefully, we were close in Indiana. So hopefully we can get it done tomorrow and Thursday.

TREY BONHAM: I've been learning about the history throughout the way. He kind of makes fun of me because I don't really know much about college basketball history. I was more of a football kid growing up. But like he has all the documentaries on, and I kind of watch them with him.

But I'm learning, and it's been cool. Indiana was definitely a cool experience. That was a great crowd, cool arena, and it's going to be fun to play here, too.

**Q. You guys are a really good time to watch, a lot of fun watching you. Who on the team makes it the most fun for you guys doing the day-to-day, going through all that together?**

DAN EARL: Just thrilled to be here in Hinkle, an historic building. The NIT has been great for us. Obviously everyone is shooting for the NCAA Tournament. Once you get past the disappointment of not making it, it's been a great run. We played three really good teams, two of which were on the road. Dayton came to us. We were a little lucky there, perhaps, with home court.

But the guys have bought into it. They have enjoyed playing with each other, and they have been a pleasure to coach, and they want to keep it rolling, I'm sure, as everybody else does. We're trying to try to have our A Game in the Final Four of the NIT.

**Q. Honor, when you guys fall down by 16 at Bradley in the first half, how do you guys stay level-headed, not getting too high or low over the course of a game specifically, when you guys play many emotional games?**

HONOR HUFF: Yeah, I we have an older group. We have a lot of fifth-years, seventh-years, whatever years. So we have a lot of experience, playing experience. We're a mature group.

So when it comes down to moments like that, we all come together. Like I always tell Coach, and reporters, too, like sometimes it's not even Coach talking to us. It's us amongst ourselves trying to get each other in line and in check, and making sure we do the right things to ensure that we can, you know, creep by and keep going. We don't want to make the home run plays in those situations.

And being real, we've been in those situations a lot this year. Down, down a lot at halftime, and down a lot in the second half, and being able to pull through end and up

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HONOR HUFF: So you're not talking about basketball, or just in general? Or both?

**Q. I would just say in general, day-to-day. The day-to-day grind, who makes that the most fun?**

HONOR HUFF: I mean, me personally, obviously it's him because that's like my best friend and you know, it's my brother for life. We kind of feed off each other and we are roommates on the road. We live together. We have a dog together. We are like co-parents. Obviously us two.

Starts with, I would say Jack Kostel. He's a clown. He's funny. He keeps us in a good mood whether we're down or up. Whatever day it is, 7:00 a.m. in the morning, he's the one that's going to bring the energy and makes us all laugh, and even makes the coaches laugh. He keeps us all unified. I would say Jack Kostel day-to-day is the one that keeps it the most fun.

TREY BONHAM: Yeah, we got a couple, I think like just high-energy guys all the time with Jack. We got Bash Wieland and Garrison Keeslar, too. Like he said, he mess with Coach, and I never seen Coach laugh this much in practice, ever. I've been with him in four years now, and he kind of can't help himself sometimes. Yeah, we've got a great group this year for sure.

**Q. What makes this team so special just being able to make it this far and be in the NIT, and what have you thought about the competition so far?**

HONOR HUFF: When we first saw the bracket, whatever, saw a lot of mid-majors and that was exciting for us. We get to play against teams that we don't usually play because the bye games are usually higher programs, and in our conference we played them twice.

So to be able play like a Middle Tennessee who is like a great team in a conference, gut it out, is big-time for our program and gives us a lot of confidence and momentum moving forward.

What was the first question? I'm sorry.

**Q. Just the level of competition for NIT. But it sounds like it's been fun so far just with the close games and coming from behind. I do want to ask about your childhood and high school experience. I know you went to a couple different high schools. Do you feel like that prepared you for college basketball?**

HONOR HUFF: I talk to him about that all the time. I went to four different ones.

But I think it all helped me in my journey, and obviously my last stop prepared me for what we do now to a T. I went to a boarding school, a prep school. We traveled to play. We stayed in holes. We had early morning conditioning, practice.

So it prepared me when I got to college, I already knew what it was. Make sure I handle my schoolwork. Do both simultaneously and make sure I multi-task with school and basketball. So learning that from my prep school was the biggest thing.

And then my public school, we weren't best team. So that gave me opportunity to lead and be aggressive and get into myself and hone into my skills.

All of those all together really cultivated to make me who I am right now in this situation.

TREY BONHAM: The competition in NIT, it's been good. Like you said, we've been playing teams that we don't usually see, playing MTSU, an in-state rival was cool, and then Dayton was cool. And then who did we play? Bradley, that was a great crowd. I've never been out that way, either. That was a good experience, as well, so it's been fun.

**Q. I read where you two guys when you played for coach at VMI, because you're both smaller in stature, similar-type players in some ways, I think Trey, were you there first?**

TREY BONHAM: Yes, sir.

**Q. The competition, like who is this guy coming in, going to take my spot. How did you guys evolve? You left, came back. The evolution of your relationship on and off the court.**

TREY BONHAM: Like you said, it started off kind of rough. It was definitely more competitive.

But I have respect. I could see he had a little game to him, a little New York style. Then Coach thought it was a good idea to put both of us in the starting lineup, which was a good idea.

So he was cool with me after that point. We were both playing, and after that, I think we just kind of got tight. I mean, announcers was calling us -- he was calling me Honor, him Trey. Like people at our school do the same thing. So we kind of get pushed into one box. So we almost like the same person at times.

Ever since then, though, we've been best of friends. I think

he was more annoyed than Coach was trying to recruit me to Chat, but it was an easy decision getting back with these guys for sure.

THE MODERATOR: As you're preparing for tomorrow night's game, obviously you get into a situation where conference play consumes every part of you. You see teams multiple times. Curious to know if you see in Loyola anybody that you prepared for or run similar styles that will help you prepare for facing the rambblers.

HONOR HUFF: We played in a similar team, Dayton, two games ago. So we kind of compare them to a little bit of film, like Enoch Cheeks and No. 9 zero for Loyola. So we put those comparisons.

On our side, it's fun because they probably haven't seen a team like us, per se. So being able to run our stuff, back cuts, stuff like that, it's starting to mess with teams a little bit. And like Coach tries to tell us, to do that more often because they haven't seen that during their regular season. So we can get some stuff that we can't get when we play the same team twice, you know what I'm saying. So I think that keeps us going, too.

In terms of Loyola Chicago, they are a good team, and they do things that we have to adjust to moving forward. And I think the coaches are going to do a good job scouting and making sure we're ready for it.

TREY BONHAM: The team in our conference they remind me of you is ETSU just with, like, their size and length at the guard position, they are like 6'3 and up all around. They have good shooters. Big bigs that's athletics. ETSU had that same kind of build to their team.

**Q. There was a picture posted on social media yesterday of the guys getting ready to leave here, and Collin wasn't in the picture and multiple people commented asking where he was. To see his growth and evolution from being a kid who maybe people didn't pay attention to, to really thriving in this starting role, how have you seen him grow over the course of this season, but specifically in the postseason and taking over for Frank?**

DAN EARL: You trying to raise my blood pressure, right, worried about Collins, what-have-you.

A young guy, for those that don't know, we have had a variety of different centers. One of our centers, Frank Champion went down right prior to the Southern Conference Tournament so we've had three different guys step up into that role and Collin, may be the most of the three.

He redshirted last year. So this is his first year as a freshman. Sometimes I expect even more out of him because I've seen his face in practice, this is now the second year, but I have to remember that he only has X amount of games under his belt.

With all that said he's kind of a shy kid. He doesn't understand how good he is, and to see him kind of come out of his shell and take advantage of this opportunity, again, with Frank going down, he's stepped up. He obviously made huge shots against Middle Tennessee when we played there and won that three-overtime game.

And with the added confidence, he's got a little more bounce in his step and it's been awesome to see. Lots of times you see that with ballplayers. Different points in their career are tipping points, if you will, and you take off one way or have tough times and go the other. And Collin has certainly taken advantage of the situation, and we're certainly expecting big things out of him the rest of this year and hopefully going forward.

**Q. The knock on you guys has been that you sometimes struggle with the length of the opposing guards, and that will be an issue against Loyola potentially. How do you prepare for something that gets named as a vulnerability like that? Is it easier to prepare, or is that tougher because it could be in your heads or something like that?**

DAN EARL: Yeah, I don't think -- we are well aware that our guards are not 6'4 and 6'5, and they have faced a bunch of different guards and/or players throughout the year that are taller.

So it is, you know, you combat things, right. Honor shoots the ball like as good as anybody nationally, really. But he's not 6'4. So you have strengths and weaknesses to everybody's game.

So we ask our guards in, particular, and they have length at the forward spots, as well, but just to play with tremendous toughness, try to keep the ball in front.

Defensively you have to make some decisions if they are going to -- we call it Barkley Down, you know, Charles Barkley down, like back you down and do you double or not. Because they have really good three -- they. Being Loyola, has really good three-point shooters, too. So you have to make some good decisions there.

But then offensively, too, they are very good on defense. Pressure the ball; are physical. We ask our guys, silly as it sounds, hey, just go where you wanting to. You can't let

somebody be physical and not allow you to cut or not allow you to come get the ball or be too physical with you. And we've been better with that throughout the year.

So we have an offense that back cuts, should help relieve fresh. And sometimes you have to go north south; that is, to the rim. Sometimes we get in trouble because we go east/west or around the horn too much. So if somebody is going to pressure, you have to make them pay at times, and then make great decisions once you get down there in the paint.

**Q. You have a lot of NIT history yourself and made a great run as a player; and were on Penn State's roster for another great run, and; as an assistant back in State College won an NIT in 2009. Has that experience factored into your approach at all? It is a unique event.**

DAN EARL: I kind of alluded to that at the start.

I think so. I also played in the NCAA Tournament, lost first round, unfortunately, to Arkansas. Coached in the NCAA Tournament. We ended up losing in the first round, as well, to a good Temple team.

So you're asked often, Hey, would you rather go to the NCAA Tournament or make a run in the NIT, right. And it's a tough answer because at the end of the day, everyone is looking to go to the NCAA Tournament, obviously, because we would prefer that because you never know what happens. You could win some games there somehow, right.

With all that said, the NIT has been a phenomenal experience. As a player, I remember the days, I have former teammates reaching out to me, Hey, it moved from -- I don't mean this in any way because Indianapolis is awesome as well. But the times in New York and you're in Times Square and all that good stuff. Like, Hey, it moved, what's going on or whatever.

So we had great memories as players and as coaches we were able to cut down the nets. It's a championship. It's real teams. Like, you know some people get caught up in, Oh, this is -- just being real, like a secondary tournament or whatever you want to say.

The games have been outstanding. Not as many high majors this year, and everybody understands what's going on or what-have-you. But the teams that we faced wanted to be there and were competing. We had a three-overtime game with Middle, and we had a really tough game against Dayton and played Bradley down to the wire. Their fans were there.

It has been an awesome experience for all those involved, the coaches, our players, and certainly our fans, as well. They were kind of getting on board; and you get on ESPN and Coach Fraschilla is here and the whole thing, you guys are here. It's been awesome for everybody involved with Chattanooga.

**Q. You have five transfers, I think, and four of them come from lower-level, DII. It's almost like they are perfect fits. It's almost like NBA free agency. How did you and the staff go about that in terms of finding these pieces that have just really strengthened your team?**

DAN EARL: Yeah, you know, I'm really proud of that. And look, a certain portion is luck to be real with you, right. You're in this transfer portal. Everybody knows this, but the time frame is so compressed, right. So years ago, as you know this, you spent time at the player's home, maybe and meeting their parents or at their school and meeting the janitor or the science teacher or the principal. And that timeline is so compressed. You have to do it so quickly.

I laugh about it -- I'm going to carry on a little bit. We literally watched two and a half minutes of film and my staff is like, Hey, what do you think? Do you want to take this guy? I'm like what's his name? What are we doing?

You know, with all that said, we try to do due diligence on what makes this young man tick. Bring him to campus and you go out eat with him, and you can pick some things. So starts with high-character guys, and we certainly check that box with our guys that we have on our team.

And low-ego guys, which has really worked out with the well, right. In this day and age of transfer portal, NIL, it's like -- look, I wanted to score the ball back in the day and have my name in the newspaper, if you can believe I come from those times. But it's even more so with all the instant gratification. So the low-ego guys that we have, it's been phenomenal.

From a basketball perspective we play a certain style offensively in particular. We want toughness defensively. But offensively we want basketball players; guys that can dribble, pass, shoot and guys that see.

So we went out and we got high-assisted turnover ratio guys. Garrison Keeslar, a guy that does not show up in the stat sheets all the time has been phenomenal. Leads the nation with assisted turnovers. High decision-makers. And some of that is the way we like to play.

And then truth be told we lost a really tough game, not this

year, I mean we lost a tough game this year to Furman, but last year to ETSU and breaking the press and having more size and whatever, and so that factored in a little bit as well.

But been thrilled to coach these guys. Some of it is luck and some of it was calculated, and it's an been awesome, awesome group.

THE MODERATOR: Talk about the Southern Conference in itself. Talk about what you feel that league does to prepare you to compete for championships when you get here in the postseason.

DAN EARL: If I can take you back a little bit, I was at the Naval Academy working for Ed DeChellis, and I had an opportunity to go to VMI in the Southern Conference when I first started.

I remember a conversations with Coach DeChellis, and he was like, hey, back in the day he had coached at ETSU, and there was College of Charleston and App State. I'm forgetting a couple but it was really good. He was like, Hey, some of those better programs may have left, maybe you can mess around and win some games or whatever.

I got into the Southern Conference and Mike Young at Wofford was rolling, and Steve Forbes might have been at ETSU and Wes Miller at UNCG and multiple coaches at Chat.

But I got in here and I was like, Wow, what is going on, right. It is a highly competitive, super well-coached -- and I know all conferences are this way. But different styles of play. You had Samford is pressing all games. Furman plays a style similar to us. ETSU is physical and whatever, and on down the list. I don't want to leave teams out.

But a variety of different coaching styles. And it just prepares you for good basketball, those teams that make the NCAA Tournament or make the NIT like this, it prepares to you play good basketball down the stretch.

We've been ranked -- like, it's how much money oftentimes. So the big wigs, SEC, Big Ten, obviously there's a ton of support and unbelievably well-coached teams. But we may have done the most with not having as much money as those kind of conferences. That is, we've been KenPom or Net Ranking, like 12, 13, 14 best conference in America.

So I think it says a lot for the administrations, for the coaching staff and for the conference office to keep us ultra competitive in this arms race of needing resources.

**Q. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think for Chattanooga, this is the first NIT experience since, like, the 1980s. I know you have NIT experience. But just for the program in general, what this means to be here, to be competing in this, and yeah, maybe just some thoughts on the Ramblers and the matchup for tomorrow as well.**

DAN EARL: Again for the NIT, it's been a while since we've been in. I forget the exact date. But it's been awesome for all those involved, coaches and players.

But really, the community, and it's kind of cool. We have a good following. We win a game, and my phone is blowing up, and all the players and the assistant coaches and everything, administration has been great.

We had a watch party for the last game at McKenzie Arena is where we play, The Roundhouse, and there's maybe a hundred people that came out and had a couple drinks and watched us and it's on Twitter. I'm not good with social media. That's out there. We had a bunch of fans come to our game at Bradley; take private planes, go out. It's been awesome.

I think even for the fan, right, everybody gets it. Trying to go to the NCAA Tournament, and there's that initial, Oh, wow, not this year, what-have-you. But everyone's s really jumped on board, unless they are just being nice to me.

But there's a lot of excitement. We were leaving McKenzie to come out here and we had a send-off, a bunch of fans there slapping our guys, high-fives, all that good stuff. It's been awesome.

And then in regards to Loyola, another just super well-coached team. A lot of times you look at the analytics or metrics or when you're watching film, you say, okay, and certainly, we are trying to -- what can we do offensively against them, or what do we have to stop defensively. But you're looking for weaknesses, and they just across the board are a really good team. Very physical and tough defense. They switch a lot defensively. But not all the time.

So they have a variety of different coverages they can use. And then ball screen defense; will do a variety of different things. One of good things for us to combat that offensively is we have seen a lot at this point in the year, right.

In this day and age of the transfer portal, you're bringing in new teams. So I don't know, I'll make it up. Like the ninth game of the year, somebody throws a 1-3-1 at you and you're like, Wow, we don't know what we're doing, we

haven't practiced that. Well, at this point of the year, we've seen a lot of things and I think our guys know how to combat that.

Offensively, Loyola moves the ball really well. They have a variety of guys that can shoot the ball from the perimeter, and also drive it and score it. So they are going to present matchup problems, as you alluded to. They have got really good size across the board, as well, especially at their guard spot. We'll have to combat that as well.

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