

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 8, 2023

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

Ohio State Buckeyes

Chris Holtmann

Justice Sueing

Sean McNeil

Postgame Press Conference

Ohio State - 65, Wisconsin - 57

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Ohio State coach Chris Holtmann along with Justice Sueing and Sean McNeil. We'll start with an opening statement, then take questions.

CHRIS HOLTSMANN: Give our players credit. I thought they found a way there. Wisconsin did a great job. Their physicality really bothered us there in the second half.

Obviously we had trouble scoring and missed some free throws, but give them credit. Their defense was outstanding in the second half, and I think that was the biggest reason for some of our struggles.

The missed free throws, they're just that. We'll get better with that. But give these guys credit. They found a way, and we'll move on tomorrow.

Q. Justice and Sean, you guys both -- as a team, you seemed to come out with a pretty good energy about you, obviously you built this significant lead. What was it that enabled you to get out to the start that you did with the season kind of on the line? And then what did it take to hold on when they finally did make a run?

JUSTICE SUEING: Yeah, we had a good kick to us to start this. We knew we had to come out with aggression and execute our game plan. We were able to get a comfortable lead.

Obviously we need to work on maintaining that as we continue on in the tournament, but a couple months ago, you couldn't have said that we'd have been able to stay as poised as we were today.



**MEN'S BASKETBALL
TOURNAMENT**

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I'm proud of my guys to pull it through, but props to Wisconsin. They played really hard and give us a run for our money. But just proud of our guys for being able to get this thing through.

SEAN McNEIL: First thing I'll say is Wisconsin is a really good team. As of -- I said this a little bit earlier, but the last month and a half, we've been playing a lot better even though the results really haven't shown. We've won 2 of 3 late, even though we dropped one to Michigan State. We're playing better, playing more of the right way.

So we had momentum going into the tournament. We're having a lot more fun. When you're playing this way, the game is a lot more fun to play. So just momentum going into this tournament.

Q. Coach, just wanted to know about the defensive adjustment on Tyler Wahl there. Obviously he got going. It was like an 8-0 run for him. Switched Felix, got Felix back into the game. He slowed him down. Got that big rebound towards the end of the game where Felix got fouled, ended up splitting a pair there. Just his impact in the game.

CHRIS HOLTSMANN: It's a good question because I think that was a critical turning point. I really do. Felix's length on him, one of the things I worried about is Felix getting just kind of run over by Tyler Wahl because he's such a good low post guy, but his length bothered him late and his ball screen defense on Chucky bothered him late.

Q. You guys came out so good, fast, loose, and then when it starts to go south a little bit, do things slow down? Does it go into slow motion? How do you keep from like looking at the scoreboard every two seconds?

SEAN McNEIL: I think we kind of did panic a little bit, but like Justice said, that's something we've got to continue to get better at. Teams are going to make a run. Basketball in itself is a game of runs.

So just learning how to respond when teams make runs



and staying together.

Q. Sean, for you in the second half, you went on a 5-0 run in the second half. Obviously you had a strong first half with 10 points. What was it about your shot today that had you feeling as well as you played today?

SEAN McNEIL: I don't think I've shot it probably as well as I would have liked to this year, but I know I have the ability. Just trying to remain confident.

I've been shooting it a lot better as of late, but like I said, my guys believe in me. The coaches believe in me. It makes it a lot easier when you've got people around you that believe in you.

Q. For both of you guys, we've asked you a lot about leadership this year. To have games like you did this late, to pull this out, to get that big lead, what did it take from the veteran guys who have been in these experiences before?

JUSTICE SUEING: I think the main thing that we're going into the game with was saying we can't start off slow. We have to start off with hitting them in the mouth and not letting it happen to us. So we came out aggressive. We came out with good energy, communicating to each other offensively, defensively, and really was just able to keep building on that, and we were able to get that lead.

SEAN McNEIL: I think Justice said it pretty well. That's a struggle we've had probably all year. Certain points in the game where we'll give up 6-0, 8-0 runs, and it's hard to come back from that. We had a big lead this game and gave it up. Fortunately we pulled it out. That's what matters.

Q. Justice, you had 16 points, 5-of-8 shooting. It seemed like you favored that fadeaway jump shot against Wisconsin, against Tyler Wahl and those bigs. What did you like about that matchup, and how did you feel about your shot today?

JUSTICE SUEING: Tyler Wahl does a great job defending in the post for real. So he got me a couple times with some charges. I kind of baited him a little bit to get to that shot.

Yeah, it's a shot that I feel comfortable shooting, and I had to adjust as the game was going on, picking up some offensive fouls and whatnot.

Q. For both of the guys, the NCAA is kind of way out there in the distance, if you can somehow win five

games in five days. Do you guys treat this maybe as your dance that you want to take this, every experience as far as you can take it and just see what happens? Looked like you laid it all on the line out there today, it looked like.

SEAN McNEIL: I think as far as saying that this is our dance, I would say no. We're confident. We're playing a lot better. We obviously have a big task in front of us to win the next five games in five days, but we're going to continue to take one day at a time.

We play a lot of good teams. Whoever we hopefully face down the road here, but like I said, all of our focus is on tomorrow, one game at a time.

JUSTICE SUEING: I have to agree with Sean on that, man. It's just one game at a time. We were able to survive today and advance and now we're onto the next.

It's a quick turnaround. Like Sean said, we're playing really well, so we're going to continue to build off of that.

Q. With like a minute something to go, they cut it to five, and you got fouled and went to the line and hit both free throws. Like Coach said, you had some issues as a team collectively hitting those down the stretch. When you get into a moment like that, for someone like you that's made as many as you have, what does it take to be composed in those moments? What did you need to knock them down, and what do guys need to do in those moments to focus and finish?

SEAN McNEIL: I would say the biggest thing is everyone believes in me, players and staff for one. And I've put in a tremendous amount of work, as far as free throws go. It's something that's not hard. You go in there and shoot them. It's something I end my workouts with them every time is free throws.

So I believe in myself. I've got 14, 15 guys around me, coaching staff, that trust me to go to the line and knock them down.

Q. What was it like to get you guys to calm down and settle in and start to chip away at the lead in the last five minutes?

CHRIS HOLTMANN: I just kept reminding them relax and have fun. This is a fun game. Got to relax and have fun. It's not life and death. It's a lot for young kids. I thought we had some guys play a little bit tighter maybe than what certainly they were doing earlier.

So as much as possible, I was trying to just play with a

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

smile on your face, relax, and we'll live with the results.

Q. You've dealt with this a long time. How will you handle it? Do things slow down like I asked them? Or you're so engrossed in it maybe that you can't really think of the big picture?

CHRIS HOLTMANN: Your mind can go bad places. You've got to have real discipline with your thoughts in that moment. You've got to discipline your mind to stay focused on the possession in front of you.

Coaches have watched enough college basketball and coached enough games where they know there is a reason why it says survive and advance come tournament time. We've seen crazy things in our league. We're playing an Iowa team that was down ten with 34 seconds to go or 35 seconds to go at their place.

So you just understand how quickly leads can diminish. Obviously there were some things as coaches and players we could have done better, but I give our guys credit for trying to finish it.

Q. In what ways has Felix's development been accelerated by Zed's injury, and what can that do for him moving forward just from the fact he's getting minutes he might not have gotten earlier in the year?

CHRIS HOLTMANN: In every way. He's been really instrumental, I think, in our play, being pretty strong here the last three weeks. I think, if you look back and you say, well, you've beaten some good teams and you played a really good Michigan State team on the road, well, you'd point to him as one of the reasons why we're playing more of the right way.

But he's a real factor in how we played, and he was instrumental in some good stuff tonight.

Q. You guys mentioned -- and I think Sean said it in the last few weeks, even without wins. How much do you think that played a part in the fast start and being able to hold on as they've dealt through adversity throughout this season?

CHRIS HOLTMANN: I think it's played -- the most important thing is are we playing the right way? How are we playing? That is the most important thing, really regardless of results. That's really what we've emphasized the last month. All the detail things, everything we've talked about in some of the media sessions.

As we've evaluated how we've played, we've certainly done that better. I think our guys know that we have

played the best -- I believe we've played the best we've played all year in these last couple weeks.

Our young guys also have emerged. You know, you're seeing a guy like Bruce, who's really -- he's leading us in so many ways right now. Probably earlier in the year he was finding his way right now. Right now he's leading us in a lot of ways.

Q. This is probably the first time since the Gardner-Webb days that you were auto bid or bust entering tournament week. Do you enter the game with a different mentality, kind of how you manage the game, something like that?

CHRIS HOLTMANN: Not necessarily like that. It's been a while since I've been in the seat where you could go home this early and you don't have the -- you know, you're not playing for seeding or you're not assured of the Tournament as the next thing in front of you.

So I don't think you can coach any different because I think, as much as anything, you're just focused on how is your team playing? And if they're playing well and confident in the right way, then whatever happens happens. I've been proud of them for doing that. Yeah, it's been a while.

Q. You mentioned recently how Brice has been playing well when maybe the statistics aren't the same. Do you, though, need him as this goes on and you guys hope to make a run? Do you need him to get back to some of the scoring and whatnot he was doing earlier in the year?

CHRIS HOLTMANN: I totally get your question. He's played as good offensive basketball really -- and I've got to go back and evaluate this game, but he's played as good offensive basketball, and I think he rebounded it well today. He's impacting winning. That's what players do. Teams are giving him a lot of attention.

He's been highly efficient these last couple weeks offensively, and I think any coach, anybody who watches him says, man, that kid has really improved in terms of reading the game, making the right read, playing the way his team needs him to play, and I'm proud of him for that. He just needs to keep doing that.

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