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Former Virgin Islands National Team Head Coach Makes NCAA Championship Game

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Jerome Tang, Baylor's Associate Head Coach and Scott Drew, Baylor's Head coach celebrate the team's Elite Eight victory By. Photo Credit- Baylor Athletics

Baylor advanced to the national championship by defeating the University of Houston, 78-59, on Saturday and their Associate Head Coach is Jerome Tang, who was born in Trinidad but moved to St. Croix when he was 3 years old and lived in Williams Delight until he moved to Texas at 10. Even after moving away from St. Croix he returned every summer before the pandemic and jumps at every opportunity to be involved in Virgin Islands Basketball from working at camps to coaching youth and senior national teams.

Baylor will play Gonzaga on Monday at 9:20 p.m. on CBS for the national title after Jalen Suggs hit a buzzer-beater from the halfcourt logo in overtime to continue Gonzaga's perfect season with a 93-90 victory over UCLA. Gonzaga has won their first 31 games this season and before this game won their last 27 games by double-digits.

The Consortium spoke to Mr. Tang, who coached at Baylor for 18 seasons, in a phone interview earlier in the week as he helped prepare his team for their semifinal matchup against Houston.

When asked to put into words what it means to be a part of Baylor's first Men's Final Four Appearance since 1950 he said "it's an incredible feeling" and spoke about the first Final Four he watched between Indiana State, with Larry Bird, and Michigan State, with Magic Johnson, and how that made him fall in love college basketball. He watched every tournament and Final Four since and even from when he was a high school coach knew that he always dreamed about being part of it the Final Four one day. He added that he is excited for the Baylor fans and "Whenever you make history, it is something special and I'm thankful that these young men get to be a part of it."

He said for Baylor to be National Champions on Monday "We can't be satisfied with making the Final Four. We have to reset and get over the giddiness and the excitement of this accomplishment and just focusing on getting better."

The team needed a comeback victory against Villanova in the Sweet 16 even to get to this far. They were down 30-23 at halftime before out-scoring Villanova 39-21 in the second half and win 61-52.

He credited the Wildcats head coach Jay Wright, who has won 2 of the last 4 national championships, with creating a plan that caused the team some difficulties "any time you give a coach like that, a program like that, four days to prepare they are going to have a plan. They are going to come up with something that is going to pose some problems for you."

He said that they did cause some problems and at halftime they found solutions and turned up the intensity in the second half. Villanova hadn't had more than six turnovers in a game since early February according to Mr. Tang but in this matchup Baylor forced 16 turnovers.

Baylor advanced to their first Men's Final Four in school history since 1950 after defeating Arkansas 81-72 in their Elite Eight Matchup

Baylor's season during the Covid-19 pandemic has encountered their fair share of interruptions and adversity. The first way the season was affected was before it even started after Scott Drew, Baylor's head coach tested positive for the coronavirus and the first three games of the season were canceled. The team figured out about this at the airport when they were getting ready to board their flight.

Mr. Tang understood it was tough on his team but credits them for being resilient and continuing to work even without knowing when their first game of the season would be.

Then when Baylor were ranked No. 2 in the country and getting ready to face Gonzaga who were ranked No. 1 in the country they figured out in the elevator down to the lobby to catch their bus to the game that the game was canceled.

The biggest interruption came in February when Baylor had Covid-19 issues that resulted in a three-week hiatus of play. Mr. Tang, players and other staff in the program tested positive for Covid-19. While the team was isolating there was an ice storm in Texas which left them without power. When they came back to play they had just two practices before playing 6 games in 14 days. Four of the games were on the road which resulted in traveling 3,500 miles in just two weeks allowing very little time to get back to practice. 5 of the 6 games after their return were against ranked opponents.

While it was a tough time for the team Mr. Tang spoke about how the team kept an optimistic view of the situation. "The guys viewed it as a blessing, they never got down, they never complained, they just kept plugging away to have this opportunity that we have now."

Baylor has the sixth highest scoring offense averaging 83 points a game in which Mr. Tang attributed this to the trust his players have in each other "the guys share the ball and the go-to person is the open person.", his players spending a lot of time in the gym getting better and the team having six players shooting over 40 percent from three-point range.

Baylor has been promoting a culture of joy on their Twitter feed that Mr. Tang explained further over the phone. "Joy means Jesus first, others second and yourself last." Baylor is a Baptist institution and explained that him and the rest of the coaching staff want to teach their players "to first honor god, put their teammates, put others, in front of themselves." and when that happens there is a real joy in watching other people's success.

A national storyline this year about Baylor has been able to utilize transfers that contribute to their success and Mr. Tang spoke about how they find players that fit in with the culture they established for the program. "we are really selective but we are really transparent." and that they focus on recruiting great

people because “great players don’t make a good program, great people make a great program.”

His involvement in Virgin Islands basketball is because he wanted to give back any way he could to the territory “wherever we’ve been needed, we’ve been willing to fill in and help wherever we could.” and is very grateful to give back to the Virgin Islands he once called home “it has just been a pleasure of mine.” He was very thankful for everyone involved for giving him an opportunity to be involved with the Virgin Islands Basketball Federation.

He spoke about how the Virgin Islands habit of greeting people, being respectful-especially to elders- , the hard work he saw from his family, not needing a lot to be happy and appreciating everything he has as attributes that he learned in the territory that helped him get to where he is today.

Houston also has a representative from the Virgin Islands as Redshirt Freshman, J’wan Roberts is a member of their team and is from St. Thomas. Mr. Roberts has played sparingly in the NCAA tournament appearing for two minutes in Houston’s first round win against Cleveland State and two minutes at the end of the national semifinal. He averaged 2 points, 4 rebounds in about 11 minutes per game this season and had a double-double in February.

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