

# **NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Final - Creighton vs San Diego State**

**Saturday, March 25, 2023**

**Louisville, Kentucky, USA**

**KFC Yum! Center**

**San Diego State Aztecs**

**Coach Brian Dutcher**

**Lamont Butler**

**Darrion Trammell**

**Matt Bradley**

**Nathan Mensah**

**Keshad Johnson**

**Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference**

THE MODERATOR: Coach, an opening remark or two from you.

BRIAN DUTCHER: Well, when we were flying to Maui with Creighton, I never thought we would be playing them here, or I would have tried to steal a few play calls off his computer. Coach McDermott and I sat across from each other for five hours going and five hours coming back. Many of the hours spent on the laptop talking about our teams, and here we are playing to go to a Final Four.

Excited for the opportunity and look forward to playing tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

**Q. Dutch, no team in school history has gone this far. No one in the Mountain West has gone this far in this tournament. What does that do potentially for your profile nationally, and is that important? I mean,**

**obviously, there are benefits to that, but what can what you are doing right now benefit you guys in terms of national respect?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: I know the fan base always says, man, now that you've gone so far, you really are going to get some good players. I'm, like, I got some good players. We're in the Elite Eight.

That's kind of the funny thing. You're going to get some five stars. We got players up here that we do a great job of evaluating their character, young men, they play hard, they have a chip on their shoulder, and that's what our program is about.

**Q. Dutch, what else do you remember about that plane ride, and was there anything that came up non-basketball-related in the conversation that sticks out to you?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: Obviously, we talk a lot about Coach Fisher. You know, Coach McDermott and Coach Fisher have had a longtime relationship, so we talked about Coach a lot.

Talked about our teams basically. You know, what we thought how our weekends went, that type of thing. Known Greg a long time. We played a lot in the past. We played a game in Viejas. They beat us. We beat them with his son in the Wooden Legacy. We played them last year in a first round game that went overtime.

We played each other. We've been great competitors against each other for a lot of years, and I'm sure it will be the same tomorrow when we see each other.

**Q. Maybe for Matt and Nathan, so much has been talked about your depth, your physicality as a team, but what does that physicality do to other teams? Alabama, you held them to roughly 20 points below their average. Brandon Miller struggled offensively to hit, like, 11% from three, even though you were undersized on the frontline. What is the impact of what you do making shooters uncomfortable?**

MATT BRADLEY: I think our physicality and our depth allows the team to have to take difficult shots in order to beat us.

And, you know, Brandon Miller, he took around 20 shots yesterday, and, you know, every shot for him, they were good looks for him, I guess, but for us they're also good looks due to how we were guarding him.

We just cause teams to take tough shots, and our physicality, we just wear teams down with that and our depth. So it's a great combination that we have going with those two.

NATHAN MENSAH: (Indiscernible) we make sure any time we play against a team there's five guys all on one guy. We don't take that for granted, and we know our defense will always play out as the game goes.

**Q. This is for Matt. We've seen you have many great games and many big shots, but last night was not that. What was the difference last night? Why did you struggle with your shot in the way that you did, and can you explain how you were able to power through that to make the big buckets at the end?**

MATT BRADLEY: I think I was a little sped up last night. You know, they had great length guarding me, but the majority of the shots I took, I felt like I was pretty open or they were shots I made before.

So it was a matter of just having to get out of my own head. My coaches and my teammates kept encouraging me. People in the stands, when I'm coming to the bench, are encouraging me.

All that put together and just a little bit getting out of my own head to help down the stretch. It was a matter of not wanting to go home and not letting my teammates down.

Yeah, I'm just glad I was able to step up at the end.

**Q. Maybe Keshad and Matt can each take this. Last year's game against Creighton, a lot has been talked about. You guys talked about it during the season. Was it you just didn't want to have that happen again, whether no matter the opponent, or is it I want a shot at those guys again?**

KESHAD JOHNSON: Most def. We know last year we had the lead late into the game, but those are situations that you just grow from. I believe that we've grown from that this year.

So, of course, it's like you want a revenge-type game, but it's also, like, you have to stay level-headed and then just stay the course of the game so that it won't happen again. We're more veterans now than we were back then, so we just are trying our best to learn from that and learn from that situation.

MATT BRADLEY: I would say in the moment when all those things are taking place, the loss to Creighton and some of the other losses we had towards late end of games, they seem really bad in the moment, and everyone is frustrated, but I think it's molded us into the team we are now as far as closing out games when things get tight.

The pressure is not there like it used to be, for sure, and we have people stepping up and making plays, and everyone is more comfortable.

In the moment it seems like the worst thing ever, but I think ultimately it's a matter of not having to go through that again regardless of who it is.

**Q. For the seniors, this really might be just for Nathan, but you were part of the team in 2019-'20 that was on track to be a 1 seed for the tournament, and then the coronavirus canceled the tournament, and the Mountain West tournament, and it really ended that year in a different way than I'm sure all of you expected. All of you had experience probably going through that lost postseason, but what do you remember about what that feeling was like of, you know, being so close and having such a great team and just not having a chance to show it on this kind of stage.**

NATHAN MENSAH: I would say it was a very sad moment on that Monday after hearing that everything was being shut down. Especially I didn't play that much throughout the year. I could only play 10 games, and I was hoping to get back on track and play for this NCAA Tournament for the seniors.

Also I felt bad for the seniors that didn't have this, the opportunity went by them. I feel like now we are here to represent them also and they feel proud about what we have accomplished and what we are capable of doing in this tournament.

**Q. To follow up, Coach Dutcher, would you mind adding a few words on that topic as well?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: Yeah, I almost wish we didn't play the conference tournament. We played a week early because I think they had a convention in town. Sam Merrill hit a buzzer beater on us, and went in the locker room and told the guys, don't worry about this. The greatest experience of your life is about to happen. Then it didn't happen.

I always say I felt worse for Malachi Flynn, KJ Feagin, and Yanni Wetzell, three good college players that never one time experienced the NCAA tournament. They were all transfers. They weren't in our program. So I felt worse for them.

So you never take a moment for granted. So we've embraced every moment we've had this year, and hopefully we'll have more.

**Q. Dutch, whoever wins tomorrow obviously is going to go to the Final Four for the first time. I think you're both first-time Elite Eight participants. There's a lot of new faces and new blood. I think only one team left has won a national title before. Can you speak to this moment and where the game is and some factors that have kind of gotten us here?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: I think we all know the transfer market has changed basketball a lot, the portal. You know, everybody has added new pieces.

I think we've been ahead of the curve in the transfer market before the portal existed. We've always had quality transfers, whether it was Tony Bland back when we started this thing all those years ago. We've had great transfers in our program.

I always say the thing with a transfer is our culture is set by our four- and five-year players. And the transfers come in, they have to have a culture to come to. So we're not trying to add nine, ten new guys every year. So the culture is set by guys that have been in our program, like Lamont and Keshad, Nate. And then guys like Darrion and Matt come in, and there's a foundation already laid here, and they buy into that foundation.

So the transfer portal has changed the game probably more than anything else. And, obviously, NIL. We'll continue to see what happens with that as we move forward, what that does to the game and parity.

**Q. For Nathan, last year obviously you fouled out in that game. Your record when you foul out in regulation is, like, 1 in 5 in the last six times it's happened. Obviously, you're a very important piece. What happened in that game in your mind, and how cognizant will you be of that in this game against the same -- basically the same team?**

NATHAN MENSAH: Yeah. Last year I fouled out, out of the game at an early stage of the game, and I wasn't able to help the team in my way of defense to accomplish a victory.

So this year coming up to this game I plan to be mindful of what I do and not get easy, cheap fouls from the refs and also ensure myself to be available for the team when they need me.

**Q. Brian, can you talk about the experience? You talked last night about it took time to build this. You've got a lot of seniors on this team. Can you talk a little bit about what their development -- how their development has propelled you to this and sort of the experiences that they've gone through and endured?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: Yeah. I've been at San Diego State for 24 years, and I feel like we've had three teams before this that were capable of going to a Final Four. Obviously, the Kawhi Leonard team. We lost to UConn with Kemba when they won it all. Xavier Thames team was a very good team. Lost in the Sweet 16 to Arizona. The 30-2 team never got a chance to play.

And this team, anybody would listen, I said before the year started, I said this is going to be a really, really good team. How good, we don't know, but it's turned out to be what we hoped it would be.

So we tell them when we recruit them, I said this before, that our plan is to make it to a Final Four to win a national championship, and so we can't act surprised when we're sitting up here. This is what the goal has been. We have good players that work towards that goal, and hopefully we're able to complete the task.

**Q. For Darrion. You've kind of had a really up-and-down season. A couple of games you didn't score, which had never happened in your career, and then you have last night. Where did that come from, and did you get to the point -- did you hear the whispers of people saying, hey, I thought this guy was a scorer and he is not, and how motivating was that?**

DARRION TRAMMELL: I think it's God's time for me. I feel like I put in the work. Whether shots go in or not, I feel like I bring the defensive intensity that my team needs every night and that leadership my team needs every night.

I think it's bigger than scoring, but it just happened to be last night was one of my nights. That's the things we talk about throughout the entire year is our depth. It can be anyone's night. Last night was mine.

**Q. Darrion, I think I had you on the radio when you first signed with San Diego State, and you said -- you had aspirations of getting into an Elite Eight or further. What was it about this group that you felt like, even when you came in, had the pieces to make a run like this?**

DARRION TRAMMELL: I think the strong culture. I feel like, like Dutch mentioned earlier, the guys who were here, they pretty much had the tradition and the culture already set. It was passed down to the younger guys and to the transfers, like myself and Matt. I think that just -- we had the DNA of a team that goes far in March.

We're a mature team. We play hard on defense, and we just stay together throughout all the ups and downs.

**Q. Lamont, you've been saying for weeks, I've been listening to you, JAM Center, Viejas, press conferences that you really felt this was a team, you weren't just interested in making the NCAA Tournament, but you felt like it was a team capable of making a run. What was it about the way the team was playing late into the year that led you to believe you could do something like this?**

LAMONT BUTLER: I feel like it's more of our grit and our mentality. Everyone believes we can win. I feel like that's been carrying around the whole team, and I feel everybody's energy going into the season and the work that everybody put in. So I just kind of knew in my head and my soul that we could do this.

**Q. So this question is for any of the players, but last night in a majority Alabama crowd you guys had a fan section that, you know, lit up when you guys started to go on that run at the very end of the game. So, you**

**know, how does it feel to have fans that will all travel all the way across the country to cheer you guys on, and now you're in the Elite Eight?**

MATT BRADLEY: You know, it felt good. Even Alabama, they're red, they have the same colors as us, so just to hear all the noise, it felt like a home game.

For our fans, for them to come all the way out this way to support us means a lot, and we definitely need them in an environment like it was last night.

So, yeah, they are with us throughout all the ups and downs, and I'm glad we're making them proud, and I'm glad they're here with us.

THE MODERATOR: The student-athletes can head towards the breakout. We'll keep Coach here for a little bit.

**Q. Coach, you've gotten this far. You are one of the last eight teams remaining, and except for maybe Florida Atlantic, you're the only team that probably doesn't charter everywhere, doesn't have a \$3 million head coach, doesn't have \$400,000 assistants. You have a lot compared to schools, but nothing like Power Conference schools. Is that something that should be celebrated as a remarkable achievement, or is it an example that maybe there's just so much superfluous spending in college athletics and all that stuff really isn't necessary?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: I just think we have a mindset where we don't complain about what we don't have. We're just grateful for what we do. I said this. I could serve a meal to these kids, and it wouldn't be completely hot, it would be cold, and they wouldn't complain. They would just be grateful for what they had.

They're in the hotel now and hugging our service staff. Chefs come down and they're thanking the chef for all the hard work he is putting in. That's just the nature of this team, and it's a good group of young men that know the world is more than just about the 15 basketball players on this team.

The world is spinning, and they're just grateful for everybody that's helped us along the way and the things we do have instead of the things we don't.

**Q. A bit of a macro question, Dutch. How much thought have you put into UCLA and USC going to the Big Ten, and do you see that for your program as an opportunity in Southern California?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: First of all, I just -- when we took that trip to Orlando and back, even though it was a charter, I thought, my goodness, those guys have to do this every other week to play a basketball game? It would be exhausting.

So it's going to be a real challenge to be at their best with that kind of travel. So, you know, I'm wishing them all the best, but that's more travel than I would ever wish on anybody.

Realignment is here, you know, so everybody is just basically waiting for the next shoe to drop. Whether that's the Big Ten or the Pac-12 or the Big 12, ACC. There's going to be more realignment. Will it be quiet for a while? Maybe. Will it happen in two or three or four weeks? Who knows.

But it's here. So we all just adapt to it and make the best of it.

I just -- from an old personal standpoint, I just feel like you should play regionally. It's better on the kids. It's easier to be a student-athlete instead of just an athlete.

So I'm all for trying to stay as regional as you can for the sports that we play.

**Q. Because you are the local Southern California team (indiscernible) would that be an opportunity (indiscernible)?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: My own personal belief is I always thought the Pac-12 would not ask us in with UCLA and USC because they would put us on equal footing, and we would be too great a competitor to let in.

So now that they're gone and Southern California has a really good team sitting in San Diego, I would think we would be desirable for the Pac-12, the Big 12, a lot of conferences. We've won a lot of games in football and basketball. Non-revenue sports have always been good.

So we do things the right way. We have a great university, and we have a competitive athletic program.

**Q. Dutch, I was just going to ask, you know, you've been in San Diego for the better part of the last 25 years. What do you think this has meant to the city to watch this team advance to this point?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: We have the greatest environment in the world because San Diego is the ninth largest city in the country, and we have one pro team in town. We have the San Diego Padres.

So the pro basketball team of San Diego is the San Diego State Aztecs, so we get corporate seats sold. The city supports us. We are the basketball team of the city, and we are the football team of the city.

So we have tremendous support from the City of San Diego, and people always support things that are done the right way. We get good kids. We graduate them. They're good citizens, and we win at a high level. So the city has embraced that, and they support us whole-heartedly.

**Q. A little earlier you said that you were one of the early adopters of transfers. So I'm curious, you know, what about that market of players is attractive to you? And when you are trying to add a player to your team -- I mean, several of the guys up there are transfers -- what do you look for, and what about some of the guys up here made them attractive to you to add at San Diego State?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: It's more than just putting in highlight film and falling in love with someone. It's digging deeper to find out what they're about. You know, they have to culturally fit what you are doing.

Anybody we recruit, we always tell them basically the same thing. If you come here, you have to play defense. If you play defense, then I'll let you play free offensively, but you have to want to play defense because that's our culture.

And you have to want to win. So most of them that want to come are going to agree to that even though in the back of their mind they may think, well, I don't know if I want to play that kind of defense.

But then we basically have them. Well, why am I not playing? Well, you are not guarding, and when you came here, we told you you had to guard. So you have to get them to agree what you are before they come. You don't take them and then tell them what you are once they're there. I think we've done a good job of researching the people we've brought to the program and make sure we get buy-in from them.

**Q. I guess this is kind of a chicken or the egg question about your physicality. I spoke with Justin, your strength coach. How much is what you target, you recruit guys that can actually play the way you need to play versus he helps you create guys that can play the way you play?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: It's both. I mean, obviously we've got a freshman on the team that looks like he's a senior, and we have a freshman on the team that looks like he is a ninth grader (laughing). So we recruit size, but then we recruit talent too that hopefully we can put size on.

Justin Landry does a great job. He is one of the best strength coaches I've ever been around. To be a great strength coach, it's not the hour or so you spend in the weight room. It's helping them go to the grocery store, buy the right food, talk about sleep, talk about mental health. You know, being a strength coach is more than a weight room, and we've got a really good one.

**Q. Being in the Elite Eight and possibly beyond, the profile of the program just keeps getting higher and higher. You'll have a lot of players, transfers, attracted to your program. Do you think some people may be surprised at the guys you don't take because of what you were talking about, just the unique nature of player that you are looking at or looking for?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: Yeah. I mean, we're not going to take a guy that says: Coach, I'm leaving a program. I'm scoring 18 for them. I'm going to score 24 for you.

It's, like, well, we have a lot of good players in the program. We want to hear that, Coach, I want to sacrifice part of my game so we can win. You know, that's when we took KJ Feagin. We had Malachi Flynn, but KJ said: You don't understand, Coach. I have to score where I'm at at Santa Clara. They require me to score. I would rather score less and give the ball up and be more of a point guard.

When you hear words like that, that rings true to, wow, he is going to fit here and what we want to do. He is not coming here saying, I want to score more for you than I did for them.

You have to do your research, your due diligence on any kid you recruit. You don't want to take someone else's problem. That's basically the way to put it.

**Q. I was out. I'm not sure if this was asked, but with regard to Jaedon, can you speak to what he brings to the table for you guys? And just, I mean, he played obviously some extremely important minutes last night.**

BRIAN DUTCHER: I've said this before. Jaedon is only scratching what he is going to be. I could let him do so much more, but right now with the framework of what we're doing, he is doing what we ask.



But Jaedon works religiously on his game. For a big, like, some of the skills he has, we're not taking advantage of yet. He is a really good drive and kick player. He can put it on the floor and pick it up and find perimeter jump shooters. He can shoot the three. He has only taken a couple for us, but he is well within his range to shoot the three.

So if I'm fortunate enough to get Jaedon back, we'll turn him more loose next year where he can play more of his game.

I thought when he got eligible this year, it's like anything else, the more you want something to happen so fast, you squeeze so hard it slips through your fingers. He was playing so fast and just trying to do everything at one time.

So now he has settled in, and he is really comfortable. I don't want to then all of a sudden just open it up and say do whatever you want. He is not quite ready for that, but he will be eventually.

**Q. Brian, I'm just wondering if you had recruited Arthur Kaluma at all just because of Adam? It seems like they both kind of fit very well in the programs they're in, but if you had tried to get in on him?**

BRIAN DUTCHER: We didn't really recruit Arthur.

We watched him play and thought he was a wonderful player when he was playing with the Houston Hoops, I think it was. I think he originally was going to go to UNLV with a friend of his, and that ended up falling apart, and he ended up going to Creighton.

Sometimes recruiting is I don't want to be greedy and stack players if I've got a player that I think fills that role because I know at the end of the day they're not going to be happy if they're stacked on top of one another.

So the timing didn't work out with Arthur as much as he is a wonderful player and could have played for us. The timing wasn't there for him to come. Even if we could have got him. I'm not to say that he wanted to come to San Diego State.