

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 15, 2024

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

New Mexico Lobos

Coach Richard Pitino

Jaelen House

Jemari Baker, Jr.

Postgame Press Conference



digits, it was all points off turnovers. Last night you got back to points off turnovers. Why is it so much -- or why is it that you in particular feed so much off of turning steals into points at the other end?

JAELEN HOUSE: I mean, I like to play defense, so I think when I'm locked in defensively, it helps me offensively. I mean, I just try to do that as much as I can.

Q. Then in an atmosphere like this with that many people and with the stakes being what they are, you guys needed to win this game. I'm curious how much that played into you playing it up with the fans. There was a Boise State fan in particular at mid-court --

JAELEN HOUSE: With the hat on.

Q. -- with the hat on. What was the...

JEMARI BAKER: Don't do it. Don't do it.

Q. I will ask anyway. What was the exchange?

JAELEN HOUSE: He started before the game even started just on me. I was, like, all right, I got something for you, and that was it. That was it.

Q. Great answer. Leave it at that. I will spin it forward tomorrow night. Colorado State, it's another great point guard battle. You guys have had some great ones with Isaiah, and you split the season series, all that kind of stuff. What tomorrow can we expect under your guy's third night of all of this for both of you guys?

JAELEN HOUSE: A battle. I'm going to go out there and play as hard as I can. I know he's going to go out there and play as hard as he can, but it's not about us. It's about our team. The better team is going to win tomorrow.

Q. Jaelen, I know what defense means to you, and you heard about their guards and they were so big. What was the effort about today? Was it something to prove? Was it just to win a game? This was a tremendous defensive effort by this team.

New Mexico 76, Boise State 66.

THE MODERATOR: Student-athletes Jemari Baker, Jr., Jaelen House. Coach Rick Pitino, start with you, some thoughts on tonight's game.

RICHARD PITINO: We defended our butts off. We rebounded extremely well. They came back, but for the most part we just battled our butts off. It was a high-level of toughness. You can't beat Boise unless you scratch, claw, and our guys fought and got a huge, huge win.

So very, very proud of them. They deserved it.

Our fans were amazing. It felt like a home game. Is a great win. We beat a great team.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Coach just mentioned it, but you guys -- they rebound -- or I guess they averaged ten more rebounds than you guys do, and you led in that category for most of the way. Just what contributed to that tonight, and how did it help you out?

JAELEN HOUSE: Just not wanting to go home. We had to play with a level of toughness, like he said, and I think that's what we did tonight.

JEMARI BAKER: Yeah, just wanted to be physical really. The first couple of games they out-toughed us, and we just didn't want that to happen today. We executed the game plan and came out with the win.

Q. Jaelen, earlier in the season when you guys had that five-game win streak and beating teams by double



JAELEN HOUSE: Like I just said, we just don't want to go home. We're playing for more right now.

Q. What does that win mean? The emotions were real to you. What did this win mean?

JAELEN HOUSE: A lot. I mean, I've never been to the tournament before, so we just clinched our first tournament berth in a while, so I'm excited right now.

Q. First for you, Jemari, as a seven-year senior, your fourth school, having three big threes to help your team essentially clinch a spot in the NCAA Tournament, what does that mean to you?

JEMARI BAKER: It means a lot. I know how much it means to everybody here, everybody that's been here for three years. I just try to go out there and play confidence and do anything I can to impact winning.

Q. Jaelen, obviously an incredible performance tonight. 29 points. I know you said the fan had some impact on that performance, but what did you see on the court that really opened things up for you to explode like this today?

JAELEN HOUSE: I was just confident today. I think lately I haven't been in the best head space confident-wise, and tonight I just went out and laid it on the line and played how I play usually.

Q. Jaelen, a number of times in last night's postgame press conference, whether it was your coach or fellow players, they said you guys felt like you were bullied by Boise State the first couple of games. How much did that give you an edge tonight? For you personally Boise State did a pretty good job on you the first two games; tonight was a different story obviously.

JAELEN HOUSE: Like I said, we don't want to go home. I felt like I owed them one. I shot terrible and I didn't play well against them the first two games, so I just felt like I owed them one.

Q. You just mentioned the shooting, and I want to ask you about the shooting, because it's been four or five games the shooting hasn't been great. A lot of those outside shots and certainly the threes, 1 for 5, the shooting still doesn't seem to have come back, but you found a way to get 26 points. Are you doing something to adjust in the shooting slump? Are you just kind of staying with what you do?

JAELEN HOUSE: Trust my shot. I got this far with the

same jump shot, so I just have to trust my mechanics.

Q. This is for Jemari. You played home games and the center and now the pit. How does tonight compare to some of those atmosphere that are known as some of the cathedrals of college basketball?

JEMARI BAKER: It was incredible, man. I honestly didn't expect this coming into the tournament, but it's incredible. We need this going forward for sure. It's only going to help, and like Coach said, it felt like a home game out there.

So, man, it's exciting. It's really exciting.

Q. Then the steal or the deflection there towards the end of the game, how electric was that play, to get the take-away and seal the win there?

JEMARI BAKER: Man, it's fun. I'm just trying to do anything to impact winning, and it's definitely exciting to make plays for sure to do that when that's my goal going into the games.

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

Q. Just what does it mean to you for in year three to finally get to the Mountain West semis, and what is it about this group and this performance tonight that makes you think you can go further?

RICHARD PITINO: Boise is an extremely tough team. I think we've been really good at times this year, but I don't know how physically tough we have been. Tonight we were physically tough.

We knew. We had scouting and a game plan and all those things, but before the game I just said, you've got hit bodies. You've got to out-tough them because they're big, they're strong, and we did that.

As I've said from day one when we got here, I love the progress of the program, and we're continuing to move in the right direction. It was an amazing night, and we'll enjoy it for a little bit longer, but then we'll move on here shortly.

Q. Obviously we've talked about the effectiveness of these two tonight, but Donovan Dent, he had 22 points on 8 of 9 shooting and five steals.

RICHARD PITINO: The five steals was great. He was great in ball screen defense. He missed some free-throws at the end there where he should have had 24, 25 points. He was great, and he was defending very, very well.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

We did a great job on Max Rice, who you hold your breath when he shoots.

Both of those guys were really in a great rhythm.

Q. 76 points, but it seemed like an up-tempo game most of the night. The kind that your team thrives off of. Did you get that feel too?

RICHARD PITINO: It was moderately chaotic in the second half. I think you knew both teams were playing for a lot. Our guys, I mean, they shot 58% versus one of the best defensive teams in the country. Always in the Mountain West. We were taking good shots. We were getting to the free-throw line.

I just thought we played a smart, smart game and a tough game.

Q. Jaelen kind of alluded to it. In his mind this gets you guys in the NCAA Tournament. Is that the message, or how do you go forward in that regard in what you are still playing for if not a Mountain West Championship?

RICHARD PITINO: I would be stunned if we're not in the NCAA Tournament after getting that win right there, but now let's go see if we can get Colorado State.

We've got amazing metrics. We have, what, 24 wins. That's a Quad 1 win right there most likely, I would assume.

Amazing win. I think that's going to put us on the right side. That pressure should be off us a little bit, but we want to go win a championship. It's Friday night in Las Vegas. We should be fired up see if we can go beat Colorado State.

Q. Then as far as Jaelen goes, I am not going to ask you at this point of a three-year UNM career and a five-year college career if you are going to get him to change in any way, but he was -- he almost seems to be stepping it up a little bit, his interaction with fans.

RICHARD PITINO: You ask all the time. I don't care. I don't do it, but that's him. The guy had 29 points. What would I ever do to get in the way of that?

It doesn't affect him. Utah State, they're screaming at him, swearing at him. It doesn't affect him. So what do I care? He's a great kid. He competes his butt off. There's an old expression, you would rather tone down a bronco than warm up a corpse. I don't want to tone him down too

much. He's damn good.

Fans, it doesn't bother him. You're seeing that a little bit more with some players. They're kind of going back. It's not my cup of tea, but have at it. Keep playing great, I'll let you do it for sure.

Q. I'll ask you a basketball question.

RICHARD PITINO: That would be great.

Q. You seemed to send a double-down on Tyson and O'Mar when they were down in the block and sending that guard down. I don't remember you doing that a whole lot in Boise. Maybe you did, and I just forgot, but is that --

RICHARD PITINO: You were too busy tweeting.

Q. I tweet a lot.

RICHARD PITINO: We adjusted. We were trying to go off the bounce at Boise. It didn't work obviously. Those two kids played great so, we went on the pass right away, so a little bit different trap scheme. Went right away on them. Should have done it at Boise.

Q. In the first half Tyson Degenhart and O'Mar Stanley combined to shoot more threes than they did twos, and those two guys are so good around the rim. Was that part of your game plan, and did it work early on?

RICHARD PITINO: They shot 29%, so I think we did a great job. We wanted to make a mess of the paint, and we wanted to get them to throw the ball out because they really hurt us at their place. We didn't do a good job there.

Great job of adjusting by our guys. Tyson is so good. Even Stanley is so good. We did a great job on them.

Q. Just kind of curious, follow-up to what Jaelen said earlier. He said it wasn't the best head space recently when it came to his confidence. How were you guys able to fix him or whatever, but give him the confidence to come out and do what he did tonight?

RICHARD PITINO: He can bring value in a lot of other ways besides making shots. The biggest thing I tell all those guys is to stay confident. You can impact a game in other ways besides shooting the basketball. Especially a guy like Jaelen who is a terrific defender.

If you just get out of your own head and pour yourself into the team, it can help you get out of it, but guys go through it. And take good shots. Sometimes you take some tough

shots. Sometimes it makes the game difficult, but he can also make some amazing plays.

Q. You have Colorado State coming up tomorrow night. Another team that, like you guys, looks like they may be playing their best basketball of the year right now. On the defensive side how would you try to go about slowing down a Colorado State offense that has really seemed to have found its stride in the last two days?

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, they run great stuff. Stevens one of the best players to play in this conference for a long time, so it won't be easy.

We won't get a lot of sleep tonight, and we'll work our butt off to put the best game plan together that we can.

Q. I wanted to ask you about J.T. He gets two points, but every other column in the stat sheet is just busting up. What can you say about what he does when he doesn't score the ball?

RICHARD PITINO: He rebounded the ball extremely well. We wanted to see if we can get some blocked shots. He had three shot blocks there. He was a little bit beat up in the first half. Came back and was terrific. I thought our front core guys, we challenged them, and they certainly answered that challenge.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

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UNLV had been playing as good as anyone.

Give New Mexico a ton of credit that that was a team on a mission, and they got veteran guards that were on a mission, and I saw that tonight. I said that one of my guys today, I'm pretty sure Jaelen is not going to miss shots tonight, and he was great. He was taking it to the hole.

It's not like it's a surprise or that they sneak-attack you. It's just one of those things that's easier said than done to keep those guys from getting to the hoop and then also just they took some of our misses that we had a couple of late when we were making a good run that just kind of rattled in and rattled out, and then they go down and get a lay-in at the other end. The big huge five-point swings, we needed those to drop.

Like I said, we battled back the second half, and I really liked the way we competed. I got a team that always responds in the greatest way, and we get another chance to respond next week.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Just what kind of stood out to you about the way you fought and didn't let this game get away from you and what would this win have meant to you guys?

TYSON DEGENHART: I think one thing we take away is we competed until the end. We cut it to four or five with 30 seconds left and we were still in the game. I'm really proud of our guys to fight until the end. Would have been a big win for us, but you just have to learn from this experience and go into next week.

Q. Tyson, 23 and 12 rebounds on a night where you didn't rebound as well as you would have wanted to. What was your mindset going into it as far as physicality and doing those things?

TYSON DEGENHART: I don't think we had the physicality that we need to do have in the first half. I think we came out with a great mindset in the second and really competed and just left it all out on the floor.

New Mexico 76, Boise State 66

THE MODERATOR: For Boise State we have student-athletes Tyson Degenhart, Max Rice. Coach Leon Rice, comments on tonight's game.

LEON RICE: Well, I thought New Mexico came out and really got after us and kind of sped us up in the first half. We had some uncharacteristic turnovers, but credit them. They can turn you over. They weren't doing it in the full court, but they were doing it trapping us and really aggressive on the ball.

I thought they kind of set a good tone, and we were kind of a little slow to respond, but in the old days of this tournament in other years the teams that were playing on the first day were not NCAA Tournament teams. So now you've got NCAA Tournament teams, now they got a game under their belt.

I mean, we all know how go ahead this league is. I mean, that's an advantage nobody wants to have. You don't want to have to play four, but the team that -- they played great yesterday, and they carried it over into today, and they have good momentum.

We looked like a team that kind of was a little slow to get going not because maybe of us. I think our guys were ready. It's just I think they really came in, and they were carried over from yesterday. They were firing on all cylinders.

We had a lot of great teams in this league and a lot of -- I think we secured six bids now. You take UNLV's first four weeks of the season out. Really that's seven NCAA Tournament level teams that are in this league, because



Q. Coach had already mentioned about how they trapped -- they found some success in trapping you. How did they do it differently, though, than a couple of weeks ago in Boise?

TYSON DEGENHART: I think they came right off the pass instead of letting the dribble a little bit. I think we had a good game plan of trying to get Roddie to the middle. We just didn't do a good enough job of hitting him and letting him make a play.

Q. They are also a team that has been very open about how you guys have been able to get the better of them. You guys had won, I don't know, five or six out of the last seven. It's always been about size. They know who they are. They have three short guards that play an awful lot. How are you guys able when you guys have beat them to exploit that, and how were they able to sort of just maybe get the better of that matchup today with those short guards?

MAX RICE: They put Dent on me today, which I thought was a smart move by Pitino. It kind of took me out of my game a little bit.

They also doubled. They were playing harder today than they did in the last two games. They knew what was at stake tonight, and they played really well.

Q. Max, Leon kind of alluded to House was going to make his shots tonight; 12 an 9 in the first two games against you guys, 29 tonight. What was different about his game?

MAX RICE: He did good at getting to the line. I think he got to the rim also better than he had been against us.

But he is a talented dude and we know that. He just played well tonight, and he has been playing well all season. He just struggled against us the last two times, and he was due for a good one.

Q. Tyson, you made a couple of runs in the second half, but it seemed like every time you did, they had an answer. How frustrating was that that you get close and then it would be a ten-point game again?

TYSON DEGENHART: It's definitely frustrating. We're making those runs, cutting it to four. We just need one stop, and we just weren't able to get it tonight.

Q. Early in the game some of those turnovers led to easy -- I think the first seven points were off turnovers, and then you are kind of playing catch-up the rest of the game. The start and the crowd getting into it right

away and just you guys just kind of seemed just not in sync for a good chunking of the game. How surprising was that tonight?

TYSON DEGENHART: It was pretty uncharacteristic for our team. We just got a little sped-up and going from our past experiences in the NCAA Tournament. You can't dig yourself in a hole like that because it's harder to dig yourself out.

We were down 19 to Memphis and almost dug out of that, but it was too little too late. Definitely something we'll learn from to take into next week.

Q. What did you see, Max, in terms of why you guys were not really in a flow and out of sync and just wasn't your typical performance tonight?

MAX RICE: Yeah, no, we were fine. Don't get it twisted. That's the most talented team in the Mountain West top to bottom. I think -- I do not envy the 6, 7 seed that has to play them in the NCAA Tournament. We were ready. It wasn't a matter of not being ready.

That team, when they're locked in, they're going to beat a lot of teams in this country. They played better than us tonight, and that's that.

LEON RICE: You have to remember that team was 18-3 the first time we played them, and they went -- I think everyone at that time was, like, this is the best team in the Mountain West. It's just the Mountain West is so good. There was ups and downs for everybody, and you saw a team that played up tonight.

But it's not like they haven't done that previously. Remember when we went down there. They were beating everybody by 30. Everybody. So like Max said, it's a really, really good team. I mean, when you have that many good guards and those big guys, man, they're terrific.

Yeah, it's not like -- that was a really good basketball team that has veteran guys. They knew what was at stake. They needed this tonight.

So did we. It wasn't like we didn't come out and have -- and compete. We competed. I think it just got us -- it just took us a little longer to get going. Like you said, then you are battling uphill. Had we came out a little bit better, I think who knows?

Q. For both of you guys, how do you feel just -- you responded a lot this season after a loss and things. Just going into next week, regrouping, and getting a chance obviously goal to make history next week?



TYSON DEGENHART: I mean, we'll just take the time to rest up and wait for Selection Sunday. Then we'll just see where we're playing and get prepared for whoever we're at stake with.

This team with our backs against the wall has always played the best. Now with the next loss our season is over. Our backs are really against the wall now. I know our team is going to do a great job of responding and recovering over this next week.

Q. Max, talking about it today, there's probably only a small handful of people that have seen every single Boise State game in the Mountain West Conference Tournament. I'm guessing you are one of them. It's not very often that you can sit here after a loss at the Mountain West Tournament and still feel pretty confident on Selection Sunday. Along those lines, just curious what is your feeling going into Selection Sunday?

MAX RICE: I really like our résumé right now. I think it's only going to get better with Colorado State winning tonight too. They can move to a Quad 1 for us. That would be our seventh I think Quad 1 win. I think we're sitting pretty.

It's a matter of staying confident and staying together as a team. But when you look alternate our résumé from top to bottom, I think we're doing really well. This will help New Mexico's résumé also. Yeah, I think we're in a good spot.

THE MODERATOR: I'm going to dismiss the student-athletes at this time. Questions for Coach.

Q. I'll pick it up right there. It is not too often that you have been able to sit here after a loss at the Mountain West Tournament and still feel good about going into Selection Sunday. How do you feel about going into Selection Sunday with the body of work that you have?

LEON RICE: I think it's beyond pretty good. It's terrific. This was the best the league has ever been and we finished second. You know, a free-throw here or there out of first really when you think about it, so terrific.

The chair of the committee, the thing that jumps out at me, he said, we're going to reward teams that went out and scheduled. Check. Which we did.

And then won games away from their home, which we got some high-quality wins especially in the league.

You couldn't ask -- I think we're being undervalued by some people. We'll see what the committee does, but we

have a really, really good résumé when you look at who we played and night-in-night-out it was pretty impressive. We played NCAA Tournament teams all over this schedule, and we beat a lot of good ones.

You look at the amount of Quad 1 wins we have, really no bad losses. Not much more you could do really. I mean, obviously you win every game. There's a lot more you can do, but really our guys are juiced up about it. We're ready to go.

You have to just shake this off and move on. When you are in a great league, it's the team that plays the best that wins. That's what happened tonight. They played great.

Q. You've been so adamant about how you want to continue to grow this program. I remember days where it felt like your family was the only people that traveled to Las Vegas, and now you look up there, and you have a nice following. On that note, too, you look over at New Mexico and what they bring here.

LEON RICE: No doubt.

Q. It almost felt like it was a semi-home game tonight. What did you think of their support? As you grow, what do you think of your support?

LEON RICE: You're right. What a great atmosphere for a late game. Our fans are more and more coming. You are just building it brick by brick and getting more and more interest. Wish we would have kept them around for a little longer.

But, yeah, it did. It felt like a road game tonight, no doubt. The New Mexico fans showed up, and they always have. I don't remember very many times when they didn't in my 14 years here, 13 years in this league.

You know, it was a great Mountain West crowd and good atmosphere for a tournament game, but I'm so grateful to the fans that did come. Sorry we couldn't keep them around for tomorrow's game too.

Q. Leon, they had a 40-20 edge on points in the paint. I think in the first half you guys only had three field goals that weren't threes, and you took 34 threes tonight, and their dribble penetration was hurting you too. How do you look at that give-and-take, I guess, where you are having tough on the inside and they were having some success in there?

LEON RICE: That's where we had a bit of an advantage. It's one of those things guarding them is easier said than done. You know what they're going to do. You know, they

finished. Donovan Dent, man, he finished as good as any guard in the country when he gets in there. There's a couple of times where we bodied him up pretty good, and it seemed like we contested pretty good, and he still finished it.

Again, hats off to those guys. He had 22 points off nine shots. That's pretty darn efficient. And made good decisions all night. Handled the ball. That kind of stuff.

Like I said, just tip of a cap to those guys. It's going to be interesting the rest of the way in this tournament. We'll see what happens.

Q. Leon, it felt like the looks were there.

LEON RICE: In the second half, yeah.

Q. Max had an in-and-out that makes it a one-possession game there. Roddie was getting to the basket at will but was having a hard time finishing. It just felt like there was a lot of bunnies that were missed tonight. Was there a common denominator with those or that's how it goes sometimes?

LEON RICE: That is. That was more in the second. Roddie got to the paint pretty good in the first half and didn't finish any of them. Second half he did a better job of getting in there and mixing up. Finished some. Kicked some.

We just settled down a little bit and got better. There was. It was a big play. Max had a three, and it looked like it was in and it rattled around. Then it rolled around, came off, and then they laid it in. It was a five-point swing that would have cut it to three, and that's -- if that goes, who knows, but that's basketball.

Q. The team only shot 29% tonight, 29.4. You guys were still able to scrape together 66 points, and it was only a ten-point loss. New Mexico played fantastic tonight. What can you say about how your team --

LEON RICE: We compete and we battle. If we didn't do that, yeah, you could have got blown out with all those -- look at those numbers. No doubt.

It was a four-point game with 30 seconds to go. After all that it was a four-point game with 30 seconds to go. Our guys never quit and they battled. They don't -- we've all seen teams that when the ball just won't go and it just affects everything. Our team is pretty good about keep fighting.

We have 18 offensive rebounds and kept fighting there and

kind of flipped the boards a little bit in the second half. You know, they knew that they had to control that or be close, even with us to win that game, and they battled on the glass too.

So just a good college basketball battle.

Q. Leon, kind of the same question I asked Max. When you're able to shut down a shooter like House for two games, how hard is it -- you know he is going to be motivated coming into the third game -- how hard is it to do it a third time?

LEON RICE: I felt that today. I was just, like, okay, he's not going to miss. We're not counting on him missing tonight.

These veteran guards, he knew that it's win or go home in both tournaments really probably is where they -- who knows, but that's how they approached it. When you have veteran guards that are playing for their lives, that's what he looked like tonight.

All of them, they were clutch down the -- they made their free-throws down the stretch, when they were fouling. They did what they had to do to win.

Q. Depending if you get a Thursday slot, Friday slot, it's going to be one game in 13 or 14 days that you have played. Do you embrace that rest, or do you worry about rust?

LEON RICE: Say that again.

Q. Depending on if you are playing on Thursday or Friday, it will be one game you guys have played in the previous 13 or 14 --

LEON RICE: This time of year any day that you can get any rest is a blessing. It's a blessing because it's a long grind of the season. We'll come in fresh, excited. It's the NCAA Tournament. It's the greatest sporting event there is.

Now, we'll play a great team because they did something to get there too. But we'll be excited and ready to go. That's how it is in that tournament.

Q. You already alluded to Donovan a little bit, but I wanted to go more into Donovan Dent. 22 points. He drew eight fouls. He had five steals on the defensive end. His kind of complete package has grown so much this year even though he's playing with Mash and House and two guards in his same spot. Can you talk about the growth you've seen as an opposing

coach over the last two years in Donovan?

LEON RICE: Yeah, and we knew that was coming, but it is hard. That's hard -- because you have three guys that need the ball in their hands, and so credit Coach Pitino and his staff for figuring that out. That's a hard thing to figure out, and it's a hard thing to get those guys -- because they all -- when you have three guys like that that their strengths are pretty similar, it can affect -- because one guy is doing it, and then the next guy says, well, I have to go do it too. It can have a negative effect because they all can do that.

They've settled in nicely and figured out roles nicely and how they can all co-exist effectively. That's what it looked like tonight. I think it's the accumulation of a season of learning and growing and learning and growing. They're settled into something that looks pretty good right now.

Q. Real quick, I know you already kind of alluded to you think they're getting in now. They thought their win tonight probably gets them in. Assuming they're in, what kind of a matchup problem -- I know you don't know who they're going to play, but what kind of a matchup problem does a team like New Mexico present just in general?

LEON RICE: Yeah, so many good guards. We keep talking about the guards. Those big guys are terrific too. Like I said, like Max said, they're one of the most talented teams in our league, and that's saying something.

When they're clicking, like I said, when they're 18-3, and we went down there, they were clicking. Like every team, you go through a valley of death, and you go through -- but I don't envy the team that they draw. Good luck.

Q. If we learned anything through the Mountain West this year, night in, night out it seems like the tougher team wins. It's not to say that a team is not tough on any given night, but as you go into the NCAA Tournament with your past experiences, have you ever been this prepared from an opponent's strength of schedule-wise to face what you will at the NCAA Tournament?

LEON RICE: Yeah, but the NCAA Tournament is so much about matchups too. You look at some of the past ones, and I've been to I think it's 16. I'm not sure. The matchups were everything.

I've had good ones. I've had bad ones over the course of my whole career. You just don't know. You just don't know what breaks you're going to get, what matchups you're going to get. That's for everybody, not just us.

If you can keep going back enough times, pretty soon you're going to break through. You just have to put yourself in that position where you can keep going back, keep having a chance, and then maybe you get the right matchup that fits your style, that kind of thing.

An example of what I'm talking about is one year at Gonzaga we were the No. 1 rebounding team in the country, and we ended up playing the No. 2 rebounding team, Wyoming, down at The Pit. That kind of canceled out our strength.

Had we played a team that wasn't a great rebounding team like we were, we might have had a big advantage, but the rebounds were even, and it canceled out. That's what I mean by the style and the --

So you can't control that. You just see where it falls. Then you just have to go out and play.

Then the other thing, you know, you have to be able -- you can't go shoot 29% and get it done. You have to make some shots. It is a game of making shots. It's hard, but that's the thing we've done a nice job of is our guys compete and compete and compete. We shot 29%, and we were down four with 30 seconds to go. But you have to make some shots to beat good teams.

Q. You always say when there's four home games left, you remind Bronco Nation, hey, there's only four home games to see these guys. You guys are down to one guaranteed game left. How does the message evolve I guess as you guys are literally playing for tomorrow from here on out?

LEON RICE: Yeah, and when Max said that, it hits you because we've enjoyed each other. Our guys, this has been -- every team has been great for their own reasons. I've enjoyed coaching. This team, I've never had a group where the 30 of us just have such a good time together working, grinding, competing. It's just been a joy.

It started back in our trip to Canada. So it's a long, long journey, but we've really kept good perspective. We've stayed in the moment. These guys, they don't want it to end, and they'll do anything not to have it end. That's what we get the opportunity to do.

When you get to this tournament, you're going to play somebody really good. Otherwise, they wouldn't be there. So we're going to have to play a great game, but these guys are not going to want it to end because none of us -- there's some teams out there, they're done. They're tired of the whole thing because it's such a long season, but not this team with us. We're going to fight and scratch and

claw to keep it going.

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