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SDSU Men's Basketball Preview Quotes – Mountain West Quarterfinals vs. [5] UNLV March 12, 2019

San Diego State Head Coach Brian Dutcher

Opening statement:

"Well we all know what time of year it is. We win three, or the season is over. So, we're preparing and wish we were a little bit more healthy. We got guys that aren't practicing, that's always a concern. Nathan (Mensah) is not practicing, Devin (Watson) is not practicing, and I plan on having them both for Thursday's game against UNLV. But they're banged up right now and we're resting them trying to make sure that they're healthy going into that game. Marvin (Menzies) has done a really good job with his team. They're playing really good basketball. That's a credit to him, his team has gotten better from the first game to the second game, and you watch them on tape now, and they're playing a really high level of basketball. (Kris) Clyburn is a big reason for that, I think he's 11 of his last 15 from three, and so that's added a whole new dimension to them. He's always been a good player but right now he's hot from three. Sometimes you get to March and you can ride a hot player, so, we've got to do a good job on him. At the same time, pay attention to all their weapons. It will be a great challenge and one we are looking forward to."

On the team's performance away from Viejas Arena this season:

"Listen, we've been a very good home team this year. Minus the last minute against Fresno, we'd all be feeling great about ourselves. But we have to be better on the road and we have to definitely see if we can be better on a neutral (floor). Nathan (Mensah) comes to mind, the difference between his home and road success. So we have to have Nathan playing well for us to make a run in this thing. Obviously I'm counting on our veterans, Jalen (McDaniels), Devin (Watson), Jeremy (Hemsley), to all have good games. Your best players have to be at their best in March. So those are the three guys we seem to run the most stuff for and they have to be playing at a high level. The rest of the guys have to get comfortable on a neutral court at the biggest time of the year. We shall see what these guys are all about when we tip it off at 2:30 on Wednesday."

On being the four-seed in the tournament:

"You know we were in this game last year and we were the five-seed and we ended up winning the whole thing. So obviously you can get to the championship from the 4-5 game. You play one less game and you don't have to play in the play-in game so your legs are a little fresher. The thing I like about the 4-5 game is that it is at 2:30 in the afternoon. So if you can win it, you have a recovery time, you have prep time, where as opposed to the three-seed – which we wanted, we wanted the three seed – but it's a harder road in my opinion because you're playing at 8:30 at night, you're not out of there until 11, and it's a tougher road. So game time, obviously I wish we were on a neutral court, but that's not an excuse. This is the way the Mountain West has been since we've been in the league other than the short run in Denver, we've always been at Thomas & Mack (Center). Somebody every year is going to draw UNLV on their home court. This year it's us, and hopefully we'll be up for the task."

On how much he will rely on players with experience in the tournament:

"I think the veterans will have a good feel for it because they have been through it and they've enjoyed success there. The freshmen, the guys that haven't been on the floor, it'll be a first-time experience (for them). I'm interested to see how they respond. I imagine all my veterans – even though I call some of my sophomores veterans – will be ready for the moment."

On the team's success when playing in Las Vegas over recent years:

"It absolutely helps. We've won a lot of games over the years at the Thomas & Mack (Center). If it was a night game we were playing UNLV maybe people would get off work and come support UNLV, but I think an afternoon game, much like probably a lot of our Aztec fans, they'll wait to see how Thursday goes before they come out Friday and Saturday. I imagine it's going to be a real neutral feel in the building, in my opinion, having been there for an afternoon game on Thursdays. So I think if we can get by on Thursday, the atmosphere will pick up. But I don't really know what it will be like on Thursday. I think it'll be pretty neutral and pretty subdued in my opinion."

On the importance of defense late in the season:

"It's funny, because our defense is ahead of our offense again. I know we're the second-ranked defense in the Mountain West, in both field goal percentage and points allowed, and in the KenPom metric we're the second-ranked defense in the conference and when we out-rebound our opponents we're 14-2. Now we did not out-rebound Fresno, they got a couple critical ones at the end of the game that kind of cost us the game. So if we defend and rebound we will have a chance to be successful. Offensively, we have to be more efficient. We have to shoot at a higher percentage, we have to have offense like the last time we were in Vegas where Jordan Schakel stepped up made three big threes and we made timely plays. Obviously, basketball is a game of runs. As much as you want to be at your best all of the time, there are going to be periods where you're not scoring and that's where you have to rely on your defense to hold you in the game, and that's what it's done for us in the back half of the year."

On who the team is playing for at this point in the year:

"I think they play for the Aztecs. They're playing for San Diego State, and that's why they're willing to go out there banged up and do whatever they have to do to play for a teammate, play for this university, and play for the name on the front of their jersey. They're trying to win for San Diego State. Now you have to be selfish at some things, and rebounding is one of them. You have to want to be at your best but you have to sacrifice, obviously. When you get into college basketball all of these players are the best players on their high school teams. At some levels as coaches we have to get them to sacrifice part of themselves for the good of the team. I think this group has done that. They've sacrificed part of their own games for the good of the team. Now we have to continue that process and try to get three wins this week in Vegas."

On the team's tempo at practice before leaving for Las Vegas:

"We went pretty hard yesterday and we'll go hard today, and then tomorrow will be more-or-less a walkthrough. Playing in 24 hours we'll really save legs tomorrow and rest them. But today we'll be up tempo and the walkthrough, we'll have to throw Devin (Watson) and Nathan (Mensah) out there to see if they can pick up a game plan in a walk through, and that's never easy. It'll be easier for Devin because he's been through this a number of times. Nathan, when he doesn't practice I'm a little bit more concerned, but he's a willing learner, but there's something to be said about experience. We'll try to get him as ready as we can get him to play at a game tempo with just walking through a game plan."

San Diego State Guard Jeremy Hemsley

On what it will take to duplicate last year's run:

"I think we just have to turn it up. The task at hand is to win three games in a row. I don't think that is asking for much. I think the effort has to be increased and we just have to want it more. We have to do the little things, we have to dive on the floor, we have to get the 50-50 balls, and we just got to do whatever it takes to win. I mean, I've been in this situation before being a fourth seed or

fifth seed, so, I like being doubted and I like being the underdog in the tournament. I think we'll be ready. I think coach will have us well prepared and I think it just comes down to who plays harder. I think if we do that, we'll have a good chance of winning it."

On being able to use last year's experience this year:

"I would say it's two different things. But, I mean, at the same time, our backs were against the wall like it was last year. So, it's win or go home, and I'm not ready to go home yet. I think you can compare it to last year's team because it was the same situation, but I think this is a different group of guys with a different mentality. We had a lot of older guys last year compared to this team that has a lot of younger guys. I think it's up to me and Devin (Watson) to set the tone if we want to go far and we want to keep playing in March. I think it'll be up to me and Devin to just set that tone."

On if there was a common trend occurring while the team was struggling:

"Yeah, for sure. Coach Dutch told us that I think we're 14-1 when we out-rebound our opponents, so, I think that's definitely something that is important when you want to win games. When we were struggling I think it had more to do with just, our defense was ahead of our offense. I think if we have both moving at the same pace and we don't let our defense dictate our offense, or let our offense dictate our defense because we just play hard on both ends, I think we'll be good."

On the biggest challenge UNLV presents:

"It's on their home floor, so, they're going to be ready to go. They're going to wild up. I know my sophomore year, they had us down by 20 or 30 in the conference tournament and I'm sure their coaches remember that, even though it's a different staff and I know their fans remember that. Like I said, we just have to want it more. It's a road game for us basically, our first game over there in Vegas so we just have to be ready. We got to know they're going to come out doing everything they can to get us off track. They want to beat us, they want to get to the (NCAA) tournament just like we want to get to the tournament. I think we just got to want it more."

On UNLV's home court advantage:

"I don't think it means anything. To be honest, this is basically a new season, except when you lose, you're done. I don't think any of that matters. What matters right now is that we just have to win the game. That's the focus right now, we want to win the first game, and then we'll go from there. "

On if there's any worry with it being his senior season:

"It's not anything scary. It's definitely something you use as motivation. Especially me, personally, I think that I have things that I can show. I still have things to do. I'm not nervous or scared or anything like that, I'll take whatever comes to me. I'll be ready for sure, I'll definitely use it as motivation because I still want to show people what this team can do and the things that we can accomplish and how much better we've gotten since the beginning of the year."

On what it's like playing in Las Vegas:

"My parents are going on this trip and this is the first time they've ever been. So I'm more excited than I was my first year."

On his advice for younger players on the team playing in their first conference tournament:

"I've talked to them about how the crowd is because I remember last year when we played New Mexico I had looked up during a timeout and I was just like, wow, I can't believe there are this many people here. It's easy to sort of get rattled when you realize how many people are there watching you. I think we have a good group of freshmen who won't be effected by stuff like that."

On the mental toughness required to win the tournament:

"You got to be extremely mentally tough. But I think this team is more than capable of doing something. Like I said before, I think it starts at practice. If you want to win games you just have to go hard in practice, too. Like I said, we're more than capable of winning

three games in a row, it's just going to take a lot of focus and a lot of concentration and a lot of hard work, which is what this whole season was. All we have to do is win three in a row and I really think we can do that."

On how much value he puts into his All-Defensive team award:

"Not much. You just want to go to the (NCAA) tournament, that's really all we want to do. Being there last year, that's a feeling I can't describe. I can't even tell you how bad I want to go back. It's something I've dreamed about as a kid and I still dream about it. I'm not worried about any of the regular season awards, I really just want to go back to that tournament."

On the mood surrounding the team this year in comparison to last year:

"I still think we're confident, despite the last two games. I can feel a different feel, of course, because we had won eight in a row last year. We're confident right now regardless of what has happened. We've been practicing so hard that we can't help but be confident. We're knocking down shots, we're helping each other out when guys fall, and I think it's going to be fun. I think we have a really good chance and I know my coaches believe in us and I believe in us too."

San Diego State Forward Jalen McDaniels

On the mental toughness required to win the tournament:

"I feel like we are (mentally tough). We just have to know what we're doing and go in there and compete at a high level. Just play hard, a few of us have been through it last year so we know what it's like and (we can) teach the young guys what it's like. We're prepared so I feel like we have a great chance."

On his personal role this year in comparison to last year:

"I feel like there's a lot more focus on me, I definitely feel that. But I just have to make shots. So that's all, just have to make shots and be in the gym."

On how much the team relies on his personal success for team success:

"Yeah, I accept that 100 percent. I feel the same way. I feel like when I'm on my game – on my best game – we have the best chance of winning. So, I got to step it up."

On how opposing defenses are working against his extra attention:

"I feel like they're just doing different things. It could be a double team, trying to get all up in me, so it's just a lot of variety of different things. Sending three guys sometimes if I go to the boards. So it's a lot of different things."

On how being a five-seed is helping the team this year:

"We know what it was like last year and we knew how tough it was going to be, nothing's easy. So we know how this year is going to be, it's going to be the same way. We got to go out there and just play hard and compete."

On the biggest difference between last year's team and this year's team:

"This year I feel like we just got to lock in and be more focused on defense. Just everything, we have to lock all the way in."

On what it will take to win the tournament:

"Just playing hard. Just getting after it, diving on the floor, all of that. That is going to matter, this could be our last three games. So we just have to go hard."

On the team's current state despite back-to-back losses:

"I feel like we're all confident. It doesn't matter about the momentum, we just feel like we are the best team. That's what we have to go out there and prove."

On his level of focus at this point in the season:

"I'm just always focused. (I'm) just focusing on the right things. Just being in the gym, just being here with my team and us just getting better. That's all I worry about because that's all I can control."

On the possibility of playing his last college game in Las Vegas:

"Yeah, it goes through my mind. I know we got great players on this team and I know we could push and make a run to get to the NCAA tournament."

On the toughest thing UNLV presents:

"They're going to come out hard. We just have to match their energy from the jump and let them know we're here from the jump. We can't play around."

On how a tournament run this year would compare to last year:

"I just feel like we'll have to see how it feels. If we win, of course we're going to be happy, but we just have to get there first."

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