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An interview with:



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CINCINNATI

**COACH MICK CRONIN
YANCY GATES
DION DIXON
SEAN KILPATRICK**

THE MODERATOR: We're now joined by Cincinnati Head Coach Mick Cronin. Coach, do you want to give us some general comments about what it's like to be here.

COACH CRONIN: We're excited to be here, obviously. We were here in '99. It was a first round event as an assistant coach. We still had trouble backing a bus into the arena, so that excited our guys for the day.

But it's a great honor for our University and for our program to reach the Sweet 16, and we're excited to be competing and happy that there's another Big East team in the region with us. Hopefully we get a chance to play them on Saturday.

Q. After the incident with Xavier, your action was very quick and decisive and firm. How do you feel that that then translated to the improved play of your team and the improved commitment the rest of the way?

COACH CRONIN: I've got to be honest, I don't think it had anything to do with it. We got beat 20, and we were 5 and 3, and we needed to

soul search as a basketball team, as a 5 and 3 bad basketball team, or mediocre basketball team, bad for our standards, the fact that we were put in must-win situations is really what changed our team. Our kids had two choices: sink or swim. Swimming wasn't going to be easy. We had to make a lot of changes. Most probably difficult was we just didn't play defense the way we needed to play defense. Our commitment on that end of the floor wasn't what it needed to be. We didn't take care of the basketball and we didn't rebound, which would be the three things that every team has to do to win.

That and we got JaQuon Parker back healthy, who's probably our toughest guy or the guy that brings the most intangibles to the table for our team.

But I give our players credit because they changed their basketball personalities. Some of our returning leading scorers, they were sorely missing their departed five seniors, and they started to take on the personality of the kids that had graduated and learn how to do dirty work and the uncomfortable things that go into winning. That's been the difference for our team.

Q. What does it mean to you to play in this city with so much tradition with the Boston Celtics?

COACH CRONIN: Oh, it's -- as a young coach, for me personally, it's exciting. You're playing where the Celtics play. I'm a big Kevin Garnett fan. He's always been an Adidas guy. But I've always been a big fan of his intensity. We don't know each other, but we have a few mutual friends, people that have worked for him. So that part of it for me is exciting.

But Boston is a great city. Of course it's always bright and sunny here this time of year, too. We would have gone anywhere, but it's great to be in Boston. It's a great city, great venue, and the opponent is tough, as well.

Q. If you would talk a little bit about



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Cincinnati - 03 21 12

Ohio State, the concerns they bring, and also an opponent other than 2006 that UC hasn't seen in a long time.

COACH CRONIN: Well, yeah, obviously we haven't seen them in quite a while, but I'm more concerned with Jared Sullinger in the post, Deshaun Thomas, Aaron Craft at the point. I've seen William Buford make shots since he was a sophomore in high school. He's the college version of Ray Allen, he really is. He's got a great future.

Their offense is -- the more I watch them, the less I'm sleeping. Fortunately I haven't had a lot of time to worry about them. We got home at 6:00 in the morning Monday, so it's just less stress that I put on myself.

I would say that their talent obviously speaks for itself. But to me the way they pass the ball on offense, to shoot a high percentage, any team that shoots a high percentage passes the ball well. You don't see that always on talented teams. You see guys trying to get their own, improve their draft stock, things of that nature. But they don't do that.

If you double-team, they immediately pass the ball to the open man and they make you pay for it. They also know each other extremely well. I don't know if that's a product of the fact that they don't really play their bench a lot, so their starting five play so much together, but the benefit of that is they all know what each other is capable of. They know that if they can get the ball to Jared Sullinger down low that they're going to do it. They know Deshaun Thomas can really shoot, and he's an answer for them late in the clock. They know when he's hot. They know they can always go to their screening stuff or William Buford.

When you watch them play, more than any team we've played against this year, they just seem to have a great rhythm on offense because of their willingness to pass the ball. But I think they're comfortable together, and you don't see guys -- none of them try to do stuff they can't do.

Even as good as Jared is, if you double-team him, he understands that passing the ball is the right move. That's the right play. He just doesn't hunt baskets. And when your best player does that, I think it probably permeates down through your team.

You know, defensively they're extremely well coached, scouting report defense, and they limit your points in the paint. They know what you're good at and they're going to try to take it away.

Q. I'm just curious about your thoughts, I know you don't face them regularly, but about facing another Ohio team on a neutral site and what the reaction has been at home about that.

COACH CRONIN: Well, obviously I live in a vacuum preparing for the game and trying to deal with travel and stuff like that. We've had a quick turnaround. But I think the fact that you have four Ohio teams in the Sweet 16 is a sense of great pride for our state. In Cincinnati alone we have two, so it's great for our community.

I'm sure the tickets would be much worse if this game were in Indianapolis or something, so it's probably good that we're up here in Boston. We don't have to worry so much about the ticket requests for the game.

Q. In that same vein, though, it's a real rivalry with Xavier because you play them. This is more of a rivalry in the minds of the fans because of the in-state thing, and it hasn't happened in a long time. How is it different for the players to just be playing a team that they don't see but the fans care so much about?

COACH CRONIN: Well, I think the real truth for our players, they know nothing about all that stuff. To be honest, I've told them don't worry about it. It's irrelevant for us. You know, let everybody else have their fun. I'm sure Ohio State feels the same way. We have a goal. We're trying to win four more games and bring a championship back to Cincinnati. You know, the fact that we're playing Ohio State is a sidebar for us, and my guys, we don't have time to worry about it, talk about it.

I will say, for the guys, this time of year as you go on, they were excited about playing Florida State, they were excited about playing Texas. You know, it's good to get out. Twenty-one straight Big East games, it gets old. It's a grind. We went to the Big East championship game. In any conference -- it's more for them -- Ohio State is a team they see on TV that they respect, and they're just excited to be here. You could roll out the Celtics and our guys would be excited. We'd be in trouble, but our guys would be excited.

Q. Even though you're in a vacuum, surely you've heard that you guys have been snubbed by Ohio State or Ohio State ducks you

guys. The Huggins teams were great, powerful teams but never got to play Ohio State. I find it difficult to believe that playing Ohio State is like playing Cleveland state or Kent State or something like that.

COACH CRONIN: Well, I didn't say that. First of all, I have great respect for Kent State and Cleveland State. But I have the same respect for Florida State our players would have the same respect for Michigan State.

Again, for the fans, it's different. For us it's the next team on our schedule. For a lot of our fans, there's nostalgia, guys, but I wasn't alive. I grew up on that stuff, but I wasn't alive. We've got bigger fish to fry, and we need to stay focused on things that matter.

Q. Can you just talk about your journey as a coach when you took over the program to where it is today?

COACH CRONIN: Well, I was -- when I was named the head coach at the University of Cincinnati, I think it's well documented the program was in a transition period. But one advice I try to give to anybody that reaches out to me, not that I'm some guru, but I have younger guys, my age, that talk to me about head coaching jobs. The dilemma is if you're going to get a job, usually it's in transition for a reason. Now and then there's a job that opens up because a guy went to the NBA and it would be in great shape. But for me, the Cincinnati job was obviously in a bad spot at the time, but if I would have passed on it, what if somebody would have come in and could have easily come in and done a good job, rebuilt the program, and I would have never had the chance again.

So I think that in life, you can't always have everything. So if I get a chance to get the job you've coveted your whole life since you've realized you were a midget and your playing days were over, you can't also want it to be in great shape. For me it would have been great to stay Coach Huggins' assistant, and we'd roll on, and he rides off to West Virginia some day and I take over and we've got a roster full of great players, just much how some other guys have done it. But that just wasn't the way it shook out.

Sometimes you have to take a chance and believe in yourself. I haven't done it alone. There's been a lot of -- a lot of our alumni have stepped up. We stepped into the Big East at a time when I took the job over from a budget standpoint. Universities all over going through

funding cuts and all that stuff. So there's been many, many boosters and tip-off club members that we started that have helped us do things to try to elevate our program to a level of a Big East program.

Larry Davis, my associate head coach, has been with me the whole six years, and he's a head coach, and he should be a head coach, so I try to limit how much I get on his case.

But there's just been a lot -- it hasn't just been me, and it hasn't been easy, I'm not going to lie. But at the same time, I just think that sometimes in coaching to get what you want, you've got to be willing to take a chance and go find out if you're cut out for it. If you're not, you've got to do something else in life.

So I don't want to talk about how tough it's been too much because it's also been the opportunity of a lifetime. No matter what happens for me, I'll always get to say that I was the head coach of the Bearcats. I do live in a vacuum. I'm not -- Cincinnati is a different city. We're our own city. We pay taxes in Ohio, but north of 275, in our city, it's about Cincinnati. Unless you're a Xavier fan, which I grew up and am still friends with a lot of those guys. But we live in our own world inside 275, and for me, Cincinnati was the Boston Celtics.

It wasn't in great shape, but we're still working. We're not where we want to be, but I don't plan on going anywhere. Hopefully we've got some more work to do.

Q. You keep mentioning the Celtics. When you walk into the Garden and you don't see Larry Bird's jersey up there or the championship banners --

COACH CRONIN: I didn't notice that. Really?

Q. They take them down for part of the tournament. Now that you know, does that take that wow effect away?

COACH CRONIN: You know, my players -- the good things for me is we're not playing on the Celtics' court, so none of the four coaches, we don't have to worry about our guys shooting the NBA three. No, not really. Our guys know the Celtics play here, but you've got to understand, we're in the Big East, so we play in the Garden, we play in the Bradley Center. We play in a lot of places that aren't on-campus arenas. But that being said, I don't know about my guys, but I'm

excited to be coaching where Doc Rivers coaches, even though he didn't send me his son. I could have used him.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach. Good luck tomorrow.

We are now joined by the Cincinnati student-athletes who will be with us today.

Q. Yancy, you probably are going to have the task of defending Jared Sullinger. Just your thoughts on that.

YANCY GATES: I've been guarding a lot of good big men this season. They all do a lot of different things like he does. I think it'll just be another challenge, trying to get to New Orleans, that I'm up for. It's going to be an interesting challenge playing against such a good player.

Q. Yancy, I talked to your coach about the Xavier brawl, the incident there and the action that he took out of that game. How do you feel it affected this team and changed everybody to sort of recommit and have as great a season as you did?

YANCY GATES: I don't think it changed. I think it just sped up us finding our identity. We were struggling early in the season, but we knew we had good players and we knew we had the talent to do good things this season.

But I mean, I think it just sped up our process of finding out who we are, how we need to play.

Q. And growing up?

YANCY GATES: Well, I mean, I would have grown up anyway, but it really helped because dealing with tough situations, as you know, you get time to sit back and think about different things and talk to different people. I mean, I took it as just growing pains and my process of becoming a mature adult.

Q. Question for Sean: With you guys playing four guards, it would appear that there's a mismatch at the four position with Deshaun Thomas. How do you guys plan to deal with him? And is the zone the best way to go against Ohio State because of that situation or not?

SEAN KILPATRICK: Well, I mean, we have a guard in that four spot like you said, but our guard in that four spot is also tough, as well. I mean, he can also handle the other four on the

other end. It'll be a team effort, but I think our guard will be okay with him.

Q. Yancy, you're obviously still getting questions about the fight. Does it bother you when people think about Cincinnati basketball that's pretty much the first thing they think about?

YANCY GATES: I think we've done a good job over the past month showing that we play basketball and we're talented and we can beat just about anybody. When we get those questions we answer them, but we really don't let them bother us.

Q. Yancy, being from Cincinnati and growing up in Ohio, not having had a chance to face the Buckeyes before, does the fact that they're your opponent mean anything more to you? And then maybe to Dion and Sean, not being from Ohio, probably not knowing much about the history or lack of it between the schools, has he been able to fill you in on maybe how special a game this might be to Cincinnati fans?

YANCY GATES: I mean, I think by us playing here in the Sweet 16, it's not about Cincinnati versus Ohio State. It's about advancing, trying to get to the Elite 8. I mean, maybe if we would have played in the regular season or something, maybe I would have said, this is a special game, all this other stuff. But really we're just focused on trying to get to New Orleans like everybody else here. It's not about whether we're playing Ohio State or Florida State; it's about the task at hand.

DION DIXON: I mean, I guess it's good for our fans, but like he said, we're focused on us and we're trying to get to the Elite 8, so we really don't look too much into it.

Q. Yancy, you guys remember what UConn did last year. They were the hottest team. You guys made a good run in the Big East Tournament. Do you guys feel you're the hottest team in this regional?

YANCY GATES: Yeah, I would say that, just because how much we fly under the radar. Almost every night you turn on the TV, teams are picking us to lose by two or three. So I mean, I would say yes, we're pretty much the hottest team. We'll take it that way and we'll enjoy it.

Q. Growing up in Cincinnati, do you know all those guys at Ohio State, Sullinger and their Ohio players from AAU ball or anything?

YANCY GATES: Yeah, I know Sullinger, I know William Buford. Buford, we played a couple of AAU games together in tournaments actually in high school. And just this past summer I was out in LA at the Adidas Nation with Sullinger. Ian Thomas was out there, too. I know a couple of the guys.

Q. For Dion, all the championship banners are taken down in the Garden with Larry Bird's retired number, that's been taken down. Does it take away that wow effect because you knew you were playing in an NBA arena?

DION DIXON: No, we even played in the Garden in New York, so it's really not. It's just a step for us, and we're excited to be here. So we're really not looking at that, we're really just focused on the game at hand.

Q. You guys have said that playing Ohio State, the whole in-state thing isn't a big deal for you, but your fans seem to maybe see it differently. I'm sure you've seen the tee shirts. They say Buckeye State with the U and the C. Does that give you guys extra pressure that the fan base really wants this win?

YANCY GATES: I mean, I think our fan base wants every win.

Q. But this one in particular?

YANCY GATES: I mean, I guess. We always want to make our fans happy, but I think we want it just as much as them. I don't think it puts any added pressure. I mean, I think we play good under pressure anyways, so we'll take the added pressure.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, guys. Good luck tomorrow.

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