

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday March 5, 2020

Craig Smith Diogo Brito Sam Merrill Utah State Aggies

Utah State - 75, New Mexico - 70

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from coach.

CRAIG SMITH: It was a heck of a basketball game. March Madness is definitely here. Got to give credit to New Mexico. I thought they played fantastic. It was an odd deal with the schedule. We just played those guys five days ago, and so there's a lot of familiarity. But they're playing, I mean, they're playing, they were playing really, really good basketball. They're a very talented team and they really kind of redefined who they are, honestly, in the last 10 days or so and got to give them a lot of credit with that.

It was a great game. We had to overcome lot of different things tonight. Foul trouble with Queta gets two in the first five minutes. Gets his third with about a minute and a half to go. We had our guys sitting at the scorer's table ready to check in for him. Sam gets three or four fouls in the first five minutes of the second half and then our starting point guard, Abel Porter was hurt and wasn't able to go back in. So now all of a sudden they're, it's a feeding frenzy out there and we had some guys out there in some different positions and trying to break the pressure and called timeout just to try to get us our poise and confidence back. New Mexico always shows up big-time at this tournament. And but credit to our guys, to find a way to win. These two young men here were unbelievable. Sam just stayed in the game after that long break, and then Diogo made some incredible plays on both ends of the floor like he always does. And so just really, really proud of our effort and that's one down and got to be ready to go tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. Let's take questions for the student-athletes first.

Q. Sam, could you talk a little bit about playing the last 9:41 with four fouls. How did you avoid that fifth?

SAM MERRILL: Yeah, we sat in that 1-3-1, I think for



the entire time that I was in. And that wasn't just because I had four fouls. We, I think we did a lot of damage with that with our length and guys like Diogo and Justin up top who do a good job of communicating with each other and are really smart. So I kind of just sat in the corner and I don't know, I just basically sat there. But, yeah, not my best defensive game. But as a team we just, like Coach said, we just found a way and that's how it has to be.

Q. Diogo, with Merrill being out with foul trouble and also Queta being limited with fouls as well, what was your mindset knowing that you kind of had to step up and be one of the leaders offensively and also defensively?

DIOGO BRITO: Definitely. Like, I looked at the floor and I saw that I had to step it up because one of the biggest things also was that Abel was not in the game, so we didn't really have a point guard on the floor. It was just me, Sean, and then Bean bringing the ball up. And we struggled for a little bit there, but I think when Coach called that timeout then just said to keep our poise. And I think New Mexico also lost a little bit of the fire that they were feeding off of from their fans. So we just kept our poise, kept playing, kept trying to make plays, simple plays, and eventually we were able to start breaking their press and get our, get it back in the game, get back into the game.

Q. For both of you: 9:38 remaining and you guys are down 57-46, Coach calls a timeout. What's that huddle like for you guys as players? What was mentioned?

SAM MERRILL: I don't know exactly what was mentioned, but those last those few timeouts, I think he called one earlier, probably three or four minutes earlier, and then there was the media and they had just slowly gotten a bigger lead. So there was definitely a sense of urgency. But also, Coach just kept telling us, Just stay poised, stay calm. We had made some silly turnovers that we always do against New Mexico. They could be full-court press or not and somehow we always do, make silly turnovers. So the mindset was just stay poised, but got to play with a sense of urgency and that's what we did.

Q. Normally, I would be asking Coach this, but Diogo, you took a really hard fall and you hit your head on the floor pretty hard. I'm amazed you're

sitting up here right now. How are you doing and did you go through some type of concussion protocol?

DIOGO BRITO: Yes, but I actually didn't get hurt in my head. It was more in the back. But you just, you just -- yeah, in the tail bone. So just got to play, you just got to play through pain, especially on these occasions. Like, I don't want this to be my last game. That was definitely one of my mindsets towards the end. You just got to play through pain, and I guess, you know, whether you're hurt or not New Mexico doesn't really care, so I had to go out there and just play my best as hard as I can.

Q. Coach, they only ended up shooting 26 percent from three, but when they were making those threes during that run, how big did they feel at the time?

CRAIG SMITH: Well, Lyle couldn't miss. He had that stretch in that first half when we were up, I think 23-9, and then he caught fire and made, what, four out of five, I think scored four out of five possessions or something like that, and it just felt like a wave. But, listen, when you're playing and they're shooting -- last five games they were shooting 47 percent, 47 percent of their shots were from the three. And they have guys like that that can take over and make those plays. And we saw it last year with Jackson and I think he had 28 on us here and caught fire and we were fortunate to be able to pretty much relatively neutralize him. He goes 2-11 from the three, but of course, we make the three to go up three and he answers the bell, you know, on the next one. So you just got to weather that Storm. Certainly we played more zone tonight than probably any time in my nine years as a head coach, but our guys are confident in that and they're a handful to guard in their man stuff.

Q. Sam, in your amazing career here at Utah State you played in a lot of huge games, especially last year with the Mountain West championship and playing in the tournament. But in your career have you ever played in a game this emotional?

SAM MERRILL: That's a good question. Probably not, just because we're both seniors, so it may be the last one, so there's a different sense of urgency, like we talked about. You never know what's going to happen. When I went out with my fourth foul I was just hoping that they didn't go on too big of a run. And we found a way to stay close-ish, and then found a way to win that game at the end. So it's definitely one of the most emotional games I've played in, for sure.

Q. And when Abel went down, what was your mindset going for the rest of the game, knowing you were going to have to be the primary ball handler?

SAM MERRILL: I feel pretty confident as a ball handler, even when guys pressure me, so I was hoping to take some pressure off of a freshman like Sean or Bean. And Diogo does a good job with pressure as well. So just trying to bring some poise and stay calm and do what we do.

Q. Both of you guys hit big 3-pointers there in the last couple minutes. Sam, you had a hand in your face, at least, pretty guarded, and Diogo hit a big one. Can you both address those shots?

SAM MERRILL: Yeah, Coach just let me go one-on-one for about three or four straight possessions there and I don't know if he is a big fan of one-on-one basketball, but he let me do it and I got to the free-throw line a couple times. Missed two in a row, which is odd. I wasn't sure I was ever going to make a free throw. But I just felt confident and stepped into it and made it.

DIOGO BRITO: In my case, like before that I was just basically a spectator, just watching that Sam Merrill show on the floor. And eventually I actually thought they were going to zone. At first I thought they were going to just trap him, either from me or from Sean. They went zone and we ran a play to get the ball to Sam in the corner. They actually did a pretty good job. So at that time I just thought I got to find a way to make a play and I saw Sam driving baseline and from that point on I said, I'm just going to go crack back and shoot it. I didn't think twice the whole time and just let it go.

Q. Can you guys speak a little bit on Justin Bean? He kind of seems like he's one of those guys that likes to do the dirty work underneath and brings the energy to the floor.

SAM MERRILL: Yeah, definitely. How many rebounds did he have? 15. That's a solid number.

DIOGO BRITO: I think he had like half a double double before the first media of the first half.

SAM MERRILL: Yeah, like he just, he's always in the dirty spots, he's always diving for loose balls, getting offensive rebounds, getting rebounds, and cleaning the stuff up, so he was big for us tonight.

DIOGO BRITO: Definitely. And also in the 1-3-1 we're very susceptible to lose rebounds, right, but he just comes from the top and just cleans that glass. And I think that's also one of the things why that zone is successful because we have Neemias, obviously, underneath and then Bean just go clean, just cleans up everything outside of that.

Q. Brito, you've kind of had a tendency the past

two years to really show up in the conference tournament. What is it about this venue and about this situation that really let's you kind of have these moments?

DIOGO BRITO: I don't want to speak too early because it's still the first day of the tournament, but I definitely love the big games, like, that's what we work for and that's why you stay in the gym even when things are not going your way during the season, you know. And I really love playing in the conference tournament, like, we just, it's the best showcase in the whole conference. And like I said, just keep working even when things are not going your way and, I guess, in the big time games I think even I take even more pride and I really love these games. Even when we're down 11, I just want to keep playing. And Coach did a good job of really trusting in me, kept me on the floor even though I did some turnovers and after that just clear your mind and go make the next play.

THE MODERATOR: I'm going to dismiss the student-athletes at this time. Thank you, men. We'll keep coach for a few more minutes.

Q. You have a reputation of being one of the nicest coaches in college basketball, but tonight you did not seem yourself. You were incredibly animated on the sidelines. In your coaching career have you ever been this animated?

CRAIG SMITH: I'm looking for the other guy that I was fortunate to be a coworker with for four years. But yeah, you go through ups and downs and certainly March Madness is, can be emotional. There was a lot of emotions from everyone, you know. New Mexico's fan base is incredible and they always show up very, very well here. And certainly, I thought it was big to get up early and, obviously, like I said earlier, being up 22-9. And then a lot of things didn't go well for us and that's a credit to New Mexico, certainly. But it was just, it was just kind of one of those games and we all saw it and were a part of it and just kind of, every game has its own unique feel to it, right? And you got to be able to play in a lot of different styles of play. And so, yeah, you got to show poise and confidence when everything is kind of -- but then the fire comes in some of those emotional plays and I try to, I like to bring emotion to the game at certain times because I think our guys can definitely feed off of that. But New Mexico is, they're a load and, you know, at the end of the day they have won, what, 19, 18, 19 games, and they have had some things that they have had to go through. So have we in some different things. And I think when you can get through that stuff you find out who you are. And they're playing, like I said, their best basketball. But for our guys, Sean Bairstow, his numbers aren't going to look amazing, but he's a true freshman and he gets thrown to the wolves and that play he made at the end to Bean

as the shot clock was winding down, to have the poise, to play off of two feet, get that guy to help up and dump it down, and then Bean makes that great finish. I think at New Mexico we missed nine shots around the basket. And tonight we did a lot better job with that. But it's March Madness and you got to be able to win in any style of play. And I just thought it was just a, certainly I was emotional at times, but I thought the whole game was very, very emotional and that's what it's about.

Q. So your game plan to start the game, was that to get Abel to see if he was able to start and play the whole game? And if so, did that change once Sam goes to the bench with four fouls and you have Sean at the point guard?

CRAIG SMITH: Well, we just -- I guess in my eyes we played Saturday, we were off Sunday, Abel, we actually didn't do a whole lot on Monday, just because the condition that we were in. And Tuesday he wasn't able to do a whole lot. He practiced yesterday. And then you could tell when he was out there he just wasn't moving very well at all. And then he basically asked to come out after, during his first run of the second half. And when Sam got the foul trouble I just kind of looked at Abel and said, Can you go? And he probably would have went, but I just know that look and I'm just like, Nope, if you can't go, we're -- so we went with the other, whoever we put in, I think we put in Sean or Brock. But now you got -- I mean Diogo's played a little bit of point guard in his career, Sean I think eventually maybe will be able to play some point guard, but and then they smelled blood, there's no doubt and I think that's when we got down 11 or eight and we called the timeout. We just did some real uncharacteristic things and that's what happens when they speed you up and it feels like you're playing in The Pit or it sort of feels like that. And we just had to take a big breath, take a deep breath, slow down, trust your training, trust everything you've done up to this point, trust one another, and then just let's chip away at this, because, you know, 10 minutes is still a long time to go in a game. Although that did feel like the longest game of all time.

Q. Sam Merrill once again was phenomenal tonight. If he didn't get in foul trouble, he could have had 60 points, who knows, he was killing it. I know your season is not over yet and regardless of what happens tomorrow you guys still have a great shot at making the tournament. But how much are you going to miss Sam after this season?

CRAIG SMITH: Oh, he's a, yeah, you don't, you don't get to coach guys like him real, real often. And his accolades speak for themselves. Utah State has a great tradition of basketball, although we're a relatively new member of the Mountain West Conference, but that

young man, I mean, when I got hired all everybody ever said about Sam -- and he could have went anywhere in the country, basically anywhere in the country, all everybody ever said about him is, all he wants to do is win. And it's amazing how his focus is always winning. Obviously his focus is to get better all the time, but all he cares about is winning. He literally doesn't care about his numbers. Doesn't care. And he's going to probably finish his career, he's for sure going to finish his career as the third leading scorer or the second leading scorer in the history of Utah State and he's going to finish his career as the number two guy in assists. And the dude never takes a bad shot. And he's almost so good like when if misses a shot you're just mad at him and it's like, How dare you miss an open shot, you know? But he just, he's a winner in every way, shape and form, he wants to win everything he does. But he's just such a -- our young guys are so fortunate to be able to play with him, all of our guys are, but what a guy to be able to look at as a freshman and say, that's how it's done. And I just can't say enough positive things about Sam.

Q. This actually had a lot of parallels to last year's game against New Mexico and then you were tied at halftime as well and went on a late run to win. How much does experience like last year's tournament help you guys in preparing for this tournament and then also in the situations that you had today?

CRAIG SMITH: Well if you would have asked me that last year I would have said it doesn't matter, because of what we did. But it definitely matters and we actually brought that up in one of the huddles. Because it was eery the parallels, except we obviously got off to a bigger lead tonight and it took us longer to get the lead back.

But Diogo makes the three in the same corner as he made last year. Last year he made it with just over two minutes to go, tonight he made it with I think just over a minute or just over a minute to go. There's just so many parallels. Sam had foul trouble last year, right? Not quite as early as he did this year, but he did. And so I think it matters to know that any time in life, whether it's basketball or anything, when you can draw back on those experiences and learn from those types of things I think it can make a big difference. But we're a different team than last year, we have some new guys out there, but there's no doubt that it makes, it can make a big difference.

Q. Both teams double-digit leads in this game. For you guys of course it was the second half that you had to overcome that double-digit lead. What do you think that means as far as, and what does that show for intestinal fortitude of your squad as you

move forward now in this tournament?

CRAIG SMITH: Well any time -- and New Mexico showed the same thing at their place last week. We were up by a decent margin and even tonight when they were down 22-9 I thought they showed a great fortitude and showed some, demonstrated some things to be able to come back. I thoughts we had some chances to kind of put them away and then of course we have some foolish turnovers and some missed communication on some defensive things that should be pretty straightforward.

But I think it shows a lot about character, to be able to do that when it felt like somewhat of a road game for a long stretch. And then when we were able to flip the momentum it probably felt like a road game for them, because I thought we had a great showing tonight with our Aggie fans.

So it's not easy, those 10 players that are on the floor at that time, for either team, you are, you see everything. It's not like football where you can hide behind a helmet. Like the fans are right on you, they see every facial expression, they see every exchange of words whether it's player to coach, coach to the player, teammate to teammate, see it all. And you can kind of get exposed and a guy like Bairstow gets in the game right away and his minutes have been kind of up-and-down, but the one thing about that kid he's like, Coach, I got to earn it. And he's always like, I got to prove that you need, that you can play me.

And he gets two five-second counts -- I'm not sure I've seen a five-second count all year -- and he gets two in like when he gets in there. And freshman, right? Like, and so, and I got to do a better job of help being him out. But he settled in and like Diogo kind of went at him in a straightforward way, like but also like, hey, let's figure this thing out, there's no time for feeling sorry for yourself, right? And Sean's an ultimate competitor.

But I was just so proud of just our poise. I thought we showed great poise, which this team has pretty much done for the most part for two years. But certainly with the Queta situation, the Merrill situation, with fouls, and Porter being out, to be able to throw those three guards out there -- and we didn't have any other options, like we were like we really have no other guard to play. You know, we're relatively thin that way because we're redshirting three guys and we got another guy out for the year and so you don't have a choice, better figure it out in a hurry.

Q. When Sam picked up his fourth foul what was your message to him and your message to the team and then when you put him back in with four fouls, you needed him, did you just have complete trust in him to let him do his thing?

CRAIG SMITH: I always have trust in Sam. He's a veteran guy, he's a very intelligent guy. Usually when you get in foul trouble, usually when you get in foul troubles it's because you're out of position, you can be overzealous, right, you lack whatever foot speed or whatever it might be, but you're not getting your work done early. Sam's a guy that very rarely doesn't do any of those things. And so we always, we play him with foul issues all the time -- he doesn't have foul trouble a whole lot, but when he does I trust him to make the right play -- and I think that's what he was alluding to with his fouls. Jackson drills that one late because Sam was a little bit probably not as aggressive as he normally would be if he didn't have four, but certainly that was a pivotal moment in the game when he gets four and he got four in the first five minutes of the second half. And so certainly we didn't handle that very well for quite some time and then I thought we kind of settled in. And then certainly when we got him back on the floor, you know, he just, he just gives guys so much confidence when he's out there and that's what really good players that are team players do.

THE MODERATOR: Okay, thank you for your time, coach.