

National Invitation Tournament: Indiana State vs Utah

Tuesday, April 2, 2024

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

Utah Utes

Craig Smith

Branden Carlson

Gabe Madsen

Deivon Smith

Semi Finals Postgame Press Conference



The second half, obviously, we just didn't have enough answers. I thought they hurt us in transition. They hurt us some in the zone and we struggled in the man. They put a lot of pressure on you. They have three play-making guards that can do a lot of things. They can shoot, pass, handle, very unselfish, and their big can really shoot it and pass it. And No. 20 for them, Kent, is a very good offensive rebounder, elite cutter. Credit to them.

I'm really proud of our guys. They fought, really, really fought hard tonight. We had 20 assists again tonight. That's four straight games, we have 23 assists, 21 assists, 22 assists and 20 assists. Our guys really fought and showed a great competitive spirit. Stayed together in a very difficult environment, and it's always tough when it ends.

But we're one of eight teams that we're playing in April, seventh month of the season. These guys really galvanized and I thought we showed great improvement the last six weeks of the season. There's always highs and we had hard times, but I'm proud of how we fought and stayed together and competed hard.

Q. How would you put into words your emotions that you're feeling after this NIT run? Obviously Coach talked about how there's been some tough times this year and some big positives, this NIT run. Just how will you look back on this in your senior year?

BRANDEN CARLSON: Senior year was great. It's been real special to be with these guys and have a ton of memories. Been one of my -- it's been a journey for sure. Just the emotions, you're sad it's over. You're sad that you don't have any more games. You're done playing with these guys up here, my teammates and being coached by Coach Smith. That's it.

So really just kind of processing how it's over now, and on to the next for me. But I'm really proud of this team and the fitness we've overcome and the things we've had to accomplish and where we got so. So I'm just proud of these guys, and I'm going to -- I'm just very happy to be a part of this team.

Indiana State 100, Utah 90

CRAIG SMITH: First of all, congrats to Indiana State. They played outstanding tonight. Had he just put a lot of pressure on you, specifically on the offensive end. We really played well offensively.

But we just didn't have a ton of answers for them, and credit to them. They put a lot of pressure on you in all five positions, and you know, what a great environment.

Tonight. Obviously it's a neutral court game but Indiana State is 71 miles away, and they showed up and they showed out, and you could feel that. But I think the guys would tell you, it was a great college basketball environment in a legendary facility.

And so you know, obviously we want to win. Our guys are competitors. We wanted to cut down the nets. But it was an amazing college basketball game.

To start the game, obviously didn't get off to the greatest start in the world. Got behind by 11 relatively early. We were having some issues with our pick-and-roll defense. Credit to them, Avila hits three threes, and then went three for four in the first half. And we made some adjustments that I thought really, really helped us.

Then went to the zone. We probably played more zone tonight than we had in quite some time. I thought it was very effective, specifically early and got them off attack. For us to gain a lot of momentum there and go halftime tied at 44, we were in a good spot.

Q. Similar to the other question, this tournament run, as you reflect back on the way the conference tournament ended for this team and to be able to go on this deep tournament run, does it reshape at all sort of your reflections of this season as you think back on this year and having this opportunity to kind of be galvanized, like Coach said?

DEIVON SMITH: I think it brought us together in the postseason. I know we were kind of iffy about it, or just wanting to play in the NIT instead of playing in the tournament because we felt we were a tournament team.

But I feel like we got really connected during this stretch and during our hard practices, film, scout, whatever we had. I feel like we were all bought in on winning, winning a championship, winning an NIT Championship and playing for each other, playing for BC and playing for the guys that are leaving.

I think it's a pretty special team. I know I say it in all the media; that this is one of the best teams I've ever been on and this last postseason stretch really showed like the brotherhood we have and the chemistry we had later on in the season.

Q. What are your thoughts along those same lines? Obviously tonight was a tougher night. Coming into this, I think you had hit 16 threes, 13 over those last two games.

GABE MADSEN: Yeah, piggybacking on what Davon said it, was never the goal to play in the NIT, but once we rallied around that, it was a great experience. For myself personally, like you said, I did not end the postseason playing the Pac-12 very well so it was nice to get some games in and play a little better.

Obviously tonight didn't go that great either but in retrospect, it was -- I'm super glad we did it. Played in this tournament, and just made more memories with this team.

Q. For any one of you three. Especially in those wins against Iowa and VCU, there was a lot of that great defense that really helped facilitate the offense. What in your mind kind of made getting stops there in that second half just so difficult?

BRANDEN CARLSON: I just think they are a great team. They do a good job of moving the ball. You've got to rotate over to help and then they keep finding that open man with those one-more passes and they are obviously very skilled all around and able to create for themselves and for others. It's sometimes they hit some tough shots, and give them

credit. I just think they played outstanding tonight offensively and really gave us some troubles.

Q. Final question for the players, anyone who wants to answer this, obviously in that first half, you get down 11. What helped you weather that early deficit and to be able to get back in that one going into the half?

DEIVON SMITH: I would say staying together. It's not the first time we've been down. I think we started off pretty hot our previous games; had a lead on teams. That kind of threw us off. But once we got used to the environment and just what was going on during the game and adjusting to the defenses and what we messed up on early, I think we settled in pretty fine.

We didn't get enough stops, really. That's what it comes down to. I think we locked in on what we needed to.

Q. First half, you guys ended up with just two turnovers and that helped going into that half tied at 44. Early in that second half, I think you had four as they were building that lead and Indiana State end up with just one. How big, especially during that second half, where you didn't have a ton of turnovers but they just felt really big in those moments?

CRAIG SMITH: Yeah, I tend to agree. Like I alluded to, we had 20 assists and only nine turnovers in a high-possession game. But certainly, when you turn it over, you just feel like -- you just feel like every possession on offense is so important because of our struggles on defense, right.

So you just feel like you've got to capitalize, and certainly when you turn it over against these guy, much like when we turn people over. It's very difficult to sprint back and get the ball stopped against a team that's dynamic like them. Just like it's hard to stop us when we create a turnover. It almost always turns into an easy look, whether it's a two or an open three. And so it just -- that pressure just feels magnified. At the end of the day, nine turnovers is really good in a high-possession game like that.

Some of those were self-inflicted. Some of those, those guys are quick. They do a good job and cover a lot of ground, specifically their guards. They have a lot of makeup-ability that way.

It's not a road game but certainly felt like a road game. So when you play in those types of environments, you feel like you have to eliminate losing to win. That's a lot of different things.

At the end of the day, I thought they executed very well.

We really struggled to guard the ball in halfcourt when we were in man and I just thought they got loose in transition, which they do, and when you start doing that, and you've got to be able to point and talk and really communicate at an elite level, you know, even just talking to some of the guys, like just how loud it was on the floor. It's really difficult, and we have a phrase in our program, you've got to violently communicate. You have to violently communicate. And that's where I think we've made a lot of growth specifically in the last six weeks is our guys finally learned how to communicate as a whole because for a long time we were really, really quiet.

But like I said, credit to them, when they get a turnover it, turns into a pick six usually pretty quick.

Q. What can you see from Julian defensively to hold down Gabe?

CRAIG SMITH: I said coming in after the game, he is an elite defender. They clearly were game planning to say Gabe is not going to -- Gabe is going to have to earn everything. And so it was very obvious seeing how they were guarding some of our stuff that we run for Gabe.

You know, they were, I don't want to say top-lock -- I won't get into all that. But they did a good job, and it was primarily him of course but some of the actions that we run, they were switching some other guys out to try to take that away, right.

And so credit to them. But one thing I'll tell you, when you have Gabe Madsen on the floor, when all of the attention goes to him and that's how they chose to guard, it opens things up for other people, and it did. Okay. You choose to do that; now we are going to play this way. And so every team going into games, you've got to pick your poison of what you're going to try to take away, when you're going against a good offensive team, and we have become a very good offensive team, specifically in the last six weeks or so.

And so because they were guarding Gabe like that, that opened up a lot of things for Branden Carlson, for Deivon and for Cole and for anyone else that was on the floor.

So when you score 90, most nights, you're going to be in a good spot. We make 17 threes tonight, which ties a University of Utah Men's Basketball record, right. But it just still wasn't enough, and that's been a bit of our issue throughout this season is just consistency on the defensive end, and we just didn't have enough tonight.

Q. This wraps up year three for you. There's been that incremental progress with the record each year. As

you look back, what are positives you can take away from this year and this building process and as you look forward to next year some steps that you want to see the program take?

CRAIG SMITH: I'll have a lot more time to evaluate some things.

I am proud of this team, how we kept fighting. I think over the last six, seven years, the most wins this program had is 18 or 19. So we made a big jump that way. We were in an amazing position all year, you know, for the NCAA Tournament kind of until that end weekend. Most of the year we were playing with nine or ten scholarship guys, nine to ten, depending on the time frame of the year. We've had things to overcome. The way we recruited, we were not expecting a couple of our guys to be in the positions that they had to play this year, so they kind of had to learn a lot of different things. That made it difficult.

But again, they never used that as an excuse. We certainly didn't as a coaching staff and they are not going to as a player. You just have to figure it out. Injuries are a part of it. Things happen and that's the beauty of basketball. You just have to be able to figure it out, right. Then roles change and it's just part of it.

But we were in a position -- last year we were in a position as well and we lost basically our entire backcourt down the stretch last five, six games. So that's been unfortunate. We are always going to look at that. We have an excellent sports science team. Sometimes injuries happen, and you're always evaluating everything that goes with it.

I'm excited. We have a rich tradition of excellence at the University of Utah. That's why I wanted to come here. Nobody is going to have more goals than me for greatness. I've always said, bring on the competition. I believe in that firmly. And now we are going into the Big 12, which, five of the six years, has been ranked the No. 1 league on the men's basketball side.

We have work to do. Now with everything going on, we've been at this, what, just the transfer portal has been open for 15 or 16 days now. We have been watching a lot but you know we got some work to get done. If anybody tells you they know who is coming back, who is going, you have an idea, but I don't know if you totally know.

Now we are getting back to the recruiting trail; that obviously we've been doing that for a while. Got to keep gaining momentum and keep pushing forward.

Q. If you can comment on the crowd tonight, and how did it impact in the middle of the second half when



they went on a run everything and was building against you?

CRAIG SMITH: They showed up and showed out and you certainly could feel it. What an amazing facility. When we walked into practice yesterday morning, we walked in here about 7:40 a.m., which is 5:40 a.m. for Utah time. But it was really cool and almost serene and super peaceful, and you could feel the ambiance yesterday morning.

Just the history and anybody that understands basketball and the tradition of it understands this place has an amazing tradition and one of the storied facilities in the country. It was really kind of a calming -- we had a great practice yesterday. And then tonight, obviously, it was a different vibe.

And it's loud in there. I mean, it is really, really loud. And we knew it was going to be really, really loud and we practiced with music at times and really, you know, every set that we run, everything that we do defensively, we not only have a verbal but we also have a hand signal. So we have to be on point tonight.

I thought two times specifically in the first half we are running a play and four of our five guys knew the set but you need five of the five, right. So they made their presence felt. It was an amazing spirit and atmosphere in that facility, but one that I think our guys really embraced and were looking forward to. But we know that can be a huge advantage.

Q. Could you just talk about the games that you saw from Deivon and Branden to finish the season?

CRAIG SMITH: BC, every game you go into BC, you never know how teams are going to guard. You have an idea because all the prep. But he just puts a lot of pressure on teams, how you're going to guard him in the post because he is really difficult to stop one-on-one. How are you going to guard pick-and-roll and he's setting the ball screen, and then what's the matchup. Like are they going to put their five man or four man on him.

So there's a lot that goes into it, and you have to figure out and adapt and adjust as the game progresses. They put No. 20 on him most of the game. They chose they were not going to give him threes, at least within the halfcourt. And certainly there was a few breakdowns where he got a couple and scored on a bounce play, another play we ran for them and got one in semi-transition with him and Deivon kind of in a drag screen where they overhelped.

But we felt confident we could throw it to them inside. They were bringing the double early, and Branden did such

a good job skipping it out and creating looks for his teammates. Then they pretty chose him play one-on-one, and he scored most of those times and had great look to him.

Deivon really got going in the second half. I think he even said, once we got used to the environment, so to speak, and kind of settled in, and you could see that in the second half. What was he, six for six from the three. You could see his confidence on the offensive side specifically is really getting better as he gets accustomed to playing that position, and you could see it in practice. He's making more shots. Not only in five-on-five play but, just in our skill stuff and we really dedicate a ton of time to skill development, and he's getting comfort level that way. He's a dynamic player without question.

So we need that. Good teams have good players, right, and you've got to have good coaching, and everything in between. You could really start seeing those guys and how they impacted the game in a great way tonight. But at the end of the day we have to guard better.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, and wish you best of luck in the future.

CRAIG SMITH: I just want to say one more thing.

Thank you to the NIT and all the people involved. It's been first class in every way from two weeks ago in our three games at home and then certainly here.

I want to thank our administration. It's not always easy when you get to March and April, there's a lot -- and I've never been an administrator and I don't want to be but there's a lot that goes into this thing and for us specifically being able to play three games at home, there's a lot of things that goes into it.

So our administration and everybody that's a part of doing that and our band coming here, and our cheer squad, and all hopping on the plane to get here, it's been an amazing ride. So thank you to them and all the people throughout the season. We were able to reestablish home court and having a great home court and a lot goes into that with our student body and fan base everything and in between.

Want to thank our coaching staff. We have a great staff. Those guys are behind the scenes doing all those types of things. And then of course, our players. Because those guys do it, man. You get to the end and you know, I always have felt like in college athletics, it's changed so much, we all know this, in the last three years.

But Cole and BC will never put on that uniform as a college



student athlete. If they do it again, it's as a pro. It's just different at that point.

And so the experiences that you gain and the relationships that you make that last a lifetime, that's what it's about, and I'm proud of these guys, how they galvanized and came together, and now we get on the recruiting trail and make it happen.

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