

# Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 16, 2024

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

**New Mexico Lobos**

**Coach Richard Pitino**

**JT Toppin**

**Nelly Junior Joseph**

Postgame Press Conference

New Mexico 74, Colorado State 61

THE MODERATOR: We have student-athletes JT Toppin, Nelly Junior Joseph, Coach Richard Pitino. Coach, your thoughts on tonight's game?

RICHARD PITINO: Another great win. I've loved how we have turned into a terrific defensive team this tournament. It's gotten better and better every single game. Colorado State is a team that doesn't turn the ball over a lot and shoots a high percentage. We were able to do both.

An awesome win. Proud of our guys, and we get a chance to go against a great team tomorrow to play for a championship.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Coach just mentioned it, the defense. You forced 22 turnovers. Or I guess 14 turnovers and scored 22 points off of them. What was the game plan, the mindset to kind of make them uncomfortable and force turnovers?**

NELLY JUNIOR JOSEPH: The mindset was yesterday we play against Boise, and we want to be aggressive and stay in the lane. He with try to bring the same mindset to today's game as we did.

**Q. Obviously, you guys are a team that feeds off of energy. What's an 11-0 start do for you?**

JT TOPPIN: It did a lot. We knew we was going to come out -- come out really strong, and we did just that. And we knew we were going to have to execute on the offensive and defensive end.



**Q. JT, Coach mentioned we've become a defensive team. What's changed? What's changed from the regular season?**

JT TOPPIN: We wanted to get that tournament. We really wanted to get that tournament, and we just knew we had to play together, and we couldn't let nobody get no easy dunks, easy layups. Had to stay in the lanes, help, and just scramble on defense.

**Q. For both of you guys. You both are two of the quietest guys on the court out there, and you got Jaalen House doing what he is doing. I'm curious with the high energy guy like that and the high energy when you get out and running like that on defense, everybody seems to be going crazy, and you are two of the calmest guys out there. Are you feeling any emotion out there when everyone else seems to be excited?**

NELLY JUNIOR JOSEPH: We're feeding off their energy. We're pumped up like to play defense and get stop, and just like (indiscernible) all the time, trying to be like cool.

JT TOPPIN: Yeah, locked in. We definitely feed off their energy. They hype us up for sure.

**Q. Joe Scott the Air Force coach said of you the other day, JT, said you're mature and he did one of these. He said you're never high, you're never low. He can't ever tell when you're excited or when you're not. You're always about business and always doing your job. Have you always been that way?**

JT TOPPIN: Always. Yeah, I always been like that. Just chill and just really locked in.

**Q. And then the other thing, Boise State last night, you guys hold to under 30% shooting, but it was two weeks ago when the word that kept getting thrown around a little bit was they bullied you guys. They out-rebounded you guys really badly in a couple of games, and they were just big and physical. Did you two take that personally a little bit the way the Boise**



**State game in the regular season played out?**

NELLY JUNIOR JOSEPH: Yeah, because once you beat a team twice, like you learn your lesson. I mean, you can't let it come back and kick your ass the same way again, so you got to be like, play aggressive just like them.

JT TOPPIN: Can't lose three times. Got to stay aggressive, and I think we executed that very well.

**Q. Nobody has ever won this tournament coming off of the first round, and you get an opportunity to do that tomorrow. Teams that have played three games in three days say it's the third day that they start to feel it. You're talking about the energy. Jaelen talked yesterday, we just don't want to go home yesterday. Did you feel any fatigue today? It's a quick turnaround tomorrow. You didn't look like a team that was playing a third game in three days. Did you guys feel any fatigue?**

NELLY JUNIOR JOSEPH: Not at all because during December we came to Vegas. We played just like this. We played like three games like back-to-back, so we're used to it.

JT TOPPIN: Yeah, we didn't feel no fatigue. We're not trying to go home. Huh-uh.

**Q. For both of you guys, you guys both are in your first year in Albuquerque. JT, you're a freshman coming in, and Nelly, you transferred in from Iona. In your first year here, what would it mean to you to deliver a championship to Albuquerque?**

JT TOPPIN: It would mean the most because our fans are really supportive, and it would be amazing to bring it back for them. Yeah.

NELLY JUNIOR JOSEPH: I think it will mean more for the city because they love basketball like this, support us. For me it means a lot for them. We're excited for tomorrow.

**Q. It looks like you guys are playing with a lot of confidence right now. Can you speak to the momentum that you guys are just playing with right now that you have the confidence that you are playing with right now?**

JT TOPPIN: We just come really locked in. In practice we're locked in. No days off. No, it's not over. We're going to celebrate, but next day we're locked in for the next game, and that really just helped us.

**Q. Can you just talk about this next matchup?**

**Obviously San Diego State a team that's very tough. A lot of history with these two teams. How are you feeling about this matchup? Are?**

JT TOPPIN: Really good. We're just going to have to play aggressive. They're a little bigger than us, but if we play aggressive, we're going to win.

NELLY JUNIOR JOSEPH: We played them before. We played them at home. We win by 20 or so. I think we're going to be ready, so we just have to play hard and play together as a team and get some stops.

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

**Q. They cut it to seven with about five minutes to go. What's the message in that time-out?**

RICHARD PITINO: We were turning the ball over a little bit I thought. We got Jaelen with the ball. Donovan was battling the flu. I think he may have gotten what Mash has. He showed unbelievable heart because he was really struggling, really struggling. Hopefully we can get him some IVs and get him better for tomorrow.

We put the ball in House's hands and he delivered. We were able to get some rebounds, key rebounds. They were shooting a lot of threes, and we had to get some long rebounds and did a great job there.

**Q. I'm curious if you think now you guys are a lock for the NCAA Tournament?**

RICHARD PITINO: You know, I don't understand how we wouldn't be. I just don't get it. I think Joe Lunardi is in his jammies right now. I don't think he is awake watching Mountain West basketball, so I don't know if he is playing attention, but we're, like, 22 or 23 in the NET. We're 27 in KenPom. We have 25 wins.

It boggles my mind. We've beaten several teams who are NCAA Tournament teams, but you can't worry about it. There's a lot of -- you just don't know, right? The biggest thing we're trying to do is control what we can control.

But as I said last night, I would be very surprised if we didn't make it. Obviously we just got another Quad 1 win. I would be even more surprised.

**Q. I asked them about the defense and Nelly gave his nice answer about not wanting to -- he learned his lesson from the Boise State game. I'm curious if you look to a point in the season or maybe even in the last few weeks when the defense did sort of kind of start**

**playing with a little bit different effort or urgency maybe?**

RICHARD PITINO: I think the Air Force game was an eye-opener for everybody. That was a devastating loss. It was disappointing.

We had to do some soul-searching as a coaching staff, players. We were not ready to go. I think our guys came back, dug themselves out of a big hole that we created, and credit to them. I think they understand if you don't defend, if you don't rebound, you're not going to win in this league. This league is too good, and there's a lot of really, really good defensive teams.

I think it was a humbling moment, and credit to our guys to kind of pull themselves out of it.

**Q. The one aspect of your team that maybe more than anything has been on full display this tournament is just how much speed the entire line-up has and how hard it is to defend. Game plan-wise is there anything that you tell guys like Jaalen and Donovan and Jamal to do, or do you just let them run wild and create havoc?**

RICHARD PITINO: Run wild is probably -- I'm not sure that's what we do, but I do think you've got let them play. They all can play the point, so you essentially have three scoring point guards on the court at all times.

I think the personnel allows them to be able to get out and run.

I still think we can actually play faster, but all of them can make plays. Jaalen was ready to go today. Donovan fought through obviously pretty rough illness. Yeah, our whole goal -- you can't run if you don't get stops, and the defense the last -- and even Air Force the last three games has been terrific. That's allowed us to run.

**Q. You know what it takes to beat a San Diego State team, but tomorrow is a different animal, right? It's the championship game. What are some of your concerns, and what are your keys? What do you need to do to win tomorrow?**

RICHARD PITINO: Well, obviously you have a high, high level of respect for their program. The level of consistency that they have built over 30 years. Obviously from Coach Fisher to Coach Dutch and the staff. They just do a great job of being true to what they are.

We've talked about toughness. Boise was certainly that. Colorado State. It's going to be ramped up even more.

You're playing on Saturday for a championship, so I think both teams are going to compete their butts off. I know both fan bases. I was told today every flight coming from Albuquerque to here was sold out on southwest Is. That's how special our fan base is. It's going to be a fun afternoon.

**Q. You came into town. Your team knew they had to win games. They played with incredible poise and composure. Somebody told me there's a rule if you keep winning, they can't keep you out of the big tournament. You have an opportunity tomorrow. What have you learned about your team in the last three days?**

RICHARD PITINO: They've been ready for the moment. There's a lot of pressure that goes on you to play in a win-or-go-home tournament, to obviously be on the bubble. It's a privilege, though. It really is.

I mean, there's a lot of teams that are not even thinking about that. We're proud of where we're at, and they've delivered. They really have. They've played great basketball. They've let their play do the talking. They just have stacked up two really, really quality Quad 1 wins on back-to-back days and obviously got a great opportunity tomorrow.

**Q. Have you ever coached a team that has had to play four games in less than 70 hours? Where does it affect the team most? What is it you are concerned about, just legs or fatigue or mentally? What is it?**

RICHARD PITINO: Well, in my illustrious Hall of Fame career I've not been to many championship conference games. I believe this is -- no. FIU, year one. I think we had a bye, though.

So I don't think I've ever had four games in four days. Fatigue is the biggest thing. Now, I think Air Force we were able to play a lot of guys. Even the last two games we were kind of able to get guys in and out. There's no time to be tired. There's no time to be tired.

You just mentally and physically have to fight through it. We're fortunate to have amazing fans who certainly create an environment where that can get us going as well. We just have to get some rest.

Obviously the hard part, what I don't love, I'm not going to complain about the Mountain West, but playing a late game and then you have to come back. I know that's kind of standard because of TV. If I win, I'll get it changed because I'll have some power. That's obviously going to be hard. That will be hard for San Diego State too. We

have to get some rest and mentally and physically just fight through.

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## Colorado State Rams Coach Niko Medved Joel Scott Isaiah Stevens

### Postgame Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: For Colorado State we have student-athletes Joel Scott, Isaiah Stevens, Coach Niko Medved. Let's get some thoughts on tonight's game, Coach.

NIKO MEDVED: Congratulations to New Mexico. Give them credit. You know, we knew they would be amped up. It's a huge game for both teams. A lot on the line. Obviously they punched us right away 11-0. We came back.

I thought the run at the end of the first half was critical. They kind of went into the locker room with momentum. They made a lot of plays. They made shots. They made plays. They were active defensively.

We just weren't able to get enough shots down or come up with a timely rebound, or we had a key turnover. We just got really outplayed I thought on both ends of the floor. Disappointing, but we'll move on and get ready for what's coming on Sunday.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Did you feel like they created a frenetic pace of play that kind of contributed to some of your shooting woes tonight? It looked like you felt rushed on offense at times?**

ISAIAH STEVENS: That's what they do. They speed the game up and execute on both ends at that pace. We were able to generate some good looks, like you said. Maybe rushed at times. We just have to settle in.

Honestly in the first half there were some shots out there we just have to hit.



**Q. You come back and tie it up after an 11-0 run. What changed after that when they got the spurt at the end that set the tone for the second half?**

ISAIAH STEVENS: I think that's just high-level basketball. Two high-level teams just trading runs and making plays on both ends. They really started to get out in transition a little bit, started to turn the corner on a lot of their ball screen actions, and that's something that we worked ad nauseam about, and it just didn't show up for the full 40.

**Q. Isaiah, so can you take me through the play at the end of the first half where something happened with your calf, and then in the second half you were able to find your shot, and you had a pretty solid second half, but just how is the calf feeling?**

ISAIAH STEVENS: I'll be fine. Nothing to it more than that. I'm excited to keep playing, moving forward.

**Q. Joel, obviously their guards get a lot of attention, but they have good big guys inside too. What was the difficulty that they create in the interior battle?**

JOEL SCOTT: It's tough. They're physical bigs. They were doing what they needed to do. They were flying around. Again, playing physical. That was kind of the biggest thing to it. They played really well and executed their game plan really well.

**Q. Obviously this isn't the way you wanted to kind of go out of the Mountain West Tournament, but I was just kind of wondering what kind of legacy you hope to leave at CSU, Isaiah?**

ISAIAH STEVENS: Hopefully one that contributes a lot of wins. Just being a good person, good teammate, somebody that they wanted to come out to Moby and see on a nightly basis; somebody that they hope that their kids could try to model themselves after and be like and just be a role model in the community.

Hopefully I feel like I did that. I love Fort Collins to death. It's going to be hard leaving it, but it was a great five years.



**Q. Joel, you have players like Isaiah Stevens, but also the rest of the senior class on the team. What have you learned from them?**

JOEL SCOTT: Man, I've learned a lot. It's really special to be able to play with guys like Isaiah. I mean, he's a CSU legend at this point or he is going to be.

Even the guys like Pat Cartier, Joe Palmer, Josiah Strong, and all of them, I mean, we grew pretty close together throughout this short time, so it's been really special to get to know them on and off the court.

**Q. Joel, this was your seventh straight game in double figures. Over the last month or so, what has been working especially well for you offensively?**

JOEL SCOTT: I think it's just been physicality, trying to set the tone in the paint. My teammates are looking for me in there, and I think we're just playing off of each other. I think when we set the tone in the paint, me, Pat, and even our guards, it helps us out in the long run.

**Q. Joel, when you have the type of success that you did have tonight, can you describe how hard it was to work for that considering they blocked nine shots, they made it a pretty physical game inside?**

JOEL SCOTT: Yeah. I mean, that's just, again, high-level basketball. It's going to be tough, especially inside the paint. Everyone is going to be battling in there. It's going to happen. Blocked shots are going to happen, so you just have to move on, keep playing, and they played very physical down there tonight. That's just how it is.

THE MODERATOR: Let's dismiss the student-athletes at this time. Thank you, men. Questions for Coach.

**Q. Did you feel like the pace of play that they were able to establish took you out of some of the things that you really wanted to do or avoid tonight?**

NIKO MEDVED: I don't think the pace of play bothered us as far as we're not comfortable running that much. I mean, I do think in the half court sped us up a little bit at times where we didn't catch and see what was in front of us, whether it was a simple post feed or a drive. You have to give them credit for doing that.

I think what happens that way is you get not just sped up physically, but you get sped up mentally. Just I think some of the guys maybe just kind of got out of character a little bit and maybe trying to do a little bit too much in some of those situations.

Again, I thought we had a chance, again, coming out of halftime. We just couldn't quite -- we had a chance to make a run, and we would turn it over, maybe force a bad shot, or even miss a good one. Yeah, you have to give them credit too, but I don't think the pace was too fast for us at all. I just thought maybe in the half court they sped up some of our decision-making.

**Q. Everybody has projections for brackets. What's your expectation of what's going to happen Sunday?**

NIKO MEDVED: I don't know. God, it looks to me at least like there's just not a ton of separation in seeding between so many of these teams right now. You never know.

Obviously another win tonight would have helped us, so I don't know. Part of the fun of it is not knowing and having that on Selection Sunday. You have no idea what your seed is going to be, where you are going to go, who you are going to play, and that's some of the beauty of it.

You know me. I'm such a competitive guy. I hated the way that -- wish we would have played better here tonight, but at the same time, this group has given us a lot, and we have to wake up tomorrow and strong chin and stick our chest out.

Selection Sunday is a really, really special time. That's what these guys dream about, so we can't let this take away from that on Sunday.

We will tonight, which you should as a competitor, but wake up tomorrow and look forward to what's next.

**Q. You mentioned maybe being sped up a little bit. Do you think in the first half there was maybe a shot that isn't a bad shot, but maybe could have found a better shot?**

NIKO MEDVED: I don't think there's any question about that. Some of them, like -- we didn't shoot the ball well from three, but I think what happens is we took some rushed ones too, so you take a few rushed ones, and then you miss a few you rushed ones, and then you get the open one, and so yes, I do. I thought we rushed a little bit. I didn't think we did a great job like we did last night of really attacking the close-out and getting in the paint and making good decision.

Yes, I think it was a combination, so I did. I thought we maybe forced or took some quick shots, some shots that we didn't need. That contributed.

**Q. You have spoken about this a little bit before.**

**We're heading into a very unique period of preparation before the tournament right here. What does that look like for you guys not knowing your first round opponent? What does it look like for practices for the team just kind of reset and get mentally refocused?**

NIKO MEDVED: I mean, we'll get back. I mean, obviously we've just played three games. We'll get back home. I don't even know exactly our travel schedule, and then we'll take Sunday off and enjoy Sunday. Then we'll take it from there. Some of it depends on if you play Friday or you play Thursday, so it depends on that.

Typically you're going to travel out two days before, so once we get our opponent and know what day we're playing, we'll kind of figure it out from there.

**Q. Tonight felt almost like a home game for New Mexico in a neutral site typically. What's your message to the team after an 11-0 run to start the game for New Mexico, and what's your message for the team going forward in situations like this on neutral sites that may feel more like a home game for the other team?**

NIKO MEDVED: I mean, you have to remember we beat Creighton in Kansas City. You want to talk about a home game? (Laughing).

We've been there and done that. We responded to those situations all year. We didn't panic being down 11. We made a run. I thought the end of the first half was critical. The last six minutes of the first half, that game was close, and we just -- we needed to end the half a little bit better and get momentum going into halftime. We're used to that.

Believe it or not, there's as many Blue Jay fans in Kansas City as there were here today, but it's awesome. Our fans showed out. The Lobos have a great fan base. They've had that for years, and you know they're going to show. I remember being here for years when they've been good, and they've got a great turnout. That's what makes it awesome. You want the energy in the arena.

**Q. The points off turnovers that the Lobos generate, they did it for three straight games. They always seemed to be at their best when they were able to not just turn you over but actually turn those into points at the other end. What are you able to do to kind of combat that, if anything? Is it just as simple as don't turn it over?**

NIKO MEDVED: Yeah, you have to make great decisions with the ball. They do a great job. With that sometimes, they would probably tell you too, it can be feast or famine

sometimes too, right?

When we say be strong with the ball, it's drive it. You have to play off two feet. You have to be strong. They force you to make quick decisions with the ball. If you hold it too long or you hesitate when you have a guy open and then you try to make the pass, that's when they turn you over.

I think another thing you have to do is you're going to turn the ball over. 14 turnovers for us wasn't terrible tonight. Some of them came in really key moments where we just couldn't afford the turnover because we were down, but you can't compound. If you have a turnover -- we had too many turnovers that led to touchdowns tonight, right? Turnovers that just led to a direct score for them.

So those are really back-breaking. If you turn it over, you have to regroup and make the next play, but that's what they do. That's how they're built.

**Q. One more question about them is you kind of already talked about you're looking forward to Selection Sunday. They're a team that if you look at projections, I know there's some expert bracketologists at places like SI.com and stuff that know what they're talking about that still have New Mexico as one of the Final Four out or even on the outside looking in. Do you think this New Mexico team should be in the NCAA Tournament?**

NIKO MEDVED: 100%, but I'm not smart enough to be a bracketologist, Jeff. I'm just a basketball coach here, so those guys, they are a lot smarter than I am.

There at NCAA -- after winning tonight, I don't see how they're not in the tournament. I know some people are, like, oh, the Mountain West is going to get six. Come on, man. For sure there's six teams that deserve to be in. A couple more bounces go the other way, UNLV was that kind of a team too.

I believe it. Nobody cares what I think, but yes, I believe after tonight for sure New Mexico deserves to be in the NCAA Tournament.

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