

GLENDALE, Ariz. — One of the most important names in Gonzaga's 2017 Final Four run logged one minute of court time in the NCAA Tournament.

"We've got somebody on our team who's kind of crazy. He always goes extremely hard, and his name is Dustin Triano," GU's Johnathan Williams said. "Dustin's always bringing the fire."

Triano's a veteran leader for Gonzaga's Red squad, the scout team players tasked with preparing the starters for what they can expect to see ahead of each game. Their value in a championship season cannot be overstated.

"Those Red squad guys are as big as anyone," Zags guard Jordan Mathews said. And the importance of their duties takes on added significance come NCAA Tournament time.

"You get those quick turnarounds [like] West Virginia week: Our Red squad had us prepared," Mathews said. "They pressed us so hard, and that was probably the hardest four days of practice for them."

Mathews referencing West Virginia, one of the nation's premier full-court pressing teams, highlights just how difficult a scout team's responsibility can be. Triano and his Gonzaga teammates not only were tasked with learning the intricacies of the "Press Virginia" style, but also needed to execute at a level approaching the Mountaineers.

In this case, it meant the Red squad successfully emulating the No. 4-ranked adjusted defensive efficiency, and the nation's best turnover-generating defense.

For Triano, it's a role he relishes.

"Any time you get to be a team like West Virginia or any of these awesome teams in the NCAA Tournament, it makes you want to play a bit harder," he said.

A good North Carolina Tar Heel wants nothing to do with Duke, unless it means beating the Blue Devils. In order to knock off Duke, which North Carolina did on its road to the 2017 Final Four, forward Aaron Rohlman looked forward to being a Blue Devil.

Rohlman said Duke was his favorite opponent to emulate when performing scout team duties for North Carolina's workout, citing the Blue Devils' tendency to shoot 3-pointers.

But whether it's a 3-point shooting team like Duke or a physically imposing opponent such as Gonzaga — which North Carolina sees Monday in the national championship game — Rohlman embraces the role of pushing hard in practice to get the Tar Heels playing to their potential.

"That's my time to play," Rohlman said. "I look forward to practice. That's my chance to get better and make these guys get better, pushing these guys. I look forward to it."

In the week leading up to the Final Four, North Carolina's scout team stood in for the Oregon Ducks — a difficult task, given their uncanny athleticism.

Oregon head coach Dana Altman employs a three-quarter-court press, the catalyst for the nation's 17th-best defense. The Ducks suffocate ball-handlers in the backcourt, and limit clean looks at the rim with speed and length.

North Carolina arrived in Arizona ready.

"That three-quarter press Oregon runs tested us a lot," guard Theo Pinson said. "Our scout team did a good job running it. That's a testament to their hard work and trying to make us better."

Oregon made its way to the Final Four in part thanks to the stellar rebounding of forward Jordan Bell. North Carolina benefited from having its own rebounding force on scout team in Rohlman, Pinson said.

The Tar Heels' top rebounding and Final Four hero Kennedy Meeks shares Pinson's sentiment.

"Those guys did a tremendous job moving the ball [in preparation for] yesterday," Meeks said, adding that the scout team's improvements over the course of the season translated into improvements for the starting lineup.

Members of the Tar Heels' scout team have had opportunities to bring their behind-the-scenes importance to the big stage of the NCAA Tournament. Luke Maye was a star in the Elite Eight win over Kentucky, knocking down the game-winning buzzer-beater.

Guard Stilman White also played key minutes against Kentucky, filling in for an injured Joel Berry. White also gained minutes in the Final Four win against Oregon.

"When you come to a place like North Carolina, everyone can play," White said. "Coming here and practicing every day is so great, because it's so competitive. There are so many great players on the court working to be our best, and we've all improved."

Indeed, an estimated 975,808 high schoolers in the United States play varsity basketball.

Roughly 4,200 players make Division I rosters each year, meaning Division I athletes make up the top 0.4 percent of hoopers around the country. Add North Carolina's historical prominence and propensity for producing top-flight players, and that fractional percent decreases further.

So when North Carolina starters see their scout-team counterparts in practice, they're playing against some of the best athletes in America — and it shows.

In Monday's national championship game, players who have fulfilled scout team duties such as Maye and White will get a chance to take the floor. Someone like Dustin Triano may not, but his contribution to Gonzaga's reaching college basketball's biggest stage is the highest honor.

"I enjoy my role," Triano said. "It might not be the most glorious role, but I try to do anything I can. The fact [Williams] shouted me out makes me feel good, and makes me feel like I'm doing my job."