

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 12, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

USC Trojans

Eric Musselman

Rashaun Agee

Desmond Claude

Postgame Press Conference

USC - 97, Rutgers - 89

THE MODERATOR: USC has arrived. We'll open with a statement from Coach Musselman.

ERIC MUSSELMAN: That's a game on why tournament play is so fun and exciting. Double overtime game obviously with two teams that I thought both teams played really, really hard.

Credit to Rutgers in their second half. Their press bothered us. But every game's a game of three runs, and we had one in the first half, they had one in the second half, and we were able to finish the game on a run.

I thought our two defensive stops were crucial, down four with a minute something to go, to give ourselves a chance to play into the first overtime.

Q. For you guys, 46 minutes and 48 minutes, how's the body feeling, especially with the game in under 24 hours. What is the process like getting ready for the next game tomorrow, keeping that body fresh?

RASHAUN AGEE: My body feels normal after a 40-minute game, double overtime. I feel good. I feel like what we need to do is ice bath, hydrate, get some rest, and focus on the next game.

DESMOND CLAUDE: I would say that we practice and train for these moments. There's a lot of stuff that we've done to get here. Yeah, just recovery, cold tub, seeing our AT when we get back and trying to -- and get some sleep. That's the biggest one. Just got to go back and knock out.

Q. Just kind of once again, you guys were able to



surge out to a big lead. Rutgers eventually came back, but you guys kind of turned the tide near the end of that second half. I believe there was a timeout called right before that. What were you guys discussing, and what really was the key to getting you guys to the finish line over the course of that game?

DESMOND CLAUDE: Defense. We had to get stops, and the biggest two stops at the end of the game, those were big. We were just harping on rebounding, stopping Harper because we knew he was going to try to go and try to get a bucket, and then rebounding. Those were the biggest ones. And then giving a good shot to our offense.

RASHAUN AGEE: I would say, when we come into the huddle around that time, Coach talks about us getting those stops and allowing them just to get open layups and open jump shots. He talks about how we haven't gotten any stops in a while.

Piggy-backing off what Des said, just coming in with the mindset to get a stop. Not the offensive mindset, just focus on one end and playing together as a team and the understanding that we need a stop. It's just one play at a time.

Q. Desmond, I just wanted to ask you, you shot 15 free throws tonight. It seems like you really have a knack for kind of that Jalen Brunson-esque drawing the fouls. Where does that come from? How do you have such a good feel for the game and drawing those fouls?

DESMOND CLAUDE: I think one thing when I first got here was to be a better point guard. So I think just me making the pass, especially in the first half, Shaun was hitting shots, Bu was always hitting shots. So I think that just opened up the lane. Once I got down there, we knew they were anxious leapers. Pump fake, come to two-foot stops, pivot, and I just got them in the air and went to their body and tried to score off of that.

Q. Once you guys have been through so many frustrating stretches of this season, what did it say just about this team's mental toughness that you guys were able to gut it out through so many ups and downs



of this game?

RASHAUN AGEE: I would say just playing together, understanding each other and believing in each other and believing in the coaching staff and what they instilled in us throughout the year and throughout the summer. Just hoping each individual does their job and does it the right way. And just stay together.

DESMOND CLAUDE: I think Shaun hit it best, just -- another thing too is just watching a lot of film as a team. We had to figure out why we was losing and how we could do better. One thing we came down to is everybody could play harder, get 50-50 balls, and I felt like we did a pretty good job today.

We wanted this game. The tournament, we thought we came in 0-0. We wanted to keep winning. So we was playing hard, and the game went our way.

Q. Of course for both of you guys, you played Rutgers earlier the season and lost at Jersey Mike's Arena. What was different this time? How was the game play differently when you're facing Dylan Harper, Ace Bailey? What worked differently today for you guys?

RASHAUN AGEE: Something we harped on for our game plan was being at the bottom of the I, top of the I, and helping each other. It's not just one person guarding them, it's the five players on the floor. We all have to help each other and we all have to communicate. Our communication was better. I felt like the bottom of our I at times was better, and I felt like we were a better defensive team today.

DESMOND CLAUDE: I would say the same thing as Shaun, having each other's backs, being over in help defense. When Harper and Bailey had the ball, just try to make it seem crowded like they couldn't really go nowhere. They had to work through their other guys.

Yeah, so I would say the biggest adjustment was just having each other's backs on defense and helping the helper.

Q. Your team looked a little bit agitated maybe a little bit with the Rutgers press that got them back in the game. I thought I saw a couple things that Rutgers did on the press they hadn't done before. Did you see that, and how did you guys really come -- go past that press and get back in the game?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: For sure, it's not often that you have 21 turnovers and win a basketball game. Not only did we have 21 turnovers and win a basketball game, they took 17

more field goals attempted than us and we led for 35 minutes.

You look at the stat sheet, and some wacky things, but I thought we were really efficient on offense when we didn't turn the ball over. We've been pretty good handling presses at times and other times struggled, but we won the game.

Q. My question is about I think this is your fifth trip east, the eastern or central time zone, which would put you at eight games out here.

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I'm probably not the guy to ask. Mick, Coach Cronin does a much better job of expressing himself about that than I do.

Q. I've noticed. I wanted to ask you, though, how do you prepare your players, yourself, sleep patterns or just avoiding jet lag and getting ready to come east and try to put your team together to compete day in and day out?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Well, my wife summed it up best this morning that she's never seen me so sick throughout the course of a college basketball season. That's a fact. I did not sleep one second last night, and it wasn't because of nerves for the game, I can promise you that.

You take a nap at weird hours, and I wasn't the only one. I texted our staff at 3:30 in the morning, and four guys responded. Normally they respond the next day at 9:00 or 10:00 in the morning. It's challenging.

I'm going to go back to our trip, Maryland, Rutgers, Ohio State is sitting in L.A. We play a late game on a Sunday in Rutgers. We fly home. We get back at 5:30 in the morning on a Monday. The guys have class at 9:00 a.m. on Monday, after we just landed at 5:00. Then we practice Tuesday, and we play Ohio State. We're down 17. Finally we get our legs under us, catch up, lose that game.

Then we get on a plane to play Oregon. That's an NBA schedule. It's like playing the Wizards, the Brooklyn Nets, home for one game in L.A., and then go play the blazers. That's what it's like. I'm not so sure our guys are used to that type of travel, but we need to be because that's how it is.

I've said to other people what USC women's basketball has done and what UCLA's basketball have done, the women's team, is you've got to have great talent. Then maybe you can survive it.

I mean, I've coached in the NBA. That trip is as hard as

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

any NBA trip I ever went on, I guarantee it, and it wasn't just the two road games. It's coming home, that game's harder than the two road games. Then you go back to Oregon. That's not a 30-minute flight.

In the off-season I thought we did a good job. I went and met with the L.A. Rams, asked what they did, got some different thoughts from some NBA trainers that I respected that have been with organizations for a long time. Sometimes it is what it is. You can get as many opinions as you want. It's had an effect.

I've said it publicly and I'll continue to say it. UCLA, USC, Oregon, and Washington are going to have to be three to four games better than everybody else flat out. You can argue about it or whatever, that's a fact.

Q. Kind of on that note, nothing has really come easy for you guys this entire season. How much do you see just that experience having gone through a lot of setbacks, overcome them, how much do you see that experience kind of come out tonight in a game where you go to two overtimes?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: When you have peaks and valleys in a season, it's not just USC, like Rutgers deserves a ton of credit too. Both teams really fought to get a win, and I thought both teams played desperate to get a win.

I'm proud that we can -- I know they made a run, but it's hard to have a lead for 36 minutes in a college game. So I give our guys a lot of credit. Just a lot of little things, winning three jump balls, super important. Those are extra possessions. Playing against two lottery picks, and defensive coverages, I thought we did a great job.

We had some time to prepare too. I thought preparation was really good with these guys, and we had four pick-and-roll coverages going into tonight, and we only used one, which rarely happens with us.

Q. So you guys led for 35 minutes today, but it felt like no matter what the lead or whatever, they were able to just stay in the game. What was it in that second period of overtime that kind of put you over the edge and finally got to put them away?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Sometimes it's like a boxing match, you know what I mean? Somebody has to persevere. Sometimes legs go out on guys. I thought that we looked, even though our guys played a lot of minutes, but they do that all the time. I've said it before, like Tom Thibodeau is one of my best friends, and we're going to play our guys that we think can help us win on that given night as many minutes as it takes.

So I do think our guys are used to that many minutes. I can't speak for Rutgers, but I do know our guys have played heavy minutes, and I didn't think that we had any dip in our energy. I actually thought it kind of rose at one point in the second overtime.

Q. Especially with the schedule that you guys have going East Coast, West Coast almost every week, what did you tell your guys to keep up with the responsibilities of being a student-athlete, with training, with playing every game? Especially with this game, all your starters played 40 minutes. How do you keep them in that mindset for every game?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Look, we feel playing in the Big Ten is a privilege. It's an incredible league to be a part of. You're going against brand names every night. It's just an adjustment for us.

Any guys that return for us, they'll now know what this is like. So you have to make adjustments. The world's changing every day. It's not just the Big Ten. It's the whole landscape's changed. So you have to make adjustments.

We're not going to make excuses. Like I said, we've got to do what USC women have done and get a player like JuJu that can help us win some road -- that's what we've got to do moving forward.

The maturity, like our GPA the first semester, obviously it was before total Big Ten play, but we had one of the best GPAs we've had. I don't know what it will be like second semester, but we had a guy take a test today on game day.

Our guys take great pride in getting their academics right at a great academic institution like USC. A lot of guys came to USC not just to play basketball, but because of the academic standards as well.

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