

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Wednesday, March 13, 2024

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

Colorado State Rams Coach Niko Medved Joe Palmer Isaiah Stevens

Postgame Press Conference

Colorado State 72, San Jose State 62

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to begin with Colorado State. We have student-athletes Isaiah Stevens, Joe Palmer, Coach Niko Medved. Your thoughts on tonight's game, Coach?

NIKO MEDVED: It's a new season, new time of year. Everyone has life. Everyone is excited, and I tell you what's interesting, Isaiah and I were just talking about this too. You prepare, and all of a sudden when you walk into the arena here, conference tournament, you feel it right away, right? It just feels different. Just the vibe, the intensity, the nerves start to come a little bit. It's what makes it awesome.

You know it's going to be hard. Coach Miles is going to have them prepared. We struggled to make a few shots early. They're a great attacking team. I thought our guys showed a lot of grit, man. We dug in.

This young man right here made some just enormous shots are tonight when we absolutely had to have them. Then I thought down the stretch in the last five or six minutes our guys executed beautifully. We made some big shots. We got the stops when we needed to. That's what you have to do. You have to find a way. All these games come down to the last four minutes, and our guys found a way to get the job done.

Everything is a one-game season right now. It's survive and advance. We were able to do that today, and then we'll get ready for tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. Questions for the student-athletes first.



Q. What kind of turned the tide for you guys at the end of both halves when you got your biggest runs of the game?

ISIAH STEVENS: I think it started on the defensive end. Just stringing together multiple stops at a time. It's a really good offensive team in San Jose. They also shoot a lot of threes, so chasing and getting in rotation is what they prey on. We were able to kind of string together a few stops and that kind of led to some runs offensively.

Q. Does this game highlight to you the benefit of having a mature veteran team, being able to do those things in the key moments?

JOE PALMER: Yeah, for sure. Practice and games are a lot easier when you have guys like Isaiah Stevens, Joel Scott, Pat Cartier, Nique Clifford, and all those guys where you come in every day and you can't help but smile because they always got your back even when you are struggling.

They come in every day and believe in you and still pass you the ball telling you to shoot it and whatnot. That gives you confidence and belief even when you don't have it in yourself sometimes. I have to give it to my teammates and my coaches for that. It's awesome.

Q. Joe, what's going through your head when that first shot falls because I think you're 2 of 18 from three since January?

JOE PALMER: Yeah. I think, honestly, it was just like thank God. Finally a little bit. I've been kind of texting a couple of my coaches all week, you know, it's March, anything can happen. I have a lot of friends texting me. Kind of just saying that to myself before the game. It's March. Anything can happen.

I was just, like, about time. It's about time.

Q. Then for both of you guys. With the game tight, Nique Clifford had a really big block in the closing minutes and kind of swung the game. What can you



say about his impact in this one?

ISAIAH STEVENS: One of the best defenders in the league. He makes plays timely all the time. He is super active with his hands. As you saw, he can go make plays at the rim, and we needed that stop right there.

We were trying to tell him to continue to look to be aggressive rotating when guys are driving with their head down a little bit.

JOE PALMER: Yeah, Nique made two of the biggest plays of the in the game. And like Zay said, he is so valuable because of his defensive abilities and stuff.

So it was great. I was jumping for joy when he got that block, and then he came down and hit the three. It was awesome.

Q. Isaiah, what do they do defensively that kind of really makes that challenge to get going, get flowing?

ISAIAH STEVENS: I think a lot of it just has to do with the effort. They play extremely hard. They're well-prepared. They know what you're going to run.

Honestly they do a good job of helping each other and just scrambling and competing. A lot of it is honestly just that. They do some things also schematically that kind of puts you in a little bit of a bind if you're not prepared for it.

I feel like we handled it in different parts of the game really well.

Q. What was it like for you watching Joe hit those and kind of get the team going?

ISAIAH STEVENS: Man, it's exactly what we needed. We were struggling a little bit from some other areas, and Joe just came in just ready to compete, ready to fight, ready to do whatever the team needed. Honestly we don't get that win without his performance today.

Q. Can you guys describe what you were feeling pregame while you were waiting for your turn to hit the court?

JOE PALMER: For me it was just my mind was very clear. Everyone kind of understands what's going on. You kind of hear the outside noise, but when you get into the arena and stuff, you kind of block out all the outside noise and just really are focused on what you are doing, game plan and what not.

That was what was going through my head. Just clear

emptiness, and I think I have to do that more because it worked out pretty well.

Q. You mentioned the outside noise and that it's March. How much is that on your mind what could come next and what could have happened today? Were you thinking about that when the game is tight late that you are playing not only for tomorrow, but for next week as well?

ISAIAH STEVENS: Honestly we're just trying to win the game. In those moments your mind kind of goes blank, similar to what Joe said. You kind of black out everything that's going on around you, and we'll worry about everything else when the game is over.

But this was a huge win for us, and I'm looking forward to tomorrow.

Q. Joe, you said you kind of got a smile on your face when that first shot went down. Is there technically a time when you don't have a smile on your face?

NIKO MEDVED: Oh, yeah. I'll ask that one later.

JOE PALMER: Coach loves to tell -- I wear my emotions on my sleeve, and it's very true. I've been trying since I got here to be better at not being so high and low and staying more even-keel.

It's hard not to smile when you have games like this and you are here doing all this stuff, so yeah, I'll keep it on my face for the time being.

Q. Your level of next-level speed, I guess how much does that play into your confidence and your get-go regardless of the kind of effort the other team is putting in? Is that a comfort level of having that kind of speed?

ISAIAH STEVENS: I wish we could tell some of my teammates that. They don't believe I'm that athletic. I use it as one of my superpowers. I'm not as big or as strong as a lot of these guys, so I try to use my quickness and change of pace to create angles, put pressure on the paint, and create opportunities for myself and my teammates.

At times it is almost like a bail-out in some ways and it keeps some defenders honest, which as an offensive player, that's really what you are trying to create is an advantage for yourself.

Q. Quick turnaround with the game tomorrow. Have you guys allowed yourself to appreciate the fact that you have probably secured an NCAA Tournament bid?



JOE PALMER: I mean, that sounds pretty cool to me. Coming from where I come from, the NCAA Tournament is what every young kid dreams of and everyone playing at this level.

I mean, like Zay said, we've been focused on just 40 minutes at a time, those games, that one game, so we were focused on San Jose State today. We focus on Nevada tomorrow.

I mean, if that's what people are saying, if that's what's going to happen, that's pretty cool, so...

Q. You have a matchup with Nevada tomorrow. Obviously a really hot team. Lost a couple of tight games to them. What are your thoughts going into this matchup?

ISAIAH STEVENS: It's going to be ultra competitive. They've got a lot of players over there that can make plays. Some really good shooters, some tough inside guys. We know it's going to be a battle. They're hot right now, so I'm really excited for what tomorrow is going to bring, but it's not going to be easy by any means.

JOE PALMER: I'm just excited for the opportunity to go out there and compete, get another chance with my teammates here. Fifth-year senior, so any time I can get on that court and compete against anyone, whoever it is, I'll be ready to go.

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

Q. Coach, Joe, just what was -- obviously his skill, but also that kind of personality mean in that locker room and kind of what he brings to you guys?

NIKO MEDVED: Joe is one of one, and I mean that in a very endearing way. I love him to death. He's an unbelievable human being. He would give himself to help anybody in any situation. He's an emotional guy.

Help him work through that a little bit has been good. He laugh about it. But I love the positive emotion and energy. That stuff just helps our guys like crazy. It pumps our guys up. It's just him learning the adversity part.

He's just an exceptional young man. I just know how much it means to these guys. You have to understand, guys like him and Pat and Joel Scott that come from lower levels and get an opportunity to do this, I know how much it means to these guys to have an opportunity to compete at this level and have success.

Q. Have you guys -- obviously offense hasn't been fully firing for a little bit, so you've been in a lot of these grinder type games. Does that almost provide some comfort that guys know how to play in this?

NIKO MEDVED: I love how you were kind of trying to figure out the right adjective. I could give you another one.

When you look at it, though, what did we shot? We shot -- we had 42 points in the paint. We ended up 53%. We made some timely threes when we had to.

All in all we ended up our offensive efficiency was good, but, yeah -- but we've defended, and I'll say it out loud. I mean, I think these last three games have been tough for a lot of reasons. You know the competition is good. The teams are going to be well-prepared.

Everybody knows what's on the line even though they don't want to talk about it. But we won them. We found a way to win. That's what you have to do this time of year.

I'm looking forward to tomorrow. I know our guys are going to be ready to compete, and it's going to be a heck of a game.

Q. We touched on it a little bit, but the block by Nique and the dunk by Joel and Nique hits a corner three a couples plays later. Just finding sequences like that in a tight game down the stretch, just what does that mean to you as a coach to pull it out?

NIKO MEDVED: That's how you win; it's what you have to do. We've been well-prepared because it's been that way all year in the Mountain West. Look at the games. Not just our games, but across the league this year.

Again, the games come down usually, right, to the last four or five minutes, and it's about making plays.

A key block, a key rebound, a timely shot, you know, sticking your nose in there and getting a steal. You name it, and Nique made two enormous plays.

I think what you have to do is you have to get over the ups and downs in the game and just live in the moment. No matter what happened before, what's happening, make the next right play, and those were absolutely two huge plays, but he has done that a lot this year for us.

Q. I know we've talked a lot about what Joe did and what Nique has done, but Joel Scott was very powerful when you got him the ball. How big of an impact did he have especially getting the spots that he had?

NIKO MEDVED: I mean, he's been like that now for a while. It feels like every game you're looking at him, and he is doing the same thing. He's got great hands. He's physical. He's hard to keep the ball from in the post because he's got great hands like that and seals so well.

It's been huge for us. And his defense has been elite too. Just the way he can move his feet, guard bigger guys, guard smaller guys. It's really a skill that -- you see it in the box score, but there's so many things that he brings that don't show up in the box score.

Q. You did suggest there are times that Joe is not smiling. Could you share when those might be?

NIKO MEDVED: I wouldn't be -- let him have his moment here right now. Yes, I can. Just like me. There's sometimes I'm not smiling too, Mike. You work down the hall from me, and you see that too.

Q. (No microphone.) Have you allowed yourself to reflect on this moment and then what it means even though you have the quick turnaround?

NIKO MEDVED: I don't want to get -- like for this guy here and again these guys, especially the guys, I care about these guys so much I want it so bad for them. I just know how much it means to them to just obviously play here right now, but hopefully have a chance to play because that's what all these kids dream about. That's what they dream about.

So they've given us. They give me everything I ask of them every day, no questions asked. They fought so hard through the ups and downs. I want it really bad for them. It is big, you know what I mean?

Now I'm over that, and I'm going to go beat Nevada tomorrow, right? That's what I want to do.

Q. Off of that, what are some of the keys? I know you'll have to get into it tonight, but you play two tight games.

NIKO MEDVED: We go back and look, and they're playing so well right now. They're terrific. The thing that people don't talk about with Nevada is their defense. They're long. They're tough. They're interchangeable. They can switch. They're playing with a ton of confidence. They get fouled a ton.

Obviously they've got great shooters starting with maybe the best shooter in the country starting with Jarod Lucas. We've been in some tight games with these guys like that,

and our guys have proven that we can beat anybody, and it's going to be a highly competitive game.

I'm looking forward to finding a way to bring our best tomorrow at 6:00.

Q. Obviously it's no surprise that San Jose State came out and gave you guys a fight here today. How do you feel that this is an overall reflection of the level of competition in this conference and how well you guys have been able to play against it all year?

NIKO MEDVED: I keep talking about it. Everybody does. I just keep going back to the last Saturday of the regular season we beat Air Force. I'm sitting there watching these last two games. There are still five, six seeds that have to be decided.

A couple of other plays happened, and San Diego State gets the 6th seed, And there's a great chance they have a lower seed in our tournament than they would have in the NCAA Tournament. If that doesn't sum up, right? I've been in this league for a long time as an assistant, head coach, the level of play that to me that sums it up in a nutshell on what we're playing for and the level of play in this league.

It's been awesome, and I think you're going to see that pay off here on Sunday.

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San Jose State Spartans

Coach Tim Miles

MJ Amey, Jr.

Alvaro Cardenas

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THE MODERATOR: San Jose State. We have student-athletes MJ Amey, Alvaro Cardenas. Coach, let's get your thoughts on tonight's game?

TIM MILES: A hard-fought game. I thought it came down to a few plays, some timely shooting by Colorado State. We didn't shoot the three well, but we competed well.

That's the one thing about this team is they really haven't got a break all season. There's been injury, illness, you name it. To see them battle tonight made me very proud to be their coach. I'm so gratified to watch them go out and be in this game.

I think that they proved to a lot of people that we're elevating San Jose State basketball where it should be.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. The energy and the pace was off the charts in a sense. When it comes to the last couple of minutes of the game where the plays really count, how much does that either diminish or affect the effectiveness of you guys knowing all the effort you put out for the 40 minutes you each played and the last difference was probably the last couple of minutes? How would you say -- how do you sort of account for that? You guys are going after it the last couple of minutes, and that's where the difference of the game was in that sense. Was it being tired, or is it just knowing that you have to do what you do?

ALVARO CARDENAS: I think we struggled this year a little bit playing 40 minutes, the whole game. I mean, at



the end of the game anything can happen. They just made more shots, played a little bit better. I thought we had really good effort except for maybe four minutes at the end of the first half, and they were just better at the end of the stretch, and they got the win.

I'm proud of how the team competed, and I think it was one of our most complete games in terms of effort and intensity.

Q. For MJ or Al, you guys showed a lot of fight and played with a lot of heart, competed throughout the whole game. What did you like from your teammates tonight?

MJ AMEY, JR: For me specifically, like I told our guys in the locker room after the game, just the fight they give because it wasn't an easy season at all, and it's easy for us -- at any point of the season it could have been easy for us to look at the record and let that define us, but I tell people all the time when we talk about our team that our record doesn't define us because we'll give your -- whatever team you put out there, we'll go to the end with them. We're going to fight until the end.

That's why I love these guys, and it was fun to go and compete, go to practice every day. I was really proud of them because we talk about A-plus mindset, and we had that mindset today. I felt that from just the first tip, and that's what even then makes this game fun. It's unfortunate that we ended up on the wrong end.

Q. This can be for either Cardenas or MJ. Isaiah Stevens struggled from the field. He finished 4 of 11. He didn't get to double digits until the last bit of free throws. What was the game plan going into there and making him struggle a little bit offensively at least to get his points up?

ALVARO CARDENAS: Yeah, we tried to -- we read all his ball screens, just kind of trapped him and tried to get the ball out of his hands. He's a really, really good player.

Even though he didn't shoot it that way, he still ended up with a double-double, ten assists. He impacts the win in so



many different ways.

Yeah, our game plan was just try to get the ball out of his hands and make other guys make plays.

Q. MJ or Alvaro, how would you evaluate Latrell Davis off the bench tonight? He's been really hot down the stretch towards the regular season, and he kind of came out and just did his thing here tonight. Double digit scoring again off the bench. Evaluate his performance and what he has done here for your group down the stretch this season.

MJ AMEY, JR: Man, like I said, Latrell is on go, and that's what he we need him to be. When he has the mindset to attack and just to have an attack and aggressive mindset on both ends of the floor, he does great things for us. You guys witness it, you know, during these games, but it starts in practice.

We kind of -- I challenge him just to be consistent every day, and not even just the results, but his mindset. If you have the same mindset every day, then the results are going to happen. Good things going to happen. We've been needing a spark off the bench, and for him to bring us that, it's been making it able for us to stay in games and compete too. It gives us the energy boost as well.

Q. What are your guys' thoughts on -- obviously the season was a difficult one, but as far as the effort and the character you guys showed, what are some of your thoughts and feelings going into offseason or next season? If you can share anything like that.

ALVARO CARDENAS: Yeah, in terms of our effort this season I'm glad and kind of proud that guys just didn't put their head down and we just gave up. We've had some bad games, but I think we've been for the most part close in almost every game, so that's a good sign.

Then for this offseason we just have to work harder and keep improving. We had a lot of freshmen this year, so obviously those guys got to step up and work out this summer and get better.

Like you said, Latrell is a good example of that. He figured it out towards the end of the year. We just need everybody to kind of step up and just try and understand what we're trying to do here.

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

Q. You guys showed a lot of passion on defense and forcing a lot of turnovers very early on in the game.

You guys kept it consistent throughout the whole game. What was the scheming? What did you like from your guys defensively during this matchup?

TIM MILES: We just felt we needed more pressure, ball pressure or more aggressive in our screen and roll coverages and post doubles.

I thought for the most part we were pretty good that way. They still shot well, but I thought we took away a lot of opportunities, and they never really got on a good roll. So I liked our intensity and our edge.

Q. Talk about going up against Niko Medved, obviously a good friend of yours, Back to your Fort Collins days. You as a head coach and him as an assistant and now coming full circle here: Season on the line; High-leverage game in March. What was it like going up against him in that moment?

TIM MILES: Well, I hated it when they scored out of time-outs, and I took that personally. Like, oh, you got me.

Niko is an outstanding coach. It was always evident from the get-go when we worked together at CSU and even before that that he was going to be highly successful and he was going to be a good head coach too.

We were really fortunate and we kind of took over CSU when it was in a difficult place and we were able to elevate it. He has taken this to a whole new level.

So impressive to see how well the Rams fans have traveled. I think that's the thing that I noticed the last two games down at Clune Arena in Colorado Springs, how many CSU Ram fans and here today. I think that's a mark of that commitment from the community and how engrained that coaching staff and that team is in that community. That says a lot about them.

Q. Obviously there's a lot of factors that go into the game, whether it's a win or loss there, but talk about what looked like from my perspective at least the potential goaltending when it was at 56 of 58. Do you think there was any type of a switch of momentum there after...

TIM MILES: Can it go one way or another on a call? That's a tough call. Did I think it was the wrong call? Of course. I bet Niko thought it was the correct call. That's just the way it goes.

We have great officiating in this league. That's hard to say, too. We have great officiating in this league, and we needed a break, and then when the break doesn't go your

way, how can we do it?

I probably stayed in one-three-one just one possession too long, right, and they banged that corner three. You know, that's something I would live with. I thought we were doing a pretty good job in it, and it had been successful for us in the first half and at their place.

They made plays, and Clifford is a great addition to that team. His length and athleticism, the things committee do driving the ball, blocking shots. He had a big block.

And then Joel Scott is a physical presence for them with some athleticism that they hadn't had previously too. Two really good additions.

Q. Myron Amey had a break-out season this year. Can you just speak on his development?

TIM MILES: So cool, right? His journey is special. He's been through a lot personally. His mental health, everything that goes with that. To see him at a point where his confidence was so low, and he kind of defined himself only as a basketball player and it wasn't going well because he wasn't healthy. It wasn't because he hadn't done the work or he didn't have the skill and the talent.

He had all those things, but he just had to get healthy, and so then to watch him rebound from that, so to speak, has been really impressive. I just can't say how great that is to watch and witness firsthand and how happy I am for him and proud I am of him.

Q. With obviously the relationship and friendship you have with Coach Medved, how difficult or easier or more fun is it --

TIM MILES: Yeah, I don't like it. It's just hard. He's such a good friend, and he's been a friend for a long time. Ali Farokhmanesh was on my staff in Nebraska for three years or whatever too. Brian Cooley I've known forever.

You have these friendships, so it's no fun to play them. I wish him luck. I think that will be a really good Nevada game.

I think that CSU with that dynamic guard like Stevens, Palmer shooting some threes today and Scott inside, but any time you have Isaiah Steven on your side, I think you have a chance.

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