

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Northwestern vs UConn

Sunday, March 24, 2024

Brooklyn, New York, USA

Barclays Center

Northwestern Wildcats Coach Chris Collins

Boo Buie

Ryan Langborg

Media Conference

UConn 75, Northwestern 58

CHRIS COLLINS: Congratulations to UConn. I mean, they are a championship-level program. We knew that coming in. We got off to a really poor start, which you can't dig yourself that kind of hole. We talked about that coming into the game. I thought we missed some shots around the rim early, and it kind of got us off-kilter a little bit and uncharacteristically they ran out on us.

We've been a pretty good transition defensive team this year, but I thought some of our missed opportunities offensively affected how we were getting back. They had 28 points in the paint in the first half out of 40, so you know, you're down 22 at half.

And the one thing, though, I was just really proud about how our guys -- I'm not surprised, but I was just really proud about how we fought the rest of the night. You know, a lot of teams might lay down when you get down by 28 or 27, whatever it was, and that's just not who these guys are.

We fought for, what, 33 or 34, whatever we played, games this year, and this was a really special team to coach. I mean, everything that was thrown at them, the injuries, the curveball, the adversity.

Guys, listen, it wasn't our night tonight, but every team except for one is going to feel like us in the NCAA Tournament. That's what it's about, and unfortunately for us, that night was tonight and we ran into a team that out-played us, a better team and we move on. But it doesn't diminish at all what these guys have meant and



what this team has meant not only to me and our staff, and to our program.

I'll go to questions first, but I said it to the guys after, when I walked out to the Barclays Center floor before the game and I saw that environment in this place being sold out with a ton of Northwestern fans, a ton of UConn fans, a buzz, second-round game in the NCAA Tournament, it just made me be in awe of these guys even more.

Like look what they have done for our program. The fact that we are playing in these games now, you know, and we got a chance to do that last year. And we have now done it again this year.

We'll get over the hump. We'll get over the hump. You can only get over the hump by putting yourself back in that position and figuring out a way to get it done. It's all back to these guys. They have led the way all year. I've loved coaching this team as much as any team I've ever coached and I'm just really sad there's no more games with this group.

Q. Boo, what has being a Wildcat meant to you?

BOO BUIE: It means the world. It's just, you know, it's bigger than today's game. You know, it's just more so that I won't be able to ever put the uniform on again.

But I can say that I'm proud of what we have been able to do this season and last season. Coach and I have really been building this since I was a freshman. I mean, just looking back on this year and all the adversity we got through, and to still persevere and make it to the NCAA Tournament and get past the first round and play No. 1 UConn, I mean, I just got to have a lot of gratitude, you know, despite the loss.

I mean, but the university itself has just shown me so much love and support, and I know I'm going to always come back to Evanston and people are going to welcome me, and it's because that's my family.

Q. When you walked off the floor with about a minute left, we saw you and Coach Collins have a long

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embrace. What was said between the two of you guys and what was that moment like for you?

BOO BUIE: Yeah, we were just talking about, you know, our relationship, how, you know, we got the program back-to-back, and everything that we talked about building, we were able to do. And it was because of each other, and you know, everybody else inside the locker room, the other coaches, the players.

But just the belief that we had in one another and to be able to just continue to grow our relationship and our friendship that will last forever and ever. You know, I'm going to always come back and see Coach or stay in touch with Coach and make sure he's good, but this place is just super special to me.

Q. You came in this season as a transfer, and it's now the last game of your college career. How does Northwestern fit into the picture of your career and what did this night mean for you?

RYAN LANGBORG: Yeah, obviously not the way we wanted to end it off, but these guys next to me and the rest of the team, beyond grateful for the opportunity they gave me to come in here and contribute. I feel like what we did this year is really special on the court, but off the court, we are brothers for life. I want to thank Northwestern for everything.

Q. So after halftime, seems like you guys were really pushing and coming back. What was it like at halftime in the locker room, encouragement-wise?

BOO BUIE: I think that we just struggled in the first half, and you know, at halftime, we were just basically saying, like, you know, settle down, and you know, come out here and fight. We were down a lot at that point, but we looked at it as if it was 0-0 and we knew we were not going to quit because that's just not us. And if we are going to lose, you're going to have to just beat us.

So that was the talk at halftime, and I think that we did a good job coming out in the second half and having better energy, but it wasn't enough. We didn't get off to a great start.

RYAN LANGBORG: Echoing Boo, taking the second half by four-minute period, just trying to win every four-minute period you can and hopefully we could walk them down, but it didn't go our way.

Q. What enabled UConn to get out to that big lead so quickly and is it that much tougher against a team like that to believe that you can come back?

RYAN LANGBORG: I think what's special about our group is no matter who we are playing, no matter what the deficit; we still have the same belief in each other no matter what. Obviously it was a difficult situation, but yeah, I mean, we came out, and I think we had to be more physical to start the game and we gave up too many easy buckets inside, which obviously ended up doing us in.

But no, just grateful for these guys and I'm glad that we battled back the way we did in the second half.

Q. A few weeks back, you said that Northwestern surpassed all your expectations. What did you expect when you came into the program and what has your time at Northwestern meant to you?

RYAN LANGBORG: When I set foot on this campus in my visit, I instantly knew. I fell in love with the guys, the coaches, the way Northwestern plays, and then I grew to love the school, as well. The fans were unbelievable this year. So I mean, it's also another home away from home, and I didn't know how the grad year was going to go. You don't know what to expect going into it.

So when I say it surpassed my expectations, it's because, like I said, these are my brothers, and it is another home.

Q. How much were you dreading taking Boo out for the final time?

CHRIS COLLINS: Yeah, I mean, I was hoping it would last a few more games. I knew the time would come. It's been a special journey. He mentioned it, just he and I, the bond you have with your point guard, the ups, the downs, the frustrations, the joys.

We have become very close through all that, and you know, I'm just thankful for him. I mean, he's now set the standard. He's the GOAT, in my opinion, for our program. He is. I mean, for what he's done, not only with the records, the legacy as a winner, but just the credibility that he's helped give our program.

You know, just like I talked about earlier, coming into this building and having an opportunity to play in these high-level games, you know, a big reason was his belief and his fight and his will to kind of fight through a couple lean years early and get to the other side.

I'm really sad that I won't get to coach him any more, but I know that there's a friendship there that's going to be really long-lasting.

Q. To piggyback off that, what did that ovation mean



to you?

CHRIS COLLINS: Yeah, I was hoping that would be the case. I mean, he's been so good, and even the last month, I was really heartbroken for him that we couldn't come into this thing full strength. Because I wanted him to deserve the opportunity to really go for -- I really believed when we had all our guys that we were a second weekend team and maybe even more.

But that's not the hand we were dealt and there's no excuses. And for us to keep fighting and figure out a way to come here and win that first round game and put ourselves in position to play a championship team like UConn in this building in this environment, you know, I wanted to get him out of the game so he could get that ovation because that's what he deserves. That's how much he's meant to this program.

Q. I know it's an emotional time but just having played this Connecticut team and seeing them up close, what is it going to take for someone to beat them? They won six games by an average of 20 points last year. Could they do it again, do you think?

CHRIS COLLINS: They are really good. The thing about it is there's not a whole lot of weaknesses. Usually when you play a team, you study film and you say maybe these two guys, we can help off them a little bit or we can do some things here, like they were able to do against us defensively.

You can't do that with them. They have got five guys who can all score. They are very athletic. I was very impressed in person with their defense. I mean, I knew how prolific they were offensively, but seeing in person their attention to detail defensively, their rotations, sticking on Boo, sticking on Langborg, making it harder on our guys, Donovan having eight blocks and his presence in the lane.

You know, they have all the ingredients to win another championship, there's no question about it. Obviously the Tournament, you have to bring it every night, but Danny is such a good coach. I have so much respect for him, what he's built there. I've talked about it the last couple days. I think he and I are a lot alike in a lot of ways, the way we do things and how we coach and how we see the game.

I know he's going to have those guys ready. I know how he's wired. So to answer your question, a team is going to have to play really, really, really well to beat them.

Q. You had long embraces with Boo, Brooks, and Ryan. What was your message to each of those guys as they are coming off the floor for the last time this

season?

CHRIS COLLINS: Mostly gratitude and thanks. I mean, I'm not the one out there playing. They are. They are the ones out there battling. They are the ones out there throwing themselves into the fire and making plays and, you know, defending and fighting and battling. And, you know, I was the lucky one that got a chance to coach this team, hopefully help guide them in the right direction and let them go out there. And what all those guys did this year was just special.

I mean, we talked about Boo, but for Ryan to come in as a grad transfer, and the seamless transition he made to our team and how big he was for us and how much we needed him, and he delivered. And the step that Brooks made this year, you know, Brooks went from being a good player to a great player, and that's really fun for a coach to watch.

You know, I know for him moving forward now with a guy like Boo, even taking on more of a leadership role, and he wants to do that. But just to see his development and his growth this year to become an all-league player, I just -- I just love coaching this team. They were so tough and so together, and they fought and they gave me everything they had. When you're a coach, that's all you really ask for. You just want your team to give you everything they got.

And this team did that. They emptied the tank. They maxed it out. You watched it out there. This team we maxed every ounce out of what we had, and I'm really proud of this group. This team will hold a special place in my heart forever.

Q. You talk about the injuries you dealt with throughout the season. What would you say you learned about yourself as a coach making it back to the NCAA Tournament even with those challenges?

CHRIS COLLINS: I don't know, it's a good question. I think you are always learning about yourself. You know, I think the thing that I've always been is a fighter. I mean, you guys cover me all the time. I mean, I'm just whoever we got, let's go out there and fight and let's try to figure it out.

I thought our team carried that personality out to the floor, I really did, every night. That's why we were so close. I thought our personalities aligned with the way things are going.

But I think you're always evolving as a coach. You're always learning. You're always finding ways you can be better. How can you motivate better. How can you coach

better. How can you teach better. That's the ongoing, you know, mission as a coach. You know, you always feel like there's more you can learn and there's more you can do to help your guys be at their best.

So it's hard for me to answer that right now because we just got out of the fight, but, you know, usually when the dust settles and you have time to kind of reflect and you look back -- you know, I always kind of self-criticize and self-rate, what are the things I did really well and what are the things I need to be better at as we move forward.

Q. You mentioned that late run. How is that reflective of the overall season and what does it mean to you that the team was able to crawl back in some fashion even when things were not going your way in the first few minutes?

CHRIS COLLINS: Yeah, we talked that up. We brought that up in the huddle with 12 minutes to go or whenever, I forget when in the huddle. We were down 28, and we just said, like this year has been too special, this year has been too good. We have fought so hard. We are going to fight to the finish.

And it's not about the score right now. It's about the standards of this program and the culture that was created this year, and last year -- I mean, these last couple years, the standard that's been created for how we fight, how hard we play, and if we are going to go down, that's how we are going to go down.

I'm not surprised that the guys finished the last 12 minutes the way they did because that's who they have been all year long.

Appreciate you guys. Thanks for covering us.

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