

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - James Madison vs Wisconsin

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Brooklyn, New York, USA

Barclays Center

Wisconsin Badgers Coach Greg Gard Chucky Hepburn Tyler Wahl

Media Conference

Q. Chucky, you talked about how February really kind of helped you leadership-wise as well as just finding that role within the team this year, how did you find that and where is your mentality right now? I know you've got your eyes set on a deep run.

CHUCKY HEPBURN: Yeah, looking back at last year, watched some of the games where we went wrong. And then going back and looking at the February film, it kind of correlated a little bit. Being one of the older guys on the team now, just got to look at that, and you look back with your other leaders on the team to figure out ways to get over those losses and just try to move ongoing forward. And it's March now, so we are here ready for the big stage and ready to compete now.

Q. Last week I spoke to AJ and I talked about you being a duo in the tournament and how that materialized. Can you speak about your chemistry and how that came together during the tournament and how ultimately you both played off each other for strong performances last week?

CHUCKY HEPBURN: I couldn't really hear you, I'm sorry.

Q. Last week AJ talked about how your chemistry really grew last week when you were building off each other. Wanted to ask you how you guys have grown through some of the rough February times where you became a leader into last week where you guys played off each other and played really well.

CHUCKY HEPBURN: The stretch in February where we were on a losing streak, I felt like we got close together.



And that's what sparked that run at the end of the Big Ten Tournament. And that give us more confidence going into this tournament, and I feel like we are all pretty confident about it.

Q. Tyler, your decision to come back this year, you said you wanted to leave Wisconsin better than where you found it. You said you had unfinished business. How much was involved with the tournament and wanting to make a run in this tournament and make an impact that way. And for Chucky, how much has Tyler, his coming back and his overall play this year, helped you and this team be in the position that you're in?

TYLER WAHL: Yeah, this team has been to the NCAA Tournament so many times, and us not getting there last year was definitely one of the deciding factors for me coming back. There's really nothing like this tournament. Everyone come in here dreaming of playing in a Final Four, playing in this tournament.

Being able to come back and have the opportunity to come back and help this team get to where we are today, it's exactly how I dreamed of it. Being able to come back, be a leader and be a good player and do all the little things right and get back to the spot where we are today.

CHUCKY HEPBURN: Tyler coming back has been one of the keys to our success this year. He knows how to win games and just having him back on the team, he just has that winning culture that we need for our program to succeed.

Q. Going off what I asked from Chucky, how does it raise the ceiling offensively?

TYLER WAHL: I said it after one of the games we had in the last tournament, this is the best basketball I've seen Chucky play. So I feel like a lot of guys are playing really good basketball right now, and we are all just feeding off the energy that we are giving to each other. Just being out there, being able to communicate with one another, be all on the same page is what's gotten us to where we are here in the last few weeks.



Q. Similar to that, is some of is that scoring approach you took in Minneapolis, is that setting the tone for the team, being the team's point guard?

CHUCKY HEPBURN: Yeah, March Madness, they always say it's a guard's game. It's finally time for me to step up and when the team needs me the most, I'm here to make plays for them.

Q. Following that, you mentioned a little bit there, but can the whole team feed off of that in terms of him trying to set that tone? I know earlier this week it was killer instinct and anybody can get it. Is that something the team can feed off of as well?

TYLER WAHL: Yeah, especially with our team, I feel like energy is contagious. And when we were going through that spell of not winning games, we would have a couple guys on, a couple guys off. Where I feel like these last three or four weeks, we've figured out how to get ourself ready to go whether that's from an individual standpoint or as a team. We're out there getting ready to go and see how good of a basketball team we can be.

Q. I know last week you might not have had the week you envisioned with the injury. I wanted to ask where you are with the knee and also what your expectations are for this weekend?

TYLER WAHL: I'm feeling good. Every day I'm feeling better and better. Not playing Friday until late night is a big plus for us. I'm just taking it day-by-day, getting better every single day.

Our expectation is to come in here and win every game that we go out and step on the court. We've got a good group of guys. We are really focused and we're here to win some games. So we're starting off with the game tomorrow, and that's our main focus is we are going to go win there and we are going to go 1-0 tomorrow.

Q. Greg has said that you have really evolved your game from where you started in the beginning of the year with your different post moves and different actions you've taken. Where do you think you've made your biggest jump this year with your overall game, offensive game?

TYLER WAHL: Not forcing things. I'm able to pick and choose my spots and where to be aggressive and where to get my teammates involved. I feel like this game has been able to slow down for me where I'm able to make the right read, make the right decisions throughout the game. And just make sure my teammates are there, them helping me out and me helping them out, and we are just running as a

well-oiled machine.

GREG GARD: A little longer bus ride than we were told it was going to be. New York traffic is not quite like Wisconsin.

Excited to be here. Excited to be in this week of basketball, which I feel is the best of -- if you're a college basketball player, the best month of the year and this obviously starts this week.

We are excited about being here, and I think we are in a good position of how we have been playing here recently. But when you get into this, you are also going to face a really good opponent. And obviously I saw James Madison on the very first night of the regular season when they won at Michigan State, and obviously it caught the nation's attention there, and they have had a phenomenal year.

No matter who you play, you know you're going to get paired up with a really good team that's had an awesome year, and they are no exceptions to that. We are looking forward to continuing to prepare through today and tonight, and tip it off tomorrow night.

Questions?

Q. Chucky has been very reflective and honest about figuring out the right mentality over this last month or two, and I think credited you and his teammates with that. How did you see some of that growth from him, and would you agree with what Tyler and some teammates have said that this is the best basketball you've seen from him?

GREG GARD: Absolutely he's playing the best basketball of his career. I think leadership and how comfortable you are with that is always organic, and typically, you always want your point guard, your quarterback, to be a leader.

But for Chucky, I think it's taken awhile for him to really find confidence in his role, and that confidence comes from how he's played. And as he's played better, even during our stumbles in February when we were not getting the results we wanted, I saw his leadership and growth in leadership take off and really trend in the right direction.

Obviously we started playing better. You know, obviously getting results we wanted, and I think it's been -- sometimes when you're in an adverse moment, it forces you to really dig deep. And I think Chucky saw that opportunity; that it was time to take that next step in his leadership, and obviously we are fortunate that he did.

Q. I wanted to ask a little bit more about kind of what shifted in this team between that February slump and where you are now where it seems like there's really a lot of chemistry, things are clicking. Chucky, you mentioned, is a big piece of that. What is the common thread between what Wisconsin does in wins versus what you were doing in February?

GREG GARD: I think the only really thing that I can concretely point to is we got healthy. We had -- McGee got hurt in our first game against Indiana and was out for 11 of the 20-league games, and he came back right the last week of the regular season.

Then John Blackwell got hurt in our first Purdue game and missed about two and a half games. I think that was enough disruption to us. Even though maybe statistically those two guys, their numbers don't jump off the page, but it was enough to upset our rhythm, and we also -- we didn't play as well. Pretty much in a week, week and a half stretch, I thought we played well and didn't get the result we wanted a couple times.

But we had to grow through some things. I know the guys had to step up. But, really, if I could point to one thing that changed -- because we were rolling in January and nothing changed other than a couple guys getting hurt. So I think it was enough to tip us over a little bit, and maybe we didn't rebound from it or respond to it fast enough.

But I can't -- I don't want to discredit the teams that we lost to. I mean, it's doing a disservice to them. But I think health has been the big thing. When we got those guys back, it took a little bit to get into a rhythm, but the last two and a half weeks, we've returned back to who we were in January.

Q. With how prevalent sports betting is in society, how much do you worry about your guys being subjected, or you, being subjected to people online, mad about their bet? How much is that on your mind?

GREG GARD: That's a cause to the social media responses or outreaches. We talk about that all the time in terms of really blocking out the outside noise.

Obviously fans -- and you never know what direction they are coming from. Are they coming from that background in terms of the gambling, or are they coming from a rival and trying to -- or is it one of your own internal fans.

The best advice I always give our guys from the very start of the season -- I haven't banned social media but some of our guys have gotten off of it during the season. Just because it eliminates some distractions. It allows you to

focus on things that really matter.

And typically when we get into a rougher time or we hit a spell where we are not performing, I remind them, again, shut off the outside noise, you know. And we've really got to focus on the people that really matter, and that's the guys in the locker room and our coaching staff and that.

So it's a balance. You know, these guys have to deal with things that 10, 15 years ago, didn't exist in the world and the outside pressures that come with it. There's obviously blessings to being a part of this and things that you have to deal with that are not as pleasant.

Q. Another player that seems to be kind of a notable shift in his mentality recently is Steven Crowl. He's even said his aggressiveness has really increased. How have you guys instilled that in him a little bit and how does that also raise kind of the floor of the offense and obviously his ceiling?

GREG GARD: Yeah, I think I've always been a believer that he's, you know, an all-conference caliber player, and I've coached a lot of them in the last 24 years here, and specifically big guys; that I've seen the talent in him.

I think the one thing with Steve is convincing himself and having the confidence to be aggressive, because when we get an aggressive Steve, we are a much better team. That's been a nonstop push with Steve for, quite frankly, a couple years of, hey, you put the time in, you're strong, you're big. You've got the skillset. Now it's a matter of your mindset taking another step and becoming more dominant in how you think and how you approach the game.

And when he's in that mindset, he's a handful.

Q. What has AJ meant for your team and did you guys kind of pinpoint him as the top guy in the off-season that you felt like could really help you?

GREG GARD: I think he's helped us probably even more than what we would have anticipated. I've said many times, he may be our most improved player from October until this day. There were points in October I didn't know if he could start for us just because he was missing a lot of intangible things and understanding of how we needed to play and how we wanted to play to be successful.

But he's really been awesome to coach. He's listened. He's embraced coaching, and he's obviously added an offensive punch to us that we didn't have previously. Really with identifying him, we knew he was originally from the Rockford area, so there was a chance for him to come

back closer to home to play, and that's really the premise behind us reaching out for the most part.

He had athletic ability that does things you can't teach, but there was a lot of things, probably more than I anticipated, that he had to pick up and learn and grow from, and he's done a good job of that.

Q. Regarding Storr, a guy transfers in, and you know, he's going to try to fit in with a bunch of people, but Storr is also a shot taker. Can you describe, like, how difficult a transition that could be and how well he negotiated it?

GREG GARD: Yeah, I think the one thing was, I noticed in June when he got on campus that his teammates, his older teammates, Chucky, Tyler, grabbed him right away and really showed him the ropes, so to speak, and probably did more behind-the-scenes instructions and passing on knowledge before I ever got on the floor with him.

But, you know, as we go through -- went through the season, yes, there was -- with a player of that talent level, you have to let them do their thing in some regards. But not without accountability. Not without some boundaries.

And that was really what the process has been with AJ, one of them, is just understanding the difference between playing basketball and playing winning basketball and what goes into playing winning basketball to help your team get to this point in March. Because, you know, this is the first time he's played in March. He wasn't on a winning team last year.

So just instilling that and reinforcing that, but at the same time, you have to let a really talented offensive player show his talents, and he has. He's one guy -- one of a few guys that we can have that can make something out of nothing with how he can make plays and score.

So there's that balance. I mean, it's not black and white. I think you continue to maneuver back-and-forth with how you help him grow. And there's also a time when he's got to come and sit down, you know, and like we've got to get back into what's best for our team.

Q. Wanted to ask you, as a head coach, you've been to six tournament appearances, and this will be your sixth in eight years. What have you learned from all the tournament experiences and how can you apply that to this year's team?

GREG GARD: I think the one thing you learn, and I learned this before I was ever a head coach, is you can't change who you are just in this week of the season. You

have to lean into what's made you successful throughout the year.

Obviously you've got a short period of time to learn an uncommon opponent. So you apply that, and you really focus on yourself. And knowing there's going to be certain things with James Madison that we are going to have to really key in on, but we have to continue to be the best version of ourselves and really lean into the things that got us here.

Q. When Tyler said he was going to return, how did you think he could impact you positively offensively and defensively this season, and now as you get prepared to play in this tournament, how has he ended up doing that for you?

GREG GARD: Yeah, I think with Tyler defensively, he's always been so versatile to guard one through five, and he allows us to switch a lot of things defensively. So from that standpoint, I knew what he could do and what he could bring. I think the biggest thing from last year to this year was he had to come through a year healthy, which he's done.

And then offensively, we made some adjustments early in the year, when things were not going so well for him after the first couple games, to change maybe a little bit of how he was going to play. And it was part of our, you know, transitioning offensively to a little different style or different concept. And I think he's benefitted from that, whether he can bring the ball in transition or he plays in punch-drive situations.

So it put him even more so into a wheelhouse where he can really use the things that he does well more often, more consistently.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports