

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday March 14, 2019

Paul Weir

Anthony Mathis

Dane Kuiper

New Mexico Lobos

Utah State - 91, New Mexico - 83

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by New Mexico head coach Paul Weir and student-athletes Anthony Mathis and Corey Manigault. Coach, an opening statement.

Q. It's been a heck of a ride a part of the coaching change. I know you've been asked this a lot in Albuquerque, it's come to an end. It's been a wild ride with the coaching change, new coach, all that kind of stuff. I'm curious, did that game have the feel like it was going to be the end?

ANTHONY MATHIS: Not at one point in the game did I think we weren't going to win that game. It's just how confident I am in my team, my coaches and my teammates. I truly thought we had what it took to pull that game out. Unfortunately the cards did not fall in our favor. And it hurts for that to be it.

Q. Dane, any thoughts about that being it?

DANE KUIPER: No thoughts at all. Utah State played a hell of a game. They hit their shots at the end. And we couldn't execute at the end. They deserved it tonight. But I had no doubt in my mind that we could pull out that game.

Q. If you both had that feeling then that was the type of game that you could win, I'm curious throughout the course of this season how often you had that feeling. There were a lot of games that ended up being blowouts and bad losses. Why couldn't you do what happened tonight when it all came together, why wasn't that this season for you?

DANE KUIPER: We never at one point went into a game and thought we were going to lose it. We just had troubles connecting as a team throughout the season and it all came together at the end for the last two games we played and that's about it.

ANTHONY MATHIS: Yeah, I just feel like this tournament we were really connected. You could really tell that everybody was playing for one another,



because if you didn't play for one another it was going to be the end of the road.

And at times during the season I felt like when we ran into our bumps in the road we were just playing selfish, trying to be stat-sheet stuffers and doing our own thing. That obviously doesn't work as we learn the hard way. But I truly feel like this tournament we bought in for one another.

Q. Do you then take this tournament, a run against a co-champion like that, a game that's been the best game of the tournament so far, do you take something from that? Is it almost more frustration that's what the season could have been? Or what are you walking away here tonight feeling?

ANTHONY MATHIS: Just that I have a lot of work as an individual basketball player. And there's so many more things that I could have done for this team to make it a successful season that I didn't do. And it's just a learning experience that I'll take for the rest of my life.

DANE KUIPER: I have a lot of work to do, too, but I think it's more for the guys that are staying. They just saw over two games what you need to do to win with the way Coach wants to coach the team, and so I think that will help them next year a lot.

Q. Both of you guys I know have hopes to play somewhere beyond this. The guys that are coming back next year, there are guys sitting out. Lobo fans heard it last year going into this year. If you had one message to Lobo fans that again turned out sub-.500 season, again showed up to Pit west in Las Vegas, again led the league in attendance -- the fans are still showing up; if you had one message to the Lobo fans who kept showing up for you guys even during a bad year, what would it be about what next year's team can be?

DANE KUIPER: Just never give up on anybody no matter how things are going. We love the fans. They came out to every game. And we can't really thank them enough for what they did. And if I could just say one thing is just never give up on a team that you're supporting, because once you lose faith in them, they lose faith in you. And it's all bad from there. So just keep supporting.

ANTHONY MATHIS: The only thing I would say is it's a

process. I mean everybody -- we heard last year how great this team was going to be this year. It's truly a process you're going to learn.

It's just -- you just gotta keep believing. Obviously this year was not what it was supposed to be. Like Coach said in the locker room, we had a big piece of humble pie this year as individual players and as a team. And everybody has a lot of work to do.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about the technical and the role it played in the turn-about in the second half there?

COACH WEIR: Yeah, from my vantage point I thought it went off Queta. I thought Bob could have maybe, being beside me saw what I saw and kind of reversed the call.

There was a timeout in play. So the play was over. So I kept going on the court. And he gave me a T for being outside of my box. I didn't think because the game wasn't going on that the box still existed. But I guess it does. I don't know the exact rule on that. Maybe he's right. I wasn't trying to get one. I was just voicing my displeasure on a play. I think coaches get that way a lot.

Do I think that was the right time and place for that call to be made? Probably not. But, hey, it's the call and I have to live with it. How much it impacted the game, I don't know. We were obviously up at the time. I'd like to say six, maybe eight, something like that.

It could have had one, I guess. But I think those plays down the stretch in the last two, three minutes to me were much more kind of pivotal.

Q. You've forced them into 24 turnovers in the game, a season high. What were you doing with the press in the first half that you might not have done in the second half when they looked like they countered you a little bit?

COACH WEIR: I think, to be honest with you, I kept telling the guys I think they almost started to feel the gravity of the game. And I think we just got a little bit more like lenient in it. And as the game went on, I wanted to do it even more. And I just felt like -- and a lot of those possessions in the last three, four minutes they were starting to feed the ball inside to Queta. They were starting to run some offense. And that was never what we wanted to do. But I think the gravity of the moment on the guys just kind of got to them a little bit and we weren't continuing to try to pressure the way we were for the first 36, 37 minutes.

I thought Utah State, obviously they kept maneuvering around their press offenses. Like, they kept adapting things. They started moving around inbounders, getting guys on the run. Like they kept probing different areas to get something. And they found a few here and there.

So I thought they did a good job of constantly evolving. But I thought we put our foot off the gas at the time when you put the pedal to the metal, so to speak.

Q. First and foremost, I wanted to give you an opportunity to talk about the two men that just left. Can you say a couple things about the seniors?

COACH WEIR: I just told the guys I think we all went into the year wanting Dane and Anthony to be a part of this rebuilding process, turning the corner and being a part of something really fun. I think the expectations we all probably bought into a little bit.

The unfortunate part now is I hope they're going to look back 24 months from now, 48, however many years from now, and say, hey, like I was a part of that. I was a part of this thing getting started and this thing growing into what we want this program to be.

And the class with which they handled themselves in the midst of that is beyond admirable. They are two exceptionally talented young men way outside of basketball. They're talented people who are going to be successful at no matter what they do. And I look very forward to the friendships I'm going to have with them for hopefully the rest of my life.

Q. Question about the fouls, Carlton Bragg, who sat out with foul trouble in the first half -- the foul disparity continued to grow in the second half. Once you got the fourth foul on Sam Merrill, just a question, did you have any thought of attacking him to try to get him out of the game?

COACH WEIR: We've looked at that a little bit this year. We've done some things here and there. Sometimes when we try and do too much of that, we turn it over. And we did a pretty good job of taking care of the ball tonight and doing that in the flow of the game as opposed to, like, let's go do this, and everyone stand around while we try and get a foul.

And I thought we were doing a pretty good job of just picking them up on the right guys at times. We went at guys at certain times. But sometimes when we do too much of that, it just really ruins our offensive flow.

Q. What did you learn this year? You had a season of expectations and you thought pretty highly of this year's potential, too. And I'm curious either what went wrong or what you learned along the

way that maybe next year we might see differently?

COACH WEIR: I just told the guys -- I mean, I'm a younger guy to a lot of people, but I'm probably an older guy to them. Everything that's happened poorly in my life I would never take back, because it allowed me to get to where I am today. And I told the guys we can sit here and look at this season as a disappointment or this game as a disappointment or individual players being disappointing, or you're going to look back at it one day and say, man, that's what was made me great or what made me do this.

And I said that's the only thing hopefully we can take from this of. The only two that have to pay this price are Dane and Anthony because they wanted to feel us turning the corner in their senior years. But unfortunately they didn't quite get it. And hopefully they'll be able to look back with satisfaction and say I was there on the ground floor as something that turned out to be pretty special.

Q. And maybe more specific to on the court as opposed to those big picture things, you built a culture a year ago, third-place finish, picked ninth, third-place finish, go to the championship high, on high-pressure defense, full court press, man, man defense, firing up a bunch of 3s. This year you changed that three, four different times man. You went from man to stop pressing. You went to zone, did a lot of changes. Do you regret not sticking with what the culture seemed to be built as one year ago?

COACH WEIR: I've gone back and forth on that since we went to it. To beat the No. 6 team in the country playing zone and doing what we did there, it's hard to look back and say, damn, Paul, you really made the wrong decision here.

At the end of the day, it was Chuck Daly, shooting makes up for a multitude of sins; if you really look at our year, the reality is we just didn't shoot the ball well. And last year I think we had six guys, 35 percent or above from three. And this year we had two. And I didn't anticipate that. I don't think those players anticipated that.

We brought in and brought back a lot of guys that could shoot, and quite frankly we just didn't shoot the ball well this year. And I think that ended up exacerbating the rest of our issues with maybe foot speed or style or whatever. And if we had made more shots, I think a lot of things would be better.

So that's on me obviously as a coach. That's something about evaluation, about recruiting, about training, about development; for it to have that many guys kind of fall off percentage-wise in a single year is

something I have to like really reevaluate and make sure going forward either, A, we're robust enough to be able to withstand that; and then, B, not actually have that happen.

Q. Did these last two games reaffirm for you that you can play your style with this group and the additions that will come in that this is the way we're going to play?

COACH WEIR: I told the guys before the tournament I thought we were the luckiest team in the tournament because of the two teams we were going to play. I've never talked about the next game after the game were playing, but it's the one time I said, guys, here's the two teams we're playing, and here's how we're going to go beat them. I thought for these two particular teams we could definitely have done that.

I don't necessarily feel that way about the entire conference. There's some other teams in this conference -- if we played Fresno, if we played Vegas, if we played some other teams -- I don't know if I necessarily would have felt that way. But eventually I'd like to get to a way that we feel that way no matter who we play.

Unfortunately I would have liked that to happen this year but it didn't quite happen unfortunately.

Q. And the way Vance played the last two games, I mean, is this something that he can carry over with confidence and go I can really do this?

COACH WEIR: I hope so. I think the great thing about it was Vance was playing the 4 pretty much the entire tournament. And I think coming in and him and people around him, where he's going to play and what he's going to do, the great thing about it from me was that he had a lot of good things happening from that 4 spot and hopefully that's a position he'll be able to grow in and develop in and thrive in as well.

Q. What do you think brought that out from Vance Jackson during the last two games? And how do you coach it so he can have that type of energy for the regular season?

COACH WEIR: I thought he had great matchups at the 4. I thought Thompson was a really good matchup for him against Wyoming. They played a bigger lineup to kind of match our rebounding. I thought he had a really good matchup. And I thought he had some good matchups again tonight as well at times. When he gets into trouble is when he's on the perimeter trying to be a perimeter player against smaller perimeter guys.

So with Vance it's all about the matchups. It's been something I've been trying to stress to him all year and we've been stressing over all, not just to him to

Makuach and to Anthony and to Corey, you name it, just reading your matchup and knowing what that skill set is.

When he gets a good matchup he's a good player. When he gets a bad matchup he's like a lot of players; it's not always going to work out great.

Q. How much do you talk to your team about officiating calls and especially when it's clear the fans don't agree with a lot of them and you don't agree with them either?

COACH WEIR: I didn't bring them up once to the guys. I don't. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't just crushed. It was 6-0 and I was mesmerized by what I was watching. But it's never something I would take to the guys. That's something they don't need to concern themselves with.

I wasn't trying to get a technical foul, quite honestly. There were times when I maybe felt like it but I didn't. It is what it is. Queta has earned the right for those calls. Merrill has earned the right for those calls. They're great players on a great team and they earn the right to kind of get the calls they do. Carlton, I love him to death. Our guys, I love them to death; they just haven't earned that credibility yet to get those 50/50 breaks with officials.

Q. Utah State had a lot of turnovers tonight. What can you say about your team's defense?

COACH WEIR: We had 30 deflections at half. I think we had 50 for the game. That was what we wanted to do. I thought it was a really good matchup for us. I really thought we could win this game. I felt that all week going into it. I felt like these two teams playing this style I genuinely felt like we could come away with them.

But Utah State played like a champion. They were terrific. They were terrific down the stretch. They made free throws, made big shots. They made enough stops when it counted late. That's what great teams do that we could not do.

Q. Just in retrospect, looking back when JaQuan Lyle got hurt, could have been one of the best players in the league, how did that throw you off kilter, or did that throw you off course before the season?

COACH WEIR: Yeah, I think I said it when it happened. At the time I thought the biggest place we were going to feel it was offensively. He was our emergency point guard. He was our best passer. He was going to be a guy that could really glue us together offensively. And I didn't think defensively it would make a huge impact.

And I think early on we were still okay offensively. But as the season went on and people figured our guys out, figured out individually who could do what and scouting kind of improved, it really exposed our passing, our guard play, the depth at point guard, things like that.

So I think unfortunately it ended up having a bigger impact than I ever would have wanted. But, hey, like I told the guys, everything happens for a reason. No matter what that happens to be, we learn from it. We grow from it. And hopefully it will just make us stronger next season.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.