

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 13, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

Wisconsin Badgers

Greg Gard

Nolan Winter

John Tonje

Postgame Press Conference

Wisconsin - 70, Northwestern - 63

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Wisconsin coach and the student-athletes. Coach, we'll ask you to make an opening statement.

GREG GARD: Obviously it was the grinder we felt it was going to be. Chris has done a really good job with that group with all their injuries and getting them to play extremely hard and be good defensively.

I thought we were really good defensively too, that we did a pretty good job on Martinelli, really good job on Berry, and then we were able to offensively get going at the end of the first half. And into the second half and be able to grind it out and move on to tomorrow.

Q. Nolan, today you drew seven fouls. Obviously had a good game statistically. When you're drawing that many fouls, what does that say to you about your game? And part 2 of the question is what kind of stands out to you about your day overall?

NOLAN WINTER: For me personally, I'm just not trying to be a one-trick pony. I'm trying to add a little more to my game, putting it on the floor, being able to score in the post, inside and outside. It was good for me today to have the confidence that I could get it on the floor and get around some defenders, as well as go outside and knock down a 3.

Just these coaches kind of giving me the confidence to showcase my game like that, it's huge for me. Going forward, I'm really excited for my future.

Q. Defensively, it seemed like you guys are really



stepping up that first few minutes of the second half. They only had eight points in the first 8 1/2 minutes. Coming off the loss against Penn State when Penn State played well in that second half, what did you see from yourselves defensively that really got you guys going to get to that double-digit lead?

JOHN TONJE: We were just real with ourselves. We came in the locker room, and we kind of knew what it was. There was a little bit of a trend, like you said, against Penn State. We just really wanted to make sure that we locked in and talked over a couple of coverages and what we wanted to do second half. I'm really proud of the guys for executing second half.

Q. John, you're a scorer, you look around on the team, and you see these guys that can also be scorers. What a relief is that to you that you know you don't have to go up and light up 30 each game, that all the players around you can do the same?

JOHN TONJE: Yeah, it's great having talented guys around you. They can't key in on one guy. I think we're a team that's willing to share it and really get anyone involved. It could be anyone's night.

Yeah, it's great to have guys like Nolan Winter on my side, Blackwell, Max Klesmit. You really don't know who's going to get hot that night, so it's awesome.

Q. John, you had that stretch final few minutes of the first half where you finally were able to get some points on the board. I guess I'm just wondering how much did maybe the end of the first half kind of help get you going for the second?

JOHN TONJE: Yeah, we were trying to get looks and trying to be aggressive, get downhill and just keep understanding the flow of the game and figuring out how to score and be effective. Yeah, that was pretty good to get going a little bit in the first half.

Q. Kind of going off of Mark's question earlier, Nolan drew a good amount of fouls, 18 points on five shot attempts. What stood out about his shot choice



efficiency and really overall impact today?

GREG GARD: I thought he was -- first half I thought he was active on the glass, kept a couple possessions alive, got him going a little bit, got fouled on a rebound.

Going to the free-throw line, to be able to get there 10 times, and he's got a really unique skill set at 7 feet and the way he shoots it, and now he's getting stronger and more confident to be able to put the ball on the floor. He has a lot of versatility to his game.

Just seeing his -- you could just tell his confidence was growing and growing as possessions were going on. Quite frankly, I know he has 18, but I was as impressed at the job he did defensively on Martinelli, which is really, I'd say the league's leading scorer. I thought he moved his feet really well. I thought he contested when he needed to and really helped set our tone defensively with the job he did on Martinelli.

Q. Max, he comes back today, it seems like early on offensively you weren't as aggressive, settling for a couple of 3s. Max comes in and has the drive, the kick to Blackwell. Second half, the step-back, and another one setting up Kamari. What does that bring to this team, especially offensively, when Max is being aggressive hunting for his own shot and really driving down the lanes?

GREG GARD: Well, he's started for three years for us, so there's a lot of experience there. He's extremely competitive. He's got toughness and an edge to him that he plays with. When he was out, we missed him. There's no doubt he's an important piece, as this whole group comes together. It would be the same for anybody else. We're best when we're whole.

I thought early we didn't handle our physicality well. I thought they were really pushing us into screens, and we didn't counter it well enough. Once we got that figured out and were able to get downhill and get at the rim, things started to become a little better for us offensively.

Q. Arguably, you're one of the top teams in the country, and you're playing on Thursday in this Big Ten. What does that say about these teams and the play of basketball happening in the Big Ten?

GREG GARD: Well, it's deep. It's deep. It's a really competitive league. I've been in it a long time and just watched it get deeper.

I've been -- I think it was 11 when I first came to Wisconsin in 2001, and now we've almost doubled in size. So I've

seen a lot of changes within the league, but the competitiveness -- our regular season championship means so much. I don't think that's the same in other leagues, and it's always been like that.

So when you have that mentality across the board, there's no off nights. Here we are with Northwestern seeded 13th or whatever, and we're in a dogfight, which we knew. We lose to the 16th seeded team in Penn State and doesn't make the tournament. It's a really competitive league, and you have to be sharp. Hopefully it prepares you for what you can do here in March.

Q. I thought you got contributions from everybody tonight. Talk a little bit about -- I thought McGee gave you some good energy, and I thought Blackwell played more under control than I've seen him lately. Talk a little about that.

GREG GARD: I think, going back to Nick's question with Klesmit being back whole, how we missed him for three games. Winter sat out most of the whole second half the last game. So to get all of our guys back and clicking -- and McGee plays such an important piece off the bench. He really has embraced that role. He really has thrived in that role.

What that gets disjointed, we don't have the same impact coming off the bench. As much as Janicki's gotten better, and I think Janicki has benefited from Klesmit being out because he got more minutes and more reps and more meaningful time.

But, yeah, that's been the strength of this team that we've done it in numbers. We've done it from different places on different nights, and I think the other thing having Klesmit back and having McGee off the bench, it allows Blackwell to settle in a little bit more and not have as much on his plate, and I can rest him more. I don't have to play him 38 minutes a game. I can use the bench more and spread those minutes out.

Q. You've known Chris Collins a long time. In the last few years, has your view of him, of sort of where Northwestern fits in the context overall of the Big Ten and all that, what it can be, has it evolved? Just a couple tournaments, but also even this year just being as hard to play as they were with what they had?

GREG GARD: They're always hard to play. He does a really good job with them defensively. I think Chris Lowery obviously deserves a lot of credit. I know he's helped them become better defensively.

Obviously he understands what it takes to be successful at



Northwestern. I think it's all unique to each school. I think we've been really able to find the recipe at Wisconsin over the last 20, 25 years and understand what works at Wisconsin and what doesn't. Chris understands what works at Northwestern and the success, the sustained success that he's been able to have there obviously is a credit to him.

Q. Coach, you commented "We play our best at home." In looking at numbers here today, Northwestern hit a fourth of their 3s. You guys hit a third of your 3s. This arena, does it have any bearing on something like that?

GREG GARD: In a good way or a bad way? No, we played here in December. We played in the Indianapolis -- whatever it was called. We played Butler. It was a double header, Purdue and Texas A&M, and us and Butler. We scheduled that intentionally knowing we were coming back here for the Big Ten tournament.

I think it was beneficial for us to get in this arena. I don't know what we shot that day against Butler, but we shot well enough to win, I know that. I think any time you can get these experiences in the regular season in a venue that you may play in or are going to play in down the road. It doesn't always work in every year's scheduling plan, but we play and shoot in a big arena too. Our Kohl Center is pretty big, and we play in a lot of big arenas.

I don't think it has anything to do with the sight lines or the baskets. I think it has more to do with the guys in purple jerseys that defend us and contest and make things -- you have to work to get your points.

Q. 17 second-chance points, 17 points off turnovers. Just can you speak to the value of when you get those turnovers, those second-chance opportunities of being able to really cash in on those?

GREG GARD: I felt that was one of our keys, specifically the offensive glass, if we could get some extra possessions there. Knowing that we were going to be in a lower possession game, and we had 63 possessions for the game. That's on the low end of where we've been.

But given how Northwestern was going to play and has been playing, if we could pick up some extra possessions off the glass, if we could obviously turning them over is part of it. We're not a defense that's built to turn teams over. We play more on percentages and taking away high-percentage shots, but I felt the offensive glass was important, and we were able to get to the free-throw line quite a bit.

That maybe made up for what you mentioned in terms of 3-point shooting because there's been nights where we've lit the nets on fire from 3. But good teams find ways to win when maybe the 3 doesn't go down, and you can get to the line, you can get second-chance points off the glass and convert some turnovers in too.

Q. Max plays 23 minutes today, obviously a pretty big impact. Was that kind of around the range where you were expecting him today? Was it more matchup dependent, or was it just kind of how the game went?

GREG GARD: Kind of how the game went. I decided once we got to that five-minute mark, four minute, whenever I pulled him out, we made a couple snafus that allowed it to get from 18 to 12 or wherever it got, but it was basically play him long enough to make sure we win the game. So that's where it fell.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports