

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - High Point vs Purdue

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Amica Mutual Pavilion

Purdue Boilermakers Coach Matt Painter

Media Conference



Q. Matt, we talked with the players about this, I would be curious to get your thoughts on it. When you have seen it all in this environment, that is a one-game playoff every time you step on the floor, with this particular group of kids that will be the epitome of that, how does that help going into another one?

MATT PAINTER: I think just the respect of your opponent and understanding, like, how good everybody is in this tournament. We didn't need some of that to happen. I've been on the other end of it at Southern Illinois end, but High Point is a very good team. They're well-coached. I've been in his practices when he was at prep school. He coached one of our guys, Rapheal Davis. My assistant was on the Creighton staff with us. Any time you can dominate your league and win your tournament and 14 straight games, that's respect, man. That's a hard thing to do. That's a very difficult thing to do in any league that you're in.

So our guys understand that and a handful of them understand that the hard way.

Q. Matt, High Point's offensive efficiency numbers are fantastic. What do you see there? Anything you would compare them to for people who haven't watched them much?

MATT PAINTER: Well, I think they really work the ball downhill. They drive the basketball. They live in the paint. That's what you want. The stuff we talk about at every halftime is how much are we living in the paint and how much are we able to keep somebody out of the paint. When those numbers are good for us both ways, we're normally up 10-15 points. When it's the other way, it's normally bad news.

They're very efficient and very analytically aligned. They're

taking threes, but they're also getting a lot of inside out-type threes. But more than anything, they're getting to the free throw line and getting layups. A lot of times, when they shoot layups, it's over help and they're the best rebounding team in the Big South. So once again, more layups, right?

I think that's going to be a key thing for anybody that plays them, being able to keep the ball in front of them, making them score over you but not two to seven feet to keep that basketball out more, but that's easier said than done. The teams that I'm watching on film are not doing it. We have to do a better job as a group of keeping the ball out of the paint. That's what jumps out the most to me.

Q. What was it that jumped out to you when you saw C.J. Cox?

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, I recruited the guy for two years, longer than that, and really liked him. Big fan. Just the last game of AAU, he played really well against his AAU team, Middlesex Magic. After the game, he scored 27-30 points. After the game, all the guys from his AAU team went and hugged him, every player, every coach. I didn't know the coach at his AAU team so I called him, asked a couple people in the area about him. Said his dad played football at Harvard, he's going to be an Ivy League guy and he's got a list of Ivy League schools. Maybe I just saw his best game. I think I did. I started digging on him. He was older, took a fifth year, very competitive. Can make shots and pullups, kind of a combo, but was just about winning.

All the things you value as a coach in terms of what leads to winning, he epitomized, and as I kept going on and on, and that's a hard thing to do, to jump off a guy you recruited for two years that you really like, but as you went on and the other kid kept making more visits and people were jumping in on him, hey, this guy really, really wants to be here.

Coach Keady would always talk about that, make sure you understand how important that is when somebody wants to be at your place. He can guard the basketball, make shots and he can play off of our other guys. He can play off Braden Smith and Trey Kaufman-Renn, but we're fortunate to have him.

Q. I want to follow up on that. You said watching him interact with his teammates. How much does that sort of thing, group dynamics and things away from the court, matter to figure out who you want?

MATT PAINTER: It's also staying with it. One of the things I found out when I called him, he had been in their program since the third grade. Everyone has adversity in what they do. He stayed with the program for that long and that resonated with me. High academics, he's pretty quiet. He gets along with people, but he's pretty quiet and just wondering at that point the why. Trust your eyes, trust everything, but like why aren't other people recruiting him? He's been out there. They've had other good players in that program, but you just keep doing your work and you trust your work there, but you would like more time to get it figured out.

The problem is that allows time for other people. When he did that, it was just... they weren't hugging him and doing all that because, like, he was a bad guy or whatever. They generally were sad for him because that came to an end for them, which in reality it doesn't. You still have those relationships and you still have that. That's what the college experience is all about. Even though the landscape is shifting, it's still about that.

Q. Along those same lines of recruiting, I wanted to ask about Braden Smith. You were the only power conference offer that he had, which means that you liked him, but could you have seen this player, an All-American guy who leads the nation in assist rate right now?

MATT PAINTER: No, I thought he was really good but it was during COVID, also, so I didn't physically go see him, but I had others who played at Purdue before. I had a commitment at the time, but I didn't have a scholarship. I jumped right into watching film of about five or six guys and he was the only guy that wasn't nationally ranked, but he looked the best on film. It's not football. I like watching film, but I want to see you in person, but we couldn't do it at that point. I trusted some other people in the business after watching him that he had that competitive gene and that he was tough and he was a leader and that he can really, really pass the basketball.

But, no, it's very similar to the questions I get about Zach Edey, did you know that he was going to be a two-time National Player of the Year? No, I didn't, but if you can see that, we have only been able to get one McDonald's All-American. We're probably going to fall out of favorite there. We're not going to get that one.

It's a really unique deal. When we win, people say we're

great at developing players, and when we lose, we don't go in the portal enough. It's kind of like being married, right? Damned if you do, damned if you don't. (Laughter).

Where's the answer where everyone is happy? That's what I want. That's part of competitive sports. Some of the losses we had, he was our guy, but the major wins we have had, he's been our guy. And so I think loyalty is a two-way street, and so when we have struggled and he's been running the show for us, we've stayed by him and stuck with him. But he's also stuck by us, and I think that's a special bond. It doesn't mean things can't happen and people break off and people go and do different things, but that loyalty is pretty important. It's pretty important to success.

Q. Matt, Braden and Fletcher and Trey were up here. They have a lot of experience playing, but you have been a top four seed for eight years now and Sasha and P.J. were part of that, too. Can you talk about their role in communicating things to especially your younger guys and what they can bring to all these years of experience, too?

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, P.J. and Sasha's voices are important. As you get older, the youth of America doesn't listen as well. So them being able to pass on their experiences and share things with them, good and bad, I think resonates with them. I think you have to have that in a program. You have to have youth, but they also have to have wisdom, and I think that's what they have. I think that's what P.J. and Sasha have. They're mature and help our players with how to approach and handle things, especially adversity.

Q. You were talking about loyalty and this time of year with whether it's coaching starting to move, players starting to move, portal getting ready to open. What do you address in terms of blocking out noise? It's just kind of natural that these conversations are already happening even though you're preparing for a game. How do you address the inevitable?

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, you really don't. It's something you talk about, keep your focus. You have worked so hard to be here... be here. Like, be here. Be in the moment. Compete. What we did from the start of June to now is about right now, but also have fun with it. Make sure you have fun with your experiences, but a lot of things that end up happening, like you just got to move quicker when it's over and that's what the business has presented us.

Right as it's over, it's like, hey, take two weeks off, we'll come back, we'll talk about things. No, it's like, take no time off and let's have our exit meetings and here's where

you are, here's where you're going and where your money is going to be. You're trying to put your jigsaw puzzle together that just ended, but you have to move towards that. Just because somebody leaves, I know I used the word "loyalty" but it is part of it. If you don't embrace and adjust and understand what's going on, it's going to steamroll you and you might know all those things and it still steamrolls you, but you have to be able to move to the next thing and just be honest. I think if you're honest, you're going to get yourself in a better position as a coach. Don't say something to one player in a meeting that you can't openly say to another. Just be honest about where you are.

If someone is going to leave because they are going to make more money or they want a different role, cool. Now the rules allow you to shift. People ranked 15th and got second, third, fourth, whatever you got, you're able to shift and get quality players. And now that dynamic, after this year, I think the following year we'll have more stability hopefully in that area where we have a cap to where now we don't have extremes to where people have those advantages from a money standpoint.

The thing I don't like about it is 99% of college basketball don't play professional basketball. It still helps so many people have an opportunity that wouldn't have an opportunity for education but also have a better start to their life and have a better life. I just don't like that issue of it. To the 1% or 2% or whatever it might be, I get it. That's your dream and that's what you want, but some guy chasing money that's never going to be a pro, I don't think that's a bad... like why not? That's your thing.

But somebody is going to be a pro or has a great chance to be a pro, the most important thing for you from a basketball standpoint is your development and the big money for you is in the NBA, not college. That's who I think should chase it, the guys who aren't pros. You're not going to make it that way. You have to go in the real world like us, average four points.

I'm not going to leverage somebody. How the hell am I going to leverage somebody? I haven't made a shot in a month. The guys who you think are pros who aren't pros, you don't want to take their dream from them, but the happiness you have from coming together and sacrificing, we could win or lose this next game, but we have all had that experience together and that journey together and that's cool. That's unique. If you're always chasing things and you don't recognize that, if you can get it all, God bless you. Good for you. That's what it's about. That's what you want to see.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks so much.

