

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - San Diego State vs Alabama

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KFC Yum! Center

San Diego State Aztecs
Coach Brian Dutcher
Keshad Johnson
Lamont Butler
Darrion Trammell
Matt Bradley
Nathan Mensah

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll get started with an opening statement from Coach Dutcher.

BRIAN DUTCHER: Excited to be here representing San Diego State and playing a very good Alabama team. We're excited for the challenge, and we're ready to play. Trip was easy. We're excited about the opportunity, and looking forward to tip tomorrow night.

THE MODERATOR: Let's start with questions.

Q. (Indiscernible) how much of that is owed to him redshirting last year and the work he did during that time?

BRIAN DUTCHER: Jaedon is a tireless worker. His redshirt year he put a lot of time into his game. To be honest with you, he is capable of doing way more than he is doing for us right now.

So whatever he is now, he is just touching the surface of what he is going to be in my opinion. If we're fortunate enough to have him back next year, I think you'll see an even better version of him. He is a tireless worker. He devotes a lot of hours in the gym to work on every aspect of his game. Hopefully we'll get enough out of him this



year where we can advance.

Q. What is it like to play as an underdog? It's so rare for you guys. You're generally the favorite in almost every Mountain West game, conference tournament. You have to go back to find more than a couple of games in a row, almost to November. What about this position you're in in terms of assuming that role a little bit?

BRIAN DUTCHER: You know, we really don't talk about it a whole lot, to be honest with you. We're just playing good basketball, and our opponent has always been ourselves.

I tell the team that. Our standard is to play up to whatever our capabilities are regardless of the opponent. So if we play really good San Diego State basketball, we'll have a chance to win the game.

Q. Just one follow-up. When you see a number like that, and maybe you don't even know what the point spread is, but is that motivating in any way that they're a favorite to 7, 7.5 points?

BRIAN DUTCHER: Not really. I don't pay a lot of attention to that. You know, I'm just trying to get the best out of our team. If Alabama plays their best and they come out on top, like I said, we'll tip our hat to them. But we want to play the best basketball we're capable of playing, and then we'll see what the results are.

Q. Just wanted to ask about what you have seen out of this Alabama team, like was just asked with the No. 1 next to their name in this whole entire tournament. What have you been telling your team, and how have you been focusing one game at a time with Nate Oats and the team he has this year?

BRIAN DUTCHER: Obviously I've done this long enough to know we watch on tape and we think this will work and that will work, and we'll take advantage of that, and you step on the floor you and see their length. We know what that is.

We thought we saw a lot of things against Arizona, and you



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step on the floor, and Ballo is the biggest man on the floor by a ton. So I'm interested to see, once we get on the floor, how much length that is and what effect it has on the game.

Q. I guess regardless, how has (indiscernible) kind of adapted or handled the whole thing of being under the radar? Is that something that they've kind of fed on?

BRIAN DUTCHER: You know, we're not -- like Coach Fisher said, we're not a one-hit wonder. We have a program. We have a culture. So I don't care what game we go into. We don't consider ourselves an underdog. We just look at the next opponent. We're not embracing the underdog role. We're just trying to embrace San Diego State basketball and be the best version of us.

It never comes up in the conversation.

We never look at ours as an underdog. We think we have a really good program.

Q. Alabama plays a fast, up-tempo style of basketball. Is that a style your team is willing to play tomorrow, or are you going to try to slow them down a little bit?

BRIAN DUTCHER: Yeah, obviously, we would like to run selectively. You know, if we get a break, we're going to run. We're not going to pull the ball out and slow the game down.

But at the same time, we have to convert defensively. We to build walls and try not to let them get up and down the floor on us.

I don't think we'll try to play a Gonzaga game where it's 100-90 final score. We play good defense. We'll try to control the tempo. And like I always say, if we can turn it into a half court game -- and this is no matter who we play, Mountain West games, whatever -- you know, I like our chances in a half court game.

Q. Looking at your schedule, the teams that you have played, the Arizonas, Ohio States, you played Arkansas, just from watching this Alabama team on tape, what do they rank in in terms of overall team, I guess, compared to the other teams you've played already this year?

BRIAN DUTCHER: They're super deep, and Coach Oats can decide how deep he wants to go. I heard his press conference the last -- after their last win, and he just said: We didn't go as deep because the TV timeouts are longer, and I felt our guys were fresh enough.

He has a deep bench at his disposal. The thing I like best about their team is we all talk about their offense because they're so dynamic offensively, yet they're ranked higher than we are defensively.

That's the part that doesn't get talked about, what a great defensive team this is, how hard they play, what a great job he does making it hard for the other team to score.

But when you are so good offensively, everybody wants to talk about that. But we've also tried to find ways where we think we can score some baskets on them, which will be a task.

Q. Brian, you touched on this a little bit with their defense and their length, but can you maybe just describe what you see on film of how that all kind of goes back to Charles Bediako and just what he is able to do protecting the rim?

BRIAN DUTCHER: Yeah, Bediako is the ultimate rim protector. You even watch early season games like Gonzaga, and Coach Few is talking about how we have to not be afraid to take midrange shots because he is tough to finish over.

So like most teams, I'm sure we'll have guys go in and attempt to finish on him, and if they don't, then they'll have to make the adjustment. But it's hard to say. You play all year, you can get to the rim and finish, and then you get to this game, and then all of a sudden you can't finish.

So hopefully we go in there. We take the best shot that they'll allow us to get, you know, and maybe it won't be all the way to the rim with him in the game. Maybe it will be a midrange floater, something like that. But we have to be willing to take the best open shot we can get.

Q. The last time a regional was here in the South region was here in 2019. The champion came out of this region. What would it mean for your program with this group of teams you're going against this weekend to come out as the last one standing?

BRIAN DUTCHER: I mean, it's March basketball, and I always say March is for players. So as coaches we just have to put them in a position to win, but it's the players that make these March Madness plays, these one shining-moment plays that you either advance with or you don't.

So March is for players. I'm going to try to put them in a position to have their March moment.

Q. You talked about getting them into a half court

game and trying to force that tempo. Without giving away the trade secrets, how can you make that happen?

BRIAN DUTCHER: Well, we have to convert. We'll decide how many to send to the offensive glass. Whether we'll send three to the glass or four to the glass or one to the glass, in order to get back and stop transition baskets.

So a lot of that is in-game adjustments. Whatever we start with -- I think that's the beauty of our coaching staff. You know, it's a long 40 minutes, and not to overreact, to know that when we get to a time-out, if we feel we need to make an adjustment, we'll make it.

This team, we're not bold enough to say this is how we play, good luck. We'll change how we play in order to win a basketball game.

So whether that's sending multiple guys back defensively, whether that's switching how we play, what tempo we play with, we're not afraid to change in order to try to win a basketball game.

Q. Brian, there are a bunch of teams in the Sweet 16 that have never made the Final Four. Do you think that's a trend -- that that's the sign of a trend? What do you think about the parity, I guess, in this tournament?

BRIAN DUTCHER: That's the best thing about this tournament, that anyone has a chance. You know, people talk about upsets. But I said it of our team, our first game against Charleston, we were fortunate to win. We looked nervous in the opening game.

And that's one thing you can't account for as coaches, that nerve level of your players, which one can affect more than others playing on this stage. I thought after the first game we settled in, and we looked more like ourselves.

So hopefully that continues. Hopefully having played two games, we're more comfortable playing the third one, but you never know. There's always that nerve of one-and-done situation what can happen. That's the beauty of the tournament.

Q. What makes this weekend different, I guess, in the larger picture of the tournament?

BRIAN DUTCHER: It's typically survive and advance. I always say we're paid to do this. We're paid to win basketball games. So this is a basketball game. So our job is to get the team ready to play. So whether it's the opening game or this game, we kind of prepare the same way.

I'm a big believer in routine, so I'm not going to change our routine. I want everything to feel the same way all year. Every game.

So if we're in our routine and we believe in what we're doing, we'll have a chance to come out as a winner.

Q. What has pleased you about your defense the last six games? What have you seen differently that has helped you particularly in the NCAA Tournament?

BRIAN DUTCHER: When we recruit kids to our program, we tell them the first thing they have to do is play defense. So it's not the last six games. It's a culture.

If you come to San Diego State, you have to defend. You have to want to defend. Then we'll let you play free offensively. We'll let you play with great freedom within framework.

These are kids that are brought here knowing, to play in this program, they have to defend at a high level. So it's as much our culture as anything else.

We have an ability, I think, to switch one through five ball screens. Like I said, we're not afraid to jump out and double a ball screen. We're not afraid to be in drop defense. We'll do whatever it takes for a given game. We're not bold enough to say this is what we do, good luck. We try to watch the opponent, and we try to see what will work best against that opponent.

So I just think it's -- we have of enough humility to say we're not going to just bully everybody and win this way. We're coaches, and we change game plans, and we have a group that's old and mature enough to adjust to a game plan if we make a change.

Q. You spoke on the depth of Alabama just a moment ago, but can you speak on the depth of your team? Because you can go just as much nine men deep as they can. How do you anticipate to kind of match what Alabama does in that regard?

BRIAN DUTCHER: That's been the beauty of our season is our depth. It's easy to say you're going to play nine or ten guys. It's having a team that's willing to accept that, you know, and not pout when they come out of a game and not drop their head, "Why am I coming out?" and you have to spend five minutes talking to a guy on the bench and explaining to him why he came out of the game.

Our guys have embraced it. They want to win. They know our strength is our depth, and so we have a bunch of guys

playing 20-some minutes a game.

They embrace that. I tell them, if you are fortunate enough to play at the next level in the NBA, guess what, you're going to be asked to come off the bench and make your first shot. If you can't do that, you won't play in the league very long. You have to embrace whatever role you play in.

I've got a group that's been able to do that.

Q. Both you and Nate are Michigan guys. Obviously, he started at the high school ranks, Romulus, and then worked up to Buffalo, Alabama. Have you followed his rise, and how cool is it to have two guys from the same state coaching on the biggest stage?

BRIAN DUTCHER: It's great. Coach Oats has done an incredible job. Like I said, he was fortunate enough to get a high school job. I couldn't get a high school job when I started. Sending résumés out. So everybody has a different path.

So I've been blessed to have been raised in the game. My dad obviously was a long-time head coach at the University of Minnesota, Eastern Michigan, assistant at Michigan like I was.

There's a lot of different paths in this business, and Coach Oats has done a great job on the path he started on, Romulus High School all those years ago, Buffalo, and now at Alabama. Really good coach. Really good person. And I haven't got to spend much time with him, but we're going to spend two hours together tomorrow night.

Q. Brian, there are some different theories about the shooting struggles in the NCAA Tournament. Some people say it's the ball. Some people think the ball is overinflated. Is that something you've heard from your players? Is there any theory as to what might be happening out here?

BRIAN DUTCHER: I don't have a group that complains about anything. I could send them -- I could serve them a cold meal. They're not going to complain. They're just really grateful for everything they get.

So they're happy to play. Tight rims, overinflated balls, they never say one word about anything. They just go out and play, and they enjoy playing together. No, we haven't talked one thing about any of that.

THE MODERATOR: Appreciate your time here today.

BRIAN DUTCHER: Thanks, everybody.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Matt, it's very rare this season that you guys are an underdog. You're a favorite in almost every Mountain West game. With any regularity, you've got to go back to maybe Maui. How does that impact thinking, if it does at all, in this game?

MATT BRADLEY: Yeah, just like you brought up Maui, you know, we've had games where we were picked to lose, and I think we came out on top or gave them a good battle. Thinking back to Maui or St. Mary's, any other game, we're just ready to compete.

We know it's the Sweet 16, so anybody can beat anybody. We're not really worried about seeding at this point. We have to stick to our game plan and try our best to win.

Q. Is there potential advantage with the makeup of this team? You don't have any underclassmen in the rotation. A ton of experience. Five-year guys. Even a six-year guy. That level of experience, how might that help you in this situation against the No. 1 overall seed?

DARRION TRAMMELL: I feel like that's the DNA for a lot of teams that make a deep run in March. It's something that we have.

In addition to that, we have a lot of -- we have our great game plans. We hang our hat on defense. And, I mean, I feel like we have the DNA and the characteristics of a team who makes a deep run in March.

Q. Matt, just curious, the level of excitement or maybe not -- trying to think -- the adrenaline of getting ready to face this Alabama team and players like Brandon Miller. Curious of your thoughts and how forward you're looking to this game tomorrow?

MATT BRADLEY: Thank you for that question. I'm really looking forward to this opportunity. This is my last season, so to be in the Sweet 16 feels really special with these guys and this team.

I'm really looking forward to the opportunity. It's going to be a big game. It put us on the map. Earn some respect across the country.

So, you know, Brandon Miller, he is a great player, and they have a bunch of other great players. But we're just going to stick to our game plan and go out there and get ready for the battle.

Q. This is for Darrion. Getting ready to play a guy like



Jahvon Quinerly, who is playing at the peak of his performance. His ability to blow by guards, is that something that you have studied on tape, and the difficulty of trying to stay in front of a guy that's that crafty?

DARRION TRAMMELL: Definitely. That's something we worked on all week. We've had a good week to prepare for that, and I feel like we've watched a lot of film and watching the tendencies and stuff like that, so I feel like I'm definitely ready and up for the challenge.

Q. Nathan, how do you anticipate to battle against a guy like Bediako tomorrow, against Alabama, and how excited are you for an opportunity like that?

NATHAN MENSAH: They have a great team, and it's not only me guarding him. It's going to be him playing against all the five guys that we have on the floor. I feel like it's a great opportunity to make a name for myself. Me playing against a team like Alabama is going to bring the best out of me.

Q. Your coach was talking about when guys come into this program that they embrace a culture and specifically defense, Lamont. How much of an adjustment has that been for you, and why do you feel like this team has embraced that philosophy so well?

LAMONT BUTLER: I feel like the team has embraced the defensive culture just because everybody wants to win. Guys come here to win, and that's the DNA of a championship team.

Defensively we go out there every night and try to shut teams down, and that's our best form of winning. That's why everybody embraces it.

Q. Keshad, Alabama has a really big frontline. Probably as big or bigger -- I mean, I know you guys played Arizona, but how do you prepare for that size up front? You guys are so physical around the post.

KESHAD JOHNSON: We both -- we are also a physical team, too, so it's just basically going to be a physical game all the way around. Me being basically an undersized big for the team, I just have to try my best and give my team all effort. A lot of times rebounding is about effort, and I'll give 110 percent of that for my team.

Q. Matt, this is for you. How much did you know about Alabama before you started the, kind of, game prep, and what's maybe the biggest thing you've learned going through that process?

MATT BRADLEY: Yeah, you know, we watched them. Me personally, I just know they're an extremely talented team. They have a lot of NBA prospects, and they're ultra talented.

They're also young, you know, and we have experience on our side. So that's one advantage we have going into this game. But, yeah, we just know ultimately they're a really good team, and it's going to be a battle in order to beat them.

Q. This is also for Matt. Coach was saying when you get teams in the half court, he thinks you can beat anybody in the country. What makes you so effective defensively as a unit when you break teams down and kind of slow the game down to a half court game?

MATT BRADLEY: The question you mentioned earlier about Jahvon, it's not one against one. It's one against five against us in the half court. We have each other's back. We make multiple efforts, second, third, fourth efforts to stop somebody.

We know what type of talent they have. It's not going to just be one-on-one isolation game all day. It's going to be one against five.

In order to beat us, it's going to take a group effort. It's not just going to take one guy, and I think that's why it's so hard to beat us in the half court.

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