

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Long Beach State vs Arizona

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

Delta Center

Arizona Wildcats

Coach Tommy Lloyd

Pelle Larsson

Oumar Ballo

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: This is the Arizona press conference. We'll open it up for questions for our student-athletes.

Q. Oumar and Pelle, I wanted to ask you about Keshad because he went to the national championship game last year. Anything that he has taught you two with him being here this season? Anything that he's taught you about what it really takes to get to that national championship stage?

PELLE LARSSON: Maybe the way he carries himself every day. He knows what it takes. He knows what to do every day, how to act. That is just contagious. I think the way he works hard every day and tries to get better, it's been contagious.

OUMAR BALLO: Pelle just said it all. We're lucky enough to have Ke. He's a tool, he's well experienced. He's been there. He know what it takes to be there. We're fortunate to have him. Happy he's with us.

Q. Obviously besides Keshad, Caleb Love had a Final Four experience as well. What has it done for the team to have a couple of key players and team leaders have that kind of post-season experience in terms of preparing for the post-season?

OUMAR BALLO: They're just a help for us 'cause they've been there, they've done it, and they know what it takes to get there. We are happy they're with us this season.

PELLE LARSSON: Oumar has been there, too, in the bubble. That was probably even harder. So yeah, experience all over the place.



Q. Obviously in the Pac-12 tournament, with the goals and high aspirations you have as a program, maybe didn't make it as far as you wanted to. What was the process like this week resetting, getting ready for the NCAA tournament? What has that journey been like throughout the past week to reset?

PELLE LARSSON: Just got some really good rest really. Got our legs back under us. Obviously learned a lot from that game, that week. Yeah, just right away we're excited for the next week to prove ourselves again and come back stronger like we always have and stuff like that.

OUMAR BALLO: Yes, last week obviously didn't go the way that we wanted, but it's over now, it's behind us. This is a new season, beginning of March. We're coming to this tournament as a new season, 0-0. We have to do whatever it takes to get the job done.

Q. Looking back to last year's tournament, coming into this year's tournament, are there things you learned about last year that have helped you this year in terms of how you prepare mentally and physically for this game?

OUMAR BALLO: Of course we did. We all know what happened last year. Me and Pelle was there. We know now in post-season every single game is important. You cannot take any game for granted, anything for granted.

We come locked and loaded for this game.

PELLE LARSSON: Yeah, I think it's one day at a time, one task. Any game could be your last as a Wildcat. You just got to treat it like that, play with that energy and effort.

THE MODERATOR: We will excuse our student-athletes. We appreciate you coming. Good luck tomorrow.

Joining us is Coach Lloyd of the University of Arizona. We'll have him open with a statement, then open to questions.

TOMMY LLOYD: It's good to see everybody. Excited to



be here. Have lots of great memories playing in Salt Lake in the NCAA tournament over the years.

Here we go.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Was basketball never, ever not going to be in your future as a kid or whatever?

TOMMY LLOYD: I mean, I think it always was. I mean, I fell in love with the game at a young age. To be honest with you, I kind of fell in love with coaching at a young age. Of course I call young guys, I probably thought I was going to play in the NBA, then I kept playing and realized I wasn't close to good enough.

The coaching bug really hit me early. Like a lot of kids that get into coaching, you're really influenced by your coaches when you're younger. I had a lot of great coaches from Little League and youth basketball, grew up in a small town. That made a really impact on me.

Yeah, I think basketball, me and coaching were something that was probably always going to be together.

Q. Coach Monson earlier talked about how you went out for pizza, had a nice time together. What was it like being out with him, being able to catch up with him? What kind of influence has he had on the direction of your career?

TOMMY LLOYD: Well, I mean, I never actually worked for Coach Monson. He'd kind of give me the opportunity, then he high-tailed to Minnesota. I was kind of left there. Then Mark Few inherited me.

He's a great guy. We have a ton of fun together. He's somebody that you're always going to smile and laugh with. I know he's going through a tough time, but he's handling it with incredible grace.

I think he's thankful for all the opportunities he's had, the relationships he's made in this business. I think we all know it can be a tough business, there's another side to it. Unfortunately he's going through that right now.

Q. I wanted to ask about Keshad and the experience I brings from San Diego State last year being in the national championship game. Was there any advice that he gave to any one of the players, maybe even yourself or coaching staff, about getting to that point?

TOMMY LLOYD: Yeah, we're fortunate. We have a lot of guys that have their own experiences with the tournament.

Me, Coach Rob, obviously Keshad, Caleb, even Oumar. They've always been part of those runs.

Keshad has been very vocal. I think his message to the guys is you don't ever assume anything. It's literally a one-game-at-a-time approach. You got to come out and be willing to lay it on the line in that one game.

That's been his message to the guys, which I think is simple but it's beautiful because it's very true.

Q. What do you talk or say to Caleb while in this slump? Do you tell him to shoot yourself out of it?

TOMMY LLOYD: Well, you're a great player and you're fine. I mean, a player like him that is a scorer, they've had this stuff happen to them before in their career, so they know how to respond.

There's no guarantee he's going to play really well tomorrow. I wouldn't be surprised if he did. I think he's in a good way. He's had a good approach all week. Now we need to get to noon tomorrow and get out on the court. He needs just to let it rip.

Q. You look at guys like Keshad and Caleb who have those Final Four runs with their past teams, what has that experience done for Arizona in terms of helping you be successful this season, prepare for the post-season? How much does their leadership matter to you guys?

TOMMY LLOYD: It matters a ton. First off, they were significant contributors to teams that made it to the championship game. That tells you they're really good players. It takes really good players to have great seasons, and they've been awesome all year.

I mean, my only regret is that I only get to coach them one year 'cause I've loved coaching 'em. They're both just awesome dudes. They're a joy to be around every day. They bring it every day.

It's been a ton of fun with them. Their experience has been significant to our success.

Q. You were talking about your relationship with Dan. What is it like when the world of basketball brings you together with Mark and that relationship?

TOMMY LLOYD: We're genuine friends. I think our friendships are before any professional relationships we have. Then our wives are friends. Our kids are best friends, more like cousins than friends.

I know all our kids were really excited they were all together last night. It's fun. It brings a smile to our face because that's what our summers are like. Summers, everyone at the lake together hanging out. It just comes really easy for us to be around each other.

Yeah, I mean, I'm grateful for what those two have meant to me.

Q. Dan wanted us to let you know he's going to run the Princeton offense.

TOMMY LLOYD: He told me that 50 times last night (smiling).

Q. What is your reaction?

TOMMY LLOYD: I told him it would be great to see some semblance of offense (laughter).

No, I mean, listen, Dan's a veteran. I think he knows this opportunity he has. I have no doubt that his team's going to come out ready to play with a spirited effort tomorrow.

Q. You were there for so many years at Gonzaga making the run to the tournament every year. Now you're a head coach making a similar streak. Do you have a different appreciation for it now that you're a head coach or has your view on it changed?

TOMMY LLOYD: I definitely have an appreciation for it. I mean, I don't know if it's different. It's hard. I think what we do is hard. I know we're open for public scrutiny, all that stuff. That's fine.

These jobs are hard. They're hard on your family. You literally have a 24/7 all-consuming job that it's tough to get away from.

I think one of the greatest gifts Coach Few ever gave me was he made me feel like an owner. I didn't feel like just an assistant coach there. I felt like I was in ownership with him of the program. I felt the importance of it, the agony of defeats and all that stuff.

Now it's probably magnified a little bit for me. I definitely have an appreciation for what he's had to go through all those years when I was supporting him. Yeah, it's not easy. It's definitely not easy.

It's awesome. I love every second of it. But it's not easy. I think being able to have this opportunity, my third year as a head coach, you're like, Wow, this guy's done it for 25 years. Coach Monson has done it for 27 years. I couldn't imagine.

Hopefully I can get to that number someday. It's a lot.

Q. Obviously we know what happened last year and all that. How do you deal with an increased pressure on the guys because of that?

TOMMY LLOYD: There's no increased pressure. You could fabricate, manufacture anything you want. We got a 40-minute basketball game tomorrow against another team that's a worthy opponent. We got to come out and play.

If we're distracted by what happened last year, then maybe we haven't done a good enough job focusing on what we need to do this year.

Q. When you had Oumar at Gonzaga, you redshirted him the first year. Wasn't ready. Limited role the second year. Gets into a couple late minutes of an NCAA tournament game. Could you see at that point the potential of a fifth-year?

TOMMY LLOYD: I mean, no. I couldn't see that. I couldn't see myself being the head coach at Arizona. There's a lot of things when you go back to when we first had Oumar at Gonzaga.

I'm really proud of him. I'm really proud of how far he's come. I think those are the stories that need to be celebrated in college basketball these days. To me, that's the essence of what this sport has been about: kids transitioning from high school becoming an adult, dealing with adversity, growing, having their own experiences.

Oumar has really stared those down and overcome a lot. There were some dark days last year at Gonzaga. He got in a pretty tough spot. He wasn't a happy person. For us to get the opportunity to come down to Arizona I think has been really impactful on his life. I know he's been really impactful on my life.

I love where he's at. I'm grateful that he's a significant contributor to a really good Arizona team.

Q. This may be a silly question. Dan was talking about his relationships with the players. You've been adamant about how special it is. Was there someone that taught you the importance of those relationships or...

TOMMY LLOYD: Well, I mean, probably a lot how you were raised. I've always been a relationship person. I've always enjoyed our people's successes. When I started coaching at Gonzaga, I was young. I could kind of still get out there with the guys a little bit. I just realized really early

that these relationships are really valuable for me and they're really impactful on the guys to have a coach that is willing to put their arm around them and love them like a brother.

Yeah, I mean, part of it's just basically how you're wired with your personality, but more importantly you want these relationships to be authentic and organic, but you also want to be intentional.

What I found is as you get busier in life, your own kids get older, it's hard to manage a lot of relationships. You have to be intentional with the effort and energy you put towards your players because it's really important. I don't ever want to lose that or forget that.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

TOMMY LLOYD: Easy, thank you. Appreciate it.

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