

FLORIDA GATORS

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Joakim Noah and Taurean Green. We'll take questions.

Q. For Joakim, it's not like you guys were seeded No. 1 or even the pre-season pick to win the SEC East. When you go on the court tomorrow night, you're going to be seen as the huge favorite, playing the biggest underdog in the history of the tournament. Do you feel like you're going to be the villain tomorrow night? How are you going to cope with that feeling?

JOAKIM NOAH: I think we're definitely going to be the villain. Right now, it doesn't matter 'cause it's do or die. Things haven't changed. We've been through a lot of experiences this year. People have been against us, we've been in very hostile environments. We've been through a lot. Right now it's all about getting a win. It doesn't matter what stories are being said about who. George Mason has a great team. At the end of the day, like my teammate Adrian Moss says, there's 10 players out there, two buckets, and one ball. That's what it's all about, just playing basketball.

Q. Could you tell me a little bit about your impression, I don't know if you've seen any tape of George Mason, but Jai Lewis, obviously a great tournament and season. Do you have much of an impression of going against a guy like that?

JOAKIM NOAH: Great player. Right now we're in a position where, like I just said, it's do or die. It's not going to be one player. If you want to win, everybody has to step up for your team. We're not on edge about one player. We're worried about everybody on the team who can make an impact. Like I said, right now we're just ready to play basketball.

Q. Taurean, your dad was a famous player in the NBA. What did you take growing up learning from your dad about preparing for a moment like now? What was it growing up in a household with a father who played in the NBA?

TAUREAN GREEN: He just always tells me to go out and have fun and enjoy playing the game. That's the main thing he tells me when I'm about to play a game. Just growing up, he really wasn't there sometimes because he was on the road. We talked a lot. We still maintain a great relationship. Just the main thing that he always tells me, just to go out and have fun.

Q. Talk about how tight you guys are as a group, that chemistry you have as brothers, how it's going to help you on the court tomorrow night?

JOAKIM NOAH: I hate him. I hate Taurean (smiling). But we have the same goals, so we have to support each other on the court. But off the court, I really hate him.

TAUREAN GREEN: I hate Joakim Noah, too, off the court (smiling). No, but we maintain a great relationship. I mean, it's not just us four, we all have a great team, we all have a great relationship. Just by the way we interact with each other on and off the court, I think that's why we're at the point we're at right now.

Q. George Mason has had a pattern in these playoffs of beating teams with larger frontlines. Your frontline resembles in size the frontline of Connecticut that they handled last week. What is going to be different tomorrow? What needs to be different for you guys to not let that happen to you?

JOAKIM NOAH: How are we similar to the ones in Connecticut? I don't understand.

Q. In terms of size. I'm not trying to match you guys in terms of types. They overcame a Connecticut team that had similar size to your frontline.

JOAKIM NOAH: To me, size doesn't really mean anything. I mean, right now we're playing basketball against a great team. In this tournament, you can't underestimate your opponent because it doesn't matter. If you play 10 games and a team beats you nine times, it doesn't matter. It's the 10th time that will make a difference. It doesn't matter at this point. A team that's better nine times, who might win nine times, might lose in this game.

Right now, it doesn't matter. It's all about being on edge and playing possession by possession. So I'm not worried about their history and who they beat. Right now we're just excited about playing basketball on a great stage.

To tell you the truth, I mean, a lot of respect to George Mason, but it doesn't really matter who our opponent is. We're just happy to be in this place and playing basketball.

Q. Talk about the dealing with the glare of what this spotlight is being at the Final Four, whether it's an issue at all, what Coach Donovan has told you guys?

TAUREAN GREEN: You just have to be able to handle all the distractions that are going to be thrown at you in the Final Four, all the media, all the hype, with all the other teams. We just got to be able to focus on our team, what we have to do in order to win games.

JOAKIM NOAH: Well, our goal hasn't changed throughout the year. Our goal has always been to win a national championship, even before the season. So I think that's made us tighter throughout the year, is that everybody has the same goals. But especially right now people are coming at us with media, on campus. Everybody's just really excited because this is an exciting time of year, which is very understandable.

But right now, like Coach says, we have to narrow our focus. Our focus has to be on doing anything we have to do to win the basketball game.

Q. Taurean, the SEC had some pretty mediocre ratings, RPI and AP, all year. Did we miss something or are you surprised also that there are two SEC teams here?

TAUREAN GREEN: You know, pre-season, everybody was saying that the SEC is going to have a down year. I mean, we knew going in when we started SEC play that every game was going to be tough. We knew the type of competition and talent that all the teams had.

It doesn't surprise me that two SEC teams are here. LSU is a great team. There are other great teams in the second, too. I don't know why people said the SEC was going to have a down year.

Q. Could you tell us something about Coach Donovan that we wouldn't otherwise know?

JOAKIM NOAH: I mean, he's a competitor. I mean, I feel like he's not just a coach that cares about the results on the court. I mean, to me personally, I feel like he's like a father figure to me, like a father figure away from home. I think personally we're very different in like the way we think about a lot of things. But in terms of basketball and just being there for his family, like I really respect what he does for his players and his family. He's definitely somebody that's influenced me in my life so far.

TAUREAN GREEN: I think Joakim said it. He's such a big competitor. When it comes down to it, I mean, he cares -- but that's not the main thing to him. He cares about his players. He's just a great teacher. He wants his players to get better and become the best that they can be.

Q. Joakim, most kids who come out of New York City come out of Lincoln, other programs. When you first got down to Florida, did you have to field any questions from teammates, what is Poly? What is it all about?

JOAKIM NOAH: I still don't think people really know what Poly Prep is in Florida, which is understandable, that's a school in New York. I'm the first player from New York to come to play for the Gators. I don't expect anybody to know.

Next year I actually have one of my teammates is going to come, one of my teammates will be Jonathan Mitchell. He might know a little bit about Poly Prep. Yeah, I mean, it was different but I

feel like Coach McNally, transferring from the United Nations school in the City, when I came to Poly Prep, it was the first time where I realized how important basketball was to people. At the United Nations school, it was just basically kids from all around the world, and soccer was more important than basketball. When I went to Poly Prep, which was the first time I actually went to a real American school, is when I really realized how big basketball was. I love that because I love basketball, too.

Q. Joakim, I read where you said that you think your hair gives you strength and power. Could you talk about that.

JOAKIM NOAH: My hair gives me strength and power. Yeah, it does. So don't cut it.

Q. Why?

JOAKIM NOAH: I can't tell you all that kind of information.

Q. It's Final Four, we're here, whatever. Don't you have an advantage because you've played in the larger venues, played in the big conference games, on TV? Doesn't that still give you an advantage over George Mason?

JOAKIM NOAH: No. Like I said, it doesn't matter. At this point it doesn't matter. It's do or die. If we worried about the things that you guys worried about, worried about who has the most hype. You guys are usually wrong when it comes to things like that. Like you guys only seen us play maybe three, four times in the year and you guys think you have it all figured out. But we know -- we know what we have to do. We're not really worried about all the stories, everything that's going on. Our job is just to play basketball. You guys write stories. We can't worry about what you guys say, otherwise our heads would explode.

Q. A lot of people probably ask you about your last name. There's been talk about your first name. What are some of the funniest things people have mispronounced? Do you correct them? Did you ever think about shortening your game to just Joe?

JOAKIM NOAH: No, don't call me Joe. It doesn't really bother me because in France you pronounce it Joakim (French accent), and in Sweden you pronounce it Joakim (Swedish accent), and then Spain you pronounce it Joakim (Spanish accent). Here people are from all over the place. People are confused. It doesn't really bother me. Wherever you go, it's pronounced differently. If you say Yokim (ph), I'm going to turn around. I know you're talking about me. Yokim (ph) is probably the most extreme I've got.

Q. A lot has been made of George Mason being a Cinderella team. What about you and maybe how your reputation has grown throughout this tournament, how you guys have gone from one of the underdog teams to one of the teams expected to be a favorite?

TAUREAN GREEN: We still feel that we're the underdogs. All the hype surrounding George Mason, we still feel that we're the underdogs and we have something to prove to everybody still. We're just going to approach this game like we've approached every game. We just got to go to prove to everybody.

Q. I know you said you hate each other off the court. Have you had a chance to take in anything in Indianapolis or does coach have you on a pretty tight leash?

TAUREAN GREEN: We're here to handle business, we're not here to have fun. We're here to have fun, but we're going to have fun on the court, not to go around and sightsee.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Florida head Coach Billy Donovan. We'll ask you make an opening statement, then open it up for questions.

COACH BILLY DONOVAN: Thank you. It's very exciting to be here in Indianapolis. Feel very, very honored to be a part of the Final Four. We realize that we've got a great challenge and opportunity ahead of ourselves on Saturday against a very, very good George Mason team. I think our basketball team is excited about having the chance to play. A lot to get prepared for. When you talk about a team like George Mason, they're very balanced, very good, and certainly they've proved themselves a great deal throughout not only the NCAA tournament but the season, they've played great. You have to congratulate them, as well. So we're just excited about the opportunity.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. How would you explain the fact that none of the top No. 1 seeds got here?

COACH BILLY DONOVAN: Well, I really think that the NCAA tournament is a completely separate entity from your regular season. When you're playing in your conference, the 16 or 18 games that you're playing, things have a tendency to balance out, you're going to probably face people twice. There's a lot of different things that happen. Again, I think when you talk about the NCAA tournament, you talk about a one-game situation against good quality teams. There's over 300 Division I teams in the country. You narrow it down to 65 teams, all those teams are there for very good reason: they're very good teams. All it takes is a game where you don't shoot the ball well or play particularly well or a team gets very, very hot, that anything can happen on any given night. I think also the parity and the balance in college basketball, I really don't believe that seeding means a whole lot or makes a whole lot of difference any more. It used to be a time where if you got that No. 1 seed, No. 2 seed, you felt pretty good about trying to get to the Elite 8 20 years ago. I think those times have changed. This tournament is so difficult and it's so hard, you realize how fortunate you are to be able to even get to this point in time. Even if it's a 3, 5, 11, 1, 12, I don't think anything surprises at least me any more in this tournament.

Q. Providence obviously is not a mid-major. Back in '87, you were sort of in the position of George Mason. That was the perception.

COACH BILLY DONOVAN: Yup.

Q. Do you have a handle on what they're experiencing? Do you think it gives you any advantage knowing what they're living right now?

COACH BILLY DONOVAN: I don't know if it gives myself personally. I can definitely feel and experience what they're going through. I think it's the same feeling and experience that our basketball team has, as well. I think when you started the year and you said, Listen, Florida and George Mason are going to be playing each other in the national semifinal, I think a lot of people would have said, Come on.

For us in '87, as a player, it was 11 years before Providence -- Providence had gone 11 years without going to the NCAA tournament. So for me as a player, I had never even been to the NCAA tournament till my senior year. All of a sudden it was just an incredible ride getting to the Final Four and having an opportunity to play against Syracuse.

I certainly understand the excitement and enthusiasm. But I think our kids have the same level of excitement and enthusiasm as their kids do. I think our guys are excited. Their kids are very excited. It's so hard to get to this point.

I don't know if I'm doing a good enough job answering that or not. Am I all right?

Q. Yes.

COACH BILLY DONOVAN: Sure (smiling)? You can spin it, great.

Q. In the six years since your last Final Four trip, you've had teams that were more hyped than this one, higher ranked. What, if anything, did you change in your approach to either the makeup of the team or the way you coach it that has led to the success of this team?

COACH BILLY DONOVAN: Well, I didn't hype the teams. You guys hyped the teams. I'm not a guy that goes out there and tries to hype my team. I would say this: when you start playing the season, the difference from this year's team maybe to last year's team is we have more balance and we can do more things.

I was very, very proud of our previous teams. I really felt like a lot of those teams really overachieved in a lot of ways. I think the perception has been that our roster is filled with McDonald's All-Americans, and that's the furthest thing from the truth. It's been that way. We've signed a lot of McDonald's All-Americans and several McDonald's All-Americans, but none of them stayed here.

Kwame Brown was as highly exposed as any player ever recruited. He was here for no years. Didn't play. Mike Miller played two. Donnell Harvey one.

The thing I don't think gets publicized enough about our kids is those guys like Udonis Haslem, Matt Bonner, Justin Hamilton, Matt Walsh, the guys that maybe didn't have that type of exposure coming out of high school.

I really believe that some of our teams were ranked high because of what happened in 2000. I thought a lot of that was unjustly given to us; it wasn't earned. This year's basketball team, when people looked at it, they said they're losing their three leading scorers, they've lost too much offense to be any good. This team starts the year "under-hyped." I don't know if anybody has a grasp or a hold on what teams are going to do what during the course of the season. I think so much goes into it.

But I've been proud of all of our teams. I really believe this: the trick is getting into this tournament to give yourself an opportunity and a chance to move on.

Q. Along the same lines, you lost two underclassmen to the NBA last year. Does this team you have now seem a little more ahead of schedule than what you thought they could do before the season started?

COACH BILLY DONOVAN: For me, and I made this comment all the way back in October, that I was going to love coaching this team, that this team was going to really try to play the right way, they were going to be unselfish, try to play together.

I think some of the reasons why our team maybe the previous year was a little bit one-dimensional, and people don't realize this, but two years ago in October when those guys were freshmen, the only three proven guys we had coming back was Roberson, Walsh and Lee. That was about it. We had to rely on some freshmen.

I didn't know if these kids this year, if that enthusiasm, excitement, unselfishness, their team, those things they were really trying to build, I don't know if we had enough experience that it would translate also into wins. That was the biggest uncertainty for me.

I think I said that back in October, that this was going to be a team that people were going to be really proud of, really excited about watching play, but I just didn't know our level of experience, if we had enough of it. You have to go back. Our leading scorer returning from last year's team on this year's team averaged seven points a game. Right now we've got five guys averaging double figures because they've relied and helped one another.

Q. Can you talk about the chemistry among your sophomores. Is it something where they hit it off right away or is that something you had to foster and develop?

COACH BILLY DONOVAN: I think probably a little bit of a combination of both. But I also think a lot of it has to go into the makeup of the young men that are here. See, I think in order to harbor and create chemistry on your team as a coach, the players inside the team have got to be willing to accept one another for their faults. It's easy to like somebody because of the good things they

do or the way they make you happy. I think a true sign of love and affection for somebody is being able to show that type of love and commitment when they get under your skin, when they do something that upsets you.

I can tell you that these kids have a great level of love and concern and care for one another. I think Joakim talks about -- I don't know what it was during the year, but they were kind of suite mates, in the same room, same area, all of a sudden Taurean gets up in the morning and tells Joakim he loves him. I just don't think that's stuff that normally happens, that you normally can create that. I think some of it you can create, but a lot of it is their personality, the type of commitment they have towards unselfishness.

Because they have that level of unselfishness, certainly we've tried to foster that, build that up, get them to really take those qualities and take it to another level. They really have tried to do that.

Q. Do you think your players at all are getting tired of hearing about the underdog George Mason Patriots? What is the importance of the first few minutes of that game on Saturday when both teams walk into a dome filled with people and you have to get down to actually playing basketball?

COACH BILLY DONOVAN: I don't think that our guys are upset or bothered by it. That's something that's out of their control. People can say and talk about the George Mason story, and rightfully so. It's a great story that I think will hopefully inspire many people outside of basketball. But we really have no control over that. I think our kids started the season as well unranked. Some polls had us to finish fifth on our side in the east in the SEC. I think our guys understand 6:00 on Saturday, the ball is going to get thrown up, they look at it as being a 40-minute game. Again, probably less about, you know, George Mason and a lot more on what's on the back of their jersey. What makes George Mason so good is Skinn, Lewis, Thomas, Campbell, Butler, Hernandez. That's what makes up George Mason.

So it's not really anything to do with the publicity and excitement that's been created. For us, it's a lot more understanding their personnel, understanding their system, understanding how they're going to play. At 6:00, all of that stops and both teams have to play. Even if we were getting a lot of hype, it doesn't make any difference at all because none of this stuff has been something that we as Florida have any control over other than we have to go out and try to be as prepared and play to the very best of our ability at 6:00 on Saturday.

Q. Talk about how creating that chemistry is tougher when you have players leaving early, and how that is an advantage for the mid-majors because their guys stick around longer.

COACH BILLY DONOVAN: Well, that's what I really believe has -- I think you can get rid of the word "mid-major." I don't ever like using that word. George Mason is a high-quality basketball team. Forget conference, they're a high-quality basketball team.

Our team, LSU team, extremely, extremely young. George Mason, level of experience. We played UW-Milwaukee in the second round of the NCAA tournament. They were the only team in the NCAA tournament to start five seniors. Several of them were fifth-year seniors. That's the one thing that's really balanced out the NCAA tournament over the years, is you have a lot of teams dealing with an extreme amount of youth. You have some other teams that have had players stick together over a three- and four-year period. They bond, that chemistry and teamwork that can really make them very, very good.

George Mason is a perfect example of a team that has continued to grow and develop. They're a great basketball team.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach. Good luck.

COACH BILLY DONOVAN: Thank you very much.