

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

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Brian Dutcher

Malachi Flynn

Jordan Schakel

Yanni Wetzell

San Diego State Aztecs



THE MODERATOR: We'll take an opening statement from coach.

BRIAN DUTCHER: First of all, Dave Pilipovich is a very good coach and the seniors from Air Force didn't want their season to end and they played like it. They played with great grit and toughness like you knew they would. That's the beauty of having a first-round bye. They had to play in a tough-playing game and got off to a great start, but we were hoping our cumulative affect defensively would wear them down some. And I think it did, because when they were on fresh legs they were almost unguardable for us. I have a very coachable team. I've already told them this. I told them I am tired of teams shooting over 50 percent against us in the first half, so they let Air Force shoot 60. So I want to -- they followed my instructions. They didn't shoot 50. But we have been good in the second half most defensively all year, and today was no exception. We held Air Force to 27 percent shooting in the second half. We upped our intensity and we guarded the ball harder and found a way to get out of here with a victory tonight.

THE MODERATOR: Let's take questions for the student athletes first.

Q. For Yanni and -- or just all three of you guys, I guess. Jordan, for you, you started off 1-5 from the field, end up scoring another -- end up with 17 in the game. What happened in the second half? And how were your teammates able to find you?

JORDAN SCHAKEL: Nothing different happened. Just had to keep shooting. My teammates continued to find me and continued to believe in me, so I thank them for that. But nothing really happened, just kept playing our game. The shots just fell in the second half versus the first half where they didn't fall.

Q. Malachi, during the second period you hit a three and the crowd started chanting MVP. You've

obviously been in the spotlight for awhile. How do you enjoy all of that but at the same time kind of like stay in focus and in the game?

MALACHI FLYNN: Yeah, I think during the game you're just trying to stay locked in and then after you kind of just realize what happened. But we definitely appreciate the fan support. I think they have been there all year, so it's definitely been good for all of us.

Q. Malachi, the coach talked about that stretch of teams shooting 50 percent or better in the first half. What do you attribute those slow starts to? Is there any common thread in your mind that connects those first halves?

MALACHI FLYNN: Some of -- a lot of the shots were just good shots on their part. I think we got to give credit where it's due. They made some tough shots. And then the second half I think we just continued to guard and eventually they started missing those. So it's hard to make all those shots for 40 minutes.

Q. For all three of you: It seems like in virtually every game in the second half of the season you guys have gotten off to slow starts in the first half. In the second half you guys kind of flip a switch. What goes on in the locker room that makes you guys flip that switch?

YANNI WETZELL: I mean, a lot of credit goes to Air Force today. They came out and they made a ton of shots. I think they were shooting above 54 percent from three in the first half. And I mean, we were contesting most of them. So a lot of credit to them. But yeah, we came in the locker room at halftime and we said, Hey, we need to pick this up. And that's our identity is defense and rebounding. So we tried to get up in their stuff a little more and not give them open shots.

JORDAN SCHAKEL: Yeah, pretty much the same thing. We kind of pick up our defense as the game goes along. We try to not feel out our opponent, but try to give great effort at all times but sometimes it doesn't work out like that. Teams may have scouted certain things that we do, but we try to pick up it up as the game goes on. And I think guys see stuff on the bench, they tell us, This is what they're doing this game. We continue to pick stuff up on the fly and then the five guys that are out there on the court just continue to execute, continue to get better as the game goes on.

Q. Jordan, I want to touch more on on your shooting today. You started off 0-3 beyond the arc. Hit five of your last seven. Can you talk about the confidence that you need in order to keep shooting the ball even when you're missing early and the confidence that your teammates have and keep feeding you the ball?

JORDAN SCHAKEL: Yeah, you know, to be a shooter, to be a basketball player, in general, at this level, you have to have extreme confidence in yourself. And I think everyone on this team has extreme confidence. And then it helps when everyone on the court is telling me to keep shooting. Malachi told me at one point right after I had missed one, Just keep shooting. So that's just the beauty of this team. Nobody gets down. And I think I give credit to my teammates a lot for helping me out with that.

Q. The fans were pretty vocal tonight and you guys have a pretty good backing there. Can you talk about how comfortable it is when you have a fan support like that, that comes out and makes it feel like a home environment?

YANNI WETZELL: Yeah, the fan support's unreal. It's a five-hour drive or an hour flight and you could tell today that a ton of the San Diego fans made it out here. And their energy, it feels like Viejas, it's contagious. Once we get a couple stops in a row or a bucket, we can hear them and it just pushes us forward that much more. So a huge shout out to Aztec Nation and all the San Diego fans for coming out here. Their support's been huge.

Q. Yanni, you've been talking all week about -- all your players have -- about, We're not going to have a slow start. We're not going to let another team get going. What's it going to take to change that? And going forward, how dangerous is this kind of game for you as you get in the NCAA tournament and start playing better and better opponents?

YANNI WETZELL: Yeah. Like I said earlier, I think Air Force came out and they made some tough shots. They had their run and they played like their season was on the line. They were making difficult shots. We were in their face still. But, yeah, I agree, we do definitely have to get off to a better start and it's just a matter of turning up when the first whistle blows and not waiting for the second half to come around. We're going to talk about it and we're going to come out and try and adjust it. But we also know that these teams are playing for their season, so every game from here on out is going to be a dog fight.

Q. For all three of you: I know you don't know yet who you're going to play, but how badly do you want to play UNLV?

MALACHI FLYNN: I don't think it matters. I think we're

prepared for either opponent. I just think that's how it goes. So we'll see who wins and after that we'll prepare.

JORDAN SCHAKEL: Yeah, I agree. Both teams, we have extreme respect for. It will be a semi-final game, so I think we're just looking forward to moving on to the next bracket.

Q. Malachi, it seems like every week you're getting nominated for a new accolade. Obviously, you just won Defensive Player and Mountain West Player of the Year. It seems like you play with no ego. How do you not let all this media attention get to your head?

MALACHI FLYNN: I think it's because of our team. I mean, we're winning games. If we were .500 or not, like, at the position we're in, I wouldn't be getting that. So I know it's a whole team award. It just has to go to one player individually. And that's just who we are, who I am. I think we're all bought into winning and that's what we're going to continue to do.

Q. I know you're focused on this season, but in a lot of mock drafts now you're coming up as a first round pick. What does it feel like to finally get that respect and the recognition?

MALACHI FLYNN: I'm not worried about that at all, to be honest. I haven't seen any of that, so I'm just worried about this Mountain West tournament and then moving on forward after that.

THE MODERATOR: We'll dismiss the student athletes at this time. Thank you, men.

Take questions for coach.

Q. You made a point of saying, you even talked to the guys specifically about the first half starts and the 50 percent shooting and they give up 60, but what, I mean, I know you were joking a bit, but to a degree, this time of the year on the calendar's probably not the right time to have those kind of trend lines. What do you identify there and what are you talking to them about to try to find faster starts?

BRIAN DUTCHER: Yeah, I try to make it a hot topic this game. I tried to say, We got to get off to a better start. We got to be better. And obviously, I didn't do a good enough job. But Air Force, like I said, credit to Air Force. I mean, they were making step-back 3s. They were making hard shots and they played a good brand of basketball. As bad as we want it, they want to be as successful at the offensive end.

So my focus is getting our mind wrapped around the fact that people are getting off to a good start and we

have to do better early in the game. And so sometimes the message isn't rewarded, sometimes it is. But I thought we came out focused and ready to play, just hat's off to Air Force for playing at the level they played.

Q. Yanni kind of started pretty hot, starting 4-4 from the field. He did commit two fouls. How much of that attributed to the first half deficit? And how were you adjust to him only playing 10 of 20 minutes in the first half?

BRIAN DUTCHER: He got in foul trouble and so he was playing well offensively. And it's game-to-game. It's like some teams choose not to double Yanni, and when they don't double him, then he goes to work and he's able to score. If they double him, he finds Jordan or Malachi or KJ. He kicks it out for 3s. So he's dangerous at both levels. If they don't double, he can score. If they do double, he can kick it out and get guys open shots. So he's a very good offensive player. And we take some of a step back offensively. When he's not in there, we don't have a low-post presence. But we bring Aguek in and we set more ball screens and let him roll, and then Malachi found him on a couple rolls and got him involved. So the way you play changes when Yanni's not in, but we're still dangerous either way.

Q. You guys switched almost everything right off the bat. They didn't get backdoor cuts, didn't get a lot of drives, but they were hitting threes. What adjustment did you make at halftime? It looked like you weren't switching some stuff.

BRIAN DUTCHER: We didn't switch Walker the second half. We switched everybody else, the way we did handoffs and ball screens. But we just left K.J. on Walker and had him fight over and then try to give some help with the post. So he was playing so well and he was shooting over our bigs on the switch, shooting step backs. And those are shots you want guys to take, but he was making them, so we decided we just leave K.J. on him and let him chase him around and try to keep pressure. Then we brought Adam in. So we had two really good defenders on him for that second half 20 minutes, and I thought they did a good job of pressuring him. We picked up full court, where he had to bring it up 94 feet instead of just running from the half court. Tried to tire him out a little bit by picking him up full court and I thought we did a good job.

Q. K.J. played about 35 minutes today, but he wasn't as aggressive as he usually is. Do you think that ankle is still really bothering him?

BRIAN DUTCHER: You know, I don't think so. I mean, K.J. missed a couple early shots and he realized other guys were hot and so he does what this team does. Like, some nights it's not your night. And we have seen nights where K.J. hits five, six 3s. But he missed a couple. He was guarding hard, so he was spending a

lot of energy at the defensive end. And then he did what good players do, he moved the ball, he got his teammates involved. And our guys don't feel a need to put up their numbers every night. The only number they care about is the winning number and that's what we came away with again tonight.

Q. Jordan actually ended up leading the team in scoring. In the first half, as he said, he started pretty slow. What did you see in the second half from Jordan?

BRIAN DUTCHER: He just going to keep shooting. We want him to shoot. If he's open he has to shoot. And shooting is confidence. So if he loses confidence then even when he's supposed to take it he won't and he won't make it. So we want him to shoot every open look he gets and if he goes 0-7 we want him to take the 8th shot, because that's what he does, he's an elite-level shooter.

Q. I know it's out of your control who you play next, and the players were politically correct today, but they have been saying all week they really want UNLV. How do you approach a game like that if indeed that's who you play, knowing that they're going to have a lot of energy? Do you try to rein that in a little bit or do you just let them go and have at it?

BRIAN DUTCHER: This is the time of year you let them play, you know. So we'll set a game plan, no matter who we play, but obviously either game's going to be a challenge. It's the semi-finals. So if we play UNLV, we'll be on their home floor, they're playing as good as anybody in the conference right now, I think they have won five in a row, and they're playing at an elite level.

Boise is very good. Leon always has his team ready to play. And I'm just excited to watch these two teams go at it and I'm glad we get to play one of them tomorrow.

Q. As a follow-up, does the competitor in you want another shot at them?

BRIAN DUTCHER: I want to play whatever team I think we can win. So if -- UNLV, obviously, presents great challenge because they're on their home floor, they sleep in their own beds and it's, not to take anything away from Boise, but nobody wants to play a road game in a conference tournament. So if we play UNLV we'll be basically playing a road game in our conference tournament. So that is always a challenge.

Q. Do you notice anything different about the collective mental makeup of the team right now and these recent games as opposed to when there was so much of that swagger in the Vegas tournament earlier with Creighton and Iowa and

that level of opponent. Is this team different mentally at all lately recently?

BRIAN DUTCHER: No, they don't get rattled, they don't overreact, they don't worry about the score in the first half. They just go make a few adjustments, go out and just play with great confidence. And that's what winning teams do, they earn their confidence because they win games, but once you start gaining that confidence you don't think you're ever going to lose. So obviously this team doesn't think it's going to lose a game. Which is a good thing. So, but the good news is they don't go out there and just take anything for granted, they don't play hero ball, they don't come up and just cast shots up. They play the right way. And again, we had 17 assists, Malachi has a unique ability to know when it's time to get big baskets, but at the same time he gets all his teammates involved. So that's an incredible skill to have and pretty rare for a guy that leads you in scoring.

Q. Adam Seiko has been a key role player all year. A lot of what he does does not show up in the box score, but he still is an integral part to this team. What you can you say about him?

BRIAN DUTCHER: He guards at an elite level and at halftime he makes great suggestions defensively, because he's a defensive specialist. Now he makes open threes, they don't want to leave him open, but he came in and he said, We got to be tighter on him on the wing, don't worry about the back cut, get up closer on the wing so when they come for the hand off we can push them over. And he makes great suggestions. So, like I said, the best thing about this team is its chemistry and it's IQ. So it's not always the coaches that come up with suggestions, the players see what's going on on the floor and they're smart and they bring great advice to not only timeouts but to halftime adjustments.

Q. And Adam has been a winner for years now obviously he played at Sierra Canyon, played in a lot of big championship games. How much more confidence does that give you in him knowing his past and what he's been through on the basketball court?

BRIAN DUTCHER: I have confidence in veteran players and Adam's third year in the program. And we have a lot of third-year, fourth-year and fifth-year players in our program. And you look up and there are no sophomores or freshmen playing for the Aztecs and that's not to say that players like Keshad Johnson aren't going to be outstanding players. But this is a junior and senior and fifth-year senior laden team and that helps win.