

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 16, 2024

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

New Mexico Lobos

Coach Richard Pitino

Jamal Mashburn, Jr.

Jemarl Baker, Jr.

Postgame Press Conference



Man, it's just a testament to our toughness and how we just keep going, and everybody is just on the same page at all times.

JEMARL BAKER JR: He said it. He said it. That's everything right there.

Q. Sometimes have you to match great defense with great defense. It's worked for you guys up to this point. You had 14 points off of 10 turnovers today. You know you're a great offensive team, but what kind of confidence does this give you these defensive performances like this for the tournament?

JEMARL BAKER JR: Definitely gives us confidence. I mean, that's what coach has been emphasizing. Just being scrappy, being tough, and getting out on the break and running.

We've been executing the game plan these last few games, and we have to continue on doing that in the tournament.

Q. First for you, Jemarl Baker. As you've had an incredible journey, seven years, four schools. Not at the complete end of this road, as you guys have clinched at least one more game, but what does it feel like helping be a part of a title-winning team for the first time in a decade for the school?

JEMARL BAKER JR: It's incredible, man. It's incredible. We've worked so hard to get to this point. Like Mash said, we have had so many ups and downs this year, and we all just stayed confident in ourselves and stayed together.

It feels great. It's not over yet, but it does feel great to get a championship on my way out, that's for sure.

Q. Then as you look to your side and you see your coach, Jamal, who you are one of the first two people he recruited and all the way at the end of -- not at the complete end of this journey, but near the end, and you guys are bringing home a title to Albuquerque. What does that mean to you, and what's your

New Mexico 68, San Diego State 61

THE MODERATOR: For New Mexico we have student-athletes Jemarl Baker, Jr., Jamal Mashburn, Jr., and Coach Richard Pitino. Coach, let's get thoughts on today's game.

RICHARD PITINO: Really, really proud of the guys in this locker room. They had so much belief the whole year and came into this tournament playing confidently, playing loose, and winning in a variety of ways.

Nobody has ever, I believe, won in this tournament four games in four nights like this, and we never looked fatigued. San Diego State is a program that we've got a lot of respect for. We knew we would have to raise our level of toughness, and we did it.

So happy for our amazing fan base. Happy for the state of New Mexico, the City of Albuquerque. I know how much they love college basketball. We're going to enjoy this moment tonight.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Coach just mentioned it for both of you guys, first team ever to play all four days and come out with a title. What does that mean to you, and what does that say about your team?

JAMAL MASHBURN JR: Man, it's just a testament to you our group and our toughness. We've gone through so much stuff this year either individually, together. Man, we've been through the ups and downs together, but we've never separated. We continue to work throughout our struggles.



connection been like with the coach?

JAMAL MASHBURN JR: Man, I mean, this guy right here, man, he's dealt with me through the worst times of my life, through the best times of my life. I can only be grateful and be appreciative for a coach like this to be able to put me in ^ positions to succeed and for him to just trust me and trust me to be myself, trust me to go out there and attack, trust me to go out there and defend and do whatever I need to do to help win a game.

Man, our goal to come here was to win a championship and cut down nets, and we did that. It's not over yet, but we did that.

Q. A lot has been mentioned about the competition level of the conference. A lot has been mentioned about six teams going tomorrow. How far do you think all these six teams will go in the Big Dance?

JAMAL MASHBURN JR: Man, we got six games to win. That's our goal. We're very confident and humble about this process, and we know we have to -- I don't know when we leave or when we have to head out or whatever, but we're ready to go. We're ready to play whoever. Yeah, we're going to win some games. We're going to make some noise.

JEMARL BAKER JR: For sure. We have a group that knows that we can beat anybody, so we just have to get back to work and be ready for whoever we play and whenever it is.

Q. Mash, it's been mentioned how you followed the guy to your right there here three years ago. You've had ups and downs with your shooting this year. How did it feel getting your shot going when you had Donovan Dent not 100%?

JAMAL MASHBURN JR: I mean, I know I've struggled shooting the ball, and I'm happy I was able to come out here and make some shots, but I always stayed confident in myself throughout anything just because I put in the work, and I put in the hours and time and the equity in my game.

So my confidence has never wavered. There's been ups and downs throughout this year, as with any athlete. It's tough. Just being able to stick through and push through, and these are the moments that you stick through and push through for, for championships, for teams winning and stuff like that. That's what we stick to it for, so yeah.

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

Q. Just what does it mean for you to get your first title in this year where it's probably arguably the best year in this conference history?

RICHARD PITINO: It means a lot. You know, I took a chance when I took this job, and I did it because of our fan base. I wanted to be at a place that celebrated basketball, and I wanted to be in a community that really cared about the basketball program.

With that a lot comes with it. It really does. Sometimes it can be hard. There were some tough times this year with some tough losses, especially at home, where you had to pick yourself up off the mat, and you just had to keep believing in what we're doing and believing in the guys in the locker room.

Our guys never ever wavered from their confidence. They really didn't. They came into this tournament truly believing that they could win it. So that's why I picked up my family and took a risk, and it sure feels like it's paying off right now.

Q. To do all that for a fan base that has embraced you in and this team, what do you see it mean to your team?

RICHARD PITINO: I think it's one of the best fan bases in college basketball. I truly, truly believe it. They are as invested in this program on a daily basis as a Kentucky where I grew up for eight years. I don't see a whole lot of a difference, and they're loyal.

When we first got here, we were 3-0-3 in the NET. Half the building was empty. To get guys like Jaelen House and Jemal Mashburn to come to your school without ever seeing campus and then being able to have this pay off, it's an amazing journey and truly I'm very grateful and appreciative.

Q. Also just curious, what was your message during the last media timeout when you were tied 59-59?

RICHARD PITINO: Get stops. Clearly they were going to LeDee every single time. We were having some issues with getting stops. He was getting fouled, which he does. He's great at it. He was knocking down his free-throws.

We just had to go make winning plays, and we found a way to get a couple more winning plays down the stretch. Our defense and our rebounding really grew this tournament, and we had no chance to win if we didn't start getting scrappy like we did.

Then to be able to do it without really Donovan Dent. He really fought to give us 12 minutes, and very appreciative of him as well.

Q. I was wondering how you would describe as vividly as you would like what it was like to play in this league this season.

RICHARD PITINO: I really liked our team. I felt like we could compete with anybody, but there were a lot of good teams that we were going against, and there were a lot of teams -- obviously we're going to get six in the NCAA Tournament.

UNLV is as good as any of them as well.

So it was just like made for TV every single night. Great players. Great coaches. Fan bases that truly care. I remember coming here thinking, all right, maybe it's a little bit of a step down from the Big Ten.

It didn't feel like it on a nightly basis. It really didn't. I mean, packed houses, national TV. There were just wars every night.

I know I got better as a coach going against some of these amazing coaches and programs. It was a long, long season, but very rewarding.

Q. I think the entire state of New Mexico is celebrating with you right now. What impact did name, image, and likeness in the greater New Mexico community, which you kind of alluded to -- what impact did they all have upon helping you build this championship roster?

RICHARD PITINO: Well I think the thing, you take a job at a place that cares, and you need to be invested, and we have a fan base, and we have a community that really, really cares.

I'm so very appreciative of their support and appreciative of all that believe-in-us and stick-with-us through highs and lows. So I hope they are enjoying this moment just like we are.

Q. Jamal Mashburn and Jaelen House combined for 49 points with those being the two first building blocks of this championship. What did it mean to you to see them go out and perform like that and both deliver just legendary performances?

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, as I said before, when we got the job, we were not allowed to go recruiting because of the pandemic so, we put together a recruiting class of eight players that had never stepped on campus. Three are left.

Sebastian Forsling, Jamal Mashburn, Jr., and Jaelen House. And Jaelen House and Mash have been all-conference players.

This year was a little bit more challenging because of all the injuries and the emergence of Donovan Dent. We had to play them together. There were times where it was hard because of defense and rebounding, but we felt like it would put us in a position to win.

Now you come in, and Donovan Dent is really sick. He can't play. Mash and House stepped up, as older guys absolutely do in that time.

Q. Then last question, have you gotten a chance to talk to your dad, Rick, yet? If you had to take a guess, what do you think the first thing he's going to say is?

RICHARD PITINO: I've not spoken to him. I'm sure he's hopefully very proud. I hope my mom is proud, my family is proud.

Any time you get fired, it's hard, you know, as a young head coach and you are Rick Pitino's son and everybody is comparing you to him, and you do feel a little bit of a burden.

I'm probably not going to go in the Naismith Hall of Fame like he is, and that's okay, but you have to have a high level of belief in yourself.

I wouldn't be able to do this profession without being able to lean on my mom and my dad and the support, because they're always there. We're far away from each other, but they're always there.

I am the person, the husband, the father that I try to be every day because of my parents.

Q. I asked Dutch what was the difference in the game when the game was in the balance really with five, six minutes to go in the game, and he just basically said House. I was wondering if you would agree with that?

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, House is the type of guy who -- because they really switch all ball screens. They mixed up their coverages, but you have to go make plays. Either you can throw it in the low post, which it's hard to score on, or you can kind of take him off the bounce.

Jaelen got to the free-throw line, made some big shots. Fierce, fierce competitor. I was never a little bit concerned that he would be tired. He's built for moments like this.

Q. Following up on the NIL question, I know you're

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

obviously looking forward to the NCAA Tournament, but you have three young guys on your roster who have played very well this year, got exposure on national TV today, are going to get exposure in the NCAA Tournament. With the way things are right now, how concerned are you at a quote, unquote, mid-major program that you're going to be able to keep those guys knowing what's coming?

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, for one, I don't think we're a mid-major program. I don't think San Diego State and a lot of these programs are. The salaries may be a little different at times and some of the budgets, but I don't feel like the players on a day-to-day basis feel that.

You know, you try not to worry about it. It's coming for all of us. It just is. It's the reality of it. You try to create a culture that they believe you're going to be invested in them. There's always going to be people with more money. That's just the reality of coaches, players, ADs, everywhere.

You just have to hope and be as transparent with them as possible. You know, you want what's best for them. You really do. I feel like all three of those guys and a lot of the guys we can bring back could be in a great position. You know, you understand. I mean, I think you understand that opportunities are always going to be there, but you just try to be as open and honest with everybody as you can.

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THE MODERATOR: For San Diego State we have student-athletes Lamont Butler and Jaedon LeDee, Coach Brian Dutcher. Coach, some comments on today's game?

BRIAN DUTCHER: First of all, congratulations to Richard Pitino and the Lobos. To play four games in four days and come out with the title is really impressive. Hats off to them.

Obviously we're disappointed, and we should be. We wanted to hang a banner, win another Mountain West title, but it didn't happen, but we can't have a lingering effect over losing.

I think we played good basketball here the last three days in Vegas, and that was important leading into the NCAA Tournament, which is the dream of everybody. That's what you grow up wanting to play in.

So as disappointed as we are over losing today, our best basketball is ahead of us. We're excited to hear our name called tomorrow, and we will be ready to play. We will learn from tonight, and we will hopefully make a deep run in the NCAA Tournament starting this next week.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Guys, I know it wasn't the result you guys hoped for, but as you enter Selection Sunday, what are you guys most excited about getting a chance to maybe make another very deep run in the tournament?

LAMONT BUTLER: Yeah, I mean, the tournament, that's



what we set out to do. The tournament, last year we had a great run, and this year we're trying to prove people wrong again.

I feel like we can go in there and make some noise, and we're going into it with a positive mindset and get better from this loss and go in there and try to get some more wins.

Q. Lamont, a lot of -- big part of you got the defensive scores in turnovers and scoring off of it. Zero points off turnovers tonight. What were they doing so well that was making it hard for you to get the ball and get out in transition?

LAMONT BUTLER: I feel like they? Were getting the ball on the rim, and they was able to get some good shots from House and Mashburn, and they were getting offensive rebounds. It was really hard to pressure them because of how quick they are and how fast they are.

It's something that we're going to learn from, and we're going to figure it out.

Q. Going off that last question, Jaedon, you didn't score a field goal until the last four minutes of the first half. What was it about their defense that limited your play in the first?

JAEDON LeDEE: I wouldn't say limited. They was loading up in the gaps and in the paint, so I was trusting my teammates, and they were hitting shots early. I mean, just they had a game plan, and we just pivoted off of what they were doing.

Q. For both players, if I could. I was wondering, that was a madhouse in there. What's your best description of what it was like to play in this league in this season?

LAMONT BUTLER: Yeah, I mean, this league was phenomenal this year. We had really good teams. Every game was rowdy. Every game was some close ones, some upsets are. We had fun playing in the league. I feel like it really prepared us for the tournament coming up.



We're going to be ready to fight and ready to play hard and win.

JAEDON LeDEE: Yeah, it was a great league this year. I mean, just it's preparing us for the NCAA. You can't take any games for granted this year in the league, and that's kind of how it is in the tournament, so it was good preparation.

Q. Jaedon, what went wrong during that five-minute stretch late in the second half? Do you think fatigue helped there?

JAEDON LeDEE: I'm not sure. Maybe you're talking about the last five minutes. I mean, just they hit some shots, we didn't. That's all I can really tell you from that.

Q. Jaedon, I'm pretty sure -- I just double checked the stats, but I'm pretty sure you broke the single-season scoring record for San Diego State. What does that title mean to you?

JAEDON LeDEE: I mean, it's just a nice accomplishment. I wish we would have won today. That's kind of what's on my mind right now, but I mean, yeah, it's a nice accomplishment.

Shout-out to my teammates and coaching staff putting me in good positions, but yeah, that's all I got.

Q. This is for both of you guys. You guys obviously made a big run to the championship game last year. What do you guys think is the one thing you have to improve on heading into your first game next week?

LAMONT BUTLER: I feel like we improved a lot. Especially this weekend, or Thursday through Saturday. I feel like just finishing off every possession with a rebound, I feel like that's going to be important for us going into the tournament. Then just continuing to play with the confidence that we play with.

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

Q. Aztecs were 4 for 29 on three-pointers and while New Mexico was 6 of 20. What's the differentmaker between that?

BRIAN DUTCHER: They played a great first half. They made a lot of shots, but they had five at halftime, and I know they only made 6.7 a game, so we were playing good defense. They were just making some shots. That's a big part of it.

I thought our defense was solid, and the defense was pretty good all game. I think both teams struggled to score the ball. I don't know what they shot from the field at the end of the day. 37%. We shot 35%. Defense was a premium today.

It was second chance opportunities down the stretch that won the game, whether it was a missed free-throw, a put-back opportunity. We caused initial misses, but we didn't finish it with rebounds, and that's the difference in the game.

Q. Jaedon LeDee, 25 points, and he also went for 11 of 11 from the free-throw line. I know the loss obviously stings, but what makes a player like Jaedon LeDee so great and able to lock in at a level like that even if he's not necessarily statistically the best free-throw shooter?

BRIAN DUTCHER: He's a pretty good free-throw shooter. But no, Jaedon shot 11 free-throws. I thought he could have shot 20, but that's tournament basketball. That's officiating. You don't know what's going to be called or not called, and it was physical today.

I thought we got downhill and got to the rim, and the only one really rewarded with free-throws was Jaedon. I don't know if anybody else -- how many everyone else shot on the team. Jaedon took 11, Reese got three and got fouled on a three-pointer. It was physical. Both teams played really physical. It was hard to get a foul out there. It's want just one team. Both teams. That's March basketball.

You better play to two feet and jump stop and play through contact at this time of the year.

Q. Your teams are kind of, especially this year, known for just playing great defense and getting the opposition in kind of a meat grinder and grinding them down the second half. I was kind of curious, it seemed like you had the Lobos there midway through the second half. I was wondering, were there any clues about why this particular game you just couldn't close the deal in this particular game?

BRIAN DUTCHER: I mean, House is a big reason. His body type allowed him to play four games in four days. I mean, if he's a big, physical guard that would wear down, but he doesn't wear down. He is blessed with an athletic live body, and I know he is tired, but he was sensational.

They just put him in ball screens. He refused ball screens, and he drove the ball. That was the game. There wasn't any pindowns for jump shots. There wasn't throw the ball in the post and get any production.

It was House downhill, miss a shot, and if he missed it, they rebounded it. That was the game.

He was sensational in a big game and hats off to him for being the player he is to be able to do that on a fourth straight game.

Q. Do you think the teams in this league are now officially sick and tired of each other in and ready to go play someone else?

BRIAN DUTCHER: Yeah, no question. This is a Mountain West game. They're all like this. They're all close. They're all hard-fought. Points drop. This is a dynamic offensive team that scored 60-some against us, and we only scored 61.

Everybody knows each other. They know what they do. They take away each other's strengths, and then it comes down to a timely play or two.

And that's what happened tonight. They made more timely plays than we did down the stretch.

Q. It's been mentioned that some of the team seeds in the Big Dance might be higher than your own conference. I'm just curious, at the end of the day how many teams do you think are coming out of Mountain West tomorrow?

BRIAN DUTCHER: No doubt six will go out of the Mountain West. I don't know how they could take anything less than six. They were always talking that New Mexico was on the bubble. Their NET ranking was in the 20s. I didn't ever see that.

They left all doubt to rest by winning the title. I can't believe there will be anything less than six Mountain West teams in The Dance.

Q. Despite the loss, the team was still able to finish strong towards the second half -- or towards the end of the half these past three games. How important do you think that will be towards your tournament play?

BRIAN DUTCHER: Yeah, we're tough. We got grit about us. We don't give in. Down 17 yesterday. Down 12 today. We just keep fighting. We cut the margin to six I think at halftime today and built momentum and took a second half lead. It went back and forth, a couple of lead changes, and unfortunately, we didn't close the game out.

We had open shots. We missed some open shots that if you are going to win a title, you have to make, and we

didn't make them. We went to Jaedon a lot. They helped, and he kicked it out. That's why I know the first half he didn't score early because he was kicking the ball out.

And that's what good players do. When they draw two or three players, they kick it out, and we have to make shots when he does.

Q. Different players this year obviously, but what makes you believe you can make another run? What about this specific team makes you believe that a run is in them?

BRIAN DUTCHER: Just because I like how they're wired. I don't think they get discouraged when they get down. They're mentally tough. They don't make excuses.

That's what you have to do.

You're going on have adversity in the NCAA Tournament. I just think we have a toughness about us that we've gained through experience that will show in March. That's the hope.

Q. You mentioned slow start. I think it's now 13 out of your last 14 games you've trailed early. Is that a viable path to winning in the NCAA Tournament? Are you going to have to change that?

BRIAN DUTCHER: Obviously everyone wants to get off to a great start, but it is what it is. All we can do is create open shots, and if they go in, we'll get off to a better start.

We go to Jaedon early, and they double him and he kicks it out. I think we had a couple of wide-open looks off post doubles early, and you make them. All of a sudden you're off and running. If they don't go in, we don't give in, which I like about this team.

We understand that it's a 40-minute game and that if you are going to be behind, the best team to be behind is early. So you've got time to fight back, and we fought back in every game.

So I'm proud of how hard we are wired as a team and hopefully that leads to success in the NCAA Tournament.

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