

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Friday March 9, 2018

Brian Dutcher

Matt Mitchell

Devin Watson

Jalen McDaniels

San Diego State Aztecs

San Diego State - 90, Nevada - 73

BRIAN DUTCHER: Just real happy to have found a way to beat a really good Nevada team. They're an NCAA tournament team, there's no question about it. We definitely benefited from having the numbers they had versus ours, that they had to play back-to-back.

I thought that our guys did a really nice job in the first half and built a lead and then the second half was tough. They were coming at us hard, forcing us into playing a tempo we didn't want to play with a lead. We knew that was going to happen. We wanted to take care of the ball, I think we got cautious against the pressure, but they never gave up.

Nevada has a very talented, very tough-minded team. We're very fortunate to have beaten them today. We're excited to have a chance to play for the conference championship tomorrow and get a chance to get in the NCAA Tournament Sunday on selection time.

With that being said, we will take any questions.

Q. What did you learn, if anything, from playing Nevada and beating them last weekend at your place?

JALEN McDANIELS: We learned that we've just got to play hard all the time. They're a tough team. We've got to be tougher than them. Stick to it on the defensive end and just get stops. And we get stops converts in the offense.

Q. Talk about coming out like you did with the first three 3s you took, kind of set the tone for the team at the very beginning, you guys kind of took off from there. What were you seeing out there on the court?

DEVIN WATSON: They kept going under me. So as they kept going under me I just had to be aggressive and take my shots and they went in. Just being



aggressive, taking what the defense was giving me.

Q. What were you guys seeing out there like on the court, like everything you were throwing up pretty much went in? What was that feeling like, and how did it all come about?

DEVIN WATSON: Just momentum. Seeing the ball go through the hoop. Everybody making shots and it was just a great feeling, just momentum.

Q. Did you guys feel like there was a little bit of extra stuff going on in this game? It was really physical in the beginning, bodies hitting the floor. Did that motivate you, you really wanted to put it to them?

JALEN McDANIELS: We knew they were going to have to come out like that. We had to match them and go beyond them and I felt like we did it.

Q. Matt, you hit the deck a couple of times and then came back, and you were going pretty hard. What was going on out there with you?

MATT MITCHELL: It was just physicality, just competitiveness. That's really all it is. Nothing more than that. And just two teams wanted to win, and win the Mountain West Championship.

Q. How much momentum do you feel you have going into the final game tomorrow the way you're playing?

MATT MITCHELL: I feel like we have a lot. Winning the way that we did, and doing what we did, just playing like a team and really defending hard and getting after it. I feel like we have a lot of momentum, a lot of confidence going into tomorrow's championship game.

Q. They always say you want to play your best basketball at the end of the season. You guys seem to be firing on all cylinders. What point during the season did it click, eight in a row you guys have won?

JALEN McDANIELS: I think after that last Nevada game at their place, you know, we put a stop to it. We just had come closer as a team, play hard every game, every possession. Every possession counts, especially on the defensive end. I feel like on the defensive end we've been getting stops and it's been

converting to easy offense. I feel like that's the difference.

Q. As freshmen are you surprised that you guys have been able to be so productive, not only throughout the season but obviously late and through this tournament so far? You guys are young, you're freshmen, you've come in and played so well. Is that surprising to you? What was your attitude coming into the season and as the season started progressing?

JALEN McDANIELS: It's not surprising. We've been playing basketball for a long time. We just want to go out there and compete, play at a high level. And I feel like us two, we've been doing that. And the freshmen, okay, we're not freshmen anymore, the season is almost over.

Q. You go to halftime with just a 30-point lead. First of all, I'm sure you didn't expect to be up by 30 against Reno at the half. But to come into the second half and not left down.

MATT MITCHELL: Really, it was just listening to the coaching staff and sticking to our game plan was what kept us going. Knowing they were going to come out harder than they did in the first half, came out harder in the second half. Just going into halftime we were just sticking to the game plan, keep getting stops, keep rebounding, playing hard, and just finish the game out.

Q. Before the game I noticed you and a bunch of other players, you finished shooting really early. You were like ready on the bench, ready to play. What was that feeling like? Did you have a calm over you or did you just know you were ready for this type of game?

DEVIN WATSON: It was the calm before the storm. We wanted to go out and play and handle business, and get to the next one, get to the championship.

Q. How hungry is this team to win tomorrow and go to the NCAA tournament?

DEVIN WATSON: Very hungry. I'm itching right now we want it so bad.

Q. Eight games ago did you guys think that you'd be in this position?

DEVIN WATSON: Yeah, we knew it was going to start clicking, we definitely knew it.

Q. What do you think was the main reason for the change? You touched on it, but if you could put one thing, what clicked?

DEVIN WATSON: Tired of losing. We knew our potential. We knew how good we could be, we just wanted to prove it to ourselves and to everybody.

Q. You've been on the bench for a lot of basketball games in your career. Where does the first half of this game rank as far as a half a basketball that you've been on the bench for?

BRIAN DUTCHER: You know, when you start making shots like that, the basket gets the size of the ocean. And when that happens everything seems to be good. Devin started us. They ducked under some ball screens. He made some early 3s. And obviously we did a good job sharing the ball.

Nevada is a very good team. And we were very fortunate to get off to the start we did, and then we just continued to play upon that momentum. And we took it into halftime, told them at halftime, Don't give up any 3s, don't turn the ball over, rebound the ball, and share the ball. And we did that for most of the second half. Down the stretch they really bothered us, jumping up into us, trapping all over the place.

As a coach I don't want to finish the game like that. I told them in the locker room, I don't want that to diminish how great I thought they played this game and how proud I was of them and that we're one game short of our dream, which is to go to the NCAA tournament.

Q. You've been around for a long time. You don't think this loss will jeopardize their chances in terms of getting in?

BRIAN DUTCHER: Absolutely not. They've got as good a résumé as anybody out there. And I would hope that they would look at us as a quality loss. That we're a pretty good team ourselves. And it's not a bad loss in March. We've got a good team. And by beating them that's our -- I know they're talking tiers. That would be our third tier 1 win, with Gonzaga and beating Nevada twice. We're quietly putting a pretty good résumé together.

Q. Might it cost them a few seeding spots?

BRIAN DUTCHER: I don't know, I don't pay too close attention on that, so focused on my own team.

Q. You've had good success getting to the finals but recently you've had not very much success in the finals. You've talked about that all season, wanting to reverse that. You've been on the bench the last four finals that you lost. What have you learned from that that you might apply heading into tomorrow's final?

BRIAN DUTCHER: Everyone is so different, the game tomorrow will be so different just based on who wins this second game. The tempo of it, the way it's played, the strategy. And so it's matchups.

So I remember back when Wyoming beat us, Coach

Shy did a great job controlling tempo. We played Fresno and lost in the finals. Marvelle Harris put on a magnificent performance.

It's one play, one rebound, I know we will compete at a high level. But so will the other team. It's a one-and-done situation. I know our team will be ready and so will our opponent. It will be a great matchup, whoever it is.

Q. Back to the whole freshmen thing. As a coach, is it exciting to have young players be so composed and play so well on the bigger stage here and throughout the year? How exciting is it to have that on the team?

BRIAN DUTCHER: It's great. And they're playing pretty free, because a lot of the plays we're running through Trey, we're running through Malik. And we run plays for those kids, but they're playing off the others. And if you're going to be good in March it's great to have great senior play.

And so we're finally healthy. Trey is healthy, Malik is healthy. And that goes a long way with how we're playing. Trey coming back started this 8-game winning streak. Trey's contributions have been enormous. Malik is playing his best basketball now. Kameron Rooks, our other senior, has come on since Senior Day against Nevada and given us three really good games.

And so the freshmen, all they have to do is follow the senior's lead. And if they do that they'll continue to have that kind of success.

Q. Kam gave you a big lift against Nevada like he did six days ago. And he was in that stretch when you really started to pull away. What is it about him and his game that you think causes them problems?

BRIAN DUTCHER: Someone once told me you can't coach 7-1. He's a big man. And he uses his height and his physicality to his advantage and our advantage.

So I know he didn't want to get all the falls he got today, but he's a presence underneath there and it makes a difference. We're real fortunate having him playing his best basketball in March. And hopefully he will continue to do that tomorrow in the game.

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Eric Musselman Jordan Caroline Hallice Cooke Nevada Wolf Pack

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ERIC MUSSELMAN: Thought San Diego State came out from the get-go the first half, played phenomenal basketball. We didn't defend like we're capable of in the first half. Free throws attempted is the difference in the basketball game. It was from the very beginning of the game.

Give San Diego State a lot of credit for putting pressure on us and drawing 34 fouls attempted to our 17. And surprisingly we took 14 more shots and still couldn't get to the line.

Having said that, San Diego State played really well. Our teams played well not just in March, we played well for an entire season, which is why you have 30 games on your schedule, 31 games. We got beat tonight. Obviously San Diego State played much better than us, not just better. And give credit to the Aztecs.

Q. You guys have been able to come out of deficits. You did it yesterday. What was it about this game where you just couldn't get any traction or make a run to dent into their lead?

JORDAN CAROLINE: You just had to be ready to play from the get-go, and since we weren't, we couldn't fight back from a 30-point deficit at the half.

HALLICE COOKE: You've got to be ready to play when the ball goes up in the air from the jump. And tonight we didn't do that. And we kept fighting hard. We didn't start playing really hard until the second half, and we were already down 30. And you can't make up for that many points in 20 minutes.

Q. San Diego State is not a team that, at least for long stretches of the season, made a lot of perimeter shots. Did that surprise you and get you off guard when they started hitting the 3s and making everything they put up?

HALLICE COOKE: We helped give them confidence by giving them open shots early. And as the game got on



their confidence kept growing and growing. And they were able to make shots. And we dug ourselves into too much of a hole. And then we were down, they were getting run-outs and fast break points.

JORDAN CAROLINE: Yeah, I agree with that. We let them get easy shots, get into a rhythm early. If you let them get in a rhythm early they're going to hit shots that they normally wouldn't hit.

Q. Did they play you as a team any differently than they did last Saturday when you played them much closer down there?

JORDAN CAROLINE: I think it was just we weren't prepared from the get-go and that's what happened.

Q. You haven't played your last basketball, obviously. How do you rebound from this going into the next tournament?

HALLICE COOKE: Every game you lose is an opportunity to learn something. And we've got a lot of guys hurting right now. And to be a person who faced a lot of adversity, this is the first time this season, losing with double digits, I'm sure we're going to bounce back in practice. Coach is going to come with that same energy and enthusiasm and passion that he brings every day. We've got to believe what he tells us and go out and execute like we did tonight.

JORDAN CAROLINE: We can learn something from this, and our next opportunity as a team we have to be ready to play. And we can't take anything for granted. From here on out it's one or done, we do or die.

Q. This has typically been a tough team for you guys to play. What is it about San Diego State that's given this team fits over the last couple of years?

JORDAN CAROLINE: I really can't tell you. They're a really talented team. I just don't think we came out to play each time we played them as we should. I think that's the biggest thing. I'm not taking anything against them, they have great players, but the times we played them we haven't been prepared.

Q. You guys didn't start playing really, really hard until the second half. Were they a more desperate team from the get-go?

HALLICE COOKE: They had a deeper team. And I

feel like playing three games in three days, we did everything treatment-wise, but a lot of our shots were short. Guys weren't using their legs. So I think that had to factor into it.

There's no excuses. We work hard all summer. We push each other so hard. So games like this shouldn't happen. And you have to learn from it and get better.

Q. You mentioned the free throw disparity and the foul disparity. Did you feel like the officiating was inconsistent tonight?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I'm not going to comment. We had more blocks than San Diego State, we had five more steals than San Diego State, 27 field goals to 28 field goals, seven 3s to eight 3s.

There's one glaring stat -- you guys all have the stat sheet, you can see it. And there's one glaring thing, they out-rebounded us, too, significantly.

Q. You talked earlier this week just about how proud you were that you hadn't had any double-digit losses and been able to be competitive. What kind of happened in this one?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: We lost. They played better than us. We had obviously our worst outing of the year not at a good time. Having said that, we're not a team that lost three out of four or anything like that. We played an entire season of college basketball and a ranked team for five weeks, whatever, the last five weeks, and seven total weeks. We've had an incredible season and we didn't play very good tonight. And we played against a good team that I think is extremely talented. And, you know, they won the game. It's quite obvious.

Q. You played these guys on February 10th at your place, outscored them by 25 points in the second half. They were 13-10 at the time, in 8th place. What's the difference between the team you saw that night in Reno and the team you saw today?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I mean obviously I think every game, and all of our local media has heard me say it over and over, every game has its own theme, it's own identity. And San Diego State played great tonight. At San Diego with 50 seconds to go it was a two-point game. And we didn't play very good that night, either. And you can certainly attribute it to San Diego State.

So I don't want to take any credit away from them whatsoever. We were bad tonight and they were really good and that's why you see the difference in 55 to 25 at halftime.

And having said all that, our guys did not quit in the second half. We outscored them in the second half by 13 or whatever. And we didn't quit.

Q. You said earlier this week that you felt you had done enough to get in the tournament irregardless of what happened here. Do you still feel that way? Do you feel the tournament committee will feel that way?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: We certainly feel we're one of the best teams in the country, without question. And if we just got hot recently or something and then lost, maybe not, but we've been so consistent from the very beginning. We put together an unbelievable non-conference schedule. We won on the road at a high, high, high rate. And so we certainly think that the NCAA Tournament Selection Committee looks at the entire body of work.

And so, yeah, we feel like we've done more than enough based on how we played an entire season, not getting hot during a stretch or anything like that. Yeah, we do feel like we have done enough.

Q. Kendall turned his ankle early in the second half. Is that something that you feel could stretch into the next game?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: We don't think so. It's just precautionary, we were down and went with some guys that could trap and press. Up to that point in 20 minutes Kendall hadn't hit a three and hadn't gotten a rebound. We wanted to just play Josh, because we thought he'd give us a little more activity.

Q. Was it frustrating that you have to defend a 27-7 record?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: No, I don't think we're defending. Like I said, we're coming in tonight 22 ranked team in the country and we've held that top 25 for quite some time. And you guys are asking the question.

I'm not really defending it. We went out and did what the committee told us, which was to schedule as many road games as you could. And we went out and won on the road. 12 road wins is a lot of road wins. And we didn't stay in our region and play a bunch of local games at home. We didn't do that. We went out and played. We have no Division II teams on our schedule. And we have confidence that a body of work that we've done, we'll be playing -- find out who we're playing on Sunday, that's how we feel.

Q. You mentioned the rebounding, I think in the first half, you missed 12 shots, got eight of those back on offensive boards. Was that something that you weren't doing as a team?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I thought Jalen did a good job and Kameron did a good job, too, on the glass in the first half and their activity. Playing UNLV and San Diego State, both teams that have length on the inside,

playing them back-to-back nights, you know, certainly affected us on the rebounds, I thought. We knew when we saw the brackets the way they came out that San Diego State and UNLV were really, really talented and matched some of our athleticism and such.