

# Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Wednesday, March 13, 2024

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

**Fresno State Bulldogs**

**Coach Justin Hutson**

**Donavan Yap Jr.**

**Isaiah Pope**

Postgame Press Conference

Fresno State 77, Wyoming 73

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to begin with Fresno State. We have Donavan Yap and Isaiah Pope. Coach Justin Hutson, we'll start with you and get some thoughts on today's game.

JUSTIN HUTSON: Hard-fought game by both teams. I got so much respect for Coach Linder and the program that he runs. There's some really good coaches in the Mountain West. You start having five and six people going. All it takes is for him to lose Ike and me to lose Orlando and Niko to lose Roddy. Next thing you know you're in trouble.

So very proud of my guys for continuing to fight like the 6'5" and under team out there. They continued to fight and run and fight through turnovers that we've had and continue to play defense. So we deserved one of these.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. How do you guys not get discouraged when they went on that 10-0 run late in the fourth, and what turned the tide for you when you went on your run to win it?**

DONAVAN YAP, JR.: I feel like we just kept a positive mindset. Even though we was down a lot, we wasn't going to give up. We just kept fighting to the end, and we were happy with the result that we came out with.

**Q. Donavan, a big hit to lose Isaiah there in the end. How happy were you that you were able to finish it out without him?**

DONAVAN YAP, JR.: Our guys stepped up. Without Pope



in the game at the end, a lot of guys had to step up to the challenge and get the job done are. Thankfully we were able to do that. Are it's a good feeling for sure.

**Q. Kot went for 14 points, didn't miss a shot in the first half. What did you do in the second half to slow him down?**

ISIAH POPE: He's really good at coming off the ball screens, making plays by himself. He likes to pull up jumpers a lot, so Hut told us to come off the ball screens and hide him, get the ball out of his hands and try to run him off the line because he had made a couple of threes. We listened to the game plan and executed it and got the stops that we needed.

**Q. You guys just lost to this team by 39 points four days ago. What has been the message this week, and how did you turn it around? They made a lot of hay inside in the last game. Not so much today.**

ISIAH POPE: It's a mentality thing, like Coach likes to say. We got down early that last game, and I think a lot of us just gave up on ourselves, you know what I'm saying?

Coming in today, this is it. It could be it. At least for me, it could be my last game ever. So I just told the guys -- I thought to myself if this is my last 40 minutes, I'm going to give it everything I have. And I think we all did that and stepped up. We played defense. We made big shots. We got good free-throws, made them.

It's basketball, baby. That's the beauty of basketball. One day you lose by 39. One day you win by four. You know what I'm saying? You got to love it.

**Q. Isaiah, you had the best game of your season today. What does it mean to you to extend your senior season?**

ISIAH POPE: It means everything. If we lose here, this is it for me and my college career. That's what I'm saying. Me and Zay, we're just going out there and going to play as hard as we can for the 40 minutes that we have.



It's a humbling experience, and I'm grateful we got the win for sure, and I'm ready to get back out there tomorrow with my brothers.

**Q. Donovan, this is your first game back in a month. To have that kind of performance in your hometown, what does that mean to you?**

DONAVAN YAP, JR.: It means a lot to me. We were able to get the W being able to play in the Mountain West Tournament back at my hometown. It's pretty fun too having family and friends out there to support me.

It was hard for the month that I was out. I wanted to be out there with my brothers. As soon as I got the news I could play, I was excited. Told my team. Told Coach Hut. I was ready to get back out there and try to be Wyoming.

**Q. Donovan, you came off the bench, 16 points, 5 rebounds in your hometown. Obviously I know you kind of just answered this question, but how do you think that momentum you built up in your first game back is going to help you as you guys go and play Colorado State next game? Not Colorado State. Utah State. Sorry.**

DONAVAN YAP, JR.: It felt good being able to kind of get my flow back in the game, you know, being out for a month. I just tried to stay confident, keep God first. Coach Hut puts a lot of confidence in me, my teammates. It really wasn't that difficult to come back my first game back. My teammates and Coach Hut believed in me, so that kind of uplifted me when I did go out there. Then being at home that helps too, so...

**Q. You guys play the Aggies tomorrow. They're the outright champions of the Mountain West Conference. What is your attitude going into it?**

JUSTIN HUTSON: We will respect them. We have great respect for everybody in our conference, and for it to be such a good conference and for Sprink to win it in his first year says a whole lot. We have much respect for them. They beat us pretty bad at their place. They made a 35-foot bank shot on us at our place. That was tough.

We're just going to take it new and come out like we play every other team and show a healthy respect, but be ready to compete.

**Q. Justin, kind of the same question I had for Isaiah. How do you turn it around in four days like that from what you witnessed in your home court, and also were you shocked to not see Cam Manyawu out there in the second half?**

JUSTIN HUTSON: I wasn't shocked. It's just kind of what it is. You're coaching your team, but...

That's the second one first, but I appreciate it.

But you go back and watch film. After that butt-whipping we took, then we took a day off, which you didn't want to do, but everybody gets to regroup, and you go back and watch film. What can you change schematically? What could you do better than you were supposed to do? Then how can we have a mentality change?

As the leader, then you fight for those three things no matter what, and you don't give in. That's just how it is. So we lost to them in overtime up there the first time, but we had our whole team. We had Eduardo. We know he was hurt. It was a heck of a game, and we had our whole team, but these guys know with these five or six guys that we can play.

**Q. Coach, this is a team that's got five seniors on it, two fifth-years. As you were coming down that stretch and kind of looking into the void and you guys were able to pull off this incredible comeback, just what can you tell me about the range of emotions that you went through through the last 30 seconds or so?**

JUSTIN HUTSON: Those grade questions are deceiving nowadays, because we only got two guys that leave that don't have any eligibility. So it's deceiving when you call somebody a senior or super senior or junior. Depends on what it is.

The range of emotions was just pride for them and happy for them. I thought we deserved a few other games, but that's how it goes. This time we deserved this one too, but it doesn't mean we were going to win. The ball goes in or it doesn't at times.

You just wanted to come and play the way that we knew we can play and give everything we can have and stick together. When that happens as a coach and a leader, you want success for them. That's the first thing you do.

Of course, you like it, but you want to see them cheer and jump around, so I'm happy for them.

**Q. Yap, you ended the last three minutes of the first half dominating, six points. You came in the second half also dominating. What got into you? Did you feel more confident now that you had played a couple of minutes, got back into the rhythm?**

DONAVAN YAP, JR.: A little bit, and then I think for the

most part I just didn't want to let my teammates down. I wanted to come in and just give it all I had, kind of like Isaiah Pope said. Just give it all I had.

This could be our last time together, so I'm just trying to go out there and do whatever it is I could do. And luckily I was able to score the six points.

**Q. How is the hand feeling now?**

DONAVAN YAP, JR.: It's feeling good. A little sore, but it's nothing.

**Q. Coach, you guys played Wyoming two times in this past week. Do you feel like that was a benefit to your guys' game that you guys played them?**

JUSTIN HUTSON: I think you always -- if you have the right mindset, that's just human nature. When they come in and beat you that bad, human nature, they may let down and human nature we're going to be upset, but at the end of the year, it doesn't always happen that way.

The difference was it happened at the end of the year where our guys could have packed it in. You know they were ready. I mean, we played them. They beat us on a last-second shot at Wyoming, so they knew we were going to come ready.

It just happened with the guys on the floor. The guys on the floor continued to fight, and we came up on the winning end this time.

**Q. Six offensive rebounds, nine second-chance points. None of them bigger than Leo's putback to take the lead at the end. Just what does that say about your team's fight and the willingness to win?**

JUSTIN HUTSON: It says a lot because we're not a big offensive rebounding team, so it says I'm going to do what it takes at the end of this game to make a play because that's not one of our strengths.

**Q. Five players in double figures tonight. Just what did you like most about the way you guys were able to spread the ball and get offense from everywhere?**

JUSTIN HUTSON: That is one of our strengths when we play right. We don't have any selfish guys on the team. They all are playing to win, but sometimes we get passive. Sometimes we get a little over-aggressive. I just thought we continued to move the ball, and we played right, and we had some guys step up that are sitting next to me and a few others that just made some big shots and continued to play.

**Q. My last question is, kind of going along with what we've already asked about how you're prepping for USU tomorrow, are there any specific players that you're looking out for, any of the three of you that you are worried about?**

JUSTIN HUTSON: That whole team.

ISAIAH POPE: Yeah.

JUSTIN HUTSON: That whole team. The ones on the bench, the coaches, everybody. That whole team. They'll be ready. They'll be ready. So will we.

ISAIAH POPE: Yes, sir.

DONAVAN YAP, JR.: Yep.

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**Wyoming Cowboys**

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THE MODERATOR: For Wyoming we have Brendan Wenzel, Sam Griffin, Akuel Kot, Coach Jeff Linder. Coach, thoughts on today's game?

JEFF LINDER: Well, obviously give credit to Fresno State. We knew after we had beaten them by 39 four days ago that that wasn't going to be the Fresno State team that we saw today, and we knew that we would see a team a lot like the team that we saw when we had to beat them at the buzzer a couple of months ago at our place.

Give them credit for finding a way to win that game, which I thought we gave ourselves -- put ourselves in position to win it. But then at the end of the day, you have to be able to finish. And that's where down the stretch the last couple of minutes when we got the lead and a couple of turnovers, the free-throws -- I mean, they went 22 for 23 from the line. We went 15 for 26. A couple of dead ball fouls where no time went off the clock there in the last three minutes as well.

Overall, though, the effort of these guys. I mean, with Sam, Wenzel, Kenny, Akuel, Mason Walters, I mean, for those guys considering where we were at at this time last year, obviously they're disappointed with the result, but these guys, they did a lot to get us back in the right track and the right direction. I can't thank those guys enough. The guys in the locker room as well.

This time last year, I wasn't even here when my dad passed away. For us to get back here, these guys played a big, big part. And those young guys in the locker room,



they're going to learn a lesson about you beat a team a couple times, it's never easy to beat them a third time, especially a team like Fresno who Coach Hutson is always going to have them prepared. They're always going to play hard.

And we knew our effort had to match or exceed theirs, which is I thought what we did on Saturday. It's a new day and they found a way to win it. Give them credit.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Sam, I guess Coach kind of touched on it a little bit, but how much does the free-throw shooting just kind of come back to hurt you there at the end?**

SAM GRIFFIN: We could have made more free-throws. Free-throws and other things as well. Defensively we had to be better. So it's free-throws and other stuff as well.

**Q. For all three of you guys, just what -- when you think back on this team and you think back on this year and all the Cowboys have been through and all this program has been through, what are your main takeaways going to be from this team and this year?**

BRENDAN WENZEL: A take-away from this year is that we didn't -- last year was really tough. Years can flip like that. It just depends how hard you work, how bad you want it. This year we had a really good group of guys.

It made basketball a lot easier this year. So just thankful for all the new guys that we got. I'm thankful for Coach. It's just -- you can always turn things around.

I think we set a good example for the young guys and what to prepare for for next year, so...

**Q. The game was going back and forth, Brendan, throughout the second half, and then you had a 10-0 run that you finished off. It felt like you were in complete control. What do you think happened over the last three minutes?**

BRENDAN WENZEL: Just weren't getting stops. It's my



fault too. I had a lot of fouls. I wasn't making shots either, so...

I don't know. It's tough. They had offensive rebounds. They made free-throws. We didn't. It all comes down to the little things. That turnover at the end that I had, just can't have things like that if you want to win.

**Q. First for Akuel. As you look back on your collegiate journey starting at Fort Lewis, working your way up to here having two very solid years what does being a Wyoming Cowboy mean to you?**

AKUEL KOT: As I look back, being a Cowboy it was an amazing year just for the opportunity. For Coach and the whole coaching staff, my teammates, just for that whole opportunity, it was a blessing, and I enjoyed every single day. I was looking forward to every single day.

We enjoy being around each other. I would just say we had a lot of great moments as a team. Like Coach said, we've just been trying to go up the right direction. And that's what this program has been doing this past year. That's been a goal going in, so, yeah, it's been great.

**Q. Brendan, what did Fresno State do so differently today, and did you know that Yap was going to play?**

BRENDAN WENZEL: No. No, we didn't know he was going to play. We didn't do a very good job on him last time either. But it just comes down to we didn't get as many stops as we did a couple of days ago. So can't stop them all, but we have to just be better. All of us individually, as a group, everyone, there's always room to improve.

THE MODERATOR: We'll let the players go at this time. Questions for Coach.

**Q. I know Cam was in foul trouble early, but only eight minutes today. Why?**

JEFF LINDER: Well, just in terms of the flow of the game and you could tell that just -- Cam has had a couple of those moments as freshmen. When you get to the conference tournament setting, when the lights are a little bit brighter -- and not to say that he had -- he was scared, but you could just tell he was a little bit off.

They played small. With Yap coming back, it gave them an extra guy. And they just stayed and played small kind of like what they had been doing up until Boakye came back. That's where just the flow of the game, just where we needed -- just we had to go play a little bit smaller. Because us playing bigger wasn't what we needed to do at

the time, which we did go small. And really when Caden was at the 5 when we made that 10-0 run, we spread the floor out.

And then I thought we kind of got the game back under control, but we knew it wasn't going to be what we saw on Saturday. But also our defensive effort over the last five games where we've held teams under 42%, that's kind of what's put us to where we've won some games.

For them to come out -- and give them credit really -- just kind of put their head down and drove it. That's where it just comes down to you have to find ways to get a few more stops.

Then they shot 57% in the second half. We found some ways to turn it over. For the most part did a good job on the offensive glass. The last one there where kind of I thought Mason had the ball, and somehow it just -- we had a lot of those where kind of the ball was there. But in those type of situations in the postseason, it just comes down to possessions.

It's the little things within the possession. The 50/50 balls, deflections, those are the things that add up. Give Colimerio credit. He was at the right place at the right time and found a way to pick it up and score it.

**Q. What are some of your biggest takeaways from this season and some goals going into the offseason?**

JEFF LINDER: Obviously with the returning guys, Wenzel, Kenny and Caden and Cort, just for those guys to stick with us, to believe in us. You can't thank them enough.

Then Mason, Akuel, Sam, I mean, the thing those three guys brought was just they never took a rep off. Every day in practice they never -- they were always every day guys.

Those guys in terms of their work ethic and how they treated every rep in practice, I mean, that goes a long ways with Kael and Cam, Caden, those young guys, in terms of as we move forward. That's where as we do move forward with the guys that will return it's knowing that regardless of a lesson of you beat a team twice, everyone says it's hard to beat them a third time. Well, it's not that hard. It's been done many a times if you do the things necessary to beat them.

We put ourselves in a position. Sometimes you just don't get the breaks. We've gotten a lot of breaks. We've been really good in close games. That's the one thing.

If it's a close game, our record has been really good, but just a couple of turnovers, the missed free-throws, a couple

of those fouls where they didn't have to really earn the basket, those things add up, and it cost us.

**Q. Jeff, obviously you have thanked those guys for kind of getting the program back in the right direction. Do you have more fire going into the offseason, or do you just kind of wait and see what happens and then adjust accordingly with this new world?**

JEFF LINDER: Yeah, it's obviously a new world. You are constantly adapting to it. We'll go back and see. Hopefully it won't be last year where you have to go out and get ten new guys, but obviously we're going to have to add a few pieces.

We'll have to continue to get the guys that do stay -- we just have to continue to get those guys better. That's the biggest thing in this day and age, the insanity that's college basketball, is that, yeah, can you have the ability to retain guys?

The ability to retain to where they can develop the discipline -- the habits, the discipline, the effort that's required to put yourself in a position to really compete for championships. So that's where at least going into this offseason you'll have a core group of guys coming back that they can build off of this season, add a few more pieces, and then give yourself a chance next year.

**Q. My question is about Akuel Kot and Mason Walters, who both have very unique journeys starting at the lower levels of college basketball and excelling there and ending up at Wyoming. What can you say about how you've seen them grow as they got to Laramie and just what you have thought of how their career has finished up?**

JEFF LINDER: Obviously, first and foremost, they're phenomenal, phenomenal human beings who come from phenomenal families, so the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Like anything, having played and coached at the Division II level, lower levels, there's a lot of good players at that level. I mean, there's a lot of players at this level that are not very good. If you're a good player, you're a good player.

It takes a little bit of time, especially in this league and how good this league is, to adjust and adjust to just probably the night-in-and-night-out, the overall size, length, and athleticism. The thing about this league is it's a smart league. It's not a dumb league where guys make mistakes.

That's where with those guys as they got more and more

comfortable with -- Mason, having missed the non-con because of an injury, it took him a little while to feel it out, but those guys put us in position to win 15 games. That's a credit to them. It's a credit to their work ethic.

That's also what's going to allow them to continue to play basketball after here and start their pro career next year.

**Q. Brendan said he didn't know that Yap was going to play. I assume you didn't either. How much of a difference did that guy make?**

JEFF LINDER: Obviously you're not sure this time of year who is playing, who is not playing. It's not like we hadn't played against him before. Played well at our place.

Obviously he can kind of do some different things off the bounce and make some plays. From a length and athleticism standpoint at the guard spot, can defend. He's been around for four, five years.

Once he started kind of warming up, we obviously put him on the board. But really at the end of the day he had 16. He also had five turnovers. But obviously for us it was just getting enough stops, and really what it boiled down to is just sitting guarding the ball.

That's where I thought with Caden and that stretch, he did a really good job of helping us get that lead with his ability to guard on the ball screen. As I said, give them credit. They made the plays when they needed to make the plays.

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