

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Miami (FL) vs USC

Friday, March 18, 2022

Greenville, South Carolina, USA

Bon Secours Wellness Arena

Miami (FL) Hurricanes

Isaiah Wong

Charlie Moore

Sam Waardenburg

Jim Larranaga

Media Conference

Miami - 68, USC - 66

THE MODERATOR: We're ready for our University of Miami press conference. We'll start off with an opening comment from Coach Larranaga, and we'll take questions from the student-athletes.

JIM LARRANAGA: First of all, I thought we got off to just a fantastic start in the first half, played a great 20 minutes. Isaiah got us off to a really good start, scoring the ball. The defense was sensational, forced some turnovers, I think it was 12 at halftime. We rebounded very well. And at halftime we were comfortably ahead.

But that didn't last long. Southern Cal played a great second half. They came back and took the lead. We really needed to raise our level of focus, effort, concentration because at that point in time when we fell behind, we could have easily let things slip away.

But what I've come to learn about this team is they really rise to the occasion. We've been through this a lot this season, a lot of close games, and every game, someone steps up and makes big plays, get a great defensive rebound or a blocked shot or hit a couple of key free throws like we did today.

Heck of a game. Welcome to March Madness.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes?

Q. Isaiah, it seemed like you played about four games



tonight. You were scoring at will early, you got into foul trouble, had to come out, had to come in and give an offensive boost, then obviously fouled out at the end. What was that whole experience like for you and the emotions of it all?

ISAIAH WONG: It was just like an up-and-down emotion. Coming into the game, I started off hot. Then I got in foul trouble and sat the bench. I just need to keep my mindset healthy. Just coming in the game, I just kept on playing, and the team helped me through that. Then I got in even more foul trouble, and I'll just try and stay focused.

At the end, I had to put my whole trust in the team when I got fouled out, and they finished the game, and I appreciate them for that.

Q. Jim, can you talk about, tell us exactly what you were thinking when Charlie went to the free-throw line at the end there? What were you thinking?

JIM LARRANAGA: I felt very, very confident that Charlie would make the free throws, but that was going to still give them an opportunity to make a two or a three, and we wanted to be sure that we were back defensively and matched up because Peterson is obviously a great three-point shooter, and he almost made that one to end the game.

We're really, really happy with the execution down the stretch, making the two free throws, Sam making that free throw beforehand. Every point counts, and every play, every pass is huge.

Q. Charlie, a lot of stops, a heck of a journey for you to get here. Could you just kind of put it into words, you had the big three, which broke up an 0 for 12 streak. You had a nice drive, I think it was right after that, and of course the two free throws at the end. Could you describe the emotion of having your team's fate riding on your back there with just a few seconds to go?

CHARLIE MOORE: I just wanted to give 100 percent effort for my teammates. I saw we needed to make some plays.



I wanted to get involved, make my teammates better, make shots when needed. I was just trying to instill my will to win to help my teammates.

I obviously made a three, like you said, a drive and a free throw, and I just wanted to help my teammates come out with the victory.

Q. Sam, you've played so many games like this in conference play. How do you think that prepared you for today?

SAM WAARDENBURG: Immensely. As you said, we've played a ton of these, and they've all kind of come down to the last couple shots there or at the free-throw line. We've been prepared the last few games as well, from the ACC Tournament, having a close one with Duke and a close one with Boston College, before that with Syracuse.

So we're well prepared for these moments, and we know in March that these moments do occur quite a lot. Going forward, we're very confident in ourselves that, if these moments come about, we're ready for them, and yeah, we'll take it on.

Q. Sam, could you just talk about just in general what's the mood of the team right now? You guys were picked to finish 12th in the ACC, and now you're going on to the second round. What does it say about this team, what you guys have done this year?

SAM WAARDENBURG: Since day one, this team has had a great chemistry with one another in the locker room. Off the court this team's been great with one another. Yeah, going throughout the season, that's just continued to grow, and it's shown on the court as well.

The energy right now, guys are super happy. Obviously when you win a tournament game, you're happy. We've got to focus now. We know we're going to watch, I think Auburn we're playing next. We're going to watch film on them, prepare for them, and be ready with a new game plan for that one.

Q. Charlie, today you guys kind of needed really everybody on the team to make a contribution. It wasn't just Isaiah. It wasn't just Kam. At different moments everybody contributed to this victory. What was that like as a guy who was kind of like a pilot of it all?

CHARLIE MOORE: I feel like most of the nights, all the team contributes, just contribute in different ways. Anthony Walker gave us great minutes. Sam, he's always battling down there as an undersized big. Who else? Jordan, he

played great tonight. Walker even came in and gave us great minutes when Isaiah got in foul trouble. And I feel like we always have a team that contributes to us winning, so I feel like that's not anything new.

Q. Charlie, when the ball went out of bounds there at the end, did you kind of feel like you had to make those free throws to make up for that there on the other end? Were you feeling any extra pressure because of what happened on the other end of the court at that moment?

CHARLIE MOORE: I mean, not any extra pressure. I just wanted to help my teammates come out with the win. I felt like those free throws were big. I just wanted to focus and take my time. I felt like, if I make them, we had a great chance of winning the game, and I knocked them down.

Q. Question is for all three. I just wanted to ask how important is this win for the program? The first tournament win since 2016 and after a heartbreaking loss in 2018.

ISAIAH WONG: This is a good win for the university because it's been a minute since we've been here, and with the team we have right now, we've been playing good. We've just been -- I feel like we've been representing Miami very well with the team we have. We've just been playing hard, our hardest and we've been --

SAM WAARDENBURG: Yeah, like what Isaiah said. I think it's huge for the program, but it's huge for the ACC as well to show how good we are as a league. I think we're a little underrated this year, but we showed tonight that we are a good league and we can compete with anyone really.

CHARLIE MOORE: I just agree with Isaiah and Sam, especially when Sam talked about how competitive the ACC were. I feel like we had a lot of great teams in the ACC. We battle every night during conference time. Also, it's just a great win for Miami, the Miami family. So just happy and excited we can get the win.

THE MODERATOR: Back to Coach Larranaga for questions.

Q. Jim, nobody sees the hundreds, thousands of hours that a coaching staff spends developing players, but today you really had to use the whole tank just in strategy, in the way the game was played out, foul trouble. What goes through your mind as you're watching guys step up in moments like that?

JIM LARRANAGA: The first thing is you recruit really good kids. My staff does a great job of finding kids that we think



fit our style of play and the kind of student-athlete we're looking for at the University of Miami. University of Miami is a great school academically, a top 50 school in the country, got a fantastic campus, beautiful campus in Coral Gables, Florida.

So when we recruit, we want to emphasize those things. We compete in what we feel is the best basketball league in the country, and traditionally it has been. How many teams have won National Championships and how many teams have succeeded in the NCAA Tournament?

When you recruit good players, they're going to work hard. They're going to put forth the great effort to try to improve. What was especially satisfying to me, my staff, and the team is to have so many new guys this year -- a Charlie Moore, who you ask him about in the ACC, he's already played in the Pac-12. He played in the Big 12. He played in the Big East, and now he's in the ACC. So when he talks about how good the ACC is, he knows. He's played against all those teams.

But in addition to that, players need to understand what it's going to take to be victorious because it can change from night to night. One stat that I really can't believe we won the game is we were 1 for 14 from three. I really felt we needed to make seven or eight threes and force between 15 and 20 turnovers. We forced 18 turnovers, so that part at the defensive end really worked. But we're a very fine three-point shooting team, and a couple of those just rimmed in and out, and yet no matter that we didn't shoot well, we didn't hang our heads, we didn't give up. Guys didn't get discouraged from missing. We kept plugging away. We still end up with 14 assists and only 3 turnovers. Only 3 turnovers, and one of them was at the very end in which Charlie stepped out of bounds.

So guys are working hard and getting better, and Wooga Poplar, Bensley Joseph, and Anthony Walker, who came in off the bench, really played quality minutes. If you look, I'm looking at the plus-minus, Anthony Walker was a plus nine, Bensley was a plus one. So those are critical segments of the game where your bench has to come through for you.

Q. Coach, your program had been decimated with injuries over the past couple years. To have the season you've had this year and now get back in the tournament and to get your first win in the tournament, how do you feel right now?

JIM LARRANAGA: I'm pretty happy. No, I'm ecstatic. I'll tell you what I told the players last night, we have a team meeting the night before, especially away games, and I wanted them thinking correctly. So I told them last night that last night was Christmas eve and that today was

Christmas, and you're going to get the greatest gift any basketball player growing up dreams about, and that's the opportunity to play in March Madness because it doesn't happen very often.

For a lot of teams, it never happens. For a lot of players, they've never participated. I would love to see the field expanded because I think there's so many teams that are very deserving -- and I know, you know, that team is on the bubble or what have you. That's always going to be the case no matter how many teams you invite.

I think in basketball and in March Madness, less than 20 percent of the teams, less than 20 percent of our 358 Division I teams participate in March Madness. I would like to see that grow because I know how my players are feeling, and I know every student-athlete would feel the same way.

You see the upsets that happen. That's always going to be the case because there's so many darn good players in our country, and guys playing great basketball, I don't care what league you're in. When I was in the Colonial Athletic Association people said, oh, we're not that good. We made it to the Final Four. Other teams in our league made it to the Final Four. Butler went to the championship game two years in a row.

There's a lot of good basketball players and teams out there. I'd love to see us expand the tournament so that more kids can experience what my guys are experiencing in the locker room right now.

Q. Jim, I'm just wondering if you could talk a little more about just three turnovers. That really is pretty remarkable.

JIM LARRANAGA: Ridiculous.

Q. What does that say? Can you just talk about that? And another thing, did you have a sense from the very beginning of the game, from warmups or anything, that this team was really ready for this game? Did you have any signs?

JIM LARRANAGA: I have a crystal ball, and I knew exactly. What was the first part of the question?

Q. Three turnovers.

JIM LARRANAGA: Three turnovers. Back in September at practice, we turned the ball over like it was a good thing. Everybody's turning the ball over, turning it over, bad passes everywhere. We had a long talk with the players about it, and when you have a lot of new guys, which we



did -- Charlie, Jordan, Bensley, Wooga. All these guys are new. Sam hadn't played last year. Rodney hadn't played last year.

So when you're trying to blend those skills together, very often there are a lot of mistakes that are made. At the offensive end, they're called turnovers. But as we improved and our chemistry developed, we became a really fine offensive team, and we find the open man very well. We get a fair amount of assists, and we're very careful not to turn the ball over too much.

So I'd just say it was a great offensive performance today. What was the second part of the question? You don't even remember.

Q. Crystal ball.

JIM LARRANAGA: Oh, yeah. I'm one of those guys that's very optimistic but also very realistic. When I'm laying down late at night in bed, I visualize how we're going to play, and when I do that, we win every game. We don't miss any shots. We don't turn the ball over. We have some spectacular dunks and everything.

Then when I wake up in the morning and start to realize, oh, we actually have to play the game, then I start to worry that I don't know how we will play against this particular opponent. But it is a roller coaster. For a coach, you're up, you believe and you're confident in your team, but then you look at the opponent, and you're like, oh, my God, these guys are really good.

Q. Coach, in talking with Charlie yesterday, he told me that just because of his background with having to move around a lot to different schools, he was in a trust deficit with coaches particularly. So he said it was very important for him to build trust with you, and obviously you guys have done that. Talk to me about how you were able to do that and just the importance of him going down the stretch.

JIM LARRANAGA: I think Charlie and any one of our players would tell you I never cursed him out. I'm not a negative guy. I'm not ripping them. I'm much more of what I consider a teacher, and when I was in high school and college, I never had a professor curse me out. I had them discipline me sometimes for when I was cutting up and acting like a clown, but never had anybody berate me or put me down.

It's been my philosophy to implement or -- it's not the word I'm looking for. To imitate my high school coach Jack Curran. I never heard him use a vulgarity in the 50 years we knew each other. So when it comes to my relationship

with all the players, and right now in particular Charlie, who's our point guard and our leader and our quarterback, I need him to trust me, and I need to trust him with the basketball.

He's been a tremendous leader in our program. We've really adopted and adapted to the Charlie Moore way of playing basketball. He's aggressive at both ends of the court. He shares the ball beautifully. He can make shots. He makes free throws. He's just a tremendous competitor from start to finish, and we've developed that kind of relationship where we trust each other. I trust him immensely, and I'm glad to hear he feels the same way.

Q. I wanted to ask about protecting the basketball. You guys had 12 turnovers -- not 12 turnovers. 12 steals on USC, and USC only had one steal. Talk to me about protecting the ball and then getting those steals on the other end.

JIM LARRANAGA: Well, basketball is constantly a game of decisions, who to pass the ball to, should you shoot or pass. And what we do defensively and why we had forced 12 turnovers in the first half was because our guys were trapping and rotating and playing with a tremendous amount of energy. I'm guessing that Southern Cal has not faced a team that did it as much as we do.

At the offensive end, because of their size, they like to pack things in around the paint, and we were able to successfully complete our passes on the perimeter.

But we had a very good ball handling day and very, very proud of the way the guys handled the circumstances.

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