

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 14, 2024

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

Utah State Aggies

Danny Sprinkle

Great Osobor

Javon Jackson

Postgame Press Conference



Utah State 87, Fresno State 75

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to begin with Utah State. We have student-athletes Great Osobor, Javon Jackson, Coach Danny Sprinkle.

Just some thoughts on today's game, Coach?

DANNY SPRINKLE: I thought it was a great college basketball game. We knew Fresno State was going to come compete. Coach Hutson's teams, they play their butts off, and it's too bad because they've kind of been banged up and had a lot of injuries this year. But for that team to continue to fight, we knew it was going to be -- it would come down to the last eight minutes of the game, just like it did at their place.

I felt like our aggressiveness, especially in the second half, was much better. We got some open looks in the first half. We just didn't knock them down. The first 20 minutes of any tournament is the hardest. They had been on the court. They've played. They were in a lot more rhythm, and you could tell that in the first half.

I think they made five threes in the first half, and we were 0-for-8 or whatever, but I thought in the second half are Great and Javon got going in the first half and kept us in the game. We don't even come close to winning that game without Javon.

Fish, or Isaac Johnson, we call him Fish, he made some huge shots in that second half, as well as Darius and it kind of gave us just enough buffer. Any time we would get up by eight, they kept scrapping back. I mean, Isaiah Hill is a tremendous player and Pope. They have so many weapons and their athleticism, it's hard to keep them from

the rim without fouling.

Proud of our guys. When we had to get it done, just like we found ways all year, they kept finding ways to get it done.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Maybe a little closer than you would have liked tonight, but is that almost a good thing? This is the kind of game you're going to get the rest of the tournament.

DANNY SPRINKLE: Everyone seems to like it close. It drives me crazy, but they seem to like it close.

GREAT OSOBOR: It's the Mountain West, there's no teams in the Mountain West that we're going to come in and win. It's high-level basketball. We tend to thrive in close games. I'm glad -- I'm happy for our team's resiliency and the way that we stick together in close games.

Q. There were seven runs tonight of seven or more points between the two teams, and you guys found the latest and greatest one. What went into that overtime period and what worked out for you?

JAVON JACKSON: It's a testament to our whole season. We've been preparing for moments like that the whole season, close games and stuff, and executing at the end of games. I think that prepared us.

Q. Great, half your points were from free throws. How did you keep on drawing those fouls?

GREAT OSOBOR: Staying aggressive, being a physical player. If you play hard, the game will reward you, and today I felt like the game saw that I was just being aggressive, and I got some calls, so that's good.

Q. Javon, you really clutched up today. What do you think of your game today?

JAVON JACKSON: I think I played well, but I knew somebody had to come and pick it up because we were



missing Mason today. I decided to do that. The coaches have been telling me all season just be ready so, I was ready.

Q. Danny, with Great and Darius playing basically the full games, how do you manage that load, especially this early in the tournament? Then, Great, just where did you get that extra level to be able to push forward?

DANNY SPRINKLE: That's what players do. They don't want to come out of the game. We have media time-outs and plenty of time-outs. These guys have been playing a lot of minutes all year. They're accustomed to it. You can see when they come out of the game, they're pissed at me, and that's what I want.

We have to have them on the floor. They draw so much attention. You can tell by how many fouls Great drew tonight, and a lot of our offense is built to get it into there, to collapse teams and open stuff up for other guys.

GREAT OSOBOR: I feel like we've been preparing for this all year. During the summer we practiced really hard. I don't know if a lot of teams do that, but I do know that Coach Sprinkle's teams are going to practice hard in the summer. I think that prepares you for March in close games when you need to be out there, we're ready.

Q. Javon, can you talk a little bit about -- you mentioned you knew that Mason was going to be out, being prepared and coming off and giving that spark?

JAVON JACKSON: Just watching extra film, just staying locked in because I never know when I'm going to get in the game, but when I do, I know I have to make an impact. Extra film, extra shots and stuff. Just always staying ready.

Q. How old are you?

JAVON JACKSON: I just turned 22 today. My birthday is today.

GREAT OSOBOR: Birthday buckets for Javon Jackson today.

Q. For both the players, the overtime you just dominated things 17-5 in the overtime period. How did you lock in to just absolutely dominate in that overtime?

GREAT OSOBOR: I feel like obviously you don't want to have close games, but we like when the stakes are high. So we knew if we got into overtime, it was a 0-0 game. We got our jitters out of the way. They're a really good team, and they played yesterday, so they had momentum going.

At that point, okay, we had already played a full game now. 0-0. Go do what we do, you know.

JAVON JACKSON: We just knew we had to go take it in overtime. We were just prepared. As soon as we seen it was going to OT, we thought, yeah, we're fitting to take this and dominate.

THE MODERATOR: We'll let the student-athletes go at this time. Thank you, men. Questions for the coach.

Q. What has Fresno State done well against you guys the last couple of times you've played them to make it a game that you have to grind out?

DANNY SPRINKLE: They play hard. They're really athletic. It's a good team. They got really good guards that can create and get to the rim. As soon as they draw two -- they missed some shots tonight too. I thought they did a really good job hitting guys in the pocket and skipping it back side. Luckily for us, they missed a couple of those.

Just their aggressiveness and athleticism. It causes a lot of people problems.

Q. How much of an emphasis was it to get to the free-throw line tonight, draw a bunch of fouls, and how crucial was it that you were able to foul out a couple of them?

DANNY SPRINKLE: Yeah, that's our game plan every game. That's just the style that we play, and our players, that's kind of what we're built for, being aggressive and really trying to attack the paint to either draw fouls or get the ball to the rim and let guys play one-on-one.

It's been one of our strengths. We obviously missed some front ends, and we had chances to -- I wouldn't say put them away, but we had a chance to make it a seven-point lead, and we would miss the front end of a one-on-one and they would hit a three. Now all of a sudden it's a one-possession game.

Moving forward we have to clean it up at the free-throw line.

Q. You guys started out both halves and even overtime really well, but in the first and second half you kind of had a mid-half drought. What went into those where you let them back in in both halves?

DANNY SPRINKLE: They started making plays. We had some sloppy turnovers. I think it was the 12:00 mark to the 8:00 mark, that four-minute chunk in the first half, we keep track of what we call wars. There's five wars each half,

each four minutes. They outscored us by ten.

We won the other four wars in that first half, and it was still they were up by one I think at half because of that ten-point cushion they had in the four-minute span.

But a lot of it was just we missed some open shots during that, but we had some careless turnovers and some defensive miscues.

Q. Can you talk a little bit more about Javon? You mentioned the first half, but he had some big shots in the second half and not only --

DANNY SPRINKLE: And overtime.

Q. Also he got some rebounds and got a couple of steals?

DANNY SPRINKLE: He did. 50/50 plays he was all over it. I think we got -- he was the one that dove on and we called time-out, which was a huge play in the overtime.

Just proud of him. The joker just steps up, man. I told him a couple of weeks ago, every time he shoots, I feel like he's going to make it, and I really do. He just has great touch. He's just got -- when the moment is big, he is one of those guys that wants the ball.

Q. It seems like the team really turned on a switch in overtime. What were you telling them in the huddle before that?

DANNY SPRINKLE: Really just the same thing: We have to play harder. When you are playing Fresno State, you have to match their energy and their toughness. I think we jumped out to a 5-0 lead, I believe, in overtime. I think Javon may have hit the first three. Then I think I don't know if we got a pitch -- we got two free-throws or a layup. That was huge to just kind of settle our guys.

Then it really put the pressure on them any time they missed, we could kind of run some clock and really make them guard. But I didn't tell them anything I hadn't been telling them all game.

Q. Mason, how hurt is he? Is he going to be available tomorrow? When did you make that decision with Mason?

DANNY SPRINKLE: Right after pregame meal today I met with him, and he didn't think he could go today. He hasn't really practiced much all week. It's just kind of one of those we'll see how he feels tomorrow. He's been getting a lot of treatment on it, but I don't expect him to play tomorrow, to

be honest. I hope he does, but...

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Justin Hutson

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THE MODERATOR: For Fresno State we have student-athletes Isaiah Hill, Isaiah Pope, Coach Justin Hutson.

Thoughts on today's game?

JUSTIN HUTSON: That was a heck of a game. Obviously it didn't finish how we wanted. Couldn't be more proud of the student-athletes that we have, of the fight that they gave, the togetherness.

They talk about teaching life lessons through sports, but it really is because you have to fight through that adversity and come out and keep playing, keep confidence in yourself. I'm very proud. I just want to express a lot of gratitude to our student-athletes first. They understand.

I'm glad I had a chance to sit and talk to them before we came out here. With that being said, I've coached my last game here at Fresno State. I've talked to the administration. It's a mutual decision. My contract is up in April. I want to express gratitude to them, the previous administration, to the community. It's the right time. It's the right time.

I'll finish off through April.

I also want to express gratitude that I plan on staying on in a consulting role for a while after my contract is up, on a new contract and do whatever they want me to do and help however they want help. We've talked about that.

I just think I wanted to make that clear now and express gratitude to everybody that I've been around during these



six years. It was a lot of fun.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. For both of you, what has it meant to play for Coach Hutson?

ISAIAH HILL: It's meant a lot. Coach will definitely go down as my favorite coach I've ever played for. He just brings so much to the table as far as becoming a man off the court. He's just helped lead all these guys from the players to the staff. It's meant a lot to be able to get under his wing, learn the game, and become a better man.

I just want to give my thanks to Coach Hut as well.

ISAIAH POPE: I'm real appreciative of Coach Hut. He put a lot of trust in me. I put a lot of trust in him transferring over here for my last year.

It wasn't the season we wanted, but I learned a lot of lessons from him, and he taught me a lot of things as well. Like Zay said about not just basketball but just being a man and how to just take life and the ups and downs and things like that. Very grateful for him, of course.

Q. What was kind of the mindset, the message going into this game given how it went a couple of weeks ago?

ISAIAH POPE: Why not us? We had lost by 39 to Wyoming last week, and we beat them yesterday. We figured, why not we go beat the No. 1 team?

I think every player believed in that. I think every coach believed in that, and I think it showed all the way until overtime.

Q. There was seven runs tonight from either team of seven or more points. Just what went into that last one where you sent it into overtime?

ISAIAH HILL: We just didn't want it to be our last game, so we was going to fight regardless. I wouldn't want to go down with any other team. So it is what it is. The outcome



is what it is. We just went out there and fought, and that's why the run came.

Q. Coach Hut, it was a hard-fought battle from a lot of your players. Especially Leo Colimerio who was mismatched with a center on their team. Can you just talk a little bit about that?

JUSTIN HUTSON: Leo is an energy giver. He never has a bad day. So if somebody is up for a challenge that way against a player of the year and giving up all that weight and size, he would do it twice, right? He did it at home, and we came up a little short, and he did it again tonight. He's a tough guy.

Q. Closing out the season this way, just what are your thoughts on kind of Utah State and you guys going back and forth this time around same as last time?

JUSTIN HUTSON: Just a lot of gratitude to our guys. That was a heck of a ride. It was a close game. We had a shot. We gave ourselves a chance and moved forward.

Danny did a great job. His staff did a great job. They got a good team. Wish them well and move forward.

Q. Isaiah, talk to me about just the game as a whole. You came out after yesterday. I know you weren't happy with how you performed, and you were ready to go. I saw you before tip. You were just fired up for this game, and you went through and I thought you played an outstanding game. Just talk me through the game.

ISAIAH HILL: Yeah, you can't really think about yesterday. Today is a new day.

I knew when I was going to go out, if I went out today, I was going to go out with all I had. That was the mindset going in.

Q. Pope, talk to me about the small line-up. Because one thing that I like about the small line-up is you guys are actually a really good rebounding team out of the small line-up. You outscored them on second-chance points even though you are undersized at different positions. Talk about the battle in the post, because Hut had to switch it up when Leo picked up the fouls, and you had to guard the big kid.

ISAIAH POPE: It's a nice challenge, and I think the small line-up makes all of us go just an extra bit harder. Without Enoch or Eduardo in there, we don't have a real big in there. We all know it's a gang rebound, like Coach likes to call it, and we have to come in and help each other. I think

in a small line-up we really focus on that. I think it elevates all of our intensity and our aggressiveness.

Unfortunately, what comes with that is fouls, but I also agree with what you are saying with the small line-up. I think we did a great job with that making those adjustments.

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

Q. I'll ask you the same thing, Coach. What has it meant to you to be able to coach this team and bring these guys up?

JUSTIN HUTSON: Man, you spend a lot of time with those guys. Again, the word is really -- and it sounds cliché, but it's gratitude. To be put in that position to spend that much time and try to influence the young men to play harder and to learn these life lessons. You're proud of them because there was a lot of opportunities in life where you point fingers or quit. We've had some tough games. We've never quit, but we've had some tough games where it didn't go our way, and our energy was down, and we were able to talk about that. I thought we had pretty good energy the last two days.

Q. I was going to ask you that question. I thought the last two games you guys have played has really shown what Fresno State basketball is all about and what you kind of represent. Sprinkle was just talking about how preparing for you guys he knows you're going to play hard, you're going to play good defense, and you're going to do all the things that you want to see. Just talk to me when you walk into a tournament and it's a new season, that you kind of wipe the slate clean, what was your mindset coming into the Mountain West Tournament?

JUSTIN HUTSON: It was all Wyoming, to tell you the truth. I think my experience -- this is my 18th Mountain West Tournament, I believe. You do know that players are going on have to make plays, and it was with Dono and Pope scoring yesterday, didn't even know Donovan was going to play. Did not know how much I would play him. It was kind of a look-in-the-eyes type of thing. Everything was on a feel.

Really coming into this play, we don't have a lot of mantras besides we're going to play better than we played last time. I'm going to coach better. We're going to prepare better. You're going to play better and start with the process and not a lot of other stuff.

Q. Talk to me about your staff because you come in,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

and you're saying that this was your final game, and you're going to be on, but talk to me what the staff has represented for you because they've been with you from get-go, and they don't see all the behind the scenes type stuff?

JUSTIN HUTSON: Your staff is like your basketball family. I've got a lot of friends. I've got a lot of friends on staff. We lost Tarvish and Tim. They're still friends, and they were friends then. We brought more friends on staff who know a lot of basketball.

One of my favorite is sitting right in front of me, Nate Leal where everybody told me how great he was. You didn't plan on hiring the ops that you didn't know, and he was probably my best hire.

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