

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 13, 2025

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

Nevada Wolf Pack

Coach Steve Alford

Nick Davidson

Kobe Sanders

Postgame Press Conference

Colorado State - 67, Nevada -59

STEVE ALFORD: I just really appreciate our guys. They battled. We obviously are down men. We ended up getting beat 9-0 off the bench. That really ended up being the difference. When you look at the stat line, it's really, really even across the board, other than our shooting, 3-point shooting.

So I was just really proud of the guys. I thought they gave incredible effort. They've been doing this. They've been stacking days of effort. About the time we think we're going to get over the hump then somebody else goes out.

We only had eight available and played all eight. And I thought everybody that played gave us everything they've got.

These two have been tremendous all year. The thing I like about what Nick and Kobe have done, have just gotten better month to month in obviously a different role for Kobe because he's with a different team. Nick last year was that third scorer for us with Kenad and Jarod. Now we're asking him to be the 1-2 scorer with Kobe. And he's done a phenomenal job just getting better month to month. And I think Kobe has done that too.

We've seen some progress with some of these other guys that weren't getting the minutes and now all of a sudden started getting minutes because of the injuries.

Hard-fought game. They gave us obviously a very, very good team. We've had two three-possession games and one one-possession game with them. I appreciate the effort our guys gave.



Q. Kobe, to think that this season has come to an end but you guys battled in close games, as Coach mentioned, being shorthanded. What do you think was the difference for you guys to be able to stay connected throughout this stretch?

KOBE SANDERS: It's definitely tough when we lose some main guys. But just staying together as a team. We were only together for some months, but I feel like I'm as close with these guys than any team I've ever been with.

So just keeping our heads together and listening to Coach and trying to fight every day, stack every day.

Q. Why do you think it was so difficult just to get stuff going there on offense there early in the second half?

KOBE SANDERS: You go through ups and downs in games. I feel like that was one of our downs. We missed some easy shots around the rim that, I think, normally would go in. When stuff like that happens, you've just got to keep pushing. It just didn't go our way tonight.

Q. Kobe, would you like to play another game for Nevada?

KOBE SANDERS: I'd love to. I would love to.

Q. Nick, what's it meant to suit up with Kobe this year. I know you have a tight bound.

NICK DAVIDSON: It's been awesome. To have that guy by my side has been truly amazing. Him kind of showing me how to be one of the leading scorers, especially him coming from another program where he was the leading scorer. It was awesome to be the 1-2 punch with him.

Q. Would you like another run with this group?

NICK DAVIDSON: Of course.

Q. Nick, felt like you guys were so close. You were within arm's reach there. Did it feel like you guys were close? Why do you think it was so difficult to try to



maybe get over that hump and maybe take a lead against the Rams?

NICK DAVIDSON: It's been that way kind of for the whole season. Just when we needed it we couldn't get it and the ball didn't roll our way.

We need to get tougher. There's a lot of things we can hang our hat on, but defensively we need to be better.

Q. You've obviously won a ton of basketball games in your career. You spent a lot of time in this conference. What can you say about Nique Clifford? And what are your thoughts on him as a player?

STEVE ALFORD: I've said it all along, I think he and Dent are 1-A, 1-B as far as what kind of years they've had in our league.

He's extremely talented because he can do so many things. You can post him. He can get out in transition and score. He can pass it. He's a great rebounder. Always been a great rebounder. But now he's really become a prolific scorer, and he can score a lot of different ways.

He makes foul shots. He can finish at the rim. Just a really hard cover.

We've got a guy like Kobe, who is 6'9" and yet we have to do a lot of switching because of all the cutting. I think they're the best cutting team in our league.

And I think he's just done a tremendous job of learning what Stevens was as a leader, and he's become that leader for them.

Because of that -- I always look at players and evaluate players, what their true value is, how they make people around them. And you look at Evans' development from the first game to now. That's had a lot to do with what Clifford's been able to do.

I think he's a very special talent. And I think he's going to play this game for a long time.

Q. You mentioned three tight games against CSU, being right there. And you just mentioned the cutting. But what makes the CSU team challenging? Do they like an NCAA Tournament game to you?

STEVE ALFORD: Absolutely. I told Niko I love his team. I think the difference even from this year to last year, their offense is always very difficult to guard when they figure out the pace and the reads. And they have figured that out. But I think this team's better defensively than what last

year's team was.

I think that's the difference with their team this year. They really guard. They're very physical. They don't really have a 6'10", 6'11" center. But the other guys are so physical, they make up for that. And they really help.

I like their athleticism. They can shoot the basketball. There's a lot to like about this team. And I think they can make a run -- not just in the tournament, I think they can make a run in this tournament as well.

Q. You mentioned not getting any production from the bench. But just how frustrating is it despite being down another body that those couple guys weren't able to put some points up?

STEVE ALFORD: Yeah, it's one of those difficult things that happened. We're without Daniel for over a month. That's a five-year player, Tré for over a month. That's a five-year player. And KJ now goes down in the tournament and that's a seven-year player. It's just a lot of experience that you don't get to carry into the tournament.

And I liked what everybody did trying to raise their level. I thought Jeriah and the minutes he got was really good. Justin McBride had a tough game today. We couldn't get him going offensively. But Justin had a very good first year for us.

Chuck had a very good tournament, obviously better yesterday than today. But still did a lot of good things for us.

It was just a limited bench and a pretty inexperienced bench. When you look at Chuck, Jeriah and Justin, there's a lot of inexperience there.

But we didn't lose the game because of the bench. We would have liked to have more depth. We have not shot the 3 well since around Christmas. From Christmas on we've not shot the ball well.

We've had inconsistency with the free-throw line. We talked about it at halftime. We hadn't shot a free throw. Then we shoot 17 in the second half.

The guys, they do that. It's like San Diego State. We come into halftime. We express things, they go out and they fix it.

That's what you appreciate as a coach, that they always weren't the toughest mentally, but I think the guys coming back, they've got to grow and see that, that it was a frustrating year in a lot of respects just record-wise, but

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

there was a lot of growth internally of handling adversity that a lot of these kids hadn't been faced with.

And that's what I appreciate. Even the guys that are leaving -- we had a lot of seniors on this team that didn't have a lot of experience when you really look at it, especially in winning.

And I think they see how close we are and yet you can say we're far away. Depends on what you do in the offseason to get tougher. And I think that's got to be -- we were a much tougher team mentally and physically last year than what this team was. But this team gave great effort and we appreciate the effort they gave.

Q. You guys were able to go man and then went zone in the second half just to try to get them off rhythm. How difficult is it because you were so close within striking distance but the changes didn't really seem --

STEVE ALFORD: We knew we had to play, look at how many minutes we had to play Nick and T.R. and Kobe, just a lot of minutes we have to have them out in a back-to-back game. Just trying to steal a possession or two. Not that we were going to rest in the zone, but you're not chasing all that cutting.

I have to look at the efficiencies of how good or bad it was. I felt with eight minutes to go our efficiency was around 96, which was really good against that team and ended up around 105.

But our offense -- I thought we got really good looks. I thought, this is another game. This is back-to-back games in a conference tournament in March we had five turnovers. The guys have done a great job handling the ball, taking care of the ball, giving ourselves chances. It was just another game where you didn't make shots.

We had a lot of really good open looks, and we just couldn't make -- and you're going to take 26 3s, you've got to make eight, nine, 10 of them to really make it work.

Q. I know frustration is probably your top emotions right now but we just talked to Noodles and one of the things he said he was proud of the guys' fight, not just tonight but throughout the year. What does it say about the group they never leaned away from each other leaned in despite the --

STEVE ALFORD: We told them, we've been doing this a long time, he and I. And we told them, those are the lessons that you're going to learn in this. We had a really good non-league. We set ourselves up really well.

Then we start off 0-4 in this league. When you start 0-4 in this league, it's a hard hole to dig yourself out of. And there might have been a outlier here and there, but not very often to where they didn't give us great effort.

It's not just effort in games. Their attention to detail in the film room and in practice. That's all you can ask for. You wish you wouldn't have, what, 22 games now, 22 games in this competitive league, to shoot as bad as we did from the 3-point line and for most of the season -- not tonight -- the free-throw line. We left a lot of points out there from the three ball and free-throw line.

That's hard. When you're in basketball as a player and you can't see the ball go in, that can have a domino effect.

And it might have been why we lost a lot of these close games. But I appreciate their fight. They had a really good fight to them. We just gotta get tougher. And that's going to be a lot of the issues that we try to address in the offseason.

Q. Are you in the offseason now, or do you expect another opportunity to play?

STEVE ALFORD: I don't know what opportunity it is. We get back home. We're 17-16. We've got to get back home and see what the guys are doing. But we've got a lot of older guys. We've got very limited players right now.

So we don't know where our guys are. And now when the season is over, I was talking to Dutch about it out in the hall. There's discussions going on now in every team in regards to the portal. It may not open until the 24th, but those discussions are happening.

So you're trying to figure out what your roster is going to look like in a week to two weeks. And then obviously what you're going to put together in the fall.

Q. Would you like to play another game with this group? I guess it just depends on the opportunity.

STEVE ALFORD: We've got to wait and see. No point to making any judgment call on that right now.

Q. Jeff Goodman recently reported you'd be back next year alluded to speculation that you might be retiring. Was that a thought this year because I didn't sense that?

STEVE ALFORD: I asked him where all that came from. Again, we're in a social media world. A lot of podcasts and a lot of stuff going on. No, I haven't told anybody that I had plans of retiring.



Q. You mentioned the portal. It's such a different day and age. The challenge of having such different looking rosters every year, how do you embrace it. It's obviously a much different game now?

STEVE ALFORD: If you're going to stay in the business, you've got to embrace it. We've got to raise the funds in the NIL. That's stuff -- we've got to get home and look at what that looks like.

And then we've got to see what pieces -- we've got a pretty good idea of what we need moving forward, but we've got a lot of discussions with a lot of these players. We're losing five of them. But we've got to see where their mind is and what they're thinking.

So it's about retention and then it's about we've got some freshmen coming in. Then we've got to get into the portal and do the things -- obviously shooting is a concern. But we've got some other concerns we have that we have to fix in the portal.

That takes a lot of work. The next six weeks is a lot of that going on. And we've got a head start on it. We spent a lot of late nights already as a staff. It's not like I want to be doing that when the season is still going on.

But if you're going to survive in this, you've got to do it. Because, again, the portal doesn't open until the 24th. But trust me, there's a lot of conversations across the country right now among a lot of teams of who's going in, who's not going in already.

Q. Should this be the final page of this season, specifically Kobe and Nick, what did they just mean to you personally and as a coach and to have them as pillars for everyone to lean on?

STEVE ALFORD: Like I said, Nick has done a phenomenal job of every year getting better from his redshirt year to gaining 20 pounds in his redshirt year to now he understands.

Like last year, he was a third option. What he learned this year was the difference in going from a third option to a one option. And I've tried to him along that way because I know I played a long time ago, but I know what it was like to be the one option. You get the best defender every night. You saw how physical they are. You're going to get beat on. You're going to get held. He only got four free throws tonight. That's what it is.

So he's learned that. Now going into next year, he knows what it takes now in the offseason to get ready to be the

number one scoring option.

Kobe learned what it was like to be on a winning team and the difference of playing in a building where you've got sell-out crowds and you've got people that actually are up on their feet and screaming and yelling and different environments, in a league that's highly competitive. That's going to help him moving forward.

I think Kobe's got, as he leaves college, he's got a great future ahead of him, because he's really raised his stock, in my opinion, in the last six weeks. That's been good. He's been able to play off the ball and on the ball. And he's proved that he could do both.

And his defense has gotten a lot better throughout the year. Very impressed -- these were two guys that came in, I don't think we realized the difference in their role changes of just how hard it was going to be. And Kobe we didn't get until August because of his graduation at Cal Poly being late.

Q. Nick mentioned a few times this season the defense he felt has slipped this year. Is there anything you can attribute to that off top of mind?

STEVE ALFORD: Our defense? Well, yeah, there's a lot. We got driven a lot, especially to the middle. We've had some injuries. When you look at our team, most people would say Tré Coleman and Daniel Foster were arguably our best two defenders. They missed a lot of games. So that hurts us.

Now we're trying to develop some guys defensively. And Nick, Nick's got to continue to develop because we're asking him to guard the post and we're asking him to guard the perimeter as well.

Q. Are there just a couple words that you would use to describe what this group meant to you?

STEVE ALFORD: No, that doesn't do it justice if it's just two words. We've had a lot of fun. This has been a grind. It's been very difficult, both for players and coaches. A lot of work's gone into it.

It always stinks when you're in the locker room and the season's over. That's never a lot of fun. But as I told them in the locker room, I appreciate what they gave us. They gave us a lot. We're not to the level of toughness that we need and the grit and that kind of thing yet, but it was a group that, through a lot of adversity, grew.

Maybe the results didn't show in wins, but I really think these young men -- the things that they went through this



year and they endured and they got through, it's going to help them in life four or five, six, 10 years down the road. I've always felt that's a big part of coaching.

Q. As you know, college basketball landscape is changing rapidly. We talked to a lot of coaches about transactional and transformational. You have been doing this at a high level, played at a high level too. Is there anything you feel, like soul searching yourself, your coaching staff that needs to do to maybe navigate better or improve on, kind of, what goes on in the world of college basketball?

STEVE ALFORD: In regard to the portal?

Q. Just in general. Like coaching style. I mean, anything.

STEVE ALFORD: No, I think you get a blueprint of what -- we've been doing it a long time, and we develop a blueprint. Now the blueprint changes and evolves.

Five years ago I wasn't on conversations saying: How much you want to be paid? Never thought that would happen in college basketball. And I've always been a big proponent, as the game and money has evolved and changed, I've never been one that said I don't believe student-athletes shouldn't be paid. But the way it is now is ridiculous. It's utterly ridiculous. And it's changed our game.

So you've got to adapt. We've got to adapt, but every coach -- every handshake I have now before games, that's brought up. Every game. Me and the opposing coach are going to talk about portal issues.

Where is academics at? I've talked to my compliance guys: What's APR anymore? You can't control APR. It's juco. You're going to replace eight, nine guys to a roster every year.

The travel time that is across the country in these leagues. It makes no sense for that to be our model, but that is our model. So more than us, do we have to evolve as coaches? Yeah, we've got to evolve of how now we recruit.

Like, it used to be, hey, what's my degree going to look like? What's your facilities look like? What's your relationship with the team look like? Are you there for all practices? Are you a coach that dives into relationships? Are you going to care for my child?

You might as well throw all that stuff out because the only question they're concerned about is what they're getting

paid in the portal. To me, that's a terrible model for an 18-year-old because, truth be told then, a lot of 18- and 19-year-olds are raising family members now and that's not what you go off to college for. It's just not.

So that's frustrating because I don't like our model at all. I don't know how that's going to change now that the genie is out of the bottle.

But you asked me a pertinent question, and I don't like the model we currently have because it's not name, image and likeness. That's not what it is. There's not that many college players that have that eval as a name, image and likeness. Most of them are getting what they're getting before they ever produce. And that's not what -- you should have to produce, then you receive. It's a bad lesson.

We shouldn't be sending kids off to college academically or in our profession to teach them bad models for when they're 25 and 26.

Like I've got five players now, NIL is done in two months. What happens to them? Are they going to be able to handle the real world now after having NIL for a couple of years at Nevada or wherever they've been, are they really going to be prepared to handle the things that, oh, I'm not getting that? I'm not getting that money? I have to go earn that money?

We're not really teaching them that. And I think that's something that people way above me have to really look at, because the NCAA and collegiate athletics should be about teaching life lessons, period, through athletics.

Q. Your son, Kory, tomorrow will play and host a game in the NAIA championship. How proud are you of him and the journey he's been on?

STEVE ALFORD: Extremely. This is four in a row making the NAIA tournament. And they get to host this year, which is really cool. So they're the third seed. They've had the most Quad 1 wins. Done everything. Top 10 team.

Hopefully things go well. They have a tough draw. They get to play at home, but they've got a very tough draw -- three teams in their bracket that can really score.

But hopefully we can win two games and get to Kansas City. That would be a lot of fun. But super proud. He's done a phenomenal job of turning that program in a lot of different ways. New facilities. They've got phenomenal facilities that he's helped raise money for. Hit dad up. It's been a lot of fun watching that development, for sure.



