

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Furman vs San Diego State

Friday, March 17, 2023

Orlando, Florida, USA

Amway Center

**San Diego State Aztecs**  
**Coach Brian Dutcher**  
**Matt Bradley**  
**Aguek Arop**  
**Lamont Butler**

Media Conference

**Q. I know you guys were in the corner watching that yesterday. What were your individual thoughts on that last sequence and what happened there?**

LAMONT BUTLER: The Furman game? That was crazy. That was one of the craziest things I've seen in a game. But this is March, so anything can happen.

Credit to them. They made the play to win the game, and now we've got to go beat them.

AGUEK AROP: Yeah, like Lamont said, all I could think was just, wow, it's really March Madness. There ain't no game that's a given, and kind of just heightened our awareness for Charleston.

MATT BRADLEY: Like AG said it made us lock in on that moment and not take the opportunity for granted. Charleston, they're a good team, we knew if we kept it going, the game could go down to the wire and go either way, so it really got us locked in going into that game.

**Q. For all three players, how can you use the experience of what happened for you guys last season to carry into this game and make sure you avoid the kind of hardship you guys had last year?**

MATT BRADLEY: Yeah, I think this season we've been battle tested, went to Maui, had some tough losses there, just throughout the season. We won some really close



games too. We have new guys on the team, we also have guys on the team last year who experienced that. But to be honest, our mindset is based on what we've done this season. Obviously in games like yesterday, kind of you have a quick grief memory about what happened last year, but immediately my mind shifts to what I've done or what the team has done this season as far as closing out games.

I think we're happy with what we've done this year and we're going to keep building off of it.

AGUEK AROP: Last year it did hurt a lot and none of us want to feel like that again, so we're taking the steps necessary to make sure that doesn't happen.

LAMONT BUTLER: We're going to use it as motivation to come out here and win every game that we can, especially close games. We take pride in taking care of the ball and just concentrating in the close games like that. We've got a lot of guys that can make big plays, so we're just going to keep doing that and keep winning.

**Q. AG, after the first round, what do seeds mean or not mean in this tournament? Until the last 10 seconds of the Furman game yesterday, you guys were going to play a 4 and now you're playing a 13, were going to play a power conference, now a program that's a little less known nationally. What does it mean at this point that that flipped for you guys in the last 10 seconds?**

AGUEK AROP: Honestly, Dutch said it last night. He said seeds don't mean anything. You watch any game, Arizona, Xavier is playing right now losing to Kennesaw State. When it comes to March, it's desperation time, it's one-and-done, so every team is playing at their best. If you're not prepared, doesn't matter if you're a one, two, three, four, five, you're going to lose. Seeds don't mean much, so we're going to prepare for Furman as if they're Virginia.

**Q. AG, specifically for you being a member of the 2020 team, they went 30-2. How gratifying was it for you to be a part -- for all of you, obviously, being part of a first**

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**NCAA Tournament win -- but how gratifying was it for you not having that opportunity in at least one of the seasons in 2020 and then capitalizing a few years later?**

AGUEK AROP: It's been extremely gratifying. The 2020 season I remember, it ended so abruptly. And I remember the day the season got canceled I was on a flight and it really didn't hit me until Matt Sawyer sent us a video of all the highlight. And the stuff off the court and saw the memories we made in those games. It was sad.

Then 2021 and last year we didn't play well and we lost. So coming into this year and winning, it's been extremely gratifying. Not taking it for granted and just being grateful and thankful for the moment.

**Q. Matt and Lamont, knowing last year that you have to wait a whole year for another opportunity, how do you make sure that take that day by day, week by week, off-season, into the season, and not get ahead of yourself and wait for this opportunity?**

LAMONT BUTLER: Like I said, I feel like it motivated us. It humbled us, too, and I think everybody just went to work after that, after the game. Just throughout the season, our mindset was on March Madness. Now that we're here, we're ready to win.

MATT BRADLEY: Yeah, my whole summer and just preseason, building up to the season, building up to this moment has been kind of fixated on what happened last year. To be here and win a game means a lot to us. I'm just really happy, and there's more winning to do. So yeah, we prepared the right way, and I'm really happy for our guys for sure.

**Q. When you see a team like Furman that came back from 12 points down twice in the second half and then able to win the way they did, does that give you guys a sense of -- that even if you get a big lead, you have to be careful not to let that evaporate because they're the type of team that fights back and able to get that kind of win?**

LAMONT BUTLER: For sure. Every game it happens. We came back yesterday. We was down nine. It can happen at any time. We've just got to concentrate, try to build leads. Even if the lead does cut short, we have to concentrate and try to win the game.

AGUEK AROP: Yeah, the moment we're relaxing, are satisfied with the lead, is the moment the team comes back, especially in March. It doesn't take much to get -- a team like Furman going with as many scorers as they do

have. And so we just can't take anything for granted and always got to keep our concentration level high.

MATT BRADLEY: Yeah, we preach like every possession matters. But especially in games like these, you don't want a loose ball to go into their hands or a missed rebound or a shot that we didn't attempt. It's like, every possession we've got to key in on because we know at the end of the game, if it's a two-point game, if we lose, we're going to think back on that one possession that could have changed it. So no, you're right, though.

**Q. I asked the three Furman players this about an Aztec. They didn't know. But for all three of you, do you know what a Paladin is? That's their mascot.**

LAMONT BUTLER: A Paladin? No.

AGUEK AROP: I do, yeah. I was doing research on Furman and trying to learn more about them. I found out what a Paladin is. What was it a knight with heroic -- heroic chivalry or honor, something like that.

MATT BRADLEY: I had no idea, no. Now I do.

**Q. Their coach coached under Niko Medved at Furman before he left for Drake and then went to Colorado State. When you watch their offense, do you see a lot of Colorado State in them?**

MATT BRADLEY: Yeah, I do. Their offenses, their sets are very similar, and this team is really dangerous because they have a lot of weapons. We've been comparing them to Colorado State this whole time we've been watching them, and we do draw those comparisons for sure.

**Q. Matt and AG, this program it's been a long time since they've been in this position to win a second-round game in the NCAA Tournament. You've got to go back to 2015. How do you kind of appreciate the door here that you kicked open to get to the Sweet 16, but at the same time not press too hard? How do you manage that balance of not going too far either direction on that?**

AGUEK AROP: Yeah, I think it's just a matter of -- biggest thing is staying in the moment and not letting the moment get too big for us. We've been preparing for this, we've been expecting this since last summer, since we got back to work. Now that the moment is here, it's not like any of us, it's been a collective effort. Obviously we want to make history, but we don't want to let that get to our heads. We just approach it like any other game.

MATT BRADLEY: I think the biggest thing was winning

that first game, but now that we won, we're here, and anybody can be beaten and we're ready to compete against anybody. Ultimately we know we're capitalizing on a great season we had, we won the league, we won the Mountain West tournament. For us to win these games is really important, but there's no pressure. We're just showing everybody what type of team we have.

**Q. Matt and Lamont, the play that AG made yesterday where he missed at one end with the dunk but then gets down to the other end of the floor and takes a charge in that same sequence, when you watch a teammate and you've seen it with AG how many times, what goes through your mind when you see a hustle play like that?**

LAMONT BUTLER: It just shows his toughness, his toughness that he can get away from a missed dunk or a missed opportunity and go down on the other side and get a stop for us. He's been doing that -- it's kind of like going around with the team, so just him doing that, his presence is going to help us a lot, and we're going to keep doing that to keep on winning.

MATT BRADLEY: Yeah, he's a highlight film, just watching him out there playing. It's not necessarily a dunk or anything like that, but just his hustle plays, grabbing a rebound. He's also a problem in the post. You can't guard him one-on-one. So he has a lot of facets to his game, but his heart is the biggest measure of who he is, and he's a player for sure.

**Q. I know obviously big deal to win an NCAA Tournament game for you guys, but I wonder if you could speak about what that meant to Coach. Because I'm sure you heard it, fans all across San Diego always said, oh, they have a great program, but he's never won in the NCAA Tournament. Did you sense -- he kind of just plays it off, but did you sense a huge amount of relief, and were you particularly happy because you sort of lifted that from him?**

AGUEK AROP: Dutch does a really good job of managing his emotions and expressing when he's stressed. I don't think we can honestly tell, but putting ourselves in that position, we can only imagine the relief he felt. Because even us players and knowing that we've lost the past few years in the first round, getting that first one was a relief for us. But being a head coach, he takes all the heat, so I can only imagine the relief he felt. He doesn't show it, but I'm sure he was relieved.

MATT BRADLEY: Yeah, definitely a big sigh of relief. But thinking back on that 30-2 team, it was out of his control making the tournament or not. COVID shut it down for

everybody. To be honest, when I was watching from my own school I was like, I think these guys might be national champions. You know, that's a big question mark. But I'm glad we won something this year, and excited to keep on winning games.

LAMONT BUTLER: I feel like it was a relief for him, but he's not new to this. At Michigan he was winning National Championships.

I think just him as a head coach winning it, I think he was relieved for sure.

**Q. Coach, do you know what a Paladin is?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: No. I don't.

**Q. AG does.**

BRIAN DUTCHER: He does? AG has got a good San Diego State education. That's probably why.

**Q. On a more serious note, obviously Coach Richey coached under Niko, and when you guys drew Charleston, your first call was to Niko because they played them. And I'm sure his first call was to Niko when he found out he was playing you. How similar are they offensively, Colorado State and Furman in what they do?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: First of all, Pete Carril's influence of the Princeton offense is worldwide now. Everybody runs a version of what it is. And it's a hybrid and that's what Colorado State runs, they run a Princeton offense with a hybrid look. And Air Force runs it and Furman runs it.

We know what our initial guarding positions should be, and then we'll adapt from there based on what they're trying to get done, whether it's triple handoffs, back cuts. They've got other actions that Colorado State runs, little screens to get the post in there.

It's nothing we haven't seen, but it's hard to guard because they've got really good players.

**Q. How much of the lost last year has been engrained into the identity of the team this year and what they've been able to accomplish?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: I think the only takeaway from last year is you watch thousands of college games, and you always ask, why does that team throw the ball to the corner against the press at the end of the game? Well, sometimes that's the only place you can get it. So we've tried to become better at throwing it in and playing out of

the press. Because at the end of the day, our inability to handle Creighton's press cost us the game. So we worked a lot harder on press offense because of that. Other than the lingering effect of that from an X's and O's standpoint, not a whole lot to me.

**Q. I know this is a conversation you guys don't have but the national conversation about the Aztecs is winning that first game in the tournament, which you've done, and also that conversation is kind of the Mountain West breaking a streak, which you've done now. Now that that door is kind of kicked open, is this team wired in a way that it won't press too hard in this next game when there's so much in front of you?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: I've already said March is for players, and we had some players to me that looked nervous yesterday at the start of the game, and they should be. This is a big event. Hopefully some of those nerves have settled where they've played a game, they've got a win under their belt, and they'll play a little bit more free now at both ends of the floor.

But nerves are high, and once you get that first win, maybe those nerves go away a little bit. Instead of an 11-turnover first half, we have a three-turnover second half. So maybe we can continue that, play less mistake-filled basketball and play better basketball moving forward.

**Q. I asked Lamont and Matt about just AG's unique skill set and even the play he made yesterday where he misses a dunk but has the foresight to take a charge within one sequence. You've coached for over 30 years. Is AG's skill set a unique one going back through your career in this profession?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: Someone once said, it's all about mentality, and he has the strongest mentality of any player we've had. He's mentally tough.

People might look at all the stats when he comes in the game, well, he doesn't score that much, he doesn't get that many rebounds. But if you look at his plus/minus he's probably the highest plus guy on the team. Whenever he's in the game we're plus six, plus eight, plus ten. He's a team player. You need a team player to win games, and he's that guy for us.

**Q. You obviously I'm sure had a chance to see the end of the Furman game, either on tape or live. What did you make of it and take from that situation, and what do you see from this Furman team as a challenge you guys are going to face tomorrow?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: Just shows you how hard it is to win a

game. Kihei won a National Championship and then he had a hard turnover to lose a game, and the difference is paper thin. It's a tough game to win. The thing is you have to try to be your best when your best is required, and Furman made the play. They stole the ball, they made one pass and they made an important three, and it changed the course of their season, of the postseason.

Hopefully we'll have a chance to take and make that shot tomorrow.

**Q. 10 years ago you were in a similar situation where you win your first game and there's a huge upset in the other game. It was Florida Gulf Coast 10 years ago and you went into that game and ended up losing. I think a lot of people just assumed and expected you would win. Now you're playing a 13 seed for whatever that means. What have you learned from that experience with Florida Gulf Coast that you might apply to the players this time?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: Yeah, it's happened, too, the other way where North Dakota upset Oklahoma and we got them in the second game and found a way to beat them. These games are right to the wire no matter who you're playing. They're all good teams now. You can throw the seeding numbers out. It's who's playing good basketball at this point in time.

Furman is playing good basketball. I don't care what seed they are. They're playing good basketball or they wouldn't have won, so now we have to find a way to disrupt them and play our best brand of basketball.

I told the kids March is a time where you get fewer mistakes, you have to play up to your full potential if you're going to win. So now we have to play closer to our full potential tomorrow if we're going to have a chance to win.

**Q. Towards the middle of the season, your offense really trended up. In fact, I think in the metrics the offensive efficiency was higher than the defensive efficiency. Now it's flipped a little bit and the defense is more locked in and you've had some tough offensive games the last few games. Have you been able to identify an issue there, or how much of it do you have to throw out because it was fatigue in the conference tournament and nerves yesterday in the first half, 11 turnovers?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: Yeah, we have to take better care of the ball. Can't have 11 first half turnovers, but Micah and Adam and Darrion and Lamont have to make some threes and then everything opens up. I thought we had great shots in the Utah State game, but it was tired legs, third

game in three days and they didn't go in. Adam turned down a couple looks yesterday that I think he may take the next game. We were on them pretty good. If you get that look at them, we want that shot up.

We have to shoot better from the three. Obviously we've been very good at playing around the basket, and we have to continue that, and then hopefully add a three-point shot or two to go in, and we'll be back up to the efficiency we think we should be.

**Q. We're only a day into this tournament, and Arizona has been beaten, Virginia lost here. As you look forward, and I asked some of the guys what do seeds mean after the first round, but what does it say about the opportunity and anyone can win in this tournament at any time?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: Well, I mean, usually -- when they call anybody in the high seed gets a second round, it's a Cinderella, but usually the most talented teams find a way to bully their way into the Elite 8 or the Final Four.

We'll see if we can play well enough to be one of those teams that meet our potential and play our way into the Sweet 16 and further on. It's all about how you're playing at any given moment and how you're wired mentally because it's stressful. It's not stressful on me. I want you to know that. I know the kids are under stress, so I don't bring any more to the game for them because they're already stressed. I try to free them up mentally where they can be their best and not be afraid of the moment.

So that's what we're trying to do, not be afraid of the moment and play our best basketball.

**Q. How much of the scheduling and kind of the battles you go through earlier in the season, how valuable is that when you get to a moment like Charleston ties the score, a couple of minutes left -- but you've played in Maui, played one of the toughest schedules of the country, played in tough environments in the Mountain West, how applicable is that when it comes to a high pressure situation late in the game where you need to take advantage?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: Yeah, if you're in that situation enough, it's not a surprise to you. We've been in a lot of close games, found a way to win the majority of them. Like Matt said yesterday, he wasn't nervous. He felt like he had the coach's trust, and Micah is obviously not nervous. He bounced up, made a big three off a hand-off.

So players make important plays in March, and I don't think our kids are -- I think they're feeling better about

themselves, all of them. Obviously there are some that aren't nervous at all, and those guys played great. Some of the guys that were a little nervy got to play better.

**Q. You mentioned you played Colorado State three times, played Air Force twice, five games against Princeton concepts. How much value is that when you have a one-day prep? Is it worth two, three, four practices having been through that?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: Yeah, it's just your initial guarding position. Instead of starting up above the ball and denying stuff, you usually start below so they can't back-cut. You make them go through your body if they want to cut and just stuff like that that we've done five times in year.

It's a reminder but still we have to do. They're good at it. They take a step up and they pull us out of our gap and they back cut us, we're susceptible for giving up lay-ups. So it's all concentration on the floor when this stuff is happening at game speed.

**Q. Obviously they're going to be called the Cinderella after what they did the other night, and they had a big crowd and probably everybody in the arena is going to be rooting for them except your 100, 200 fans. Have you addressed that with the team and tried to prepare them for that kind of atmosphere? You know everyone wants the Cinderella to win, right?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: Well, not everyone. But no, come on, the environments we've played in, Logan, Utah, and Fort Collins and all the places we've played that have been full of opposing fans? Like I said, we were 8-2 on the road so it feels like a road game. We'll be ready for that environment, too.

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