

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Final - Miami (FL) vs Texas

Sunday, March 26, 2023

Kansas City, Missouri, USA

T-Mobile Center

Miami Hurricanes

Jim Larranaga

Isaiah Wong

Jordan Miller

Norchad Omier

Nijel Pack

Wooga Poplar

Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference

Miami - 88, Texas - 81

THE MODERATOR: Okay, everyone. We are ready to begin with the Midwest Regional champions, the Miami Hurricanes. Coach Jim Larranaga, and he brought everybody. His starting five, Isaiah Wong, Jordan Miller, Norchad Omier, Nijel Pack, and Wooga Poplar. Coach, you're going to the Final Four. Tell us all about it and your opening statement.

JIM LARRANAGA: First of all, I was very, very impressed in our preparation to play the University of Texas, but when the game began, I was like blown away by how fast they were.

Normally we're the faster team when we take the court, not the biggest, but we're normally the fastest. And I thought Texas showed that they're every bit as fast, and maybe even a little faster than us, athletically. I don't know if these guys agree with that or not.

But I think what occurs is the excitement of the game, I think we got in a little bit of a hurry. We made some miscues on fast breaks that we normally finish, and we got into a situation where we couldn't really stop them so we trailed by eight at the half. They pushed the lead up to 13. We called a timeout and I said to them, we just need to calm down and play better. There's no big secret in this.



We're very good but we've got to play very good.

Our defense dramatically improved. Our rebounding improved. And once we get stops, we really can score the ball. So we went on a run offensively, defensively, and that completely turned the game around. When it got to be 75-75, we've been in so many close games this year, I felt very comfortable and confident these guys will pull us through.

These guys are sensational players, each and every one of them. The game Jordan Miller had is ridiculous. 7-for-7 from -- how many points did he end up with? 27. That's pretty good to score 27 points on seven shots. Any threes? No, not even a three.

But Isaiah was great. We called a play for him towards the end of the game, and he just scores. We called a play for Wooga Poplar at the end of the first half because we were in desperate need of a bucket. He made a jump shot. He's absolutely sensational at that.

Then Nijel was so good last weekend, this weekend, making shots, making plays, defending Tyrese Hunter, who's very, very hard to guard.

And then Norchad, my coaches were saying, don't take him out because he only has one foul. I don't know if you know, towards the end of the first half, I took him out because he has a tendency to foul. He has a very aggressive --

NORCHAD OMIER: Damn.

JIM LARRANAGA: What?

NORCHAD OMIER: Damn.

JIM LARRANAGA: He's a very aggressive player. We love the aggressiveness but I don't want him sitting on the bench in the second half. So I took him out the first half to give him time. He only had one foul. I put him out in the second half, and sure enough, he picks up two, three, and four.

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But he never fouled out. He ends up only nine rebounds, but we had five guys in double figures. That's really the balance we've showed all year long. I love these guys. They're all terrific. Their personalities are just sensational. I probably talked too long. So questions.

Q. I know nobody's perfect. Jordan came pretty darn close to it. What makes him so special and able to do that?

JIM LARRANAGA: I've said it all season long, he's the most underrated player in the country because he's good at everything. In the summertime, he had a 7:1 assist-to-turnover ratio in practices. Seven to one. That's ridiculous. That's better than any point guard I know.

He can rebound. He defends all different-sized guys. Today he was switching ball screens at the end and keeping the guy in front of him.

Last week he guarded Indiana's center Trayce Jackson-Davis, did a fantastic job on him. He can shoot the three. He's great at driving. Straight line drive, dribble drives. He makes all of his free throws. He is a great, great player. Simple.

Q. First off, congrats on the win. Last season in the Elite Eight your team was facing a double-digit deficit in the second half, dealing with foul trouble. This year again was kind of similar. Why was this team able to overcome that?

JIM LARRANAGA: I think last year we got in very serious foul trouble. Jordan got in foul trouble. Sam Waardenburg got in foul trouble. I think they both ended up fouling out. And we missed a couple of key opportunities in the second half that might have kept us in longer and given us a chance to do what we did today.

So I told the guys at halftime, hey, this is very much like the Kansas game. We're behind. They came out and took control of the game, and that's what we need to do.

Even though it took us a little longer to do it, if you watch the last ten minutes of the game, our defense, our rebounding, our scoring is at just such a high level.

Q. Jim, basketball at the highest level is such an individual sport. Your team is going to the Final Four by being a team and like exemplifying that as much as any team you'll ever see. Talk a little bit about how that's developed over the course of the year and how important that was today when you're in quite a jam.

JIM LARRANAGA: Well, chemistry is hugely important.

You want your players to really bond on the court, off the court. And I'll tell you, last summer when our two transfers, Nijel Pack and Norchad Omier, came into the gym. Nijel just bonded with Zay like right away. Zay loved having him. They played great together. They both could really score the ball and just enjoyed it.

Norchad, his personality is just amazing. You can't help but fall in love with the guy. He smiles all the time -- is that better?

NORCHAD OMIER: That's good.

JIM LARRANAGA: We had a team dinner one night, and everybody had to say where they were from and everything. So when it came Norchad's turn, they said, well, how did you end up here? He said, I come from Nicaragua, and I got to Mexico, and then I walked across the river. And everybody looked, oh, my God, this guy came into the country by -- and then he just started laughing. And he said, hey, I'm just joking. (Laughter). So that's his personality.

You look at a guy like -- Isaiah Wong is the ACC Player of the Year for a reason, and Wooga Poplar, his trajectory is so high right now, I can tell you. His defense on Rice was, I'd say at the highest level I've seen in college basketball because Rice can really score. He's got a fantastic shot fake, and normally everybody jumps for it. Wooga wouldn't let him catch it. He fought over every screen. He boxed him out. He got some rebounds.

Between Nijel, Wooga, and Zay, we've got a tremendous backcourt. And you look at our 4/5 position with Jordan, who's exceptional, and we've got the best rebounder in the country with Norchad.

Have I complimented you guys enough? Okay, good.

Q. Just as a quick followup to that, when you're in a jam like you were today, how important is that chemistry that these guys have built?

JIM LARRANAGA: When you're at a timeout, you need their attention, and the first thing that happens is I meet with my coaches to talk with them about, hey, what adjustments do we need to make? We're falling behind.

So we have a circle, these stools that the players sit on, and there's one stool for me. So there's five stools for the players, the guys that are in the game, and one stool for me. So when I was finished meeting with my coaches, I turned, and there were the five guys in the game, and Norchad is sitting in my chair telling them what to do.

WOOGA POPLAR: Can you tell them what I told you?
When I said look at the score.

JIM LARRANAGA: Oh, so Wooga wants me to tell you. I tell the players all the time, when you're in games, whether you're ahead or behind, don't play the score, play the game. But we had come so far back, we were only down four, and I wanted the players to know, hey, now the game is really on the line.

I said, look at the score. I think it was 72-68. I turned back to the team, and Wooga said, we don't play the score, we play the game. Is that the one, Wooga?

WOOGA POPLAR: Yeah.

Q. Coach, 17 years to the day, you led George Mason to the Final Four, and now you're doing it with the Hurricanes. What did you feel back then? What do you feel right now?

JIM LARRANAGA: It's the same exhilaration, just the jubilant attitude, the effort, because you just love when your player accomplish a goal they set out before the season.

I'm a great believer in the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. The first habit is be proactive playing ahead. So always talking to the guys about planning, visualizing, seeing yourself being successful.

But habit two is -- what's habit two? No, habit two is begin with the end in mind. And what we said the first day of practice, we've got to start visualizing right now what we want to accomplish and be working toward that every single day. And that's what these guys have done.

Q. Jordan and Isaiah, you guys are down eight at halftime but shooting 64 percent.

JIM LARRANAGA: Did you guys know that?

Q. As the second half unfolded, your shooting percentage actually went up and the deficit increased as well. What is it about this team that allowed you to not get frustrated at that point?

JORDAN MILLER: First thing I would say is our perseverance. None of us wanted to go home.

Another big factor I would say is we know we're pretty good offensively, but what's going to decide a game for us comes down to how many stops we can get.

Even though we shot that good of a percentage, they were

scoring too, and we knew we couldn't just keep scoring back and forth because they had the lead. So we had to dig deep, find a way to get stops.

ISAIAH WONG: I would just say I thank the ACC for preparing us for these types of games, just coming in, every game we played in the ACC is always a close game. It's always a shot to win. I feel like coming into March we'd been in those types of situations, and we played good.

We weren't afraid or scared of any situation. We just stuck together and played together throughout the game. I would just say I appreciate the ACC for the competition.

JIM LARRANAGA: I like that.

Q. For you, Jordan, we spoke a couple times, and all you said that last year the Elite Eight, you weren't satisfied, and you just did not want to have that feeling, and you wanted to make sure you willed these guys, and you definitely did tonight. What was that like? Did you really want to put the team on your back, being the senior and just ride out the way you did tonight?

JORDAN MILLER: That loss sat with me for a really, really long time. I had to put it in the past because it was a new season, but like I said, having the opportunity to kind of right your wrongs almost and get past something that stumped you previously is a great feeling.

I wouldn't say I put the team on my back. My teammates did a good job of getting me the ball, and everybody was in double figures. What I'm most proud of is the will and the togetherness of this team. I don't think we've been down that much at a halftime in a very long time. I can't remember.

We just all bought into staying together, keeping that hope alive. And the way we just willed this one through, I think everybody played really well, and I think it really shows the poise of this squad.

Q. Just talk about the U and this is a major day in the U men's basketball history. To Coach and any of the guys who want to take it.

JIM LARRANAGA: Well, very, very simply, I tell the players all the time it's about having a positive attitude, making a total commitment, and behaving in a first-class manner. So the university's attitude has been to provide all of its athletic department sports the needed resources.

Our athletic director Dan Radakovich immediately came in. He's got the basketball program is going to have a new



weight room and training room. We're building a new seven-story football facility. We're building a new dormitory.

The University of Miami is one of the top 50 schools in the country, and we want to be sure everybody in the country knows that. We have a great pep band. We've got great cheerleaders. Last week I went through the lobby of the hotel, and our cheerleaders and dance team were all there studying. Two of them are going to be doctors. One of them is going to be a lawyer.

I sat and talked with them because to be at the University of Miami is a very, very special place. It's like a resort.

(Laughter).

You're not exactly on vacation because you're working hard, but the venues are just tremendous, and we're investing in ourselves and in our brand. I love it. My wife loves it. I'm going to go home and have a Smoothie King tomorrow.

ISIAH WONG: I would just say the Miami culture is just a great place to be at. Like Miami is nice weather out here. Like he said, the students are great. It's just a great culture to be a part of and a great organization to be a part of.

It's just an honor to be one of the players on Miami and just going to the elite four -- I mean Final Four.

NORCHAD OMIER: Final Four.

ISIAH WONG: Let me talk, Chad. (Laughter).

It's just an honor being around these guys. We all show appreciation. We all love each other. And we're all just here sticking to each other.

It's just a great place to be at.

Q. I wanted to ask Nijel and Jordan, if you could just say, at the moment you knew you were going to win that game, what was your feeling to make the Final Four? That's something that every college basketball player wants. What were you feeling at that moment when you knew you were going to the Final Four?

NIJEL PACK: It was a feeling that it's unreal. To come back from that deficit, especially some people were starting to doubt, could we come back? How hard we fought to get back in this game and to come back and actually win this game, especially on a stage like this, it was an amazing feeling I can't even put into words.

I know how much these guys wanted to win this game, especially being here last year and then losing the Elite Eight, and now being able to make it to the Final Four for the first time in program history is something special.

I know for me and Norchad being transfers and this is our first time in the NCAA Tournament, this is something unreal. To be with this great group of guys, our coaching staff being great, and being able to make it to the Final Four on your first time making it to the NCAA Tournament, it's like I don't know what to say.

I'm loving the experience so far, but we've still got more work to do.

JORDAN MILLER: I don't know if there was a point in the game where I thought we were going to win. I was so determined to make sure -- anything can happen with how much time is left on the clock. Coach always preaches that. After the buzzer sounded, it felt surreal. Being able to go on stage, hold up the trophy, cut down nets again, truly blessed.

Like Nijel said, we're going to celebrate tonight, maybe a little bit tomorrow. But it's not over. We've got a big -- a team that's rolling next, UConn. So celebrate and then on to the next one.

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