

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 14, 2024

Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Target Center

Michigan State Spartans

Tom Izzo

Malik Hall

A.J. Hoggard

Tyson Walker

Postgame Press Conference

Michigan State - 77, Minnesota - 67

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Michigan State. Head coach Tom Izzo will be here in a moment. Malik Hall, A.J. Hoggard, and Tyson Walker. Joined by Coach Izzo.

We'll start off with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions from our student-athletes.

TOM IZZO: It's been an interesting year in a lot of fashions, but I said early that you win with veterans and you win with your key guys doing the job. I said we have a veteran backcourt, we've got a veteran in Malik, we've got a veteran coach.

I think we all took a little blame for the ups and downs, but first I'd like to give credit to Minnesota. They played well. Ben's done an unbelievable job with the program. They could be the Number 1 team in the league next year. So hat's off to them.

Number two, I want to give credit to these guys. It was Malik in foul trouble early. I've never sat him that long in a long time. I thought A.J. struggled a little bit in the first half with some turnovers and Ty not taking shots in the second half. All three of them really responded like they're capable of. I thought Jaden Akins made big plays defensively.

But A.J. ran the show. Tyson made some shots. Malik, we used him as a point forward down there, and he made some big-time plays. We're just excited to be moving on. I don't care who we play, we're still excited to be moving on.



Q. For A.J. and Tyson, veteran seniors, experienced guys take over this time of year. Did you guys both feel that in this game?

A.J. HOGGARD: Yeah, definitely. It was something that we harped on all week. We know that's definitely the key to winning games, especially during tournament time. So we definitely had our mind set on coming out here and handling business.

Like Coach said, we started off a little slow, turning the ball over unusually. Just responded in the second half, being that guy for my team that I needed to be in the second half and making things happen.

I think we had our mind set on that coming into tournament time.

Q. How was it playing this Minnesota offense?

MALIK HALL: I mean, they do a lot of things. We kind of struggled at the beginning with the chin action, the ball screens. It was something we talked about at halftime. We tried to make an adjustment on. I think they did a really good job making sure they were rolling and slipping out of them. That, for a majority, is what I noticed for sure.

Q. I just wanted to ask all three of you guys, you guys during the season you had some losses, but it just seems like every time Michigan State has some kind of mystique. Is there some kind of power that it seems like every time you guys get to a game you need to win, you keep winning in the clutch games.

TYSON WALKER: I would say for us, I think we learned the most lessons out of anybody, just the games we lost and how we lost them. So just trying to build on that. We talked about it a lot, so just trying to build on that and make sure we don't do it again.

Q. Tyson, what was the biggest difference after the first half, kind of shaking off the cold shooting and hitting the big shots down the stretch?

TYSON WALKER: Just being more aggressive and



looking for my shot, not looking for pass and then shoot, but looking to shoot. Then trying to get fouled and just being aggressive.

Q. Can you speak a little bit about Tre's performance today? And if you've got anything else you want to say about Ben Johnson's performance this year as a coach?

TOM IZZO: First on Tre, you know when you put the stickers on and the team that moves forward, the team votes who does that, and it was unanimous that Tre was the guy. It wasn't because he's from here, it's because of the lift he gave us and some of the plays he made. 3-for-3, 2-for-2 from the three, misses one free throw, but I thought played pretty good defensively.

I thought it was one of his best games, if I looked at all around the things that he did. So I'm really proud of Tre and happy for him. You come home, you want to play well in front of some of your family and friends.

As far as Ben Johnson, everybody in the room knows that I'm close with Ben and should be close with Ben because there were people that took care of me when I came in. You're going to see one tomorrow, Gene Keady, and the Bobby Knights and the Clem Haskins, those guys. I try to do some of that with Ben because I believe in him, and I believe what he's done.

All he has to do is hold this team together, and they'll come in as, if not the favorite, one of the favorites. It's a very, very good basketball team. I've been really impressed. The guards have gotten better. Christie's gotten better. I thought we did a decent job on Mitchell today. I don't know what he ended up with. He had 5 points.

The improvement that Payne has made has been phenomenal. I thought the Fox kid really did a lot for him, but Garcia is a load. You have to game plan against Garcia. He can beat you from the outside. He can beat you from the inside.

I just thought, when we got close a couple times we were down, they came with a great play. I mean, he did a marvelous job of managing the game. At the end, we made a couple more plays than they did.

But the guy deserves a lot of credit. When you look at him, being a Minnesota kid, there's going to be a lot of great years ahead for him.

Q. Dawson Garcia in the second half kind of late he made that floater and a shot went in, and you kind of walked the other way from the bench. How would you

describe his offensive skill set?

TOM IZZO: As I said, he can beat you a lot of different ways. He can beat you with a three. He can beat you -- we had him beat a dominant left-hand guy, and he can go right.

I think his improvement -- I told him after the game. I said, I think you've improved as much as anybody. I just think he has a lot more to his game now. That mid-range floater, that was a critical time in the game. I'm the one that turned around and said a bunch of words, none that I'll repeat, but give him credit. He made some plays.

When we double-teamed him, he made some passes. He's a three or four-dimensional guy. I think he can score it from three different ways. I think we can rebound the ball. I think he can definitely pass the ball. He only had one assist because I thought we did a decent job. We changed our double coverage from what we did and tried not to let those guards go crazy, like Cam did against us up here. He had five threes almost in a row.

He's a good player. He's a very good player, and if he keeps getting better, watch out.

Q. Next up is Purdue. Next up is Zach Edey. What message do you express, do you tell to your young people, to your bigs especially, as far as competing, competing against that load that is Zach Edey?

TOM IZZO: You said little? What time is it? This guy is a friend of mine. He doesn't even give me a chance to enjoy the press conference, and he's asking me maybe about the greatest player maybe in basketball in the past two years.

I am going to come up with something. I brought a couple of football coaches. My buddy Mariucci came. My buddy Mark Dantonio. I'm going to institute coaching from them. I'm going to institute a couple of players to bring up. Zach Edey is a helluva player, man. Talk about a guy that deserves credit.

The way they get him a ball in so many different ways. We thought we did a pretty good job the last game, and then the two guards went nuts. We did a couple things the year before, and he got 35, and we held the guards. So we're going to have to pick our poison in what we're going to do.

This team is better than any team he's had because he's got Gillis, who can make threes. He's got Loyer that can make threes. We all know Smith is one of the better three-point shooters. Jones did not shoot it real well at our place, but he's a very good three-point shooter. If you cover them, Edey's there.

So you ruined my press conference, but I'm going to answer it that way, and the rest I'm going to answer on my team today, so I can enjoy it until I get on the bus and start thinking about the jolly green giant down in West Lafayette.

Q. Tom, you mentioned at the start your older players, backcourt taking over in the second half. Is that when you guys are at your best, when those guys are getting up and down the floor, you're forcing turnovers, a fast break? Because they really seemed to get out in transition a lot in the second half.

TOM IZZO: I guess you -- when you coach, you become more critical of people but no one is being more critical than I am of myself. If we don't win, I look in the mirror before I look at anybody else. But at the beginning of the year, those guys were all over, and deservedly so. They've been a little inconsistent. Tyson was a little hurt, but we've been a little inconsistent, and I think I've been inconsistent.

So the veterans got together for a couple meetings, me and them, and we just talked about it. First half, we were okay, but the second half, we played like I think our team has to play if we're going to be successful.

You usually win in the tournament with your guard play. I thought Tyson was passing up shots. So part of my rant was on him to shoot the ball. But, yeah, I thought that our guards did a great job.

Jaden Akins will be the unsung player of the game because of like three or four defensive plays he made. Twice he knocked the ball loose. They would have had layups. We call him the fifth defender. He did his job. So even though he didn't score as much as Jaden would like probably.

But we look for guys that make game-winning plays, and he made some game-winning plays.

Q. How did it feel coaching in the house that Flip Saunders built?

TOM IZZO: It was a tearful visit for me. As everybody knows, Flip and I were really good friends. I interviewed up here one time in the new practice facility across the street and went on a couple tours here. When I recruited some guys from Minnesota, like Tre -- not this Tre, the one that went to Duke. I was escorted around with Flip.

If you remember, then all of a sudden Flip's name came up on the Minnesota job. I said, Flip, are you helping me, or are you helping next week's announcement?

But I love the guy. I love Debbie, his wife, and his kids. I'm really proud of his son who's doing so well out in Denver. Flip Saunders deserves to be even thought of more than he probably is here because he loved this city, he loved the Gophers, he loved the Timberwolves, and I love him. Sad to see him not with us right now.

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Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

Minnesota Golden Gophers

Ben Johnson

Dawson Garcia

Parker Fox

Postgame Press Conference

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THE MODERATOR: We're joined by University of Minnesota head coach Ben Johnson, along with Dawson Garcia and Parker Fox. We'll have Coach Johnson start with an opening statement then take questions for the student-athletes.

BEN JOHNSON: I thought to start the game I really liked our mentality, I really liked our approach. To be able to build the lead, I thought we had pretty good momentum, which was good to see. That was my challenge to them is how can we start today just in an aggressive, positive way, and I thought we did that.

We knew it was going to be a grind. A team that's a proven veteran, been in this position before. Kind of a must-win game for both teams. We knew it was going to come down to the details.

I just thought in the second half, kind of around the midway point, we couldn't get consecutive stops, and we had a couple of tough possessions offensively where we couldn't get the ball to fall.

But I liked our guys' compete, liked their mindset, and it's a tough one for us.

Q. Question for Parker and Dawson, just talk about the environment there, playing at home. It seems like a lot of your fans came out and supported you. To begin the game, did you think that gave you some energy?

PARKER FOX: I thought the energy was even better than I expected it to be for Thursday at 11:00 a.m. Our fans were out. Just Big Ten fans in general were out. It was a



fun atmosphere. I haven't played on the Target Center court since I was in third grade. To be able to go back out there and play there again was pretty special.

Unfortunately, it didn't go the way we wanted it to go, but I'm proud of the way we fought and proud of the way that our fans brought energy to help us, kind of lift us up.

DAWSON GARCIA: Our fans, they definitely lifted us up, especially when we went on runs. I could really feel the environment. It felt like we were at a home game. Props to our fans. They always bring it. Much respect.

Q. Dawson, Parker, what was it about Michigan State that kind of gave you guys fits in the second half where you couldn't get over the hump and find a rhythm offensively?

PARKER FOX: Like Coach said, they're a veteran group. Malik, Tyson, A.J., they're veteran guards. We knew they weren't just going to go away. We had the lead going into the half, but we knew it was going to be a whole 'nother battle in the second half. They just did some things offensively that we weren't able to execute with our defense.

We had a really good plan. Our coaches put in a really good plan for what we wanted to do defensively, and some of that unfortunately broke down. Then they go out and we weren't able to stop some of their stuff.

Tip of the cap to them, but we want to play better than that. Unfortunately, we didn't today.

Q. Parker Fox, I've got a question for you: Could you just wrap up what it's been to play at home in front of these fans and what this Minnesota experience has meant to you.

PARKER FOX: I think it was a different experience than I thought it was going to be. I thought I'd transfer in and be ready to play right away. Unfortunately, injuries kind of took that away for me for a couple of years. I wouldn't trade my journey for anything. I wouldn't trade my teammates, coaching staff, support staff, everybody that's



been a part of my journey here at the U for anything.

Coaches never wavered. They always stuck by my side. That's the thing I'm most grateful for because it's a tough journey when you go through back-to-back knee injuries, and there's definitely days you want to give up and quit. I found that energy from my teammates, from my family, and just being around the University of Minnesota and truly bleeding it.

I've bled it for a long time. I've bled maroon and gold since I can remember. And being a part of this team and being a part of this university was truly something really special. I'll never forget it.

Q. Dawson, Tom Izzo only had good things to say about you, he said he talked with you a little bit after the game. Can you talk about that and how that makes you feel?

DAWSON GARCIA: Much respect. He's a legend in the coaching game. He always gets his guys to play hard and play well. It definitely means a lot.

It's unfortunate we couldn't come out on top and put ourselves in a position where we control our destiny, but at the end of the day, much respect to him and their team.

Q. Parker, talk about the growth of a couple of the younger guys. I know you were here a few years before this and tried to mentor some of them.

PARKER FOX: Before Coach came in the locker room, I basically said to the guys, this has been such a fun year, with the last two years not being able to win as much. This year we turn around and had some pretty good winning streaks. Even games when we weren't winning, we were competing really hard and just doing some really good things offensively and defensively.

Just being able to see the guys grow. A kid like Cam Christie, you see the work that he puts in every single day, it's no surprise he's the talent that he is on the court.

You can go down the line, from 1 to 15. We've got a group of guys that were truly bought in. I hope that the NIT gives us a chance to keep playing because we've got guys that want to be here and want to play and want to continue to play and want to continue to grow as a group, not just as individuals. I think that's what's really special about this team.

Q. Dawson, this question is for you: Seeing where you guys ended last season and where you ended this season, I know it's a disappointment to lose, but do

you feel like this program took steps in the right direction? Where do you think this team can go next season?

DAWSON GARCIA: I definitely think we're continuing to go in the right direction. That's what it's about. We've got guys in the locker room, a whole coaching staff, a whole university that's behind us that's willing and committed to moving in the right direction.

I've got nothing but good to say about every single one of my teammates. Love them to death. Same with the coaches and support staff. Everybody's invested into a winning culture.

Q. Ben, we talked on Tuesday about defensive issues you guys had towards the end of the year. First half it looked like you guys played better. What did you feel like maybe didn't work in the second half against Michigan State?

BEN JOHNSON: I thought our defensive mindset was where it needed to be. It was better than the two previous games, and that showed obviously from the start and our ability to build the lead a little bit in the second half.

Obviously Michigan State is a good offensive team. So any little breakdown that we had -- I think it was 49-44, and we had a couple offensive miscues and then a couple defensive miscues. But just that little stretch, it might have been two or three minutes, all of a sudden you look up and the score and the momentum has flipped. That's all it takes against a really good team.

I think for us finding ways to be more consistent throughout the 40 minutes, especially these last three games, we couldn't really do that. That's going to be the point of emphasis from here moving forward now that we've got a core group, guys that are back. Now they totally understand what I mean when I say that.

Again, sometimes you've got to go through it to fully feel it and believe it, and now it's proof. So it's something to build on.

Q. Ben, defensively you took a step forward, I think at one point in the Big Ten season. Last time you played Michigan State, you held them to 55 points. Whether you play in the NIT or not, when you go back and look at the film of these last several games, what specifically defensively do you think that you guys was your strongest point, and what can you build on moving forward?

BEN JOHNSON: I thought we did a lot of good things



defensively. We were big on not allowing them to get big easy catch and shoot threes. I know they made five, but they shot eight. They only got eight off, which was good.

I thought part of the score, they had 18 points off our turnovers, so I think that was part of it. If you limit, even cut that in half, they're not getting 77. So I think part of that is your offense does control a little bit of your defense. When you're careless with the ball, you can play great defense, but when you're leading to straight points off your turnovers, that just eats away at your defense and eats away at your mentality.

But I thought for the majority of our game, I thought we were aggressive on the ball. I thought our rotations were pretty good. For the most part, I thought we were engaged in what we were trying to do. Again, just had that one area where both sides of the ball, we just weren't clicking. It's really tough against a good team that obviously is playing for a lot now to have those mistakes and start to take care of the ball. Can't give up 18 points off our turnovers.

Q. Just throughout the duration of the season, how have you seen players develop both on and off the court?

BEN JOHNSON: A lot. I think we've had a different type group. Dawson is a guy that I think has been super consistent when he's had the true target on his back. He's been consistent in practice. He's been consistent in games with his production, both defensively and offensively.

I think he's taken a step in his feel and understanding of the game. I think, when you look at the guys who are the sophomores -- Pharrell, Josh, Braeden -- those guys went through it last year and now are able to confidently take another step, and I thought they did that. Now their next step is to be consistent players.

Then you've got the new guys. You've got Cam. You've got Mike. You've got Elijah. I'd even though Parker and Isaiah in there because they hadn't played. And I thought those guys showed a ton of growth. For Parker to even be able to compete the full year and have no setbacks, knock on wood, it shows how far he's come with just his rehab alone.

Cam, being a freshman and not knowing anything about anything and being a guy that towards the end of the year is on the front of the scouting reports, that shows his game took a growth and took a step.

It's the same thing with Mike and Elijah, those guys coming from different programs where they were asked to do and perform differently for two years and have two years of

different habits. It's not easy to flipping a switch to all of a sudden now morph and be successful in the Big Ten when you're a key piece.

I thought those guys were willing learners. They want to get better. They want to be good. They're competitors. Just real excited to get going in the off-season with those guys.

Again, hopefully we have more basketball ahead of us. But if not, I know we're going to attack this spring and summer and really be ready next year.

Q. Hey, Ben, Tom started his presser by talking about how impressed he was with what you've done with this program this season, and he talked about how much guys meant to him in his time as a head coach. What has he meant to you in your time at Minnesota?

BEN JOHNSON: He's meant a ton. Obviously it's been documented, we go way back to when he recruited me in high school. I came up under Brian Gregory as a GA, who's one of his best friends. So he's kind of known my path from day one, from a player and from a GA, and now to head coach.

The guy has been unbelievable with me, as well as other coaches, but a guy in the league normally doesn't do that. He takes the time out to always check in and call, and he pays attention. I'm able to use him as a sounding board.

I think we're more similar than different in a lot of aspects, and I think he sees that too. So to be able to have a guy of his caliber that obviously I have a ton of respect for, be able to guide me through certain situations, couldn't be more thankful.

He's made me a better coach. All the coaches in this league, but he for sure has made me a better coach. You have to be on your Ps and Qs when you go against Michigan State, and just the development that I've been able to have just in this league. But to go against a guy like that night in and night out and be able to pick his brain at the same time, thankful for it, and hopefully next time we can beat him.

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