

# Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 11, 2026

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

## Rutgers Scarlet Knights

## Steve Pikiell

## Tariq Francis

## Darren Buchanan Jr.

### Postgame Press Conference

Rutgers 72, Minnesota 67

STEVE PIKIELL: We thank Rutgers nation for coming out, staying up late here.

Just proud of my team. These two guys were awesome, seven assists, zero turnovers for June, and Tariq I think broke our school record for points in the tournament.

We played them not too long ago, and it wasn't pretty. My staff did an excellent job of preparing. I like playing teams a second time. We made a lot of adjustments.

But we've been getting better, so proud of our guys. 40 gets you 40, and obviously quick turnaround time and got to play a team that took it to us, too, in UCLA. Got to get these guys some rest, but good day for Rutgers nation. Our band, cheerleaders are awesome. Kelly gets her first Big Ten win, and she's awesome.

Just really happy. But mostly proud of our guys. They fought through. They keep getting better, and they got a connectedness now, and our defense is getting better, and that's been a problem for us all year. And today we did a really good job against a good offensive basketball team. We hit more threes than they did, and last time they hit a lot of them.

It was a good day for us.

**Q. Francis, of course good game for you today. What was working so well against Minnesota's zone defense that you were able to score so much and so effectively?**

TARIQ FRANCIS: Just staying with the game plan. In



practice we worked on the zone. We knew they were going to play zone with their numbers.

Just running the plays correctly and trying to keep the attention to detail right.

**Q. What did you think of how Manny played today, scoring in the first half and three big blocks towards the end of the game?**

DARREN BUCHANAN JR: He's been putting in a lot of work, and we told him today going into the game that a lot was on him, with him dominating inside and he did that from the opening tip.

I'm just so proud of E. That's a testament to who he is and he put in a lot of work. I'm just glad we could playing for him. We've got an opportunity to play again tomorrow.

Big game for E, and I just know he's going to build off it in this tournament. So I'm excited to see how we're going to compete tomorrow.

**Q. I wanted to ask about your bench play, 21 points off the bench. That seemed to be a separator against Minnesota, which didn't score hardly at all off the bench. How instrumental were they tonight and how good were they all year to give you breaks?**

TARIQ FRANCIS: I think they played great. They gave us great energy. They gave us great energy, Harun, J-Mych, KP, everybody that came in gave us great energy, and we knew they had less players and they played less players than us. So just being able to throw in different guys and heat them up a little bit, and they all have great shot-making ability. Being able to stay connected and playing together was important for us.

**Q. Darren, you were playing with three fouls for most of the game. How were you able to stay so strong on defense even with those fouls already?**

DARREN BUCHANAN JR: The coaching staff just told me stay ready and just stay with it. I normally am not in that



situation. I try not to foul. But I picked up three early in the first half. Everybody just believed in me to just stay aggressive and stay who I am. Big kudos to them because I was in my head about it a lot, and I wanted to be out there and compete with the team.

So just being able to go out there and play with three fouls and not pick up a fourth was huge for me and the team. I'm just glad I was able to go out there and do that and we came back with a win, so that was the biggest thing.

**Q. For both of you guys, it was a very close game, back and forth the whole time, but you were able to get the win in the end. Talk about the toughness of the team to get the win and get over the line.**

TARIQ FRANCIS: I would just say probably just the coaching staff. I feel like the coaching staff helped us really understand time and the possession of the game. So really just staying focused and knowing that the game was coming to an end. We were up towards the end, so we didn't need any more points. We just needed to get stops, and they emphasized just really stopping them and focusing in in those last minutes.

**Q. You guys had a run in the second half where both teams were going back and forth, making threes. After that point completely shut them down. I don't think they hit another three until the game was a little bit out of reach for them. How did you accomplish that?**

DARREN BUCHANAN JR: We just knew guarding the three-point line would win us the game. They've got great shooters in Cade Tyson and Bobby Durkin. We just knew if we run them off the line and force them into shots they normally don't take, and just rebound the ball, we'd come out with a win.

When they was on that run, we just told each other we can't let them live at the three-point line, and I think we did a good job of forcing them into bad shots and rebounding and getting down on offense and running our sets.

I think it was just us trusting our game plan. In the beginning we let them get some easy looks and we just doubled down on what we do, and it got us a win.

**Q. Steve, you guys separated at the end. Did you think given you guys had more depth and were fresher, you were able to pressure them and outlast them at the end --**

STEVE PIKIELL: They don't turn the ball over and they had 15 turnovers, so huge help for us. The last time they really took it to us, so I thought our guys were locked in.

Reynolds had a great game and he was a major concern for us because he got to the rim.

But Harun helped us a great deal. E had an outstanding game, three blocked shots, seven rebounds, 10 points. We needed everybody.

But they were connected. They've been connected in practice, and we had two days to prepare, and this team plays very different, Minnesota, than any team in the league. They have elite shooters. They don't turn the ball over, and I thought our defense -- it's taken a long time, but we're starting to figure it out. We've always scored enough points for the most part this year. It's really been that end of the floor. To hold them under their averages was a good sign for us.

And 40 gets you 40, so we're excited about playing tomorrow against a great UCLA team.

**Q. You had such a tough stretch in late January and early February, losing seven straight but then you've come back and won five out of your last eight. How have you been able to help get the team into that position to where they're winning games, and then conversely just not deciding to hang up the season at that point?**

STEVE PIKIELL: I'll tell you, it's a credit to the guys. They just kept believing. Our staff, too, preparation. We've done a really good job, and I really like playing teams twice. We don't get to do that much anymore in league play because the adjustments you can make in Game 2, very different. We played them very different than a month ago and we changed a lot of things. We put some new tricks in. I thought it really helped us today.

But it's hard in this day and age, a lot of things distracting kids, focus, and these guys have just kept getting better. Our freshman class has gotten better. I'm proud of them. J-Mych today, six assists and really gave us some timely baskets. Juney played through foul trouble. Harun didn't have a great first half but he really helped us in the second half.

Just keep plugging, that's what we did. This league humbles you. It's a really good league. Good teams, really good teams have losing streaks. You'd better be able to manage the obstacles that this league brings. It's the best league in the country, or arguably one or two, or whatever people want to debate.

But I will tell you the coaching in this league is outstanding, the players are outstanding. You can go through times like that, and it's a credit to our guys. They just kept getting off



the mat, and we got better.

Yeah, just pleased we're playing another day.

**Q. Obviously a huge game for Tariq. Speak about how important that was for Minnesota's own defense giving you trouble in the first half especially?**

STEVE PIKIELL: We made more threes than they did, so Tariq a big part of that. He's a really good, unique offensive player. He really is. We had good command of our zone attack today, and we rebounded. We out-rebounded the team. We haven't done that in a while. All those things are important. When we did miss we got some second opportunities and getting 15 turnovers helps us with possessions, too.

But Tariq, obviously really important guy I feel real comfortable with. I'm glad he has another year.

**Q. How long does the feeling of this win last before we're moving on to UCLA?**

STEVE PIKIELL: Yeah, it's over. We're on to UCLA.

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