

2024 NCAA Men's Lacrosse Championship

Saturday, May 25, 2024

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

Lincoln Financial Field

Denver Pioneers

Coach Matt Brown

AJ Mercurio

Richie Connell

Media Conference



question, it must have worn you down a little bit. And in the second half, your goalie had a tough stretch there with a lot of goals in a short amount of time. Do you think the heat could have hurt his focus?

MATT BROWN: I don't think it was the heat. I think we played in heat like that a couple times this year. I'll tell you what, Malcolm had a heck of a first half. He came up with some big, big saves, and he kept us in it for a number of stretches.

So I think at the end of the day, when you don't capitalize, we failed to clear the ball a few times in a row. Those turn into longer extended possessions.

And as great as our defense plays -- which I thought in moments today they were fantastic just like they have been all year long -- but as great as you are as a defensive unit, if they have the ball for that long stretch periods of time, things will get a little sloppy from time to time.

But I'm so proud of Malcolm and the season that he's had. He's really stepped up. And I'll be honest with you, at the beginning of the year, I had no idea if Malcolm was going to be our starter or not.

I was under the impression we might have to go with a two-goalie -- two-man rotation. And he continued to impress us over and over again and played great in big minutes.

Q. Coach and players, I'd like to know what made it so hard going against that Notre Dame defense. You guys hung with the best of the best. They were the champions of last year. You guys took them down to the wire. But what made it so hard for them to defend against?

RICHIE CONNELL: I think during the game, the first half, we obviously came out hot. We were scoring. We weren't really having trouble moving the ball. The pressure wasn't getting to us.

And they came out in the second half and made halftime adjustments and we kind of just didn't adjust to those

Notre Dame - 13, Denver - 6

MATT BROWN: Thanks, everybody, for being here. Obviously tough moment there in the locker room. I apologize if I get a little emotional.

But I'm proud of these guys. We got our program back to where we belong. And they don't feel it now, they don't recognize it now, but they will. And they should be really, really proud of what they've done for our university and our lacrosse program.

They battled. I felt like we probably needed to have a perfect game today, and that we did not. But through the course of the 60 minutes, these guys just continued to compete like they did all year long.

So we're disappointed. We're upset, as we should be. This is a big moment. Pinnacle of lacrosse, but I couldn't be more proud of the men we have in our locker room.

Q. AJ, I know you guys were playing a lot of defense today. Just how difficult was it to kind of hang in there? And what did you feel like happened in the second half after you guys were able to gamely keep it together there for the first half?

AJ MERCURIO: When a bunch of great players have the ball for a consistent amount of time it's obviously tough to stop them every time. But our defense, we put up a damn good fight and really made them work for everything that they got. And unfortunately they just came out with the win today.

Q. AJ and Coach, it must have been really hot down there. All I can think is following up on that last

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adjustments well. Credit their defense. They're hell of a defense.

We have I think one of the best defenses in the country. I don't think this game defines us, as Coach has said. But they're a heck of a defense. And we just kind of lacked ball movement toward the end. But credit to them.

Q. Richie, your goal right before halftime, were you on a different midfield line? Take me through that goal. And what was the message at halftime, it was 5-4 with momentum?

RICHIE CONNELL: Going into halftime, it was a momentum goal. Obviously getting one there, only down one going into the locker room kind of gave us some excitement and some juice to come back out.

But I think -- sorry what was the second question? We had a seven-man rotation this whole year. It's kind of just we start off with two lines and then as the game goes on, we kind of just adjust to matchups and that sort of thing.

So I don't completely remember the midfield out there, but we kind of have seven strong offensive midfields. Everybody plays well. And I think the cool thing about our offense, we never know who is going to have a day, who is going to score two, who is going to score four for us. It kind of just opens up and makes it hard to defend us, in my opinion.

Q. AJ, to build off Richie's comment about how today doesn't define you, how do you ultimately define what this season was about for you guys, and how joyful was it for you?

AJ MERCURIO: We all came back, these fifth-years and seniors, we came back for a chance at the championship weekend. And that's exactly what we got. And we are a gritty, gritty team. I mean, we fought tooth and nail every single game.

We had overtime wins. We went against top 10, top five teams and came out victorious. So it was just really getting back to the Pioneer way.

Q. Richie, it felt like tempo, where the game was going to be something that was a key for you guys. As Coach said in his open, felt you would need to play your best game, even a perfect game. As you tried to control tempo on the offensive side, do you feel a pressure to make sure that every possession ends as officially as it can?

RICHIE CONNELL: I think the key to our success was

kind of just slowing the game down and us having control of the game. So I think kind of in the middle or towards the beginning of the game we were using every possession, whether it was using the entire shot clock or getting to a good shot.

And I think towards the end of the second half/the second half, we kind of just shot early in possessions and didn't have full control like we did in the first half. So to answer your question, I think that's what kind of credits that.

Q. Did Notre Dame surprise -- going into the second half did anything that Notre Dame show you surprise you at all, especially how you guys got the lead down to one?

RICHIE CONNELL: I don't think anything surprised us. I think we were ready for everything. Our coaches, credit all our coaching staff, they do an incredible job for us. They're the best mentors I've personally ever had.

So I don't think anything surprised us. I think it was just they kind of took control towards the second half and we weren't able to gain it back. But credit them and credit our coaching staff for doing the best job that they possibly can. And love these guys to death.

Q. May I ask about the faceoffs? I think it's been a while since Denver, with Baptiste (phonetic) and (indiscernible) have been so good. Could you take me through the faceoffs and what you were seeing?

MATT BROWN: They have a great faceoff man, and so do we. It was a battle out there. I didn't think that we did a great job of supporting staff off the wings. I thought, especially early on in the game, we had some loose-ball opportunities that we just didn't get our nose over it. We just didn't scoop through it. And possession led to them.

When you look at this thing, it's not a one-on-one battle. It's a three-on-three battle. We tried to change our patterns on the wings. We tried to move around a little bit to see if we could get him to put the ball in different spots.

But Alec Stathakis one of the greatest warriors I've ever been around and I'm proud of the year he's had. He didn't have a great day today, but you know what? This guy is going to continue to have a great future. He'll be a future P.L.L. player.

There's no doubt in my mind that Curt Malawsky is getting one with the Vancouver Warriors in the National Lacrosse League. This guy just embodies everything that our program is about. And he's been our leader, and one of our leaders since the first day he stepped on campus.

Q. The coaches challenge. What was that about? Because we couldn't hear anything. We don't know what's going on.

MATT BROWN: The coach's challenge? I think it's, at that point, you're in the fourth quarter. It's a crease dive. They call a no-goal. The ball goes in. I've got two timeouts in my hand. I'm going to throw it regardless to see if maybe they see something that they didn't see during live play.

Also thought maybe it could give us a stoppage so we could jump into ten-man and turn the ball back over. But I'll be honest with you, I didn't really know at the time, but you can throw it at that moment.

Q. Between their depth and running three midfields and just their off-ball movement on a few of those goals, how much pressure do they apply to you regardless of whether they have the ball a ton or not?

MATT BROWN: Yeah, they do a great job. Obviously, they're a heck of a lacrosse team. They play well as a unit. They're well-coached. They've got some great individual players. They do. They do move off-ball extremely well.

I thought we did a pretty good job in a lot of possessions of handling them. But if you have a slip or you have a fall or you fan off on a ground ball, they picked it up. In the scramble situations, that's when they're deadly. And they're hard to play against.

They ride like no other. I know a lot of people have been talking about their ride. I thought we prepared as best as we possibly could for it this week. We put four attackmen down riding in practice to try to simulate that.

But they just, credit to Notre Dame, they did a great job, and they outplayed us in a couple of moments that were vital in the game.

Q. You got emotional at the beginning, phenomenal season. Talk about how you use those moments not only from the entire season but what you learned today to set your program. You have a lot of talented guys still playing next year. So talk about how you move on from this and set your team up for success in the future.

MATT BROWN: I think for our younger guys that are returning -- you're right, I feel we've got great depth across all the classes in our locker room.

You have to use this experience as motivation. There's nothing else like it. From winning a quarterfinal game to

getting back here, to being at the hotels, to coming to go the beautiful stadium like we are here today at the Linc. You get the police escort into the stadium. This is a big deal.

And I've been fortunate enough to be a part of a few of these weekends. But for the guys in that locker room, this is their first taste. They haven't tasted anything like this before.

We've got a lot of talented young men in there. And we have a lot of gritty guys, as AJ talked about. I just hope they continue to use this as motivation and say, hey, we want to get back here again. We want more. We want to experience more of this.

And I just have to thank our administration. We're at a special place with special people. I've said it before and I'll continue to say it. Our hockey team is the all-time greatest hockey program in the history of college hockey.

But we're also a lacrosse school. There's not many places in the country that can say that. I'm so proud always and every day to be a Pioneer.

Q. Was there a particular moment, whether it be in the tournament or the regular season where you knew this team was going to be special and was bound to make a run?

MATT BROWN: I believed in this team from the get-go. I think the connection that they have -- when you're around teams and you know you've got a special group, you see how well connected they are. We did a ranch trip the beginning of January. We went away for a couple of nights.

It was so neat to see guys outside of their lacrosse element and how they interacted with each other. We did some team-building stuff. We read the book of Peter Barton, who our stadium is named after. I thought that was important for our guys to know where they're playing on a daily basis. Each group had to do a little report on the chapter.

And I just knew right away. And I think you saw it with this group on opening weekend against Hopkins. You go into historic Homewood, and we're down maybe four or five goals at least once in the game, maybe multiple times in the game, and there just wasn't any quit. They just kept chipping away, chipping away, chipping away to end up winning a game against a top-ranked opponent in overtime.

So I think that moment right there for the guys, I knew it



that they had it in them. I think for them it kind of proved to them what they were capable of doing.

Q. I can tell you're very passionate about the team and the program. This time of year you're really playing for one more practice. And I'd just like your comments on the finality on when you lose in the semifinals and it's all over.

MATT BROWN: It's tough. And listen, there's only one team that is truly completely happy at the end of this whole thing. I've been fortunate enough to experience that once before. I've been on this side of the equation a lot of times, but you just -- it will take a while.

As I told them in the locker room, you'll gain better perspective as time kind of goes on. And they just need to know that what they've done for our program and our school to get us back on this map is, it's unbelievable. It's unbelievable.

And last night we put a video together of some of our former players who played on this stage in this moment. And they kind of sent a quick little message, it was about a 15-minute video. And I told these guys, you're going to be those guys here in five to 10 years. You're going to be sending that video back to that next group that's going to be at Memorial Day weekend.

I'm just so proud of our players. So proud of our program, our school, our university, and thankful for everybody for being here and thanks to the hosts for putting on such an amazing Memorial Day weekend.

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