

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 14, 2024

Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Target Center

Michigan State Spartans

Tom Izzo

Malik Hall

A.J. Hoggard

Tyson Walker

Postgame Press Conference

Michigan State - 77, Minnesota - 67

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Michigan State. Head coach Tom Izzo will be here in a moment. Malik Hall, A.J. Hoggard, and Tyson Walker. Joined by Coach Izzo.

We'll start off with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions from our student-athletes.

TOM IZZO: It's been an interesting year in a lot of fashions, but I said early that you win with veterans and you win with your key guys doing the job. I said we have a veteran backcourt, we've got a veteran in Malik, we've got a veteran coach.

I think we all took a little blame for the ups and downs, but first I'd like to give credit to Minnesota. They played well. Ben's done an unbelievable job with the program. They could be the Number 1 team in the league next year. So hat's off to them.

Number two, I want to give credit to these guys. It was Malik in foul trouble early. I've never sat him that long in a long time. I thought A.J. struggled a little bit in the first half with some turnovers and Ty not taking shots in the second half. All three of them really responded like they're capable of. I thought Jaden Akins made big plays defensively.

But A.J. ran the show. Tyson made some shots. Malik, we used him as a point forward down there, and he made some big-time plays. We're just excited to be moving on. I don't care who we play, we're still excited to be moving on.



Q. For A.J. and Tyson, veteran seniors, experienced guys take over this time of year. Did you guys both feel that in this game?

A.J. HOGGARD: Yeah, definitely. It was something that we harped on all week. We know that's definitely the key to winning games, especially during tournament time. So we definitely had our mind set on coming out here and handling business.

Like Coach said, we started off a little slow, turning the ball over unusually. Just responded in the second half, being that guy for my team that I needed to be in the second half and making things happen.

I think we had our mind set on that coming into tournament time.

Q. How was it playing this Minnesota offense?

MALIK HALL: I mean, they do a lot of things. We kind of struggled at the beginning with the chin action, the ball screens. It was something we talked about at halftime. We tried to make an adjustment on. I think they did a really good job making sure they were rolling and slipping out of them. That, for a majority, is what I noticed for sure.

Q. I just wanted to ask all three of you guys, you guys during the season you had some losses, but it just seems like every time Michigan State has some kind of mystique. Is there some kind of power that it seems like every time you guys get to a game you need to win, you keep winning in the clutch games.

TYSON WALKER: I would say for us, I think we learned the most lessons out of anybody, just the games we lost and how we lost them. So just trying to build on that. We talked about it a lot, so just trying to build on that and make sure we don't do it again.

Q. Tyson, what was the biggest difference after the first half, kind of shaking off the cold shooting and hitting the big shots down the stretch?

TYSON WALKER: Just being more aggressive and



looking for my shot, not looking for pass and then shoot, but looking to shoot. Then trying to get fouled and just being aggressive.

Q. Can you speak a little bit about Tre's performance today? And if you've got anything else you want to say about Ben Johnson's performance this year as a coach?

TOM IZZO: First on Tre, you know when you put the stickers on and the team that moves forward, the team votes who does that, and it was unanimous that Tre was the guy. It wasn't because he's from here, it's because of the lift he gave us and some of the plays he made. 3-for-3, 2-for-2 from the three, misses one free throw, but I thought played pretty good defensively.

I thought it was one of his best games, if I looked at all around the things that he did. So I'm really proud of Tre and happy for him. You come home, you want to play well in front of some of your family and friends.

As far as Ben Johnson, everybody in the room knows that I'm close with Ben and should be close with Ben because there were people that took care of me when I came in. You're going to see one tomorrow, Gene Keady, and the Bobby Knights and the Clem Haskins, those guys. I try to do some of that with Ben because I believe in him, and I believe what he's done.

All he has to do is hold this team together, and they'll come in as, if not the favorite, one of the favorites. It's a very, very good basketball team. I've been really impressed. The guards have gotten better. Christie's gotten better. I thought we did a decent job on Mitchell today. I don't know what he ended up with. He had 5 points.

The improvement that Payne has made has been phenomenal. I thought the Fox kid really did a lot for him, but Garcia is a load. You have to game plan against Garcia. He can beat you from the outside. He can beat you from the inside.

I just thought, when we got close a couple times we were down, they came with a great play. I mean, he did a marvelous job of managing the game. At the end, we made a couple more plays than they did.

But the guy deserves a lot of credit. When you look at him, being a Minnesota kid, there's going to be a lot of great years ahead for him.

Q. Dawson Garcia in the second half kind of late he made that floater and a shot went in, and you kind of walked the other way from the bench. How would you

describe his offensive skill set?

TOM IZZO: As I said, he can beat you a lot of different ways. He can beat you with a three. He can beat you -- we had him beat a dominant left-hand guy, and he can go right.

I think his improvement -- I told him after the game. I said, I think you've improved as much as anybody. I just think he has a lot more to his game now. That mid-range floater, that was a critical time in the game. I'm the one that turned around and said a bunch of words, none that I'll repeat, but give him credit. He made some plays.

When we double-teamed him, he made some passes. He's a three or four-dimensional guy. I think he can score it from three different ways. I think we can rebound the ball. I think he can definitely pass the ball. He only had one assist because I thought we did a decent job. We changed our double coverage from what we did and tried not to let those guards go crazy, like Cam did against us up here. He had five threes almost in a row.

He's a good player. He's a very good player, and if he keeps getting better, watch out.

Q. Next up is Purdue. Next up is Zach Edey. What message do you express, do you tell to your young people, to your bigs especially, as far as competing, competing against that load that is Zach Edey?

TOM IZZO: You said little? What time is it? This guy is a friend of mine. He doesn't even give me a chance to enjoy the press conference, and he's asking me maybe about the greatest player maybe in basketball in the past two years.

I am going to come up with something. I brought a couple of football coaches. My buddy Mariucci came. My buddy Mark Dantonio. I'm going to institute coaching from them. I'm going to institute a couple of players to bring up. Zach Edey is a helluva player, man. Talk about a guy that deserves credit.

The way they get him a ball in so many different ways. We thought we did a pretty good job the last game, and then the two guards went nuts. We did a couple things the year before, and he got 35, and we held the guards. So we're going to have to pick our poison in what we're going to do.

This team is better than any team he's had because he's got Gillis, who can make threes. He's got Loyer that can make threes. We all know Smith is one of the better three-point shooters. Jones did not shoot it real well at our place, but he's a very good three-point shooter. If you cover them, Edey's there.

So you ruined my press conference, but I'm going to answer it that way, and the rest I'm going to answer on my team today, so I can enjoy it until I get on the bus and start thinking about the jolly green giant down in West Lafayette.

Q. Tom, you mentioned at the start your older players, backcourt taking over in the second half. Is that when you guys are at your best, when those guys are getting up and down the floor, you're forcing turnovers, a fast break? Because they really seemed to get out in transition a lot in the second half.

TOM IZZO: I guess you -- when you coach, you become more critical of people but no one is being more critical than I am of myself. If we don't win, I look in the mirror before I look at anybody else. But at the beginning of the year, those guys were all over, and deservedly so. They've been a little inconsistent. Tyson was a little hurt, but we've been a little inconsistent, and I think I've been inconsistent.

So the veterans got together for a couple meetings, me and them, and we just talked about it. First half, we were okay, but the second half, we played like I think our team has to play if we're going to be successful.

You usually win in the tournament with your guard play. I thought Tyson was passing up shots. So part of my rant was on him to shoot the ball. But, yeah, I thought that our guards did a great job.

Jaden Akins will be the unsung player of the game because of like three or four defensive plays he made. Twice he knocked the ball loose. They would have had layups. We call him the fifth defender. He did his job. So even though he didn't score as much as Jaden would like probably.

But we look for guys that make game-winning plays, and he made some game-winning plays.

Q. How did it feel coaching in the house that Flip Saunders built?

TOM IZZO: It was a tearful visit for me. As everybody knows, Flip and I were really good friends. I interviewed up here one time in the new practice facility across the street and went on a couple tours here. When I recruited some guys from Minnesota, like Tre -- not this Tre, the one that went to Duke. I was escorted around with Flip.

If you remember, then all of a sudden Flip's name came up on the Minnesota job. I said, Flip, are you helping me, or are you helping next week's announcement?

But I love the guy. I love Debbie, his wife, and his kids. I'm really proud of his son who's doing so well out in Denver. Flip Saunders deserves to be even thought of more than he probably is here because he loved this city, he loved the Gophers, he loved the Timberwolves, and I love him. Sad to see him not with us right now.

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