

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 8, 2023

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

Nebraska Cornhuskers

Fred Hoiberg

Keisei Tominaga

Derrick Walker

Sam Griesel

Postgame Press Conference

Minnesota - 78, Nebraska - 75

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by the Nebraska Cornhuskers, head coach Fred Hoiberg, along with Sam Griesel, Derrick Walker, and Keisei Tominaga. We'll start with an opening statement from Coach Hoiberg.

FRED HOIBERG: This one hurts. It's a tough way to end our tournament. This team has meant the world to me. It's meant the world, I think, to our fan base. It crushes me for it to end this way.

I'm going to focus on the positives with this group. Since February after the injuries, where I'm not sure anybody thought we'd be able to get things going again and get things turned around, to have the best record in the league in the month of February with this team with four rotation guys out of the lineup, I think says everything you need to know.

The leadership that these two guys specifically to my right did for this group and for what they did to flip the narrative of this program, I can't say enough about how much that means to all of us in our program and what that can do for our future.

As these guys know, and as I told them in the locker room, I'm going to do anything in my power to help them along the way. They've got incredible futures in front of them, and we owe it to them to do everything we can to put them in a really good position moving forward.

I would be remiss to not include Emmanuel in that discussion as well for what he did to really helped change



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our culture this year, even though he wasn't on the floor.

Keisei, the stretch he has had has just been an absolute joy to be a part of. Going out and throwing that one up, I thought it was in when it left his hands.

Just, again, this group was special. It's absolutely special. It's going to go down without question as one of my favorite groups of players that I've ever coached, not just on the floor, but what these guys meant to our team off the floor and the chemistry that they've built and how they stayed together through all kinds of adversity.

That's what I'm going to focus on with this. Congrats to Minnesota. They played great. They've been playing very well since they came back from their shutdown. Unfortunately, we just let them get a little too comfortable early in this game.

But as we've done all year, we came back. We were resilient. We kept fighting. We battled adversity. Unfortunately, we couldn't quite get over the hump. We got that thing to one like four times. We just couldn't quite get over the hump.

Q. Sam, you guys were down with, I think, 11 with 15 minutes left, and like Coach said, had multiple chances to take the lead and couldn't do it. What's going through your guys' head that you had the opportunity, getting good looks, but just weren't falling down the stretch?

SAM GRIESEL: I know this group. We all believe in each other, trust each other. Every time we came to the huddle, we were talking about a sense of urgency. There was never any doubt, and there never has been in any game this year for us because we have that trust.

I think that's just all the adversity we've been through has brought us together. Not one time in this game did I think we were going to lose, no matter what it looked like. These guys are my brothers, and we will be friends and love each other for a very long time.

But, yeah, it was a tough one to end on.



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Q. Obviously you guys just got off the court 30 minutes ago, but do any of you have an idea of what's next for you after this season?

DERRICK WALKER: My eligibility is up here, so I plan to play pro, professionally, whether it's here or overseas. That's my plan after this.

Q. Derrick and Sam, we don't know what's going to happen Sunday. This could be it. How are you feeling right now? Angry? Sad? All of the things? Is what's going through your heads right now?

SAM GRIESEL: I think the initial thought is sadness, but with what this group is -- just for me personally, like why I came here, it's more of a smile because it happened. Right now it sucks, it hurts, and I'm sure it hasn't really -- if it is the end, it hasn't really sunk in. Obviously we're going to wait and prepare like we're going to play in postseason, and we'll see what happens Sunday.

I guess, if it is, just smile because it happened.

DERRICK WALKER: Same what Griesel said. We just finished playing 30 minutes ago, so it hasn't fully set in. Like you said, we still don't know if we're playing Sunday.

But sad, angry, just because we wanted to continue to play in this tournament and we knew that was a game that we could get, but we also knew we shouldn't have let that game slip through our hands. Just sad, upset, a little disappointed.

Q. Keisei, what did you see on that last shot, and did you think it was going in?

KEISEI TOMINAGA: Yeah, I thought it was going to go in, but it didn't.

Q. What was this experience like for you in the last three weeks -- month or so? What's it been like?

KEISEI TOMINAGA: It was a very good experience. I ended up playing with this team. I have great teammates. So it was very fun for me.

Q. Keisei, I don't know when the next time we're going to talk to you is. Where do things stand with you as far as your decision to come back next season or potentially pursue other opportunities?

KEISEI TOMINAGA: I haven't decided yet. I don't know yet.

Q. Fred, they missed the free throw at the very end there, and you opted not to call a timeout. What was your decision or your thought process there? Is it a hindsight situation, 20/20?

FRED HOIBERG: I thought Sam had a lane to the basket. I thought he had him on his hip. He'd had some really nice finishes down the stretch for us. I thought he had a lane to the basket. If it would have stopped or slowed down momentum, I would have called a timeout.

Sam had a lane to the basket, and I was going to let him go. Hopefully draw a crowd, either finish or get fouled, or be able to kick out. If it goes down, it works, you're a genius. If it doesn't, you get questioned on it. I thought Sam had a lane after he got the rebound. I thought he came down with the pace that he needed to and attacked.

If you call a timeout, they're able to set their defense. If you're coming down in the flow and got a lane, Sam has made great plays for us all year.

Q. Fred, I know you can only say so much, but what was the explanation on the two offensive foul calls in the last 70 seconds?

FRED HOIBERG: The explanation was they thought they moved. Right now I've got to go back and watch it. But that was the explanation, that there was movement going into the screen.

Q. Did it feel like, if you could just get that one shot to get over the hump?

FRED HOIBERG: That was the big one. We just could not get the lead. You find a way to get the lead, you get over the hump, and who knows what the end result is, but we just could not quite -- we had a couple really good looks at the basket, and I think we were right at or maybe a little under 50 percent at the rim. We just did not finish like we normally do at the basket.

It's tough. We executed that last play to perfection to get Keisei the look. Keisei shoots those in practice every day, and we switched guys around a little bit, and they executed it really well. That thing just unfortunately scraped off the back of the rim. But they executed it really well and gave us a chance to send that thing to overtime.

Q. Minnesota has had some success against you guys this year offensively, but the first 25 minutes they seemed to have a lot of success. What do you feel like they were doing well, and what do you feel like you guys maybe did better the last 15 minutes than you didn't do initially?

FRED HOIBERG: I thought our urgency was better as the game went on. I think they made 12 of 14 in one stretch the first half. Give them credit, they're playing good basketball right now. You look at their last five, I think our game last week was the biggest margin at 11. Everything else was Wisconsin was what, 4. They beat Rutgers. At Illinois was 7. Penn State was a single-digit game. The team is playing good basketball right now, and they pose problems for us with their size.

Right now for us, it would have been great to have Blaise on the floor as our most physical defender. It's unfortunate we didn't have him this last part of the season, but they've got skilled, talented players, and their guards made shots.

You've got to give them credit for coming out and doing what they did. Garcia and Battle are two of the tougher players, and those freshmen get better every time they step on the floor. It's a talented team, and when their guards make shots, they're very dangerous.

Q. This is your third time playing Minnesota, beyond making one of the better shooting performances of the year, what do you think they did differently? Did they do anything that surprised you?

FRED HOIBERG: I don't think they did anything differently. They posted us up 34 times in the last game at our place. That's what they were doing tonight. They went inside. Derrick picked up two quick fouls in the first half. He played only 11 minutes in the first half.

That's what at the they do. They've got great length and size across the board. They're 7', 6'11", 6'8" at the 3, 4,5 when they go with their lineup. We're smaller. We're giving up size at every position. I think we rebounded the ball much better today. We gave them four offensive rebounds. That was a big key coming into the game.

We did a solid taking care of the ball. Those two offensive fouls, I think, of our eight turnovers. So we took care of it and we rebounded. I just didn't think the urgency is where it needed to be early in that game, and they got a little too comfortable. That's where a team gets confident.

Q. You guys won nine conference games this year, the most since 2018. What are the next steps in terms of maintaining this and building off of this year?

FRED HOIBERG: It's a great question. As I told those seniors in the locker room, they put this program in a position now to continue to move in the right direction with what they did to change what people thought of our program. That month of February was so much fun for

everybody. And Pinnacle Bank Arena, that was the month we had the most home games, was on fire.

It just was a really fun group to be a part of. They set the table, I think, for what can be now. The culture where it is has to continue that way. We'll see what we look like next year. Obviously we've got some big holes to fill. A lot of that is with leadership.

So we're going to have to get the right guys in here. I think we've got a blueprint for what we want it to look like, and now we've got to go out and find the right players to keep this positive trend going.

Again, I look at that, most wins since '17-'18 season and the best record of the league in February, that's saying something for what we went through. Again, I just will continue to point to the leadership that this group had and what those guys had on the floor and how they fed off each other.

It's unfortunate that we just, with some injuries early, with Derrick out and then Griesel misses a couple and those other guys got hurt, I think we lost four straight before we really got it going again. Those four losses were by a pretty wide margin. I think that's when you look at whatever ranking you want to look at. I think our best one is 61, whatever it is, the SOR, the KPI. I don't know what the hell they stand for, but they're pretty good. We're in the 60s in both of those, and our NET's not very good.

I don't understand the NET. We win at Iowa, and we go up two spots. I just don't get it. Those other metrics were pretty good. We've got to find a way to compete. We'll see what nonconference -- we're pretty much set with what our schedule is going to look like. Hopefully we take care of business there. I'm always thinking towards next year.

We'll see what happens Sunday. Hopefully somebody recognizes what this team did and sees that this is one of the hotter teams or was one of the hotter teams in the league, and they give us a chance.

Q. How beneficial would an opportunity to play in that be for some of your younger guys, and how would you maybe change your strategy as to who plays and who doesn't? How beneficial would an NIT berth be?

FRED HOIBERG: It would be great. Just to get into the postseason, it would be a phenomenal feat for everything we went through. Whatever happens, whether we play or we don't, these guys had a great experience getting on the court this year.

Look at Jamarques Lawrence, a kid playing as well as any



freshman in the league right now. And you look at the experience that Sam got as a freshman. When you look at it, Wilhelm technically is still a freshman with the injury. Denim, freshman. I think I'm missing one -- Oleg, freshman.

You've got a lot of guys out there in their first and second year, and they got really valuable experience and sees what it takes with the leadership and the culture. And that's what we can build on. Whether we play or not, there's a lot of really valuable lessons that these young players learned.

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