

NCAA Wrestling Championship

Wednesday, March 20, 2019

Cael Sanderson

Tom Ryan

John Smith

Keith Gavin

Tom Brands

Press Conference



Q. For all of you, but Keith especially, how important is it to recruit this area of Pennsylvania, this District 7 area? And, Keith, how important is it for you to get guys to stay home here?

KEITH GAVIN: For us, it's really important. If we're not getting guys around here, we're going to struggle. So one of our advantages is certainly location. We're very close to northeast Ohio, too, and that's another strong area. It's probably the most important thing we do.

TOM RYAN: Pennsylvania is a great state for wrestling. This region, we have three on our team from this region. I'm excited for Keith and what he's doing for the program. He was with Ohio State in our regional training center for a couple of years and got to know him really well and excited for what he's doing here.

Recruiting is a huge part of compiling a team that's got a chance to compete for a title every year. It's a great region and we've got to be in this region.

Q. Coach Smith, you obviously had to do a little lineup shuffling at the end of the year. What went into the decisions and when were those decisions made?

JOHN SMITH: Well, we had some injuries throughout the year. And that was really part of the reason why we had to shuffle our lineup. Other than that, trying to win dual meets and putting our strongest team out.

We at one time really thought everybody would stay up and we thought Preston Weigel would be out for the season. And just a miraculous recovery that he had. All of a sudden in February he's back. And we didn't plan on that.

So just some challenges that unfortunately the rules that are in place today didn't really acknowledge some of those challenges that coaches have with weight issues, with guys getting injured, moving guys around, trying to fill a team. We like to win dual meets, so we're going to try to put our best team out.

Maybe in the future we can consider the challenges coaches have with injuries and moving guys around. But honestly it was a tough year and tough decisions at the end.

Q. John and Cael, both of you were in situations

THE MODERATOR: We're joined from left to right by Tom Ryan, head coach at Ohio State; Cael Sanderson, head coach Penn State; Tom Brands, head coach at Iowa; John Smith, head coach at Oklahoma State; and Keith Gavin, head coach at Pittsburgh. Coach Ryan.

TOM RYAN: Great to be in Pittsburgh at the National Championships. I know as a young kid growing up, I was a big Steelers fan, '75, '76, '79 and '80. They won the championship. My brother was a Cowboy fan, so I loved making fun of him at the time. But I love the city.

We've got three guys that are from this area in Luke Pletcher at 33, Te'Shan Campbell at 65 and Ethan Smith at 74. So it's good for those guys to have an opportunity to compete in the home area. And looking forward to getting the weekend underway.

CAEL SANDERSON: I don't really have a statement. I'd just say we're happy to be here and thank you all for being here.

TOM BRANDS: Fired up to compete. I'm speaking for our guys, and they're fired up as well. And like Tom Ryan said, we have some local flavor here as well.

JOHN SMITH: Just looking forward to it. Kind of neat that we're having the championships here. I think it's a great place to have them. And I'm sure it's going to be a great show.

KEITH GAVIN: We're excited to have it here in Pittsburgh, obviously. It's a special opportunity for our guys. Most of our team is from Pittsburgh. So, yeah, we're all excited.

THE MODERATOR: Questions?

where two-time all-Americans are not wrestling for your team. And I understand the nature of the sport how competitive it is. But could you talk to me about the limitations of the sport because of the situations where there's only so many spots, there are no reserves, and because of that there are a growing number of transfers in the sport? Is this good for the sport?

JOHN SMITH: I don't know how to answer that. I mean, we as a team, we knew the issue from the very beginning. It wasn't something like it snuck up on us. The nice thing about wrestling is you get to put the two guys out there and see who wins. You don't have to pick or choose necessarily. Both of them are high performers, or have been. It's just the way it is. I don't know if you can do anything about it.

Q. [Inaudible]?

JOHN SMITH: I think if the coaches wanted that, there was a big support for that, I don't see that being a disadvantage for the student-athlete.

Q. The nature of the sport, because you yourself have to re-- two-time all-Americans are not good enough -- is that good for the sport and there's a growing number of transfers --

CAEL SANDERSON: I think there are a lot of things that come into play with what you're saying. Generally speaking, wrestling needs more scholarships. I don't think the issue isn't that we have too many guys and can't get them all in the lineup. That happens occasionally. And obviously -- like for us heavyweight, it really -- it really is gleaming, right?

But heavyweight is just that weight class where there's nowhere else to go. They're not going up a weight because there's no other weight. And Nick Nevills is two-time All-American, great wrestler. We have a ton of confidence in him. If he was in the tournament I think he could do really well. But Cassar moved up and earned that spot. And that's wrestling. You get a chance to earn it.

Transfers, you're probably going to see more and more transfers. That's more on the NCAA and them trying to kind of bend to accommodate student-athletes. We'll see. We'll see. I think it will probably be a problem. It's probably not in the best interests of what sports are supposed to kind of teach you a little bit about commitment and when you give your word or something or you sign a contract, usually -- it's just tricky. Right?

So you can look at it from a lot of different perspectives and obviously I'm going to see from my perspective. But I think it will be a challenge. I think you're seeing that with other sports already.

But I think wrestling we're more on the other side where we should be fighting for more than 9.9 scholarships. We have ten weight classes. I don't know why that isn't brought up more. But this tournament, sold out. You can't get a ticket here. Dual meets are growing. The popularity in the sport's growing. We should be getting more scholarships. That would be in the best interests of wrestling, yeah.

Q. All five of you have had decorated wrestling careers of your own. Just being in this venue, what memories does it bring back for your time as a collegiate wrestler?

TOM BRANDS: Duplicate and exceed, that's what we want to do. We have a lot of coaches that did well in this sport. And we want our guys to find their own path and exceed what we've done. And it's never been about me or my experience except for how we mentor our guys and how we train them.

But this is about their path and we're really about how these guys are maturing and getting their own chance at what they want to attain at the sport at the highest level -- national, world and Olympic championships. And you can't separate that world and Olympic championship from the NCAAs, especially in the cross-section of the kids that we're all recruiting right here.

And that's who we're recruiting. We're recruiting guys that want to be national, world and Olympic champions. Duplicate and exceed, that's what we want for our guys. So, it's exciting.

It's a great venue, it's exciting when you walk in. It doesn't change anymore. It looks the same in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Philadelphia and Des Moines. And so it's exciting, brings back good memories.

KEITH GAVIN: I think like Coach Brands said, I don't think about my experience that often because it's not about me. I'm just trying to encourage these guys and individually help them get their best performance. I mean it's all the same. And I think that they need to take it one match at a time and that's probably pretty cliché advice, but it's cliché for a reason. I think it's probably the way to do it.

Q. Keith, I think it was two years ago, your first day on the job was the day they announced the tournament would be here in Pittsburgh. Did you think about that back then and what might be happening two years later? And follow-up to that would be, what's it like for you and your wrestlers to have this event in Pittsburgh, which is considered a hotbed of high school wrestling?

KEITH GAVIN: When it was announced, I didn't really

think too much about it. There was a lot going on at the time. I kind of played it off like I did this and got it here, but that wasn't the case.

But for our guys, like I said, a lot of them -- we have five qualifiers, three of them are from right here. It's special for them and it will never happen again for them. For them it's being grateful for this opportunity and making the most out of it.

Q. Coach Gavin, you had three guys in Meech Thomas, Micky Phillippi and Nino Bonaccorsi burst on the scene. When did you and the coaching staff know you had something special with those guys in particular?

KEITH GAVIN: They're all different cases. Micky was a transfer, and I've known Micky since he was a little kid. We kind of knew what we were getting there. And he's a very successful high school athlete and just a great kid all around.

Meech, we really didn't know. We needed a heavyweight, and found him in the NAIA and he was looking to transfer. We knew he had a lot of ability, but what we didn't know was he also has a really strong will. And I guess that's hard to find when you're just watching tape.

And Nino is similar to Micky. Nino grew up in the Pittsburgh Wrestling Club, and I knew his older brother who wrestled at Pitt. So you kind of know what you're getting with those two guys because we just had a relationship with them.

Q. Cael, eight, nine years ago you saw Jason Nolf probably for the first time. What made you think he was going to be so special, and how he's progressed through his career this coming weekend?

CAEL SANDERSON: I think Jason is special. You can tell just by the look in his eye. He's very confident. And the bigger the match, the better he wrestles. But, yeah, I think especially midway, kind of late into his high school career you could just kind of see that he was separating himself and a lot of that is his desire, his work ethic, his drive. It's just him wanting to be the best and believing that he can be that.

Q. Coach Brands, you have a pretty young team in terms of how many years of eligibility they have left. You've been coaching a long time. How would you compare maybe this team's level of maturity and leadership from some of the young guys to some of the other teams you've had in the past?

TOM BRANDS: That's a question that probably has a long answer to it, and a short answer would be these guys know what they want. They're excited to be here

because they know that this is the most important time of the year. They feed off of each other like all good teams do.

And when you look at our season, how it went, we got whooped at the end. And sometimes when you get whipped at the end, you don't handle it well.

And we had 10 guys and 25 more at home that handled it pretty well. That's not just me making a prediction. There was hangover that first day at the Big Tens, that first round or whatever, and then maybe straightened out a little bit. But that's what this weekend is about. We'll answer that question through the weekend, and I'll let you know how it went.

Q. Coach Brands and Coach Sanderson, with the growth and development of regional training centers, how have you seen those make an impact on your college programs?

TOM BRANDS: It's been great. It's not a new frontier but it's a newer frontier. And I think that USA Wrestling has done a good job of managing it as we go forward into it more and more. They're becoming more popular and it's definitely made a difference with the development that's happening.

And not just young, like young athletes. The obvious benefit is for the young athletes but also for veterans. Veterans have gotten better. They can stay in the sport longer because of financial reasons, opportunities are there more than ever before. And not little money either, not just getting-by rent money. It can add up to significant income. It's been a good thing.

CAEL SANDERSON: I think Coach Brands pretty much said everything I would say. I think the proof's in the pudding. I think USA Wrestling is doing very well. I think all ages -- junior, cadet, senior, Senior World Team, so it's definitely working for USA Wrestling, and it's a great benefit if you take advantage of it.

We're trying to do the best we can taking advantage of it. And it's great for the kids on our team. Like Coach Brands said it's great for the senior-level guys. And I think that we're seeing that with the international success of USA Wrestling.

Q. Keith, since you're the only nonpower conference with the Big Ten and Big 12 up here, Pitt's been a member of the ACC going on a decade now -- 41 qualifiers, 60 percent of the conferences qualifying. When people say ACC they're starting to think good wrestling conference. What have you seen from your time being an assistant, being an athlete and being a head coach and seeing where the growth of the ACC is coming in wrestling?

KEITH GAVIN: Yeah, it's pretty fun to be part of. All the coaches in the ACC are doing a great job, obviously. And it's fun to be part of a competitive conference. I mean, when I was in college it wasn't that long ago and that was -- when you had an ACC guy you were pretty happy about it. We're now -- maybe that's not the case anymore.

So it's just fun to be part of a competitive conference. And our guys get tested throughout the year wrestling those duals and of course our championship, and they know they're ready for this.

Q. To piggyback off of Taylor's earlier question, when you first got the job, you talked about the importance of building the Pitt Wrestling Club. You've got a guy in Megaludis, just went 3-1 at the World Cup, how has that come along and do you see that growing in your two years on the job?

KEITH GAVIN: It's been going really well. It wasn't done before at Pitt. So that was a lot of explaining what RTC was and what you had to do to get a fully functioning one. It's going well.

I think my time at Ohio State, at the Ohio RTC there it helped me a lot. I saw what Coach Ryan had to do and all the efforts that went into that and that was a great experience and trying to duplicate what we had going on there.

Q. Obviously you care about every one of your student-athletes that compete here. But for your seniors, this is their final college opportunity. And I think each one of you guys have some seniors that you're proud of and you'd like to see them have a successful NCAA Tournament when they're finishing up what they're doing as part of your program. I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about the seniors on your team and individually your thoughts about some of these guys and what they've meant to your team?

TOM RYAN: We've got a couple of seniors on our team that been here for quite a while at Ohio State and some not as long. So the relationships that you build with them, you like to see them leave with what the ultimate goal was in their wrestling life.

I think the bigger thing, though, is as much as we want that for them and you visualize hoisting them up on Saturday night, you can play those scenarios over and over in your mind, but ultimately you're glad that you helped them suffer, that you've caused difficulties for them, that they've been through some things in a college wrestling room, whether winning, losing, just fighting the battle of being a college wrestler is very hard.

College wrestling is very hard. And you hope they leave and take things with them more than anything. But obviously I'm hoping to do some hoisting this weekend.

JOHN SMITH: I have several. Derek White, our heavyweight, his journey has been interesting, went to Nebraska, didn't work there for him, and ended up walking on Oklahoma State.

And two of his three years was a walk-on. This was his first year he's ever really, where we had the opportunity to give him money. He's been a nice story from the standpoint of didn't know if he was going to finish his career in the sport to here he is ranked number one in the country as a senior in likely his final tournament.

Jacobi Smith, another Oklahoma boy, both from Oklahoma, and Preston Weigel, 197-pounder, who has been challenged with a lot of injuries. He's found himself back in the lineup for his senior year.

And so it's pretty exciting. My seniors have gone through some different challenges, a little bit like Tom said, it's tough being a wrestler and sometimes it's challenging. And for my seniors, they've gone through the challenges and really been true leaders. Especially this season as we've gone through a lot of injuries, these guys really stepped up.

CAEL SANDERSON: I would just say there were, just like Coach Ryan said, we want these guys to be happy when they leave. We've had a very special group that are now seniors and you just want them to be smiling when the weekend's over and maybe this is the end for them. Maybe they'll keep wrestling depending on who it is.

But we want them to be happy. And obviously I can't do that for them. They've got to go out there and write this final few pages of their book or whatever, however you want to say it. But you want them to be happy. And we're grateful that we've had this time with them.

Q. Coach Brands, can you talk a little bit about Max Murin's development this season? He's been a little bit up and down but had a really good Big Ten tournament, talk about that momentum that he's feeling coming into this tournament?

TOM BRANDS: Biggest thing with Max Murin is that he fights hard. Wrestling's important to him. And he's learning as he goes. He's young. It's not an excuse. But sometimes when you're young it's not quite like you envisioned it, and he's wading through the adversity like everybody has to. And he's handled it with a very mature perspective.

We love Max Murin in our program. And we joke he

leads with his face. And I don't mind guys like that.

Q. Coach Sanderson, we've heard a lot of wrestlers mention mental toughness as the biggest strides they've made since they came into the Penn State program. We've seen Bonnie Epstein travel with the program a lot more this year or I have in photos. I wondered if you could tell us a little bit about her role with the team and how she helps your wrestlers improve the psychology and the mental part of their game?

CAEL SANDERSON: Bonnie's been traveling with us for a while now, I think more than just a couple of years. I have all the confidence in the world in Bonnie. I met her when I was competing a long time ago, and when we had the chance to bring her on staff we did.

But just really honest, good advice. And I think -- we love having her and she's very good at what she does. But she's a counselor slash -- if you call her a sports psychologist she'd slap me. I don't know why. Still don't understand. It is counselor, whatever, it's all the same thing to me. But she's very valuable to us and she's part of the family and we love having her, yeah.

Q. Coach Sanderson, would you say your opinions on the conference tournament has maybe changed over the last few years?

CAEL SANDERSON: In what way?

Q. Conference tournaments, has your opinion changed --

CAEL SANDERSON: I don't think my opinion's changed. I guess I don't know what you're getting at. But it's a qualifier. It's a conference tournament. The Big Ten is very important to every team in there. You want to do well.

Obviously the bigger picture is to get your guys to the nationals and you want to be at your best this weekend. But doing well at the Big Ten Tournament is very important to your school and your community and your fans and the wrestlers. So I don't think anything's really changed unless there's something I'm missing, I don't know.

Q. Keith, with your experience in this tournament and everything, what kind of advice -- what have you told to a wrestler like Micky, a freshman, who's seeded as high as 4; he has a win over No. 1 seed -- just going into a tournament like this, in his hometown, that he's said he's looked up to a tournament like this all his life, what kind of advice have you told him going in to deal with the pressure?

KEITH GAVIN: Micky's experience is different than mine I think. He's in a very tough weight class where --

maybe one of the toughest ones that we've seen in a long time. So when I wrestled it wasn't necessarily that way. I had a couple guys that I had to be concerned with. But every round he's got to be ready to go.

I'm not really concerned with that with him. He's a true competitor and this is what he does best. He's best in moments like this. So just kind of remind him of that; this is who he is. Remind him of that and make sure he keeps it simple.

Q. Coach Gavin and Sanderson, what are the chances we could see a Penn State-Pitt home-and-home dual series the next couple of years?

KEITH GAVIN: Yeah, I'm good with that. They have a tougher -- because the Big Ten schedule -- we only have six teams in the ACC. So our schedule is a lot easier to work out. So I know those guys have a much tougher deal with that.

CAEL SANDERSON: I think there's been talk of that. But it's something that we've -- we wrestled Pitt every year, I think, the first however many years I was at Penn State. So it's not anything, any stretch of the imagination, obviously.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.