

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Gonzaga vs Purdue

Friday, March 29, 2024

Detroit, Michigan, USA

Little Caesars Arena

Gonzaga Bulldogs

Mark Few

Ryan Nembhard

Anton Watson

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference



I think we did a good job of that first half. Second half, getting to the open sides and getting to the floaters. But, yeah, I think we were trying to do that.

Q. For either one of you, Mark mentioned pick your poison with Zach and the shooting, and Braden Smith actually said something similar. We're either going to hit shots, or we're going to give it to Zach. How do you balance that defensively when choosing to send help or trying to guard the shooters or leaving him isolated?

RYAN NEMBHARD: It's just tough. He creates so much attention down there, you kind of have to pull in when the guards get downhill a little bit because they're going to throw lobs or kick out and hit a three. So it's a pick your poison thing. There's not really too much to say about that, just he creates a lot of attention down there.

THE MODERATOR: Anton, anything to add?

ANTON WATSON: He got it.

Q. Anton, I know you've barely had time for it to set in, but your emotions walking off the court in a Zags uniform for the last time?

ANTON WATSON: I'm just super grateful, super thankful. Yeah, it's surreal. I haven't really had time to let it set in. But I enjoyed the season with my coaches, my teammates, just all the fans, just all the love I've gotten this year. It's been super special to me, and I know my family, they appreciate it too.

Yeah, it's difficult right now, but I love everyone here on this team, and it's been a special year for me.

Q. Ryan, I saw at the end of the game that you went to a couple of your teammates as the clock wound down and then you and Zach shook hands. I was wondering, can you share what you guys said, or two Canadian guys paying respect to each other?

RYAN NEMBHARD: Are you talking about what me and

Purdue - 80, Gonzaga - 68

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by head coach Mark Few, Ryan Nembhard, and Anton Watson.

MARK FEW: Hey, we're disappointed in how this game turned out, but obviously -- I mean, as a head coach, just very, very, very proud of how these guys battled and fought through all the stuff that this season brought and put us in position to be playing -- I don't know what this is, March 28th or something, and one of the last 12.

So tip your hats to Purdue. When those guards shoot it like that, it's pick your poison. It was -- they shot it great from three, and then in the second half, we, I think, shut down that area pretty good. Then Edey was just a load. It's a nice entity to have, just pitch it into him. If you play him one-on-one, he's either going to get fouled or score.

They played great tonight in the first half. We played great offense in the first half but then couldn't quite keep it going.

Q. Anton, just with Zach Edey, such a presence down there, how were you guys able to on occasion get him away from the basket? It seemed like that was an emphasis. What were you guys trying to do there on offense, that is? When you guys were on offense?

ANTON WATSON: I think we were just trying to space him out, whoever he was on, try to give him ball screens. Yeah, just try to make him move as much as possible on the defensive end and get him away from the hoop.



Zach said to each other? I just said, "Keep going, man. Go get the job done." Stuff like that.

Q. Ryan, as a follow-up to this question, leading up to the game in our country, the buildup was you and Zach. Can you please share your thoughts on your relationship and your thought process heading into this game during the week?

RYAN NEMBHARD: I mean, as far as our relationship, we played on Team Canada together. So we were together for a month, about a month. We're pretty cool. We don't really talk too much. We're not like best friends or anything. We're fellow Canadians, so obviously we have a certain type of relationship. We played on a team together before.

As far as the team thing, it was never me versus him, it was Gonzaga versus Purdue. So that's how we looked at it.

Q. Ryan, I asked a similar question to them. That stretch middle of the quarter where you guys bounced back after their initial punch, they push it up from 2 to 16, kind of puts you guys behind the eight ball. How difficult was it at that point when you've already survived one big push from them to be able to gather momentum and try push back, which you guys were unable to?

RYAN NEMBHARD: It's tough. During that stretch, I felt like we had some bunnies around the rim that we missed that just didn't go our way. Then they got in transition, made on threes and gave it to the big fella, got some easy buckets down there. It's definitely hard. They're a good team.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, guys. We'll continue here with head coach Mark Few.

Q. A bit of another Canadian question to start. Obviously you've had a lot of Canadians on your team, and today was a special moment, both Canadian players on opposite teams started the scoring. Could you expand on how special Canadian basketball has been a part of NCAA and kind of what that meant today.

MARK FEW: Well, I come at it from a little different perspective. They beat us in the bronze medal game in the World Cup. So I'm not as fired up as I was with all the Zags.

Hey, Canada basketball has been on the rise for pretty much the whole time I've been a head coach. It's getting to

the point where they've got some phenomenal players in the NBA right now, and they're going to be quite the formidable foe over in Paris this summer.

We've been blessed to have some great Canadians over the years. Obviously having the Nembhards is incredible. They're an incredible family, and they're just the best. They're so easy to coach and so smart.

You go back to Kelly Olynyk and Robert Sacre. We've had just a great run. So definitely on the rise. It's going to be fun competing against them this summer.

Q. When you're dealing with a guy like Edey, how much of it is obviously the raw talent, but how much of it is also the fact that you don't see that very much in this game these days?

MARK FEW: No, it's definitely the latter. He's just an entity all to himself. But having drawn on the experience we had the first time playing him over in Hawaii, and that's why we felt like we played that game pretty even and just had a couple of silly turnovers, missed some shots down the stretch.

That's why we tried to play him one-on-one. Then we got in all kinds of foul trouble there. That was a big basket, the and-one there at the half. I thought that impacted us a little bit. We couldn't start Benny in the second half.

Yeah, he's a load, and they did a great job. They made their threes in the first half, which really got us attentive and kind of dialed in to take those away. Then they just time and time again went to him over and over again in the second half. It's either going to be a foul or, you know.

He's done a great job of really getting his skill level up and delivering in there.

Q. Coach, what does Purdue do defensively, especially kind of on the perimeter, with someone like Lance Jones that can put so much pressure on the ball. What makes them so difficult on defense?

MARK FEW: He does a great job. He's been a great addition for them this year. I think they added some athleticism and quickness and ability to pick up full court. He kind of dogs your point guard and caused a couple of collisions that were offensive fouls on the screens.

Offensively, I felt pretty good, especially in that first half. We were clicking right along. Then second half we had some good looks. We just missed those.

Q. Coach, you talked earlier about some of the

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different paths that this season has taken. It's been different than some of the others. You learned a lot about these guys, the character, et cetera. Can you talk about now that it's over, what that's meant to you?

MARK FEW: Yeah, I just told them, hey, listen, I think the majority of teams in college basketball probably would have folded up there in January based on the expectations that we have in our program and what we were dealing with.

But these guys, they doubled down, and they showed their real character and competed and then got even closer instead of pulling apart. I think they deserve a lot of credit for that, and I think they showed their true character during those times even though there's a lot of background noise circling around them.

And they stayed coachable the whole time, totally coachable the whole time, which is just a joy. So I thanked them for that.

Q. I know we've asked you this multiple times this season, but now that you're on the other side of it knowing that the Spokane kid Anton won't be playing for you anymore, what are your emotions around that?

MARK FEW: To be honest with you, I'm so happy that we kind of delivered on everything we talked about when we first recruited him to come to Gonzaga. He's had just an awesome career.

I told the team in the locker room, it feels like he's won 300 games at Gonzaga. I mean, that's what it feels like. I don't know what his winning percentage is, but the guy's been in National Championship games and Elite Eights and Sweet 16s and made huge shots and huge plays. He's been unbelievable. He broke presses and solved zones when we didn't know what the hell we were doing.

That's just what he is, he's just a complete player. Switches, guards Zach Edey at 7'4" and guards little guys at 5'9". He's my problem solver.

It's been great. He's very close, he played with both my kids coming up through the ranks. So we'll stay very close with him. Hopefully we can get him started on his pro career now, because he definitely deserves to keep playing and find a professional deal somewhere.

Q. I don't know how well you know Matt, being in different conferences, but you guys have both been at it a while. Last year he fielded a lot of questions and he had conviction about their style through it all. I was just wondering how much does that ring with you, also

having success, just having the conviction he has and the way Purdue runs their program?

MARK FEW: Look, Matt's a class, class act and one of the great coaches we have in college basketball. He's involved -- we're together with USA Basketball. He assistant coaches the select team. So we get to hang out and do that, and then we're on some committees together.

He's been great. I wish, as I said earlier in the press conference, the NCAA needs to start listening to us coaches, especially the ones like Matt Painter and some of us that are doing it the right way and been around for a long time because he's a great leader, he's got a good feel.

Wish him the best, man. I think he handled all the stuff these past couple years great. They're primed and focused. They're hungry. They're hunting right now. They're not being hunted. I think that's how you get to Final Fours, and that's how you get to National Championship games. So rooting for him.

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