

National Invitation Tournament: Chattanooga vs UC Irvine

Friday, April 4, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

Chattanooga Mocs

Dan Earl

Garrison Keeslar

Trey Bonham

Finals Postgame Press Conference



Chattanooga 85, UC Irvine 84

DAN EARL: I don't want to watch that last play where they got that little layup and offensive rebound layup, I think is what happened. That's not the way we drew it up. But super proud of these guys, as everyone says when you win a championship like this, but they are a wonderful young group.

They all remained completely unselfish. Played the right way throughout the year. This might have been our least efficient offensive game in, I can't even tell you how long.

So there was some great and defense involved in this game, which we were fortunate to come out on top against a very, very good UC Irvine team. They are great on both sides of the ball.

But super proud of our guys. These are the two guys sitting here, but Garrison has given us courage all year long, plays extremely unselfish and is an unbelievable defender, willing to do whatever it takes to win.

And then Trey Bonham, we have a long history, but I can't tell you how proud I am of him. I've been with him a while. I've been really tough on him in the past. Eased up a little bit, but I'm so proud that he's playing his best basketball at the end of his career and able to cut down the nets for a championship. Proud of all the guy, and we'll take it.

Q. Was the layup too close for you?

GARRISON KEESLAR: At the end of the game?

Q. One that you passed off to Honor, and then you shot the jumpshot on the next. Was the layup too

close and that's why you didn't want to shoot it?

GARRISON KEESLAR: Sometimes Coach tells me I'm a little too passive. Sometimes I see an open layup, and then I see Honor for a wide-open three, and I'm like, This is the best shooter in the country, so I might as well try to get him one. Yeah, maybe a little too close.

Q. You mentioned yesterday you had not won a championship in your life. You can't say that anymore. Tell me how that feels.

TREY BONHAM: It feels great. I'm 1-0. Undefeated. My dad's going to make fun of me because he's a Jordan fan, I'm a LeBron, so y'all know how that goes. I might just have to go with the Jordan train now, undefeated in championships. Feels great.

Q. You're a champion now. What does this do for you moving forward, knowing you're going to be a champion as you progress in basketball maybe to the pros?

TREY BONHAM: I was pretty down on myself, not ever going to the NCAA Tournament. I kind of felt like my career was a failure at a moment. But people around me quickly made sure that, hey, we got more basketball to play, and I can still be a champion in a different way.

I was just glad to do it with this group of guys, and I'm just blessed to be here.

Q. I wrote a lot of times this year that this team had a "Last Dance" feel from the documentary, Jordan documentary. Shout-out to Robert Vaughn, in terms of you don't quite get the results you want. But this seems to be a pretty good ending for you all. To go through the journey, the reason you came, and to get the result, this result, like how special is that in hindsight?

GARRISON KEESLAR: It's such a blessing, and like you said, after we lost to Furman in the overtime game, I mean,

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it was devastating. I mean, we all wanted to go to the NCAA Tournament but the coach has helped us and our team came together to quickly turn the page.

And we knew we had a special group of guys that had a chance to make a run in the NIT, and honestly for us, I think the biggest thing was we didn't want it to end. Like, this is a great group of guys. This is special. You don't get this very often.

And so to play as long as we can, I mean, we had a triple overtime game with MTSU; that game overtime. Even when we went to overtime, I looked at him like, you couldn't have written it any better. We get to play five more minutes of basketball with each other of the just trying to play as long as we can.

It's such a blessing. To get this done for everyone here is awesome.

Q. It's just where we are now, but as you all were cutting down nets and everything, Honor comes up and you hear the chants. What are the conversations going to be like? Obviously you left Coach Earl for a year and came back and Honor still has that one year left. What are your conversations going to be like going forward?

TREY BONHAM: First I want to say Coach Earl left me -- nah.

I mean, he's a grown man. But I told him that -- I mean, he's seen it. You seen he was crying at the end. This is a special place. I love Chatt. I'm probably going to move back after I play wherever. He knows that. He's won Mr. Chattanooga in sports athletics event, I think two times in a row. He's loved here, and just the feeling of being able to walk down the street and people are like, Hey, that's Honor Huff; Hey, that's Trey Bonham, it's a special place. That's all I can tell them.

It's a lot of extra noise out there with the money and NIL, but I think he realizes how special this place is.

Q. In terms of -- you don't dwell on this game. As you reflect on this game, how do you reflect on what's transpired over the previous 45 minutes and the journey from June till now?

DAN EARL: Yeah, you know, again, I'm just thinking about our defense on that last play. I can't help myself. It's how I'm built. So I'm upset about that.

But I'm so thrilled for the guys. Again, you talk about the original disappointment in not making the Tournament, and

then turning the page, and to see how appreciative the guys are. I mean, you know how genuine they are.

Like, we just had a couple donors pick up a dinner for us last night. It was awesome. We were all together. The guys are thanking me, thanking everybody involved. They are appreciative of everything.

It's just, again, in this day and age of me, me, me, to have the guys play unselfishly, to have them appreciate everything, to be high-character guys, and they are saying it from their heart. They wanted to keep playing and keep this thing going. Just proud of them, and proud we could finish this off. And they can each call themselves champions.

Q. Talk about the resolve of this group. You've talked about it before the season, and how that's developed over the course of the year.

DAN EARL: Yeah, you know, when you first come together, we had, I want to say, nine new faces, and it takes a while, you know, and you go through all the ups and downs with either injuries or trying to get on the same page or figuring out roles. But the core fabric of this team or fiber of this team is awesome.

So as you fast-forward throughout the season, you have all these moments, being down big to Wofford or Furman, and coming out and figuring it out in the second half. And you have these tipping points in the season where, hey, you take a big jump forward.

Then we were all devastated for Frank. He was out there and I'm so proud of him because he was into it. He's crying. He's a great teammate. He stayed positive with all the guys. I'm sure there's a part of him that it's really hard because he came to the Division I level to try to go to the NCAA Tournament. And he's a huge part of what we're doing.

So you know, looking in the huddles and seeing those guys, their belief and then looking back at me in the eye and looking at each other and say, Hey, we've been here before, let's just get it done. I think that says a lot about their resolve.

Q. Talk about your fans. I almost felt like it was a home game for you guys with your fans, but what do those fans mean to you and your program?

DAN EARL: That's awesome to hear from somebody impartial, right. They are outstanding, right. You can't say enough.

I'll usually like tune out once I walk out on the floor or once the game starts or whatever. But you heard during warm ups, they are doing nuts. It's like Mocs, "Let's go Mocs," the whole thing. We had, I don't know, my understanding is a few or more than a few planes, private planes come out here. We had people bussing. Our men's golf team, my understanding is, came out here. The band, cheerleaders, athletic administration.

Everybody's been behind us. That's a tribute to the guys, how hard they pray, our style of play, but a tribute to the fans, and then getting on board and supporting basketball. The Roundhouse which is McKenzie Arena, our home arena, was rocking especially towards the end of the year but we had a home game against Dayton. It was absolutely awesome. Can't thank the fans enough for coming out and supporting us throughout the year.

Q. Mulholland and Keeslar combine for 30 shots. How big of a part of your game plan was that going in, and what adjustments were made by both teams for that to kind of happen?

DAN EARL: That's a great question, right. We knew a good part of this game was going to be decision-making, right. They playoff certain guys. And that can mess with you when you're a player and like, hey, you go to square up and you're at three-point line, and the next closest guy is 17 feet off you.

So he don't want to bait yourself into just shooting it all the time but we have a lot of confidence in our guys. Certainly Colin, Garrison shooting a really good percentage. He takes good shots. They didn't make a high percentage. They obviously made someone accounted, obviously.

But in each huddle -- and I was doing a little ask of the assistants. We were like, Hey, we've got to keep swinging, keep letting them shoot; correct? Everyone's like, yep, let's them go.

For those guys to stick with it, and obviously Colin had the one at the end of regulation that I really thought was going down. But he made one in overtime, too, I want to say. For him to be able to move on and shoot the next one is awesome, and certainly Garrison as well. We have confidence, and those guys kept shooting and made some huge ones.

Q. When you took the job, people questioned, who is this guy, 71-139. Three years later, you're NIT Champions. Within three years, you've maintained the level of excellence at this Chattanooga program and even raised the bar. You told me the day you got hired that you're a competitor. So now, in hindsight, how do

you feel kind of understanding the journey to get to this point and now this end result of being NIT champions?

DAN EARL: Yeah, you know, everybody has their own journey. First of all, it's hard to get any job, assistant job, head job. It's ultra competitive. Everybody has their own journey.

I'm certainly appreciative of VMI for giving me our chance. They stuck with us through lean times to start. We became ultra competitive at VMI, and I can't say enough about Mark Wharton, our AD, right.

So many administrations, ADs, and I get it, there's pressure out there to get -- make a splash, if you will, or win the press conference. And it's hard to sit up there and say, Hey, here is our next coach, Dan Earl. I don't even know what my record was, which you just pointed out. But it's an awesome question.

Just my level of appreciation for Mark because he was in conference, he saw what we were able to do at VMI, which again don't look at our record but we became really competitive. I think we tried to do it the right way. And as I mentioned, everyone's got a lot of qualities. One of the ones I pride myself on is being competitive.

I think we thought we could do some big things at Chattanooga. We're still trying to get to the NCAA Tournament. But to go on this run has been awesome, and again, just super appreciative of our administration, and in particular, Mark, for giving us a chance and everybody for being on board and hopefully people will stay on board going forward.

Q. There's been many times that your team has went to many overtimes. You had the crowd going crazy and probably a lot of nailbiting everything and. What were you telling your team whenever y'all went into overtime here with the game just so close?

DAN EARL: You know, as you point out, we certainly pointed out, we were like, we've been here before. This is our game. Just trying to stay positive.

Sometimes when you have the last opportunity, which we did, and we missed the three-pointer, there's a little bit of like, oh, sulking your shoulders, what-have-you. I just told the staff, like, Yo, everyone is upbeat, keep your head up, we are winning this game. Walked into the huddle, the guys, all heads were up, ready to go. And we said hey we've been there before, and let's just go take this thing.

The game of basketball is so tough because the reality of it



is, the bounce of a ball here or there changes people's lives, changes people's being champions or not. It's an awesome game, and you learn so many lessons. It's a very unforgiving game at times, as well.

So just proud of the guys for figuring it out, and we'll take a little luck on our side with them missing that chippy down the stretch.

Q. As you look back on this past year, and this is sort of one of those momentous occasions, you've done it as an assistant coach, and now you've done it as a head coach. Who are the people that come to mind that you think back on that made all this possible?

DAN EARL: I mean, so many. You know, I think starting with my family, my mom and dad were so supportive. We're a basketball family. My father played at Rutgers. My brother is a head coach. He was at Cornell; he's now at William & Mary. A lot of family friends and a lot of friends that are supporting us sending a million texts. I'll go check my texts out there.

But then professionally my former coaches that I played under, Bruce Parkhill, Jerry Dunn. I was under Ed DeChellis for ten years who was -- both at Penn State, gave me my first start, and then I followed him to Navy.

And then the athletic administrations. General P, who was the superintendent at VMI. Dave Diles, the athletic director, took a chance on me, too.

I get my first job being assistant at Navy in the Patriot League. You talk, again, about that's not usually the trajectory, if you will. But so they give me the first opportunity. And then obviously Mark Wharton and the administration, Dr. Engel at Chattanooga.

Too many people to thank. But it's been a fun ride, and now we get to hopefully hang out and celebrate a little tonight, and then transfer portal tomorrow. So it doesn't end.

But yeah, super appreciated everybody that's helped me along the way.

THE MODERATOR: Tomorrow is today now.

DAN EARL: Oh, is it? It's past midnight, there you go.

THE MODERATOR: We want to congratulate you. Thank you so much for the class you've exuded this entire tournament, as have all the coaches, and wish you the best of luck.

DAN EARL: Yeah, thanks so much.

You guys do an unbelievable job, and we are superb appreciative to have been here, and thank you for all your efforts. Appreciate it. Thank you.

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