

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 14, 2024

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

Colorado State Rams

Head Coach Niko Medved

Nique Clifford

Jalen Lake

Postgame Press Conference

Colorado State 85, Nevada 78

THE MODERATOR: For Colorado State we have student-athletes Nique Clifford, Jalen Lake, Coach Niko Medved. Coach, we'll start with you with thoughts on tonight's game?

NIKO MEDVED: Man, what a great performance by these guys. I mean, they played incredibly hard, incredibly tough. Every time Nevada punched us, we found a way to punch them back. I just don't think I could have asked a group of young men to play harder than they did here tonight.

It's a high-level game. Two NCAA Tournament teams going at it. That's what you would expect in the Mountain West, but we have so many contributions from so many guys. These two young men were terrific on both ends of the floor. Terrific defensively, battling on the glass. I just thought their energy never slipped for 40 minutes, and that's what you have to do if you want to win this time of year.

Great win for our guys. Survive and advance, and we'll see you tomorrow night.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Nique, yesterday was Joe. Today was Jalen Lake. Just what do you make of the way they've been playing, especially today in the first half and what it means to have guys that can show up like this off the bench?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: No, I'm just proud of those dudes. The adversity we've been through this year, we've had



guys that can really shoot the ball and have went through some shooting slumps to an extent.

We just stick with it, keep working, and those guys -- all the work they put in every day is showing up right now on the biggest stage. That just shows the depth we have on our team. We're just getting back it how we were playing at the beginning of the year, just having fun playing with that passion.

Q. Jalen Lake, would you consider this to be kind of the more complete game you've had in maybe a month just the way you played and the way you played through what was constant foul trouble throughout the night?

JALEN LAKE: Yeah, for sure I would say that was probably the most complete game I've played in a while. Just continued to stay consistent knowing that my teammates have the belief in me, knowing the coaching staff have belief in me. That gives me the confidence, so it was great to see some shots go down on the offensive side and then sticking with it on defense as well.

Q. How hard is it to play defense the way you guys did knowing that the game is being called the way it was and people and the fans were in foul trouble?

JALEN LAKE: Some calls didn't go our way. I think we stayed level-headed. I think we stayed consistent. The way we played defensively, showing our hands. Yeah, it was good.

Q. This was your most points scored since December 29th. What do you guys think worked? What do you guys think made today so good offensively, and how do you guys want to keep that momentum going into the semis?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: I think we just played our offense, got back to just flowing. Everybody was playing just care-free, I feel like, and everybody was playing with confidence. So when you have guys playing their game and doing what they do, I think the ball is going to go in the basket more times than not. So it felt good to have everyone get back



to playing well offensively.

Q. You guys had 31 rebounds this game, and Nique you had three blocks. It was a good offensive showing, but it was also a good defensive effort as well. What does that mean going forward for the rest of the tournament?

JALEN LAKE: Yeah, I think that really set the tone. I think we played great defensively all 40 minutes. Just trying to play through the foul calls and things like that.

Rebounding on the glass I think we did good keeping them off the glass in moments. We've got to continue that. Like Nique said, we're playing free, carefree, and just having fun out there. That's what we want to do is get that joy back, and I think that will carry over to the next game.

Q. Nique, it looked like early on Blackshear was kind of talking a lot of smack to you up and down the court. Is that something that, I don't know, brought some intensity out of you? What kind of emotion went into this win? Everybody was obviously reacting after the big win.

NIQUE CLIFFORD: No, we were chippy the whole game, I would say, but that's what we love to do. We love to compete. They got the best of us twice, so it was a little personal for us, so we had a chip on our shoulder going into that game. It was a lot of fun getting after it against them.

You know, he's a good player, but we got the best of him tonight.

Q. Nique, you were all over the court defensively, especially in the second half, causing either multiple blocks or offensive fouls on the other team. What goes through your mind every play after momentum-shifting plays like that?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: I think we set the tone with our defense, like Lake was saying. We were playing hard defensively, and I think that translates to our offense doing well. Just flying around, playing as hard as we can. They got a lot of weapons, so I think we dialed into the defensive side.

Q. Both of you guys spent a decent amount of time on Lucas. Obviously he had success in I'm of the first two. I guess first motivation side on that, and what does it take to be effective on him, a guy that has that quick release?

JALEN LAKE: Yeah, he is a tough cover. I mean, this is

my second year guarding him. He's grown a lot in his game just a little bit off the bounce and shooting threes from deep and all that. So just have to be able to chase him around and be effective and kind of pressure him, so...

Q. We're about a month removed of Jarod Lucas and Nevada ending the game at Moby Arena off the crazy buzzer beater. How good did it feel to get your revenge game here tonight?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: It felt great. That's something we talked about before is just him running all over our floor. Go back to what I said. It was a little personal for us, and we needed to get this one, so it felt really good to get this win.

Q. Nique, for you to have these big moments late in March, late in games how much are you relishing this, and is this kind of what you envisioned in making this move?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: Definitely. It's a lot of fun playing with a team that's so unselfish. Everybody cares about each other. The coaches are just so locked into our team and everything that we're doing.

It's been a great move for me, and it's been a lot of fun. I couldn't ask for a better place to be.

Q. The Rams fans have made the travel and brought that energy the last three games on the road. How has that been for you guys?

JALEN LAKE: That was great. I mean, it gets us going seeing them out there. All love to them. I mean, they brought the energy in Moby and then being able to see them bring it in Colorado Springs when we play Air Force. These last two games has been amazing. It's helped us a ton bringing the energy.

Q. Nique, I was curious, I think Lucas hit three or four shots in the first half that looked indefensible. When you finally get a fly through the air and block that three on the wing, does it feel like a breath of relief for you to finally get him once?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: Yeah, it always feels good to get a block on somebody. Like Lake was saying, he's a good player. He can really shoot it. You just have to be dialed in and make it tough on him, try to make him shoot as tough of shots as possible, and I feel like we did that for the most part, but he's a tough shot maker, so credit to him.

THE MODERATOR: We're going to dismiss the athletes at this time. Thank you, men. Questions for Coach.

Q. Just from your perspective, how badly did you see your guys want to get this one today given how it went last time?

NIKO MEDVED: I know these guys talk about last time. That's a factor too, but you better want to get one because it's March. These are all one-game seasons right now. That's what we talk about. If you don't win tonight, you're going home in the Mountain West Tournament. I think there's a desperation for every team right now to play.

The Mountain West has been so competitive this year. Obviously they beat us twice. I think we felt -- they're a terrific team. They're well-coached. They've got great players. They're tough. But I think both times we felt like we didn't bring our best against them, so we really wanted to bring our best tonight. And we think when we bring our best, we can compete with anybody.

Q. Coach, you mentioned that you felt like you brought your best tonight. How long has it been in your mind where you really felt like your team had played this well this complete?

NIKO MEDVED: I think it's been a while. Particularly on offense. It's been a weird season that way that the first couple of months of the season we were one of the best offenses in the country. Then we struggled a lot just shooting the ball.

I think all the other metrics offensively we were pretty good, but our defense took a massive jump. You know, tonight it was interesting. I told the guys, I'm not going to call any plays. We're just going to go. We're going to get it out. We're going to go. We're going to play. I told Isaiah today at pregame meal, I'm, like, come here. I said, don't look over at me tonight. Just go. Just go. Just go be you. Just go play, hoop. That's what I told him to do.

You could kind of see his chest kind of -- I said, don't worry. Game goes on. We'll do what we need to do, but just go. Just get it out and go and play.

I think our motion offense is good. I mean, I look at the numbers, and man, when we have multiple guys -- you guys followed us up. When we have multiple guys in double figures, high assists, low turnovers, we're sharing it, getting to the next action quickly, that's when we're at our best.

Q. First couple of years you were in the league, two-bit league. This thing is, obviously, really competitive still, but just curious how it feels right now you're playing quarterfinal games against lock NCAA

Tournament teams. Next game up, same deal. Just how good has this thing gotten?

NIKO MEDVED: It's amazing. I've been in this league a long time as an assistant, as a head coach. I said it last night, but there's a scenario on Saturday night last game of the regular season, I mean, a couple of balls bounce, San Diego State is looking at a 6 seed, and more than likely they get a higher seed in the NCAA Tournament than we have here.

To be the 7 seed in this tournament and be playing -- I mean, heck, we could end up with a higher seed. Who knows? So it's just been incredible. It's a testament to we have terrific coaches in this league. We have a lot of programs and fan bases that care deeply about basketball, and you put those things together. We've got great players, here's what you get.

It's about an a great year for the league and three years in a row now, and I hope we can keep that in a momentum goes because it's a lot of fun. It's not fun to coach every night in the league, but it's sure as heck a lot of fun to compete in it.

Q. Jalen Lake led the team in points this game. What does that mean to relieve a little bit of stress off of those more common higher points scoring players?

NIKO MEDVED: When you coach, you don't understand sometimes the things these young people go through off the court and the challenges that they have and to just see these guys continue to have a strong chin and get back in the fight and just keep playing, and they do everything we ask them to do. I'm just so proud of him because he cares so deeply. He works so hard. He is so coachable.

Just to see those shots again go in for him tonight was just awesome because, again, he's such a team guy. He's a coach's dream that way. I thought that just energized our group, much like Joe Palmer did last night.

Q. Coach, you're now 5-0 on neutral site, which obviously in this time of year is exactly where you want to be. What do you think about this team -- what about this team makes them so good at a neutral site?

NIKO MEDVED: You know, I don't know. I don't know that. I think we have a good team, but all these teams are good. For whatever reason, we've played really, really well. We do what we do. If you get out of this tournament and you play in the next tournament, people probably don't have each other scouted as well, and you just kind of let loose and play.

I don't have any answer why we've played well in a neutral court this year. We've lost a bunch of close games on the road, but we've played well. I guess playing well in the neutral court is a good thing this time of year. Are.

Q. What does a game like this mean to you as a coach whether you see so many key contributors in this game? You have five players score double figure points in back-to-back games with a guy coming off the bench with such big scoring outputs early in the game?

NIKO MEDVED: Again, when we were playing our best basketball early in the season, that's kind of what you saw from this group. That's kind of what we do, and that's what happened tonight.

Again, we share the ball. We move. We get multiple guys that can score, and that makes you harder to defend. Obviously I think we have the best guard in the country, so that helps a lot. It makes me look like I know what I'm doing at times because he's so great, and he's such a great -- he just buys in. He's the one that sets the table. He's the one that buys into playing this way and playing unselfish. He encourages the other guys to keep staying aggressive.

When you have leadership like that, that sets the tone.

Q. I just want to hear your thoughts on Nique Clifford's skill set and what allows him to make some of these moves late in games that maybe aren't really something you coach, but just something he can do?

NIKO MEDVED: I think for him he's finding -- every player is their own unique self. He's such a unique player that way. He's got great length. He's got an unbelievable nose for the ball. He sees the floor really, really well, and he is just one of those guys that can affect the game in so many ways.

What's funny is he's been so good in a lot of these games where we're not calling plays. We're just playing, and his talent takes over.

He just is so versatile on both ends of the floor. He is one of those guys that can come out of nowhere and make a play. This time of year you've got to make plays if you want to win, and he sure made a lot of them tonight.

Q. Coach, there's a point in the second half where Nevada got back in the game and your guys were only up by five. How were you able to hold ground right there and extend the lead back up to double digits at that point?

NIKO MEDVED: I think any team -- Nevada is a great team too. They would tell you that's basketball. Basketball is a game of runs. When two good teams are going at it, they're going to make a run, and you can't panic. You just have to keep playing. You have to stay aggressive. You have to find a way to punch back. Our guys did that every time.

We were able to answer the bell. We knew Nevada was going to make a run. They're a terrific team. But our guys showed resilience. When you have a veteran group who has been through that before, they understand it. They don't panic. They just regroup and try to make the next right play.

Q. Coach, you say that you didn't call any plays. Is that hard for you to do, or is Isaiah that good that you feel comfortable that he can just take the reins like that?

NIKO MEDVED: We called a few plays, you know what I mean? Time-outs or whatever. For the most part we weren't.

Yeah. Really, that's what we do every day. The guys have a good feel for how we want to play with each other and getting to the next action. I just thought today we needed to play a little bit faster. I just thought we needed to play a little bit faster, a little bit more aggressive. And I thought it paid off.

Obviously, we have a great point guard. So when you have a great point guard, the ball is in his hands a lot to start those actions. And because he's such a great decisionmaker and finds guys and builds confidence and makes it a lot easier.

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another opportunity in the NCAA Tournament, so we have to make the most of it, but it sucks it ended the way it did.

Q. Kenan, you guys were out of sorts offensively early. You had, like, a 5-minute stretch where you didn't score. What do you feel like led to that just not being able to get it going early?

KENAN BLACKSHEAR: As a point guard it starts with me. I have to have better pace. Coach Alford preaches that religiously to me, just have good pace and like that. I feel as if we just need to -- we should have been more connected really on the offensive end. We'll be fine. We'll figure it out.

Q. Jarod, for you guys defensively, this is one of the most breakdowns you have had this year. What do you think was the cause of that?

JAROD LUCAS: Coach mentioned it. We came out slow in the first half. I think there was a moment in the second half or a couple of moments in the second half where we cut the lead down. We just couldn't get over the hump and take the lead.

They played a really good game.

Q. Kenan, you have a week now. Everyone is saying that you guys will get a chance at the NCAA Tournament. I guess what do you guys want to try and show what Nevada basketball is as you get a chance to play in another tournament setting?

KENAN BLACKSHEAR: For me personally, it's just get better every year. First year, 13-18. Second year, 22-11. This year, 26-7. Go farther in the NCAA Tournament really and just represent Nevada it on our chest.

Q. Same question for you, Jarod. You get a chance next week to play on the game's biggest stage. What do you want people to know about Nevada, and what are you hoping to kind of prove when you get a chance to play in that environment?

JAROD LUCAS: We've been a really good team all year,

Colorado State 85, Nevada 78

THE MODERATOR: For Nevada we have student-athletes Jarod Lucas and Kenan Blackshear. Coach Steve Alford, your thoughts on tonight's game?

COACH: Yeah. Obviously, we've been playing really good basketball. Very proud of our guys. I didn't think we had it. The first half we were a little out of character.

I think it favors the team that gets to play first, but I thought the second half if we could hang in there, we might be able to do something. I thought they played really well, and it's a credit to Niko, his staff, his players. I thought they played outstanding basketball.

We didn't have too many answers for them defensively. We've been a good defensive team all year, and we couldn't -- we just couldn't guard them. I think in the end that's what got us. We shot the ball better in the second half. They won the turnover game. They won the bench game.

I thought those ended up being pretty good keys for them.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. For Jarod, obviously you wanted an opportunity to cut down nets here, and that's not going to happen. What do you guys feel right now?

JAROD LUCAS: It isn't easy losing the way that we did, but we knew we beat them twice this year, and they were going to come out and give us their best shot. It sucks, but the good thing about basketball is you have another opportunity. For us seniors both Kenan and I will have



so we know we'll be you will U up for the challenge. It was one setback tonight, but obviously there's going to be a lot of things we can learn from the video the next couple of days as we got ready for Selection Sunday and our next game.

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

Q. Coach, obviously, you preach defense as being so important to you guys, and to give up 80-something points, obviously it's not where you want to be. Where do you feel like the breakdown was on defense?

STEVE ALFORD: Well, their bench hurt us. They beat us in the paint, which we don't get back on the paint very much. We got in major foul trouble. We haven't been in this kind of foul trouble in a long, long time. Months with this kind of foul trouble to key guys. You know, Kenan, Nick, KJ, we just had Tre. We had four starters with two fouls in the second half.

We win the free-throw game. We get there 37 times. I thought we did a really good job and got much more aggressive in the second half. We just didn't have much it answer defending them. We didn't keep the ball in front like we normally do. We weren't as physical as we normally are. It's been tough.

These guys have performed at -- you mentioned leaving their mark. They've done that. They're 26-7. They have played unbelievable basketball for two months.

There's only two teams in this league that went through the league and won 10 out of 11, and we're the only team that won seven in a row. They got the most Quad 1 wins and the most road wins. We're a little beat up. Hunter is at home. We have guys -- this is not an excuse at all. I told you we didn't deserve to win. Colorado State very much outplayed us, but I don't want our guys getting down. I want them getting healthy.

Kenan has been sick the last two days. He gave it everything. You could tell listening to Jarod where he is at. Yeah, I don't want to use that as an excuse at all, but we've got to get healthy before we get to the NCAA Tournament.

We have to get home and get healthy before we do anything else.

Q. Obviously 15 turnovers uncharacteristic for are your team. 11 in the first half. How much did you feel like that was really detrimental, those 11 first half

turnovers?

STEVE ALFORD: Yeah, they were 18-9, and we were 11-15. That's a huge difference. The boards were pretty much equal.

I thought both teams competed. Both teams shot. We didn't shoot well in the first half, but we ended up shooting 48 for the game, and they shoot 50. You have a lot of similarities.

They get 22 at the line. We get 27. I thought the difference was just they got eight more shots on goal because of the turnovers. When you are playing in March and you are playing possession-possession basketball, you can't have one team get nine and another one get 15. We've been on the flip of that a lot this year, but not tonight.

Q. Niko had commented about the strength of the conference and the fact that they're a 7 seed here, and they might be a higher seed in the NCAA Tournament. There might be a couple of teams in this tournament that are in that situation. I guess can you just speak to -- someone might look at this you lose to a 7 seed, but the quality of what the Rams were and just the entire league.

STEVE ALFORD: Yeah, somebody has to slot into the 4, 5, 6, 7 in this league. The Mountain West Conference has been so good throughout my 11 years in it, but it's never been at the level it's been this year. This is the best it's ever been.

You have a team in UNLV who lost tonight that that was the 7 team, and they were really good. We're definitely a six-bid league if you look the all the résumés. We're one of the few leagues that have six teams in the top 36 in the NET. I don't think the NET is all it is to be. I think Quad means more.

If you look at our top six teams, what we've done in the Quad has been really good. We're one of those teams. Our résumé looks really, really good.

So I don't think losing to this game and losing to Colorado State, who has been ranked -- we've been ranked one time, and that was Monday. This is a league that has been very, very demanding for the last eight, nine weeks. I think we've done our job as a league/non-league in what we did. Got some really key wins within our nonconference. Had several teams win championships and MTE events, and now the competition for fans and everything, it's unbelievable.

The last two and a half months have been an unbelievable stretch of good basketball in the Mountain West Conference. We were fortunate to be a part of it. To go 13-5 in the regular season, obviously distraught about not being able to play another game here in the tournament, but I like what our guys have done. They've really competed all year long. We've got to get home, get healthy, and hopefully get a good seed.

The NCAA Tournament is about matchups, so we'll be praying for a good seed and good matchup.

Q. As you look into that NCAA Tournament, obviously there's a group of people that will sit in a room and decide your fate, and a lot of people feel like you are a shoo-in to get in. What would be your message? You talked about some of the metric that is you had in terms of road record and Quad 1 wins. In terms of your team on the floor, the way they play, the character of this team, what do you want I mean to know about your basketball team?

STEVE ALFORD: Well, just like Kenan and Jarod said, they represent the front of their jerseys the way it should be represented. They play very hard. We got down early tonight. If our first two games we didn't get down. Yeah, we won on a last-second shot against Colorado State, but we led that game almost start to finish.

Tonight we got down, and I thought we really responded in the second half. I thought we competed harder. We talked about that at halftime. I thought they out-competed us. Both teams worked hard, but they out-competed us.

In the second half I thought it was two teams really competing, but we got ourselves in a hole in the first half. These guys have been very consistent. Kenan mentioned it over two years. Two years ago he wasn't a point guard, and now his point guard record is 22-11, 26-7. He's done a phenomenal job.

Jarod has been a prolific, consistent scorer for us. Tre Coleman, Nick Davidson, KJ, Daniel, Tylan Pope was great tonight. We've had so many guys that have improved over the course of the year.

That's what you want, but March is nasty. It's why it's madness. I shared that with them. Season one you're going to get a lot of games. 13, 14 games. Season two you're going to get to play all your league games. You get to season three and get to season four, you're guaranteed one.

That's the nastiness of March. You work awfully hard to get yourself in position and our guys did that, and we

weren't able to advance in this tournament, but hopefully we can go and play well and advance in the next tournament.

It's not easy. It's hard to get in it, and it's hard to advance in it. I think these guys on every level -- academically, socially, what they've done in the community, what they've done for our community of Reno, how they've represented -- they've been top-notch all year long. For that I'm most pleased.

Q. I know this wasn't the result that you want, but I can kind of see between your face and from Jarod Lucas and Kenan Blackshear you guys all have a lot of confidence still despite the result of tonight. What could you say about overall the team's confidence level going into the NCAA Tournament?

STEVE ALFORD: I think we'll be fine. We need these two days to just get back to Reno and rest. We have to get some rest.

This has been a long haul to get to this point, and our guys have played -- you win eight games on the road -- we won six. I think we were 6-3 on the road in this league. That's hard to do.

So it's been a grind, but it's been a fun grind. It didn't go well tonight. We just have to get rest. I think the next 48 hours about getting rest, find out who we're playing on Sunday, and then Sunday night put in the hours as a staff and get to work.

This team will be fine. I know they're going to respond. They're upset that we were one-and-out here in this tournament, but we have got an opportunity next week to get in the national tournament, which is always a huge accomplishment and try to win a game or two or even more.

I think this is a team that can move through the tournament if we're playing our best basketball, but you have to be doing that. Colorado State won tonight because they played better basketball than we did. You get to March, you can't play your B game, and we played a B game really tonight. They played an A game, and they deserved to win.

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