

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 12, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

USC Trojans

Eric Musselman

Rashaun Agee

Desmond Claude

Postgame Press Conference



USC - 97, Rutgers - 89

THE MODERATOR: USC has arrived. We'll open with a statement from Coach Musselman.

ERIC MUSSELMAN: That's a game on why tournament play is so fun and exciting. Double overtime game obviously with two teams that I thought both teams played really, really hard.

Credit to Rutgers in their second half. Their press bothered us. But every game's a game of three runs, and we had one in the first half, they had one in the second half, and we were able to finish the game on a run.

I thought our two defensive stops were crucial, down four with a minute something to go, to give ourselves a chance to play into the first overtime.

Q. For you guys, 46 minutes and 48 minutes, how's the body feeling, especially with the game in under 24 hours. What is the process like getting ready for the next game tomorrow, keeping that body fresh?

RASHAUN AGEE: My body feels normal after a 40-minute game, double overtime. I feel good. I feel like what we need to do is ice bath, hydrate, get some rest, and focus on the next game.

DESMOND CLAUDE: I would say that we practice and train for these moments. There's a lot of stuff that we've done to get here. Yeah, just recovery, cold tub, seeing our AT when we get back and trying to -- and get some sleep. That's the biggest one. Just got to go back and knock out.

Q. Just kind of once again, you guys were able to

surge out to a big lead. Rutgers eventually came back, but you guys kind of turned the tide near the end of that second half. I believe there was a timeout called right before that. What were you guys discussing, and what really was the key to getting you guys to the finish line over the course of that game?

DESMOND CLAUDE: Defense. We had to get stops, and the biggest two stops at the end of the game, those were big. We were just harping on rebounding, stopping Harper because we knew he was going to try to go and try to get a bucket, and then rebounding. Those were the biggest ones. And then giving a good shot to our offense.

RASHAUN AGEE: I would say, when we come into the huddle around that time, Coach talks about us getting those stops and allowing them just to get open layups and open jump shots. He talks about how we haven't gotten any stops in a while.

Piggy-backing off what Des said, just coming in with the mindset to get a stop. Not the offensive mindset, just focus on one end and playing together as a team and the understanding that we need a stop. It's just one play at a time.

Q. Desmond, I just wanted to ask you, you shot 15 free throws tonight. It seems like you really have a knack for kind of that Jalen Brunson-esque drawing the fouls. Where does that come from? How do you have such a good feel for the game and drawing those fouls?

DESMOND CLAUDE: I think one thing when I first got here was to be a better point guard. So I think just me making the pass, especially in the first half, Shaun was hitting shots, Bu was always hitting shots. So I think that just opened up the lane. Once I got down there, we knew they were anxious leapers. Pump fake, come to two-foot stops, pivot, and I just got them in the air and went to their body and tried to score off of that.

Q. Once you guys have been through so many frustrating stretches of this season, what did it say just about this team's mental toughness that you guys were able to gut it out through so many ups and downs

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of this game?

RASHAUN AGEE: I would say just playing together, understanding each other and believing in each other and believing in the coaching staff and what they instilled in us throughout the year and throughout the summer. Just hoping each individual does their job and does it the right way. And just stay together.

DESMOND CLAUDE: I think Shaun hit it best, just -- another thing too is just watching a lot of film as a team. We had to figure out why we was losing and how we could do better. One thing we came down to is everybody could play harder, get 50-50 balls, and I felt like we did a pretty good job today.

We wanted this game. The tournament, we thought we came in 0-0. We wanted to keep winning. So we was playing hard, and the game went our way.

Q. Of course for both of you guys, you played Rutgers earlier the season and lost at Jersey Mike's Arena. What was different this time? How was the game play differently when you're facing Dylan Harper, Ace Bailey? What worked differently today for you guys?

RASHAUN AGEE: Something we harped on for our game plan was being at the bottom of the I, top of the I, and helping each other. It's not just one person guarding them, it's the five players on the floor. We all have to help each other and we all have to communicate. Our communication was better. I felt like the bottom of our I at times was better, and I felt like we were a better defensive team today.

DESMOND CLAUDE: I would say the same thing as Shaun, having each other's backs, being over in help defense. When Harper and Bailey had the ball, just try to make it seem crowded like they couldn't really go nowhere. They had to work through their other guys.

Yeah, so I would say the biggest adjustment was just having each other's backs on defense and helping the helper.

Q. Your team looked a little bit agitated maybe a little bit with the Rutgers press that got them back in the game. I thought I saw a couple things that Rutgers did on the press they hadn't done before. Did you see that, and how did you guys really come -- go past that press and get back in the game?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: For sure, it's not often that you have 21 turnovers and win a basketball game. Not only did we have 21 turnovers and win a basketball game, they took 17

more field goals attempted than us and we led for 35 minutes.

You look at the stat sheet, and some wacky things, but I thought we were really efficient on offense when we didn't turn the ball over. We've been pretty good handling presses at times and other times struggled, but we won the game.

Q. My question is about I think this is your fifth trip east, the eastern or central time zone, which would put you at eight games out here.

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I'm probably not the guy to ask. Mick, Coach Cronin does a much better job of expressing himself about that than I do.

Q. I've noticed. I wanted to ask you, though, how do you prepare your players, yourself, sleep patterns or just avoiding jet lag and getting ready to come east and try to put your team together to compete day in and day out?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Well, my wife summed it up best this morning that she's never seen me so sick throughout the course of a college basketball season. That's a fact. I did not sleep one second last night, and it wasn't because of nerves for the game, I can promise you that.

You take a nap at weird hours, and I wasn't the only one. I texted our staff at 3:30 in the morning, and four guys responded. Normally they respond the next day at 9:00 or 10:00 in the morning. It's challenging.

I'm going to go back to our trip, Maryland, Rutgers, Ohio State is sitting in L.A. We play a late game on a Sunday in Rutgers. We fly home. We get back at 5:30 in the morning on a Monday. The guys have class at 9:00 a.m. on Monday, after we just landed at 5:00. Then we practice Tuesday, and we play Ohio State. We're down 17. Finally we get our legs under us, catch up, lose that game.

Then we get on a plane to play Oregon. That's an NBA schedule. It's like playing the Wizards, the Brooklyn Nets, home for one game in L.A., and then go play the blazers. That's what it's like. I'm not so sure our guys are used to that type of travel, but we need to be because that's how it is.

I've said to other people what USC women's basketball has done and what UCLA's basketball have done, the women's team, is you've got to have great talent. Then maybe you can survive it.

I mean, I've coached in the NBA. That trip is as hard as

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any NBA trip I ever went on, I guarantee it, and it wasn't just the two road games. It's coming home, that game's harder than the two road games. Then you go back to Oregon. That's not a 30-minute flight.

In the off-season I thought we did a good job. I went and met with the L.A. Rams, asked what they did, got some different thoughts from some NBA trainers that I respected that have been with organizations for a long time. Sometimes it is what it is. You can get as many opinions as you want. It's had an effect.

I've said it publicly and I'll continue to say it. UCLA, USC, Oregon, and Washington are going to have to be three to four games better than everybody else flat out. You can argue about it or whatever, that's a fact.

Q. Kind of on that note, nothing has really come easy for you guys this entire season. How much do you see just that experience having gone through a lot of setbacks, overcome them, how much do you see that experience kind of come out tonight in a game where you go to two overtimes?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: When you have peaks and valleys in a season, it's not just USC, like Rutgers deserves a ton of credit too. Both teams really fought to get a win, and I thought both teams played desperate to get a win.

I'm proud that we can -- I know they made a run, but it's hard to have a lead for 36 minutes in a college game. So I give our guys a lot of credit. Just a lot of little things, winning three jump balls, super important. Those are extra possessions. Playing against two lottery picks, and defensive coverages, I thought we did a great job.

We had some time to prepare too. I thought preparation was really good with these guys, and we had four pick-and-roll coverages going into tonight, and we only used one, which rarely happens with us.

Q. So you guys led for 35 minutes today, but it felt like no matter what the lead or whatever, they were able to just stay in the game. What was it in that second period of overtime that kind of put you over the edge and finally got to put them away?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Sometimes it's like a boxing match, you know what I mean? Somebody has to persevere. Sometimes legs go out on guys. I thought that we looked, even though our guys played a lot of minutes, but they do that all the time. I've said it before, like Tom Thibodeau is one of my best friends, and we're going to play our guys that we think can help us win on that given night as many minutes as it takes.

So I do think our guys are used to that many minutes. I can't speak for Rutgers, but I do know our guys have played heavy minutes, and I didn't think that we had any dip in our energy. I actually thought it kind of rose at one point in the second overtime.

Q. Especially with the schedule that you guys have going East Coast, West Coast almost every week, what did you tell your guys to keep up with the responsibilities of being a student-athlete, with training, with playing every game? Especially with this game, all your starters played 40 minutes. How do you keep them in that mindset for every game?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Look, we feel playing in the Big Ten is a privilege. It's an incredible league to be a part of. You're going against brand names every night. It's just an adjustment for us.

Any guys that return for us, they'll now know what this is like. So you have to make adjustments. The world's changing every day. It's not just the Big Ten. It's the whole landscape's changed. So you have to make adjustments.

We're not going to make excuses. Like I said, we've got to do what USC women have done and get a player like JuJu that can help us win some road -- that's what we've got to do moving forward.

The maturity, like our GPA the first semester, obviously it was before total Big Ten play, but we had one of the best GPAs we've had. I don't know what it will be like second semester, but we had a guy take a test today on game day.

Our guys take great pride in getting their academics right at a great academic institution like USC. A lot of guys came to USC not just to play basketball, but because of the academic standards as well.

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guys had that big surge in the second half to come back and take the lead, and then USC did just enough to kind of get back into it and force the overtime. What do you think kind of happened after you guys went all the way back to take the lead? Did you end up letting off the gas a little bit, or do you think USC figured something out and was able to attack certain advantages?

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STEVE PIKIELL: Thank you all for staying this late. Incredible game really tonight. So disappointed for our guys. They played hard, and USC was very good, but I thought we were very good to come back, and the guys played their hearts out.

It was a sad locker room, but proud of these guys, proud of the work that they did. I enjoyed coaching them too. Just a tough, tough, unfortunate ending.

Q. Tyson, obviously it's your last game. Jeremiah, I'm not sure of your eligibility completely. But what's the feelings right now going out like that?

TYSON ACUFF: Heartbreak. I think that right now I'm just trying to be there for the guys, make sure everybody keeps their head up. All the guys in that locker room have bright futures, so just being there for them.

JEREMIAH WILLIAMS: Yeah, Tyson said everything, just devastating. I think the guys in the locker room and even the coaches, we worked so hard all year, and even this game was a reflection of we worked so hard. Sometimes you just come up short, and it's just devastating.

Q. Tyson, you obviously just spent one year here. Looking back, how will you remember this season and the decision you made to come to Rutgers?

TYSON ACUFF: I'd make it a hundred more times. I love Steve Pikiell. I love the guys. The connections I've built here, I would choose Rutgers again and again and again.

Q. This is for either one of you guys. Obviously you

JEREMIAH WILLIAMS: Like you said, I think credit to USC, I think they did just enough to surge back into the game and force overtime. Anything can happen in overtime at that point. It's kind of like another game in a sense. Regulation doesn't matter at that point, and you jump into a new segment of the game.

Like you said, they did just enough to make it a new game, and they executed in the extra minutes we had.

TYSON ACUFF: I think they schemed, we schemed. They changed their game plan, we changed our game plan. We were fighting for 65 minutes. I don't know if any of you have ever been in a fight, but it's hard to keep fighting for 65 minutes, and we gave it everything we've got.

Q. A lot of new faces on the team this year. For both of you guys, was it kind of hard to gel with the team at times, offensively and defensively, and just kind of be on the same page in certain games?

TYSON ACUFF: It's always hard just meeting new people and figuring them out and do stuff like that. I think we got along really well. We bonded really well on and off the court. We did a lot of things together to build that bond and that chemistry. These guys are my brothers. This is my family. Rutgers is my family.

JEREMIAH WILLIAMS: For any team, I've been in college for five years, for any team, especially nowadays with the portal and stuff like that, you'll have times where you may have miscommunications or it may be hard to gel at times. Sometimes we probably went through that this year. We had a younger team.



To answer your question, yes, I think sometimes we did, but I think that's the nature of college basketball now, and I think every team in America has had that issue.

Q. You guys are obviously -- this isn't your first rodeo. You guys are experienced veterans. What was your guys' kind of message after the game to some of the younger players on your team like Dylan or Ace who maybe haven't been through a situation like this, especially after such a tough loss like that?

JEREMIAH WILLIAMS: Honestly, I don't think there's much to say. Coach Pike gave us a speech after. For all the players, it's very devastating, a lot of emotions. It's the end of the year, and we've been through a lot. I think there's a lot of emotions in everyone, and you just take it all in. We'll all communicate after the season and will regroup then but you kind of take in all the emotions and it really sucks at that point. No need for us to talk amongst each other.

TYSON ACUFF: Right now, like I said earlier, just trying to be there for the guys. Right now is not the time to give speeches. It's not the last time we're going to see each other. We'll talk amongst ourselves, like Jeremiah said, and sort it out then and talk to each other about different type of things.

Q. In the flow of the game now that it's gone double overtime and the game's over, do you think you should have put that press on different? I thought I'd seen some differences in your Rutgers press that I hadn't seen all year long against SC. Do you think you might have put your press on a little bit earlier?

STEVE PIKIELL: It's hard to do that too, but we got down early in the first half, and we pressed kind of a lot at the end of the season. We changed our rotation a little bit, and we pressed more and more. I thought it was effective at times, and then at other times they got some easy baskets too.

When a game goes that long and it's that grueling, it's really tough to do that. I thought at the end they kind of were throwing the ball all over the place and getting some easy looks. We had our opportunity certainly in this game. I would have liked to have Ace in the game for a little bit longer. I think that was huge. I think his third foul was just a tough one. Kind of needed him at the end too.

But put in a lot of work, this team, and they're great kids. They've worked all year. A lot of obstacles, as a lot of teams in this league have had. This is a great league. We fought, and we couldn't get big stops down the stretch too in games. I couldn't get this team to rebound or defend the

way I would have liked them to, but they showed some great signs. We scored 89 points in the basketball game, plenty of points to win.

I really love these guys. They were really good to coach. We obviously didn't win the amount of games that anyone would like, but these guys were a joy to coach. Our press helped us get back into the game today, but hard thing to do for 40, 50 minutes.

Q. Steve, what did you say to them in the locker room?

STEVE PIKIELL: Honestly, I told them I love them. If you saw the fight of that team today, we were down at halftime. This group just kept fighting, no matter what the obstacles were. We didn't have the kind of season, it was choppy. We hit a lot of obstacles. There's no excuses. I take full responsibility for our season.

This is a great group of guys. Tyson, I wish I had four years with him. These kids really grew in so many ways. Through all the obstacles and playing in this league is tough. It's a humbling league. Just after that game, what do you say to the group? You didn't play hard? We played as hard as you could possibly play. They left it all out on the court.

We needed a few bounces to go our way. We didn't get that. It's kind of been that way this season, but I'm proud of them. The year that Ace and Dylan had, the way this group newly assembled came together, the youth that we have, the oldest time in college basketball too and we have a young team. They fought. They fought the entire night. They're banged up right now. They've got ice bags everywhere.

I told them I love them, I'm proud of them. They should be proud of how hard that they worked. We put in a ton of work, and they did with film and all that. I wish you guys could just see us practice. You would really understand it. That's not part of it. You come to games, and you just see the results, but the work that these guys truly put in to try to be great was a lot. I'm proud of them for that.

So I told them that after the game.

Q. Talk about Ace Bailey, his freshman year, and Harper. Coming in they were five stars, and they seemed to play good team basketball most of the year. I know that's hard coming off the AAU circuit. Talk about how they acclimated into your system.

STEVE PIKIELL: The year they had, they broke every freshman scoring record in the history of Rutgers

basketball, which is unbelievable, especially in this league and as competitive as this league is.

What they did -- and they didn't play every game. They were injured, and they missed games. If they played every single game, those records would be untouchable, and they both did it together. They've been great kids to coach, great families. They work. The hours that those two put into it.

I only wish I had another year or two with them. Fortunately, their best basketball is head of them too. They grew a lot this year. They grew a lot from film. They saw every kind of defense that you could imagine. They're getting guarded by 25-year-olds -- they're 18 years old -- 25-year-olds, 26-year-olds. The two were fantastic, and they're going to be fantastic pros. They really are.

Q. Can you speak more on kind of the other younger guys like Dylan Grant, Bryce Dortch, Sommerville, broke through this season. How they're going to improve next season and help the team out in the future?

STEVE PIKIELL: The development of those two guys, I mean, Lathan lost 50 pounds from June to get into the kind of conditioning and shape that he got into, just continued to get better.

Dylan Grant didn't play much early on, and he kind of figured it out late and then turned into a really good basketball player for us.

Bryce Dortch is going to be another really good player for us. I thought those guys improved, as did Tyson Acuff had foot surgery in June, did not practice until end of October. Had a serious foot injury, and you could see him get better and better. I only wish he wasn't injured early.

The improvements of those guys and playing in this league and playing against the guys that they went up to, if they continue to work, they're going to be really, really good basketball players. They're workers and surrounded by great people. Development's been a part of what we do here. Hopefully we can keep those guys around and keep them developing.

Q. You have two guys that are going to be picked in the top five in the NBA Draft in a few months and you finished below .500. How do you explain falling so short of expectations, going into the season and falling short?

STEVE PIKIELL: These guys worked their tails off. You're up against really good players every team we play against.

Today they were 23-year-olds, really good players. It's a really good league. The ball didn't bounce the way we needed it to.

I understand your expectations. I think the league picked us ninth, but I understand the expectations that, A, that I set for this program, which are to win every game. Those guys did everything that they could. The ball didn't bounce our way sometimes, and sometimes it was a disjointed year with injuries and guys. I think Dylan missed most of the month of January, which didn't help us, and there were some close games there that we could have won.

I'm proud of this team. I take full responsibility for our win-loss record, but I'm really proud of how those guys performed and got better. They're going to do a lot of really good things in basketball. I'm real proud of their development.

Q. Where do you go from here with this program now? You tried to experiment with Ace and Dylan. Where does this go next?

STEVE PIKIELL: I think our recruiting class is 28th in the country next year, so Ace and Dylan helped us a lot in that area. I think with the settlement, I'm really excited. That's going to help us a great deal, and we're going to keep working like we always do.

I think other coaches in the league will tell you Rutgers is pretty good and they don't want to play us every day. You pretty much can talk to coaches. We're going to be good, like we always are. I've got to try to keep my staff because every year they want to steal them from me.

Hopefully we'll do a great job with our players, and we've got to jump in the portal too.

I'm excited. 78 straight sell-outs, and I get the disappointment. I have to live with it. But a lot of good things are happening at Rutgers. I think a lot of people would want 78 straight sell-outs and they'd want to have the top 30 ranked recruiting class in the country coming in.

If we can retain our guys from this year, we'll keep plugging. You know I'm a worker, and we'll get them to play defense, and we'll rebound better. Yeah, we'll do -- Rutgers is going to be fine in the best league in the country.

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