

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 13, 2024

Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Target Center

Rutgers Scarlet Knights

Steve Pikiell

Clifford Omoruyi

Aundre Hyatt

Postgame Press Conference

Maryland - 65, Rutgers - 51

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Rutgers Head Coach Steve Pikiell, along with Cliff and Aundre.

Coach, we'll start with your thoughts on the game.

STEVE PIKIELL: Congratulate Maryland. I knew it was going to be a tough game. I'm thankful for our fans that came out. We didn't play the way we wanted to. These two guys have been awesome for us. I'm proud of them, our seniors.

It's been kind of a choppy year. Fought through a lot of different things -- injuries, lineup changes, all that kind of stuff. I knew the backboards were the key, and they got us on the backboards tonight.

Tough game. Really tough game. Didn't play the way we needed to play for sure.

Q. Cliff or Aundre, obviously Coach said a bit of a choppy year, but you guys have both been veterans at Rutgers for three years and four years for you, Cliff. What has the experience been like overall this year, last year, and just reflecting on your Rutgers career?

CLIFFORD OMORUYI: It's been a great experience just playing with the guys. They've been great people off and on. Just having a great coaching staff around us. It's been a great experience just having people support us. Our fans show up no matter what. I just want to say thank you for everything.

Q. Cliff, only two points for you today. What about Maryland's defense really stopped you on offense?



CLIFFORD OMORUYI: They played great defense. My shot wasn't falling, but my teammates we just keep attacking. Even though my shots weren't falling, we tried to play great defense. We just played great defense. Kudos to them. They played better D.

Q. For Aundre, Maryland came out strong both in the beginning of the first half and the second half. What did you see from them or from you guys that led Maryland to get off to big runs at the beginning of the halves?

AUNDRE HYATT: They were more aggressive on the defensive end, and the shots weren't falling for us. It was hard for us to get second-chance points. They were just more aggressive tonight.

Q. Coach, obviously you said it was a choppy season, yet you had that four-game win streak in February. Down the stretch, things kind of seemed to fade away. What happened these last six, seven games that caused you to fall off?

STEVE PIKIELL: It's just been, first of all, a ton of injuries all over the place. Even Noah today couldn't play. Mawot practiced yesterday; couldn't play today.

We just never had a great rhythm. Halfway through the year, we get Jeremiah and E back. You see where E is going with this thing, and Jeremiah a big help. Then we lose Mawot that time of the year.

Never really got into a rhythm. I'm proud of these guys. It wasn't the year that I wanted. It wasn't the year that any of us wanted. We started this journey in June and fought through a lot and had a lot of new faces too in the lineup.

As I always am, I'm proud of Rutgers nation. I'm proud of the support that we get. It's my job now to make sure that we're a lot better next year. I'm on a mission to do that. Hopefully we stay healthy too because that was a big part of it this year, never getting into a rhythm.

Q. Coach, obviously you went big to start the game



with Cliff, Gavin, Oskar, and Jeremiah, and Maryland went on an 11-0 run. Why do you think that happened?

STEVE PIKIELL: We were concerned about the backboards. We knew that would be the result if they got us on the backboards. They're a really good rebounding team. We went a little bit bigger. Sparked that lineup.

I thought we got some decent looks. Couldn't really hang around because we didn't make the shots that were open and available to us.

I think in the first half we had eight layups, eight missed layups. Obviously 0-for-3 from the foul line. So not able to get off to a good start when you're not capitalizing on those opportunities.

Q. Missed free throws have been a theme of the season. What do you think in terms of free throws, is it a practice thing or a mental thing? What do you think went wrong with missing layups and free throws?

STEVE PIKIELL: I think it's a little bit of everything. We had shot the ball really well on the road. Our neutral site's away. So tonight it was a little unusual. We hadn't shot well from the free-throw line at home.

Each guy it's different for. Some guys it's mental, and other guys it's other issues. We've certainly got to figure it out. That's been a problem. We've spent a lot of time on it. Sometimes you make too much of an issue out of something, it becomes self-fulfilling.

We'll figure it out, and we'll get some guys in here hopefully that are better foul shooters to begin with, but we've really got to do a good job of solving that problem.

Q. Coach, kind of a sour end to the season. What do you tell some of the guys like Cliff, the older guys, who the future is up in the balance, to pick their spirits up?

STEVE PIKIELL: No season ever goes exactly the way you planned. I was proud our guys kept fighting till the end. I think tonight we had 11 stops out of the last 12 possessions. They kept fighting until the final buzzer.

These guys have a lot of choices now. Next year is not guaranteed to anybody. So it's a different kind of world that we're living in with college basketball now.

You thank them. They've been great representatives of Rutgers. Terrific academic. They worked. There was no drama this year. They kind of came to practice, and they fought.

It just didn't go our way. A few games here, a few games here. I'm not making excuses. I have to do a great job with this group and get them into a rhythm. But we just never had consistency.

An injury bug hit us hard and some other things happened this year that we weren't kind of planning on.

Q. Both Gavin and Jamichael got the start today, both freshmen. What have you seen from their progression throughout the season, as you've always mentioned freshmen have a hard adjustment period, what have you seen from them?

STEVE PIKIELL: I think if you look throughout the league and throughout the country, it's a tough time for freshmen because college basketball is so old now. Normally you have a four-class rotation. Some of these freshmen are playing eighth-year guys, seventh-year guys, tons of sixth-year guys.

It was always a hard adjustment for freshmen, now living in the COVID years and all this other stuff, it's a real hard year.

They got better and better. Those guys came to work every day. Gavin kept improving and improving. You saw at the end of the season some of the things he can do. I think with some guys too around him, he has a chance to be really good.

And Jamichael is just a worker. He came in, and he worked. I expect some great things moving forward. Those guys have bright futures. But all freshmen, it's not easy. It's not easy.

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