

Atlantic Coast Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Wednesday, March 10, 2021
Greensboro, North Carolina, USA

Miami Hurricanes

Jim Larrañaga

Postgame Press Conference



Miami 67, Clemson 64

JIM LARRAÑAGA: Well, it was a great win for us. Our guys played their hearts out. Very proud of them. I thought Clemson played fantastic in like the first 10 minutes, and we had to make several adjustments. Our guys did it. We started to clear a whole side of the court to give Isaiah Wong and Kam McGusty a chance to attack. Because with the pressure, we couldn't make any passes. We couldn't dribble hand-off, which we like to do, and we did it very effectively against them the last time.

I just told the guys, forget the hand-offs, forget running offense and just attack their guards. Their guards are very good at pressuring. But when you clear a whole side, it gives Isaiah and Kam a chance to do what they do really well, and that's basically just play one-on-one. As we started to score, our defense improved, and it was a really close game at the half. It was a close game throughout, and we were fortunate enough to finish.

We made a couple of critical errors. I did. I ran the wrong press breaker and the wrong sideline out of bounds and it cost us two turnovers. But thank goodness our players were able to recover from it.

Q. You've won a lot of games, 200 at Miami now in fact. I'm just wondering how these two victories in a 24-hour period barely with everything this team has been through this season, where this ranks for you?

JIM LARRAÑAGA: Well, first of all, every season is special. This group of players have been through so much adversity, so many injuries, so many close losses. But in practice the last three weeks, we've had tremendous energy. The attitudes have been great. The guys are having fun. They're enjoying playing with each other. And I think they're enjoying that, hey, I don't come out, I get to play like the whole game.

So they keep plugging away. I'm very happy. This is three in a row. Boston College at home and then Pittsburgh and now Clemson. Who knows what will happen, but we're enjoying this journey in the ACC Tournament.

Q. You still have the same number of guys as you've had in recent months, and there was always this concern of they're tired, they can't finish out the game because they're tired at the end. Where are these legs coming from? Did you replace their legs when you went to the ACC Tournament? These are the same guys with the same legs; where is all this energy coming from to finish the games now?

JIM LARRAÑAGA: You want to hear a crazy thing that I believe? I think it's Rodney Miller, Earl Timberlake, Harlond Beverly, Filippos Gkogkos -- the guys on the bench are cheering so loud for their teammates. They're just in their heads all the time, pumping them up. Every time-out they're up there high-fiving, and I think our players are just playing off of that enthusiasm and energy that the guys on the bench are bringing.

I mean, Rodney in the locker room right now, pumping his -- banging his fist against his chest, and the other guys, as well.

You've got to give credit. We always talk about commitment, and commitment has four levels: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. And spiritual is about team spirit, that we're all in this together. If you saw the enthusiasm on the sideline and the team spirit of guys pumping each other up at every time-out, you don't want to let your teammates down.

I think those guys, they're probably exhausted. They're playing on fumes. But they have all season long, and they keep rallying because they're happy and they're excited and they just want to keep playing.

Q. Were these guys -- was the bench not cheering as much during the regular season? Is this a new phenomenon?



JIM LARRAÑAGA: Well, I would say we didn't give them enough to cheer for, and the injured guys were oftentimes not even there. Rodney had surgery -- like we don't have two of the injured guys now. Sam Waardenburg had surgery again to take the pins out of his foot. Chris Lykes is still rehabbing his ankles and he's got academic work to accomplish. We really have a shortened bench again, but those guys are doing a great job, and it doesn't do any good if they cheer their teammates on if their teammates don't respond.

Look at the job that Deng Gak did, blocking shots, getting two dunks, getting five rebounds -- was it five rebounds?

Q. Seven rebounds.

JIM LARRAÑAGA: Seven rebounds?

Q. Not seven. Four, sorry.

JIM LARRAÑAGA: I thought it was five. But he had five rebounds in eight minutes yesterday. So when you have guys who just step up and just add an additional dimension to your team, that's really good.

Q. On that same note regarding the energy, your thoughts on now potentially a fatigue factor as you go deeper into this tournament, especially as you play every day, which is not normal under the regular-season schedule, and the minutes these guys are playing now and you'll face a team that has a double bye.

JIM LARRAÑAGA: What do you think? You want me to rest them? I'd have to put it Chris Caputo and Bill Courtney and Adam Fisher. No, they love playing basketball. They'll give it their best effort. I'm not going to worry about fatigue. They've been out there every game giving it their all. Whatever happens happens.

We're just excited about playing tomorrow.

Q. After the game was tied right around the 10-minute mark, Isaiah scored eight of the final 17 points of the game. At what point did you know that he was special enough to take games over down the stretch for this basketball club?

JIM LARRAÑAGA: Honestly, when I saw him in high school. The way he scored the ball -- when he played at the NBA top 100 camp, he led the camp in free throws. Look at his free throw numbers compared to everybody else in the league. He's a tremendous free-throw shooter. He's very good at driving and making an assortment of

lay-ups and acrobatic shots. The area of his game he needed to give some attention to was his three-point shot.

I don't know this for sure, but check; I think he's made more threes than any player in the ACC. Anybody know that? I think he's played more minutes than anybody. I think he's made more threes than anybody. Is that true or not? Steve, do you know the answer to that?

Q. Not sure whether that's correct.

JIM LARRAÑAGA: Okay, so I'm exaggerating. Who cares? The guy is a terrific player.

Q. What you can say about the way the season has gone and everything that you've been through that you get to 200 in this way, seeing the team with literally almost no bench get you to the next round of the ACC Tournament, just how sweet No. 200 is knowing that it's coming from these guys at this time in this situation.

JIM LARRAÑAGA: Yeah, well, as I said, I'm just very proud of them. Every young man goes through college differently. They're all on their own journey. They have their ups and downs. There's always adversity. There's always things that you don't control. You have no control over. And what we try to do -- my coaches do a fantastic job with this -- is just try to let our players know, hey, this is what life is all about. When you graduate from Miami and move on, you're going to have adversity. You're going to have bills to pay. You're going to have a family that you're going to want to have a great relationship with, and you're going to be concerned about your children.

The adversity we went through this year will only make our players stronger in the long run because they'll know, hey, they can overcome it. They can keep striving to be better, and this tournament is a good example of, hey, pulling together and getting some critical victories so that you just feel good about yourself.

Q. You touched on the confidence of your team, just feeling good about yourselves. Going into the next one against Georgia Tech, that's one that obviously didn't go well for you guys last time. Avenging the two losses against Clemson, do you feel like this team is gaining confidence each game here?

JIM LARRAÑAGA: Oh, I think our confidence is as high as it's been at any point in the season, but Georgia Tech is a great team. They're an NCAA Tournament team. They've got the Player of the Year in Moses Wright and they've got the defensive Player of the Year in Jose Alvarado, they've got Michael Devoe, who's a tremendous scorer at the 2

guard position. So they present a lot different problems for us than our first two opponents.

Q. Playing against Georgia Tech for probably the third time this season, how difficult is it to play somebody three times in one year?

JIM LARRAÑAGA: I think we've only played them once so far. And they crushed us. We played terrible, they played really well. We're going to have to do a much better job tomorrow than we did at our place a month ago.

Q. Talk a little bit about when you cleared those sides out for the guards, Isaiah Wong and Elijah, Kam McGusty, their creativity in proliferating numbers that you had 40 points in the paint, 54 percent shooting on the afternoon.

JIM LARRAÑAGA: Yeah, crazy. I mean, we've been shooting the ball so badly all year long, and now to have Kam and -- I will look back on it. Kam was not 100 percent for a very long time. He missed seven games. He had a pulled hamstring. He was not in great shape when he came back. He needed time to play not one or two games but a dozen games to get himself back confident and shooting the ball well.

And then Isaiah, he's had to make the adjustment of being our 2 guard and our leading scorer to being our point guard and getting other guys involved.

And then Elijah, he's been our best defensive player. We put him on whoever has got the hot hand, and he normally can cool them off.

Those guys have really found a good rhythm with each other, and part of it is they're being asked to play all three positions. Isaiah will start at the point, then Kam will go to the point. Then Elijah will play some at the point, and they're very, very comfortable and confident with each other and playing multiple positions.

Q. You've been in a situation on the other side of things where you've had the double bye. Can you just speak a little bit to the advantage that is and kind of how you counter that tonight?

JIM LARRAÑAGA: Well, obviously the double bye means you didn't play for two days, and they'll have to prepare for us starting now. Now that Georgia Tech knows they're playing Miami, they'll go back and look at the tape from the first game, what worked well and what didn't. Josh has his team playing at a high level. And my staff and I will go back, we'll meet tonight at 6:00 -- it's 5:00 now, so this is going to be the last question I answer -- and then I'm going

to go get my COVID test and then I'm going to go start preparing for Georgia Tech.

But they're an outstanding team, and I think having the double bye certainly helps because you've got to win three games to win the title instead of five.

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Anthony Walker

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Q. Jim Larrañaga mentioned that you guys were getting a lot of support from some of your injured teammates, Harlond, Earl, Rodney Miller. Can you talk about how they've been motivating you guys the last two games?

ANTHONY WALKER: Yeah, they're a huge part of our success right now and a huge part of the team's spirit. Just having them travel with us and hearing them on the bench cheering us on through ups and downs, it really keeps our spirit in the right place and keeps our energy in the right place. So without them on the sideline cheering, we probably wouldn't be here.

Q. Can you talk about what you guys did in the second half to slow them down today?

ANTHONY WALKER: Yeah, in the first half both their big men were actually hurting us. They were shooting a great percentage from three. We just made the adjustment to switch 1 through 5 and try to take away those threes as much as possible and turn them into a two-point shooting team. That worked out well for us in the end and we came out with a W.

Q. There was a sequence there in the second half that you hit a couple threes, Deng Gak hit a couple dunks, you guys went on a run to set you guys out in front. What was kind of working during that time and your activity level, too, with the steals and things like that?

ANTHONY WALKER: Like just the ball movement. We were getting everybody involved on offense. Isaiah did a good job finding me, and I did a good job hitting the shot. And just the spirit, like Rob on the bench, Harlond on the bench, just those people on the bench keeping us in the game, it was good. Just keeping our spirit up and getting

everybody involved on offense, and then we just did our thing and knocked down shots.

Q. How much energy do you guys have left? I was just asking Coach L before. It seemed like during the season you guys kind of petered out at the end of the games, and there was all this talk about only six players, only seven players, not enough players. This is the same group of guys, so where is the energy coming from, and how much energy is left for tomorrow?

ANTHONY WALKER: Again, we just believe we're going to win every game. We believe that this is a new season and that we're starting fresh. Yesterday we were 1-0, today we're 2-0. Tomorrow we hope to go 3-0. We've just got to get back and get ready for Georgia Tech and keep our spirit up.

As far as energy, we just going to bring as much as we can. We're going to go out and give 120 percent, like I said yesterday, every game from this point on. We've got to keep winning to advance.

Q. We heard Coach talk about the fact that he put it on himself and blamed himself for a couple mistakes down the stretch. Just what you can say having a coach like that that puts some of it on himself and says thank goodness that the players worked through that, just what it means to you to have a coach like that?

ANTHONY WALKER: He preaches accountability on this team, and to see him take accountability for something like that, even if it not necessarily was his fault or if it was, it doesn't matter. Just seeing that, it just brings our team spirit up even more, knowing that we can trust him and he trusts us to make the right calls and make the right plays.

Q. Tomorrow will be the third game in three days. I know you don't like to look ahead to it, but how do you maintain your body personally to get prepared for Georgia Tech tomorrow, and if you guys win, potentially playing on Friday and Saturday?

ANTHONY WALKER: That recovery starts as soon as the game ends. As I'm talking to you guys right now, we've got people in there stretching, doing treatment for certain things. And as soon as we hit the hotel, again, as a team, we're going to stretch, we're going to get hydrated, and just keep ourselves and our bodies as maintained as possible.

Just looking forward to tomorrow's game. We're going to bring out as much energy as we can.

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Isaiah Wong

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Q. I asked Coach L before he stepped on the podium about the time he realized that you were a player that could take the game over at the end of games, and he said going back to the top 100 camp when you were in high school. Personally for yourself, when did you realize that you could have that ability to close games out by getting baskets at the end of games?

ISAIAH WONG: I remember when I was young, I was in like -- we had a little AAU championship -- a travel team championship, and my mom has it on video. But it was like in the championship, I had like five seconds left to go and I was, like, making a whole lot of good decisions, a whole lot of tough plays. And I remember like the last shot I hit, the game winner, and it was like ever since then, I knew I could be the type of person that can get the ball in the last situation and make the best decision.

Q. What did you learn last time you played Georgia Tech? What needs to happen so that result doesn't happen again tomorrow?

ISAIAH WONG: They play hard on defense. They play that little 1-3-1 zone, so they're probably going to play that. That really helped them from the last time they played us. And we've just got to figure out what to do and just try to make the best decision for their zone. We've got to stop their most valuable player, Moses, I think, and we've got to stop their two guards. I feel like if we do that, we're going to be in a close game and we're going to -- it's going to go down to the wire who's going to make the best decision.

Q. I just want to ask about energy, how much energy is left. You've played a lot of minutes over the last few days, left everything out on the court. How much is left for tomorrow?

ISAIAH WONG: We still have a lot of energy coming into next game. Like today we still had energy from the last game we played in Pitt, so we still are keeping the same energy. And I feel like coming into the game, we're going to have more energy coming into Georgia Tech because we already knew what they did to us at home. So we have more energy, more things like we need to prove to Georgia Tech that we have improved since the last game we played them. So we're going to have a lot of energy coming into that game.

Q. Just what you can say about being on this team at this point in the season with everything you've been through with the short bench that you have, with the way that things have gone this year, just what it's like to get these victories and still be alive in this conference tournament amidst everything that you've gone through adversity-wise?

ISAIAH WONG: Going through the adversity of this whole season, we have like seven players coming in and out of the lineup trying to figure out the chemistry. So it's been very hard to try to figure out like what decision to do, like how to feel our players out and what they do best. So we was really trying to figure out the whole season how to get better and how to get our players the open shots they need and how to get comfortable.

Throughout this adversity, we've been just trying to figure out -- just playing hard every game throughout the season. I feel like coming into today's ACC Tournament, we have a little bit of chemistry and we all figure out a little bit. So coming into this next game, we're going to have to figure it out again and figure out who's going to make the best decisions.

Q. With the scoring numbers your team has been putting up the last two games and then today, 54 percent shooting, what are you noticing offensively with what's working for you guys as a team?

ISAIAH WONG: I'm noticing more players are scoring, Nysier is scoring and made some big-time plays today. He made like two corner threes. And I feel like Ant is really

stepping up to the plate and he's really making some big plays throughout this ACC Tournament. Our teammates are just helping our team just make a better chance of winning the games, and I feel like throughout the season we really struggled on that.

We didn't have -- like, we didn't have our five players scoring over 10 points and getting over to like those 70 points a game range. When we start hitting those types of numbers, we're a little bit scary.

We're starting to figure that out. We're having more players score the ball, and it just feels more freely and more easier just coming into games.

Q. How much are you enjoying being on this stage? These are big games and you guys had a tough season, but how much are you personally enjoying this?

ISAIAH WONG: Personally I'm enjoying this. To be honest, I like it a lot, and after the game I'll be just testing the North Carolina food out. And I'm having a good time just testing these foods out, so I'm having a good time. And coming into these games, just being prepared, playing on this type of floor in the ACC Tournament is just a great feeling. To play with my guys and just play our hardest out there and give our hearts out. Just being on this team in Miami, it's an honor to be on this team, and I'm very grateful for that.

Q. I know you got hurt, if memory serves, in the Georgia Tech game. I imagine you must feel like you're a different team than what you showed on that day.

ISAIAH WONG: Yes, we're definitely a different team. I feel like the energy didn't really mean anything, but it was just coming back. We've been having a stronger team. We have more players scoring in the double digits, so they're going to have more players to focus on coming into next game. We're all going to make an effort to score the ball, and we're all going to make an effort to try to win the game.

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