

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 14, 2024

Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Target Center

Indiana Hoosiers

Mike Woodson

Anthony Leal

Kel'el Ware

Postgame Press Conference

Indiana - 61, Penn State - 59

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Indiana. Head coach Mike Woodson, along with Kel'el Ware and Anthony Leal.

MIKE WOODSON: The only thing I got for you is both teams played extremely hard. Their team is well coached. They've kind of had our number the last few years. I thought our guys fought from the very beginning till the end.

It was just one of those type of games, an ugly game, but we made the plays we needed to make coming down the homestretch.

Q. Kel'el, obviously no Trey tonight. What does it mean to get the performances you did from guys like Anthony with some big buckets, Gabe hit a lot of big threes, X had a lot of assists? Just steady backcourt play, even with a guy out injured.

KEL'EL WARE: Even with one guy out, we've always got to come together as a team, just play together and lock in on defense, and just be able to execute the offense well to be able to come out with a W.

Q. Anthony, on that final possession, can you just kind of describe what was going on there and what you saw? How it all turned out and how good that feels, the way it turned out.

ANTHONY LEAL: I know with the shot clock running down and everything that we're going to get a chance to get a shot, but the odds of that shot going in aren't always high. The odds of losing on a tip-in or a rebound is something we



talk about a lot on defense. If there's a buzzer beater, we've got to be boxing out.

So I knew that, if he did happen to miss a shot, to go in there and try to make something happen is a possibility. I'm blessed I was able to do that.

Q. Anthony, can you talk about for all the guys guarding out on the wing, the defensive mentality you had to have to keep a small wing to 3-for-15 from the floor. Kind of the approach you had.

ANTHONY LEAL: Our first two games, he was really comfortable, operating on the floor, being able to penetrate and make plays for everyone on his team. But coming into this game, we challenged our bigs to guard the ball screens differently, and they did a great job of that. For wing guys like us, it made it much easier to keep a guy like Ace under corral and under control.

So big props to the bigs for being able to execute that game plan.

Q. You all are 5-0 since Xavier returned. What is it that he's brought that's helped you guys click? What in general has clicked of late?

KEL'EL WARE: Well, I feel like X, he brings of course the speed. He's also, you could say, a veteran. He's been in college for a minute. So just with him being on the court and his experience and just being able to lead us every time we go to a huddle, telling us what we need to do, fixing us if we make a mistake.

Him just bringing it on the court, I feel like that helped us out today, even the last five games.

ANTHONY LEAL: He's ultra-competitive. I'll add to that. He continues to add to our team's competitiveness because he hates losing more than anything. I think that's a really great feature of him.

Q. For either of you, in terms of confidence, especially in tight games, has there been a moment the last couple weeks where it's kind of flipped on for you



guys, or do you think it's been a gradual thing? You guys being battle tested a little bit, going through some adversity, that's what has produced that?

ANTHONY LEAL: I think it's kind of a culmination of just the whole season, becoming more familiar with each other as players and learning how to win together. Sometimes it doesn't work out. For example, coming down the stretch at Illinois earlier in the season, we really felt like we could win that one, but we didn't make the right plays.

From that point forward, I feel like we've had the right mindset going into the final six, eight minutes of the game that it's winning time. And we're confident in each other to make plays and trust in each other to continue to execute the game plan.

Q. It seemed like it was a very physical game. How do you guys handle that? How do you approach that, when you don't want to shy away from the physicality, but you also don't want to pick up too many fouls? How do you kind of approach that?

KEL'EL WARE: You've got to play smart. You just have to play smart and not try to foul the opponents. That's really it. Just play smart, I would say.

Q. Anthony, it seems like down the stretch when Penn State had to go small, got into foul trouble, it seemed like you guys really tried to hammer the post a lot on offense. Knowing you have Kel'el and Malik down on the low post, what does it do for your guys' offense?

ANTHONY LEAL: In my opinion, they're two all-conference bigs. Our game plan all season has been to play through them. They've become so comfortable with each other, similar to how Race and Trayce were last year to be able to play off each other.

I don't think there's many frontcourts in the league that can play with them when they do what they do. We embrace them and we know what they're capable of. So we'll keep playing through them.

Q. Anthony, what was that conversation like in the huddle late in that game before your tip-in? Who talked the most, and what was that like?

ANTHONY LEAL: Coach Woodson always talks the most during our huddles. It's a good thing, though. It's what he does.

But we're all kind of collectively words of encouragement, it's winning time, it's time to win this game. We're going to get this done. Talking about different coverages and what

we're executing.

I think that we're -- as a team, we're leading together, and there's not just one person who's taking everything, but everyone kind of pushes off each other, and I think that's a great quality that we've started to develop.

Q. A similar question, especially about the veterans you had in the backcourt. You talked about Ace Baldwin, obviously the play Anthony makes late on. Just without Trey, the steadiness of guys like Anthony and X just kind of giving you, even though on a night where the shots aren't falling in either direction very much, kind of key plays.

MIKE WOODSON: The fact that the game was such an ugly game, neither team could really make shots. I expect X and Anthony to lead. They're seniors. That's what seniors should do after going through a program or playing college basketball for a number of years.

X is not fully there because he just hasn't played a whole lot. Hell, we played him 37 minutes tonight, and I just think his presence on the floor changes our team.

But I thought tonight overall defensively what we set out to do was really, really good tonight for 40 minutes, I thought.

Q. A few weeks ago you mentioned that you've had a few teams in the past have, I guess, clicked late in the year. This year's team has kind of followed a very similar path. What is it about this team that's kind of enabled this late success?

MIKE WOODSON: Again, I keep mentioning Xavier, but getting him back gives us some stability a little bit in the backcourt, and defensively we've picked up. Offensively we've made shots. We didn't tonight, but in the previous four games, we've really been shooting the ball extremely well from the three-point line, and we've been making our free throws.

So when you defend and you do those two things, we're sharing the ball, I mean, I think in our last four games I charted, we were No. 1 in the Big Ten in assists. So everything is clicking.

In order to beat teams in the Big Ten, you've got to play at a high level every night, man.

Q. Anthony was saying that he felt the Illinois game was maybe a turning point for your guys in the final six minutes. Did you feel that as well that you figured out the late game situations and have not made as many mistakes down the stretch after that game?

MIKE WOODSON: There's been a number of games. The Michigan State game, Izzo's team took us right to the end, and we didn't buckle. We made winning plays to secure the game. Defensively, we were very solid in that game as well.

We just -- it's taken us a while, man, to really put it together. Unfortunately, losing Gallo hurts, man, but we can't stop here and complain, man. We've got to just next man up. Whoever plays has got to give us something while he's out there to help us win.

Q. Mike, Anthony spoke about the change of the defense on ball screens from the base. Can you elaborate on that and just how well the plan that you guys put into place was implemented?

MIKE WOODSON: The first two times we played Penn State we dropped, and they just dissected everything that we did. The second time we played them, we tried to trap, and they made threes. They made nine threes in one game and 12 in the next game.

So we just tried to stay as close to Baldwin as we could. Our bigs were more up, where he actually saw bodies, and we tried to play in to get out. We guarded the three-point line extremely well. They shot it well last night, and tonight we were really good in guarding it.

Q. Two quick things if you don't mind. One, are you hoping for Trey to be able to play at all this weekend, or do you not know?

MIKE WOODSON: I don't know at this point. I really don't.

Q. Secondly, going all the way back to November, you had a lot of games where you needed to play well down the last stretch too. I know we talked about Illinois, Michigan State, all this stuff, but it kind of goes all the way back to the start of the season, right? These guys being comfortable playing in the last few minutes?

MIKE WOODSON: We had a lot of early games where teams really pushed us to the limit, and we didn't buckle in those games. But, again, missing X during the stretch that we missed him, it just, we went into another tailspin. When we went on that four-game losing streak, man, we were all reaching and searching.

The last few games we've been able to flip it and turn it around, and that's pretty good for our ball club.

Q. I think on Senior Day you said that Anthony has

kind of always stayed ready, even in seasons where maybe he hasn't played as much. Could you kind of expand on that. What does that look like specifically? How do you know he's always ready? How good does it feel for him to have some game-winners he's had this year?

MIKE WOODSON: Coming from the NBA, in the 34 years I spent there, we call that a pro, a true pro. He has hung in there with me because he hadn't played a whole lot, but in practice he comes to work every day, and he knows everything that we're doing on both sides of the ball.

So from a coaching standpoint, we feel comfortable knowing, if we throw him in there, he's not going to embarrass us, himself or our team.

He's come in and given us a helluva lift, and tonight he hits the biggest shot of his college career, the putback. So that's beautiful for him, I think, in terms of the hard work that he's put in. I couldn't be more proud of him.

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THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Penn State head coach Mike Rhoades along with Ace Baldwin Jr. and Puff Johnson. We'll start with comments from head coach and take questions for the student-athletes.

MIKE RHOADES: Just really proud of my guys and the effort. We didn't, I think, play particularly well today, but we just kept fighting and giving ourselves a chance to win the game.

I think we fought the game at times today, but we just hung in there. I just commend the group that was in there late in the game trying to find a way to win the game. We just came up short.

It's that time of the year where guys make plays, and you got to live with it. I loved our effort. I loved how these guys are trying to find a way to win the game. We just didn't. And credit to Indiana.

Q. For both of you guys, how would you sum up how this season has gone compared to maybe considering everything how this year started with all the uncertainty, how it went for you and where are you sort of at with what's next for each of you?

PUFF JOHNSON: I never like ending a season on a loss, and that's what happened today. So it's just it hurts, and it's something you need to build on and you need to learn on, and as a program we can learn on.

All the losses we had this year, it's always a learning piece. There's never a time where you can't learn from your mistakes.



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ACE BALDWIN JR.: Like Puff said, it hurts end of the season with a loss. Also, they just picked us last for the preseason, and I think we did pretty well.

Q. For both of you, have you guys made any decisions about whether you are going to come back and help kind of lead the team again?

ACE BALDWIN JR.: I got to talk to Coach about that.

PUFF JOHNSON: Yeah, we haven't had these conversations yet, but I'm sure we will, and we'll go from there.

Q. Looking at this game itself, how challenging is it to fight through the kind of foul trouble that you guys had tonight, sort of navigating that?

ACE BALDWIN JR.: I ain't going to make no excuse about that. I just felt like Indiana was a good team, and they just played harder than us at the end of the day.

Q. Mike, if this is it for you guys this year, what's sort of the 30,000 foot view of how this year has gone and where you're at in the building process?

MIKE RHOADES: Here we are playing in the second round and expected to win. I think a lot of people didn't think we'd win any games. I think one time they said we were going to lose 17 in a row. The best thing about that is outside of our locker room all the other noise doesn't matter.

So I think our guys, my view with a wide lens, there was a lot of things that helped put that foundation of our program down that we can build on, and I'm proud of our guys for that.

We've come a long way. We've had a lot of ups and downs. We've had some great moments and real tough moments and learning moments. But like you saw today, we've got a group of guys that really fought. I thought these guys, as they went along -- I think we got together the first time June 14th. They made themselves into a

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team that people in the Big Ten didn't want to play against.

In today's world, that's hard to do very quickly. I'm proud of our guys that way. Just disappointed today in how we played.

It's that time of the year. You've just got to find a way to scrap a win out, and we just didn't do it.

Q. Demetrius Lilley, he gave good minutes, but towards the end when Wahab fouled out, you opted to use RayQuandis Mitchell.

MIKE RHOADES: Meech couldn't go. He was hurt.

Q. With that small ball look, what's your idea of trying to contain Kel'el Ware with that zone defense you threw out?

MIKE RHOADES: We went zone, and honestly they didn't throw it into him right away, they just isolate him. That helped us a little bit, tried to keep our defense a little bit tighter, especially since they weren't making a bunch of threes.

I thought Puff was playing well. I thought Puff was rebounding well. He had eight rebounds today. I thought he was battling. So we put him at the five.

At that time, you know, it's a gut check. You've got to go with the guys you feel are battling the most. Keeping D'Marco out there, he's a rebounder from the wing. We put RayQ out there just because I thought he could keep the ball in front of him, if they tried to go at him.

When Nick fouled out, that really hurt us because he's another guy that can rebound from the wing when we went zone.

We had some limitations there at the end. Puff was playing well. He was rebounding. So we were going with that.

Q. You mentioned people saying that maybe you'd lose 17 in a row. You guys are a few bounces and whistles from that sort of feel good 20-win mark. How much pride do you take in what this season wasn't as much in what it was?

MIKE RHOADES: I take great pride in it. When you spend so much time with young people and then you demand them to work really hard and to get outside of their own comfort zone, there's a lot of rewards for that as a coach, and there's a lot of joy in that too to watch them grow and all that. I love that part of it. I love that more sometimes

than the games.

I love the games and the competition, but to help a young man go from here to there as a basketball player and as a young man to mature and understand how adversity is a lifetime thing, and we can use basketball as the vehicle to help these guys understand that. I love that part of it.

I'm really proud of these guys. I just think we had moments throughout the year where all of us got really excited saying, can we take the next step? Can we take the next step? You've got to go through it all, the highs and the lows, and tough moments like this. If we're going to build a program the right way to get to the top of this league, today's got to burn for a long, long time until we put the uniform back on.

And you've got to live in the gym. As a coaching staff, we've got to get better. How can we get our guys bigger, stronger, faster, and better players. How can we go out and get the right pieces to make us better?

All these experiences we had this year built some foundation for us, but now it's -- and the close games, the tough things that we went through, it's got to burn you to go to work and to get better because that's what it's all about.

Q. Obviously Puff and Ace have some decisions to make. What you do next will be dictated a lot by those decisions. Obviously tonight is not the night to have that conversation. What is sort of the timeline here?

MIKE RHOADES: We've had some conversations, but task at hand, that's the most important thing. Let's be where our feet are.

I'm always going to do what's best for the young men, not what's best for me. These parents give their sons to us. We want to give them back to them better young men and better basketball players and good opportunities.

I love both those guys. They've been great this year. I've recruited Puff's brother because I've known his family for a long time. I've gone through some great things with Ace and been with him and his family for a long time. So I love him and respect him, and we're going to do what's best for those guys.

We'll have conversations as we move along. I always say real talk, I call it. Let's have real talk and go from there. But it's about making the best decisions for these young men.

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