

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 14, 2024

Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Target Center

Penn State Nittany Lions

Mike Rhoades

Puff Johnson

Ace Baldwin Jr.

Postgame Press Conference

Indiana - 61, Penn State - 59

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Penn State head coach Mike Rhoades along with Ace Baldwin Jr. and Puff Johnson. We'll start with comments from head coach and take questions for the student-athletes.

MIKE RHOADES: Just really proud of my guys and the effort. We didn't, I think, play particularly well today, but we just kept fighting and giving ourselves a chance to win the game.

I think we fought the game at times today, but we just hung in there. I just commend the group that was in there late in the game trying to find a way to win the game. We just came up short.

It's that time of the year where guys make plays, and you got to live with it. I loved our effort. I loved how these guys are trying to find a way to win the game. We just didn't. And credit to Indiana.

Q. For both of you guys, how would you sum up how this season has gone compared to maybe considering everything how this year started with all the uncertainty, how it went for you and where are you sort of at with what's next for each of you?

PUFF JOHNSON: I never like ending a season on a loss, and that's what happened today. So it's just it hurts, and it's something you need to build on and you need to learn on, and as a program we can learn on.

All the losses we had this year, it's always a learning piece. There's never a time where you can't learn from your mistakes.



ACE BALDWIN JR.: Like Puff said, it hurts end of the season with a loss. Also, they just picked us last for the preseason, and I think we did pretty well.

Q. For both of you, have you guys made any decisions about whether you are going to come back and help kind of lead the team again?

ACE BALDWIN JR.: I got to talk to Coach about that.

PUFF JOHNSON: Yeah, we haven't had these conversations yet, but I'm sure we will, and we'll go from there.

Q. Looking at this game itself, how challenging is it to fight through the kind of foul trouble that you guys had tonight, sort of navigating that?

ACE BALDWIN JR.: I ain't going to make no excuse about that. I just felt like Indiana was a good team, and they just played harder than us at the end of the day.

Q. Mike, if this is it for you guys this year, what's sort of the 30,000 foot view of how this year has gone and where you're at in the building process?

MIKE RHOADES: Here we are playing in the second round and expected to win. I think a lot of people didn't think we'd win any games. I think one time they said we were going to lose 17 in a row. The best thing about that is outside of our locker room all the other noise doesn't matter.

So I think our guys, my view with a wide lens, there was a lot of things that helped put that foundation of our program down that we can build on, and I'm proud of our guys for that.

We've come a long way. We've had a lot of ups and downs. We've had some great moments and real tough moments and learning moments. But like you saw today, we've got a group of guys that really fought. I thought these guys, as they went along -- I think we got together the first time June 14th. They made themselves into a



team that people in the Big Ten didn't want to play against.

In today's world, that's hard to do very quickly. I'm proud of our guys that way. Just disappointed today in how we played.

It's that time of the year. You've just got to find a way to scrap a win out, and we just didn't do it.

Q. Demetrius Lilley, he gave good minutes, but towards the end when Wahab fouled out, you opted to use RayQuandis Mitchell.

MIKE RHOADES: Meech couldn't go. He was hurt.

Q. With that small ball look, what's your idea of trying to contain Kel'el Ware with that zone defense you threw out?

MIKE RHOADES: We went zone, and honestly they didn't throw it into him right away, they just isolate him. That helped us a little bit, tried to keep our defense a little bit tighter, especially since they weren't making a bunch of threes.

I thought Puff was playing well. I thought Puff was rebounding well. He had eight rebounds today. I thought he was battling. So we put him at the five.

At that time, you know, it's a gut check. You've got to go with the guys you feel are battling the most. Keeping D'Marco out there, he's a rebounder from the wing. We put RayQ out there just because I thought he could keep the ball in front of him, if they tried to go at him.

When Nick fouled out, that really hurt us because he's another guy that can rebound from the wing when we went zone.

We had some limitations there at the end. Puff was playing well. He was rebounding. So we were going with that.

Q. You mentioned people saying that maybe you'd lose 17 in a row. You guys are a few bounces and whistles from that sort of feel good 20-win mark. How much pride do you take in what this season wasn't as much in what it was?

MIKE RHOADES: I take great pride in it. When you spend so much time with young people and then you demand them to work really hard and to get outside of their own comfort zone, there's a lot of rewards for that as a coach, and there's a lot of joy in that too to watch them grow and all that. I love that part of it. I love that more sometimes

than the games.

I love the games and the competition, but to help a young man go from here to there as a basketball player and as a young man to mature and understand how adversity is a lifetime thing, and we can use basketball as the vehicle to help these guys understand that. I love that part of it.

I'm really proud of these guys. I just think we had moments throughout the year where all of us got really excited saying, can we take the next step? Can we take the next step? You've got to go through it all, the highs and the lows, and tough moments like this. If we're going to build a program the right way to get to the top of this league, today's got to burn for a long, long time until we put the uniform back on.

And you've got to live in the gym. As a coaching staff, we've got to get better. How can we get our guys bigger, stronger, faster, and better players. How can we go out and get the right pieces to make us better?

All these experiences we had this year built some foundation for us, but now it's -- and the close games, the tough things that we went through, it's got to burn you to go to work and to get better because that's what it's all about.

Q. Obviously Puff and Ace have some decisions to make. What you do next will be dictated a lot by those decisions. Obviously tonight is not the night to have that conversation. What is sort of the timeline here?

MIKE RHOADES: We've had some conversations, but task at hand, that's the most important thing. Let's be where our feet are.

I'm always going to do what's best for the young men, not what's best for me. These parents give their sons to us. We want to give them back to them better young men and better basketball players and good opportunities.

I love both those guys. They've been great this year. I've recruited Puff's brother because I've known his family for a long time. I've gone through some great things with Ace and been with him and his family for a long time. So I love him and respect him, and we're going to do what's best for those guys.

We'll have conversations as we move along. I always say real talk, I call it. Let's have real talk and go from there. But it's about making the best decisions for these young men.

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