

Emirates NBA Cup

Friday, December 13, 2024

Milwaukee Bucks

Damian Lillard

Semifinal Practice Day



Q. Doc earlier, he mentioned the Pacers last year. They got to the finals here, and they ended up in the Conference Finals. Then this year the top two teams in the West are in this tournament, you guys and the Hawks are hot right now. Do you think that being able to get this far and maybe get to the finals or win the NBA Cup finals has any meaning or just like sort of representative of what you can do in the playoffs?

DAMIAN LILLARD: I mean, not really. I think the one thing that you do get out of the NBA Cup that's similar to the playoffs is just high stakes. You get in these games -- like we had a game at Detroit. Both of us were undefeated in the tournament. We had to go on the road. It's like regardless of who you're playing, you're on somebody else's home floor, the winner moves on. The loser is done.

So it's just a lot on the line. It requires you to focus. You've got to come and get the job done. So I think in that way it's similar to a playoff experience, just that you got to get the job done.

Then we play against Orlando. We end up in a dogfight again. You've got to get the job done or this is it.

So I think it does in that way. But, obviously, for us, we had a tough start to the season. We've gotten ourselves going in the right direction. We've been able to win a lot of games lately. This is just another opportunity for us to continue that, obviously, but with more on the line and with us to get even more momentum from an experience like this.

Q. Obviously, getting Khris back and you guys are getting healthy and all those wonderful things, but when it was 2-8, what was your level of concern? You've been in the league long enough you know that, when it goes bad, teams have two choices and you guys could have gone the other way real easy. Was it something that changed, or was it just you guys knew that eventually you'd figure it out?

DAMIAN LILLARD: I would love to say, oh, I knew, but the truth is you just never know. You never know what could

make a team just keep going in that direction.

I would say the one thing that I didn't lose faith or confidence in is just my interactions with Giannis. For me, I'm always a competitor, and I'm always optimistic. I always think the tide is turning. Every time, there's opportunity to start going in the right direction.

I would be texting with Giannis, and we'd be talking at practice or whatever. His mind was never shut off. He was never discouraged. He was never overly concerned. It was always fight. Our conversations had always been, like, we're going to turn it around. We're going to figure it out. We're going to lead. We've got to keep going. We've got to dominate.

That was the conversation, and that's my spirit naturally. Just to be in a situation like that and to see that that's his spirit naturally as well, that's what made me just believe. I wasn't overly concerned because I knew that eventually it would turn around just based off of that.

We had a great training camp. I think the energy with our team was always good. So just because of those things, I just felt like eventually we'll hit our stride. It's just a matter of us keeping our minds in the right place and us staying together, and we did that. We were able to get ourselves right.

Q. What would you say about your own defense? My question is if you're super happy with your moment as an offense-defense player for your team?

DAMIAN LILLARD: Obviously, I watch each game, and I watch it as my biggest critic. So I'm always looking for the things I could do better. I think this season on the ball I've been good. I think off the ball there's times where I relax or I have lapses or I get behind on certain plays. But I think it's definitely been an area where my energy and my effort has been there. It's something that I focused on, just taking the challenge of being part of our team improving defensively.

That's all it is for me. Obviously, being aggressive offensively, attacking, making plays and being a point guard, being the brains behind how we play and what we

ASAP sports . . . when all is said, we're done.®

do offensively. Then defensively just doing my job.

Q. Has Doc inspired you in that?

DAMIAN LILLARD: Coming into the season, I just told our coaches -- they told me that they would regardless, but I just said, whatever you all want to challenge me on or show me on film or whatever you want to do, the effort is going to be there. I'm embracing improving however they see I need to improve.

When we watch the clips or from game to game, for me it's just the process of accepting the challenge of getting better as we go and making sure, like I said, that I'm doing my job so the team can be the best that we want to be.

Q. I just wanted to ask a question about the prestige of the Emirates NBA Cup. You've been in the league for 12 years now. Every season there's a playoff, and you know the weight and the value of the playoff. Two years into the Emirates NBA Cup being established, how do you feel about the prestige nature of the Cup, and do you and the team have a passion where you really want to win this? How do you see the future of the Emirates NBA Cup in terms of the basketballers and how they respond to it?

DAMIAN LILLARD: I think it's definitely on its way to carrying some weight. I think last year most people didn't even understand what was going on until it got to the final stages, and then you realize, oh, some teams are going to Vegas. You might have got two games in and you lost two games already, and it's like, oh, now I get it, but we don't have a chance.

Then when we got to the game against New York last year where the winner got to go to Vegas, we started to have a better understanding of what was on the line. Then coming into this season, I think everybody understood better and everybody cared more, not just because it's an opportunity to win money. Your teammates who don't make a lot of money got the opportunity to make some extra money. You get an opportunity to come to Vegas and do something outside the norm in the middle of our regular season.

But it's an opportunity to win something. It's something that every team is competing for, and then you get here and there's only a few teams that can win it. It can energize and lift your team up to come here and be the team, the last one standing. Even though it's not the ultimate goal, I think it gives you an edge. It gives something to a team.

For us, we want all of those things. We want to be the last

team standing in it. We want to win the tournament. We want to win the money. We want to continue going in the right direction as a team.

I think as the years continue to go by, I think it will be -- like I said, it will carry more and more weight. People will start to care more and more about it.

Q. How tough is it to be focused when you are playing for a championship for two, three, four days, and you are in a city like Vegas? And do you have any plans off the court for these days?

DAMIAN LILLARD: For me, it's not even -- I'm not 22 or 23 years old. I've been to Vegas many times, and I've had fun in Vegas. I've been here for Summer League playing. I've been here during Summer League. I've been here for a lot of fights. I'm a big boxing fan.

I know what I'm here for this time, and it is not to enjoy Vegas. I'll have some dinners. My family being back on the West Coast, I'm from the West Coast. So my family being able to come here and visit, being able to see them. But we came here to win the tournament.

I don't really have no plans other than practice, play in the games, see my people and that's it.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports