

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 15, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

Wisconsin Badgers

Greg Gard

John Tonje

Carter Gilmore

John Blackwell

Postgame Press Conference

Wisconsin - 77, Michigan State - 74

THE MODERATOR: We'll begin with an opening statement from Coach Gard.

GREG GARD: Obviously one heck of a college basketball game, two really good teams, two really high level programs that have been in this position a lot. I obviously have great respect for Tom and his program, and we've met a lot over the years. I think we have the record for how many times we've met in this tournament.

The competitiveness and the guts that we needed to show at times, we had to battle some foul trouble. Obviously big plays across the board. Obviously these three to my right were huge in terms of both ends of the floor, and obviously Gilmore's block there in the second to last possession was important.

Just to take a team -- and we've got a really good one -- in order to compete at this level at this time of the month or this time of the year, you've got to be connected, and you've got to play your rear end off. I thought both teams did. We were just able to make some plays down the stretch and get to the free-throw line and get a couple rebounds and move on to tomorrow.

Q. John, I guess I was curious about the final defensive possession. Just take us through there because it looked like Michigan State was looking for a call. Take us through the play and what you saw happen there.

JOHN TONJE: I seen them just bringing the ball up,



obviously trying to get a 3-point shot up. I tried to just make a play on the ball. We would give up a foul in that scenario, but he was in the act of shooting. So I'm just glad I was able to get that deflection at the end.

Q. For John and Carter specifically, what's it like for you guys to be back in this point again? You were here last year to that final game against Illinois, and then we know the result. What's it like to be back at this point with a different team with an opportunity that you have tomorrow?

JOHN BLACKWELL: I think it's a great opportunity. I mean, the two teams we just played, UCLA and Michigan State, obviously got us at their place. Then these two teams playing right now, they both beat us. So it's a great opportunity to get our revenge and the championship.

We know how it feels to get to this point. Now we've just got to finish the job.

A different team, but a lot of the guys that were on the team last year were in this position and on the team that made that run to the championship. So we know what we've got to do to get it done, and we're going to do it tomorrow.

CARTER GILMORE: I think it just goes back to our coaches, to be able to go to back-to-back championships in the Big Ten is no easy feat, and to have the right system -- obviously right now is when you want to be playing your best basketball.

Super blessed to be in this position to go back. Obviously it didn't finish the way we wanted to last time, but we've learned, we've grown, and hopefully the maturity of this team, as we showed today, will pan out.

Just got to keep working hard, recover tonight, and show up ready to work tomorrow.

Q. John Tonje, how does a guy go from not starting full-time until senior year at Colorado State to being the best player on the floor on this stage against a super heavyweight opponent?



JOHN TONJE: I think just a state of progression is just belief in myself. You've just got to be able to -- it doesn't really matter what anyone thinks about you. As long as you believe in yourself and put the work in, you can essentially do whatever you would like to do.

I just stuck with it, kept getting better every summer. I'm just continuing to try to get better each day.

Q. Carter, like Coach said, you made that key block on the second to the last possession. Would you walk us through that?

CARTER GILMORE: To be honest, I blacked out a little bit and kind of forgot we were only up three. So I was getting ready, and I know Fears kind of came down the last possession and got right to the rim right away.

I saw him driving downhill, and I was getting ready to block that one. Then I realized we were only up three quick, and the pass came back, and I knew I had to get on my horse and try to get a deflection or at least try to alter the shot in some way.

Yeah, I was trying to block Fears at the start and then realized that Holloman was my guy, and I had to sprint back there and just try to make a play or do whatever I could to try to alter the shot any way I could.

Q. John Tonje, these teams met 13 days ago in East Lansing. Michigan State won by nine, and you had 11 points. What's the big difference today from that game, and how motivated were you to show that that wasn't you?

JOHN TONJE: I think I was just happy to have this opportunity to play basketball today. Obviously you learn from your past mistakes, and I think the coaching staff really prepared us and showed us a better game plan for this time around, just things that we could have done better as a team.

I think me and the guys really just bought in today and just kind of saw those looks, saw things open up when we were able to execute what the coaches gave us. I just want to give a shout out to them.

Q. And was it motivation for you? Did you take it personal? Trying to showcase your basketball?

JOHN TONJE: It was a blessing to be out there today. I don't really have too much animosity towards anybody. I just go game by game.

Q. Carter, we've talked with these two and really a lot of the team this week about just how many different options there are to step up. Can you just speak to some of the unselfishness within this group, and when there are so many options, how tough this group is really hard to defend at its ceiling.

CARTER GILMORE: For sure. I don't know what all the stats are, but Coach Gard has came in the past two games and told us on how many assists, how many buckets we've gotten, and it's been a good majority of them. I think that speaks to how skilled we are and how much we're willing to share.

We pass up the good one for the great one every time. We believe in each other. Then it's just making the right play.

Our coaches do a phenomenal job of putting us some positions to be successful, and then it's going out there and executing, not giving in, not being tired, and knowing the defense wants to force us into some tough midrange shots, not settling for that.

Just believing in each other, making the right play. When everyone's skilled and great players on this team, we've got so many options and believe in each other that it will all work out, and just make the open shots.

Q. Carter, you had a great game today, 10 points, 5 rebounds, 5 assists, and 3 blocks, and really played your best when it mattered most. As an upperclassman going forward, how important is it for you to help lead your team to victories in the month of March?

CARTER GILMORE: For sure. I had a good game today. Past couple games haven't been my best, but that's part of this team that everyone can step up on any given night. We've been lucky to do that here in the past couple games, just have different guys step up in different times.

Especially in these tournaments, when you're getting down here in March and playing multiple games back to back, guys are beat up, tired, injuries nagging here and there. So to be able to have the depth and guys that can step up at any given moment, make plays, make shots, and do the right thing, it's super helpful and going to be very important here in March.

Q. For John Blackwell, it seemed like early on shots weren't falling as much, but late in the game, you had a couple of big moments. You know the corner 3, the and one, and then the lay up with 190 seconds to go. Talk to me about those final moments, and maybe you're confidence even when shots aren't falling but



when the ball is in your hand, that you're able to do what you do today.

JOHN BLACKWELL: If you're not making shots, your confidence can't waver. My teammates are on me about that. All credit to them and my coaches too.

Down the stretch, I know the team trusts me to get a bucket, so that's what I did. It doesn't matter if the shots aren't falling early. I just stayed aggressive and keep going at it.

Q. John Blackwell, I believe you're a Michigan native, and the first matchup with Michigan State, you were the leading scorer, and you were the second leading scorer today. Is there something about playing Michigan State that gives you a little bit more juice playing that in-state team?

JOHN BLACKWELL: Honestly, yeah, a little bit. It's always good to play in front of all my boys that I went to high school with going to Michigan State. So it's always good to beat them and then give them crap when I text them.

Yeah, they're a great team, well-coached. I just love games like this. Like these are games you dream of when you were a kid. I grew up watching Michigan State and Michigan battle, and I'm just blessed and honored to be in this position.

Q. Carter, I'll ask you this. In terms from a defensive standpoint, today was another good performance defensively. Specific to Michigan State, what went into that, especially after those first few minutes Michigan State came out pretty hot. Then from there, especially in the first half, it seemed like you and your teammates were able to tighten things up. What were the keys there?

CARTER GILMORE: For sure. Last game they kind of crush us on the offensive glass, and that hurt us. Obviously I think Kohler kind of got in foul trouble early, which he does a phenomenal job crashing the glass and doing all the little things they need to do.

I think everyone just did a great job listening to Coach's game plan. We obviously played them just a couple weeks ago. So we knew coming in that it was going to be a battle. We obviously knew all the rules and the little things that they're going to try to take advantage of and they did last game, and we weren't going to let them do that same stuff this game.

Boxing out was the main thing. We know they're fast in

transition getting the ball up the sidelines, shutting that off, building a wall, but then just executing them -- playing harder. All the 50-50 balls had to be ours, all the loose rebounds and stuff like that, we had to clean up and run.

Especially down the stretch, they do a great job when they go 10 guys deep, they can constantly be crashing. We did a phenomenal job fighting for rebounds and doing the little stuff that took us over the top to get the win.

Q. We could talk about a lot of things about this game, but I looked at Michigan State, what they won in the categories, you won the categories. This is a game of little things. Talk about how important it is and how much stress you put on the team to get those little points in the game and make it work.

GREG GARD: I think the game is over coached and under taught. We try to really emphasize from the day players arrive in our program how important fundamentals are. In your world and everybody watching this, the highlights, that's all they see.

Truthfully, if you want to win at this high level, you have to be really fundamentally sound. We try to keep it simple. I try not to have a lot of ambiguity in terms of what we're trying to accomplish and why we're trying to accomplish it. When you have a player-led team and the coaches can feed into that, it allows you to play at this level with a lot of success.

It's really trying to keep it simple, and fundamentals matter. Fundamentals still at the end of the day, when all the glitz and glamour fall off, the fundamentals get it done and help you stay consistent over the course of seasons -- a season or the course of, in our case, we didn't just start emphasizing fundamentals yesterday.

I was mentored by a guy that fundamentals were demanded in Coach Ryan. So that's an important piece of our program.

Q. I'm sure you've been asked this at some point this season, but you evaluate John Tonje through kind of the process, and I know he's got some history as a scorer. But especially going through what he went through last year and having to sit out for so long, when did you, maybe realize that he can't just be a scorer, but he can be a guy that fills it up in volume but also really efficiently with the way he's able to use the 3-point line, the free-throw line. Just able to score in really efficient ways as well as obviously scoring a lot of points?

GREG GARD: The process was really fast because

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

recruiting through the portal is like speed dating or getting married off eHarmony. You evaluate some little things. I knew he had a chance to be a good player in June when we had him on campus. We were working him out with everybody else as summer started.

But quite frankly, once we got into the season and playing games and you saw -- I think for him, he mentioned it a little bit with one of the questions about motivation. He's such a selfless person, such a selfless player. He's motivated by success, and I think he's gotten better on both ends of the floor.

If I would show you some film of him in October on the defensive end, he had a long ways to go, and he's worked at it, and he's gotten better. He's understood our concepts better. Then offensively obviously, you try to put him in positions of success, and it comes also with his teammates around him to be able to spread the floor and share the ball.

Like I said, he's earned every accolade he's getting, and he's one heck of a player. More importantly, he's an even better person, and that's why it fits so well with our team and why the transition, and even though it will be one season, has been so good. Because he's the right type of person in our program

Q. Michigan State controlled much of that first half, never quite got it into the double digits, but the lead did get up to nine. Your guys kept fighting, got a late lead heading into the locker room and kept up that momentum into the second half, even with the arena getting active. What does that say about this group's resiliency overall?

GREG GARD: I debated taking a timeout there at points, but it's a long game and you're probably going to need a timeout later. You've got to weather the storm. The two things that got us early were transition defense. We lost a guy or two in transition. And we took a bad shot, Klesmit took a deep 3 in the right wing in transition from about -- I said it was 30 feet. It was probably only 28, but it put them in transition, and they get a bucket on the other end.

We went to media and just talked about, yeah, we want to shoot the ball in transition, but understand cause and effect.

Then the other thing was the offensive glass. We didn't do a good enough job early of securing the defensive rebound, and we got better as the first half, we worked our way through the first half and then much better in the second.

Q. Obviously coming into this game Michigan State was the Number 1 seed. They beat you early on in the month. My question is is that the type of thing that you use to get your guys even more hyped up coming into the game, or do you want to maintain the same process as any other game?

GREG GARD: Where are you from?

Q. England.

GREG GARD: I knew you weren't from Cobb, Wisconsin, I know that. Anyway, I like your accent.

We don't talk about any of that stuff in motivation. Michigan State earned the Number 1 seed because they were the best team through 20 games in our league, and they won the league hands down.

It's just about you get to this time of year, you know you're going to be playing really good teams, and it's about competing. We needed to get better and do some things better than we did two weeks ago in East Lansing, and we were fortunate enough to do those things better.

Specifically we did a better job of taking care of the ball, better job on the defensive glass, and we made some shots. We shoot the ball a little bit better than what we did two weeks ago.

Q. During one of the key stretches of the game, you may have had four bench guys out there. Just can you talk -- we had Carter up there, but just can you talk about -- I think there was that sequence where you scored 11 straight points and took the lead, and a lot of those guys were bench guys. Just the impact of those guys and what they were able to give you at that juncture in the game.

GREG GARD: I think the depth of this team has been something that's been talked about and everybody's seen it all year. But we were actually in a little bit of foul issues. Winter had gotten his third. I felt Steve was out, he was starting to tire, and I usually roll those two guys back and forth to keep them both fresh.

So I just decided Gilmore can play at the 5, and it makes us a little unique. We did it yesterday too a little bit. It makes us a little harder to guard. We're a little faster in and out of the ball screens. Like I said, Gilmore can defend and rebound with 5, so I'm not as concerned about that.

Yeah, Janicki, Amos, I think McGee was out on the court with them as well. It's just they know it takes everybody



and we're not dependent on one or two guys, and that's what makes this team so good is the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. We know we have to have help and lifting power from guys off the bench, and we got it this afternoon.

Q. Number one, congratulations. Number two, I know it's about the kids, I know it's about your young people, but I want to talk about you. What does it mean to be at this point again with this group when last year your leading scorer from a year ago at another school, your starting point guard from a year ago at another school. What does it mean to retool and to be back here again for you? What does it mean for you?

GREG GARD: It means I have a really good team, and I have a really good staff that helped put this team together. That's the era we're in in college athletics. You have to -- it's a year-by-year process in terms of now with the transfer portal and everything else going on in college athletics that you have to embrace the new environment. You have to run to it, not run from it.

I think our staff did a phenomenal job of running to it last spring, and we had a plan of how we wanted to put a team together and what we wanted it to look like.

Then obviously the credit goes to our players because they've bought in from day one. I haven't had any pushback, any resistance, any ego. They've been an absolute joy to coach because they're so selfless and they want to play for what's on the front of the jersey.

Even in the transfer era that we're in, there are still people that want to be a part of success and want to play for something bigger than themselves, more than themselves, and this group has done it as good as any group I've been around in a long time in terms of just their commitment to each other and their joy and selflessness that they play with.

My name goes up here as this, but there's so many people that have their hand in this to help make this successful.

Q. There's often narrative around a really good Michigan State team, a first place team, that has to do with toughness or intimidation or willfulness. I'm not saying that they're not that, but you guys are like that. How much is your team like that? And I'm thinking specifically of Tonje, the way he will just barrel into really good defense, almost wantonly. There aren't many players like that, and what do you make of it?

GREG GARD: I think to answer the first part of your

question about Michigan State, when I got to Wisconsin with Coach Ryan in 2001, Michigan State was in the midst of three straight Final Fours and had won the league a lot. Tom was in the first five, six years of his tenure there, whatever it was, and they were the King of the Mountain.

When you come into a program and you want to pursue championships, you say, okay, who's been winning at the highest level, and what do we have to do to be able to compete with them?

And the toughness and playing hard and that, that's expected. That's not an exception. No matter who we have on our roster, we expect them to play hard. That's the -- I don't want to use the word culture. It's the expectation. As a coach, if you ever want one thing said about your teams, it's that they play hard because playing hard will cover up for maybe other miscues that you have or hiccups you have here and there.

I think going back to the previous question about Tonje, he's bought in. He understands, and he's a really good listener and he's a quick learner, and he wants to win. Here's the recipe to be able to win in this league and compete, go toe to toe year in and year out with the Michigan States and the other teams in our league.

You look at Michigan State, Wisconsin, and Purdue, those three have been as consistent as any at the upper echelon of this league over the last 25 years, and they all, if you took the names away on what the logo is, you look at the recipe, it's very similar for all three programs.

Like I said, I'm just fortunate to be in this position. I was mentored by one of the best. I think Izzo is one of the best. You understand, you learn really quick, before we ever got to Wisconsin, what it was going to take to win, and the first question was about fundamentals, and that's a big piece of it. So you have toughness, you have to be fundamentally sound, and you have to have guys that want to compete and want to win. I've got a locker room full of them.

Q. We've talked a lot about Carter's journey and kind of his development throughout this year. It wasn't just some of the highlight blocks today. 10 points, 5 boards, 5 assists. Just how impactful was he, and how is he kind of emblematic how you really can be developed if you put time into this program and eventually make that impact?

GREG GARD: Yeah, he's committed to this program. He bleeds Badger Red. Obviously his family lineage is deeply connected to our coaching staff, and he loves the university, he loves our program.



When you have somebody like that that gives their heart and soul to and commits that to your program, it doesn't always work out where good things happen, but for him I'm really happy because he's come the long hard way as a player. A lot of players these days aren't that patient and willing to work. He's done it, and he's being rewarded for it.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports