

National Invitation Tournament: Tulsa vs New Mexico

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Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

New Mexico Lobos

Eric Olen

Semifinal Pregame Press Conference



Q. In your first season you've taken this team to the NIT Final Four here in Indianapolis. What does this deep postseason run mean, known as the "Olen Era."

ERIC OLEN: It's nice to be playing good basketball. It's late in the season. You know, really proud of our guys for how they responded to some disappointment to play well in this event.

If you look across history there's some mixed results with teams participating in this event and their ability to be excited about it. So I think that says a lot about our group and their competitiveness.

And you know, for guys like Luke and Deyton, everybody is just trying to do everything they can to get them one more game and let them play a little more basketball. But it's a great group. We really enjoyed working with them and coaching them, and so to still be playing at this stage, we feel fortunate and hopefully it's something we can build on going forward.

Q. And you've spoken about recruiting players with a chip on their shoulder. How have you seen that mentality manifest during these three dominant NIT wins?

ERIC OLEN: Just the competitiveness of our guys. I think that's something that I think all great players have a competitive spirit that is just innate, and these are two guys that have that. We have others.

I think all the teams probably have guys like that if they are still playing at this stage. But I think it's important, you know, in this current landscape of college basketball we really try to identify guys who still care about winning and who want to play a certain way and part of that is their kind of competitive spirit and their team-first mindset.

I think we have a lot of those guys in our locker room, and I

think that's part of why we've played some good basketball this season.

Q. Tulsa gets to the line a lot in games. How are you going to play that sound defense to keep your guys out of foul trouble with just how dominant they are at attacking the paint?

ERIC OLEN: Tulsa is a terrific basketball team, specifically offensively, they are as good a basketball team as we've seen, comparable with some of the best teams we've played. And so yeah, it's a challenge. Riley gets to the line a ton. Does a great job. He's physical on his drives. Gets into it the defenders bodies and draws fouls.

So, I mean, they present a lot of problems, not just at the free throw line. They have a ton of shooting on the floor. They move the ball. Execute at a really high level. Talented players. Terrific coaches. Yeah, we certainly have our work cut out for us for sure.

Q. After the Saint Joe's game, the question was put to their coach about the challenges non-major schools have with building a schedule. So you look at the NIT, 28 of the 32 teams are from non-major conferences. So I'm just curious with minus the quad one and quad two opportunities, it seems like the window for the NCAA Tournament is getting smaller and smaller for teams that are not in a power conference. How difficult is it to build a schedule in this day and age for schools like the Mountain West?

ERIC OLEN: Yeah, there's certainly challenges in scheduling and trying to get quad one and two games. You know, when you don't have them built into your conference schedule, there's some creativity required.

I know our staff, it's something we talk about and work on constantly to try to create opportunities for ourselves in the nonconference as much as possible, and I think that's increasingly important for us in the new iteration in the Mountain West and how that's changing.

So it's something that is kind of top of mind, always, especially in the off-season, as we really get into putting our schedule together.

Q. One thing about Deyton. You don't try to talk him into wearing the sunglasses? Because things have gone well since he's been doing that.

ERIC OLEN: Nah. He can decide for himself.

Q. Curious, if not the sunglasses specifically but, what Deyton brings to this team. You guys did miss it in one of the NIT games. I know Uriah has picked up the slack but Deyton's ability to set everything up on the offense by getting in the paint, is that what you wanted and envisioned when you got him in the transfer portal a year ago?

ERIC OLEN: Yeah, we feel like Deyton has delivered on what we were hoping for. You know, he's terrific in transition. Puts a ton of pressure on the rim. You know, plays both sides of the ball.

So his ball pressure point attack defense is a big part of what we're trying to do on that side. He's a really good rebounder for a guard which is important for us because, you know, we play pretty small outside the five position. So you know, guards that rebound are really helpful and you know his play-making has been -- has been good as well. He makes a lot of plays for other guys. Gets guys shots through his rim pressure and decision-making.

I think he's had times where, you know, he's probably had some higher turnover games, but you know, it's sort of part of the Deyton experience and we signed up for it. He gets to the free throw line. He does a ton for us. He's an important player on our team. He's absolutely been what we hoped when we recruited him.

Q. I didn't mean to put them on the spot like that but do you know the name Unser?

ERIC OLEN: I do know the name. We did not go to the Speedway, by the way. It was just they had a car at the hotel when we got there and it was like a little photo thing. They didn't do the whole, like, museum. They didn't learn anything.

Q. But you know about the name Unser and the tie to Albuquerque?

ERIC OLEN: I didn't know about the street. That was news.

Q. Are you in any way a racing fan in any way?

ERIC OLEN: I don't follow it. I've been to a NASCAR race in my life, Talladega 500. But nah, it's not something I'm really following closely.

Q. Alabama guy.

ERIC OLEN: Different version, yeah.

Q. Just the pageantry of getting to this setup. The NIT is one thing when it's in your own arena. You're getting now to -- I know Final Four is a copyrighted name for this other tournament in town but you're four teams left in the tournament that is well-known and you're at a pretty historic venue. Curious if you are enjoying or embracing this moment in any way or are you as a coach trying to focus like you're getting your players to try and focus on just the game at hand, the balance between the two, how are you handling that?

ERIC OLEN: I think we try and do both. I think, you know, this is a cool experience for our players to come here to Indianapolis to play in Hinkle Fieldhouse, to be in the semifinals of the NIT. You know, especially with the NCAA Tournament and the Final Four happening here at the same time. So it's a cool experience. You can feel -- you can kind of feel the energy downtown, even though it hasn't started yet.

So we're excited that our guys get that experience but we also understand why we're here, and you know, we want to play good basketball. We want to represent New Mexico the right way here, and on a big stage, and I think these guys have a lot of pride in their performance and it matters to them.

So I don't have concerns about being distracted or, you know what I mean, we know why we're here and it's cool to be here and we want to play well while we're here.

Q. I was hoping that you guys would walk into the service entrance where Hickory walked through right down the hallway here. This venue, the history of this building speaks for itself. Just curious, your home arena is pretty special in and of itself as well. But is this kind of the feeling that other teams get when they walk into the pit, the history and the nostalgia of that building? Kind of the same thing here, isn't it?

ERIC OLEN: I think that's one of the reasons I'm so excited to be here in New Mexico and why we came here and why these guys came to play in New Mexico is part of that history and wanting to be part of that and play at the pit.

And now to come on the road and be in this environment at this event and play in another historical building like this, those are things these guys are always going to remember, and I think it's one of the benefit of being on a good basketball team at this level of college basketball. You get some experiences that you can take with you, and so I hope our guys sort of soak it all in and enjoy it and play some good basketball at the end of it.

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