

# Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 13, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

## Wisconsin Badgers

### Greg Gard

### Nolan Winter

### John Tonje

#### Postgame Press Conference

Wisconsin - 70, Northwestern - 63

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Wisconsin coach and the student-athletes. Coach, we'll ask you to make an opening statement.

GREG GARD: Obviously it was the grinder we felt it was going to be. Chris has done a really good job with that group with all their injuries and getting them to play extremely hard and be good defensively.

I thought we were really good defensively too, that we did a pretty good job on Martinelli, really good job on Berry, and then we were able to offensively get going at the end of the first half. And into the second half and be able to grind it out and move on to tomorrow.

**Q. Nolan, today you drew seven fouls. Obviously had a good game statistically. When you're drawing that many fouls, what does that say to you about your game? And part 2 of the question is what kind of stands out to you about your day overall?**

NOLAN WINTER: For me personally, I'm just not trying to be a one-trick pony. I'm trying to add a little more to my game, putting it on the floor, being able to score in the post, inside and outside. It was good for me today to have the confidence that I could get it on the floor and get around some defenders, as well as go outside and knock down a 3.

Just these coaches kind of giving me the confidence to showcase my game like that, it's huge for me. Going forward, I'm really excited for my future.

**Q. Defensively, it seemed like you guys are really**



stepping up that first few minutes of the second half. They only had eight points in the first 8 1/2 minutes. Coming off the loss against Penn State when Penn State played well in that second half, what did you see from yourselves defensively that really got you guys going to get to that double-digit lead?

JOHN TONJE: We were just real with ourselves. We came in the locker room, and we kind of knew what it was. There was a little bit of a trend, like you said, against Penn State. We just really wanted to make sure that we locked in and talked over a couple of coverages and what we wanted to do second half. I'm really proud of the guys for executing second half.

**Q. John, you're a scorer, you look around on the team, and you see these guys that can also be scorers. What a relief is that to you that you know you don't have to go up and light up 30 each game, that all the players around you can do the same?**

JOHN TONJE: Yeah, it's great having talented guys around you. They can't key in on one guy. I think we're a team that's willing to share it and really get anyone involved. It could be anyone's night.

Yeah, it's great to have guys like Nolan Winter on my side, Blackwell, Max Klesmit. You really don't know who's going to get hot that night, so it's awesome.

**Q. John, you had that stretch final few minutes of the first half where you finally were able to get some points on the board. I guess I'm just wondering how much did maybe the end of the first half kind of help get you going for the second?**

JOHN TONJE: Yeah, we were trying to get looks and trying to be aggressive, get downhill and just keep understanding the flow of the game and figuring out how to score and be effective. Yeah, that was pretty good to get going a little bit in the first half.

**Q. Kind of going off of Mark's question earlier, Nolan drew a good amount of fouls, 18 points on five shot attempts. What stood out about his shot choice**



## efficiency and really overall impact today?

GREG GARD: I thought he was -- first half I thought he was active on the glass, kept a couple possessions alive, got him going a little bit, got fouled on a rebound.

Going to the free-throw line, to be able to get there 10 times, and he's got a really unique skill set at 7 feet and the way he shoots it, and now he's getting stronger and more confident to be able to put the ball on the floor. He has a lot of versatility to his game.

Just seeing his -- you could just tell his confidence was growing and growing as possessions were going on. Quite frankly, I know he has 18, but I was as impressed at the job he did defensively on Martinelli, which is really, I'd say the league's leading scorer. I thought he moved his feet really well. I thought he contested when he needed to and really helped set our tone defensively with the job he did on Martinelli.

**Q. Max, he comes back today, it seems like early on offensively you weren't as aggressive, settling for a couple of 3s. Max comes in and has the drive, the kick to Blackwell. Second half, the step-back, and another one setting up Kamari. What does that bring to this team, especially offensively, when Max is being aggressive hunting for his own shot and really driving down the lanes?**

GREG GARD: Well, he's started for three years for us, so there's a lot of experience there. He's extremely competitive. He's got toughness and an edge to him that he plays with. When he was out, we missed him. There's no doubt he's an important piece, as this whole group comes together. It would be the same for anybody else. We're best when we're whole.

I thought early we didn't handle our physicality well. I thought they were really pushing us into screens, and we didn't counter it well enough. Once we got that figured out and were able to get downhill and get at the rim, things started to become a little better for us offensively.

**Q. Arguably, you're one of the top teams in the country, and you're playing on Thursday in this Big Ten. What does that say about these teams and the play of basketball happening in the Big Ten?**

GREG GARD: Well, it's deep. It's deep. It's a really competitive league. I've been in it a long time and just watched it get deeper.

I've been -- I think it was 11 when I first came to Wisconsin in 2001, and now we've almost doubled in size. So I've

seen a lot of changes within the league, but the competitiveness -- our regular season championship means so much. I don't think that's the same in other leagues, and it's always been like that.

So when you have that mentality across the board, there's no off nights. Here we are with Northwestern seeded 13th or whatever, and we're in a dogfight, which we knew. We lose to the 16th seeded team in Penn State and doesn't make the tournament. It's a really competitive league, and you have to be sharp. Hopefully it prepares you for what you can do here in March.

**Q. I thought you got contributions from everybody tonight. Talk a little bit about -- I thought McGee gave you some good energy, and I thought Blackwell played more under control than I've seen him lately. Talk a little about that.**

GREG GARD: I think, going back to Nick's question with Klesmit being back whole, how we missed him for three games. Winter sat out most of the whole second half the last game. So to get all of our guys back and clicking -- and McGee plays such an important piece off the bench. He really has embraced that role. He really has thrived in that role.

What that gets disjointed, we don't have the same impact coming off the bench. As much as Janicki's gotten better, and I think Janicki has benefited from Klesmit being out because he got more minutes and more reps and more meaningful time.

But, yeah, that's been the strength of this team that we've done it in numbers. We've done it from different places on different nights, and I think the other thing having Klesmit back and having McGee off the bench, it allows Blackwell to settle in a little bit more and not have as much on his plate, and I can rest him more. I don't have to play him 38 minutes a game. I can use the bench more and spread those minutes out.

**Q. You've known Chris Collins a long time. In the last few years, has your view of him, of sort of where Northwestern fits in the context overall of the Big Ten and all that, what it can be, has it evolved? Just a couple tournaments, but also even this year just being as hard to play as they were with what they had?**

GREG GARD: They're always hard to play. He does a really good job with them defensively. I think Chris Lowery obviously deserves a lot of credit. I know he's helped them become better defensively.

Obviously he understands what it takes to be successful at

Northwestern. I think it's all unique to each school. I think we've been really able to find the recipe at Wisconsin over the last 20, 25 years and understand what works at Wisconsin and what doesn't. Chris understands what works at Northwestern and the success, the sustained success that he's been able to have there obviously is a credit to him.

**Q. Coach, you commented "We play our best at home." In looking at numbers here today, Northwestern hit a fourth of their 3s. You guys hit a third of your 3s. This arena, does it have any bearing on something like that?**

GREG GARD: In a good way or a bad way? No, we played here in December. We played in the Indianapolis -- whatever it was called. We played Butler. It was a double header, Purdue and Texas A&M, and us and Butler. We scheduled that intentionally knowing we were coming back here for the Big Ten tournament.

I think it was beneficial for us to get in this arena. I don't know what we shot that day against Butler, but we shot well enough to win, I know that. I think any time you can get these experiences in the regular season in a venue that you may play in or are going to play in down the road. It doesn't always work in every year's scheduling plan, but we play and shoot in a big arena too. Our Kohl Center is pretty big, and we play in a lot of big arenas.

I don't think it has anything to do with the sight lines or the baskets. I think it has more to do with the guys in purple jerseys that defend us and contest and make things -- you have to work to get your points.

**Q. 17 second-chance points, 17 points off turnovers. Just can you speak to the value of when you get those turnovers, those second-chance opportunities of being able to really cash in on those?**

GREG GARD: I felt that was one of our keys, specifically the offensive glass, if we could get some extra possessions there. Knowing that we were going to be in a lower possession game, and we had 63 possessions for the game. That's on the low end of where we've been.

But given how Northwestern was going to play and has been playing, if we could pick up some extra possessions off the glass, if we could obviously turning them over is part of it. We're not a defense that's built to turn teams over. We play more on percentages and taking away high-percentage shots, but I felt the offensive glass was important, and we were able to get to the free-throw line quite a bit.

That maybe made up for what you mentioned in terms of 3-point shooting because there's been nights where we've lit the nets on fire from 3. But good teams find ways to win when maybe the 3 doesn't go down, and you can get to the line, you can get second-chance points off the glass and convert some turnovers in too.

**Q. Max plays 23 minutes today, obviously a pretty big impact. Was that kind of around the range where you were expecting him today? Was it more matchup dependent, or was it just kind of how the game went?**

GREG GARD: Kind of how the game went. I decided once we got to that five-minute mark, four minute, whenever I pulled him out, we made a couple snafus that allowed it to get from 18 to 12 or wherever it got, but it was basically play him long enough to make sure we win the game. So that's where it fell.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

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### Ty Berry

### Matthew Nicholson

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THE MODERATOR: We'll take an opening statement from Coach Collins.

CHRIS COLLINS: Congratulations to Wisconsin. We knew it was going to be a tough game today. They're a really good team.

Just really proud of these guys the whole way. Obviously it's always tough when you lose your last game, but I always say, man, when the emotions come out in the locker room at the end of the year means that it was really special because that's how much everybody cared.

We fought hard. We had little stretches of the game where it got away from us a little bit. They're the kind of a team where you just can't make mistakes. They're really good. I thought every time we were locked in and kind of talked our switches and did a good job, we did a pretty good job defending them. I thought the second-chance points in the first half, they had 13 second-chance points in the first half, and we're down seven.

But we hung in there, man. Look, we were running on fumes there, and they started to push it out. I think they got it to 16 or 18. For these guys to say, you know what, we're not going down like that. For us to fight the last seven minutes and get it back to 7. Just so proud of this group.

I hear coaches talk about it all the time. Obviously you have years where you win 27 games and go to tournaments and finish higher in the standings, but a year



like this was as rewarding as any year I've had coaching. We've been thrown a lot of stuff this year, on and off the court, injuries, off the court. All kinds of stuff has been thrown at this group.

For them to rally back and find a way to win 17 games and finish with a winning season, for our third winning season in a row, we got every -- all you want to do as a coach, you want to feel like your guys left it on the floor and they gave you everything they had, and they did. These guys gave it everything they had.

I'm just so sad I won't get to coach Matt and Ty anymore. They've meant so much to me the past five years. They've meant so much to our program. The excitement of our home court advantage, the wins, the tournaments. Those guys were a huge part of it. Just sad I won't get a chance to coach those guys anymore.

**Q. Nick, you were pretty emotional there at the end. Could you just talk us through how you were feeling when the buzzer sounded and your season is over now.**

NICK MARTINELLI: Obviously I wasn't feeling too great. These guys to my right and left, I've kind of grown up with. My older brother went to Northwestern for a year, and they'd come over to the house, and we'd hang out when I was in high school.

Then when it kind of hits you that they're not going to maybe be around anymore as much, it just hurts. Then looking over to the bench and seeing Brooks, somebody that is my best friend in the whole world, it's super painful.

But I cherish every single moment with these guys, and I'm so proud of them. They're the reason this program has become what it's become today, so I'm just grateful for them.

**Q. For Ty and Matt, seems like this has ended up being the last game of your guys' tenures here at Northwestern. For the past five years, what has this program meant to you guys, and what was it like to leave the court for the last time in uniform?**





TY BERRY: Coming in as a freshman, all we wanted to do was win and help Coach find the winning track again. It was tough at first, but after we got over the hump, just being a part of that and giving this program everything that we have these last five years, me and Matt can honestly say that we left this place better than we got it.

That was ultimately the main goal of choosing Northwestern, and just the relationships that we built over these last five years, the teammates I've had, the camaraderie, just the family culture that we built, it's something that I'm so, so proud of and will cherish forever.

MATTHEW NICHOLSON: It's meant a lot to me. It was probably the best decision I've ever made to come to Northwestern. Being a part of the program that was able to turn around the seasons and make it to the tournament not once, but twice in a row meant a lot to me.

Coming in with Ty, we were roommates for three years, and we grew really close. So it really means a lot to me to have Ty by my side all these years. Coming back together, we both announced on the same day because that's just how the program is. It's just we built the program that we wanted to be a part of, and I'm leaving happy as can be about that.

**Q. This game kind of typified how you continued to fight, but what does it mean that your coach continues to fight for you to demand respect and to elevate the Northwestern basketball program?**

NICK MARTINELLI: He means a lot to all of us. He's a guy that will ride or die with us, and we know that. You talk about guys that have come into the program and how they've progressed. That's a tribute to him for sure.

Not just the days when you're in the gym and he's critiquing things and trying to develop you as a player, but he's developing you as a person. He's really about loyalty, and he's about the right things. He has great values, and those values he's instilling in all of us. So we're not just becoming better players, but we're becoming better people.

He always has our backs, and we're always going to have his back. So it means a ton to us.

TY BERRY: I would just say it just shows how much he cares for us. He brings it every day and leaves it all on the line for us every day. It's an honor to have done that for him the last five years. I'm just so grateful for his leadership to me, his mentoring to me. He's like a father figure to me.

At the beginning of the season, when I was coming back off injury and it was hard for me, he was the main person telling me to stay confident and keeping the utmost belief in me. A lot of coaches would have quit on me and would have just said, no, you're done. You will never be as good as you were, and he didn't do that. He kept his belief and just kept pushing me and motivating me.

Just to finish this year like how I did, it was all because of him.

**Q. Nick, has this season kind of changed your life? It certainly has changed the way the outside world, the basketball world sees you. What has it been like for you to ascend as you did and what's next?**

NICK MARTINELLI: I think these past couple years have changed my life, and it's not necessarily involving basketball, but my faith, my relationship with Jesus Christ has powered me through these times.

I don't have to be anxious any more when I'm out there. I always had issues wondering what other people had to think about me, and kind of getting to let that go, I got to grow as a person obviously, but as a player you know that stress, not having to worry about all these people watching me or what they think, that's definitely been a huge part of my development.

I think as soon as I got here my life changed, and not because of the media or people knowing my name, but because of these guys, being around these guys every day. I think that's really what changed my life and definitely attribute to all my teammates that I've had. I have great relationships with them still.

**Q. Nick, you're Northwestern's single season all-time leading scorer. What does it mean to hear that? And then for Ty or Matt, what does it mean to just see Nick's growth through the years as fifth years?**

NICK MARTINELLI: Coach always likes to say, isn't it nice having a coach who will let you shoot any shot you want?

CHRIS COLLINS: Thank you.

NICK MARTINELLI: Yeah, that's really it, you know. I get the ball a ton in great spots, and sometimes shots are falling, sometimes they're not. Over time you continue to build as a player, and you continue to build the trust in your teammates, and they're throwing you the ball more.

I think just this year has been a bunch of ups and downs obviously with Brooks and Jalen and losing more games than we've lost in the last two years since I've been here,

and just kind of taking all that on myself. When you lose, it's a reflection of what us three are doing.

So, yeah, it's just been pretty difficult, but it's obviously a nice stat, but I'm more worried about wins and losses and the relationships I have with these guys.

TY BERRY: To watch Nicky's growth over these last -- honestly, it's been like six or seven years since I've known Nick when he was in high school, it's just been amazing to see. I always knew he was going to be a great player just because of his work ethic. I mean, he's the hardest-working player in the gym. We have to tell him to get out of the gym, he's in the gym so much.

Just his growth from his freshman year to his sophomore year and then his sophomore year to now has just been amazing to see. I'm just so proud of him and so happy to see where he's come.

**Q. Ty and Matt, obviously five years with the program. It's probably pretty hard right now to reflect on your time with Northwestern as a whole, but I'm curious if there's one major memory that's really stuck out with you guys as that was emblematic of my time, my five years with this program and in Evanston?**

MATTHEW NICHOLSON: That's a great question. I'd say -- I don't know. It's hard to think about. Five years is a long time. I really think this year has been a symbol for what we've been at Northwestern. We started out not that great of a team, losing, and then we kind of fought back and just never stopped fighting. That's kind of what we did this year all year long.

I'm really glad that we're leaving like that. I hope that Nick can keep it going.

NICK MARTINELLI: I got you, bro.

TY BERRY: I would say there isn't -- I don't have a specific -- I couldn't tell you a specific like moment. I just know the moments that we built here, the fun times, the crazy game winners, the overtime wins, the foreign trip we went on, just so many great team memories that I'll have forever. That's definitely it.

**Q. Matt and Ty, you guys talk about building the type of culture for a program you then want to play at. Can you talk about what those core features are of Northwestern culture. Some feature that you hope stays even after you guys leave.**

MATTHEW NICHOLSON: Gritty. It's a dogfight out there. Coach says it all the time, we don't want to score 100

points every game, we want to win in the 60s. We want to stop the other team from scoring, just playing defense and getting down and dirty.

TY BERRY: I think for me, as I continue to watch, as I'm done playing here, I think just toughness, toughness has really been the thing that our program has hung our hats on. We always say before every game it's not about being the best team in the country, it's about being the hardest playing team in the country. If you do that every night, you're going to win more than you lose.

**Q. Three fine gentlemen just walked away from you, didn't they?**

CHRIS COLLINS: Yeah, I was just thinking to myself how lucky am I to get to coach guys like that. It's pretty special.

**Q. It sure is. A local young man, KJ, fine game. I saw an interview with his dad the other day, and he's just talking about K.J. being ready for an opportunity. Seems like he's taken advantage of it.**

CHRIS COLLINS: Yeah, I'm really proud of K.J. He's learned a lot, man. I'll be the first to tell you, we hold our guys accountable for trying to do things right and play at a certain standard and how hard we play on both ends of the floor. He's really grown in so many areas throughout the course of the year.

Obviously when Jalen Leach went down, who's our primary ball handler, we needed K.J. to step up. To see him these last eight to ten games to really grow, it's a great sign of the future. I've noticed a huge growth this last month of the season. He's starting to figure some things out.

Hopefully it will be great for him going into the off-season where he can kind of see, okay, here are the areas that I've really got to work on to take that next jump to become kind of what Nick did, and take what Brooks did, Ty, come in a freshman, figure things out and come back the next year and be better.

I think you see with his talent, the kid has a lot of talent. I'm really excited for his future.

THE MODERATOR: For the transcriptionist, that was a reference to K.J. Windham.

**Q. How do you know that you're done, that there's not another game, there might not be another invitation?**

CHRIS COLLINS: Unless we get invited to the NCAA Tournament, we're not going to be participating in any other tournaments. We're a beat-up group. The way our

team is, we got together as a group, we wanted to leave it all on the floor here and make a run for the NCAA Tournament. Some of it's the timing too.

You look at some of these tournaments, it's a three-week layoff with one of them. I don't have enough bodies to practice for 20 more days before a game.

We just felt as a team we left it on the floor. We've been through a lot. It's been a really emotional year on a lot of fronts, like I said, on and off the floor going through things. It's just time to put a bow on this year. We all got together and kind of made that decision as a group with the players, and we wanted to come here and put our best foot forward and compete and see if we could find a way to make a run and maybe get to the NCAA Tournament.

That was kind of our mindset, and we're going to move forward now.

**Q. Talk a little bit about this year. Boo graduated. You came up with a new team. Jalen went down, Brooks went down. How stressful was it for your kids and the staff to come back and be competitive?**

CHRIS COLLINS: Again, I said it in the locker room, I'm so proud -- nobody does it alone. Obviously I'm the leader of the program, the coach but the staff, the job that they did this year, I love my staff. They complement me so well. They bring out the best in me. They help these guys in so many ways. Their mindset kept me going through tough times.

It was hard. Losing Brooks was really hard on me because I love that kid, and it was just so unfair to me for him not to have his senior year. So that one hit me really hard.

Then all of a sudden two games later, Jalen goes down, and he was starting to play great. You're like, man, what is going on?

So I just give a lot of credit to everybody in our room, and I said that in the locker room. Everybody that was a part of our core -- our support staff, our managers, our players, we just rallied around each other, and we left it all out there. Like you guys hear me say that all the time.

Whatever you guys are doing in life, I say that to young people all the time. You just want to be able to look yourself in the mirror and say, I left it all out there. I didn't hold back. I put myself out there. I gave my very best. If you do that, you can live with the results. It doesn't mean it's not going to hurt, not going to sting. No one hates losing more than me.

You had a group of kids right there, you saw how heartfelt they were with the things they were saying and how genuine they are, it made it easy to coach those guys. But it was tough. It was a tough year. I felt like we had to reinvent ourselves about four different times.

You know what, that's life. No one cares. We never made excuses. We just tried to figure out, okay, how can we be successful with what we got. I thought we did that. I thought we got the most out of this group, and I'm proud of it.

**Q. After the upset against Minnesota, what was your mindset going into this game?**

CHRIS COLLINS: Just to live to see another day. We knew how good Wisconsin was. We knew it was going to be a really tough game. When you get in tournament settings, it's just about playing 40 minutes and figure out a way.

We thought we needed to get off to a good start, which we did. A lot of times I feel in tournaments it can be a little bit of an advantage at the start of a game, a team that's played the day before, because the team that hasn't, they're kind of working their way in the first eight minutes. I thought we did a good job. We got off to a good start.

Credit Wisconsin. They're a really good team. They're hard to guard. Like I said, we gave up a bunch of second-chance points, which hurt us, 13 in the first half. They just kind of methodically pushed their lead. Every time we had a chance to get back in it, we missed a shot, they hit a 3. It was just kind of one of those nights and then they got away from us there with the double-figure lead, and we tried to fight back the best we could.

Our mindset was to win. You don't come into these games in a Big Ten tournament, if you don't believe you should win, you shouldn't suit up. We were confident. We thought we were ready. We were excited about the opportunity. We just came up a little short.

**Q. Coach, you have three years remaining on your contract right now. As you head into the offseason, are you looking for or working on an extension?**

CHRIS COLLINS: Every year those conversations will be had. Now is not the time to talk about that stuff. I'm so all in on my team during the year. I block everything out. We'll let the dust settle and figure out, everyone knows how much I love Northwestern. I've never made that -- it's become a home for my family and I.

My son, the four years I just had with him were the best

four years of my life being able to be with him. So it's our home, and we love it. So I've loved every part of the 12 years, good and bad. The ups, the downs, what we've built, the history we've created.

Now is not the time, I'm too emotional about not coaching these guys anymore. Those things will be figured out in time.

**Q. It was a taxing season for sure, injuries and all the minutes guys had to play and all these close games. Then still losing more than you won in the Big Ten. Was it hard for you too? Did it exhaust, did it empty your tank? Are you exhausted?**

CHRIS COLLINS: Yes, I'm exhausted.

**Q. Where are you at sort of mentally now?**

CHRIS COLLINS: Yeah, at the end of every year, I just -- one of the things I do in recruiting, I tell guys all the time I'm a human being, I make a lot of mistakes. I call bad plays. I make bad substitutions. I make mistakes just like all humans do.

The one thing I tell the guys when they choose to come play for us is the one thing I can promise you and I guarantee you is you're going to get my best every day. I'm going to show up every day, and I'm going to give you everything I got. I felt like I did that this year. I felt like I've done that every year.

I do a lot of things wrong, and I've got a lot of growth as a coach. I still feel like I'm young even though I've been doing this for almost 30 years. It's crazy. I'm always tired at the end of the year because, just like I ask the players, I demand that of myself too. They deserve that. These guys have a small window. They deserve my best.

I feel like they got it. So, yes, to answer your question, I am tired. I am tired.

**Q. Coach, how do you put into perspective in just one season Nick Martinelli averaged under 9 points a game, and now he just had the greatest season in Northwestern school history scoring-wise?**

CHRIS COLLINS: It was all coaching. I'm just kidding.

What a special guy Nick is. You hear him talk, he always amazes me every time I hear his interviews, I get teary-eyed. People send them to me because I'm not a big social media guy. People send me the interviews, the things he says, and he thinks them out.

Every time you guys ask him a question, it's always well thought out, and it's always super genuine. He's a genuine guy, and he's just a baller. He's just a baller. He wants to get in the gym, and he wants to hoop. He wants to compete. I love that because that's what I kind of -- my younger days, that's who I was. I just wanted a ball.

That's what I love about him. He's not afraid of anything. But the proof is in the work. Like he's worked on his game. You don't just magically become one of the best players in the Big Ten without putting in time, and he does that. Even to the point I've told a lot of you guys cover us all the time, I've had to pull the reins in on him because he's sometimes in the gym too much because that's how bad he wants to be a great player.

But that's what it takes. I've been lucky in my life to be around a lot of the best of the best in my experience with USA basketball and being at Duke for so long. The best of the best, that's the characteristic they have. They want to be coached. They want to be held accountable. They want to be demanded, and they want to work their tails off. Nick Martinelli fills that.

Just really excited for him to decompress now, get his body right, have an off-season to kind of continue to hone his craft. I'll tell you what, man, I'd be hard pressed to tell you there's too many better players in the country next year than Nick Martinelli.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about the grind that is the Big Ten. When you came in, I think there were 12 teams and now there are 18. It was tough then when you were playing double plays and back and forth. Now you're playing almost everybody once, a couple teams twice, but you're going cross country. How has that added to -- has it added at all to what you guys have to deal with physically, mentally? And how do you maybe commiserate with the West Coast teams that are going all the way across the country several times?**

CHRIS COLLINS: I'll tell you what, when we did the Oregon, Washington trip and we were on the road for six days and had those two games, I told my staff, I can't imagine having to do this four times, whatever they have to do it. Obviously they made that decision to join this league, and that was part of the deal.

Yeah, that added, but I think we've gotten so much from adding those four programs and those brands and getting to a different part of the country. Honestly, guys, you looked -- which I hated. Every coach is going to tell you they want 18 teams here. I don't think it's good for the league. That's just my personal opinion. There's so many



more positives including everybody, and I hope the league can get that right, but you're talking about a team that won seven games in this league, and as of like three days ago was on the NCAA bubble that's not even here.

So if that doesn't tell you how good this league is, then I don't know what does. This league is so well-coached. The level of talent is so good. The atmospheres you play in are so tough. This is just top to bottom such a great, great league, and I'm lucky to be a part of it.

We try to hold our own and do our thing, but yeah, it's a grind. You've got to play two games a week and go on the road and play in these atmospheres, you've got to scheme up. Because if you're not ready to go, you're going to get exposed, if you're not ready and not locked in.

The 20-game grind, it's a long grind, but the teams that navigate it the best are the ones left standing and the ones that are going to be called on Selection Sunday here in a couple days.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned before about how you don't like to compare different years' teams and you treat each one as its own unique group. 10, 15 years from now, how will you remember this year's group and this season?**

CHRIS COLLINS: I'm going to be really proud of this team. Sometimes as coaches there's certain years -- like I even look back at my first year. To me, my first year was one of my most memorable years. I didn't even know what I was doing. There were so many times, I'll say that now, like what am I doing? I don't know what to do, like looking at the wall, and we found a way to win like six league games.

There's years like that that stand out. This one will definitely be. There were things that happened this year that just don't happen. With the injuries, with just crazy things in games, just things that I've never even seen, it felt like they all happened in our games.

For us to kind of navigate that and to find a way to have a winning season, that meant a lot to all of us. That win yesterday was huge because it ensured we were going to -- no matter what, we were going to have a winning season for the third straight year, which that was something we really made a vow to each other when we were sitting at 4-11, guys, let's find a way to get this winning season. That's a great goal for us right now.

I'm going to remember these guys, what they gave me, the year Nicky had. He was unbelievable, man. I told him after the game, I felt like we rode his wave all year long, his competitive spirit, his heart. I was on his journey. I was

just trying to do my part and not screw it up.

**Q. Coach, you know you mentioned you're on fumes and your tank is empty, but how much did this season and the effort from your kids fuel you to want to get back to where you were the last couple years?**

CHRIS COLLINS: Oh, yeah, my fire burns deep. I've always said, the moment my fire isn't stoked, then I need to step aside. I think you guys see, man, I'm a competitor at heart. I'm a fighter. I want to win. I want to do it the right way. I want to do it ethically with great kids and play a great style of basketball.

My fire's burning, and obviously I want to be at the level that some of these guys -- you watch what Coach Izzo did. I'm so amazed by him. I got a chance to be with Coach K for 13 years, and you see the great ones, the great coaches, and that's the biggest thing. You see that fire that burns, and I got it. Don't worry, I may be tired, but the fire's still burning really bright.

Hey, I just want to appreciate the students too that cover us all year. Appreciate you guys being with us.

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