

March 22, 2012



Ohio State – 81
Cincinnati – 66

An interview with:



**COACH THAD MATTA
JARED SULLINGER
DESHAUN THOMAS**

COACH MATTA: Well, obviously a great college basketball game. We were able to put together a run there in the first half. Give Cincinnati credit, they came out and stung us to start the second half, and we had to take some timeouts there to kind of refocus what we were doing on the defensive end. And once we got that going, I thought it generated some offense for us. We were able to make the plays we had to make down the stretch. When you play a team that is as multidimensional as Cincinnati is, it can take its toll on you. And the biggest thing was challenging threes. Half the shots they took tonight were threes. I thought we did a pretty decent job for the most part, especially when we were dialed in. But great, great win for us tonight.

Q. Deshaun, just talk a little bit about especially the first half you really seemed to get in a groove. What got you going in this game tonight?

DESHAUN THOMAS: Having my mind right. I mean, trusting in coach and my teammates and hitting open spots. I was really good in that zone, flashing and kicking it down to Sulli (Jared

Sullinger) and just getting in the open area and just knocking down shots, and that's what got me going.

Q. For Jared, can you describe what happened to start the second half, as Thad put it, when you were dialed in you were pretty good? And then what happened when you did get dialed in? What was said that got you dialed in again after they hit you with that run?

JARED SULLINGER: We've got two types of basketball teams: We've got the cool guys and then the blue collar guys. I thought to start the second half we got into the cool guy mode and we kind of let our guard down. Coach Matta basically told us before we started the second half that they was going to come at us with everything they had because Cincinnati is just the type of team that does not give up. I mean, we just came out and decided to be cool guys, and they came out and they stung us, and then we got ourselves back into another basketball game.

Q. You can give that kind of answer to me. That was good stuff right there. I'd love to know if you guys think you're the best forwards in the country. I don't know if you'll answer that, but do you think you complement each other as well as any two forwards in the country?

DESHAUN THOMAS: I mean, we work well together. I give us credit. I think we're one of the top forwards in the country in my eyes. Playing well with Jared in the summer, we was playing real well together, and Coach Jent was telling us you and Jared can play off each other very well, so I give us a great compliment being one of the top forwards in the country.

JARED SULLINGER: When you've got somebody like Deshaun that can post the basketball, score off jump hooks, hit the open shot at the three-point line, and he pretty much catches everything that you throw at him, he pretty much makes me look a lot better than what I am. I think

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when Deshaun is hitting shots like the way he was hitting today in the first half, and even when he was open in the second half, he was still knocking them down.

I think it makes it so much easier for me to find Deshaun because nobody knows where he's at but me. There's sometimes he's at the block, sometimes he's at three-point line, sometimes he's at the mid-post area. I think Deshaun just makes me look a lot better than what I am.

Q. Could you talk a little bit about Lenzelle's (Smith) game tonight? He really had a strong game.

JARED SULLINGER: Lenzelle, when he gets going, this whole basketball team, we kind of feed off of Lenzelle. I mean, when Lenzelle pretty much came to the huddle, he kind of spoke throughout the huddle, and I thought that was tremendous. I think we responded off his leadership today and his defensive intensity and just his ability to get to the basket and share the basketball.

Q. For Jared, in that 17-1 run in the second half, there were a couple of three-pointers for you guys, but mostly it seemed like you made a commitment to go pound it inside and either get to the line or get the easy baskets. Was that the thinking at that point?

JARED SULLINGER: Around that time I think we was in a one-on-one situation, so we was just trying to attack the basket and not settle for a good shot and turn down a good shot to get a great shot. I thought Craft's ability to get to the rim and Deshaun knocking down the shots really kind of got us going, and we knew they was going to double in the post after they doubled Deshaun the first play of the game.

I mean, we just read their defense really well tonight, and you've got to give that to the coaches and putting us in situations where we can succeed.

Q. I know you decided to come back to college this year in order to make another run with Ohio State. Can you talk about that decision now that you're one win away from the Final Four? Do you feel like you kind of redeemed yourself with that decision and you want to keep it going?

JARED SULLINGER: The decision was to come back to make another run, but also it's just --

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the basketball team last year really had a touch of my heart. There's some guys where they're pretty much family. I mean, I really couldn't let my family down like that, and I thought that was tremendous on their part for accepting me the way I am.

But I think as far as redeeming myself, it feels good to be in the Elite 8, but we still have one more game on our schedule, and we have to focus on that. Hopefully the train doesn't stop here.

Q. Jared, that idea, though, I know you had the Brandon Knight poster in your bathroom last year with losing in the Sweet 16. You've now made it that one step further. I know you don't want to stop, but to be here today instead of a losing locker room, how does that feel?

JARED SULLINGER: It feels tremendous. Coach Matta has been through two Sweet 16s where the train kind of stopped. Well, it did stop. And we wanted to make sure that this train was going to keep rolling.

I mean, it's tremendous to be in a situation like this, and it's a blessing, but at the same time we can't lose sight of focus.

Q. Deshaun, just to sort of double back on this, do you feel like you and Jared have gotten better over the course of the season, sort of playing off each other and helping to create things for each other?

DESHAUN THOMAS: Yeah, I think we've gotten way better. We've learned that teams are double teaming us and playing the right guy out of the double-team. He seen me flashing, now they double-teaming me, so now I see him flashing. So I think that's way better. I think we're here as a team, we keep moving the ball and then we play off each other. And that's what me and Jared, we keep doing. We're just successful at that.

Q. Jared, what are your initial thoughts about facing Syracuse on Saturday?

JARED SULLINGER: I know we're going to face a 2-3 zone. There's no hiding that. They're very long. They're very athletic. I mean, they can get up and down with the best of them. So it's going to be a game that we're going to have to try to control the tempo in, and also we're going to have to score and execute our offense even though they're playing 2-3 zone. We can't just sit back and let them punch us. We've got to throw

the first punches. Not literally, but...

Q. Talk a little bit about defensively you guys turned them over 18 times and they are not a team that has turned the ball over, 13 steals. A lot of that had to do with Aaron, but did you think coming in you could do that against them? Talk about the defensive effort.

COACH MATTA: Well, what we wanted to do was be in position and force them to make quick decisions. A lot of the tape we had seen of their opponents, teams hadn't -- we told each other, just be sound, and we weren't sound to start the second half, but just be in the right spots at the right time. They're going to make shots. They're a high-powered, offensive team. They've got plenty of guys who can score. That was where our minds were of just positioning, faking, staying, doing those things, and I thought our guys did a pretty good job except the eight minutes to start the second half.

Q. Did you have any inkling at halftime that the cool guys were going to show up? And what finally got them back to being the blue collar guys? Was it you or was it the change in score?

COACH MATTA: I might have had a little to do with it in the time-out. But yeah, I think what Jared was saying, we let our guard down, and the one thing we had seen with Cincinnati was they can come at you in waves, and the game plan was never to let them get some consecutive scores. When we did that, they had the momentum going on their side, and we weren't able to control it. It affected us a little bit offensively, as well. We had some costly turnovers there, I think three in the first four minutes, that as we told our guys, if you turn it over against Cincinnati, they are scoring at the other end, and they did.

To these guys' credit, they did a good job playing themselves out of it and really got reconnected out there, which was great to see.

Q. We have sort of seen your team this year, that you're great in stretches and then at times not as great. I don't know if we defined it as cool guy and blue collar guy, that's pretty good, but that was happening in that eight-minute stretch to begin the second half. What did it feel like for you? And you were talking about in timeouts you wanted to get them out of that.

COACH MATTA: Well, I think a lot of it had to do with just youth. I keep saying I'm not going to beat a dead horse here, but we've got one senior, one junior, and the rest are freshmen and sophomores. We talk about maturity with these guys, and I think we've grown in that area. But we need a little bit of a wake-up call there.

The thing I don't want to do is take anything away from Cincinnati because they're a really, really good basketball team. And we knew they were going to make a run on us, and we just weren't able to stop it when we wanted to.

But like I said, I give our guys credit. They played themselves through it.

Q. What difference have you seen in Lenzelle the past couple week at NCAA Tournament? It seems like he's playing with a lot more aggression and confidence, especially tonight the way he went to the basket.

COACH MATTA: Yeah, I think in a lot of ways Lenzelle is like a freshman because he didn't get a ton of playing time last year and it was pretty much spot play. He's worked very hard. I think the biggest thing -- I talked to Lenzelle about it before we left Columbus, of just make sure all your thoughts are about the team, and when Lenzelle is dialed in, he really, really sees things in terms of thinking how do I help the other four guys on the floor, because he can go into his own world and say I've got to get myself -- when he's thinking that broader vision, he plays great basketball.

Q. Just your initial thoughts on Syracuse, and also, given all the off-the-court distractions they've had this year, what does it say about Coach Boeheim and the team that they're here and have persevered?

COACH MATTA: Well, I think when you look at Coach Boeheim and the job he has done, I hate to say this, since I was a little kid, just watching Syracuse year in, year out, all the great players, all the great teams they've had. Obviously they're playing at a high level, and they've got a great cause. I've always said that. I think you see teams in the NCAA Tournament that there's a cause, something that has happened. And we talked about this today in a meeting. What Mick (Cronin) has done at Cincinnati since early December, those guys had a cause. He's done a great job with them. And I think Coach Boeheim has done that. We've got a heck of a challenge on

Saturday.

Q. Just Jared and Deshaun combining for 49 points, did you feel like that was something that you could get out of them in this game, and did you feel like Deshaun might be a match-up problem for them coming into this?

COACH MATTA: We did. But conversely we thought they may try to -- and they did, they were moving him all around and getting him involved in pick-and-rolls with the reverse size effect. But no, I thought those guys really combined, and they were connected. The one Jared threw the hook pass out, Deshaun hit a three late in the first half, they were on a rope together. They've been that way here as of late.

Q. Could you reflect a little bit on -- I know you don't have much time to think about it, but making past this barrier to the next round and what it's like dealing with that quick turnaround of the high and then back focused on the next game?

COACH MATTA: Yeah. Well, I'm obviously excited to get past it. I think as you get to this stage, a lot of it, just the emotion of continuing to advance really centralizes your guys' thinking and focuses their thinking. We've been on a stretch here, quite honestly, dating back to when we began February, through the Big Ten season, and with the conference tournaments last weekend. We're kind of in the same boat here. We talk a lot about the quick turnarounds, and I'll be honest, we went into this game thinking Cincinnati was probably going to play a zone. We spent a majority of our time this week going against zone. And I told our guys, trying to motivate them, when we play Syracuse on Saturday, this will pay off for us.

Q. Two things: Just the idea that this is where the train did stop for the past two years, does that add anything more to being up here and being a winner on this night? And then the last ten minutes, the defense, steals, Deshaun had a block, you guys took a charge, just that last ten minutes, the defensive stretch.

COACH MATTA: Well, like I said, it's obviously a very, very good feeling to be down to eight tomorrow night, whenever the games end, with a lot at stake. I mean, so much is put on now, the NCAA Tournament.

I couldn't be happier for this team. If you would have told me in November this team was going to win 30 games, I would have said there's no way we're going to win 30 games. And to their credit, they've done a great job of putting us in this position. I think the last ten minutes we challenged them. It was time. And we kept talking about in the four minutes, we need four stops in this four minutes, we need three stops in this time, and they did that.

Q. Do you have to have a conversation with William (Buford) just because of the struggles he had tonight? He did some other things, but he also had -- he missed shots again and he had a turnover, big turnover there when they were making their run. Are you concerned about his mindset going into the regional final on Saturday?

COACH MATTA: I say this, and I said it at halftime: William Buford played his best defense in his career at Ohio State that first 20 minutes, and that was something that we had really challenged him in guarding (Sean) Kilpatrick. I think from the standpoint of did he have a great offensive game? No. But you know what, that was a huge three he hit during the second half.

I think he will be ready to go. For him, being the only senior on this basketball team, as crazy as it sounds, he's the only guy that lost two years ago in St. Louis to Tennessee. I mean, he's the only guy that was on that team. For him to get past this, I'm very excited and got great confidence he'll play well on Saturday.

Q. You talked about this a bit yesterday. I was just wondering if you could reflect a little bit on the year for the state of Ohio in terms of the success all the programs have had and knocking out one of your fellow Ohio teams.

COACH MATTA: Yeah. I think that -- I was at Xavier many years ago, and if I'm not mistaken, one time we had three in the Sweet 16 or something. I know it was the year Kent State -- I don't know if it was Sweet 16 or round of 32, whatever it was. Yeah, I think Ohio is a great state. Obviously very happy. Being at Ohio State, I love to see, from Division III teams, Division II, we've got great those teams, as well. And I think it speaks volumes to the high school coaches, AAU coaches, all those guys, and all the great college

coaches you have here.

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