

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 13, 2024

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

Maryland Terrapins

Kevin Willard

Jamie Kaiser Jr.

Jahmir Young

Postgame Press Conference



Maryland - 65, Rutgers - 51

THE MODERATOR: For Maryland, we're joined by head coach Kevin Willard, along with Jahmir Young and Jamie Kaiser Jr.

KEVIN WILLARD: Really, really pleased with the way we bounced back. Obviously the last couple games defensively we hadn't been what we were all season. These guys, I challenged them to come back defensively, and they answered the bell and were great defensively.

Q. Jahmir, how much of an emphasis was there on getting started quickly? You opened up an 11-0 run, hit your first three three-pointers. How much confidence did that give you guys?

JAHMIR YOUNG: We opened up hitting shots early, just trying not to give them life. Just being able to bounce back, like Coach said, was huge for us. Guys stepping up and just defending, trying to run them off the three-point line.

We did a good job of staying in front and staying in control all game.

Q. Jamie, when those first couple of threes fall, how does it help you guys open up the rest of the offense?

JAMIE KAISER JR.: It definitely opens up. Paid for Ju to go to work down there, and driving lanes for DeShawn and Jahmir. Just helps the team.

Q. Jahmir, after that hot start, what allowed you guys to keep the lead at double digits throughout the rest of the game and never dwindle down past eight?

JAHMIR YOUNG: Just continue to share the ball. Find the open man. It started on defense. Being able to limit them to one shot and getting out in transition where we're finding success. Just limit them to one shot, so we can get out and run.

Q. For either of you. Defensively the past two games against Rutgers you've had a lot of success. What do you think has contributed most to that?

JAHMIR YOUNG: Just being able to be connected defensively, limit them to three-point shots. They're not the greatest shooting team.

So being able to stay locked in, stay packed in on the defensive end and being in gaps was huge. They had a hard time with that.

Q. What was the difference in your defense today versus what it was against Penn State? What kind of efforts did you guys have in the last couple of days to make sure you were playing the type of defense they did for most of the season?

JAHMIR YOUNG: I mean, it really started in practice. Just we had really good days in practice. We're getting back to what we do well.

We slipped on that Penn State, so just being able to get back to the basics and just trying to stay connected on defense, stay in front of our man, guard one-on-one, and limit them to one shot.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach Willard.

Q. Kevin, having JuJu back, obviously how much of a difference does that make, huge in your lineup today?

KEVIN WILLARD: I think the biggest thing is JuJu practiced -- we got back late on Sunday, and I brought him back in -- I brought the team back really early the next day, and Ju is a great leader. He showed me that he was all right.



Again, I'm always extra cautious, especially as many minutes as he's played. So having him back -- again, he's one of the best centers in the country. So when you have that scoring threat, passing threat, defensively he helps us, and he locks down so many different ways. It was huge.

Q. Is there anything that specific that you wanted to take advantage of on defense against Rutgers' offense?

KEVIN WILLARD: Rutgers is a lot like us. There's times where they really struggle to shoot the ball, and they run good stuff. But there's times where you've just got to pack it in on them at times and just try to make them make threes.

I thought the last two times we've played them, our guys have done a really good job of understanding the scouting reports and personnel because it's more of a personnel game. Just because they're so good at driving the basketball. Williams is so good at driving the basketball. Just making it hard for them to drive.

Q. Coach, getting back to JuJu on the defensive end especially, what does he kind of provide that was missing at Penn State?

KEVIN WILLARD: Just experience. Three years he's been in the league. He understands, he knows our drop coverage really well. He's a smart basketball player. So it makes life on everybody else a little bit easier.

And he's 6'10", he's physical, and he throws his body around, which really helps in this league.

Q. You mentioned flipping the switch at this time of the year. How much did you emphasize getting off to a fast start today? I know you mentioned defense in practice.

KEVIN WILLARD: We just talked about defense. I wanted to get off a fast start defensively, get some stops. We got two deflections. We got a fast break layup, then we got an open three off a turnover.

For me, when we've been good, it's been on the defensive end. We've struggled -- we had open shots all night. Unfortunately, just we've struggled to shoot the basketball at times, but our defense has kept us in every game. We've had seven losses by one possession.

So just keeping them -- it's hard in college basketball right now. Keeping these guys focused and keeping them understanding. They're frustrated and disappointed the way the season's ended, but just getting them to

understand how close we really were. It's not like we were getting blown out. It's not like we weren't in any games. We missed a free-throw, a layup here, a jump shot there, so it's four wins on one possession that -- everybody's a lot happier.

So just getting them to understand what made us good and get them refocused on that.

Q. You mentioned the open shots early. Just mentally what do you think it does for the guys when they hit those first four shots, get out to a huge lead, how does it help them on the defensive end of the floor?

KEVIN WILLARD: It just relaxes us. You can just see it. Believe it or not, you can see our body language just -- we've played better on the road than we have at home this year for some reason. I have no idea why.

It just seems like we've shot the ball better on the road, and these guys, it just relaxes them and gives them a chance to understand, okay, we're going to go play defense and get stops, and now we're scoring. Psychologically, it's just a big difference.

Q. I saw Jahari take a pretty hard spill at the end. Any idea --

KEVIN WILLARD: I have no update on that. I apologize. If we get one, I'll have John tell you.

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Rutgers Scarlet Knights

Steve Pikiell

Clifford Omoruyi

Aundre Hyatt

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THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Rutgers Head Coach Steve Pikiell, along with Cliff and Aundre.

Coach, we'll start with your thoughts on the game.

STEVE PIKIELL: Congratulate Maryland. I knew it was going to be a tough game. I'm thankful for our fans that came out. We didn't play the way we wanted to. These two guys have been awesome for us. I'm proud of them, our seniors.

It's been kind of a choppy year. Fought through a lot of different things -- injuries, lineup changes, all that kind of stuff. I knew the backboards were the key, and they got us on the backboards tonight.

Tough game. Really tough game. Didn't play the way we needed to play for sure.

Q. Cliff or Aundre, obviously Coach said a bit of a choppy year, but you guys have both been veterans at Rutgers for three years and four years for you, Cliff. What has the experience been like overall this year, last year, and just reflecting on your Rutgers career?

CLIFFORD OMORUYI: It's been a great experience just playing with the guys. They've been great people off and on. Just having a great coaching staff around us. It's been a great experience just having people support us. Our fans show up no matter what. I just want to say thank you for everything.

Q. Cliff, only two points for you today. What about Maryland's defense really stopped you on offense?



CLIFFORD OMORUYI: They played great defense. My shot wasn't falling, but my teammates we just keep attacking. Even though my shots weren't falling, we tried to play great defense. We just played great defense. Kudos to them. They played better D.

Q. For Aundre, Maryland came out strong both in the beginning of the first half and the second half. What did you see from them or from you guys that led Maryland to get off to big runs at the beginning of the halves?

AUNDRE HYATT: They were more aggressive on the defensive end, and the shots weren't falling for us. It was hard for us to get second-chance points. They were just more aggressive tonight.

Q. Coach, obviously you said it was a choppy season, yet you had that four-game win streak in February. Down the stretch, things kind of seemed to fade away. What happened these last six, seven games that caused you to fall off?

STEVE PIKIELL: It's just been, first of all, a ton of injuries all over the place. Even Noah today couldn't play. Mawot practiced yesterday; couldn't play today.

We just never had a great rhythm. Halfway through the year, we get Jeremiah and E back. You see where E is going with this thing, and Jeremiah a big help. Then we lose Mawot that time of the year.

Never really got into a rhythm. I'm proud of these guys. It wasn't the year that I wanted. It wasn't the year that any of us wanted. We started this journey in June and fought through a lot and had a lot of new faces too in the lineup.

As I always am, I'm proud of Rutgers nation. I'm proud of the support that we get. It's my job now to make sure that we're a lot better next year. I'm on a mission to do that. Hopefully we stay healthy too because that was a big part of it this year, never getting into a rhythm.

Q. Coach, obviously you went big to start the game



with Cliff, Gavin, Oskar, and Jeremiah, and Maryland went on an 11-0 run. Why do you think that happened?

STEVE PIKIELL: We were concerned about the backboards. We knew that would be the result if they got us on the backboards. They're a really good rebounding team. We went a little bit bigger. Sparked that lineup.

I thought we got some decent looks. Couldn't really hang around because we didn't make the shots that were open and available to us.

I think in the first half we had eight layups, eight missed layups. Obviously 0-for-3 from the foul line. So not able to get off to a good start when you're not capitalizing on those opportunities.

Q. Missed free throws have been a theme of the season. What do you think in terms of free throws, is it a practice thing or a mental thing? What do you think went wrong with missing layups and free throws?

STEVE PIKIELL: I think it's a little bit of everything. We had shot the ball really well on the road. Our neutral site's away. So tonight it was a little unusual. We hadn't shot well from the free-throw line at home.

Each guy it's different for. Some guys it's mental, and other guys it's other issues. We've certainly got to figure it out. That's been a problem. We've spent a lot of time on it. Sometimes you make too much of an issue out of something, it becomes self-fulfilling.

We'll figure it out, and we'll get some guys in here hopefully that are better foul shooters to begin with, but we've really got to do a good job of solving that problem.

Q. Coach, kind of a sour end to the season. What do you tell some of the guys like Cliff, the older guys, who the future is up in the balance, to pick their spirits up?

STEVE PIKIELL: No season ever goes exactly the way you planned. I was proud our guys kept fighting till the end. I think tonight we had 11 stops out of the last 12 possessions. They kept fighting until the final buzzer.

These guys have a lot of choices now. Next year is not guaranteed to anybody. So it's a different kind of world that we're living in with college basketball now.

You thank them. They've been great representatives of Rutgers. Terrific academic. They worked. There was no drama this year. They kind of came to practice, and they fought.

It just didn't go our way. A few games here, a few games here. I'm not making excuses. I have to do a great job with this group and get them into a rhythm. But we just never had consistency.

An injury bug hit us hard and some other things happened this year that we weren't kind of planning on.

Q. Both Gavin and Jamichael got the start today, both freshmen. What have you seen from their progression throughout the season, as you've always mentioned freshmen have a hard adjustment period, what have you seen from them?

STEVE PIKIELL: I think if you look throughout the league and throughout the country, it's a tough time for freshmen because college basketball is so old now. Normally you have a four-class rotation. Some of these freshmen are playing eighth-year guys, seventh-year guys, tons of sixth-year guys.

It was always a hard adjustment for freshmen, now living in the COVID years and all this other stuff, it's a real hard year.

They got better and better. Those guys came to work every day. Gavin kept improving and improving. You saw at the end of the season some of the things he can do. I think with some guys too around him, he has a chance to be really good.

And Jamichael is just a worker. He came in, and he worked. I expect some great things moving forward. Those guys have bright futures. But all freshmen, it's not easy. It's not easy.

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