

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - New Mexico vs Marquette

Friday, March 21, 2025

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

New Mexico Lobos

Richard Pitino

Mustapha Amzil

Tru Washington

Media Conference

New Mexico 75, Marquette 66

RICHARD PITINO: Terrific win for our program. We've got a lot of respect for Marquette. Shaka does an amazing job. I just thought at the end of the game, we buckled down and got stops. We stopped turning the ball over. Donny really, really -- he was struggling a little bit, and we just tried to keep him positive, and he made some huge plays down the stretch. Tru was phenomenal. Mustapha had some big rebounds. It was just a team effort all around. Very grateful, very proud. We'll get a little rest and get back at it tomorrow.

Q. Tru, if I'm not mistaken, first time since 2012 you guys have been to the second round. What gets you to that Sweet 16? I think that's the first time since 1974. What happens on Sunday that gets you that win?

TRU WASHINGTON: Defense. We've got to come out and play hard on defense. Our defense is our identity. So when we come out and play defense, offense is going to take care of itself.

Q. Coach, it was a tie Game 54-54 and Donny had been struggling. Did you change anything schematically to get him going or what was --

RICHARD PITINO: We were trying to slip out of some of those ball screens because they were really crowding him. I thought the other guys, their spacing allowed Donovan to get going a little bit more. We slipped some stuff, got him downhill, and he was terrific. Got fouled.



Q. Tru, you won the steals battle 8-7, but when they've won games, they've won it by five or six on steals. Was that a key to the win?

TRU WASHINGTON: Yeah, pretty much. We didn't want to turn over the ball. They get on fast breaks. We didn't want that happen,

Q. Staph, it wasn't your best shooting game, it really wasn't going offensively for you, but you end up with eight rebounds, you draw five fouls. Big defense down the stretch. I'm curious how you were able to keep going when the shot didn't fall like that?

MUSTAPHA AMZIL: That's part of the game. I've got to play hard regardless, specifically in March. We lose; we're going home. I'm not trying to go home. We came here to win games. I've got to play hard for us to win here, and we had some other guys who made shots, so I just did my part.

Q. Tru, Staph, it's been a long time since New Mexico has won an NCAA Tournament game. Just talk about the impact you think it has on the fans and the program back home.

MUSTAPHA AMZIL: It's definitely big. The impact fans have on us, coming to every game, being loud, we have so many fans here far away from home. We appreciate everybody, so this is the least we can do for them.

Q. Tru, you have a matchup with an All-American. I'm curious how much that gets you motivated, how excited you were about having the matchup you had with Kam tonight?

TRU WASHINGTON: I was very excited. You know, he's All-American. I just had to come out here and showcase my defense. 15 points, but I know he averaged more than that, so we did our job on him.

Q. Guys, it felt like at the end of the game, you ended strong. Anytime they had a run, you guys countered. Felt like you were resilient to time. What about your team and your group are able to be fires out here because it felt like you were ready for anything tonight.

MUSTAPHA AMZIL: We had a long season. We had a lot of close games, so I think we prepared very well for this one. It's just about us, about us, what we can bring, what we can do on the games. It's not perfect. We've just got to play hard.

TRU WASHINGTON: Just like I said earlier, our identity is defense, so we just had to go in there and get stops. It was kind of hard to stop one of the guys shooting threes, but the other four guys, we shut them off.

Q. Your length causes a lot of problems. What is it about that length, especially when they're kicking in the lane, there's a lot of deflected balls. How important is that for this team to succeed?

RICHARD PITINO: We were fortunate to be in this tournament last year and played a really good Clemson team, and I remember watching, and I really liked our team a lot last year. I mean, we won 26 games, won the Mountain West tournament, did a lot of great things, but we felt like in order to get back here and win a matchup like this, we needed to recruit bigger guards.

Now, there were times, certainly, we missed the guards that we had. They've been phenomenal. But the defense, because of the length that we added, whether it's Phillip, whether it's CJ, has been huge. We wanted to go toe-to-toe with all these programs from a size standpoint. So, it all started with recruiting, identifying where we thought defensively some shortcomings could be. And I think you saw tonight, made some huge, huge steals. Mustapha had some big steals, Tru, as well, that length really helps.

Q. Donny ends up seven straight games with 25 points, five assists, but it started off as one of his worst games. I know you said keep him positive, but when he gets in his own head, you've talked about that before. How were you able to pull him out or was that something he did on his own?

RICHARD PITINO: I mean, he did it. I helped. I just kept encouraging him, stop hanging your head, body language, body language. I was really, really encouraging him. He's one of the best point guards in the country. Stevie Mitchell is a phenomenal defender. He's going to do that to a lot of players.

So, he had to get over the turnover part of it and step up and win us the game. In crunch time, he made huge plays, as did other guys. So just being positive with him through the whole thing and just continuing to harp on him that he's had an All-American year.

Q. Coach, you mentioned the Clemson game last year. I think it was Donovan yesterday said he felt like they were just happy to be there. Did you spark a different mentality leading up to this game?

RICHARD PITINO: We certainly talked about it. I don't know if we were just happy to be there, but we didn't make any noise at all that game last year. Clemson really led wire to wire.

But those experiences that you have, and to have six guys who were on the team last year, as well as a staff that experienced it, and then you can reference those things certainly helped in this game.

Q. Coach, it felt like -- you talked about just the mindset from last year of maybe recruiting and it's felt like you could see a toughness tonight from your guys. I'm sure that's something you've been wanting to see. What about this group just shows that because they didn't back down from anything and they responded to a lot of challenges tonight?

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, we're on late a lot in the west, but if you've watched us, we're a pretty darned tough team. We're 17-3 in a four-bid league. These guys have scratched and clawed and made winning plays all year, whether it's Mustapha with some steals, Tru, Donovan making some huge free throws, huge plays, some offensive rebounds, some key offensive rebounds. It's a tough group, and it's a team that certainly likes to win, and they don't want to go home.

Q. Coach, I know you still have some ball left this season, but can you tell us how big this game is for you personally as a coach, and also how big this is for your program?

RICHARD PITINO: Personally, it doesn't really matter. New Mexico has given me a phenomenal opportunity. When you receive some tough news that you're being fired and you've got to get off the mat and not complain, and you've got to -- you've just got to get back to work. New Mexico gave me that opportunity and brought the joy and the life back into coaching. Winning comes along with that.

I'm very, very grateful just for all the support that we got, that we get. You saw the fans here; that's going to -- I know Michigan State, whoever wins, right, that's a huge brand, but New Mexico will find a way. Those fans will find a way to get here.

So for me personally, it's another win. Very, very proud of the program. These players, to be able to taste that. So we'll enjoy it tonight, but we'll move on, see if we can go



shock the world.

Q. Final stat sheet, anybody that looks at it is going to see Donny and Nelly combined for 40 points and that's what most people expected from you guys, but how big was Phillip and CJ to set the tone in the first half?

RICHARD PITINO: Huge. We've talked all year about being able to shoot the ball a little bit better. Tru was on the line on that last one, but we didn't make a three in the second half. A lot of that was them. They are really, really physical. They're very scrappy. They turn you over. But those role guys were really big. Even Atiki coming off the bench, I thought he gave us great minutes, as well.

Q. You guys scored 38 points in the paint. What were you seeing offensively there and how were you able to exploit them inside?

RICHARD PITINO: Well, Nelly is a pretty darned good big man, and we need to continue to find him. They were trapping him and doing some things, but then Nelly was able to make some plays, and then we're pretty good at the rim.

I thought guys like Tru and Donovan and CJ were really, really good at just putting pressure on the rim.

It was just an overall -- just one of those games where we just had to will ourselves to victory and found a way to do that.

Q. Free throw defense, 7 of 12 for Marquette. I want to ask you about CJ, to transfer his defensive and offensive ability from North Texas, how big were his first couple of threes early in the game? How happy were you to see those falls?

RICHARD PITINO: I always tell them all the time, I'm rooting for it to go in. I'm right there. I'm their biggest cheerleader. CJ has been a little bit hobbled with a hamstring, but I thought gave us huge minutes off the bench, making shots. Free throw defense-wise, we work on it a lot. We work on the other team missing free throws, so very proud of our guys to be able to do that. That's a cornerstone of our program is getting the other team to miss free throws.

I have no idea about that stat. I think it's the dumbest stat ever, but I laugh about it, as well. Grateful that they missed them.

Q. I know you don't peruse social media a lot, but during the game, Twitter is exploding from people back home, watch parties and things like that. I would

imagine this means a lot to the team, but to the state of New Mexico with everyone watching, what do you think it means to the people back home?

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, I cannot wait to get that dopamine hit, you know, get to that phone and see all the mentions and everything. It's special. It's a special place. They value basketball. I've talked a lot about it. It's a generational thing. We are the pro team to our fans. So, the ones that were watching, amazing. Hopefully, we see some more on Sunday.

But yeah, this program is about the fans. It's everything. It's why I decided to come here. It's why the players decided to come here. So, to see those loyal, loyal fans reap the benefits of a great win, I know they're going to have a lot of Fireball shots tonight in Albuquerque. They love those things. They're disgusting but they seem to really like it, so they'll enjoy it. I know they will.

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