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An interview with:



THE MODERATOR: We will take questions for San Diego State.

Q. I'm curious, what would a win against UConn do for your program? If you beat a team against Northern Colorado and Temple, that's fine. At the same time, UConn is a team that everybody knows. Everybody across the country knows their tradition and their history.

MALCOLM THOMAS: I think a win is a win no matter who you play. Every team in the tournament has earned their way into the tournament. Beating UConn would mean a lot because everybody knows 'em, like you said, but I feel like winning in the tournament is all that matters.

D.J. GAY: A win against UConn, I think, in the image for the city and the people that have been watching us would be huge. But for us as a team, like Mal said, a win in the tournament against anybody is a big deal.

I think, you know, the politics behind it, it would be a nice thing on the resume.

BILLY WHITE: Like they said, we are just here to play. You know, it would be a huge win for our school. We'll just be excited, just ready.

KAWHI LEONARD: I think it would be a win. I don't think it's going to do nothing for our program, next year people will still look at us as San Diego State, so we've got to win a game and keep going on.

Q. D.J., I know you've played against Jimmer (Fredette) three times in person this year, and I'm sure you've seen a lot of Kemba on tape. Can you compare, contrast the two of them?

D.J. GAY: By compare and contrast, it won't do him justice because I haven't played him in person but from the film and playing against Jimmer, I think the difference is that Jimmer is more of a 3-point threat as for Kemba, he gets to the basket at will and his mid-range game is close to perfect. Both are very hard guards to play against, both very good scorers, but one, you're picking up at the half-court line and the other one you constantly need help within that 3-point range.

Q. D.J., can you talk about what this win getting back into the Sweet 16 means for Steve Fisher? It's been 17 years and he kept talking about that in the locker room after the last win. You guys were all but one or two when he was in the Sweet 16. Can you get a sense of what this means for him?

D.J. GAY: I think it's very exciting, very special to him. You know, it's also exciting to the program. It's been a long time for him, and a first for us.

We're lucky to have a coach that's been there before, been in this situation and knows how to handle it. I think he's grateful for the opportunity that he's been given, and we're just blessed to have a coach like that.

Q. D.J., did you expect when you first got there -- I think you've played in more winning games than anybody in the history of the program. Did you expect this program to be where it's at now? Is this something when you signed on that you said, okay, this is where we want to be in four or five years?

D.J. GAY: I saw major potential when I first got to San Diego State, and that's the reason why I came. If you would have told us we would have been in the Sweet 16 my senior year, I would

have told you that I wouldn't doubt it. I thought we would have the opportunity to get there, but there is no greater feeling than to be in my senior year and to have this opportunity. I saw an opportunity here, but it became reality.

Q. D.J. and Malcolm, do you think it's an advantage playing this close to your school? And talk about the overall fan support you've had this season?

D.J. GAY: Absolutely, I think that playing this close to San Diego we're expecting a very large following, and the fans, they've been here all season long, sold out more games ever in the history of the program.

For them to follow us and support us the way they have, we call them our sixth man, and we couldn't ask for a better sixth man from our fans.

MALCOLM THOMAS: I think it will help a lot. We play well at home, and if we can have a home game-type of environment I think that will have a big advantage for us.

Q. Billy and Kawhi, how much does the personality of a coach enter into your decision about where you want to play and could either of you or both of you see yourself playing for someone with a personality as different from Coach Fisher's as Coach Calhoun?

BILLY WHITE: Coach Fisher has been by our side, playing with him, he's been real for us, and he's a friend. I can talk to him on and off the court. I love playing for a guy like that. Ever since he's been recruiting me in high school I just knew that he was special, and I knew that I could trust him and everything, so I'm glad to play for a coach like that.

KAWHI LEONARD: Like Billy said, Coach Fisher is a player's coach and he helps you out on and off the court. He makes you feel better and more comfortable playing with him in the game.

Q. Kawhi, Jim Calhoun came in here and said you would be a lottery pick and that he has to prepare for you early because of the match-up problems, how would you guard you?

KAWHI LEONARD: Try to contest my shots, play defense and hope that I miss.

D.J. GAY: I'm not giving that away!

Q. Kawhi, following up on that, out of high school you weren't a highly recruited guy, but now you've got NBA scouts salivating all

over the nation about your prospects. What's changed?

KAWHI LEONARD: I just probably -- probably just me being in a gym, working hard, trying to develop my game and I got great players around me that make me look even better. They just make the game easier for me, and I'm just out there playing hard with them and I guess they see that I've been working hard and some of my skills developed to be a professional.

Q. Kawhi, you talked before in Tucson about you playing in this building before, in high school, won a couple of championships, do you feel comfortable around here? It's not exactly your hometown, but it's pretty close, within a freeway. Do you feel comfortable around here?

KAWHI LEONARD: Yeah, you know, since I had some success in the building it makes me feel a little more comfortable playing here, but this is a different level of competition, and different players I'm playing against so I have to come in focused and prepare to play a good UCONN team.

Q. Guys, what role if any does tradition play in this regional? You've got UCONN and Duke and Arizona with extensive tournament pedigrees, you guys are just building yours this year. Talk about your thoughts on that.

BILLY WHITE: I think it doesn't matter. To us, we're just here to play. Doesn't matter who we play. We're just trying to better our own resume here. If we keep winning and go playing hard it's going to take care of its.

MALCOLM THOMAS: I don't think it plays a role at all. Every team wants to win. Every team is going to play hard. We're going to play hard no matter what team we play and every team just wants to win a championship, and I think that's the main goal.

Q. D.J., is there any team that you guys have faced this year that Connecticut reminds you of, from watching tape?

D.J. GAY: No, I don't think so. If I had to choose one, it would probably be BYU with Brandon Davies, they have big guys. They have that one scorer that can go off for a lot of points, and they have a shooter, a guy that can knock down shots at will and some role players that do their jobs very well.

This will be a fun match-up, there's a team that likes to get up and down, a transition team, so if it would have to be anybody it would be close to a BYU.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you.

COACH FISHER: I said this when we started our tournament in Tucson, that to have an opportunity to be playing at this time of year is what every player, coach, fan dream about. This period of March is the most exciting of any in any sport, and it's always fun when you're not a spectator, when you can be in the mix and be a part of it.

We have a team, and I'll underline "team," that has earned its way here, and we're excited to be a part of the Sweet 16. It's nice that we only have an hour and a half bus ride to get here and hopefully we will have the type of fan base that will let everybody know that we're an hour and a half away.

Q. Steve, can you talk about after your last game you were saying in the locker room, you know, I haven't been here in 17 years, the Sweet 16, can you talk about getting back here and what that's meant to you and if you thought maybe that wouldn't be possible again?

COACH FISHER: I knew it would be possible. We've been in the tournament, but we've not advanced past the first round since I believe 1994 was the last time that we did it. So to have the opportunity to be in it, you can't win if you don't get in it.

This is our fourth opportunity at San Diego State, it's only the second time that we've been able to go back-to-back, that's significant for us, that has helped us and will continue to help us. I'm smart enough to know that it's a privilege to do what we do, and to have an opportunity to play in the tournament, and then rarely do you continue to move on.

I don't care who you are, you have to be a bit lucky and you have to be good, and I think we're a little bit of both this year. I've said that all along, I voiced my appreciation to our team. We've got a wonderful group of young people who have found ways to win more games than anybody in the country except Ohio State and Kansas right now, that's saying a mouthful.

So we've all said "let's enjoy it" and after we won the first game I told them, "we're good enough" and then when it came to the second

game -- I made the comment after the game that they had a "pin" for the second game, had no idea they had a pin for the second game because it's been so long since I've been a part of it, and it feels good to be here.

Q. Coach, when you first made it to a Final Four it was under bizarre circumstances, obviously and the other couple of times you made it it was like a stream roller, you guys were great. Now you're here trying to get to that Final Four game, from your personal standpoint, what has it been like for you knowing that you're two games away?

COACH FISHER: It's been a wonderful, wonderful journey that we've had. I knew we were going to have a good team, I didn't know how good we would be. I knew that we had a team that I expected and our fans expected to make the tournament. Our previous seeds, the highest seed we had was an 11, so now we get a 2 seed and you're expected to win and you expect to win.

So what's happened at San Diego State obviously hasn't happened before. So we've got the whole community upside down, excited about our team, and it's fun. We sold out every game of the season, 12,414, and it's an atmosphere that is no better than any of the other three schools playing here. We've got a great fan base and they have enjoyed it immensely, and so have I.

Q. Can you compare it at all to what you went through before?

COACH FISHER: Not really. Obviously it's the same game, same tournament but it's all together different.

Q. How?

COACH FISHER: I would say early on there were no expectations. We created the expectations. Where we were before, there were expectations, somewhat because of where we were, so I think more than anything else, it was that. Both places I loved immensely, I loved where I was before but I -- I can't tell you how much I enjoy being a part of San Diego State right now.

Q. Steve, as long as you and Jim Calhoun have been coaching, I wonder how well do you know him, and how much different you are personality-wise and how similar you are in terms of your basketball philosophy?

COACH FISHER: I've known Jim Calhoun since I was an assistant, which is a long time ago. He was a guy that didn't always gravitate to every head coach in the room, so I got to know him a little bit then; and then when I became a head coach, we would sit and we would talk.

I don't know him all that well, but I do know him, I know him well enough to say he is a friend, and I've watched his teams play and I would think that we have similar feelings about what it takes to win. You have to be able to defend, you have to be able to rebound, you have to do it consistently.

I do think that he's different on the court, on the sidelines and the demeanor that you see and what he presents to another coach in a social environment or off the -- off the track of the stress of the season.

He's a little more laid back, low key, unassuming. He's very, very good at what he does and very demanding with what he does, and I've got a lot of respect for him as a coach and as a person.

Q. Coach, you talked about that fan base. How big of an advantage can that be being so close and where does that advantage show itself, when the team is down or when a team is ahead?

COACH FISHER: The big thing that's good for us now is we're an hour and a half up the road. We don't have to fly three hours and three time zones to play a game. We are going to have a lot of fans here. How much that will help us win games, I don't know. It did at home. At our home games when we got on a run our crowd kept us on that run.

When we struggle a little bit, they allowed us to get back on the road quicker. We're going to have a good number of San Diego State people here, and they'll make a lot of noise and hopefully it will help us a little bit.

Q. Coach, do you like playing in this facility, being back here at Honda Center right now?

COACH FISHER: I'm Oh-fer right now, got the same locker room that Saint Mary's beat us twice in, so I'm hoping we can change that. This is a nice facility in terms of the number of people we can put in here and great building, so hopefully we will play well and have a chance to get a win.

But I think I've only played here twice, both times in the Wooden Classic, both times Saint

Mary's and both times wishin' we could have played longer.

Q. Coach, can you give us your impressions of UCONN, what you've seen on tape, their strengths and things?

COACH FISHER: They're big, they're very, very good rebounders, they run as well as any team we will have played and they have a super star in Kemba Walker. That's a tough combination to deal with.

You can end it with, they're playing as well right now as anybody in the country, the way they've gone through the Big East tournament and their first two games. They're very talented and very well coached.

Q. Coach, you had some fairly great players over the years, both at Michigan and here as well. Where does Kawhi Leonard compare?

COACH FISHER: Kawhi compares favorably with players we have had in the past who have had a reputation and then lived up to the reputation. He came in as "Mr. Basketball" in the State of California, and he, from day one, nobody worked harder. I've made the statement before, he is a gym rat who is constantly trying to get better, which is why from year one to year two he was significantly better and determined to get even better as he goes along. Huge hands, pursues the ball like none other player that I've coached.

When he gets his hands on the ball he will usually get it. He's a hard guard because he can score on the bounce, he's good with the ball, he can post you up and he's just good enough to where you're hesitant to back off him and give him an open shot from the perimeter, he's a very, very good player.

Q. Coach, talk about Kawhi Leonard and his attitude. He's a guy that it's so clear he's a fabulous player, he's going to translate very well to the NBA, yet you never hear from the guy. Even in this press conference he's a very, very understated guy, very different from those Fab Five guys you had way back in the day. Can you compare his attitude and how is it going to help him make that transition?

COACH FISHER: He is a man of few words, "yes, no, maybe." He was that way recruiting him. You never knew what he was

thinking.

He has become much more open now with us when he gets to know you, he will smile more readily, but he would much rather be in the gym now on the court. We told him as we told everybody, enjoy this part of it, this is all part of the process. Enjoy it. Doesn't say a whole lot but he says a whole lot with his actions on the floor with how he plays.

Q. Coach, when you're up against a dynamic player like Kemba, does that change the way you normally play your defense when you go up against somebody like him? D.J. was saying you're going to throw everybody and the kitchen sink at him.

COACH FISHER: Well, he scores 35, 40% of their points and takes about that many of their shots, so we better have a plan in terms of what we want to try to do. You can't foul him. He's a deadly free-throw shooter and I believe he's gotten 76 free throws in his last seven games.

You've got to keep him off the line. He knows how to draw fouls. He's lightning quick with the ball. We've got to keep him on the outside, challenge his perimeter shot, minimize the number of threes and layups they gets. It's easy to say, hard to do. He's not scoring 26, 28 points a game for nothing.

Q. Steve, following up on Jim Calhoun, when he's on the court and fairly animated, do you think that personality intimidates the officials? Do you think there is something to be gained there and are you conscious in your relatively mild-mannered way that you have to do something to get that edge back?

COACH FISHER: I would hope not, I would hope not especially at this time of the season, this level. I think all of us, when we have regular season games, there are certain guys that you would prefer to have on home games, and others that you don't want to see on somebody else's home court.

I don't think that factors in in this type of a setting. I think you've got officials who have all had experience doing what they do. I don't -- I'm not going to -- I don't spend time looking down to see what the other coach is doing, and I try to be just demonstrative enough to make sure that when I say something that they've got ears.

I think if you're harping and carping all the time, pretty soon they tune you out, whether it be players or officials, but, no, I'm not worried about

any type of things that another coach might do to help him get an edge on the officiating.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you.

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