

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 14, 2024

Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Target Center

Wisconsin Badgers

Greg Gard

Steven Crowl

John Blackwell

Postgame Press Conference

Wisconsin - 87, Maryland - 56

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Wisconsin head coach Greg Gard, John Blackwell, Steven Crowl. We'll start with an opening statement from the coach.

GREG GARD: State the obvious here, I thought a complete team effort both sides of the court. I thought defensively we set the tone early. Then obviously you start knocking down some shots and getting some offense from your defense. Just all the way up and down the lineup, got great contributions.

Such an unselfish group when you get 25 assists on 31 made field goals. And I think starting to see more of what we were back in January. I felt that the last week or so, that we were trending back in the right direction and really starting to click, and today it showed again.

Looking forward to tomorrow against a very good Northwestern team, but we're going to enjoy this a little bit before we prep tonight for them.

Q. Steven, this is the first ever Big Ten men's basketball tournament in Minneapolis, in Minnesota. You're obviously from the area. What was it like to be out there in your home state? And what are your thoughts on the tournament possibly returning to Minneapolis in the future?

STEVEN CROWL: I thought it was a lot of fun, not only for me, but the other Minnesota guys -- Tyler, Jack, Nolan -- just being able to play in front of our friends and family and get a win.

It was a lot of fun. I enjoy playing here. We tend to have a



lot of success in Minnesota, and like I said, it was a lot of fun.

Q. Steven and John, Greg mentioned that he felt you guys are playing like you did in January and you felt it in the last week. What specifically did you guys feel, whether it was in practice or what you talked about at the loss at Purdue, the specific things you guys were doing better that gave you the confidence?

JOHN BLACKWELL: I just feel like we've turned up our defense a little bit more and pushed more on offense, and we didn't like put the blame on each other. We just took the loss and stayed together. I thought that was important with us making this run and us playing better together for sure.

Q. Steven, there's been some times this year where opponents have hit early threes and that's gotten them going. Experiencing that for yourself, how much does that change the momentum when you see the threes falling like they were early?

STEVEN CROWL: It's a huge thing. Obviously you can get off to a big lead. But I think it really started on the defensive end, our intensity, getting out in transition, like John said. I think the threes were just a matter of doing that.

Luckily we knocked them down tonight. Hopefully, like I said earlier, we can go tomorrow too.

Q. John, for you, we've seen you be aggressive going at the rim a ton to try and get that confidence offensively. Today you had three early three-pointers. Kind of when you're getting your shot as well, how does that kind of help your game offensively in terms of getting into a rhythm?

JOHN BLACKWELL: Mainly just taking what the defense gives me. The threes were inside-out threes from the post and from kickouts. If my three is falling, then I know guys are closing out. So I try to get to the rim also, staying aggressive.



Q. John, kind of would you have ever anticipated that your freshman year, you're right up here on the podium, at least 17 points in three straight games. You've made such a big impact. I guess would you have anticipated you would play such a big role in this Wisconsin team in your freshman year?

JOHN BLACKWELL: First of all, I just want to give glory to God for helping me get this role. I just thank my teammates and my coaches for preparing me in the summer and preseason to prepare me to play at this level.

All I did was work and stay in the gym and kept my head down, and my hard work is paying off.

Q. Steven, you were asked again after the Purdue game about being more aggressive offensively. There was a play early, I think it was John was kind of down. His guy was there, and you motioned for him to kick out so you could post your guy up. Did you come out more intent on trying to attack early today in this game?

STEVEN CROWL: I'll thank the coaches for that. They've been on me all season about being aggressive. That's on me, just trying to be more aggressive. Like you said, today my mindset was just to go out there and try to get them up.

I think we're better when I'm aggressive. That's a courtesy of my teammates also, like you said, getting me the ball down low when I need it and kicking it out for threes.

Like Coach said earlier, I thought we did a good job of sharing the rock all around and knocking down those open shots.

Q. John, can you just describe the energy that the bench -- and yourself, but the whole bench today brought to the team.

JOHN BLACKWELL: Definitely. I feel like us coming off the bench, me, Kamari, Markus, we've got to bring the spark plug thing to the starters. I feel like we do that well. We've got to keep it going.

That motivates them when they come back into the game and play well.

Q. We talked a little bit after the Purdue game about kind of even though some of the shots didn't go down, you generated a lot of good looks. Did you feel like it was just a matter of time, and what type of confidence can that give the guys going forward?

GREG GARD: I see these guys every day, in every drill, in

every workout, so I know we've got good shooters. That's a credit to defenses that have been able to do different things to us.

But I think you also go through ebbs and flows of the season, and when you hit a little dip or a valley, not to get -- don't beat yourself up mentally. You have to keep playing and keep playing aggressively.

I thought during our little stretch we weren't as aggressive as we needed to be. Now, it helps to be fully healthful, specifically with John and Kam back. It just makes us more complete. That's been really one of our aces in our pocket all year has been our depth and what guys do for each other.

Yeah, we didn't make a big deal about it. I thought we played pretty well at Purdue. Thought we played pretty well in the second half against Rutgers. So I've seen a trend of us, just how we've practiced, how we've approached things, that were escalating towards where we want to be. You're going to go through those flows during the season, and the key is don't -- if you hit a little dip, just keep working your way out of it.

I kept telling them all the time when we were going through this, we're a really good team. We're a really good team, and we'll fight our way out of it. I'm glad to see that they're getting rewarded for their perseverance and their persistence.

Q. You kind of alluded to it, it's been a while since you've had this comfortable of a win. Did the team need to see something like this?

GREG GARD: Heck, if I could get them all by this much, I'd do it. It's not easy. They still have to do it. They have to go out and make shots and make the plays and share the ball.

Yeah, I think when we are at our best, this is a sample of what we're like. We're pretty -- we've got a lot of weapons and very unselfish people in that locker room that want what's best for Wisconsin.

Q. Greg, you go into halftime. I think it was a 21-point lead. What do you say at half? How do you keep them kind of up? You go on a 14-0 run to start the second half. How big was that to just put it away right there?

GREG GARD: It was the first time all year that I pulled out the old quiz, and I always pick on the young guys, of what the score is. Fortunately, none of them named what it was, and finally someone got to 0-0.

Then same as always. You go through things that I've seen, because we can watch a little bit of clip tape at halftime as a coaching staff, and things that we've talked about, and then re-emphasizing the first five minutes. Come out, don't take our foot off the gas. Know what they're going to try to do. Know who we have to buckle down on and keep out of the paint.

I thought we came out really well. We came out aggressive again and got the ball to the rim, turned our defense into offense again, and were able to continue to build on that lead.

Q. Obviously you play again tomorrow, but on a back-to-back, how important is it to get the starters some rest down the stretch of today's game?

GREG GARD: It's huge. If you have the opportunity and you're fortunate enough to do that -- obviously you play who you need to play because it's March and you want to keep advancing. But I think not only for them to be able to play in spurts -- and we got great contributions off the bench before I was able to make the decision that I could let some guys rest more.

That's what we need. We need everybody involved with this. That makes us a much better team. When we can go deep and not really take our foot off the gas, that makes us that much harder to play against.

Q. Coach, Chucky Hepburn and Max Klesmit did a really good job on Jahmir Young. Can you talk about their focus on defense today?

GREG GARD: I've got a really good backcourt. They're experienced. They're tough. They both know what we need to do defensively. We used John a little bit on Jahmir too, he's a terrific player, and even Kam on him some. We were able to keep rotating guys on him and give him different looks and keep everybody fresh.

That's the other thing, he's such a load, you want to keep the bodies on him fresh. I thought we did a good job of collectively keeping him under control, and the same thing in the bigs and how we were able to layer the defense behind the initial ball screens.

I thought for the most part we were pretty well in the right place at the right time.

Q. Coach, early in the season, Nolan kind of felt overwhelmed with his one-on-one post defense. I know sometimes you haven't had a choice with Steve in foul trouble, but these last couple games, you've given him extended minutes against Zach Edey, Julian

Reese, and he seemed to kind of hold his own. How much has he grown from the beginning of the season, and what's allowing him to compete on that end of the floor all of a sudden?

GREG GARD: Yeah, it's experience. Like I always say, I play young guys when they're ready and I feel they can help us, and he was ready right out of the gate, as was John.

I think the experience has helped him. There's been a lot of baptism by fire, so to speak. The other thing that's helped him is we've got better defensively around him. If we need to trap the post, we can, we have that part of our arsenal. But also how we can dig and raid and crowd the paint if he does get lined up one-on-one and send help to him and have help nearby.

Not only has he gotten better and grown through this year, and there's no better teacher than experience, but the pieces around him collectively, we've gotten better defensively as the year's gone on.

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