

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 13, 2024

Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Target Center

Penn State Nittany Lions

Mike Rhoades

Zach Hicks

Ace Baldwin Jr.

Postgame Press Conference



State - 66, Michigan - 57

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Penn State head coach Mike Rhoades, along with Zach Hicks and Ace Baldwin Jr. We'll start off with an opening statement from Coach Rhoades.

MIKE RHOADES: Just proud of our guys today. I thought we had a good week preparing for the tournament. We knew this would be -- get ourselves going and get into this game.

Credit to Michigan. I thought they had a hard-fought game and they were ready to go.

I thought Ace settled us down as we went along there, and Zach made some big plays to get us going and made some shots. I thought a bunch of guys contributed in different ways, and it didn't always come up on the stat sheet.

This time of year, it doesn't always have to be pretty, but you've got to stick together. Just like how we handled some adversity. Win the game and get to the next one, and that's what they did today. I thought it was a great team effort.

Q. Zach, things have sort of clicked for you since early February. What would you say the change has been, or what is it about your game that you've sort of found now?

ZACH HICKS: I don't think there's been much changes. Every shooter goes in a slump. Coach always tells me shoot the ball with confidence. So that's one thing that never left me. I started hitting toward February, and I'm just riding the wave right now.

Q. Ace, your experience in VCU in the tournament over the past couple of seasons, how has that translated to a bigger stage like the Big Ten tournament and hopefully into the March Madness tournament this season?

ACE BALDWIN JR.: I would just say we've got to take it a game at a time. That's what I've got to say.

Q. Ace, defensively, what was the key for you guys tonight? I guess kind of big picture with your press, how has that been so effective for you guys this season?

ACE BALDWIN JR.: The game plan was just to cut off the head of the snake, which was Doug, and I think we did a pretty good job of it. I think a lot of teams, they don't want to dribble against our press. So I think that will keep working for us.

Q. Ace, you're one of the top minutes played guys in the entire country, and now you're going to have to play back-to-back days. How do you mentally and physically prepare your body to get ready for tomorrow?

ACE BALDWIN JR.: Just get a little bit of treatment, ice my legs, and we'll be right back in tomorrow.

MIKE RHOADES: We took him out today. He should be well rested. (Laughter).

Q. Zach, anything specific, when you were shooting the ball today, anything about the flow of the game or how you felt specifically that made you so successful today?

ZACH HICKS: As a shooter, once you see that first one drop, it's just like the basket gets super big. I felt that was the main thing today.

Q. Zach, you've had success against Indiana this season. Is there anything to be said for the success that you've had as you play them again? Does that



give you confidence? How does that kind of affect your mentality?

ZACH HICKS: We're just going to approach it like every other game. They're a good team. Going to try to do what we did the first two times and come out with another win and keep advancing.

Q. Mike, there have been a couple different guys this year, that you've really gotten a lot out of. Q and Zach are good examples. What do you think has helped them develop past the player they were at the start of the year?

MIKE RHOADES: Number one is keep demanding them to get better. Q is in his fifth year, and Zach three years now in college, and they've been successful.

But there's always more to all of us. That's just sort of the way we do things. If you can get a little bit better every week during the season, you get better late in the season, it helps you right around now.

I think you just demand them to get better all the time. We talk about that every day. It's a daily approach from the way we play as a team and what you do after practice and getting extra reps up.

I told Zach, I said, he's a heck of a shooter, but I think you're a good rebounder because you have a nose for the ball, and I really demanded him to go rebound this year. He's done that. He never played defense until he got here this year, and his defense has improved.

I think one of the reasons he didn't shoot the ball so well early in the year was he was playing so hard on defense and trying to do what he wanted. It wasn't familiar to him. He was tired and fighting through fatigue. He's learned to battle through fatigue.

Even with Ace, just continue to read ball screens better and better, and run your team better and better, even though he's been doing it for a long time. Just always demanding these guys.

Q, this is the best he's moved in his career. We've asked him to play a different style than he's ever done. He's been great at it. He's been getting better and better at it. The second half of the year he's really stepped up, and he's made big plays for us that he maybe didn't have earlier in the year.

Just always demanding them to get better. That's one thing as a coaching staff, we say work them hard, love them harder, and try to make them better.

Q. Since Indiana played you guys at the BJC they haven't lost. How do you think they are planning on attacking you guys differently?

MIKE RHOADES: I think, when you play a team multiple times, there's always changes, counters to things you do and all that. That's basketball. We'll do some things differently as well.

We're not going to change, I mean, with the pieces we have and where we're at. There's not a lot of things we can just change on the fly. But you make a couple of tweaks here and there to help your team.

I think our style of play at this time of the year really helps us because, if you turn people over late in the year and you capitalize on it, it's tough to battle that stuff and compete against that.

They're playing really well. Xavier is back. They've got another ball handler. But it's that time of the year, man. You've got to double knot the shoes and see what happens.

Q. Just wanted to say congrats on your first Big Ten win. When looking at your big rotation, we saw Meech early on in the game. He looked pretty good early on. Eventually Leo came in and played some big minutes in the second half. Q, I saw you talking to him a lot. Can you just explain your thought process on getting all three of them in at certain times of the game and what that's going to look like throughout the tournament.

MIKE RHOADES: Yeah, I want to play a lot of guys because you can play so hard, and our guys get to a point where they play as hard as they possibly can and know, if they come out, they know they're going to go back in. Always my philosophy. I think it creates great morale in your team and your program.

Meech knows he's going in, he can help the team win, and he did that today. Of course Leo and Q have been doing that all year long. So I'm always going to play a lot of guys and throw them in the fire.

But be impactful. Impact your team. Don't get in the way of winning. Impact your team to win. So we're always going to shuffle guys like that.

You're not getting demoted when you come out after two or three minutes because you're going to go back in there and try to outwork the other team who might not do that. So that's just sort of our approach.

Q. With Indiana you mentioned Xavier Johnson. What have you noticed that's different with them when he's in the lineup?

MIKE RHOADES: He's a vet. He's a vet, and he's had a lot of success in his college career. I watched him from high school all the way through, and he's a very talented player. There's a calming presence when he's out there with his teammates. You saw that the last few games. He's sure of himself, and I think he gives confidence to his teammates that way. So we'll have our hands full.

Q. Do you have an update on Meech, just how he's doing?

MIKE RHOADES: Yeah, he just tweaked his back. We'll see. That's why we brought our docs with us.

Q. Coach, what do you say to your players to kind of invoke like, hey, you have the green light, go ahead and play your style of game, shoot that shot, like Zach Hicks did tonight?

MIKE RHOADES: It's just what we do. I hate to answer it like that. It's just what we do. We shoot the ball when you're open. You work on it. If you want the neon green light like Zach, you'd better be in the gym all summer long. You'd better come back late at night and shoot.

We've got like 15 managers and 5 GAs, and their number one job is to rebound for these guys. There's no excuse not to get in the gym and work on your game. When Coach tells you you've got the green light, it all works together, that part of it.

The other part of it is it's a player's game, it's not a coach's game. When guys play with great freedom and confidence and know they don't have to look over their shoulder if they miss a shot or make a mistake, are they going to get pulled? It gives guys great confidence. And guys want to get better too because they're going to have great opportunity and freedom to go be the player they dreamed about and want to be.

I've always believed in that. I played for a coach like that. It's a fun way to play. It's a confident way to play. And I think later in your career, when you know you have the green light, you keep working on your game. You don't look at the end. You think I can keep going and keep getting better. So the neon green light is important at Penn State.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

