

# Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Wednesday, March 13, 2024

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

## New Mexico Lobos

## Richard Pitino

## Donovan Dent

## Tru Washington

### Postgame Press Conference

New Mexico 82, Air Force 56

THE MODERATOR: We have student-athletes Donovan Dent, Tru Washington. Coach, your thoughts on tonight's game? Are.

RICHARD PITINO: Loved our energy, loved our toughness, plus 20 on the glass. Loved the way we shared the ball. 21 assists.

I thought overall it was about as complete a performance as we've had in a while. I know it was the largest margin of victory in the history for us in the Mountain West Tournament, which is great.

All-around really good 40-minute effort, and it was good to be able to play some guys going into the bench a little bit because obviously we're trying to do what every other team is trying to do here and win three more. We know it's going to be hard, but it was great to be able to get this win tonight.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Just how much did the Air Force game a couple of weeks ago weigh on your mind going into this one, and how did it feel to get your get-back?**

DONOVAN DENT: A couple of weeks ago they kind of hurt us a lot. We didn't come in prepared and we took them for granted. This game we came in ready, prepared to do what we gotta do.

TRU WASHINGTON: Like he said, we took the first game for granted. This game we came in and got after it.



**Q. Obviously the competition will get a little tougher, but when you look at the way you were able to dominate in basically every facet of the game tonight, what does that do for your confidence going forward?**

DONOVAN DENT: I think it just builds momentum for us going into a strong game against Boise. We know what we have to do. We have to be physical. We didn't win against them in the regular season, so we know what we have to do to figure it out.

**Q. The Boise State matchup tomorrow obviously is the big one for you guys in a lot of ways. Not only did they sweep you guys, you guys probably need another good quality win to feel a little more comfortable about NCAA Tournament. What needs to change in the Boise State matchup?**

DONOVAN DENT: We just have to be more physical. They kind of bullied us the first two games this season. We know what we have to do: We have rebound and play hard and play together.

TRU WASHINGTON: After this game I feel like we're finally clicking. Going into the game we're going to have a better bond going into it, so we should get this win.

**Q. Based on this last matchup that you had with Air Force and just being able to make those types of differences, I mean, what do you think you'll be able to bring in from this game into the next game with Boise State?**

TRU WASHINGTON: Just our confidence, man. This first game we're just trying to get the rhythm. Going into the next game and just get the win.

DONOVAN DENT: I think this builds great momentum for us. Great first win. Getting day two, it would feel great.

**Q. This is for you, Tru. You haven't had a lot of games recently in the back half of the season, maybe the last month or so, where you scored 14. You had some of those in nonconference. I'm curious, when you got out there today, what was the difference, and what gives**



**you the mindset just to be aggressive in your role like you were in the second half tonight?**

TRU WASHINGTON: Just get on the court and play hard at all times. Even if it's going my way or not going my way, just go in there and just compete.

**Q. Another question for you, Tru. Obviously another great game today. You've had the opportunity for this year to learn under some great guards, like the guy next to you, like Jaelen House, Jamal Mashburn Jr. What are some of the things that you think helped you kind of have this great game today from what you have learned from that?**

TRU WASHINGTON: I will say it started at practice. Competing against them, they're making me better as much as I'm making them better. Just having confidence going into this game, honestly.

THE MODERATOR: We'll dismiss the student-athletes at this time. Questions for Coach.

**Q. The way you dominated the boards was impressive. They only had four offensive rebounds. The second chances, A, that you didn't allow them and the ones that you got set the tone and you were able to get out and run. They didn't get second chances. The offensive rebounds I thought was pretty good. Your thoughts?**

RICHARD PITINO: They switched everything, so they're going to have guards on bigs around the rim. You have to take advantage of it.

We had the size advantage. Our guys were battling their butts off on the glass. JT was terrific. Then it allows us to get out on the break, I mean, if we rebound the ball.

Like you said, we guarded them, and they missed 30 shots. We only allowed them to get four offensive rebounds, which was great. Physically a very, very good performance by our guys.

**Q. Rytis Petraitis had 16 points and 6 rebounds at the half tonight. What did you try to do differently in the second half to try to limit what he does?**

RICHARD PITINO: I mean, he had 26 points and 10 rebounds, so I don't know if we did anything well on him. He is really good, and he's really good at finishing around the rim.

We had, like, four or five and-ones that we've got to be better at, but he's one of the better players in the league,

and he just finds a way to not take bad shots to get to the rim, so a lot of that -- I thought we made him earn it, but a lot of it was him just being really good.

**Q. Obviously getting a lot of production on both ends of the floor from basically anyone on any given night is something that has helped you throughout this season, but how does that help in a tournament setting especially today and going into the rest of the tournament?**

RICHARD PITINO: It was good to be able to rest some guys. Mash is coming off of an illness, so he was winded. We were getting him in and out.

Jaelen played really, really well, but then we were up, and I wanted to keep him out. Donovan was playing pretty well offensively. I was trying to get him that 10th assist to see if he could do it. It was good to be able to not wear them down too much and still find a way to win the game.

**Q. A couple of the specialty stats that have coincided with your success and your struggles this year are points off turnovers and points in the paint. You guys 50 points in the paint and got back to 20-9 advantage in points off turnovers. Those are the two things that seem to bring you a lot of success. Was there something that you guys did going into this game that kind of focused on those two in particular?**

RICHARD PITINO: Well, we wanted to disrupt. I think if you let Air Force run their offense and you let them be comfortable, they can pick you apart. They've done it to us obviously in the past. We were really, really aggressive trying to turn them over.

Then we knew whenever we've been good versus Air Force, we've had to go inside because, like I said, they're going to switch everything, and they're going to be physical with you. We wanted to go inside. We wanted to get to the free-throw line. So credit to our guys to be able to go in there or throw it in there.

**Q. JT in particular inside shot 8-of-12 and hit a three too, but double-double for JT and his ability to kind of do that on a big stage again. I know this is the first round, but it is a tournament that he has never been in.**

RICHARD PITINO: Just remarkably consistent. Remarkably productive, and to do it missing three or four shots. Not a high, high volume guy by any means.

He's had a great year. I told our guys, I said it's been a really good year. Can we go make it a great year this week? And tonight was the right step in the right direction.

**Q. Boise State is the matchup. They swept you guys. Big and physical on the last one. You said you got bullied a little bit. I'm curious what you do to combat a bully and what you can do. They're the same size as they were when you played them both times in the regular season. What can you do to combat what they do?**

RICHARD PITINO: Just be more tough. Be more physical. Provide more resistance. Do a better job on Stanley and Degenhart. They were too comfortable st game. We have to keep Buzo off the glass. He hurt us. Everybody has to be ready. We've put ourselves in a position to go do something special.

23 wins is great, and we have to get some rest, lock in, see if we can get one tomorrow because Boise is a terrific team.

They're tough, and we've got to be tougher.

**Q. Just kind of along those same lines, Richard, you guys clearly have a competitive bunch. How eager are you to get another shot at Boise State?**

RICHARD PITINO: Well, eager to get some rest. I'm happy that we played great tonight. We'll go back and watch some film. We'll go play with amazing energy and spirit.

We've got some of the best fans in the world that love to turn this into Pit West. Hopefully they can do that. We have a high level respect for Boise. Well-coached, tough culture, have had a level of consistency that we're trying to build over time it. We've got to give them our best shot because they're really good.

**Q. One more: If you look at the way the game went tonight, Donovan Dent plays a tick over 30 minutes. You kept everybody else well under what they averaged. Did that go about as ideal as you would have wanted it to in those regards?**

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, I think so. Being able to get to the bench a little bit was great, and hopefully we'll have fresh legs tomorrow. You never know going into these games. You don't prepare for it. You just want to play great basketball.

We did that, and it was good to be able to sub some guys out and get them some rest.

**Q. You got off to a great start. How did that help fuel the way you want to play and the way you want to**

**disrupt?**

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, I thought we were ready to go. Like our guys said, we were really disappointed in the last one that we lost at our place. That one really, really stung.

To our guys' credit, they bounced back. They played unbelievably hard. They looked at themselves in the mirror and said, we didn't bring it that game. The coaching staff looked themselves in the mirror and said, we didn't bring it that game and did a much better job tonight.

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## Air Force Falcons

**Joe Scott**

**Rytis Petraitis**

**Beau Becker**

Postgame Press Conference

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THE MODERATOR: For Air Force we have student-athletes Beau Becker, Rytis Petraitis.

Coach, let's start with you and get your thoughts on tonight's game.

JOE SCOTT: I mean, I think obviously New Mexico is a very, very good basketball team. They've had a really good year. They have very good players. They're well-coached.

We knew they were going to obviously be ready to play. We went down to The Pit, whatever it was, a few weeks ago and won down there. That's what makes league play league play. It makes league play so intense, and that's what makes like what I just said to our guys, that experience, gaining that experience, learning those things, if it's really important to you, you learn from it, and you learn how intense it is.

You learn that you're in a league where you're playing a team where, I don't know, it looked like we were in New Mexico today. You know, give credit to them for that. Well, that's who New Mexico is, and that's the experience.

We're playing in that league and in that environment, and I can say another however many teams that are in this league with those kinds of fans, and that's what makes this league such a good league, and that's why this league as we keep going forward here, you know, there's five, six NCAA teams, seven NCAA teams. That's something special, man.

That's the experience we're getting. That's the experience



we're having. It's only experience if you are mature enough to look at it that way and fuel your decisions going forward to say, okay, we're going to rise to that challenge, because that's the challenge in this league.

So you give them credit. They're ready to play. House was all over the place being House. Big time. Dent, you know, he's a really good player. First half, turnovers. Turnovers, offensive rebounds. That's the game right there.

Second half we did a better job, but then as that occurs, 1-for-12 as we only have two turnovers from three.

In the end they played really well. I know we can play better, but you have to give them credit for playing extremely well across the board.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Guys, after we talked, I think it was after the Colorado State game, about the losses getting closer, becoming more competitive, just going from that to a loss like tonight, how frustrating is that?**

RYTIS PETRAITIS: Yeah, it can be frustrating. I think mostly our offense is what led to those transition buckets and the turnovers, like Coach said. That can really kill you and go on those kill runs. When you go on a 10-0 run, it's hard to come back from that. We need to learn how to mature and just be the players that we want to be and just stop those runs. That's something we need to get better at.

BEAU BECKER: I think we've shown we can compete. We had a win against them at their place. It's unfortunate we couldn't get that energy tonight. But it is frustrating knowing that we can compete and we didn't show it tonight.

**Q. They had 26 points off turnovers in Clune, 7 points off turnovers in The Pit. Then tonight they get it back to 20. They're a team that seems to feed off the points off turnovers. Not just getting turnovers, but actually turning them into points. What do you guys see on the floor in the difference between when they're not doing**



**it and when they are, like tonight?**

RYTIS PETRAITIS: I mean, every single game they played the same way. It's just that it's the way we handled the ball. We just rushed. We weren't in our heads. We made bad passes. We tried to make everything back in one play when they did get a steal. It's something we need to work on is staying in control and run our thing and do our thing and listen to what Coach has to say.

BEAU BECKER: I think also, too, that it's about running our offense, being able to make the right decision every time. I know House is someone that feeds on turnovers. He feeds on playing fast, and he got involved tonight. He was able to get all of his players involved off of that. That's what led to that, so...

**Q. Lowest win total for Air Force in a full season since '01, '02. After such a rough year, how confident are you two that you can become a more competitive team in this league?**

RYTIS PETRAITIS: Well, we're a young team. If you look at every other team in the league, they all have all these fifth-year seniors. I feel like that's just some confidence we have. We've played together as a team for three, two years together now, and we have that chemistry and that bond that a lot of people don't have. Especially being at the Academy.

We've showed that we can play. It's just we've got to work in the offseason, get stronger, do what we do, and eventually hopefully we'll get back to where we are.

BEAU BECKER: I think with no seniors, it looks like all of us will be back. We'll have the same amount of -- same starters, same people to work with. It will be the same team, and we'll just get more experience from that.

**Q. Going off of what you guys just said, no one is graduating, no seniors on this team. Despite this not being the result you guys wanted, all the experience will help you guys more next year. What are your goals going into 2024 -- or 2025, I mean?**

RYTIS PETRAITIS: Personally one of my goals is to get stronger and just kind of work as a team and just play how we played when we beat UNLV and New Mexico. Just play that way, move the ball, shoot really well, and just get stronger. That's something we need to do is get stronger because the offensive boards is going to kill us.

I think we need to focus on getting stronger and just work at it.

BEAU BECKER: I would say the same thing too. Just getting stronger. We've done a lot in the weight room this year, but we need to do a lot more. Me being an undersized five in this league, I get pushed around a lot. That's something I need to be better at is being more stronger.

**Q. In addition to being stronger, what else do you think this team needs to be more competitive, whether that's another big body in the paint, getting quicker, just working on certain aspects of your game? What do you think this team lacks that it can gain?**

BEAU BECKER: I think we have a lot of people on the bench that can step up and hit shots. We had a lot of open shots that we missed tonight. Myself included.

I think being able to have guys that will step up. I know someone that stepped up this year is Byron Brown. Having not played before, he stepped into a big starting role for a lot of the season. Having guys like that will step up and score points for us because what it comes down to a lot of times is making an open shot. That's something we can.

RYTIS PETRAITIS: I feel like maybe discipline. Just running our stuff and not getting out of hand when doing our own thing. We usually turn the ball over somehow, and so just being disciplined and mature and running our offense.

**Q. I wanted to ask you a question. JT Toppin is a freshman, and he had 20-something in Clune. Tonight he had 18 and 11. What do you see in what JT Toppin is able to do and how he is able to get so many offensive boards in particular?**

RYTIS PETRAITIS: He's a great player, great freshman. You can tell how hard he works in the paint. He got two fouls on me in the game today. Just gained position.

It's frustrating. He is a big body. He is strong, and he has a lot of potential. Just those offensive boards, he's just stronger than us sometimes and gets better position, and we just have to work at being better in that, but yeah, he is a great freshman.

BEAU BECKER: It's hard to guard him when he is on the block because he is a lefty, and not a lot of guys are lefty down there. I see a lot of potential in him also and just a lot of physicality and working. He'll work for offensive rebounds. He'll work for rebounds, and he will get -- run in transition. He's really athletic and really strong, so he is a good player.

THE MODERATOR: We'll dismiss the student-athletes at this time. Questions for Coach.

**Q. Let me start with that.**

JOE SCOTT: He has a maturity to him, the Toppin kid. He doesn't have highs and lows. He doesn't play like he is a freshman. There's a certain maturity. He is playing with some older guys, which that always helps. Those guards, they've been around and played a lot of games.

But what I notice from him is just sort of that type of -- he is just always like this. He knows who he is. He's got a game, he sticks to his game. That's how they played today as a team. That's why they played really well. They've sort of played to their individual strengths.

I think he's done that all year, and he seems to be getting better at that too.

**Q. The points off turnovers that I asked them about, House in particular, he's a guy that feeds off of it and when he gets going, maybe they get going. Maybe it's all intertwined. Why were you guys able in The Pit to keep them from turning turnovers into points and in Clune and here you were not able to?**

JOE SCOTT: Obviously we talked about that at length with our guys, whether it was film, practice. Just the differences between the two games.

We said, here, look, turnover, lead-outs. Like you said, they go directly to points. Then offensive rebounding. Those were the two things. That was our focus, and the reason is because when they play well, that's sort of the way the game goes.

Obviously when we play well, that's not the way the game goes, and it's really about your consistency as a team in that approach. How often are they able to make the game sort of be like that. That is the game, the back and forth. When they play that way, they're going to be really good.

That's the game. That's the nature of the game there. You have to win that game. Nope, you're not going to do that. We're not going to turn it over. Like I said second half I think there was 7:49 to go, timeout, and I was, like, all right, guys, we have two turnovers. The score was 20-11 in the second half, and we were 1-for-12 from three. Wide-open shot.

It's like those three things. It starts with the turnovers. Good offensive possessions. You have to make that shot to put some pressure on them. Tonight to their credit, we were never able to have the game be that way, and

therefore, there was never any pressure put on them.

**Q. We've talked a lot this year about struggles with opposing big men. Whether that's someone on the bench, someone at the prep school, anyone else, are you confident that you guys might be able to get a big body down there that might be able to neutralize some of these guys any time soon?**

JOE SCOTT: I think no matter what, I know for a fact we got better as the year went long and went down to The Pit the last time and were good there. We were down the stretch interior defense. We were bad early in the league.

We ran into Osobor right off the bat game one. Like, who is this cat? Oh, he is the player of the year. So right off the bat. That happened with every one of these teams.

Every team in this league, they got that. We got much better at it. So whether we get a big guy, it's not a one-guy type thing. For us it's a five-guy type thing. We have to be better inside that way. We have gotten that. Part two is the rebounding. You have to finish that possession.

Obviously you saw 51 playing out there. Wes, he has been playing. Like I said to Wes and the team, in the grand scheme of things, Wes isn't ready to play in the Mountain West at this level or whatever it is.

Did he get better this year? Did he do things that made me look at him and say, Wow, this kid is coming along? There's a big difference between coming along and say, Get in there and play against these cats. Big difference.

But he made progress, which is the number one first thing, and now to what these guys just said, we're going to have a postseason program, and it's going to be about having that drive, that intensity.

There's got to be an intensity and a drive based off these experiences. You play here, if you don't have this intensity and you're not driven to get better, to get stronger -- you have to acknowledge, this is the playing field. This is the level of competition.

When you are mature, you look at that. I got that experience? I'm doing something with that experience. That's what Wes has to do. If Wes goes and does that, if we do that as a team, Wes, number 51, he will be way better. Will the day come? Probably going to take more than one more. You know what I mean?

But will the day come where we have a 6'11", 7-foot guy who is 21 years old and strong -- but it's only going to happen if he uses this experience to motivate him, to fuel

him, to be that driven. It's that important to him.

We have to get that across the board. We have to get that. It's like a mentality. We have to get that across the board, but he's definitely a guy like that, and we have another one, Caleb Walker is 6'9". Okay, we're going to see. That's why I say, our place is a 47-month place. We have to get 47-month guys. When we do, we'll have the answer to that question.

**Q. With how the season went, how confident are you that you are going to be able to retain most of you guys' underclassmen?**

JOE SCOTT: I don't even -- I don't think -- I've moved on to what our postseason program is. What's our postseason program? What's it entail? It's fueled by here's the competition. They got 23 and 24-year-olds. It doesn't matter. They're playing. You got to be just as strong. You've got to acknowledge that and hopefully like I just said, that fuels guys to say, you know what, I'm playing at this level. This is one of the best leagues in the country. This is one of the top five leagues in the country. This league is going to have six teams in the NCAA Tournament.

If you're not driven by that, if you're not fueled by that, then you know what, you can go do something else. Listen, I know how I am. I'm a competitor. I'm trying to compete at the highest level. It don't get much higher than this league.

Hopefully that's going to answer that question.

**Q. Rytis Petraitis had 26 points, 10 rebounds. Obviously it wasn't the result you wanted today. What have you seen from Rytis throughout this season and do you think going into next season he could have an even more expanded role offensively?**

JOE SCOTT: No question. No one knows, Rytis had surgery last season. He didn't play basketball for nine months. He never played with our guys. From April 27th of last year until December or November 25th was the first time he got on the court and played with his teammates.

Now throw that out at our team and who we are and the kind of team we have to be now, hopefully Rytis is healthy, and he doesn't have another surgery, but I know this, that offseason, postseason guys keep playing together. He wasn't in the weight room with our guys last -- okay. Is everybody going to be in the weight room doing this offseason program? That's how a guy like him, he just keeps growing.

I think to his credit, he used the word "discipline," and it's

really just, how is Air Force going to win? What do we have to do?

One, we have to get stronger. That's front and center. But then part B is the understanding of, yeah, we're getting stronger for one reason, to be so disciplined in how we do things because that's got to be our greatest strength against this competition in this league, and that's why there's a maturity that's required to sit there.

I think he gets that. He does, he'll keep growing and then the answer to that question, I know, is his ceiling is going to keep going up. Then our teams will as well.

**Q. When you talk about the strength of the conference and depth of the conference, how different is that part of the equation from 20 years ago when you did turn the corner?**

JOE SCOTT: What's different is the strength of the conference could be the same just in terms of, yeah, three of eight teams got in back then. Now it's 11. The whole environment in college basketball has changed, so these teams don't get young. The thing about this league is the top has stayed the top. I think the top is going to stay the top right now because nothing is changing next year with fifth-year guys and sixth-year guys.

I know going forward they're not recruiting 18-year-old kids. We have to take 18-year-old kids. There's an immaturity that comes along with being 18 years old, and every other team in this league is going out and getting a junior from another college who has played. They go get Division II guys that played four years, four full years.

The experience and the maturity that comes with that, that's why this league has gotten really good. Whatever the changes in the environment are, which we know are immense in college athletics across the board -- some football coach was talking on Capitol Hill yesterday about it. You know what I mean? The football coach is talking about how different college athletics is. I know in this league what's happened is the schools in this league, because of who they are, they're great venues. New Mexico, San Diego State. They have a history of basketball being important. These are basketball schools in this league.

Now they've done a really good job of taking advantage of the changing environment. They've done a great job of going out and being ahead of the curve and having places where, you know what, people want to go. A transfer might want to go to Boise State. They want to go to San Diego State. These are great programs. Now you say, there's six teams coming out of this league, there's five teams last

year?

That's where I think the difference lies is nobody gets young. They're not coming out here next year, and we're not going to see a team playing next year with four freshmen. Never going to happen again. Never going to happen again.

So then, therefore, these teams stay up here because they're replacing someone who leaves with a 22-year-old, with a 21-year-old, with a guy who has already played. You know how much you mature?

Everybody knows how much you mature in your freshman and sophomore. I played two years somewhere else, and I might have gone to a prep school before that, and now I'm 21, and I played 65 college basketball games, and I played for a pretty good coach somewhere, and I was in that league over there, and I got ten a game. That guy, he's so far ahead of an 18-year-old freshman. It's ridiculous.

I think, you know what, this job, the coaches in this league, the schools in this league, they have done a great job of taking the environment and going with it and we got really good teams and really good coaches and really good players in this league. That's what this league is right now. I don't see it changing.

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