

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Grand Canyon vs Saint Mary's

Friday, March 22, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena

Saint Mary's Gaels

Coach Randy Bennett

Augustas Marciulionis

Mitchell Saxen

Media Conference



AUGUSTAS MARCIULIONIS: I would agree. I think we just weren't ready to play the way we usually play. And they were really physical. I don't know why we didn't expect that because we saw the film. We saw, like, we were preparing for the game, and we knew they were going to be physical and they were going to try to knock us out of our rhythm. And we still turned the ball over. We just didn't have a good game at all.

Q. Did any of their athleticism surprise you, whether it was their ability to recover and get their hands on shots or get hands in the passing lane or even offensively as they tried to drive to the basket?

AUGUSTAS MARCIULIONIS: We knew that they were going to be an athletic team. But probably just playing, like, I was a little surprised, but we shouldn't because we saw the film. We knew that they're a driving team. They draw a lot of fouls probably one of the top teams in the country. And it still somehow surprised us. But, yeah, we knew it and they're really athletic.

MITCHELL SAXEN: We knew they were athletic and stuff. But we could have done a better job of getting two feet in the lane and just playing slow and playing how we normally play. We've played against plenty of athletic teams before.

I don't know if it's the jitters of it being March Madness or not playing in 10 days or whatever it was. But we didn't play as well as we could have there.

Q. You were down 17, I think, with 11 and a half minutes to go, which is a pretty big hill to climb. But you climbed much of it. You got it down to five. And I think there were still five or six minutes to go. What was sort of the mood like at 17 points down? And then how had it changed, how optimistic were you when it was down to five?

AUGUSTAS MARCIULIONIS: That's kind of our mentality. We just keep fighting through. Like, obviously we were not happy with being down 17 with 11 minutes to go but we kept fighting. I mean, that's one of our main strengths of our team is just being together, being tough and just trying

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THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Saint Mary's. Coach, we'll take a quick opening statement.

RANDY BENNETT: I'm proud of this team. We had a great season. Proud of these kids hanging together and accomplishing what they did. Although I don't think we played very well tonight. But it doesn't diminish what they did for the overall year.

So, Grand Canyon, good program. They played well enough to win. We did not. And it's kind of where I'm at. These guys here played well and we just didn't have enough of them play well tonight. And I didn't do a good enough job coaching them.

Q. Mitchell, how difficult was it to kind of -- I guess for both of you -- but to get into your offense and play the way you normally do? Randy said you guys didn't play as well as you normally have, clearly. How much of them was them? They had eight steals, nine blocked shots. Seems like they made it difficult for you to run your offense the way you normally do.

MITCHELL SAXEN: I think they did a really good job pressuring the ball and making it tough for us to catch it where we wanted to and get into our actions. A lot of that was us shooting ourselves in the foot a little bit and giving them (indiscernible) passes early on especially.

I thought we lost composure a little bit there and could have done a better job just executing our stuff like we normally do.



to fight back, and we did.

We missed a couple of shots that would have helped us if we made them. We didn't play good defense in certain positions. And, yeah, we couldn't get back fully into the game.

MITCHELL SAXEN: One of our big mantras is staying on our front foot always. Whether that's up 15 or down 15, whatever it was, we were never going to stop fighting.

That's why it hurts so much to lose with this group especially now in the tournament, man, because we're such a tough and tight-knit group. And it hurts for all the right reasons. That's what's great about college basketball and that's what sucks about it.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. They shot 36 free throws to your guys' 12. Just kind of what they were able to do to get to the line so much, if there were any mismatches there they saw.

RANDY BENNETT: There haven't been many games where scored five more field goals, two more 3s, outrebounded a team by six, had more assists by five that I've coached in where we lost. So it's strange.

They have some guards who put some pressure on you, but it's a big discrepancy to overcome. And having said that we should have overcome it. We still should have overcome it. We didn't guard well enough and definitely weren't good enough offensively for the first 30 minutes.

I don't think we played well. I do think they're a good team. I knew they were a good team going into it. I had seen enough. I watched them about 10 times. I had a pretty good feel on them. And the guys who we thought we needed to do a good job on, they numbered.

And so you just have to play better. You're going to play a good team in the NCAA Tournament. We played a good team. We played a good team last year against VCU. We played better. We didn't play as good this year.

So we're on the opposite end of the spectrum, so to speak. Last year we were pretty happy. Right now we're pretty disappointed.

Q. For most of your career you guys have generally, when you reach the tournament, have lost to better seeded teams. This is a rare case of being on the opposite side of that. What is it about your program that has made you, I guess, able to avoid upsets when you're the better seed? And kind of just kind of that

dynamic, I guess.

RANDY BENNETT: I just think we're good defensively, good on the boards, usually take care of the ball. And those things -- they'll travel. You just don't win at home on that. You can win on the road. We were undefeated on the road this year, which is hard to do.

But we didn't do it well tonight. I think we're a pretty consistent team, and pretty consistent year after year. And these guys did a phenomenal job to do what they did to turn it from 3-5 to win like 23 of the last 25.

So I have to just kind of remind myself of that, that these guys have done a phenomenal job. And Alex and Mason, our two senior leaders, were really good. And Mason had, yesterday was the first day he practiced since the conference tournament. He had a little concussion thing.

I just appreciate him and Harry trying to get back and help the team in any way they can. But the short answer to your question is we're usually pretty good in there. Yes, it matters -- taking care of the ball, defending, rebounding, and the fourth one is being good offensively, which we were not tonight.

Q. When they have eight steals and nine blocked shots and you guys clearly have trouble finishing, how much of that was just athleticism? And how do you sort of account for those numbers?

RANDY BENNETT: The steals is a big number because a lot of those steals were pick sixes. And it's hard to guard a 1-on-0 or a 2-on-1. So I think when we had it in half court we were pretty good.

But that's where we were bad. We turned the ball over. Just too many of those, 13; they force 14. But in a game like this you've got to be good with the ball. You can't just throw it to their guy and let him go down there and dunk it. We had a couple of those.

In a game against a good team, which Grand Canyon is, those are going to hurt you. I thought those -- the blocks, yeah, that was a factor too. A lot of those were layups, and they blocked them. And those can also lead to transition. You need to keep them out of transition.

But they do some things that are kind of hard to guard if they're just going to steal a ball from you or if they're going to block a shot. They are athletic around the rim. They block them and then they're off to the races.

That's a credit to them defensively. They're good there. But that's where we needed to be better. That's not just

tonight. They're always good at that.

Q. Bigger picture, as you said, you don't want to diminish from your great season. You've won 25-plus games, any number of years in a row. How do you sort of rationalize all your success in the regular season and not being able to make a deeper run in the tournament, which obviously I'm sure has been disappointing?

RANDY BENNETT: It's hard to advance. This one was tough. Last year we lost to the national champ. A lot of teams lost -- there were five other teams lost to them too.

This year, yeah, we should get that done but we didn't and credit them. They outplayed us.

Q. It was electric in there for GCU. You're playing in Gonzaga's place. Just kind of if there was any impact that the crowd had on the game, in general?

RANDY BENNETT: Not really. I don't think so. It was good basketball environment. The place was packed. Every seat was filled. That's what you want it to be. I played in some NCAA Tournament games, First Round, where there's not a crowd. And I think early on my career we played at Oklahoma City, there was hardly anybody at the game.

What a great venue to play in. Perfect size. It's not too big. It's big. It's packed. And we had good fans. They had good fans. Pretty cool. Kind of reminded me when we went to Portland. That was good, too. It's nice being on the west for us every once in a while. It was good.

The thing was ideal for us. Ideal setup, the whole thing. We just didn't play as well as we needed to play.

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