

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 14, 2025

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Wichita State Shockers

Paul Mills

Xavier Bell

Bijan Cortes

Postgame Press Conference

Memphis - 83, Wichita State - 80

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

PAUL MILLS: Yeah, just so thankful to the guys to left of me, Bijan and Xavier, their level of commitment for all the things they have done in order to propel themselves, to propel this program. Just thankful for the guys in our locker room.

And to be honest with you, it's really just -- obviously disappointed, but it's really just a heart of gratitude for who they are and the things that they have done. Again, that was a -- we were 1-7 through our first eight games, and I've been around enough players to know when people will tap out, and that just -- it wasn't this group.

As I shared with them, an absolute joy just to be around them every day at practice. I think coaches and players, we have a love-hate relationship. Like, we love them, they hate us, and it's one of those situations where I'm so thankful for just who these guys are and the things that they have contributed to this program.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Going back to what we talked about last Saturday before that game against Tulsa, would you say that the seniors left the program better than they found it, given today's effort?

PAUL MILLS: Yeah, I mean, no doubt. I think if you look back on it not only just from a number of wins, but just from



the expectations of what's required of you day-in and day-out that that's -- you know, it's the Muhammad Ali quote, right? I run in the dark so I can dance in the lights.

What I don't think people realize is how much running in the dark is actually done. Like, these guys put in a lot of time on their game and their effort and -- I mean, because Xavier mentioned it to me after our last practice. He just said, You remember where I was ranked in the conference just from an efficiency standpoint? And I didn't know I had told him that. But if you go look at the strides that he's made, he's left better than -- or when he first came in. And, in my opinion, he's left the program better and, again, nothing but gratitude for every single guy who put on a Wichita State jersey.

Q. You get in a game like this and obviously just an incredible effort from your guys, the competitive spirit in games like this. Tell me about just how razor thin that margin is. You're trying to take down a No. 1 seed. Just how thin is that margin for error?

PAUL MILLS: Yeah, again, I mean, when you're dealing with one-possession games, this stuff matters. Every free throw matters, every shot matters. And it's not just at the end of the game. I mean, something could happen at the 18-minute mark of the first half. So these are valuable lessons. I've told the players this a lot, that the course of their life will be determined by how they handle temptation. And if you give in to temptation, whether it be to the wrong temptation or you do something that's inappropriate, it's going to alter not only your life, but it's going to impact other people.

I thought their competitive spirit impacted other people in a positive way. How they handled all of that, again, it's a tribute to them and to their families. But the margin is thin this time of year. You have to be on point about a lot of things. I'm just really proud of our guys.

Q. What did the officials tell you on that goal tending call from Quincy? I guess your thoughts on that.

PAUL MILLS: Yeah, I'm not -- I mean, there's enough

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screen shots out there, and that one's pretty apparent. That one's not hard.

Q. Last time you saw Memphis you held PJ Haggerty to 4-18 shooting, and he had an uncharacteristically bad night. Today obviously he had his way. What was different about what he was doing offensively or what you guys did defensively to be unable to stop him as you guys did last time?

PAUL MILLS: Yeah, I mean, I think anytime that somebody shoots the ball 25 times, and they have free throw opportunities, they're going to get a chance to be in a high-caliber place. Give him credit for some of his shot-making ability from 17, 18 feet.

Then there's some reject screens that they were able to clear out on the left side of the second half. He was able to get us on some back-to-back plays. But for the most part, he carried 'em, he's a good player, there's a reason he's the Player of the Year in this league. And again, this time of year you see these kind of performances. But he was able to get shots and really didn't defer much at all.

Q. Bijan, it felt like you played your best basketball here. Do you feel like when you look at everything you did, do you feel like you left everything out there? Just tell me about just the thoughts after a game like that. Do you feel proud about what you were able to do down here?

BIJAN CORTES: Yeah, I'm just proud of just all of us. I mean, they came in and just giving me that extra boost of energy, telling me what I can do. Just the whole team being confident in me helped me a lot, for sure.

Q. Xavier, can you walk us through kind of what that 12-0 run that Memphis went on in the second half kind of did to you guys?

XAVIER BELL: I don't think it really did too much. We were able to fight back from it. We knew the game of basketball, they're going to go on runs. It's just about sticking together through those runs and just trying to find solutions to kind of withstanding that run, I would say.

Q. Xavier, seeing the kind of fortitude and the valiant effort we saw from this team today, wire-to-wire with the 16th ranked team in the country, what did you learn about this group? It's a testament to fortitude that we have seen from this group, especially during the second half of the season.

XAVIER BELL: I mean, it's nothing that I've known, you know, the entire season itself, I would say when we went

on our winning streak back in the regular season. But we knew we could compete with anybody that we face up against on the court. It's just about executing the game plan and staying on top of what we need to stay on top of and just trying to find solutions in that moment.

I think just going down the stretch, it shows that we're able to finish a game. We just still had to find one or two ways to pull this one out. But it just shows the resiliency of this team, for sure.

Q. You brought a pretty big cheering section with you down here for the Shocker faithful. What were some of your thoughts running through your head when you walked off the court and your last game with this program?

XAVIER BELL: God is the greatest, and I'm just super grateful for everything, man, being able to transfer back, my family being able to travel down here for this tournament, and last year. Just the support system that I have from the group of guys in the locker room, the coaching staff, top to bottom, I can't do anything but just say thank you for it all. I know there will be other emotions that come with it, especially with this being my last college game and everything like that, but right now all I can say is thank you for everything, the ups, the downs, thank you.

Q. The emotions of, you guys play well, take them, go toe-to-toe with a really good team and it just doesn't end up your way. Take me through the emotions of what you're feeling right now, and just, like you said, gratitude, pride, just what's going through your mind?

XAVIER BELL: Super thankful to be able to share that court with the group of guys that I did. That group that was out there, it just shows you how much fight we really have. We just had to clean up some things earlier in the game and everything like that, turnovers, more specifically myself, I would say. But just little things like that. I'm just super grateful for the opportunity to share the court with these guys and to be able to go out there and just compete playing a game that we love, for sure.

Q. You spoke about being proud of these guys for stuff behind the scenes, leaving it better than they found it. In terms of win/loss record how would you evaluate this season and just from that perspective what's your thoughts on how this season went?

PAUL MILLS: I mean, you never win as much as you want. That's just, that's reality. I think what you're always trying to do is you're paying attention to the direction and not getting caught up in the destination. I just thought the direction of our team, there were a lot of one- and

two-possession games of things, I thought we were headed the right way, that we needed to clean up. Obviously February turned out really well for us, prior to today, being able to win eight of your final 11. But, you know, I think you're always evaluating it. I mean, the next month will be spent a lot of that, doing that. But again, I do like the direction that we're headed and we'll continue to get better, but this is really on account of what these guys have laid in regarding a foundation and the work that's required in order to be good.

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