

# Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 9, 2023

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

## Rutgers Scarlet Knights

### Steve Pikiell

### Cam Spencer

### Derek Simpson

### Caleb McConnell

### Clifford Omoruyi

#### Postgame Press Conference

Rutgers - 62, Michigan - 50

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by the Rutgers Scarlet Knights. Head Coach Steve Pikiell along with Derek Simpson, Cam Spencer, Caleb McConnell, and Clifford Omoruyi.

STEVE PIKIELL: I appreciate you guys being here, obviously. I want to thank our fans for traveling and coming out. They helped us a great deal. It's also Jalen Miller's birthday today, so good birthday present for Jalen.

Just proud of our team. They've been awesome to coach all year. Michigan's terrific. Hunter Dickinson is a problem for everybody. Their guards are super talented. He's a really good coach.

You know, to come in here and be locked in and hold them to, I think, four field goals in the second half goes to show you what these guys are made of. Caleb hasn't been practicing, and to give us the minutes he did today, and Jett Howard has been scoring a ton of points. To rebound a team like this too, just goes to show you what these guys are made of.

Great team win. Cliff blocked shots. Caleb doing his thing. Derek, Cam making big shots, two down the stretch. Our defense was terrific.

**Q. You guys have been in this position before where you've needed a win and gotten a win. What is it about the character of this team that allows that to happen?**



CALEB McCONNELL: Just a good old Rutgers grind-you-down win. This is the type of games we win. Definitely when our backs are against the wall, like I said last week, I feel like that's kind of when we play at our best.

Somehow we just end up winning these ugly games. Sometimes it may not be pretty, but we just end up coming out with the W. That's just what we do.

I just want to thank my team for sure just for grinding this one out and onto the next.

**Q. Along those lines, did you guys consider this game, I don't know if it is officially, like we have to win this game, but was that your mentality going into it?**

CALEB McCONNELL: Definitely. It's March. When March comes around, it's time to do all the little things to survive and advance. I feel like that's what we did. You've got to continue to do all those little things, and 40 minutes gets you 40 minutes.

**Q. Derek, you obviously got the start. What did it mean for you to get that responsibility, and how do you think you did? For any of your teammates, what did you think of how Derek played?**

DEREK SIMPSON: It meant a lot. They all gave me confidence, all the coaches gave me confidence. They told me, go in there, play with your speed, and get everybody open and create for others. I feel like I did that today.

Shout out to my guys for making all the shots, and we played great defense. So yeah.

CAM SPENCER: I thought he was great. He does a great job getting in the paint and getting downhill for us out of some of those pick-and-rolls. To step up in a big game like this was huge for us. So we have all the confidence in the world for him, and he stepped up big time today.

**Q. Cliff, for you and maybe Caleb too, the best compliment that an opposing coach gave out all season long was Matt Painter of Purdue where he said,**



**if he had to go to war, he was going to stop in New Jersey and pick you guys up. You get another shot at them tomorrow, and you have beaten them twice as a Number 1. Cliff, how much are you looking forward to that today and battling them? Caleb, if you want to weigh in too, please.**

CLIFFORD OMORUYI: Just like a team effort. Last time we beat them as a team. Like my guys did, like deflect the passes. Just have to keep them out the paint. In order to get this W, we have to play as a team. We're going to do that tomorrow.

CALEB McCONNELL: Yes, sir. Matt Painter is a great coach, great team right now, and they also have things rolling. I feel like we're going to come up with a great game plan, same thing we did last time. We just stick to the game plan, and I feel like we'll do a great job.

**Q. Spilled the beans on BTN about Coach Pikiell smashing his phone and it's made the rounds on social media. If you could describe what happened, any of you guys, and what the message was from that moment?**

CALEB McCONNELL: Coach Pikiell, he hates the cell phones. He wants us to throw them away. If you have any cell phones in here, I advise you not to pull them out around him because he might smash yours.

No, Pikiell, he just wants us to focus. The cell phones have been really big in mental issues and things like that. He just wants us to stay positive. When you're doing bad, everyone wants to bash you. Everyone wants to kick you while you're down. But as soon as you are doing good and you win a game, now all of a sudden you're the best team in America.

So you just have to stay focused. You just wants us to all be connected and stay focused and not worry about what other people are saying.

**Q. Cam, you hit that three with probably six, seven minutes left. You kind of looked like you had some swagger going down the floor. What was going through your mind there?**

CAM SPENCER: It felt good. Honestly I was going a little crazy and then remembered to thank Derek for a good pass. He got me open there. He got downhill and just kind of called for the ball and was able to knock it down.

My thought was just get a stop now.

**Q. Caleb, Woolfolk obviously gave you guys big**

**minutes in the first half. What have you seen from him this year and what did it mean for him to do that in this type of game?**

CALEB McCONNELL: It's just a matter of time. Woolfolk, Derek, a couple other guys, they've been having great practices. They've been showing up every day and just getting better and working hard. It's about time that it kind of simulates to the game.

Woolfolk has been great for us, great energy. Backing up Cliff is not easy. He's only a freshman, and he's playing against Dickinson and all these big -- all these other big guys that have been in the league for a while, and he's doing a great job.

So as long as he just keeps getting better, he's going to be great for us.

**Q. You held Michigan in the second half at a point there 14 minutes without a field goal. What can you say for that second half defensive effort?**

CALEB McCONNELL: That's what we do, man, honestly. This Rutgers team, we just grind teams down, and we just stay connected on the defensive end. I feel like we did an awesome job of just staying with it no matter what, no matter if shots are going in or we're turning the ball over or just whatever.

I feel like we did an awesome job. Cliff was up to touch. Guys were in their gap. We're getting big-time rebounds when we had to and big-time stops. It was just definitely a team effort.

**Q. Derek, as one of the youngest guys on the team as a freshman, what does having a big win in the Big Ten Tournament mean to you?**

DEREK SIMPSON: It means a lot, but I couldn't do it without my older guys -- Caleb, Paul, Cam, everybody, Cliff. They gave me great praise, and they told me go out there and be confident with that ball and play with your swagger. All the coaches have said the same thing.

That confidence from everybody around me, and the great locker room, great people around me have just gave me great confidence. So shout out to them.

**Q. Cam, you're shooting something like 14 percent better on the road versus at home. Is there anything you could put your finger on for those splits? Is that just a coincidence? Have you given that any thought at all?**

CAM SPENCER: Nothing in particular. I like playing on the road. I always have. It feels like you're playing against a lot of people. So it kind of motivates me to step up my game.

**Q. Cliff, you battled with Dickinson in the post throughout. How were you guys able to kind of limit him later in the game?**

CLIFFORD OMORUYI: My teammates helped me. You could see he had almost 26 points, so like whenever he got the ball in the post, he's looking to score. So my teammates tried to double or like help side, so we was able to guard him together.

**Q. Steve, was it your actual phone? Was it a burner?**

STEVE PIKIELL: No, it was -- the phones, you guys don't want to get me started on that. I don't know how you found out about that, but it's just a complete waste of time. Need the team focused.

People tell them how great they are when we win. Tell them how bad they are. These guys are young guys. It's us. They put the work in. We sweat. We started in June on this journey. We won more games now, 19, than we won all of last year.

This team has fought through a ton of adversity, players injured, calls at the end of the game, and just proud of them. We outrebounded a really good rebounding team. And these guys just keep fighting. They're a great group.

Yeah, the phones don't help them be better players. They don't help them -- that's it. That's my phone...

**Q. Steve, how do you strike the proper balance? Obviously this is a pivotal game. You don't want them to be overpressured by it, but you also don't want them to -- obviously not going to take it for granted, but you don't want them to be overwhelmed by what needs to be accomplished. How do you walk them through that?**

STEVE PIKIELL: We're always in this position. It's the best league in the country. The challenges are immense everywhere you turn. Just try to keep them to stay the course and be focused on what's important.

It's a good group. Caleb McConnell. I thought Paul Mulcahy was spectacular today. I thought he did an unbelievable job keeping balls alive. I liked our shots we got in the first half. Put Derek in the starting lineup. Aundre Hyatt was awesome, "Coach, whatever you need." I trust them. These guys have been connected, and you've

got to keep them that way because it's a tough league. Night in and night out, any team can beat any team. There's really good coaches and obviously really good players.

I thought we did a good job on Dickinson, and then I look at his numbers, and like oh, my God. It's a credit to him and Michigan too. Sometimes the other team has got some pretty good players too.

**Q. What led to the decision to put Derek in the starting lineup, and what are your thoughts on the way he responded?**

STEVE PIKIELL: Obviously, yeah, he was terrific. Just the matchups. I thought last time McDaniel caused a lot of problems for us. We turned the ball over a lot. So to add another really good ball handler to our list.

What I'm most proud of with Derek is zero turnovers in that game. We really lost the first game because of our turnovers. Then really appreciate all the other guys that came and did what they were supposed to do.

Cliff, it's a hard night. He got in foul trouble. You're guarding some really big players, and he stayed the course. Blocked some huge shots down the stretch.

So every guy chipped in. I really believe in this group. Wolf gave us great minutes. Aundre comes in and hits a big three and makes two free throws. Oskar Palmquist just straight solid. It's a credit to Oskar hasn't played, and now he plays 18 minutes. So stayed the course and kept doing what he needed to do, and now he's a big part of this.

**Q. Three years ago the first game on Thursday at the Big Ten Tournament was supposed to be Rutgers-Michigan with Rutgers on the verge of the NCAA Tournament. Was there a moment at all today at breakfast or this morning where you flashed back to what a very different world it is now to what it was three years ago?**

STEVE PIKIELL: Thankfully, thankfully, it's a very different world. I was with Andy Katz before the game, and it was deja vu all over -- he interviewed me right before the Michigan game. It's the same time, it's the same date. Andy and I were like -- he was standing about 18 feet away from me like this that time. This time we were a little closer with the interview and stuff.

I did have a flashback to that, and thank God that's in the rearview mirror. That was a really difficult year, and the next year following was really difficult. We were in a great place at that time. So a little deja vu.

**Q. Paul Mulcahy went down with an apparent eye injury or something to his face. Do you have an update on Paul's status?**

STEVE PIKIELL: I don't. I don't have an update. He took it in the eye. They're working on him right now. So I don't have any updates on that. I'm sorry.

**Q. Rough stretch the last four weeks, which can happen in this league. How did you handle the criticisms and cleaning up the mistakes but also keeping them upbeat and positive going forward?**

STEVE PIKIELL: Smashed the phones.

(Laughter).

You know, I'm very confident in what we do, and I'm very confident in my team. There's no team this year in this league that didn't go through a stretch like that. This league is just -- and we're adding UCLA and USC. This is how it's going to be. This is the best league in the country, and you'd better be able to play through stretches like that.

Everyone thinks you just roll it out and you just win. It's just not that way. We lost a really important player. I just talked to him on the phone, a starter with eight games left, that's not easy too. Everyone has to shift their roles and change everything and that kind of thing.

So you just stay the course and keep fighting and know that you could beat anybody and know that you could lose to anybody. That's the kind of league it is.

Credit to all the coaches in the league. These teams are good, and these coaches can really coach.

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