

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 12, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

Rutgers Scarlet Knights

Steve Pikiell

Tyson Acuff

Jeremiah Williams

Postgame Press Conference



guys had that big surge in the second half to come back and take the lead, and then USC did just enough to kind of get back into it and force the overtime. What do you think kind of happened after you guys went all the way back to take the lead? Did you end up letting off the gas a little bit, or do you think USC figured something out and was able to attack certain advantages?

USC - 97, Rutgers - 89

STEVE PIKIELL: Thank you all for staying this late. Incredible game really tonight. So disappointed for our guys. They played hard, and USC was very good, but I thought we were very good to come back, and the guys played their hearts out.

It was a sad locker room, but proud of these guys, proud of the work that they did. I enjoyed coaching them too. Just a tough, tough, unfortunate ending.

Q. Tyson, obviously it's your last game. Jeremiah, I'm not sure of your eligibility completely. But what's the feelings right now going out like that?

TYSON ACUFF: Heartbreak. I think that right now I'm just trying to be there for the guys, make sure everybody keeps their head up. All the guys in that locker room have bright futures, so just being there for them.

JEREMIAH WILLIAMS: Yeah, Tyson said everything, just devastating. I think the guys in the locker room and even the coaches, we worked so hard all year, and even this game was a reflection of we worked so hard. Sometimes you just come up short, and it's just devastating.

Q. Tyson, you obviously just spent one year here. Looking back, how will you remember this season and the decision you made to come to Rutgers?

TYSON ACUFF: I'd make it a hundred more times. I love Steve Pikiell. I love the guys. The connections I've built here, I would choose Rutgers again and again and again.

Q. This is for either one of you guys. Obviously you

JEREMIAH WILLIAMS: Like you said, I think credit to USC, I think they did just enough to surge back into the game and force overtime. Anything can happen in overtime at that point. It's kind of like another game in a sense. Regulation doesn't matter at that point, and you jump into a new segment of the game.

Like you said, they did just enough to make it a new game, and they executed in the extra minutes we had.

TYSON ACUFF: I think they schemed, we schemed. They changed their game plan, we changed our game plan. We were fighting for 65 minutes. I don't know if any of you have ever been in a fight, but it's hard to keep fighting for 65 minutes, and we gave it everything we've got.

Q. A lot of new faces on the team this year. For both of you guys, was it kind of hard to gel with the team at times, offensively and defensively, and just kind of be on the same page in certain games?

TYSON ACUFF: It's always hard just meeting new people and figuring them out and do stuff like that. I think we got along really well. We bonded really well on and off the court. We did a lot of things together to build that bond and that chemistry. These guys are my brothers. This is my family. Rutgers is my family.

JEREMIAH WILLIAMS: For any team, I've been in college for five years, for any team, especially nowadays with the portal and stuff like that, you'll have times where you may have miscommunications or it may be hard to gel at times. Sometimes we probably went through that this year. We had a younger team.

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To answer your question, yes, I think sometimes we did, but I think that's the nature of college basketball now, and I think every team in America has had that issue.

Q. You guys are obviously -- this isn't your first rodeo. You guys are experienced veterans. What was your guys' kind of message after the game to some of the younger players on your team like Dylan or Ace who maybe haven't been through a situation like this, especially after such a tough loss like that?

JEREMIAH WILLIAMS: Honestly, I don't think there's much to say. Coach Pike gave us a speech after. For all the players, it's very devastating, a lot of emotions. It's the end of the year, and we've been through a lot. I think there's a lot of emotions in everyone, and you just take it all in. We'll all communicate after the season and will regroup then but you kind of take in all the emotions and it really sucks at that point. No need for us to talk amongst each other.

TYSON ACUFF: Right now, like I said earlier, just trying to be there for the guys. Right now is not the time to give speeches. It's not the last time we're going to see each other. We'll talk amongst ourselves, like Jeremiah said, and sort it out then and talk to each other about different type of things.

Q. In the flow of the game now that it's gone double overtime and the game's over, do you think you should have put that press on different? I thought I'd seen some differences in your Rutgers press that I hadn't seen all year long against SC. Do you think you might have put your press on a little bit earlier?

STEVE PIKIELL: It's hard to do that too, but we got down early in the first half, and we pressed kind of a lot at the end of the season. We changed our rotation a little bit, and we pressed more and more. I thought it was effective at times, and then at other times they got some easy baskets too.

When a game goes that long and it's that grueling, it's really tough to do that. I thought at the end they kind of were throwing the ball all over the place and getting some easy looks. We had our opportunity certainly in this game. I would have liked to have Ace in the game for a little bit longer. I think that was huge. I think his third foul was just a tough one. Kind of needed him at the end too.

But put in a lot of work, this team, and they're great kids. They've worked all year. A lot of obstacles, as a lot of teams in this league have had. This is a great league. We fought, and we couldn't get big stops down the stretch too in games. I couldn't get this team to rebound or defend the

way I would have liked them to, but they showed some great signs. We scored 89 points in the basketball game, plenty of points to win.

I really love these guys. They were really good to coach. We obviously didn't win the amount of games that anyone would like, but these guys were a joy to coach. Our press helped us get back into the game today, but hard thing to do for 40, 50 minutes.

Q. Steve, what did you say to them in the locker room?

STEVE PIKIELL: Honestly, I told them I love them. If you saw the fight of that team today, we were down at halftime. This group just kept fighting, no matter what the obstacles were. We didn't have the kind of season, it was choppy. We hit a lot of obstacles. There's no excuses. I take full responsibility for our season.

This is a great group of guys. Tyson, I wish I had four years with him. These kids really grew in so many ways. Through all the obstacles and playing in this league is tough. It's a humbling league. Just after that game, what do you say to the group? You didn't play hard? We played as hard as you could possibly play. They left it all out on the court.

We needed a few bounces to go our way. We didn't get that. It's kind of been that way this season, but I'm proud of them. The year that Ace and Dylan had, the way this group newly assembled came together, the youth that we have, the oldest time in college basketball too and we have a young team. They fought. They fought the entire night. They're banged up right now. They've got ice bags everywhere.

I told them I love them, I'm proud of them. They should be proud of how hard that they worked. We put in a ton of work, and they did with film and all that. I wish you guys could just see us practice. You would really understand it. That's not part of it. You come to games, and you just see the results, but the work that these guys truly put in to try to be great was a lot. I'm proud of them for that.

So I told them that after the game.

Q. Talk about Ace Bailey, his freshman year, and Harper. Coming in they were five stars, and they seemed to play good team basketball most of the year. I know that's hard coming off the AAU circuit. Talk about how they acclimated into your system.

STEVE PIKIELL: The year they had, they broke every freshman scoring record in the history of Rutgers



basketball, which is unbelievable, especially in this league and as competitive as this league is.

What they did -- and they didn't play every game. They were injured, and they missed games. If they played every single game, those records would be untouchable, and they both did it together. They've been great kids to coach, great families. They work. The hours that those two put into it.

I only wish I had another year or two with them. Fortunately, their best basketball is head of them too. They grew a lot this year. They grew a lot from film. They saw every kind of defense that you could imagine. They're getting guarded by 25-year-olds -- they're 18 years old -- 25-year-olds, 26-year-olds. The two were fantastic, and they're going to be fantastic pros. They really are.

Q. Can you speak more on kind of the other younger guys like Dylan Grant, Bryce Dortch, Sommerville, broke through this season. How they're going to improve next season and help the team out in the future?

STEVE PIKIELL: The development of those two guys, I mean, Lathan lost 50 pounds from June to get into the kind of conditioning and shape that he got into, just continued to get better.

Dylan Grant didn't play much early on, and he kind of figured it out late and then turned into a really good basketball player for us.

Bryce Dortch is going to be another really good player for us. I thought those guys improved, as did Tyson Acuff had foot surgery in June, did not practice until end of October. Had a serious foot injury, and you could see him get better and better. I only wish he wasn't injured early.

The improvements of those guys and playing in this league and playing against the guys that they went up to, if they continue to work, they're going to be really, really good basketball players. They're workers and surrounded by great people. Development's been a part of what we do here. Hopefully we can keep those guys around and keep them developing.

Q. You have two guys that are going to be picked in the top five in the NBA Draft in a few months and you finished below .500. How do you explain falling so short of expectations, going into the season and falling short?

STEVE PIKIELL: These guys worked their tails off. You're up against really good players every team we play against.

Today they were 23-year-olds, really good players. It's a really good league. The ball didn't bounce the way we needed it to.

I understand your expectations. I think the league picked us ninth, but I understand the expectations that, A, that I set for this program, which are to win every game. Those guys did everything that they could. The ball didn't bounce our way sometimes, and sometimes it was a disjointed year with injuries and guys. I think Dylan missed most of the month of January, which didn't help us, and there were some close games there that we could have won.

I'm proud of this team. I take full responsibility for our win-loss record, but I'm really proud of how those guys performed and got better. They're going to do a lot of really good things in basketball. I'm real proud of their development.

Q. Where do you go from here with this program now? You tried to experiment with Ace and Dylan. Where does this go next?

STEVE PIKIELL: I think our recruiting class is 28th in the country next year, so Ace and Dylan helped us a lot in that area. I think with the settlement, I'm really excited. That's going to help us a great deal, and we're going to keep working like we always do.

I think other coaches in the league will tell you Rutgers is pretty good and they don't want to play us every day. You pretty much can talk to coaches. We're going to be good, like we always are. I've got to try to keep my staff because every year they want to steal them from me.

Hopefully we'll do a great job with our players, and we've got to jump in the portal too.

I'm excited. 78 straight sell-outs, and I get the disappointment. I have to live with it. But a lot of good things are happening at Rutgers. I think a lot of people would want 78 straight sell-outs and they'd want to have the top 30 ranked recruiting class in the country coming in.

If we can retain our guys from this year, we'll keep plugging. You know I'm a worker, and we'll get them to play defense, and we'll rebound better. Yeah, we'll do -- Rutgers is going to be fine in the best league in the country.

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