

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday March 10, 2018

Brian Dutcher
Kameron Rooks

Malik Pope

Trey Kell

Devin Watson

San Diego State Aztecs

San Diego State - 82, New Mexico - 75

BRIAN DUTCHER: First of all, I want to say that New Mexico was the one opponent I didn't want to play in this thing early. Paul Weir has done a great job with that team, they've gotten so much better. A team on an 8-game winning streak played a team on a 7-game winning streak. It was the kind of game I thought we'd see, right down to the end. So I want to congratulate Paul on the job he's done with New Mexico.

I want to thank Steve Fisher for leaving me such a great team. Not many first-year coaches get a team like that. I want to thank Steve for all he's done to build this Aztec program to what it is today.

I want to thank my seniors, Trey Kell, Kameron Rooks, Malik Pope, they've provided everything I thought they would. And they weren't afraid of the big moment. That's why you have seniors on your team for these big moments, and they all delivered. I'd like to say Devin Watson's like a senior, he's a fourth-year junior. I have him back for one more. I don't want him to get too full.

Congratulations to my Aztecs. Thanks to Aztec Nation for following us. Two of the greatest fan bases in this conference were here tonight, New Mexico and San Diego State. And I thought it was a great environment for a championship game. And we're grateful to be moving on to the NCAA Tournament after suffering disappointments in the conference tournament in the past, to get back on the winning side of that. We're grateful for that.

Q. Trey, you got hurt and looked like Coach wanted to take you out. You indicated you wanted to stay in. Can you talk about how important it was for you to finish the game and how you were able to



respond in that moment.

TREY KELL: I felt like I was rolling at the moment. And I saw that we were down about like six or something like that. So for me, coming out because of an injury wasn't an option. I didn't want to go home. It was just as simple as that. They asked me if I wanted to come out and I told them no.

Q. Trey, to feed off of that, did you personally feel it was on you, the senior leader, all due respect, to continue and take over at that point and lead your team?

TREY KELL: A little bit. It was just like I was saying, I felt like I was in a little bit of a groove at the moment. And I felt like what we were running, I felt like they couldn't -- they didn't have an answer for it. So the main thing I just wanted to keep running and see if they made an adjustment. And I'm glad it worked out for us.

Q. For the seniors, San Diego State has had so much success in this building, in tournament in the past. Did you feel like there was a lot of pressure for you guys to come out and win, just to carry on the legacy of having success in this tournament?

MALIK POPE: We kind of had a stable focus and controlling what we could control on the court within the team and just kept on with that.

Q. Devin, when you guys played here the first time during the regular season, obviously the team was struggling at the time. Can you just talk about where you were and what was it that kind of turned around to play the way you are now?

DEVIN WATSON: We were just tired of losing. We knew we had way too much potential to be losing games like that. And mentally from then to now I feel like we're on a whole another level.

Q. How are you feeling right now?

DEVIN WATSON: Not itching anymore. We won it. I don't got to itch no more.

Q. What was going through your minds when you were down by six late in the game?

MALIK POPE: Stay focused. It's a game of runs, you know what to do, lock in. We knew stops and rebounds were going to seal the deal. And guys locked in and we followed through with that.

Q. Moving on to the NCAA tournament, how excited are you guys?

MALIK POPE: I don't think words can describe that right now, to be honest. You can just see the smiles on our faces. We're not content, we're not really satisfied, we're definitely happy with the outcome, but we're still hungry.

DEVIN WATSON: We're still hungry.

MALIK POPE: It's not over.

Q. Trey, obviously amazing performance. What did this mean to you, after this whole season, the injuries, everything, just you did it?

TREY KELL: Yeah, it means a lot to me. Being there my freshman year in the tournament and seeing what it's like and everything like that, I wanted to get back so bad. And we came in wanting to win three, and we just needed one more tonight. And I tried to do whatever I could to make sure that happened. And I'm glad we came out on top.

Q. Kam, late in the game when you guys were down five, Coach put you in and Max in. Was that unexpected, did he tell you that was going to happen and what were your thoughts, Okay, I'm in this game in crunch time?

KAMERON ROOKS: I was just going to always be prepared, regardless of if I went in or not. I just wanted to stay ready. I know Dutch is putting me in the game and he's giving me an opportunity. And he trusted me and I'm just glad I was able to go out there and be able to get stops and help this team win.

Q. And Trey, it looked like on that foul a couple of minutes, maybe six minutes to go, when you got a long rebound and took off, and got fouled and took a bit of a bump, what happened to you there?

TREY KELL: I don't know what exactly happened. It kind of felt like I got like kicked or kneed in the shin. And the longer the game went on, it felt like there was a timeout every ten seconds to me, and it got tighter and tighter. But it wasn't a big deal.

Q. The one part of your body you haven't hurt this year?

TREY KELL: Yes. Like I was saying when I was walking over here, it's a new week, a new injury for me. I'm just used to it at this point.

Q. So it's nothing lingering?

TREY KELL: No, I'll be all right. Get some ice and treatment and I'll be straight.

Q. Coach mentioned there was the two fan bases here today, it was a great atmosphere. What was it

like for you to play in this type of environment with the NCAA tournament on the line?

TREY KELL: It was a great environment, like you said. It's always fun to play in a game where one team scores, their fans go crazy, the other team scores, their fans go crazy. It was the type of game every player wants to play in. And like I keep saying, I'm glad we got the victory.

Q. Talk a little bit more about that decision to put Kam and Max in the game and take Malik and Jalen out, and talk about tactically, but also in the context of rookie head coach in your biggest game down five with four minutes to go and having the guts to do that?

BRIAN DUTCHER: I don't even remember that happening. I don't know what the score was when I put them in. I know that this is New Mexico's style, they wear you down at the end. And so I know Malik and Jalen, I was going to give them one more blow and come back with them to finish the game.

But that crew came in with Max and Kam and they did a great job. They got us back in the game so I rode with them longer. You know what I've said, I'm going to play the people that are playing the best at the time. Those two played really well. I told Max that I thought he was going to do something special in this tournament. I don't know where or when and I thought he would. He hit the big corner three and got fouled, attacked the offensive glass, and he had his moment.

The key to basketball is not being frustrated when you're not in, so you're ready for your moment when it comes. And I've talked all year about developing my bench. And counting on my bench. And I could count on it here in the tournament and it helped me win tonight.

Q. What tactically did they both bring? Coach Weir talked about Max spreading the floor. He said that was a key there because they couldn't help on the ball screens. And it looked like Kam was setting all those ball screens.

BRIAN DUTCHER: Yeah, absolutely. Jalen is dynamic attacking the glass. And is going to be a very good 3-point shooter, Max already is a very good 3-point shooter. With all the high ball screens we were setting, they were switching and having to deal with it, that I needed shooters around the ball screen so they couldn't help in on the rolling post.

Max stretched the defense for us a little bit, he made that timely three. And he did run in to rebound from the corner or the perimeter, he just didn't stay there. When he saw the shot go up, he ran in and was aggressive on the glass. Real pleased with his

performance tonight.

Q. When you lost to UNLV here, that was obviously during the time the team was struggling, did you do anything at that moment with the players to keep their head up? How did you turn it around?

BRIAN DUTCHER: That was Trey Kell played one minute or two minutes into the game and got hurt, and didn't play the rest of the game and didn't play the next two or three. So I don't think it's any surprise that our nine-game win streak started when Trey Kell came back into the lineup.

This is what I envisioned for Trey all year long, senior guard with the ball in his hands with the game on the line. Devin was sensational, too, good guard play can make a coach look good. And they made me look good tonight.

Q. Looking ahead, now, what is it going to take this team to legitimately have a shot and make any kind of run at the NCAA tournament?

BRIAN DUTCHER: We're on a nine-game win streak. I told them four weeks ago, when it didn't look like we were going to avoid a play-in game, that I thought we were the best team in the Mountain West. And that's motivation. That's trying to tell them. But they have to believe that. And they have that kind of swagger. They believe they're the best team in the Mountain West. We had to win nine games to cut nets down and prove that we are.

And so I don't think this team is satisfied at all. I think some teams are satisfied to get in tournament. This is the second trip for Malik and Trey, and Kam's been there with Cal, and so I've got veterans that played in this environment before and are ready for this moment and are going with no other intention other than to win games in the NCAA tournament. And I wish we were playing at Viejas, but we can't.

Q. Just a little bit more on Trey. You've said you wanted to have him with the ball in key situations. Did you sense that entire season a frustration finally coming out? He's almost like he willed you guys to this win.

BRIAN DUTCHER: I don't think it's frustration. Trey is just such a smart player. If he doesn't draw a double team, you can see how he scores. If they put two on him, he gets the assist. So he's is smart.

When you run a ball screen, you don't feel he's going to shoot whether he's open or not. Trey takes what the defense gives him. There's been players like that with Coach Fisher. A guy you give the ball to, that if they don't double him he's going to get a good shot, if they double him, he's going to get a really good look for

someone else. That's Trey, Devin tonight too. Both of them like that high ball screen. Veteran guards that made big plays at big moments, and that's why we're advancing.

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Paul Weir

Joe Furstinger

Antino Jackson

New Mexico Lobos



San Diego State - 82, New Mexico - 75

PAUL WEIR: Obviously I thought San Diego State did a tremendous job. I think we played a pretty good game. But I think to win tonight we would have had to play a great game. And unfortunately, particularly I think offensively there in the middle, the end there of the second half, San Diego State did a great job defensively and we didn't take the greatest amount of shots or the shots that sometimes go down don't. And we just couldn't get in a groove and they went on a great run there. Kell was terrific.

And you have to tip your cap to San Diego State. It's a great team. They deserve to win the championship and they did. Unfortunately for me and for us, that means the end of an amazing run with a tremendous group of young men that I'll never forget. I wish I could give them a different ending because they worked so hard and they gave so much and you always -- like your kids, you want to reward them for things like that. Unfortunately I couldn't reward them tonight. And you have to give San Diego State credit for that.

Q. You guys did have that lead about the 8-minute mark down. Were you in the huddle? Was it more of a Boise State feel when you guys weren't able to close, or were you poised like you had been the last 7-game winning streak?

ANTINO JACKSON: It was about 6 minutes not 8.

I don't think we thought about Boise State in the championship game. They were fortunate enough to make a couple of shots and get on a run, and we didn't make shots.

Q. The memory of the season, you have talked about it with senior night being recently and stuff like that. What are you going to take away from this week, not as much the whole season, but this week, what are you going to take away?

ANTINO JACKSON: Well, first and foremost, as Paul Weir is the head coach, at the end of the game I'll be a

different type of person. I just felt like tonight I just fought. And there were times in practice where we go through stages like that, I just feel like all of us just kept fighting. I won't forget this the rest of my life, just trying hard to the very end and not giving up.

JOE FURSTINGER: I just love my coach so much. He's given me everything. I'm very thankful for him now.

Q. Obviously down the stretch Trey Kell starts hitting free throws and starts kind of taking over at the end. Do you feel you did a great job with Trey up until the final six minutes or so?

JOE FURSTINGER: He just made a few plays, and we lost the game.

ANTINO JACKSON: I give credit to him. He's a good player. He did a really good job in the middle pick and roll. He was just fortunate enough to make a couple shots. We tried hard on defense.

Like Coach said, you have to tip your hat to him.

Q. Down the stretch they had both Pope and Jalen McDaniels on the bench. Had Kam Rooks and Max Montana, two guys who for long stretches in the season didn't even play in games. Were you shocked by that? Did you notice that? And how did you think that might affect the game?

ANTINO JACKSON: Honestly, I didn't notice that at all. And I don't think that affected the game.

Q. I don't know if the final decision, Paul, you kind of mentioned maybe this was over before the game, sounded liked maybe there was still a possibility for postseason. If there is a possibility I'll ask, is it official that there is no postseason?

PAUL WEIR: I don't know yet, to be honest with you.

Q. If there is any possibility that there is postseason play beyond this in any tournament, would you guys want to go play in a tournament that possibly is a pay-for-play kind of tournament?

JOE FURSTINGER: I'll leave that up to Coach.

ANTINO JACKSON: No comment.

Q. I'll go ahead and continue where I asked them: Would you want to continue with this group of guys or is this more of a fitting end for what you guys went through?

PAUL WEIR: I wish it was a single question. There's a lot that goes into it; financially, logistically, arenas. There's a lot of different layers to it, and I haven't spent any time going through that. I know we have facility issues back home. I know there's financial considerations for different things. And I don't know, I'd have to go through those with Eddie and see what he thinks, and see if it even fits with all those other things. It's not really just the heat-of-the-moment kind of emotional thing right now.

Q. I know you're proud of your kids, press were raving about the execution of your team. But the Aztecs, you've played TCU, Arizona, Nevada, you played big-time tournament teams. How dangerous do you think San Diego State is moving on into the big dance?

PAUL WEIR: When I went to Mountain West Conference Media Days and I saw those guys walking around for the first time I thought to myself, This is an impressive-looking team. And I think the way their season started they showed tremendous potential. They had a couple of bad losses early. I think they had one to Cal, I think one to Washington State. If you eliminate a couple of those, they're better than Nevada. They are good.

I think they have the best center in the league. I think they have the best point guard in the league. And Trey Kell obviously think he could be the best two guard in the league. They have a tremendous group of players. They have great length and size. And Coach Dutcher, the way he managed his team and got through things, whatever they were going through to get to this point and playing at this time, you have to give him a lot of credit.

I said in the handshake he's coach of the year as far as I'm concerned, the way he managed this season and get his team playing well and get all those kids bought in. Their body language I think has changed drastically to what it was earlier, and you can see a different vibe about them.

We gave it our best shot. I would have loved to play the perfect game, because it would have taken that to probably get them. But capable, very, very capable basketball team.

Q. I want to ask you the same thing I asked the players about not having Pope or McDaniels out there late. You've probably watched tons of film on them, how surprised were you? You've been a

rookie head coach before, he's a rookie head coach in the biggest game of his career as a head coach. How much, for lack of a better term, balls does it take to make that move in that situation?

PAUL WEIR: You know, I thought Montana being in the game was actually a really slick move. It really allowed them to spread the floor in the ball screen coverage, we couldn't pack anybody in because they were doing a really good job of spreading the floor. Putting Kell on the ball screen and then they kicked out and Montana made the big three on the corner on the end one, as well. I think the Montana one was great.

Pope, to be totally honest with you, when he's not on the floor I'm happy as can be. He is such an impressive, physical specimen. Rooks was terrific, and played a great game. But to me, just watching Pope move around, I think he's the best center in the league. What some other people see, they must know a lot more than I do. I just think he's a very influential player on both ends of the floor.

So any minute he was out I felt was potentially beneficial. But at the same time Rooks was terrific. Dutcher is terrific, and their team did everything they needed to do to win.

Q. You just said so many great things about San Diego State and all their great players. What does it say about your team that you guys were six minutes away, you were right there with them basically the entire time. Talk a little bit about the heart and will and desire of your team.

PAUL WEIR: Yeah, it was pretty special. I told the guys in the locker room, I have a two-year-old, I don't know if that makes me a good dad or I a bad dad, but I get proud of my two-year-old. I'm just watching my two-year-old and interacting. I was proud of these guys. And I don't really have that emotion very often, not even just today, just the last six weeks or so they've made a lot of people believe. And I think in the process they even made themselves believe. And to do that in today's day and age is really hard.

I think even Dutcher will probably attest to how hard it was for him to get to this point. But to get a group of young men 19 to 22 years old to kind of form as a unit is a challenge. And it was amazing to kind of watch them do that. And I think there's power in that, and I think that's what allowed us to shrink the gaps between us and all these tremendous teams like San Diego State.

I'm happy for them that those things work and still matter and got to this point. I would have loved the feeling for them to obviously get it. But San Diego State was just too strong.

Q. I'm not sure if there's one play, obviously, that you can pinpoint or that there was, but to feed off the question about Montana, the three-pointer was big. He had a blocked shot and for a moment, your players almost looked briefly deflated. Was there ever a point in the waning moments that you have to remind them we're still in it? Did you notice any body language?

PAUL WEIR: No, we talked throughout the whole game. The last time we played them we finished the game on a 13-2 run. Let's keep going. Let's keep going. Eventually we'll be able to punch back in this thing.

I thought there were a couple of critical plays. Kell's deep three was a dagger. He made it over Joe from about 25 feet. I thought that was a big shot. Thought whether it was a charge call or not at center court on Watson, I thought that was a big play, because it could have gone from a charge at center court to him making a floater in the lane. And it seemed like all those kind of critical plays it could have gone one way or the other, whether it's a deep three or charge or whatever.

We had a couple of layups rim in and out. That just kind of happens in those games. Fortunately those plays went our way a lot this year. But tonight, to San Diego State's credit, they went their way.

Q. Going back to the question about you had an end-season turnaround. Can you comment on the way their character grew as young men, not just basketball players throughout the season?

PAUL WEIR: Yeah, incredible. And I learned a lot, myself, as a coach this year. You talk a lot about culture and the culture you want to instill in a program. And when I got here there was a culture I wanted to put in place. And there was a lot of things we had to do differently. And it's easy to do that in April through November when there's no games, there's no adversity, everyone is all in. They'll put on the "believe or leave" shirt, they'll do all that stuff April through November. But when you're 2 and 8 and 3 and 8, that shows a lot of resolve. And our culture was really challenged at that point. And fortunately we were able to work through it.

It was a bumpy road. There was unfortunately a lot of guys that had to go through some things to get where we wanted them, but really thankful they did, and they ended up getting to reap those rewards.

Q. At the eight-minute mark they had gone in a bit of a scoring slump, Makuach at 7:39 hit the bucket and you have a 7-point lead. I'd asked the guys at that point when you guys were in the huddles, and

you've referenced the Boise State game a lot and how things changed from that moment on and how you guys were in timeouts down the stretch, was tonight more of a Boise State timeout?

PAUL WEIR: I don't think so, because the Boise State was 28 seconds. The Boise State was really like a snapshot right at the end of the game with six or seven minutes to go that we're not even talking like that. We're just trying to keep the game going. Like I said, the last time we played them we finished on a 13-2 run. We kept saying, this is where we want it, this is hopefully where the game is going to continue to go. There was nothing that like that that came into my mind.

Q. Because you didn't have that 13-2 run, and you didn't close like you had done lately. Are you surprised that you weren't able to close out, that they did have the energy that you guys hoped they wouldn't? And do you have any regrets about sprinting on the day of the championship game, the day of the semifinal game, any regrets?

PAUL WEIR: No, I think you have to give Trey Kell credit. He made a 25-foot shot that was big and Montana made the and-one in the corner. They made some big plays, and unfortunately we just had a couple that so far this year in those games have gone down. The open looks, the layup around the rim, the charge at center court, those are kinds of things that if they go the other way we're not having that conversation. And those probably two or three plays in the stretch turn into a six-point run. Unfortunately in a game like this there's not a big swing. The game was going to be so tight anyways, when you give up a swing like that it's hard to come back from.