

National Invitation Tournament: Chattanooga vs Loyola Chicago

Monday, March 31, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

Loyola Chicago Ramblers

Drew Valentine

Des Watson

Miles Rubin

Semifinal Pregame Press Conference

DREW VALENTINE: Right to be here. Excited to be here. I think, you know, getting here was awesome for our guys.

You know, playing in an historic tournament like this, and you know, with the way a lot of seasons end in conference tournaments, the way the season ends, you can feel like the season is unsuccessful in some ways.

And I think the way that these guys have responded to our loss against VCU in the conference tournament, and really just banded together, stuck with each other, found a way to win three games, is a testament to them how much they love the game, how much competing means to them, and it gives you a better feeling to a season. You have a feeling of success.

So I think that that's really important. And then, you know, getting the opportunity to play here in Hinkle against a really good opponent in Chattanooga. We have a lot of respect for them, especially on the offensive end with what, Huff and Bonham, and then the big fella stretches you out.

They are going to be a tough matchup for us. We're going to have to be on it. But our league and nonconference schedules have prepared us well for these moments, and I'm excited to be here with this group and to try to get another championship for an historic program that we're all really lucky to be a part of in Loyola Chicago.

Q. For the program as a whole, haven't been to NIT in a long time, since the 1960s, what does it mean for you to two just be in this building? Have you played here before? Is this all a new experience for you being in Hinkle? And like Coach was talking about, just the history of it all.



DES WATSON: Yeah, I would say this is a new experience.

But I think this just shows who we are as a culture, as a team. Like Drew emphasized, not making it to the tournament can kind of you let down a little bit. But to us, we had another time to play ball. We love hooping. We love being out there on the court with each other and having a great time.

MILES RUBIN: I would say it's an exciting experience. I mean, I heard the environment is going to be crazy tomorrow. I'm ready for that. But we're all ready to play tomorrow and go win the NIT.

Q. Specifically with this group, what do you guys think makes the team so special that you guys have been able to win these games in the NIT and compete the way you have?

MILES RUBIN: I feel like we just like at the end of games, just come together as a family and just push through like through all of our adversities. Yeah, that's pretty much it.

DES WATSON: Yeah, he funny. But just going off of what he said, you know, just coming together as a unit. Playing for each other. Playing together. Following our scouting report. Doing everything we've done to lead us to the moments on the court, and just stick together, and we'll be fine after that.

Q. You made it into this last year, lost to Bradley in the first round. This year you find out you're back in it. What was the attitude like when you found out you were going back to the NIT, and did last year's loss impact how you prepared this year?

DES WATSON: Yeah, I mean, we just knew that we weren't going to go out like we did last year. We didn't go out with a fight, a battle. Going out like that doesn't leave a good taste in your mouth, especially going to war with your brothers all year. So we knew we weren't going to go out like that this year.

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MILES RUBIN: I would say we were excited coming to the tournament. We got another chance to play another game. So we took advantage of that.

THE MODERATOR: We've been asking all the players to talk about, obviously conference play is a grind, seeing teams two times. Is there anybody that reminds you of what you're having to prepare for in facing Chattanooga tomorrow night?

DES WATSON: I would say closest is, like, Richmond, they have a Richmond style a lot, cutting a lot. Davidson, too, similar a little bit. But like a really good Richmond. Like Drew emphasized, those two guards are real small and real fast. So we are going to have to be on our A Game, and then they have a big fella, too.

Yeah, Richmond is probably the closest comparison.

MILES RUBIN: I would say Richmond, and a little bit of St. Louis with little guards, a little comparison. But yeah, they cut a lot like Davidson and everything.

THE MODERATOR: What does it mean to you to have these extra two to three weeks together, as opposed to when the season ends, people start scattering a little bit. But you get to make more memories with teammates and potentially win a championship. What does that mean?

DES WATSON: I mean, everybody always tells me to cherish my college moments because they go by fast. I've been on this road for four years and it has gone by fast.

So you know, just being able to be with the guys that you are with 24/7, every day, go to war with, tears, blood, everything. Just being able to just get to hang out with them. Get to know them even more as a person outside of basketball because we all have lives outside of basketball. And just, you know, having fun together. That's all it is. Just this is all fun.

MILES RUBIN: I would say making new memories. We all have two more weeks with each other and making new memories with each other, it's good.

DREW VALENTINE: Miles, you just started to play FIFA these last couple weeks, too, right? So Miles has become an expert FIFA player.

MILES RUBIN: The best on the team.

DREW VALENTINE: What were you saying this morning, Real Madrid?

MILES RUBIN: Yeah, Real Madrid's broken.

DREW VALENTINE: I learned this morning that FIFA just depends on the team that you play, not the person behind the sticks. Right?

MILES RUBIN: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Q. Who got you into FIFA? How did that start?

MILES RUBIN: Just started playing during COVID.

Q. Oh, it's not new?

MILES RUBIN: I stopped playing and I picked it back up.

Q. I know he's sitting right next to you, but what is Coach like as a coach? What's the relationship you guys have with him? Is he tough? Is he funny? Tell me more about the relationship.

DES WATSON: I would say Drew, he's everything. He's your brother. He's a leader. He's everything that you need.

I would say Drew is just like us, like I've said in every other interview. He dress like us, talk like us. He's relatable. From a personality standpoint, you can talk to him about anything and come to him literally about everything.

Like I said we all have lives. Everybody goes through he everybody. You can come talk to him about stuff related to basketball, stuff outside of basketball, but yeah, when it get between the lines it, turns tough. I think everybody that is here is a competitor and wants to win. So whatever Drew has to do to get us suited to win, we are all here for it.

MILES RUBIN: I would say pretty cool. I mean, he's very, like, relatable with the players and everything. Like, he's like -- like we can relate to him like better than other coaches, I would say. He's a younger coach. He acts like us. Catch on with the lingo and everything.

THE MODERATOR: Last question for the players. What's it like having a two-game road trip in the postseason where it's win-or-go home, especially when you don't know who you are going to play, and what was that experience like in the Bay Area?

DES WATSON: One thing that we always wanted to do better this year was play better on the road. I feel like we haven't played at our best on the road, and you know, now, we got to a point where it's win-or-go-home. So we really don't have a choice but to play good on the road.

So I felt like we figured that out a little bit. We were in San Francisco and we are bringing it here, so we going to do what we do, and that's execute and come ready to play.

MILES RUBIN: I would say it was a crazy experience. With we came straight in the A-10 tournament and left the next day to go to San Francisco and then we won two games. I would say not many teams could do that. I mean, it's a lot on your body and it's a lot mentally, too, to scout and everything.

Q. What's it like getting that level of support for an NIT home game, especially in such a basketball city like Chicago?

DREW VALENTINE: Yeah, I wouldn't expect anything less. When you turn on a Loyola Chicago home game, you immediately just see our students. The PAC is one of the most passionate and consistent student sections I think in the country. The way that they show up, they are loud, and everybody talks about our environment, and that's whether you're watching on TV, or even the other coaches. The fact that it was a postseason game, I think the coolest part was the whole crowd. Like, not just the students was on their feet the whole time. It really popped on the TV. It was special.

It was special for the seniors, for them to get another home game in there. Like, those guys love playing there. You know, it's going to be something that I'll always remember, they will always remember, and the fact that it was a postseason game in the NIT that led to us coming here was even more special.

Q. With what you guys did last year, the turnaround season, and the way that it ended losing in the first round, do you have a chip on your shoulder entering this part of the tournament and now making it to the semifinals? I know it's cliché a but how bad do you want to make it to the championship game?

DREW VALENTINE: I would say, I always ask them, and I try to be the same way, is approach every game as a Super Bowl. I use that term. It's like every day is an intense, like, fight for survival, to be great.

And so when you talk about having a chip on your shoulder, like to me, you have to wake up every day, no matter whether you're playing in the NIT Final Four or our first summer workout in June. I'm going to have the same energy, enthusiasm, passion for this.

Because again, I love what I do. These guys all have a passion and love the game.

And so my mentors, you know, obviously Coach Moser before here and then Coach Izzo, two coaches that have really, really impacted me. If you go to a Coach Izzo practice in June, it's the same as it is in March, and that's why he's had so much success in March. That's why they call him Mr. March.

The success that we had under Coach Moser, advancing in the NCAA Tournament, when we were -- whether it was here, actually, we played in Hinkle, our first round game in 2021 and beat Georgia Tech. We had success because the way he prepared every day.

So the chip can't just come when it's postseason. I feel like the chip has to be something that is inside you every day, and I want competitive guys that really, really want that.

Q. And then this might be a loaded question, but maybe just something you're most proud of in the eight seasons overall that you've been with the Ramblers?

DREW VALENTINE: Yeah, I would just say the consistency. It's so hard to be a consistent winner. Even the best programs in the country, like it's really, really hard to stay up at the top.

And I think that we've strengthened our brand by the consistency that we've had. I mean, the recruiting calls, like who we're recruiting now, compared to when I first got here, like nobody knew who we were when I first got to Loyola. They are like, How to you say that name?

And then now everybody knows Sister Jean or they know Cam Krutwig, or they just know that we play a good style of play, or they know I'm Denzel Valentine's brother, whatever it might be. They know our program.

And so you know, our resources have really improved. We have a practice facility now. There's so many things. But I think the thing that I'm most proud of it consistency.

And then, I would say the thing that goes hand-in-hand with that is the combination of player development and player retention.

I think you can see in the interactions in here, like, I have genuine relationships with our players. Like genuine, I'm like their big brother, and give them advice on everything.

Like Des freaking texted me on Saturday after practice and is like asking me to get him a food reservation for him and his girlfriend in the City. Those are the kind of things that are the reasons why I think we have retention with our guys.

And then the way that we've been able to develop our guys. You look at guys like Sheldon Edwards or Des. Des made 29 threes in two years at Davidson. When we took him, all I could see over social media was, "Why are you taking this guy? He can't shoot." And he's made, what, 138 threes at 36 percent in two years? And he started, he played 30 minutes a game at Davidson.

That comes from what we do with player development, how hands-on I try to be, and the coaches, the talented coaches that I have in the locker room.

So I would say just the consistency of our program, how we've had 20-plus wins in seven out of the last eight years, and how we've been able to keep our guys and develop them.

THE MODERATOR: I'm going to ask a Fran Fraschilla question. You played in two NCAA Tournaments. You were the youngest coach hired ever in the history of Oakland University, your alma mater, and Greg Kampe. One of the things he was trying to get out of everyone was to talk about each person that has influenced your coaching career, whether it's Greg or Porter or Coach Izzo.

If you could give a little bit on your thoughts on each of them, I think that's something that he was looking for. Because as one of the brightest young coaches, as I told you, didn't matter, there was a time when you played, and now you have the chance to take it even further and have a greater impact.

DREW VALENTINE: I would say of the first thing with like Coach Kampe would be like the freedom that he let his guys play with. I mean, you guys all saw the tournament game last year with Jack Gohlke, and what did he hit, like ten threes in a game? I don't even remember.

But the offensive freedom and how, like, empowering that was when I was a player. Like, it makes you feel like you can just do whatever you want out there on the floor, and like you're going to stay in the game and play through mistakes. Like, it's empowering. And you guys will see some of the shots tomorrow that those three in particular, Jayden Dawson and Des and Sheldon Edwards, some of the shots they take are very aggressive. But like, I want them to feel free out there on the floor. So I would say that's the first thing.

Coach Moser would be the combination of like, balance, like, with life and basketball. He was a great dad. He still is a great dad, not saying was; he still is a great dad. He's a great husband to his wife. He's a normal dude off the floor.

Like, any time he could, he would go to Wrigley Field, he still does, and go to Cubs, which I do, too. I'm going opening; first home game is Friday. So I'm hoping we win this on Thursday. I've already got my tickets ready to go. I live in the Lake View area, so I'm just going to walk down there.

But like balance with it, but also like being totally locked in and focused and pushing the envelope. Taught me a lot about, like, offense because you know we kind of change up what we do offensively based on how the opponents guard us every game. So I would say that.

And Coach Izzo is all about family and passion. You see him game after game, can text him after -- I texted him congrats on their season last night. Texts you right back. He's as humble as they come. Every former player, manager, coach, everybody always goes back. It's a true family atmosphere. It's very welcoming. And that does wonders for your players because, like, you want your players to want to play for you and want to play for the name on the front of the jersey.

This time, college athletics, everything that we're dealing with, it's really, really important to create a sense of family, even if it's just having people in your program for one year. I would say that's kind of a little bit of -- or my favorite thing that I've learned from all three of those mentors.

THE MODERATOR: Talk about the Atlantic 10 and what you've seen in being in that conference and the type of competition, and again, every conference is a grind because the familiarity. What are the virtues of the A-10 that people may not know of or think of that you would like to get across.

DREW VALENTINE: It's such a high-level league. Coming into the league a couple years ago, I didn't know that. One, we didn't have any NIL; and two, you didn't know how talented the players were in the league, and that was the reason that we didn't have a successful first season.

But after we figured out, okay, this is the talent level that you need. These are the resources that you need to be successful. We are the winning team in the A-10 over the last two years in conference play. We had 27 wins the last two years over national programs like Dayton and VCU.

I would just say that the league has extremely high-level talent. I mean, NBA draft picks. Rasheer Fleming will be a draft pick this year. Extremely high-level talent. Extremely passionate fan bases and, like, big-time atmospheres.

When you go and watch a game at UD Arena at Dayton, that's a high-level atmosphere, or the Siegel Center at VCU, like high-level atmospheres. And then teams that -- you know, what we've struggled with the last few years is nonconference play, but like us, for example, we had Jayden Dawson, Kymany Houinsou, Justin Moore, all out in our biggest stretch of nonconference play.

Other than that, if we would not have had that stretch, we would have been an at-large team in the NCAA Tournament, as well because of how good the league is because of the calibre of league that it is.

So I love the A-10. I love being a part of it. I love traveling to all those cities and playing against really talented coaches. But it's just a really, really high-level basketball league that will only continue to be better with how much schools are investing, as the House case gets settled and all the resources that the schools in the league are going to have.

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