

# Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 14, 2024

Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Target Center

## Minnesota Golden Gophers

## Ben Johnson

## Dawson Garcia

## Parker Fox

### Postgame Press Conference

Michigan State - 77, Minnesota - 67

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by University of Minnesota head coach Ben Johnson, along with Dawson Garcia and Parker Fox. We'll have Coach Johnson start with an opening statement then take questions for the student-athletes.

BEN JOHNSON: I thought to start the game I really liked our mentality, I really liked our approach. To be able to build the lead, I thought we had pretty good momentum, which was good to see. That was my challenge to them is how can we start today just in an aggressive, positive way, and I thought we did that.

We knew it was going to be a grind. A team that's a proven veteran, been in this position before. Kind of a must-win game for both teams. We knew it was going to come down to the details.

I just thought in the second half, kind of around the midway point, we couldn't get consecutive stops, and we had a couple of tough possessions offensively where we couldn't get the ball to fall.

But I liked our guys' compete, liked their mindset, and it's a tough one for us.

**Q. Question for Parker and Dawson, just talk about the environment there, playing at home. It seems like a lot of your fans came out and supported you. To begin the game, did you think that gave you some energy?**

PARKER FOX: I thought the energy was even better than I expected it to be for Thursday at 11:00 a.m. Our fans were out. Just Big Ten fans in general were out. It was a



fun atmosphere. I haven't played on the Target Center court since I was in third grade. To be able to go back out there and play there again was pretty special.

Unfortunately, it didn't go the way we wanted it to go, but I'm proud of the way we fought and proud of the way that our fans brought energy to help us, kind of lift us up.

DAWSON GARCIA: Our fans, they definitely lifted us up, especially when we went on runs. I could really feel the environment. It felt like we were at a home game. Props to our fans. They always bring it. Much respect.

**Q. Dawson, Parker, what was it about Michigan State that kind of gave you guys fits in the second half where you couldn't get over the hump and find a rhythm offensively?**

PARKER FOX: Like Coach said, they're a veteran group. Malik, Tyson, A.J., they're veteran guards. We knew they weren't just going to go away. We had the lead going into the half, but we knew it was going to be a whole 'nother battle in the second half. They just did some things offensively that we weren't able to execute with our defense.

We had a really good plan. Our coaches put in a really good plan for what we wanted to do defensively, and some of that unfortunately broke down. Then they go out and we weren't able to stop some of their stuff.

Tip of the cap to them, but we want to play better than that. Unfortunately, we didn't today.

**Q. Parker Fox, I've got a question for you: Could you just wrap up what it's been to play at home in front of these fans and what this Minnesota experience has meant to you.**

PARKER FOX: I think it was a different experience than I thought it was going to be. I thought I'd transfer in and be ready to play right away. Unfortunately, injuries kind of took that away for me for a couple of years. I wouldn't trade my journey for anything. I wouldn't trade my teammates, coaching staff, support staff, everybody that's



been a part of my journey here at the U for anything.

Coaches never wavered. They always stuck by my side. That's the thing I'm most grateful for because it's a tough journey when you go through back-to-back knee injuries, and there's definitely days you want to give up and quit. I found that energy from my teammates, from my family, and just being around the University of Minnesota and truly bleeding it.

I've bled it for a long time. I've bled maroon and gold since I can remember. And being a part of this team and being a part of this university was truly something really special. I'll never forget it.

**Q. Dawson, Tom Izzo only had good things to say about you, he said he talked with you a little bit after the game. Can you talk about that and how that makes you feel?**

DAWSON GARCIA: Much respect. He's a legend in the coaching game. He always gets his guys to play hard and play well. It definitely means a lot.

It's unfortunate we couldn't come out on top and put ourselves in a position where we control our destiny, but at the end of the day, much respect to him and their team.

**Q. Parker, talk about the growth of a couple of the younger guys. I know you were here a few years before this and tried to mentor some of them.**

PARKER FOX: Before Coach came in the locker room, I basically said to the guys, this has been such a fun year, with the last two years not being able to win as much. This year we turn around and had some pretty good winning streaks. Even games when we weren't winning, we were competing really hard and just doing some really good things offensively and defensively.

Just being able to see the guys grow. A kid like Cam Christie, you see the work that he puts in every single day, it's no surprise he's the talent that he is on the court.

You can go down the line, from 1 to 15. We've got a group of guys that were truly bought in. I hope that the NIT gives us a chance to keep playing because we've got guys that want to be here and want to play and want to continue to play and want to continue to grow as a group, not just as individuals. I think that's what's really special about this team.

**Q. Dawson, this question is for you: Seeing where you guys ended last season and where you ended this season, I know it's a disappointment to lose, but do**

**you feel like this program took steps in the right direction? Where do you think this team can go next season?**

DAWSON GARCIA: I definitely think we're continuing to go in the right direction. That's what it's about. We've got guys in the locker room, a whole coaching staff, a whole university that's behind us that's willing and committed to moving in the right direction.

I've got nothing but good to say about every single one of my teammates. Love them to death. Same with the coaches and support staff. Everybody's invested into a winning culture.

**Q. Ben, we talked on Tuesday about defensive issues you guys had towards the end of the year. First half it looked like you guys played better. What did you feel like maybe didn't work in the second half against Michigan State?**

BEN JOHNSON: I thought our defensive mindset was where it needed to be. It was better than the two previous games, and that showed obviously from the start and our ability to build the lead a little bit in the second half.

Obviously Michigan State is a good offensive team. So any little breakdown that we had -- I think it was 49-44, and we had a couple offensive miscues and then a couple defensive miscues. But just that little stretch, it might have been two or three minutes, all of a sudden you look up and the score and the momentum has flipped. That's all it takes against a really good team.

I think for us finding ways to be more consistent throughout the 40 minutes, especially these last three games, we couldn't really do that. That's going to be the point of emphasis from here moving forward now that we've got a core group, guys that are back. Now they totally understand what I mean when I say that.

Again, sometimes you've got to go through it to fully feel it and believe it, and now it's proof. So it's something to build on.

**Q. Ben, defensively you took a step forward, I think at one point in the Big Ten season. Last time you played Michigan State, you held them to 55 points. Whether you play in the NIT or not, when you go back and look at the film of these last several games, what specifically defensively do you think that you guys was your strongest point, and what can you build on moving forward?**

BEN JOHNSON: I thought we did a lot of good things



defensively. We were big on not allowing them to get big easy catch and shoot threes. I know they made five, but they shot eight. They only got eight off, which was good.

I thought part of the score, they had 18 points off our turnovers, so I think that was part of it. If you limit, even cut that in half, they're not getting 77. So I think part of that is your offense does control a little bit of your defense. When you're careless with the ball, you can play great defense, but when you're leading to straight points off your turnovers, that just eats away at your defense and eats away at your mentality.

But I thought for the majority of our game, I thought we were aggressive on the ball. I thought our rotations were pretty good. For the most part, I thought we were engaged in what we were trying to do. Again, just had that one area where both sides of the ball, we just weren't clicking. It's really tough against a good team that obviously is playing for a lot now to have those mistakes and start to take care of the ball. Can't give up 18 points off our turnovers.

**Q. Just throughout the duration of the season, how have you seen players develop both on and off the court?**

BEN JOHNSON: A lot. I think we've had a different type group. Dawson is a guy that I think has been super consistent when he's had the true target on his back. He's been consistent in practice. He's been consistent in games with his production, both defensively and offensively.

I think he's taken a step in his feel and understanding of the game. I think, when you look at the guys who are the sophomores -- Pharrell, Josh, Braeden -- those guys went through it last year and now are able to confidently take another step, and I thought they did that. Now their next step is to be consistent players.

Then you've got the new guys. You've got Cam. You've got Mike. You've got Elijah. I'd even though Parker and Isaiah in there because they hadn't played. And I thought those guys showed a ton of growth. For Parker to even be able to compete the full year and have no setbacks, knock on wood, it shows how far he's come with just his rehab alone.

Cam, being a freshman and not knowing anything about anything and being a guy that towards the end of the year is on the front of the scouting reports, that shows his game took a growth and took a step.

It's the same thing with Mike and Elijah, those guys coming from different programs where they were asked to do and perform differently for two years and have two years of

different habits. It's not easy to flipping a switch to all of a sudden now morph and be successful in the Big Ten when you're a key piece.

I thought those guys were willing learners. They want to get better. They want to be good. They're competitors. Just real excited to get going in the off-season with those guys.

Again, hopefully we have more basketball ahead of us. But if not, I know we're going to attack this spring and summer and really be ready next year.

**Q. Hey, Ben, Tom started his presser by talking about how impressed he was with what you've done with this program this season, and he talked about how much guys meant to him in his time as a head coach. What has he meant to you in your time at Minnesota?**

BEN JOHNSON: He's meant a ton. Obviously it's been documented, we go way back to when he recruited me in high school. I came up under Brian Gregory as a GA, who's one of his best friends. So he's kind of known my path from day one, from a player and from a GA, and now to head coach.

The guy has been unbelievable with me, as well as other coaches, but a guy in the league normally doesn't do that. He takes the time out to always check in and call, and he pays attention. I'm able to use him as a sounding board.

I think we're more similar than different in a lot of aspects, and I think he sees that too. So to be able to have a guy of his caliber that obviously I have a ton of respect for, be able to guide me through certain situations, couldn't be more thankful.

He's made me a better coach. All the coaches in this league, but he for sure has made me a better coach. You have to be on your Ps and Qs when you go against Michigan State, and just the development that I've been able to have just in this league. But to go against a guy like that night in and night out and be able to pick his brain at the same time, thankful for it, and hopefully next time we can beat him.

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