

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 14, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

Wisconsin Badgers

Greg Gard

John Blackwell

Karmari McGee

John Tonje

Postgame Press Conference

Wisconsin - 86, UCLA - 70

THE MODERATOR: We'll begin with Coach Gard's opening statement.

GREG GARD: Obviously, really proud of our guys. I thought we played -- the 3s are going to get a lot of the attention, and obviously, this group has the potential to do that, and they've shown that through the year.

But the job we did defensively, I felt, was just as important, if not more important, of how we were able to keep them out of rhythm, that our perimeter did a really good job of ball pressuring, getting into the ball. Our bigs did a good job of being able to help them and get reattached to their bigs.

Obviously, when you make shots like that, it makes the game easier.

Proud of our group. Looking forward to playing tomorrow.

Q. John and Kamari, can you speak to the satisfaction defensively? What kind of satisfaction do you get from a game like this, especially given some of the challenges that UCLA gave you back in January?

KAMARI MCGEE: Honestly, I wouldn't even say we got satisfaction from it because that -- in the last game, we knew we could have been better defensively, and we showed that today.

We're not satisfied because we've still got more games to be played, and I feel like our defense could be better. We



played a good defense today, but I feel like we can step it up a notch too.

JOHN BLACKWELL: Yeah, we got steps to get better. I feel like we did a pretty good job on their main guys today. We've got to keep going and getting better every day.

I think at their place, we didn't do a great job, so we ended up losing the game. Yeah, we just watched film, took that, and used it today.

Q. John, you guys had 22 assists on your 30 buckets. You guys were very aware of each other on the court all day long. What do you attribute that to today?

JOHN TONJE: I want to say the coaching staff. I think they prepared us well. We were able to look at some of the things we did well and some of the things we didn't do so well the last game.

I think it's just, you know, we have unselfish guys in this locker room. We're trying to come out here and compete and do everything we can. I think sharing the ball really carried us over the top today.

Q. John, for you as well, coach has kind of mentioned you're kind of a mild mannered guy, one of the more calm guys as for your demeanor. It seemed like today you were pretty animated, getting shots to go, but also for your teammates. How fun is it being out on the court today and just in general playing with this group of guys? Where did that maybe extra set of emotions come from today?

JOHN TONJE: I think just being in a competitive game, it's kind of win or go home. I was just trying to bring any energy I can. I know I'm known as a more calm guy, but I think I couldn't help myself today. This guy didn't miss a 3 today, so it was kind of hard to contain it. It was awesome today.

Q. Kamari and John, you guys picked your games up here lately. The last two days, you've been pretty effective in everything you're doing. What are you guys collectively seeing on the floor that's making you



prosper?

JOHN BLACKWELL: I think it just starts with us as point guards of the team. We're the leaders of the team, the leaders of the court, we're the quarterback on the court. The guys feed off our energy. If we're down and not able to go, they feed off that.

I told Kamari, the couple games that we lost, it's on us. We've got to keep going, keep our energy high, even when we're not playing it that good, not shooting it that good. I think as point guards, that's our job.

KAMARI MCGEE: Just to piggy-back off of what John said, we're the point guards, the head of the snake. It starts with us. We can't just go out there and tell our guys one thing and not do it. We've got to lead by example.

I feel like we picked that up. We dropped a couple games where we maybe were telling the guys to do something that we weren't doing ourselves. Just us leading by example is very key in these games that we want to win.

Q. John Tonje, you had an overall round performance today, just between distributing and rebounding * with just a single turnover. Did the floor just open up for you today? What went into that performance?

JOHN TONJE: I think I was just trying to be aggressive within the flow of the game, trying to figure out how they're guarding me, and how I can adjust and just really be effective.

With all these guys around me that balance the floor and make it easier to open up and make it the right decision, I think it's just having talented guys around me that help me make plays.

Q. For John, Kamari, and John, I'd like to hear from each of you. What did you learn from the last experience playing the Spartans two weeks ago in East Lansing? What did you guys learn from that experience that you can take into tomorrow's game?

JOHN TONJE: I think one of the things is just how physical they are and how they're trying to get to the offensive rebounds. They cycle a lot of guys. I think they go 10, 11 deep in their roster.

We're just going to have to be ready to compete, and it's going to be as simple as that.

KAMARI MCGEE: I would say not to get jump shot happy. A lot of shots went down today. I feel like we didn't go in the paint enough at their place. I feel like we can really eat

inside and find guys and spread. That's where we can get our 3s from inside out.

If we just attack the paint more than we did in the last game, we'll have better results.

JOHN BLACKWELL: I just think down the stretch, we've just got to execute a little bit better. I know you're on the road and it's a tough environment, but you've just got to execute better as a point guard to do that. I think we didn't do that there.

We're careless with the ball and gave them a few more possessions. Then the effort plays. They had more effort plays than us. We can't give up that many offensive rebounds if they're going to win the game.

Q. All three of you guys scored in double figures. Steve did. X had 8 points. You know, obviously, really a complete performance. How impactful is that when you guys have so many options every night, and how does that raise the ceiling offensively going into March?

JOHN BLACKWELL: I think we just love playing with each other. The guys that early had 22 assists on 30 baskets. We just love playing with each other. We love to move the ball, share the ball.

It's great when guys like Xavier Amos comes in and gives us a spark off the bench. We know how capable he is of doing that, and we needed it today, and he showed up.

JOHN TONJE: We have a lot of talented guys, and we kind of feed off each other. When we're able to be unselfish and kind of look for each other, the ball just kind of finds its way back to you. I think everyone's kind of bought in now, and we're just -- we're not pushing our own agendas. We're just trying to compete and doing everything we can to get the win.

Q. Greg, to start the second half, UCLA came out. They scored the first 7 points, and cut it to 12. You guys were able to bounce back from back. What went into that stretch of your guys being able to withstand that early surge?

GREG GARD: I think understanding how they were going to come out. They put four different starters in the lineup than what they had started with knowing. We felt they were going to come out, and really try to get after us, pressure us, drive the ball downhill, obviously, with Mack.

I don't think the first few possessions we handled it well. It took a little bit for the officials to sort some things out and



clean some stuff up.

We were in the bonus the last 17 minutes, so we got there really quickly, and we did a better job of being stronger with the ball, and for the most part, stopping dribble penetration. We didn't do a great job keeping them off the glass.

We were able to counter and match their aggressiveness and not let that faze us.

Q. I know the conversation started with 3-pointers. You guys hit 19 of them. It tied the 2022 mark that Iowa had set Keegan Murray with Bohannon and those guys. What did that mean to shoot the ball so well?

GREG GARD: Usually, when you're shooting it well, we're moving it well. I thought the numbers bear that out as well, too. We moved it. We changed sides. Guys are unselfish and making plays for each other.

When you do that, the ball finds -- like John said, the ball will find its way back to you. The ball finds the energy. I felt we were all playing with energy, and it shows with how good we were offensively.

Q. You've staggered lineups throughout the season, especially with the two bigs. At that 13:29 mark early in the first half, you went back to the starters and get a 9-2 run there. Was there maybe a sense of urgency or what kind of went into that compared to the lineup? And then, what do you see offensively, with those 3s especially, when those five are out on the court?

GREG GARD: You talk about the starting five? Some of it's fatigue based. Winter and Crowell got their third fouls relatively quick in the start of the half. So I kind of played them opposite each other for a little bit. Then Winter got his fourth obviously.

Then we played Gilmore at the 5, which we've done in the past. He was able to play smaller. They were using Kyle at the 5, and we were matching perimeter players around it.

I think the versatility to -- we're harder to guard too when we've got essentially two 4s in Gilmore and Amos on the floor together. We're a little faster. We're obviously not as big, but in terms of ball movement, body movement, the mobility picks up, and we're harder to keep up with.

Like I said, it was just -- then I went back to the lineup. When I felt guys were getting tired and put up a few offensive rebounds, we needed to clean that stuff up. It was a gut feel of what I watch and what I feel, and watching body languages, and our guys getting a little

exhausted and I needed to give them a break. Obviously, some fouls played into those positions too.

Q. Were you a little bit surprised they didn't go more to Aday Mara considering the success you had when you two met at Pauley Pavilion, 22 points?

GREG GARD: I think we did a better job on him. We made his catches a little harder. We were around him a little bit more with some help. He was able to get us on the offensive glass. He got at least five tonight.

I just thought we were more physical. We had more of an edge to us on the defensive end than what we had back in January.

Q. I touched on it a little bit with John Blackwell, but just X, in addition to a couple triples, three blocks, I think three boards, a couple of assists. Just where are you kind of seeing his comfort, especially after he sees one go down early? How is he growing defensively right now as well?

GREG GARD: I think he's still growing is a good word. He's got a lot of potential. I think a lot of -- he's got a lot of steps yet to make. I think he's gaining confidence, and that's one thing with a younger, underdeveloped player, that the confidence sometimes ebbs and flows.

So for him, it's just keeping the game simple. He knew when things -- he missed a block-out or something offensive we had called, he went the opposite direction with it. So he understands those things. But I think for him, it's just gaining that confidence and keeping the game simple.

Sometimes -- I know he's not young, but he's young in terms of our program. They think there's this magic possession that you have to use as a player. Really, it's about keeping the game simple and being fundamentally sound on both ends. He's still figuring those things out.

Q. The last time you played Michigan State, Max Klesmit was unable to play. Can you describe for me -- listen, it's a team sport, one person. It's not an individual sport. But can you describe for me what difference Max can make into this mix playing the Spartans tomorrow?

GREG GARD: I think Max -- regardless of who we would match up to play tomorrow, Max is important. We played 33 games. He's missed 3 of the 33. He's missed 3 games.

Regardless of who it was, he's starting for a reason, and he's an important piece. I would say that about if it was



somebody else too because, as you put a team together and you grow through a season, roles get established, and they start to really define themselves. Players take ownership in those roles, and Max's role is really important with this group.

Obviously, an emotional leader, a vocal leader, an experienced leader, and obviously brings an element from his ability to score, defend. It's an important piece. I think it would be -- I know it would be the same regardless because we've had other guys in other years that we've missed, and maybe they weren't a starter, but you understand, as the team comes together on this journey, you realize how important each piece is to that journey.

When someone has to sit on the sideline a little bit and they're part of that rotation, you can maybe survive it a little bit, but eventually it takes its toll. Eventually you get out of a rhythm, and it forces other players to move out of the role that they had grown into prior to the injury.

So it doesn't just affect Max when he missed it, it was the shifting, so to speak, of the seats on the bus that happened. Obviously, we'd love to have him back and got everybody healthy. When we're whole and we've got all our people, we're a pretty good team.

It's regardless of who we're going to play tomorrow. I know Michigan State, we've had battles for a quarter century. I've got great respect for Tom and his program. Looking forward to tomorrow.

Q. Sebastian Mack was obviously a key attacker for UCLA tonight, 18 points and kind of finding his way into the paint. What can you say about just his play style from what you were seeing?

GREG GARD: I thought we did a better job than we did in L.A. back in January. He single handedly put them on his back and made plays.

I thought we were better after the start of the second half, when he was really trying to get downhill and draw fouls and buckets and free-throw line, we got better at squeezing gaps. Klesmit got a charge on him, and we were able to withstand some of the stuff he was trying to do off the bounce.

He's a really good player. We learned that firsthand back in January. I felt we were better today when that time came.

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Sky Clark

Sebastian Mack

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MICK CRONIN: I don't have an opening statement.

Q. Guys, this isn't really the team we're used to seeing that we saw tonight. What do you think happened? Obviously, they kind of punched you in the mouth first, but from your perspective, what happened?

SKYY CLARK: I think we came out too flat. We let their two best players hit some open shots to get them comfortable, get them confident, and then it just kind of rolled over to the rest of the game.

There's not really much to say.

Q. What was your -- the 3-pointers obviously was the story. Defensively, what was happening to allow them to go get so hot?

SEBASTIAN MACK: To be honest, we let them get comfortable too early. Once you get a team like that, that can hit 3s all over the floor like that, it's hard to stop them when you start trying to pressure them and stuff.

We didn't do none of what we were supposed to do game plan-wise. We failed miserably at that. They just played comfortable, and they looked like it too.

We just looked like the team that came out flat and just stayed flat. We've just got to work on not doing the same thing and relapsing on what we did today.

Q. Skyy, you've got another game in roughly a week. How do you kind of put this aside quickly and move forward in a positive way?



SKYY CLARK: Just come in, we've got to bring our own energy. If we're not on the West Coast, the bench, the players, everybody, we've got to bring more energy. We've got to play tougher.

Q. Tough game. That's not UCLA basketball. Where do you think it went wrong, and what do you think you can do now going forward in the tournament?

MICK CRONIN: You got to give Wisconsin credit. They shot the lights out.

We all have weaknesses, and there are teams that can shoot it at five positions. Really, we don't have the personnel. We don't match up well with teams like that, and we haven't all year. When teams are like that, like when Michigan made shots like that, we don't have an athletic lineup that can just switch and really shut that down.

They're really hard -- we're going to have to beat them with offense. Like I watch certain teams play, and I know they're a bad matchup for us. I mean, you can get mad and yell. I'm just giving you -- removed from I'm -- I'm upset about, I thought effort-wise.

Really what I was upset with wasn't that. It was because I knew the matchup was going to be a problem, so I knew we'd have to be a high execution team today. To Skyy's point, they know. The message was, we can't try to win a 3-point shooting contest. So if they get hot, we can't just grab it and shoot it and try to match them. And that's what we did.

That was hammered into them from the time we knew we were playing them. We cannot do that. Case in point, we're losing at half at home when we played them, and we shot like 15 3s, three or four for 15. Second half, we shot five 3s in that game in the second half, and we were, I think, 15 for 20 from 2 and shot over 60 percent and won the game. We stopped trying to match them.

We took the bait miserably today. So they're a tough matchup for us.



Q. I think the starters combined for 30 points on 20-something percent shooting. Hard to win a game like that.

MICK CRONIN: Sure. I mean, you answered your own question.

Q. Then you shook up the lineup going into the second half.

MICK CRONIN: I'd like to give William Kyle credit. I thought he played unbelievably hard and competed. Really proud of him. It doesn't surprise me.

He hasn't had a lot of minutes lately, but that's who he is. Didn't surprise me he was going to compete that way.

Q. Did they do a better job being more physical with Aday today defensively?

MICK CRONIN: Look, I don't want -- because the problem is, when I answer a question, then people say Cronin is complaining about travel. He wants to leave UCLA, which is ridiculous. But you and I are together every week. All I do is answer your question.

I didn't say that. I just answered your question. Also, he hates to travel. I never said that, ever. I'm not leaving UCLA until they make me leave, okay? So please stop with that.

I just answer your question. Now, if I answer that question, it's going to seem like I'm making an excuse. Are they more physical with Aday? So the problem is, if I answer that, then I'm making an excuse. I'm not going to answer it. You know the answer, so you answer it, because if I answer it -- and I'm not making an excuse.

They kicked our ass. We didn't throw the ball to him really enough to make it a factor. So if I answer that, then I'm complaining -- losers blame the officials. Winners know why they win. And winners know why they lose too. So I try to teach these guys, you got your ass kicked. That's why you lost.

We took the bait and shot a whole bunch of 3s, what I was alluding to earlier, we shot 32 3s today. That's not who we are. We don't shoot it well enough for that. We didn't move the ball, so we didn't get the ball to him.

Did he get pushed? You can answer that. Every time he tried -- you can answer that because I don't need the headline in your paper saying that I complained about the damn refs when I didn't.

We got our ass kicked. That's the headline.

Q. John Tonje was a bit all over the place in the stat sheet. Can you speak to the type of player he is that he was able to affect the game?

MICK CRONIN: Can I be honest? Right now, I just got my ass kicked. I'm going to answer this quick. I voted for him for Player of the Year in the league. We had to rank them. I voted Tonje 1, Smith from Purdue 2. Very close, but I gave Tonje the nod. That's how good I think he is.

Q. Question I asked Skyy, how do you put this aside and move forward? Can you, should you just flush it away and disregard it?

MICK CRONIN: I don't really know what that means. I flush stuff away, but I don't think we're supposed to talk about that right now.

Q. Recognizing that it was not a good result versus --

MICK CRONIN: I mean, it's not the first time I lost in my career, Ben, so I'm confused. I said it's a bad matchup for us. We struggled -- our big guys struggled to guard the perimeter. You've seen us all year.

I alluded to the Michigan game, Vlad Goldin hit a couple 3s, Danny hit a few. It's not -- we don't have that type of team. So that's what it is.

But you always just -- whether you win or -- I tell you the same answer all the time, but I know you've got to ask questions. Whether you win or lose, you've got to try to get better. You've got to try to get better.

What they know is, we didn't -- we did not follow the game plan, which was -- the predictability that they were going to get hot against us was 50-50. Now, they lost 3 of their last 5 because they shot 25 percent from the 3-point line for their last regular season games. I told them they're probably going to get hot again. That's just who they are.

We cannot grab it and shoot it and try to match them, and that's what we did. That was the game. When we started doing that, the game was over. We started playing -- we started trying to be them instead of us. So that's that.

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