

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 14, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

Maryland Terrapins

Kevin Willard

Rodney Rice

Jordan Geronimo

Postgame Press Conference

Maryland - 88, Illinois - 65

THE MODERATOR: We will take an opening statement from Coach Willard.

KEVIN WILLARD: Really happy with the way we came out and played defensively, knowing they had played Iowa and it was almost like a good matchup for us because we're so much different than Iowa.

But guys came out focused and good win.

Q. Rod, can you kind of take us through what it felt like being in the zone you're in tonight, and then at what point in the game did you realize it might be a special night for you? Was it after your first 3 went through or after the four-point play or somewhere in between?

RODNEY RICE: Probably the first 3. It just felt good leaving my hand, and that's what the rest of them felt like. So it was definitely a good night, yeah.

Q. Jordan, your teammates all season long have spoken about how much of a presence you play whether or not it shows up on the score sheet, what you do defensively, what you do energy. How satisfying was it to put your season high up in a game this big at this time in March?

JORDAN GERONIMO: Feels great to be able to contribute and to be able to help my team win. I trust my teammates to find me, and that's what they did. They trust me with the ball, and I was able to put it in the rim. So shout out to them too.



Q. Jordan, welcome back to Indiana. It has to feel pretty good to be sitting up on that stage after a nice win like this after you transferred into Maryland. Talk a little bit about your journey back into Maryland and how it feels tonight.

JORDAN GERONIMO: It feels good. Like you said, when I was at Indiana, I was able to play -- go far and play March Madness. Coming back in with this new team, it feels great to be able to advance with this team and show you guys what we got. So it feels good.

Q. Rod, just how well did you guys take care of the basketball? Three turnovers is kind of a ridiculous number. You had zero in the first half. How much of a focus was ball security?

RODNEY RICE: That might have been our best of the season, but that's a great job by us. We got to do that moving forward too.

Q. Rodney, can you sort of take me through that second four-point play in the second half there coming off the ground. What happened?

RODNEY RICE: Coach drew up a good play. Came around the screen --

KEVIN WILLARD: You guys don't say that very often.

RODNEY RICE: The ball found me, and I looked at the rim, and it was going up. It felt good coming off my hands, and I was able to hit the shot.

Q. Rodney, have you ever had a game or a moment like that where you're just not missing. Shucks, even going back to high school or grammar school or anything like that, have you had a moment like that for yourself?

RODNEY RICE: Yeah, our second game of the season, probably that game.

Q. Rodney, earlier this week you talked about the All Conference awards and how it was kind of crazy that



you got left off of that. I don't want to say that you tipped your hand, but did some of that motivate you to do what you did tonight?

RODNEY RICE: For sure. I'm glad I got the motivation now. I'm going to just continue to play and let my game do the talking.

Q. Jordan, we kind of talked about after the Northwestern game about the long break you have and how the last couple times you haven't done well. What did you do this week differently to make sure that wasn't going to happen again?

JORDAN GERONIMO: We just focused in practice. Coach Willard does a great job making sure that we stay sharp in practice, and knowing that we haven't performed well after long breaks, we were conscious about that, and we was able to lock in and do what we have to do to get this W today.

Q. After a slow start by both teams, and there was a couple free throws by Illinois, it was a 6-4 ballgame. Boy, things just seemed like it took off for your ball club then. Rice hit four 3s. He also had a couple free throws. Reese had a single field goal in there. Bear with me here. And Derik Queen, he just ripped the ball out of the hands of the Illini on a rebound and put it back. Then Geronimo with an offensive rebound.

KEVIN WILLARD: Are we going to go through the whole box score? I'm from New York. There's got to be a question.

Q. I'm done. Then Geronimo also with a 3 and capped off a 23-6 run and a 19-point lead. It seems like you guys never looked back after that. Sorry for the length of it.

KEVIN WILLARD: That was a great job describing the game. I got nothing for you. That was great.

Q. You're one of the top defensive units in the country. Just to kind of cut to the chase, what went into this performance to hold them to 36 percent shooting from the field?

KEVIN WILLARD: I think we're sixth in the country in defense. We've been really good defensively since probably the Marquette game early. The Marquette game kind of exposed us a little bit of what we had to fix.

We've been really, really consistent defensively. These guys listen to our schemes. They understand our schemes. And our bench, they don't get enough credit.

Obviously The Crab Five is great, and I know I have five guys that shoot it in the starting five, but our bench guys give us great energy on the defensive end. So we don't have a let down when we go to the bench.

A lot of teams they go to the bench, they have a letdown. We never have a letdown. Because defensively our numbers actually get better when the bench goes in the game.

Q. What was practice like this week to make sure the same thing wasn't going to happen after the break?

KEVIN WILLARD: We took off -- I think Senior Night was Saturday. We took off Sunday, and then that's the only day we took off. We got right back into it Monday, had two good days of practice Tuesday and Wednesday. Then technically yesterday was, in my eyes, an off day. In their eyes, not.

Again, we didn't play good coming out of going out West, but that was a little bit -- it was just bad scheduling by me, to be perfectly honest with you. We had four days off for Christmas, and I threw a game in there probably way too early, and just we didn't have enough practice time.

We played pretty good at coming out at Ohio State was our last bye, and we just missed six free throws. If we make our free throws, we win that game.

These guys have understood that to stay sharp we've got to practice.

Q. Illinois has blown out a lot of teams this year. You guys have flipped the script and blown them out twice. What do you like about that matchup that's led to that success?

KEVIN WILLARD: The first game was a little different because they didn't have Ivistic. They are a talented team, and they're really good, but they're also young. So I kind of like the fact that we can post-up, we can go at them and be a little bit more physical. I think they've struggled against teams that have been physical with them just because they're young.

Last night they score 100 and something points with Iowa, but the ball never touched the post. It was going to be different tonight. So we came out, and I think we've been very physical with them both times we've played them.

Q. Hey Kevin, Jordan and Tafara's performance might get overshadowed with such a big number on the scoreboard, but for them how important is it for them this time of year to eat this many minutes and to put

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

points up as well when they haven't been doing that recently?

KEVIN WILLARD: Jordan has been great. Jordan has been as good as anybody, especially energy-wise. For me, getting Tafara back is huge because he gives us another level coming off the bench, and he just -- he got sick, and he missed 12 straight days with the flu, lost 19 pounds. So he's now just getting back to where he was.

He was playing really good. I mean, he was playing at a high level for us, and he was getting 22 minutes a game. Then he got sick. To get both those guys back is great because they each give us something a little different.

Q. How did the team's performance align with your pregame strategy, and were there any adjustments made during the game?

KEVIN WILLARD: Any time you're up 26 at halftime, you must have done something right. I thought we came out very focused, really understood what we wanted to do with the game plan. Again, the second time you play someone, you have a better feel for them.

Yeah, we didn't really do anything out of halftime. We're up 26, so I just told them not to mess it up. And they didn't, so I think they listened both times.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 14, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

Illinois Fighting Illini

Brad Underwood

Kasparas Jakucionis

Kylan Boswell

Postgame Press Conference



Maryland - 88, Illinois - 65

THE MODERATOR: We've been joined by the Illini. Coach Underwood, we'll take an opening statement from you.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: My hat's off to Maryland. Pretty good. They're pretty good. Whipped our butt in every facet.

I think we have a lot we can learn from a team like them. But it was probably my fault for not doing a good enough job, one, getting these guys mentally -- what's the right word -- dialed into understanding what this was going to be. It wasn't going to be Iowa. Free and easy, quick turn.

Yeah, we let Rodney Rice cook us in the first half, very disappointing. I was really disappointed in our defense on the perimeter. I was good with letting Reese and Queen try to score 2s because it's not what makes them great. What makes them great is when they make 3s.

Our perimeter defense, we were very flat, very lethargic, not much energy, and that's on me. Getting these guys ready to play, understanding the urgency -- when you lose you go home. Next time we get to do this, we lose, we go home.

Hopefully we learned a lot from Maryland today. The energy, they're the Number 1 defense in the country analytically since January. Us scoring 110 or whatever we scored yesterday probably gave them a little more hype to come out and kick our butt, and they did.

By the way, they're good enough to win it. They're good. They're really good.

Q. KJ, Kylan, what did you learn? Coach Underwood said you have to learn something from this. What did each of you learn from this?

KASPARAS JAKUCIONIS: Definitely the importance of every detail in the game because it's one game, you win or you go home. It will be the same in the tournament.

We just have to learn that every detail matters, every little thing, every little effort matters in the game, and we have to execute for that.

KYLAN BOSWELL: For me, I just feel like hopefully next time we step on the court we just pick up all of our energy as a team. It was definitely flat. It wasn't going our way in the beginning, and you just kind of could tell the situation wasn't rolling.

Yeah, I've won a conference tournament, then I got sent home early my sophomore year, so I know what it takes. For us, we've just got to pick up our energy for sure.

Q. Kylan or KJ, I don't know if you agree with this, but it looked like in the first half you guys maybe weren't getting the shots you wanted offensively. Kind of what went into that and maybe feeling a little bit rattled on the offensive end?

KYLAN BOSWELL: Yeah, they definitely were really aggressive. For us, that's something we need to amp up on our side.

We made some careless mistakes, some early turnovers. Definitely we just didn't make the right decisions as we normally do. All we can do right now is just watch the film on that, get back in the lab together, and just fix it.

KASPARAS JAKUCIONIS: Yeah, I would agree we turned the ball over, and we didn't shoot the shots we wanted, we didn't create the shots we wanted, but the defensive side was even worse. So that's where we have to focus on.

Q. Guys, the last loss you guys had was against Duke four weeks ago almost. What changed after that game



that you feel that you can maybe take into next week with the tournament?

KASPARAS JAKUCIONIS: I think our effort and energy after Duke went up. We were executing on defense a lot more. Our practices were going better and better. I hope and I think and I believe that, after this loss, we will only get better, and we will execute in practice, especially on the defensive end.

We'll all have more energy, and we'll be more hungry to win.

Q. Kylan, how do you feel about your team heading into the NCAA Tournament? Obviously you guys don't have a lot of experience outside of you and Tre and Dra. How do you feel about this?

KYLAN BOSWELL: I feel confident as always. I'll never not say that. Sometimes it's good though to get your butt handed to you right before you walk into March. I think Coach said that Iowa was kind of a false reality. Every team is going to be trying to play because they're not trying to go home, really aggressive, talking a lot.

Maryland for sure today, he was saying it earlier before the game, it was a shock to our central nervous system. You just can't come out there not ready to hoop at any point.

It's good for us to watch this film, get a couple days rest, get back on our feet, and just go in with the right mentality.

Q. Kylan, you've been around the block. Does it concern you that there have now been two games pretty late in the season, high profile opponents and stages and all that, where you guys just didn't have the energy, the readiness that we're talking about here?

KYLAN BOSWELL: No, I mean basketball is a game of opportunities. It happens. We've had two bad losses, but at the same time, we beat Michigan and Purdue. People were thinking the same stuff.

For us, it's nothing to worry about. Like I said, we've got to watch the film, and then when we find out where we're going, we've just got to know it's win or go home, and we've got to have the right mentality when we go into March.

Q. Brad, obviously this team's going up-and-down. There's been a lot of discrepancy. You've had big wins, a lot of big losses, not as many in between games. Can you explain that for your team?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Again, I thought today was -- we're

young. We haven't been here. To know and to see our energy yesterday compared to today, I just told our staff that's on me. We've got to do a better job of making sure these guys understand.

We opened the game with two turnovers. We just threw the ball to them. They do a great job of playing with their hands in the pocket. We told them, all your pocket passes, you can't throw. Tommy throws one low right after that.

Mentally getting dialed in, that shows more on the defensive side. When we get a little bit stunted or hit early -- we handle it late, but when we get it early, we haven't been able to respond to that very well.

Today's the first time in a bit that we've gotten off to a tough start. We just didn't handle it very well. Maybe it's me. Maybe I've got to do something different, I've got to sub, I don't know. But our energy today was awful. Awful.

Q. As you mentioned, you pride the defense on not allowing 3-point opportunities. The last two nights a couple guys have got off. Is that two guys getting hot, or something that needs to be cleaned up?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I thought Payton's looks last night, for the most part, other than one or two in transition, were really hard. He made some hard shots. The job we did today was awful. We let Rice step into four in the first half that you could have made. There was no bite. There was no sting.

That's where I'm really disappointed. We trailed everything. We were really late, nonaggressive. And when you're nonaggressive in basketball and the ball doesn't go in for you, the other team gets confidence, and then you get these opportunities where that rim looks like a 55-gallon drum.

Q. You know your team better than anybody, but based on where your head was at last night or this morning when you got up, what were you expecting? Were you surprised, and are you surprised now by the way it went?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Yeah, I'm disappointed. I don't want to say -- nothing in basketball surprises me after 38 years of doing this. There's so many things that are variables.

I was disappointed we didn't fight on the defensive end, and that's my job to get them ready to fight. I didn't have them fight. I didn't have them ready to go to battle today.

We can't do that anymore. This team's young. I need to

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

help them in those areas. It was back-to-back. We were ready yesterday. I think any time you're playing for a trophy or a championship, I assumed too much that maybe we would just be ready to go.

Boy, our energy was really off, and we've got to get that corrected. That's on us.

Q. With 2:40 left in the game, you called timeout. Maybe I'm reading into something, but what's the message to the team in that moment? I know you guys finished the game on an 8-0 run.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: Maybe I need to burn them all -- no. Really I wanted to run the play. We had a last second play that we put in that we haven't ran all year, and I wanted to make sure that Morez, being in the game, knew it. Will scored on it. That was a great timeout. I wish I could have had 42 of them.

Yeah, the game was over, but it was more about wanting to run that play and literally talk through next week. We didn't talk about ending the game in any other way. We talked about it's a loss, let's move on, what this thing looks like for the future.

Q. A couple Big Ten coaches have been fired. Do you have any thoughts or reflections on -- especially with Fran, but you've competed against these guys for a while and know them well.

BRAD UNDERWOOD: I know Fran much better than I do Ben, but I have so much respect for the job that Ben did. His teams are always well-coached, disciplined, played hard.

I don't know what goes into all those decisions internally. I know as a basketball coach that you hate to see your counterparts -- it's like I saw Fran in the hallway last night, and you could tell he was emotional with Payton. You've got 15 years in a place at an institution, and nothing's easy.

For me personally with Fran, you go back, and you start thinking of the battles that we've had, and they've been epic. There's been some incredible battles competing for championships. You always remember those.

The other side of that for me is I know Fran personally. I know his family very well. I know how good a person he is and what a great human being. You never want ill things to happen.

I texted Ben the next morning. Just a tremendous amount of respect for those two guys. In Fran's case he's had an unbelievable run, unbelievable career, and I'm sure Ben

will get another opportunity.

Q. Obviously losses like this hurt and not having the chance to win the Big Ten Championship hurts. But as you said throughout tonight, you've got a couple more days of rest and preparation to go into really what matters is March Madness, like you said in that last timeout. After tonight in the next couple of days you get, what's your main message going to be to the team so you guys can try to avoid this come next week?

BRAD UNDERWOOD: The great opportunity is last year, when we won it last year, we took Monday off and had to travel Tuesday. There was no prep time. We were fortunate that it's such a quick turn. Now we'll get to dissect this with film. We'll have some teaching points. We'll get rested. We'll actually have practice times to go correct some things that we've got to get right and get focused.

It was a good learning tool for me today. Now we get one day prep instead of four days in a row or what could have been four days in a row.

We'll be fine. This is a good basketball team. We've proven that here in the last couple weeks. It wasn't our day today. Give Maryland all the props because they deserve them all. We're going to show up next Thursday or Friday against whoever we have to play, and we're going to compete awfully hard.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports