

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

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Craig Neal

Tim Williams

Elijah Brown

New Mexico

Fresno State - 65 New Mexico - 60

COACH CRAIG NEAL: Well, I thought you saw two really good teams play a hard-fought game. We're up one, the last media timeout with 3:39, I think. And they made three big 3's. And we kind of played the clock for one possession, and I think it was 14 left on the clock and we missed a rebound.

I'm proud of our kids. I've had a great time coaching them, fun time coaching them. We've had some ups, we've had some downs. We had a lot of fun. We had some adversity. But these two guys next to me had a heck of years, and our team had a good year. I was proud of the way they competed today. We didn't shoot free throws like we've been shooting all year. We missed ten. And that includes three front ends, would have gave us three more.

So it's just one of those things. I thought we did a nice job. We kept them off the boards, which we wanted to do, but they got one big rebound that we didn't need them to get. They had 17 points off of turnovers. We played pretty good the first half without turning the ball over, we just couldn't get any shots to go. We asked a lot from Elijah and Tim. And Tim coming back from an injury for a month, it's very difficult. I went with my two guys, they played hard and played well, and just came up short.

Q. The flagrant foul that was called in the first half, can you give us your explanation of what happened on that play and what did the officials tell you?

ELIJAH BROWN: He was running back, I was running back, and we just got caught up. That's pretty much all it was to it. They told me the same they told you guys.

Q. The five of eight, not the worse free throw shooting night. But looked like you were holding the hand. Was that affecting the free throws?

TIM WILLIAMS: No, I'm not going to blame it on that. I made two after that. So it wasn't a problem.



Q. You're obviously a guy that just missed a month, I know you came back Saturday, second game back. Were you rusty tonight, were you winded?

TIM WILLIAMS: No, I think I was just rushing my shots a little bit and trying to draw fouls instead of just trying to focus on making the shots.

Q. I know you had mentioned you obviously want to end this with an NCAA tournament appearance, five years in college, two with another school, two here. That's not going to happen now. Do you still want this season to continue in any tournament or are you looking at what just happened as the end of a college career for you?

TIM WILLIAMS: We'll figure that out later. But we're not going to the NCAA tournament, so that's always a bummer.

Q. When you aren't able to connect on the free throw shots, how much does that hurt your overall offense and your ability to score?

TIM WILLIAMS: I think we win the majority of our games shooting 75-plus from the line and getting to the line 25 times a game. And we just didn't do that tonight.

Q. How much did it contribute to the offense and how tough it is when you come up short in that category?

ELIJAH BROWN: I mean sometimes the ball goes in, sometimes it doesn't. There are things we could have done to win the game. There have been times we missed free throws and still won the game, so I don't know.

Q. The emotions here are probably still pretty fresh for you just coming off the loss. Have you thought about next year if you're coming back?

ELIJAH BROWN: It's a long way away. I haven't thought about that for one second. Still trying to get over this.

Q. When they're hitting some of those long-range 3's, is there anything you can do to defend at that point?

COACH CRAIG NEAL: They hit some tough shots. I think the biggest thing is they have two guys that can shoot the ball really well. And when it's late clock, the

thing that we talked about, you've got to make them put it on the floor. I think we let them shoot some shots because they were way far out. And I think our guys didn't know if they could make them. They hit three big ones in that three-minute span that gave them nine points and that hurt us.

Q. You're a guy that's gone to the free throw line your entire career. You got there plenty. The last couple weeks of the season you weren't getting there as much. Tonight you didn't get there very much either. Did you change something? Was something being called differently or the team is changing? What was the difference the last couple of weeks that wasn't there the first two years, almost two full seasons for you?

ELIJAH BROWN: I've got to do a better job going strong to the rim. I've gotten a little bit better, but I still have a long way to go looking for the foul on my jump shot. And sometimes I just wasn't getting those calls. I don't know. I just wasn't able to get to the free throw line. And I think I did a little bit too much settling, when I'm not making shots I need to be able to get to the rim.

My percentage has been horrendous almost the whole year. So the fact that I wasn't able to get to the free throw line, I would say I settled too much, I didn't make adjustments.

Q. This season you guys were sort of pointing toward this year as the year to make a run, return to maybe Mountain West championship type form. It didn't happen. I want to ask both of you what maybe went wrong this year and what you are going to remember from this year?

TIM WILLIAMS: I think definitely me getting hurt was a shot in the foot to our team. I think we were still at the top of the Mountain West in the hunt before I went down. And we let a few games slip away during that span, and even when I was playing, we let some go, as well. If we want to be a championship team, we have to win those type of games.

ELIJAH BROWN: I think we could have done -- when Tim went down, that really hurt us. But things like that happen. I don't think we did a great job of stepping up and covering for him while he was down. Most of the games that we lost we were in, we just let them go. It's just tough. But as far as what I remember from this season, it was a great season with my brothers. I love these guys for the rest of my life. And we still feel like we're a really good team. It just didn't happen for us today.

Q. You just alluded to your shooting percentage the last few games. Was there ever frustration? Did you feel like you had to do maybe -- I don't know if

too much is the right way to say it, or was it a simply the shots didn't fall the last few weeks?

ELIJAH BROWN: I just wasn't mentally strong enough to shoot the same shot I shoot in the gym every day when no one is guarding me. They weren't hard shots, I just missed way too many. And I hurt my team going down the stretch, I hurt my team today. I've got no excuses for that. I've got to get better. It's not going to happen again.

Q. Was there a particular point that you saw a momentum shift to kind of get away from that, you led for more than a half hour of game time?

TIM WILLIAMS: No, I wouldn't say the momentum shifted, even when they were up three. It was a rebound I missed and they got it. And that was basically the game right there.

ELIJAH BROWN: I feel the same way. I don't really feel like -- I feel like, if anything, we had the momentum. Our fans are great. And they were behind us the whole game. We had a crazy amount of fans in there. If anything, we had the momentum, we just weren't able to close it down and finish the game down the stretch.

Q. You had a technical foul in the first half, Elijah had a flagrant foul, Sam had a double technical call. Are those signs of a team that was pressing too much or flustered?

COACH CRAIG NEAL: I think it's a sign of a team that wants to win, that's competing. I just don't know -- I've watched a lot of games this year, and I've got two very unusual technicals, and that was one of them. And I can understand -- I didn't really see Elijah's play, because we didn't get to see it on the monitor. I didn't see it, so I don't know what the play was. I just know they say he tripped him. That's all I know.

And Sam and Williams was jawing back and forth and they said they were going to clean that up, and they did. So it's just one of those things that happens.

And I think it's a competitive edge. I don't think any of those affected the outcome of the game. We're up one with three minutes to go and we weren't able to close it out.

Q. This was a game that free throws, you get 15 attempts in the first half, 7 in the second half, and not one in the final 6:50. Was that something you guys failed down the stretch at doing something or did they --

COACH CRAIG NEAL: You'd have to watch the tape on that. I'll just leave it at that. I think there was several times that we could have went to the line but we didn't. And that's just part of the game. And that's what happens.

But when we shoot 50 percent from the foul line and we give up 17 points on turnovers, we're going to struggle. But we couldn't get separated. We're up three. We're up one. We're up three. We're up three, we have two possessions, we go up five. We turn it over, take a bad shot. We just couldn't get away from them. And then they made three huge shots in the last three minutes.

And it was interesting because we made a nice play, Elijah hits a 3, we go down, we decide we're going to wait. We're looking at a 14-15 second difference. If we get that rebound we can push it and try to get another three. It just didn't work out for us. I thought the kids played extremely hard. I just think we had a hard time making some shots tonight. And you've got to give them credit. They played well. It was a very competitive game.

Q. Obviously they've been playing good going into this. And you're feeling pretty good about your team going into this. But this is your third straight year of one and done in this tournament. At a place like New Mexico that you talk about a lot having a certain expectation of championships, three years of being one and done is not what the fan base expects, and you're well aware of that.

COACH CRAIG NEAL: I'm not oblivious to it. I've been a part when we won three in a row too. I thought our younger kids really competed. We appreciate all the support. We're grateful for all the support, the fans that came out. I think they were proud of the way our kids played and how hard they played. It was difficult.

But I like where the program is. I like the young players we have. I like who we've signed. We've got some stuff we've got to figure out. We don't know exactly what Elijah is going to do. But I like where we are. We could have very easily won that game. But we didn't. It went down the stretch and they made plays.

I thought our guys handled adversity as good as we've done since I've been here, with all the injuries. We haven't had near the injuries in the years past, except for the year we went 15-17, with Cullen being hurt, Alex Kirk going to the draft. Jordan Goodman being hurt. That was a unique year, but not as many as this year. With our team to go 3 and 4 in February, with arguably the best player in the league defensively rebounding and scoring, that was a huge loss for us, especially when your team's set up for him to be one of the main cogs in that team.

Q. Elijah alluded to it, was he asked to do too much because there was so much question of where you're getting points this year?

COACH CRAIG NEAL: Well, I just think that's the competitive kid in him. He's going to take the heat. He's not going to blame it on anything else. He's not going to blame it on the shots he had to take, the pressure he had to take, the expectations on him. He's just not going to do that. He doesn't have it in him.

So I thought he had a good year. I thought he had -- he's second in the league in scoring. He's six rebounds a game, three assists a game. If you look at that over the years, that's a pretty dang good year. And I don't know if he didn't get the recognition he deserved. But he made Second Team Coaches and Second Team Media. I think he did everything.

But I'm going to protect him because I'm his coach. I honestly think that the month off with his hamstring, I don't think he's ever been fully healthy. That's just me. I don't know that. He's going to tell you that he's fine. But I know him and watching him over the years for a really long time, that injury had a big effect on him.

Q. You're down three, they get the offensive rebound at about 44 seconds.

COACH CRAIG NEAL: We waited -- we were going to extend the game, but then it goes to five. And then it goes to five. So they got that offensive rebound and I still thought we had 14 or 15 and we could get a play off. And we're pretty good at getting plays off 3s. He got a wide-open 3. So I was pretty confident he'd get another one.

Did I think about it? Yeah. But you think about it and then you don't want to foul because you go to five and you try to extend it and then you really run out of time. You run out of time. I just thought we could get another defensive stop. I think there was a time right before the three-minute or 3:39 media time. I think we had nine stops in a row. We were playing excellent defense. The two things that I thought were going to hurt us, three-point shooting and offensive rebounds kind of got us in the last few minutes.

Q. Looking at the season, with the exception of late January where you had the four-game winning streaks, there's a lot of wins followed by a lot of losses. Not a lot of continuity. What is going to be your reflection when you look back as far as the team overall?

COACH CRAIG NEAL: I think the one thing that's unique about our team is we had to adjust on the fly. I think when Xavier Adams went out the second game of the season and an ACL tear, and then Tim Williams went out, then you throw that out the window. And then you try to figure out how you're going to play and how you're going to win. And we lost some in February -- we lost those three in a row, and beat San Diego

State at home.

But the thing I'll take most, these kids never gave up. They went through some serious adversity. Some people questioned them. I thought they really hung together as a group. I'll take this year -- I had a lot of fun. I really had a lot of fun. I wish we would have won more games, which we all do. But we had some adversity that we weren't expecting. But I've got to give my kids the credit, they played hard and stayed the course and gave everything they had.

I think the biggest thing you can do as a coach is for your kids to play hard and compete every night, that's a good sign. I just think -- they're hurting right now. And I understand that because some had great careers. But it's difficult. But I think -- I'll take away that my kids continued to play every game and really competed at a high level.

Q. Tim talked about coming up short in the NCAA tournament. Can you speak to how much and how valuable he's been to the program since he's been here?

COACH CRAIG NEAL: I think the unique thing about Tim Williams is when we got him as a transfer, he was -- we knew he was a really good player. We didn't know what a great kid that we got in the transfer. He's an amazing kid. He's an amazing teammate. He's a unique player.

I think there are some things that Tim does on the floor that you can't teach. He's got a great knack for scoring the ball. I think tonight like he rushed it a little bit. And being out a month, we probably expected too much from him. Not only me, his teammates, and I'm sure a lot of his supporters. I think we expected him just to go in a phone booth and put on a cape and he was going to be back to Tim Williams. And that's very difficult. That's very difficult.

And to his credit he gave everything he had. He played at a high level coming back after a month, not a lot of practices. But he's just a unique kid. He's very talented. If he doesn't get hurt in February, he probably would be the only kid we ever had with 2000 points in his career, that's ever played at our place.

So that says a lot about his rebounding. But he's going to be able to play after this. And that's one thing that I wish we were going to play three more games or even another game. But I enjoyed coaching him. He's a special kid. We were very lucky to get him in a transfer deal. He had a great career for us.