

Big East Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 11, 2026

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Madison Square Garden

Butler Bulldogs

Thad Matta

Michael Ajayi

Finley Bizjack

Postgame Media Conference



some big shots, guys stepped up on their team, and we couldn't find an answer. But we fought until the end, yeah.

Q. I know the result wasn't what you wanted, but what does it mean to you to break a Butler single-season rebounding record?

MICHAEL AJAYI: It feels good. I wanted to beat it, for sure. That was kind of in the back of my head, just to grab every rebound out there. Yeah, a great record. Records are meant to be broken, so, yeah.

Q. Congratulations on an amazing career, and I want to congratulate you also on your All Big East recognition. What does that mean to you and to show out on the big stage at MSG? And also, most importantly, what would you like to say to young kid in Nigeria watching you and watching your whole journey?

MICHAEL AJAYI: Yeah, I mean, it's big for the program being First Team. Guys coming in can look up to me and, hey, if this guy can do it, then I can do it. Yeah, the journey's been long and a lot of ups and downs, and the kids in Nigeria looking up to me, just keep working, have faith, and never stop believing in yourself, because I never stopped believing in myself and that's where I am right now. Just fight each day and claw each day and try to get better each day, believe in yourself, have faith in God and just trust yourself.

Q. I know you just mentioned how when you were younger, playing at MSG was a dream. What would you tell your younger self, I guess, now -- or before?

MICHAEL AJAYI: I would tell him never give up. You're going to fall a lot on your butt, and as long as you come in every day with a winning mindset and a good attitude, everything's going to look better. So just never give up.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse the players and take questions for coach.

Q. Coach, Kim English came into this game not

Providence - 91, Butler - 81

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

THAD MATTA: Go ahead. You guys start with the players. Go ahead.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the Butler players, please.

Q. I understand that you guys lost, but still what does it mean to play at MSG and play here a Big East tournament, a big stage, nationally broadcasted? I don't know, I thought your effort all season was unbelievable, but what about today made it so different than other days?

MICHAEL AJAYI: It's a dream come true playing here at Madison Square Garden. When you're a kid, you watch the Nicks play at the Garden. It's like, damn, like, one day I'm going to be there. So finally, they're here -- the day is here.

And it was a great game. Obviously came up short, but had a great season here with Butler and proud of my teammates, the coaches, for trusting me and believing in me, and I can't wait to watch these guys next year.

Q. You guys had a dominant start to the game. What really happened that had it lost from you guys after the first couple minutes?

MICHAEL AJAYI: I think our transition defense and our rebounding declined a little bit in the second half. They hit



knowing if it would be his last at Providence. Did you have any words of encouragement or support before and after the game?

THAD MATTA: I just told him, I said, I'm upset that we lost, but I'm happy as heck for him because I know he's been through a lot this season, which comes with this profession, there's no question about it.

But Kim, I don't know him real well, but any encounters I've had with him, I've got the utmost respect for him and he seems like a solid, good person. In this profession, it's crazy to sound that you're happy for guys when something good happens for 'em.

Q. Vaaks had eight threes for them tonight and then in the second half, they hit nine threes as a team. Was that really the difference in the game was just the perimeter and just that whole --

THAD MATTA: Yeah, I think we were up 25-9 and Vaaks hit the one, and it kind of woke him up like, hey, we are here to play a basketball game, and they got going. And a few of those were Mela pulling up in transition. I think Vaaks was 2-21 in our first two games, so he saved the best for last, that's for sure.

Q. You got off to that 25-9 start, and you're up 16 early in the first half. What went right in that stretch and what made it difficult to maintain that the way Providence adjusted?

THAD MATTA: Yeah, you know, you knew -- I mean, I think Providence is one of the most talented teams I've seen in, and I was hoping they didn't get going. We knew they were going to make a run. We have seen that all year long. They were hitting shots, and Michael touched on it, we had a couple turnovers -- it wasn't a turnover, but he lost it. They started -- Jones, I think it was, got a couple baskets in transition, because when you play them, you got to get back.

We had the one where the officials told us the ball was on the baseline, but they gave it to us on the side, we turned it over on that. Those are the type of plays against a team that as talented as they are and can get going like that, those kind of break your back a little bit.

Q. What were your thoughts on the officiating tonight?

THAD MATTA: Best I've ever seen. What did we have, three reviews, and we won 'em all. No, that wasn't on them. I think just from the standpoint of Providence made some big plays and there were a few things I was extremely upset about, and didn't change the outcome, so

it is what it is.

Q. What do you tell your team post-game after you guys got off to that hot start and then you lose a game like that with it being your last game of the year? What do you tell your team post-game?

THAD MATTA: Well, what I told 'em, I'll be honest with you, I said this season it didn't go the way we thought it was going to go. When we broke camp in August, I felt like we had something special. And starting out the beginning of November we were playing the caliber of a top-30 team in the country. Then we lose our starting point guard. And when you're a program like Butler, you got to piece everything -- everything's got to go right. And we thought we had it. We lose Jaylin. We start bringing Stink along, and we say, okay, now we're getting him, and then we lose him. And this has been one of the most challenging seasons I've had just in terms of the injuries, the illnesses. But those are things, I'm not making any excuses, it is what it is. Somebody touched on it earlier, I think with the exception of the second half of the Creighton game, these guys have fought all season long. And they have been a joy to be around. I told my wife the other day, two days ago, I said, if you watch us practice, you would have thought we were 27-4. I mean, they come in every day with energy and passion. And I think for Michael, coming in with the plan that he had to be First Team All Big East, the work ethic that he has on a daily basis. For Finley, Finley's a little bit of an anomaly he's been with us for three years, he's Third Team All Big East. And that's something we take great pride in is making our players better, and I think Finley is living proof of the growth that he's made from his freshman, sophomore to junior year. Are those days gone now? I guess they are. But those are the type of things I'm proud of is just seeing the growth.

For our freshmen, they got thrown into the fire this year, they just kept getting better, kept getting better, kept getting better. So that was fun to see.

Q. You mentioned injuries being a reason why things got derailed for you this season. What does improvement next season look like for Butler?

THAD MATTA: Well, we got to -- you know, I have no idea what our team's going to look like. So I think, from that standpoint, taking a deep breath and looking at what we got in terms of everything, players, money, all that stuff. And I thought the staff this year, or last year, we did an incredible job of putting a roster together. And a roster that had a chance. But we knew nothing, our margin for error was like this big (indicating.) But like I said, those things are going to happen. You got two point guards on your roster, you lose 'em both midway through the season, that

makes it challenging. And we played the Seton Hall game without Finley this year, second game, and I remember, I sort of felt like my hands were tied at times with what we were trying to do. But they kept fighting. Like I said, with the exception of 20 minutes against Creighton, these guys have done a heck of a job for us. So we're good.

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