

NCAA Men's 1st and 2nd

Rounds: Wichita

Wednesday, March 14, 2018

Wichita, Kansas



Brian Dutcher

San Diego State Aztecs

THE MODERATOR: Coach, what's your assessment of your opponent tomorrow, Houston?

COACH DUTCHER: You know, it's Kelvin Sampson-coached team. So we know what that's about. He's had a storied career -- Washington State, Oklahoma, Indiana, NBA stints, and now at University of Houston.

And his team reflects his personality. They're tough. They're hard-nosed, and Rob Gray at the point is everything that Kelvin is, tough, winner. And they're going to be a tremendous challenge for us tomorrow night.

Q. Kelvin talked about you guys having size advantages at almost every position, and he joked that you were probably pretty excited, when you looked at their roster, to take advantage of some of that in the guard court and posting guys up. One, is he right about that, and how do you use that to your advantage in a game like this?

COACH DUTCHER: That's why he's the wily ol' head coach. We have length, but he has width. So we'll see where that meets, length versus width. So they're very physical. They've got depth at every position. They've got seniors and juniors in the starting lineup, and so it'll be a real challenge for our length to see if we get knocked around or if we are up for the challenge of playing a physical brand of basketball tomorrow night.

Q. I know you've talked about this at some points this season, but offensively this team seems different than past San Diego State teams. You guys have always had that defensive resumé throughout the program in recent years, but more points, less time in possession, pushing pace. Could you just walk through how thoughtful that's been to be that kind of team offensively and be -- and how are you different offensively?

COACH DUTCHER: You know, that was one of the main emphasis when I took over. I wanted to increase our tempo of play. We know what the numbers were over the last couple of years. And with that being said, we didn't go on a nine-game win streak until we got better defensively.

So I'm happy with where we are offensively. I like the

tempo we play with. I like our versatility. We can score from multiple positions, but the key to our success as of late is our ability to defend better and to limit opponents' three-point shots. Obviously we're going to have to rebound at a higher level tomorrow. But I'm happy with where we are right now as a team at both ends of the floor.

Q. Coach, I just wanted to ask about this experience as a head coach, because you've been to so many NCAA tournaments, but now as a head coach does this feel any different for you?

COACH DUTCHER: You know, I said to the team, and I've said publicly, as a coach, if you have any longevity, you just say eventually I'm going to get back there. And so I'm grateful that I'm here as a first-year head coach, but I'm happiest for my team. I think back to Malik and Trey going here as freshmen and then the fear of saying, wow, they're not going to go again unless we get hot. And I take great pride in the fact where Trey and Malik and Kam Rooks, who went when he was at Cal, get to finish their careers at this event and then give our freshmen, sophomores and juniors, some of them, the first taste at this NCAA Tournament.

So I feel extremely blessed to go, but I'm happiest for the team that they get to experience this and get to play in the greatest event in college athletics, the NCAA Tournament.

Q. Coach, I'm curious, Houston likes to take a lot of threes, specifically Rob Gray and Corey Davis Jr. What are your thoughts as to what you've seen on the film of those two guys and their ability to hit those shots?

COACH DUTCHER: Well, Davis and Brooks, if you give them any space at all, they're going to shoot it. And we've played against good three-point shooters all year, but some of them are more set shooters so you can get there later. Both Davis and Brooks raise up on the catch. They shoot over you. So we're going to have to pay attention. We're going to have to be there on the catch and do our best to contest those shots.

I know Kelvin wants them taking them. He wants them on the fast break if they're open to let it go, and they shoot deep because everyone knows when you get into the half-court offense and the defense is set, a lot of times you see them coming.

So we have to pay special attention to finding all three of those shooters, number one, on the break and then pay attention to them in the half-court sets.

Q. You were talking about Houston's width and physicality. I guess a two-part question. One, do they remind you of somebody you've played in terms of their size and how they play? And two, if they are that physical, how do you work with the team to make sure your guys aren't getting knocked off their spots?

COACH DUTCHER: We just have to play smart position basketball. We have to know when it's time to bang and when it's time to release pressure and try to get them under the basket and in front of them.

So obviously the physicality will be most in play rebounding. I mean, they're a Top 10 rebounding team. So to box out and to try to maintain contact, to have the guards come back and clean a lot of rebounds up, I think the physicality will be most reflected when it comes to rebounding.

So that's something we spent some time on. We do that anyway, but we'll have to pay special attention to that tomorrow.

Q. Do they remind you of anybody?

COACH DUTCHER: Probably the most physical team we might have played. It was really early in the year. Georgia being from the SEC had some big bodies. They might have been longer. Houston is just wider. They're just broader in the shoulders. So they're going to provide a challenge probably that we haven't seen this year.

THE MODERATOR: If there are no other questions, wish you the best of luck tomorrow, Coach. Thank you very much.

COACH DUTCHER: Thank you, everybody.

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Devin Watson

Malik Pope

Trey Kell

San Diego State Aztecs

THE MODERATOR: At this time we'll take questions for our student-athletes.

Q. Devin, the program at San Diego State historically has been one that's been known for being defensive minded, but this year you guys have shown a lot more offensive versatility, not just with the starting line up, but off the bench. What has this team done offensively this year that's helped kind of shake some of that defensive-first talk?

DEVIN WATSON: I just think that this team has a lot of confidence. We're also really talented. And we play well together. So with those three things, it's easy to have a great offensive team.

Q. NCAA Tournament's a different kind of animal, and you guys have been there before. I think Kam and Max also have. No one on their roster has. Is that a big deal? I know it was when you played St. John's three years ago. They had nobody on their roster played. Why is experience important in this event in?

TREY KELL: I think it's important because it's just the level of intensity and things of that nature pick up. Obviously it's win or go home. It's nationally televised games and things of that nature. So it's kind of easy for a team to go on a run, and you kind of overreact when we all know it's a game of runs that could change just like that.

So the main message you just have to preach is even though it's not another game, it is another game and just go out there and play the way we're capable of and everything will take care of itself.

MALIK POPE: Can you repeat the end of the question for me.

Q. You've been in this tournament before. How important is that experience versus not having ever played in this before?

MALIK POPE: I feel like the experience is just important itself in terms of leading, you know, the guys that haven't been here. That will be a vital part of us becoming successful in the future. So experience and just knowing what's coming is big.

Q. This is kind of a follow-up on that one. Does it feel any different or do you approach it any differently being an NCAA Tournament now as a senior as opposed to being a freshman last time?

MALIK POPE: Kind of lost me. Can you repeat that?

Q. Does it feel any different being in the NCAA Tournament, or do you approach it any differently now as a senior and it being your second time as opposed to as a freshman in 2015?

MALIK POPE: Yeah. A senior it's your last go-around, so of course it's that important. It's kind of do or die. You gotta leave it all out there. Being back, you just have that urgency as leaders and vets and rookies, whatever you want to call them. You guys just have that level of urgency and ready to go.

TREY KELL: Yeah. I just look at it as I have a different role. My freshman year my main focus was come in, don't mess up. Now it's, you know, I'm one of the vocal points of the team. So, you know, just gotta keep the team level headed, go out there, try to make plays and just leave it all out there, as Malik was saying.

DEVIN WATSON: Even though this is my first time playing in the NCAA Tournament, I've played in a lot of big games, so I'm kind of one of the older guys on the team. So I think I can help in those categories as well.

Q. Malik, this year, back on that thought about offensively how you guys might be a little bit different this season, you're scoring more points as a team. You're taking less time per possession. Seems like you're pushing it offensively at a quicker pace. What's that felt like and what have you noticed about that change this season? The numbers seem to bear that out.

MALIK POPE: Yeah. Like Devin said, we have a lot of guys that have confidence in theirself and in the game and with our game shouters mainly being to get up and down which is our style of play. We try to emphasize that and play to our strengths. And I feel like we have been doing a good job with that.

Q. This is for Trey and Malik also. Going back to NCAA Tournament game against Duke three years ago, you guys had a sequence where you had back-to-back plays. Trey drove off the ball screen and fed you for a three-pointer. Do you remember that? Could you talk about that and what that felt like and how that's sort of remained and bonded you guys?

TREY KELL: That's funny because I was just on the way to practice, that exact sequence, I was thinking about that. You know, just read. Read the defense really and knowing Malik, he can shoot. So that helped on me a couple of times and I was able to hit him for threes. We still have that same connection and vibe off ball screens. So hopefully we can have some of that same magic tomorrow.

MALIK POPE: Yeah. It was just a level of synergy and connection, and luckily I was able to knock down those two shots. Yeah. We was definitely just talking about that before.

Q. When you think about the matchup with Michigan, what's the one area that you guys are emphasizing in scouting them that you're going to have to be really sharp in tomorrow?

MALIK POPE: You say against Michigan?

Q. I'm sorry. Houston. But same question. What's the one area?

MALIK POPE: It's definitely matching their physicality in my area. We kind of have different jobs. But we know that they're pretty big down there, really strong and physical. We're aware that their guards can play a little bit. They can get up and down just like us.

So just matching their intensity and their momentum and containing their fast breaks, you know, how they get out and transition to get up threes. So just matching that pretty much.

TREY KELL: Yeah. I would just kind of go off what Malik was saying. We know they're a real physical team. They play really hard. So, I mean, I feel like before anything you just gotta match the intensity of the game. And then also just they push the ball a lot in transition, and they got really good guards.

So if we can do a good job of containing them a little bit, I feel like that'll put us in the right direction.

DEVIN WATSON: I think we're definitely going to have to bring the fight to them, be aggressive, match their intensity. Yeah, and it's definitely going to be a physical game, like Malik and Trey said. So yeah.

Q. For Trey and anybody else who wants to chime in on this, one of the unique things about the NCAA Tournament is often you get referees, officials who have never seen you guys play. What's that like as a player, and how do you have to adjust to that? Can that become a factor?

TREY KELL: I don't think it's something you really think about too much. It's just like every other game. Obviously we're going to have the best of the best refs in this tournament. But at the same time we know they're not going to be perfect. They're going to miss some calls.

So just the main thing, move on to the next play. Keep a level head, and I feel like if you worry about the refs, then you're already at a disadvantage.

DEVIN WATSON: Sometimes on the court I have a pretty good relationship with the refs, and probably going to be a little different not having seen refs that I see over and over again. So it won't be a challenge, but it'll just be a little different.

Q. I was going to ask Trey, Houston coach Kelvin Sampson said that Dutch probably was -- I forget the phrase he used, but licking his chops, something like that, looking at the size advantage you guys have at so many positions, and he specifically talked about how big you guys are as a guard court, talked about your ability to post their guys up, but basically that size advantage that you guys have. How do you view that heading into this game or how do you use that or utilize that?

TREY KELL: Yeah, we for sure have a height advantage, but I don't think it's something that they haven't faced before. I think that's where they make up with their physicality. They do a really good job of knowing that they're not the tallest team, but being physical at the same time.

So just the main thing, you know, is gotta match their physicality and know that we have that height advantage if we happen to get the ball on the low block or something like that. And if we can do that, then that'll help us a lot.

THE MODERATOR: Malik, do you want to add to that?

MALIK POPE: Can you repeat the question?

Q. You guys have a size advantage at almost every position, and Houston coach Kelvin Sampson talked about it. So how do you take advantage of that advantage?

MALIK POPE: Like T.K. said, I'm pretty sure they've seen a height advantage before, so I think our job would be just to make the best, the smartest play there

that's presented within the defense and go from there.

THE MODERATOR: If there are no other questions, we'll dismiss the players. Thank you very much. Best of luck tomorrow.

San Diego State Aztecs

LOCKER ROOM INTERVIEWS

10 Max Montana, junior forward

Q: How did winning the conference tournament affect the team's confidence?

MONTANA: "It definitely just brought us here. I think we had a lot of confidence because we had won like eight straight at that point, so we were already rolling. That just kind of punched our ticket to get here, so we are extremely confident."

Q: What specifically have you focused on to beat Houston?

MONTANA: "I think the main keys are just to stop their point guard, who is very fast on the break. They are a really good transition team, so we need to find their shooters and just rebound. They have a lot of guys who aren't very tall but very physical, so we really have to box out and not let them kill us on the glass."

Q: You have seven guys averaging between 7 and 13 points, with so much balance, can anyone have a big night?

MONTANA: "One hundred percent that has been the story of our team all year anybody can have a big night any game. We just have to come into the game ready to go."

Q: What do you guys have to do get a win?

MONTANA: "We have to keep playing the way we've been playing with confidence, stick to the game plan and execute."

Q: You won your last nine games, how will you keep the streak going?

MONTANA: "Just keep the same level of confidence, the same level of team spirit and the same level of energy and hope to get a win and keep going."

#11 Matt Mitchell, freshman forward

Q: What is Coach Dutcher like as a head coach?

MITCHELL: "It's more the same style but we focus more on the defensive end. Our offense kind of comes with it. We try to focus a little bit more on defense this time."

Q: How important are your forwards to getting a win?

MITCHELL: "They're very important. Our forwards are key to game. They're always going to be important. I think they'll step it up in the big moment, and they'll be there "

Q: How did beating Nevada and winning the conference build momentum?

MITCHELL: "It builds a lot of momentum. Huge confidence. Just keep that nine-game win streak alive. So we're just trying to focus on keeping it alive and playing together and playing like brothers."

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Kelvin Sampson

Houston Cougars

THE MODERATOR: We're going to begin our session with Houston head coach Kelvin Sampson, in his fourth season, first appearance for the Cougars in the NCAA since 2010.

Coach, welcome to Wichita, and your assessment of your opponent tomorrow.

COACH SAMPSON: First of all, San Diego State is -- after watching them, I'm not sure -- I don't know what their strength and weakness is. I think their strength is they don't have any weaknesses. There's not one area, I've watched them I say, well, we can exploit this for sure. They've got big, strong, physical guards.

I keep hearing about how physical we are. Our guards are six foot, six foot, six foot. Theirs are six-four, 220 and one's six-five, 230. I don't get that. So they got a really big back court. That causes problems. Big back courts have caused us problems all year. Cincinnati it was six-six and six-six on the wing. Wichita State was six-six and six-seven. Teams with big wings have caused problems for us. And then go inside. Those are usually rock fights.

But San Diego State is very talented. Pope and McDaniel, we don't have guys like that, we don't have guys like that in our league. Probably the best inside player in our league is Morris from Wichita State. Best overall player may be Clark from Cincinnati. I think Morris is probably about six-eight. Clark's about six-seven.

So we haven't seen this kind of length this year. Probably the team that had that kind of length that we played against was probably Wake Forest maybe, Providence. Providence was big. Wake Forest had a couple of seven-footers.

So San Diego State is very good. Brian Dutcher does a great job of coaching his team. They're well coached and very disciplined. Good guards, good front line. Good team. There's a reason they've won nine in a row.

Q. Just listening to you, it sounds like you're the 11 seed and they're the 6 seed. Do you guys have a



chance tomorrow --

COACH SAMPSON: I think that seeding stuff, you can put that in a bag and throw it in the ocean. What does that mean? How do they know how to seed? If you look at the two teams, we are the 11 seed. If you look at their players, look at ours. We're six foot, six foot, six foot, six-five. I just like their roster. They've done a really nice job of putting their team together. They've got a two-headed point guard that's really good. Watson and Hemsley complement each other well, so they don't take a dip when they go to the bench.

I think that's what really good teams do is they have depth. They have seven or eight starters. So Hemsley and Watson are really good at the point. Kell is a great closer. He's one of those guys that can get the ball to Pope, Mitchell, McDaniel throughout the game, and then all of a sudden the last five minutes he wins it for you. It's nice to have a guy like that.

But I've never been concerned. You don't know what you don't know. But people that take stock in seeding, you're a higher seed and they're the lower seed. After the 1 seeds and 2 seeds, everybody's about the same as far as I'm concerned. Three seeds, there's some 3 seeds that could be two seeds. But once you get from 4 to about 13, I think it's -- and everybody talks about parity and all of a sudden we get to the tournament and you forget parity and start talking about seeds. What happened to parity?

Q. Coach, at least program-wide San Diego State's had this national reputation as a defensive team, defensive minded. That's how they stayed in games, that's how they limited opponents. This team seems to be breaking out of that mold a little bit offensively with more options. Is that accurate in your mind or what do you see about them offensively?

COACH SAMPSON: Are you from San Diego?

Q. Yeah?

COACH SAMPSON: You know way more about that than I do. I've never seen them before. I've never seen them play except on film. How many times have you seen them this year.

Q. Five.

COACH SAMPSON: Answer your own question. What

do you think?

Q. I'm just curious through the film the last couple of days --

COACH SAMPSON: I mean, I wouldn't know. I've never seen them in person. So, you know, I have to read about them and look on film. So I don't know that I'm qualified to answer the question. But after reading and catching up on them, it sounds like they struggled early because of Kell being out with injuries. You know, and I think about if Rob Gray was out with injuries for us, I mean, we'd struggle, too.

But I think I go back to my -- I would answer that question I guess with my initial thought about them. I don't think they have a weakness. I think they're really good offensively. Because Brian can go different ways. When you can post your guards up against other six-three, six-four guards, I'm sure his eyelids was blinking when he saw our guards. They post up six-three, six-four guys. I mean, we're going to run six foot guys out there. They're going -- I'm sure their kids saw our film and said, it's going to be fun.

Q. Kelvin, the guys back in the locker room just talking with them saying, look, we learned from what happened in that conference tournament. How do they take that what happened --

COACH SAMPSON: Learned what? Learned from what? Beating Wichita State?

Q. Beating Wichita State and a tough loss to Cincinnati. They said that's something they can build upon. They learned the things they did good, the things they did bad?

COACH SAMPSON: No, I don't think they learned. I mean, we played 33 games. This is our 34th game. I think our kids are no different than Kansas kids or Pennsylvania's kids or San Diego State's kids. This is our next game. You've gotta flush the last one, let it go and get on to the next one. We played Sunday afternoon. So short turnaround for us. Three games in three days from Monday. We left yesterday. We're here today. We don't have a new offensive to put in. We don't have a new defense to put in. We take our system and put it against San Diego State's system.

I think this game's 50/50. I think if -- I think we can beat San Diego State, but I think San Diego State can beat us too. I think it's that kind of game. Gotta play good. If we play good, we'll have a good chance. If they play good, that means we're probably not going to play good and they're going to have a good chance. Does that clear anything up for you?

Q. Totally clear now. The other thing they want to do is make history for U of H basketball. UH hasn't

won a tournament game since '84, and they're well aware of that.

COACH SAMPSON: It's hard to win a game when you haven't been in a tournament. So I think we need to start there. How many times have we been in a tournament since '80 -- what year did you say?

Q. '84 they won.

COACH SAMPSON: So they haven't won a game since '84. How many chances have they had?

Q. Five.

COACH SAMPSON: So they're -- what are they, 0 for 5?

Q. Four.

COACH SAMPSON: So they've had four chances. Yeah. So they've had four chances. I mean, I don't know what the question is.

Q. Just that the guys know the history and they would like to make history by getting a win.

COACH SAMPSON: Yeah. I'm sure they would if you ask them, but that's not something we ever talk about or even think about. I was really proud of our kids. You know, when that U of H went up on the board Sunday, that logo, interlocking U and interlocking H, that's a proud day, you know, when you're -- because I remember where we were in 2014. San Diego State's got a great history. You know, Steve Fisher, who's a very good friend of mine, I've known Steve for 30 years, I know what Steve did at San Diego State, and Brian was sitting right there with him all those years.

So that program is established. They've been really good for a long, long, long time, whereas we're kind of a latecomer to the party. You know, three years ago we went 13 and 19, and that was a great year. That team could have went a lot worse than 13 and 19. Then the next year we got a little bit better. The next year pretty good again, and then this year.

So we're kind of three years into this thing, and here we are in the tournament. So we're happy about that. And I think our best days are ahead of us, too. So I thought our first year would be our worst year while we were at Houston. But I don't think this will be our best year. I think our best years are going to be ahead of us. Whereas with San Diego State, I've always watched Steve's teams play. I just was always amazed at their length and athleticism. I know how good quite Kawhi Leonard was, and Kawhi Leonard, it's not like he stood out on that team. That was a really good team. There was a lot of good players on that team. And it's like the team they have now, you can tell how good they're going to be in the future because they're freshmen.

This McDaniels kid is special now. He's not going to be 210 pounds forever. And that Mitchell kid, that boy is a load. He's a good player. So I think you got two programs that it's going to continue to get better. They're established. We're not. We're still fighting to get there. We need to continue to win and continue to be consistent, whereas San Diego State has been like that.

But we have kids in this program, this is their first year at Houston, and they're in the NCAA Tournament. So when you start talking history to them, they don't know what you're talking about.

Q. So at least in recent years this hasn't been a program that's had the players that are deemed five stars or McDonald's All-Americans, but I'm curious as you've gone out and grabbed guys from the junior college ranks or other places, there's things you can teach, but is there a trait that you look at a recruit and say I can work with this, this is a guy that could fit what I want to do?

COACH SAMPSON: Well, you talk about five star, who in our conference does? I mean, nobody in our conference has five stars, except for maybe Connecticut. They have five stars. And we talk about junior college kids, we have as many high school kids as we do junior college kids. Fabian White was on the All Freshman team this year. Galen Robinson was on the All Freshman team two years ago. Rob Gray may have been a junior college kid, but Rob was a qualifier, was a 3.3 student in junior college and had three years' eligibility. So I've had him for three years, not two. Chris Harris came from a junior college, and same thing academically. He's got three years.

So we have a lot of kids here three and four years. It's not -- sometimes you have to put things in proper context. We're not a junior college program. We have some really good junior college players, though. So what was your question?

Q. When you're assembling those guys, or just in general recruiting, is there something that you look at and you see a trait that -- other things you may be able to teach, but is there a trait that you look at that you say I can work with that or that's something that'll fit my program?

COACH SAMPSON: Yeah. I think you guys -- I just walked into the tail end of Devin and Rob's press conference. I think you can tell the intelligence level of both of those kids. Those are smart kids. I like smart kids. It's hard to play this game if you can't think. It really is. Defense is about instinct, reaction, and basketball IQ. You know, I can teach a lot of things, but I cannot teach instinct and I cannot teach IQ. I can't.

Can't teach size either.

But if you're coachable, if you have the ability to react and make multiple decisions in a short amount of time, you know, talent is always there. That's number one. You recruit good players. We all try to recruit good players. But I like to recruit smart kids. You know, Devin's a very smart kid. Rob was one of those kids that he graduated in December, but he could have graduated last December. He's extremely, extremely bright kid. I have four seniors, two of them have already graduated. The other two are taking single-digit credits to get their degree in May. Every kid in our program is on track to graduate from Houston, and they're all good students. They would graduate from anybody's college.

So for me, I look at instinct. If a kid's on a three and one break, does he make the right decision. When the shot goes up and he's -- does he block out or does he go after the ball, and is he pretty good at either one. I also like to recruit kids that come from good coaches, winning programs. Good coaches are usually good teachers. They teach kids -- they come in advanced. Devin played his freshman -- he played at Indiana. Came from a really good high school program, outstanding, outstanding junior college coach at Odessa. Tra Arnold is an outstanding coach. Rob played for one of the best junior college coaches in the nation, Scott Raynes, at Howard, excellent coach. Scott Raynes would be a good coach anywhere.

So I just think kids that are smart, kids that are tough, we can help them with the toughness. As long as they're not too far back, you know, we can help them. I've had some that, you know, it's hard to help -- hard to help them all. San Diego State's got a tough team, though. I like their toughness.

THE MODERATOR: That's going to conclude today's session.

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Wichita, Kansas



Rob Gray

Devin Davis

Houston Cougars

THE MODERATOR: Before we start we're pleased to have with us senior Devin Davis and Rob Gray. Questions, please.

Q. Rob, maybe starting with you, I know the NCAA Tournament format, you're learning about these teams you don't see during the season very quickly on the fly, but San Diego State has this program-wide defensive reputation, but in the short window that you've tried to learn about them, what do you know about them offensively?

ROB GRAY: You know, they have Trey Kell, Malik Pope, Mitchell, some very good offensive players. I know they haven't been healthy all year, and they're rolling right now. They won nine in a row. They've been playing some really good basketball.

And it's a great quality first-round competition, and we're just looking forward to the chance to compete after losing in the championship game in Cincinnati by one point. We pride ourselves on defense and rebounding, and we know we'll have a good test coming out in the first round, and we'll get a chance to show everyone nationally what we've been working on all year and the pride that we have in our defense.

Q. Rob and Devin, by now you've probably heard that the last time this program, Houston, has won a NCAA Tournament game was 1984. What would that mean to get that first win under your belt, if you can win tomorrow night? And since it's been so long.

DEVIN DAVIS: It would mean a lot to the program and to the players. We've put in a lot of work since June and July to get to this moment, and we don't feel like we're done yet. So we're just going to play as hard as we can and just take it one game at a time.

ROB GRAY: Yeah. Exactly what he said. It'll mean a lot to the fan base, the alumni and everyone that's affiliated with Houston Cougar basketball program. We've been battling all year for them, and to make the tournament, I know they feel real good about that.

But we're looking to do a little bit more than that. We

want to make a run, make some noise. And we believe in ourselves, and we're just thankful that we have this opportunity.

Q. For both of you, people talk about tournament experience being important this time of year. San Diego State has I think four guys who have played in it before. And I'm not sure you have anybody. Do you think that will be a factor, and if not, why not?

ROB GRAY: Did you play in a tournament, Dev?

DEVIN DAVIS: No.

ROB GRAY: We have a great leader, Coach Sampson. He's had a lot of tournament experience. He teaches us things every single day. He gives us the recipe to win. It's our job to listen and do our jobs and just compete as hard as we can. We understand we don't have any players who have played in the tournament, but we have a great leader we learn from each and every day.

And as far as San Diego State, that'll be an advantage that they have. They have players who have been in the tournament, and seen the competition level and understand what's at stake.

But we're pretty smart, even though we haven't been there. We listen to Coach Sampson. We watch film and we understand what's at stake, and we're just ready to go out and compete.

And in a sense it could be an advantage that we don't have anyone who's played in a tournament because we're all so excited to be here, and we're confident in our abilities and our energy, and our desperation is really going to help us with our competitive nature.

DEVIN DAVIS: We have a great head coach in Coach Sampson. We're going to buy in and listen to everything him and his staff have because they've put a lot of work into the scouts. So we're going to buy in to everything they're telling us.

We're excited. Nobody's played in this tournament. None of us have ever been here before, so we're excited. We're going to play as hard as we can, and we're going to play smart, too.

Q. For Devin, back on the thoughts about San Diego State offensively, Trey Kell scored 28 points in the Mountain West title game, and Malik Pope at points in his career has been talked about like an NBA guy. Watson is an experienced scorer. Jalen McDaniels has taken over games at times. When you try to scout a team like that, where do you start in terms of priorities defensively?

DEVIN DAVIS: Head of our defense, which would be our guards, and it's going to take all five defenders on the court to just guard, like to pick and roll, they're a heavy high pick and roll team. We know that. So it's going to take each and every player on the court to guard the ball. And we just have to stay focused all 40 minutes.

Q. Rob, after the Cincinnati game Coach Sampson was saying that playing so many games that weekend kind of caught up to you on Sunday, both teams, actually, in terms of fatigue. I think he gave you Monday off. How were the legs and how is the team's energy right now?

ROB GRAY: Well, you know, situations like this you can't afford to be tired at all. I feel great. I'm excited to be here. Those three games in three days is a little AAU-style format. I haven't played AAU in a long time.

So you could tell in that Cincinnati game it was very sluggish and ugly in the second half. Games like that, that's where we have to pride ourselves on the defensive and offensive rebound and be able to win. And those have been staples of our culture all year long. We just try to survive by any means. No matter if our legs are tired or not. It's all about mental toughness at this point.

Q. For both of you, does San Diego State remind you of anybody you've played this year that was on your schedule?

DEVIN DAVIS: With their length, I would say Wake Forest or when we scrimmaged against Baylor earlier in the year. They just have a lot of length in their front court. And talent-wise I would compare them to Wichita State. They have a lot of talent one through five.

ROB GRAY: Yeah. Same as he said, Baylor, Wake Forest, those long teams with the maybe seven-footers or six-ten guys coming off the bench. But we're a very small team. We understand that. I think we're about 318th out of all 351 schools when it comes to height. But we rarely get outrebounded and we pride ourselves on our hardness and toughness. We're not looking to make any excuses, just looking to go out here and get the job done no matter what it takes.

Q. The San Diego coach has been talking the last few days just about how physical you guys are. Obviously, as you just said, you're not the tallest team in the world. But do you think you're the most physical team in the country?

ROB GRAY: I'm not sure if we're exactly the most physical in the country, but I think we're in the conversation. I know we're Top 10 offensive rebounding team. We have a tendency to foul a lot, one of the higher fouling teams in the country. But it's just part of our effort and part of our nature to not back down and box out, make hustle plays and just bring it to the competition.

So we're definitely going to stick to our style. We're going to try to impose our will and just win in defensive rebounding, offensive rebounding battle, and that's been the key to our success all year. So don't need to change anything now.

DEVIN DAVIS: Yeah, we're a team full of little small guys, little height. But we all have big hearts and a lot of pride, and we're going to buy into the coaches and we're going to play as hard as we can.

Q. Rob, on the fouls, this time of year, do you have to change that approach in terms of not fouling as much as maybe you would in the regular season just because of the opportunities, the free chances to go to the line for the other teams and just the stakes are raised at this point?

ROB GRAY: Yeah. Well, Coach Sampson doesn't change no matter what it is. It could be a scrimmage versus a D-II team. He's been on us all year about fouling and just gift wrapping the other team two points. It's just something that comes with playing hard and being extra physical, blocking out and pursuing offensive rebounds.

So we're going to try to balance playing hard and playing smart as good as we can, but there's going to be mistakes. We're all human. So we just gotta try to do anything we can to win. And we definitely need to limit the fouls. We don't want to give them any free points.

Q. I know you all don't get to play West Coast teams that often, but West Coast kind of has a growing reputation for being I don't want to say soft, but more finesseful, the type of guys you see on San Diego's roster, long, really lean, like Jalen McDaniels and Malik Pope. But you don't see the thick guys like you guys have on your roster. Do you agree with that? And when you go play a West Coast team, do you feel like we want to show them how we play basketball over here?

DEVIN DAVIS: We don't see a difference in West

Coast, East Coast. We just see an opponent and we have to be the best we can be, play the best that we can be. It doesn't matter who we're playing against. We just have to play to our culture, play to our style of play.

ROB GRAY: Yeah. I don't know if we've played any West Coast teams this year.

DEVIN DAVIS: No. No.

ROB GRAY: I will say, though, watching film on San Diego State in the Mountain West in the tournament, it is a little different, you know, as far as like the ball pressure and denial. It's just kind of like, you know, more finesse, it's like an offensive shoot-out, even though San Diego does have a high ranked defensive team on KenPom. I think they're 36 right now.

It may be finesse, but obviously they're doing a good job in matchups and limiting opponents scoring per possession. We can't really focus on East Coast-West Coast. Just gotta focus on the opponent, stick to our style and just try to impose our will and win the game in the small areas.

Q. You look at your roster. You don't have a lot of guys who were five-star All-American, McDonald's All-Americans, bunch of JC guys, a couple of transfers from mid major or low major schools. Is that an accurate assessment, and does that kind of bind you together and make you the team that you are because it seems like everybody's got a chip on their shoulder?

ROB GRAY: Extremely accurate. I know half of our team went to junior college. Me and Devin both went to junior college. No All-Americans, no five-stars, just a bunch of junkyard dogs, and that's how we gotta win. We pride ourselves on not being the most pretty and just getting the job done, and it's been working so far, and it's something Coach Sampson sticks to each and every day in practice.

And our toughness is what has to get us over the hump, whereas other teams may have height, length or athleticism. So we understand what we're capable of and what we're up against and we're going to stick to our game plan, and I'm very confident in my teammates.

DEVIN DAVIS: We don't mind being the underdog. It kind of makes us hungrier, I would say. Like Rob said, we just have to outwork our I guess less talent or less length that we have and just play to our culture.

ROB GRAY: And similar in the preseason, we were picked sixth in the American Athletic Conference, and

they were going off five stars, length, all that. So we don't pay attention to that. We just let it fuel the fire, and I'm pretty sure there will be similar assessments here in the tournament.

So we just gotta kind of ignore that. If anything, just let it fuel us and get ready to go out there and compete.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much, gentlemen. Best of luck tomorrow.

Houston Cougars

LOCKER ROOM INTERVIEWS

#25 Galen Robinson, junior, guard

Q: How will assists and passing help you to win?

ROBINSON: "Our unselfish nature. You know, shoot if we should shoot, pass if we should pass, anybody's open, make the easy pass. You know, just let your instincts take over."

Q: San Diego State is on a nine-game winning streak, how will you end it?

ROBINSON: "It's not like they haven't lost a game. Every team has flaws. If we play to our identity, play to our strengths, we can compete with anybody."

Q: How much of a factor is momentum in the NCAA Tournament?

ROBINSON: "I think anything can be a factor. We lost a heartbreaking game to Cincinnati by one point in the conference championship. That can be more motivation than having success. You know, because Coach Sampson always says he never worries about guys when they fail, but when they have success, that's when he worries about them. They might get complacent, you might slip up a little bit."

24 Breanon Brady, junior forward

Q: What are the little things that you are going to focus on for this game?

BRADY: "Staying out of foul trouble. Offensive and defensive rebounds big time. With their length, we have to box them out and just executing our plays. When we execute, there isn't much a team can do with us."

Q: How is the transition from junior college last year to the NCAA Tournament this year?

BRADY: "It's a tough transition because in JUCO, you have a lot of leeway and there isn't much accountability, you know. Then coming into a program that is so structured and ran by a great coach like Coach Sampson, it's all about accountability, dependability and responsibility. You are responsible for what you can control and that's it. You have to be able to perform every night, not just one night."

#3 Armoni Brooks, sophomore guard

Q: What kind of energy do you bring?

BROOKS: "I just really try to get a flow of how the game is going and how each team is playing. I'm just looking for any way I can amp myself and help the team."

Q: Do you feel any pride coming off the bench and helping out the team?

BROOKS: "Yes, I do. Coming off the bench is a really important role, and someone has to do it. Everyone want to be a starter, but coach talked to me early on and told me this was my season. I take pride in that role and run with it."