

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 17, 2024
Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA
Target Center

Wisconsin Badgers

Greg Gard

A.J. Storr

Chucky Hepburn

Postgame Press Conference

Illinois - 93, Wisconsin - 87

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. We'll start with the Wisconsin press conference. Opening statement from Coach Greg Gard.

GREG GARD: First of all, congratulations to Illinois. I thought this was a terrific college basketball game, as it should be in March. It came down to a play here, a play there, a rebound here, a rebound there.

But I'm so proud of these two guys to my right and the other 15 guys in that locker room. We're leaving here today a much better team than when we came in on Wednesday and started this tournament on Thursday.

We got to the game we wanted to get to, and we were able to completely get across the finish line, but it doesn't diminish the pride I have in these guys and how they've committed and grown over the last -- you know, this whole season actually.

It stings. It hurts because it's one we wanted obviously and it was one of our goals. But as I told them in the locker room, we put ourselves in position, so we have more basketball. We'll take the thing we learned through this week, which were many, and way more positives than negatives. Like I said, we're a better team walking out of here today than we were when we showed up on Thursday.

I'm looking forward to these guys having more ball coming up this next week in the tournament.

Q. A.J., Coach kind of mentioned how you guys have grown throughout the year. How do you feel your



game has grown over the course of the season and especially recently?

A.J. STORR: I think just being on the same page with my guys out there, like helping me a lot. Defensively I think I improved a little. The guys are motivating me to be a better defensive player, and I'm buying into it.

Just looking forward to playing some more games.

Q. Chucky, obviously the issue over the course of this second half of the season has been defense. Do you feel like it's not necessarily indicative of some of the problems you guys have, but it's just they made more of the shots and made some of the plays they needed to?

CHUCKY HEPBURN: Made some tough shots, got offensive rebounds, second-chance points. That's what we need to fix in March Madness in order to advance. We've got to do the little things to win games like that.

Q. Greg, you kind of alluded to it, but I guess what were you hoping to build with this week? How close do you feel you came to what you were trying to get out of this week?

GREG GARD: Trying to get a championship this week. That's what we were working towards. Like I said before, we're better today than we were at the start of the tournament when we landed on Wednesday. Now we get to go chase another championship.

68 of us -- or 64 of us at least with the play-in games -- will start on the same starting block. One game at a time. You've got to get six. I liked what I saw. We're primed and ready to go now.

Like I said, you want to be playing your best basketball in March, and we are. Looking forward to these guys getting more opportunities to go show how good they are.

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Illinois Fighting Illini

Brad Underwood

Coleman Hawkins

Marcus Domask

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Just staying ready for whatever opponent we have next and staying dialed into those details and being ready to make adjustments on the fly whenever we need to because we only got one shot now. If we lose, we go home.

Just staying dialed in and staying attention to detail is what it's going to take to win.

Illinois - 93, Wisconsin - 87

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. We'll start the Illinois press conference with our opening statement from head coach Brad Underwood.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: What a great feeling. My hat's off to Wisconsin. Boy, are they good. They'll make a lot of noise.

When you're part of something that's really special, and that's this league, when you accomplish something like this, you don't take it for granted. This league is very, very good.

To come here and have three games that were all a little bit different and then have the confetti fall at the end, I couldn't be prouder of these guys. I'm glad they get to experience that feeling and hoist that trophy.

We talk about it a lot. We don't take this tournament for granted, and we're coming here to win and play. I thought the game was as good a college basketball game as you want to see, ebbs and flows. We just happened to make a few plays down the stretch to pull away.

Q. Coleman, feels like you're playing some of your best basketball right now. How do you guys feel? What do you think you show to yourselves and everybody else going into the NCAA Tournament?

COLEMAN HAWKINS: I feel good right now. I feel like I still could have played better this tournament, shooting the ball. I feel like we made some crucial adjustments in all the games we played, and that's what won us these games, and that's what it's going to come down to in March.

Q. Marcus, you come here for one year, you get one chance to kind of do all this. What's this mean to you to get this moment in Minneapolis and have all the confetti falling?

MARCUS DOMASK: It means everything. In my college career, I haven't gotten a ring yet. So to come here and get the ring, this is the conversations, the visions I had with Coach during the recruiting process, and we came here and got the job done.

Q. Marcus, you struggled shooting the ball the first couple days, not so today. Finally getting adjusted to the ball or the court or shooting backgrounds, or what was the difference today?

MARCUS DOMASK: It's just basketball. People have off nights. Steph Curry has off nights. When I have an off night, I just remind myself that Steph, the greatest shooter ever, has off nights.

It's just onto the next play, next possession, next game, and you just keep playing with confidence.

Q. Coleman, what are your immediate thoughts being able to bookend your career, with your freshman year winning this title and then your senior year, being able to do the same thing?

COLEMAN HAWKINS: It's great because I feel like these last four years we haven't been labeled as the best team in the Big Ten. But at the end of the day, after every year, we always end up being the best team in the Big Ten.

So it means a lot despite of what people may say. We put



a lot of time and effort into trying our best to win, and it means a lot, especially staying here for four years and getting this job done tonight. It feels really special.

It means more when you stick around and do something for four years and you're familiar with everybody on the staff and all the changes that have happened. You've seen so many changes, it just means more. So I'm super proud of everybody.

Q. Coleman, I saw you signing autographs for the fans. How important is that for you to take time to talk to fans?

COLEMAN HAWKINS: It's really important to me because they spent their time, their money to come out here and come support us. I've always been that little kid and wanting to get an autograph from college or NBA players, and I just don't want to be the guy to blow them off.

Obviously it was a timely thing, and if I had more time, I would have stayed out there and interacted with more fans. But it definitely means a lot to me.

Q. Coleman, Coach always talks about this team being the most connected team that he coached. From you being here for so long, what's the thing that makes you the proudest of this team?

COLEMAN HAWKINS: I think the thing that makes me proud is I feel like there's just a difference, like Klesmit hit two big, tough threes, and nobody hung their head. We came down, and we scored the ball. Then we ended up getting stops.

I feel like sometimes in my career there's been moments where those threes would have just destroyed everything, and we would have lost that game because we weren't connected. Tonight we saw the end result. You saw nobody hung their head. We kept playing. We made some mistakes, but we were able to keep playing.

Ultimately, we played hard, and we were able to get a win. So nobody's quit on anybody. I'm super proud of all the adversity we've gone through, whether it was from Marcus in the summer with his hamstring, me all year with my knee, Quincy's wrist all year, off-the-court things -- we've all stuck together, and we've done a really good job of just being together.

Q. Marcus, what encourages you most about how you guys played this week? Was it coming back from the deficits? Was it a certain way you played? What do you think it was?

MARCUS DOMASK: Yeah, I think it was just our fight. There were a lot of times where it would have been really easy to fold and pack it up and accept defeat, but every time out, we had the same message that we weren't going home, we weren't losing this game.

So I think just the ability to push through stuff that we didn't have planned, we didn't want to get down ten, but just our ability to keep fighting.

Q. Coleman, this is for you. Wisconsin counterpunched as well as any team you guys played against in the tournament. What did you see was different from them, and how did you guys overcome that ability to rally against you guys?

COLEMAN HAWKINS: It's funny because I told the guys in the locker room after we beat them in Wisconsin, I said, I wonder why Chucky Hepburn isn't so aggressive. I feel like he's one of the best players in our league, and I feel like the first game he wasn't that aggressive. But tonight we saw him be a little bit more aggressive, coming off those ball screens, choking his motor, get into his spots, passing the ball well.

I think, if he plays the way he plays tonight in all the tournament, really toughing it out through that leg injury I think he had -- but I think when he's aggressive, I feel like they're a really good team. I think that was the biggest thing tonight, his aggressiveness for sure.

And Steven Cowl was in the game. He was in foul trouble when he played them up at Madison. So he's a big piece for them as well.

Q. Brad, what you encouraged you most about how your team played this weekend heading into the NCAA Tournament?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Resiliency, toughness, fight. It was a little bit different every night, I love that. It was a great defensive second half yesterday that won it yesterday. I thought today it was swings and emotion and really, really good offense. You shoot 62 percent today in the second half.

I thought that we got through the first game, maybe a little nervousness and a little sloppy, but yeah, you're going to have some of those. I just love our resiliency today.

Q. Three double-digit deficits in three days, Brad. What did you learn about your basketball team this weekend?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I didn't like it, but yeah, I think it's a

long game. I think there was no panic. I thought we stayed the course. I thought today one of the biggest things was we made a switch and we went really big, playing Dane. I thought that impacted -- put Coleman on Storr, which he did a terrific job on.

Yeah, I think it's just the variety of ways that we think we can play and have to play. Like I said, it was kind of a little bit all over the place in terms of our who did it and how we did it.

Q. Brad, looking forward to next week. How do you balance when you're preparing in general between the cautionary tales of learning from some of the relatively early exits in the first few years, and then knowing those are in the past and moving forward not to worry about them?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: There's very few guys who know anything about the past. They're living in the moment. We didn't talk one second about coming to the Big Ten tournament and getting beat last year in the first round. Every team has its own identity. This team's no different. We'll dive into Morehead State in about an hour as soon as we get on that plane, and we'll prepare for the postseason.

The postseason is over in the Big Ten, and thank God we don't have to see another Big Ten team for a while. Yeah, we've got to go prepare. We'll put a bow on this with the ability to carry the trophy up in the practice facility.

Q. I'm sure you've seen the photo, it was viral last night, you in the tub with all the players. Can you walk us through that photo where you feel so comfortable with those guys that you get on them in the game and you were able to have those moments with them after?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Wow, I didn't know I looked that good with my shirt off. I actually cold tub every day. We're fortunate we've got one in our practice facility, so I'm a big fan.

A few of the guys called me out the first day, and I had to go in and really show them that, even though I'm a little older than them, that I'm still pretty tough because none of them can dunk all the way under and hold their breath for ten seconds while I can. So I had to show them the old man's got a little toughness to him.

Q. Brad, I'm jumping ahead, but you haven't been to the Sweet 16, Illinois hasn't since '05. Everybody is going to be burning for it. I want to know how much you really burn for that, to check that off your list.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: It's not about checking a box. I

came here to win a National Championship. If you think that's all I'm trying to get to -- we've had unfortunate draws. I think we've had some tough draws. You get beat. I think every program has had those moments where you get upset. You maybe don't play as well. We had the year with Trent with pink eye, Jacob Grandison out with an injury.

I think we're going into a place we're as healthy as we've been, and we're playing well. This team doesn't know anything about any of that. I'm here to try to win a National Championship. Illinois is that type of program.

I told Josh Whitman, our athletic director, Chancellor Jones that, every time I see him, we are here to win a National Championship. If those goals ever change, then I probably don't need to be your ball coach anymore. In the meantime, that's our goal. Not just get out of the first weekend, it's to keep moving on.

Q. Coach, obviously Terrence and Marcus are your go-to guys offensively. We saw some major bench production offensively this week from Dane and Luke and some others. How important is it going to be for those guys coming off the bench to produce even more in the tournament even with Dane and Marcus still doing their thing?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, Coleman didn't have a great tournament offensively, but he's a guy that had 30 a few games ago. I thought Ty Rodgers had an unbelievable tournament. He got in some foul trouble today. Quincy had an unbelievable tournament. I think we've got a lot of weapons. Justin Harmon has been a consistent double-figures scorer. I thought Dravyn Gibbs gave us some today.

I like this group. I like that you can push some buttons and have different lineups and have the ability to be different if we need to be. I feel good about that.

Q. Coach, you mentioned being different. This roster is built with a lot of positional flexibility and guys who can switch a lot on screens and switch defensively. How do you think that helps you prepare and be ready for success at the next level?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: We have our base foundation. We made a change in the second half tonight, where we did start switching. For a lot of the game we wanted to try to keep Terrence on A.J., and then Chucky got going, and we made a switch and put T.J. on him and slid Coleman over. So that helps.

We went to a lot of switching late. That gives us some



flexibility, I should say. But yet we have the ability to keep a really good defender -- yesterday's a great example, keeping Ty on Keisei for most of the -- or T.J. on Keisei most of the game.

I like our diversity on that side.

Q. Brad, how do you reflect on cutting nets in the Big Ten three out of four years?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Special. I feel good. I mean, it is so many people, and it's -- I say this, coaches win games. Administrators win championships, and that's a fact. Come look at our facilities.

It's not about what we do in a moment or what we do in -- it's a lot of work. It's a lot of years. I say it all the time, it's the best league in the country, best coaches who have become great, great friends. Throughout we compete like hell for 40 minutes, and yet we all get along. Great players.

And to be able to do that, in my opinion, it's pretty special. I like the fact that I think that's where Illinois basketball should be, and it's nice to get it there and keep it there. A lot of hard work. A lot of people behind it. A lot of great players, a lot of great coaches, a lot of administrators and support staff.

Q. I'd appreciate an answer. Terrence Shannon Jr., I think 102 points in three days, hottest player on the planet, but he's not at the podium after. He's not available in the locker room. As you go forward, the game's get bigger, the stage. If he keeps playing like this, I assume it's going to become even more of a complaint from the media. Are you concerned at all about where this could head? Are you okay with it? To what extent can you kind of speak for Illinois?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I'm great. Again, I'm the basketball coach, and a lot of this stuff was put in play by our university, the courts, and I'm not going to consume myself with it. I've got a locker room full of players that I said, when he was suspended, I was going to coach the guys in the locker room. He's in the locker room. I'm going to coach him.

It's a very serious matter. He's got representation. That locker room is so strong that whatever, how hot he gets -- we knew he was hot. He's a good player. He was hot before it happened. That it will be handled accordingly and with great sensitivity and respect to everybody.

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