

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 13, 2025

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

Colorado State Rams
Coach Niko Medved
Rashaan Mbemba
Nique Clifford

Postgame Press Conference

Colorado State - 67, Nevada -59

NIKO MEDVED: Really hard fought win here tonight. We knew it would be that way. I have so much respect for Nevada and Coach Alford. He's won 700 games. That's amazing when you look at it.

We knew it would be hard. Our guys battled.

I thought at halftime we really kind of changed our look a little bit. I thought we came out with more force in the second half. And I think that kind of played out in the stats a little bit.

Just got a little more aggressive on both ends. I thought we got into foul trouble early. I thought our zone helped us a little bit, kind of like in Boise State, just kind of stemmed some of that foul trouble.

And this guy right here (pointing to Clifford) is playing at an All-American level right now. Made some plays down the stretch. Got out of here with a huge win. Advance and see you tomorrow night.

Q. Nique, perfect from the free throw line and big ones late. What were you focusing on to keep them out of arm's reach?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: I felt pretty good offensively. Honestly, I thought I was terrible defensively tonight. I had way too many easy rip drives and certain things I've got to be better at to help us win games. I've got to focus on those type of things. But got going and it just rolled for us tonight offensively.

Q. How much of a grind did that second half kind of



turn into for you guys? How did you kind of try to break through that?

RASHAAN MBEMBA: The way we started the first half, we had to change our look, especially in the second half. They pounded us in the first half. They played way more aggressive. We knew we had to change our look.

We tried to start aggressive. I think we did that very good, very well. And I think just fed us more motivation, more spirit. Just go-after-it type of playing. And I think that helped us, especially the first four minutes of the second half helped us a lot to get to our game.

Q. Nique, you really came on strong in the back stretch of last season. Played a big role in leading this team to the tournament, had big performances in the Mountain West Tournament. Did that experience prepare you for these past couple of weeks and just the tension that comes with being in this position?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: Yeah, I understand the stakes that we're playing at right now. This is March Madness. Anything can happen. Everyone's trying to play their best basketball because you could go home at any moment.

Definitely having those experiences in the past have helped me to be able to be a leader for my team and kind of let these guys know how many games really mean. And we've got a lot of guys like that, like Ethan and Lake who have been in these situations. We've got a veteran group that's going to be ready to go every game.

Q. Is this something you embrace as a player? I've got to imagine this is what everybody grows up dreaming of?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: Yeah, 100 percent. The goal every year is to make it to March Madness every year, win the Mountain West Tournament. That's been our goal all year long. We just continue chasing that.

Q. Nique, in a game like this where it's so low scoring at times, possessions are so important. How big is it



for Keshawn comes in, hits a 3; Morton had a couple? Some role players, if you will, got you guys some buckets?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: That's why our team has been really good all season is because we've got so many guys that can step up in big moments. Crock hit a big shot down the stretch. Lake hit a big shot down the stretch.

We've just got so many guys that can step up to the plate and aren't afraid of the moment. That's why I think our team is just so versatile. And we've been successful because of it.

Q. Rashaan, in that first half Crock was limited in foul trouble. How nice is it when you're able to play together, sort of the chemistry you guys seem to have playing off each other in different roles inside?

RASHAAN MBEMBA: Definitely it's great playing with Crock. He's playing as physical as I am. Can trust him on defense whenever and things are just great. He has my back. I have his back. We feed off each other. We feed off our energy.

Towards the end of the season (indiscernible), we played a lot of games together, had a lot of practices together, and we just kind of found our chemistry.

Q. What would you say your team's identity is?

RASHAAN MBEMBA: I would say just we trust each other so much. Whenever somebody subs in, there's no frustration of getting a sub out. It's like having joy for each other and just playing for each other. I think that's just the biggest thing for our team, I would say.

Q. I know how Coach Niko would respond to this question, but what would you say the song that best describes Coach is?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: Song? Hmm. What's a good song. That's a tough one on the spot. A song that I like and I think kind of fits Coach is "Love Yours" by J. Cole.

It's kind of about just enjoying your life. You don't get a life that's any better. He's a big guy about just focusing on the present moment, focusing on what we have and trying to just continuously get better, be grateful, be joyful.

Those are the things we talk about all the time. So I feel like that song kind of embodies what he's about.

Q. There's a lot of CSU fans there today. Can you just speak on the crowd support today and what that

means to you, especially on the road in big, high-stakes games like today?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: Shout-out Colorado Springs, though. It's pretty awesome to see our fans travel and support us. It means so much to us. It definitely gives us energy to play even harder and just know that we're playing for a bigger reason than just ourselves.

Q. At one point of the game Nevada's coaching staff was yelling Nique from the other side of the court. What's it like to have a player you know that they're going to target and make sure you get around that offensively?

NIKO MEDVED: It's pretty dang good to have a player like that. What's happened is he just has done an amazing job of growing. He knows what it's like to be the focal point of scouting reports.

He's seen every coverage, double, switch, you name it, and he's just playing with a really calm mind. So that's a testament to him and the way he's playing. And he just continues to take what the defense gives him.

Q. Nique or Rashaan, you were in the lead the whole game but it wasn't really a comfortable lead. Do you think that really showed the grit of the team, just pushing through that, making sure that you guys maintained on top throughout the entire game?

RASHAAN MBEMBA: Most definitely. Coach always talks about it. We really prepare for those close games, especially end of the second half. We feed off the energy. We feed off the pressure.

And we just try our best to keep playing our game, not like getting pressure, not getting what's it called, like sped up. We're just trying to calm down, play our game and really end the game in our way and finish it the right way.

Q. Nique, you were talking about kind of the aspects that embody the team. What can you say about the teammates that have surrounded you in your final year?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: I mean, like I said, we've got some dogs on our team. Guys that stand out like Keshawn or Bowen, guys who maybe didn't play as many minutes tonight. When their name is called, they just step up to the plate. We've got such an unselfish group. And that's what makes us so good.

Like I say, any guy can step up any night. Nobody's afraid of the moment. Keshawn, somebody was talking about,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

came in, hit a big shot for us and got us going. So it's just stuff like that.

That's hard to do to come off being cold or sitting for a long time and just come into the game and impact and bring energy. So our group is just so versatile. And I love playing with these guys.

Q. Coach Ali has said in the past that the team has shown increased shooting confidence. Does that come with the readiness to step off the bench?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: Yeah, definitely. We do a lot of shooting every single day. The coaches put a lot of trust in us and allow us to have freedom shooting shots that we work on. So guys feel comfortable in the game to just step up, shoot it with confidence if they're open and just make the right play.

Q. Rashaan, you got a healthy dose of Nick Davidson there, especially in the second half. What's it like to play against a player like that?

RASHAAN MBEMBA: For sure he's a hell of a player. He has great footwork in the post and outside the post. It's fun to play against people who are just talented. I think it was just a great game between him and me.

Q. Nique, you've only been in the program two years but your relationship with the staff goes much further back. They recruited you in high school. When you look back on the relationship with Niko and Ali, especially in this moment? You guys have won eight straight here?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: It's special just how it came full circle. We joke all the time how hard it was for me to come here and play for him. He gives me a lot of crap for it.

But I always say it's God's timing and I was meant to go to CU first and go through that. And I ended up here and it's been a great situation.

But it's pretty cool to be with these guys every single day. They're just great human beings that I love being around and I'm going to miss it when I'm gone. But I'm just trying to make the most of it while I'm still here. It's been a lot of fun.

NIKO MEDVED: You tell Rashaan we do work on the double-pump free throw in the game, yeah.

RASHAAN MBEMBA: It was out of my hands.

NIKO MEDVED: Still trying to figure that one out. My

goodness. (Laughter).

You know, I've been really lucky in my coaching career. I've coached some great players and some just great people. And you know them. You've been around them. They're all that way, everyone on the team.

This guy right here (pointing to Clifford), I don't want to think about not coaching him because he's just a special guy. He's an incredible player. I'm so proud of the way he's grown and developed. When you're around him every day, his spirit is just infectious. He's such a beautiful person to be around.

If you all were at our game in Air Force, in Colorado Springs, we had like 200-some people at the game. And they weren't there -- they were there because he's a great player but they're there because who he is.

He gives time to everybody. Everybody loves Nique. Just an elite human being, elite player. I'm just really, really fortunate to coach him.

Q. How substantial of a leap has he made since coming into your program?

NIKO MEDVED: Gosh, it's really hard to even put into words. I go back to when we recruited him the second time and he told me, my goal is to come here and after a year I want to test the NBA. You're like, okay.

He did it, you know what I mean? And that was his goal the whole time. He believed in himself.

But he's the one who does the work. There's "like it" guys, there's "love it" guys. And there's "live it" guys. He's a "live it" guy. He lives this game. I mean, he can't get enough of it.

Loves to be coached. Loves to be in the gym. Wants feedback. Wants to get better. He just gets better at everything.

You just see his confidence grow. And, listen, I don't want (indiscernible), but he'll be have a long career playing basketball making a lot of money.

Q. You talked some early in the season one end of the floor was affecting the other when you guys were struggling. You had some droughts tonight -- obviously have kind of figured out how to work through those. What has it taken this team to not let stuff like that impact all parts of the game?

NIKO MEDVED: I think over that Christmas break for us,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

when the whole thing kind of turned, we just really made a commitment to defense. We made a commitment to understanding how hard it was to win any game and just playing possession by possession.

Then when you start to have success doing it, winning in all sorts of different ways, I mean, our offense has been really good in conference play this year. So has our defense. You've got to win a lot of different ways.

They just don't flinch. They know a team goes on a run the other team doesn't. They don't flinch. They just has to make the next play. It's just a mentality that all winning programs have to have.

Took a little bit to get that going. But now it's there at a high level.

Q. What did you think of Crock tonight? He didn't take a shot in the first half. Second half he comes out, kind of sparks that 8-0 run for you. He was perfect until those last couple free throws?

NIKO MEDVED: These guys talked about it. We just got such a -- they never look at you sideways when you sub them out of a game. They don't get down on themselves or whatever. They're ready when their number's called. They know they've just got to make the next play. Those guys put in the work.

I love how Crock came out and didn't hesitate at all. He was strong going to the basket. What a huge 3. And when that thing came to him, no hesitation at all.

I love that. It's just playing with confidence, believing in what we're doing. Yeah, that run was massive for us.

Q. Nevada doesn't really have the luxury of a big bench to pull from. You guys had, like, nine points from the bench. How important is your bench in contributing to scoring for CSU?

NIKO MEDVED: It's been great, great on both ends of the floor. These guys said it, too. When you look at different games, what, Bowen had 18 a couple games ago. Keshawn, Ethan, Nikola, Kyle -- all these guys are ready. They all have had big games and big moments for us.

I think our depth is huge because they're always ready. And hopefully, it's going to be huge here tomorrow. And if we're fortunate enough to win, it will be huge again on Saturday. I think our depth has really paid off.

Q. Knowing Nick Davidson's impact on Nevada as a scorer, did you prepare for him specifically, or was he

just somebody who came out and got those 22 points?

NIKO MEDVED: No, he's an all-conference player. He's one of the most talented guys in our league along with Kobe Sanders. They're at the top of the scouting report.

They're just tough covers. They're really hard to cover. You've got the to handle them in ball screens, gotta handle them in posts, gotta handle them putting on it the floor and exploiting mismatches.

Listen, this is one of the best basketball leagues in the country. It will get multiple bids. There's great players in the league. These guys are hard to handle.

We've got a guy that's pretty hard to handle too. You do your best. You try to mitigate it. And we did enough. In the second half, what, they shot 27 percent. They're shooting a lot of free throws. But we clearly did a pretty good job defensively in the second half?

Q. Give me one word to describe the Mountain West Conference, and you can't use "unforgiving."

NIKO MEDVED: Man, you just took that from me. This is going to sound really corny, but it's just -- it's fun. I love this league. I've been around this league for so long as an assistant and head coach. There's amazing coaches, Places that really care about basketball.

Every night out is a -- I think because we're west of the Mississippi, a lot of people don't get to see what we do and the kinds of place and what we do every day. It's just a blast.

It is unforgiving, too. It's really unforgiving. Every night. But more than anything, I'm a competitor and I just love to compete in this league every night.

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