

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 10, 2023

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

Ohio State Buckeyes

Coach Chris Holtmann

Felix Okpara

Bruce Thornton

Roddy Gayle Jr.

Justice Sueing

Postgame Press Conference



**MEN'S BASKETBALL
TOURNAMENT**

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with a free spirit and this aggression on defense, we're going to keep winning. So we'll keep this up and onto the next.

JUSTICE SUEING: Like Bruce said, we love to have Brice on the court. He does so much for us offensively and defensively. He raised our elevation of play. We have a lot of players on this team that can step up to the plate. Roddy did it. Tanner was able to come in today and make an impact on the game as well. He did a great job. Just overall a great team effort and a great team win.

Q. Anybody other than Justice, I guess. I think Justice had the first eight points -- 8 of the first 10 for you guys. He tied his career high in three-point makes. How big was that for setting the tone early on, he hit those two big threes early to get you guys going when Michigan State had started on a 7-2 run?

BRUCE THORNTON: Like I said yesterday, I see him make those shots in practice all the time. Him coming out aggressive, we love that. He keep the defense on their toes.

But him coming out like that gave us a spark. To see his leadership the last couple games is beyond believable. He showed the young guys the way how to play the Ohio State way. If he keep playing like this, he's going to be very special and very hard to beat us.

Q. Bruce and Justice, Bruce first. Three games, three days. How are your legs? And it looked like you were coming up a little short on some of them, but then you'd find some energy and take it to the hole. How hard is this to do?

BRUCE THORNTON: It was very difficult. As soon as I leave here, I'm getting an ice bath right away. It's hard, but at the end of the day, I want to win so bad. I want to just prove people wrong. I want to show everybody what this team is really made of.

We went through a big slump, but we keep fighting. We keep showing people that we belong. We belong here.

Ohio State - 68, Michigan State - 58

THE MODERATOR: Ohio State is here. We're joined by the Ohio State Buckeyes Coach Chris Holtmann, Felix Okpara, Bruce Thornton, Roddy Gayle Jr. and Justice Sueing.

CHRIS HOLTSMANN: Great team win. Great team win over an incredible program and terrific players and one of the best to ever do it. It's a great win for our team.

I just thought these guys really stepped up and made plays. That's really what it's about. Beginning with our defense, they just stepped up and made plays. Players win games, and those guys went out and did it.

Q. For all four of you, finding out that you're not going to have your leading scorer, you talked a lot about not having a balanced scoring attack, but not having Brice and playing your third game in three days, what did it take to overcome that and also be, like Coach just said, a really good team?

BRUCE THORNTON: Another key player with Brice's scoring, his three level scoring, and also his rebounding is going to hurt. Of course we want Brice on the court. He provides so much spirit with his way of playing and everything.

Next man stepped up. Roddy stepped up. Tanner came in and made a big three. Felix had a block. We played with collective effort, and as you see, we keep playing together

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I see these guys put in so much work, the coaching staff and just the fans, man. I just feel like we're going to keep working, keep surprising people if we keep playing like this.

JUSTICE SUEING: No one said it was going to be easy trying to make this run. My guys, I have full confidence in them. We all have full confidence in each other. Like Bruce said, we're trying to prove that we need to be there, and I think we've done that as a team collectively and really just paid attention to our mentality coming into each and every game.

Q. Felix, this has been a real gradual progression for you, for a few minutes here and there to now in crunch time you're out there helping them decide the games. Just five blocked shots today. Just the impact that you were able to have around the rim and how you've really kind of grown up before everybody's eyes here.

FELIX OKPARA: I'm going to give the credit to my coaches and my teammates. They really believe in me. I also want to thank the coaches for giving me the opportunity.

When I'm on the court, I try to do my job as best I can. I feel like I did my job very good tonight, and I've just got to keep doing it every night.

Q. Justice, when you guys were struggling, a lot of teams in that situation would kind of fall apart, especially a team this young. Why didn't you guys?

JUSTICE SUEING: Like I said, over the past couple of weeks, like over the month-and-a-half, we've been playing our best basketball. Even though the results haven't shown necessarily, we've been able to grow with the good and the bad.

I think it just shows the amount of growth, the amount of progression we've made as a team to kind of stay in knowing we have more than what we need to get the job done no matter what the other team is going through.

Q. Justice, you just beat a 5 and a 4, your second and third wins this weekend. Do you realize you're two victories away from an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament?

JUSTICE SUEING: We see that, but right now we're focused on this next one. We're going to go get some rest, get some recovery in, some treatment, and head into our film and get ready for the next one tomorrow at noon.

Q. What would it say about this team if you could pull that off?

JUSTICE SUEING: We knew we were capable this entire year. We had our struggles, like every team has, but ours is a little bit more. These are guys I'm running with, man, so I'm excited for noon tip-off tomorrow. Yeah, I think we're going to be ready for this.

Q. Roddy, we talked to you yesterday about being aggressive offensively. Today further. How much did yesterday's performance kind of buoy you to take it the next step today and get the 15 points, especially without a guy like Brice up there?

RODDY GAYLE JR.: Yesterday's performance just basically gave me even more confidence than I had, knowing that my teammates and my coaches have the same belief or even more confidence in me. Like I just really just stayed aggressive and try to play aggressive and play the best winning basketball.

Q. Roddy, Coach Holtmann always talks about the change was you guys started to play the right way in this season. What does that mean to you? Can you explain what playing the right way means, what it looks like?

RODDY GAYLE JR.: Playing the right way basically means trusting the pass, playing aggressive but also smart. Just knowing the small details going into a game is very important. It may not be as important as it may seem. But just those small details separates the good from the great.

So I think we've been really good on that this past month or few weeks.

Q. Justice, I'm wondering, you just played this team last weekend. The way you guys played that game, how much confidence did it give you coming into today's matchup?

JUSTICE SUEING: It was good we just played them, so we had a good feel for them. Coming in, we had to make those adjustments, especially on transition defense.

Just being good on the rebounding for our team. But we had a good feel for it going in, and we had a lot of confidence going in, especially just from playing them. Yeah, we got the job done.

Q. Justice and Bruce, as captains on this team, we talk to you guys a lot after really difficult games, and you try to sum up what was going wrong. What does it feel like for you to be sitting here and maybe reflecting on the journey to get to this point and still have more

to play for, but enjoying this stretch of games after what you had been through as captains?

JUSTICE SUEING: During those times, we always said it was just a little bit -- like a little thing we needed to fix or those little details we needed to pay attention to to finally turn things over.

I think over the past month, the past couple of weeks, we've been able to do that, and we've been paying close attention to that and we've gotten the results over that. Even though it didn't look like it at times, we knew, as soon as we continued to get through the season, and now it's starting to show right now during Big Ten tournament.

We're just going to keep pushing and keep adjusting and keeping our mentality strong.

BRUCE THORNTON: Like he said, a while back, we always said it was the little things, the boxing out, holding teams to one shot, just the extra pass, things like that. They really don't get shown on the stat sheet, but we make sure we do it, and it's showing. We see that it's working, and we keep using it.

I'm really proud of these guys. I feel like we've still got so much to show and so much work to do, and we'll be ready to play tomorrow.

Q. Can you walk us through the Brice timeline a little bit here? And then secondly, want to get you on really how you controlled tempo and how important that was with the fatigue factor.

CHRIS HOLTSMANN: Brice, late in the game last night, or yesterday, he said, hey, Coach, I need to come out. I thought he was fatigued. The we took him to the bench, then we found out his knee was bothering him.

He was evaluated by our medical staff. They decided, rightly and smartly, to keep him out for the rest of the game. There might have been five minutes to go at that point. Keep him out the rest of the game. Evaluated him last night, our medical staff, evaluated him again this morning. And he's getting testing done tonight.

We'll hopefully know more tonight on how significant the injury is. That's really all we -- we're just concerned about Brice. He's obviously got a really bright future. He really wanted to play, as did Zed. Both those guys would love to be a part of this. It was clearly the right decision for him.

I told him, I said, if you say, Coach, I'm playing, I don't know if I'd have let you play until we know for sure the extent of the injury.

As far as the tempo, listen, obviously we could have some legs that are a little bit fatigued, but I think more than anything confidence trumps fatigued legs. We'll roll with that any time, and I think we're playing confident, and I love that, but as far as the tempo is concerned, I felt like we needed a game. We've had a couple games at their place. I think the game was in the high 70s. We were fine playing that.

But this was, for us, I thought we were efficient on offense.

Q. You mentioned the first game, 6 of 29 from three at your place, and then you guys heated up against them in the second half. What's changed for you guys in terms of the outside shooting? And what's changed from their three-point defense from earlier?

CHRIS HOLTSMANN: It's a good question. They were terrific defensively at our place, and to be honest with you, I don't think I had a very good plan to attack them. We beat them at our place last year. I just don't think I had a very good offensive attack against their defense. They can be very stifling with how gapped up they are. So we made some adjustments going into game 2, and we made some shots.

So I think it was a combination of I didn't love our attack in game 1, and listen, as I said, we're playing way more the right way since that point. That was maybe as low a point as there was in the season, but certainly it's up there. I think we're trusting the pass a lot more and playing way more together on that end.

Q. To that point, as I asked your players, a lot of times when things struggle, especially these days, kids just don't want to work through it. Why do these guys have what it took to work through it?

CHRIS HOLTSMANN: That's a really good question. I think we have good kids. I think we haven't had a lot of kids on this team who have seen us have some success in the past. Sometimes when you -- Justice wasn't really on last year's team, although he was on a team that played The Finals his junior year in the Big Ten tournament.

I think sometimes when you have six, seven guys that maybe have experienced and seen what the process looks like, going through the ups and downs in a power league and just trusting that, I think that helps because they spread it to other guys. We didn't have as much of that with so many new faces, and I think we really struggled to accept the fact that, if we just will do these things -- and I obviously didn't do a good enough job communicating it, and I also think our youth and inexperience were all

factors.

I don't know if I'm making sense, but I think those were some of the reasons.

Q. I want to know how rewarding is this stretch right now? I know you're still in the middle of it, but just to see this effort out of these guys. I know you said you thought some of these guys could put this together maybe next season and stuff, but to see that happen now rather than waiting a whole off-season, how rewarding is that for you?

CHRIS HOLTMANN: I came out before this game and said, man, what an incredible experience for our freshmen to be in this environment, to see this, to see the game before, the Rutgers-Purdue game, incredible environment.

This is just invaluable experience for these young guys. You don't love college basketball if you're not chomping at the bit to get out there and compete.

So I love that for our guys. I do think it's really, really important. Again, what I'm most pleased with is how we've played in the last month, even when we lost at Michigan State. Just really pleased with that.

Q. This season you guys, you brought Roddy and Felix along in the right course of events, just slowly and surely, a few more minutes here and there. These guys just helped you beat a top 25 team in the Big Ten tournament and were key players in this. Just their development, how has this happened?

CHRIS HOLTMANN: I think playing them -- and my AD kept saying it. Play them early. Play the freshmen early. We just -- you know, I think playing them has given them maybe some confidence at this point in the season that we've really needed.

Obviously Bruce has hit a whole 'nother level with his play, but Felix, if a guy can control the game with scoring less than 10 points, he's a prime example because I think he did.

Q. For a long stretch of the season, Brice was your primary and only real consistent offensive weapon. To come into this game today -- and I know you've gotten more from guys recently, but to come into this today without him and to win by ten, what are you getting collectively that you weren't getting a month ago, two months ago from your offense that's enabling other guys to fill in in a game like this?

CHRIS HOLTMANN: Trust. I think they're trusting each

other. They're trusting if they trust the pass, whether we make it or not, it's the right play. I think that, as much as anything, offensively has been the difference. They're trusting the pass. They're trusting each other. And they're living with the results.

A by-product of that has been better offense.

Q. Yesterday you talked about your messaging, and you even questioned your own messaging. I'm wondering when did you get to the point that you knew that, yes, you did get through to your guys when you were struggling?

CHRIS HOLTMANN: I questioned everything. I questioned if I was too hard on them at times. I questioned if I was not hard enough on them at times, too emotional. When you go through stretches like this, you're not sleeping. You're not eating. You're in a bad place, so you question everything. I certainly did question if I was getting through to them.

Again, I think what we tried to do is celebrate small steps of quality play, and we started celebrating that more, a good five to ten-minute stretch of playing the right way, and really, really celebrate that and build on it. I think this has been the result.

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