

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 12, 2026

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

Purdue Boilermakers

Matt Painter

Oscar Cluff

Braden Smith

Postgame Press Conference

Purdue - 81, Northwestern - 68

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Purdue head coach Matt Painter along with student-athletes Braden Smith and Oscar Cluff.

MATT PAINTER: I thought we were really good in the first half. I thought our execution offensively was great. Really wanted to attack on the interior. We knew they were down a man on their front line. I thought our guys did a good job there. I thought they did a good job of just understanding personnel and defending.

Martinelli is a very, very tough cover. Knew if he could get to his spots, which you saw in the second half, that it would be difficult for us, like it's difficult for everybody else. They got away from us a little bit there in the second half obviously. They scored 47 points in the second half.

I thought our defense was great in the first half. I thought our pace, just playing that game and only turning the ball over seven times and out rebounding them by 12, just to win in that possession war ends up being kind of tougher for them to get back in the game even though they played really hard and did some good things in the second half.

I thought Braden was great, 16 assists, one turnover. He was really good. I thought our two guys on the front line, Fletcher gave us 15 points, but Oscar and Trey did a really good job on the interior of establishing themselves.

Q. Braden, I wanted to ask you about that play in the first half where you got the steal, and when you're going out of bounds, you tapped it forward and ended up getting you another assist. Just your mindset at that point. Anybody could have let that ball go out of



bounds, yet you're fighting for it. Kind of take me through your thought process on that play and maybe how that may have sparked you guys tonight.

BRADEN SMITH: Yeah, when I do those things, it's not really -- it's split second to make that decision. I don't know, I think it's just more habit than anything. I try to get the steal, and then I just try to keep it alive. If you hit it in the backcourt, I think there's six to eight seconds left on the shot clock.

So, okay, if I can hit it on the backcourt, maybe take off four, they got to dribble up, that's at least two, got to contest a shot from deep. I didn't see Omer or Gicarri who were chasing it down. I just tried to hit it to try to get us more time to roll down the shot clock, and that's what happened.

Q. Braden, that's the most point Oscar's had in a game since Jan 17. There's too many matchups where he's too big and too good on the inside. Is this something where you talk about before a game like this that Oscar really needs to establish himself so we can play through even more?

BRADEN SMITH: Not necessarily. For us, it's every single game. We want him to have those games no matter who it is. Whether it's Mara from Michigan guarding him, whether it's Northwestern's bigs, whoever it is that's who we want. We trust him to go down and make plays and score the basketball, and he showed that. He continues to do that. We just trust our guys.

They put a lot of time in and work in. For us, it's just feed them the ball when they're open and go make a one-on-one play.

Q. You passed Chris Corchiani and Ed Cota tonight, and now you're just behind Bobby Hurley. When I say those names, to be mentioned in the same breath as those guys, what's that mean to you? What's the significance of that?

BRADEN SMITH: If you want me to be honest, I don't



know who either of those guys are, and that's no disrespect. I really don't. I know Bobby Hurley.

MATT PAINTER: I know him.

BRADEN SMITH: I don't know those two guys. Obviously I've been very thankful to be around a lot of great guys who can score and put the ball in the basket. They trust me. Paint trusts me. The coaching staff trusts me to go out there and make plays. When you give me confidence, it's kind of what you want as a player. You let me go out there, play free, and I'll probably throw one in the fourth row every once in a while too, but at the end of the day, they trust me with that and trust me with my decisions. Just to be able to do that, it's a great opportunity.

Q. Braden, you and Martinelli are the same recruiting class, like one of 20 high major seniors that have stayed in one place for all four years. What memories do you have of competing against him, and what was it like to go up against him the last four years?

BRADEN SMITH: He's a great dude. Actually this past summer, I came up to Chicago because my agency is up here, but I went to Northwestern and played pickup with Lance, that's where he's from. So Lance was there, Nick was there. We kind of grew a relationship and friendship from there.

He's just a good dude. Obviously he can score the crap out of the ball. Just playing against him these four years have been -- I mean, all the games we've played have been close, neck and neck, and really fun games to be a part of.

Obviously he had a great career, and he's also a great dude. I've got a lot of respect towards him and what he's doing.

Q. Oscar, you came out to a really hot start, especially on the boards. How important was it for you guys to come out and set the tone physically early?

OSCAR CLUFF: It's something that's an emphasis coming out and showing -- like being dominant on the glass, being dominant in the interior. So that's something we're going to do every game.

Q. Braden, obviously the short roll to Trey has been a huge part of your guys' offense the entire time you've been playing together. It seemed like it was really effective today. Any particular reason it was working so well in this game and it was such a big part of the offense?

BRADEN SMITH: Yeah, it's just how teams guard. Obviously different teams play different defenses, just how they guard. If they're playing kind of in between me and him on a ball screen, it's me dragging it and shooting the ball or me hitting Trey on a pocket pass or him swinging it and shooting it to the corner, whatever it is, it's just reads. We went into the game knowing that's how they're going to play, and that's how they're going to guard the ball screen with me and him.

Obviously Trey is a really good basketball player who can make those plays, and we trust each other.

Q. Braden, the last game you played against Northwestern, you struggled for much of the game before putting it together at the end. Did you like getting another crack at them? What did you feel was different tonight throughout the game compared to the last game you guys played against them?

BRADEN SMITH: Obviously as a competitor, I take it to heart every game I don't play well. Other than the assist, I don't think I played great today. I didn't shoot it well. I thought I had some defensive parts here and there that I thought I did good at.

Overall for us and for me, it was good to get them again and to play them. I thought defensively we were a lot better. Obviously we kind of let up in that second half there, but if we can do what we did in the first half in the second and make it a complete 40-minute game defensively, I think it's going to be real difficult for teams to beat us.

Q. Braden says he doesn't really know the names of Ed Cota and Chris Corchiani, but I know you do, and I know you know the name Bobby Hurley. What does it mean for you to see a guard, a Purdue guard that you're coaching go through -- you know, go up the ranks of that list in terms of assists? What does it mean to you to see that?

MATT PAINTER: Obviously you have to log a lot of minutes, and you've got to do it from day one. So you think those three guys are right in that triangle in Raleigh, Durham, one being NC State, one being Duke, and one being North Carolina.

Bobby Hurley and I are in the same grade, which I knew and he probably doesn't because he was a good player and I wasn't, and Corchiani's a little bit older than I am. I think Ed Cota is four or five years younger than I am. Ed Cota went to St. Thomas More. Corchiani went to Miami Senior. And obviously Bobby played for his dad at Saint Anthony's. Just to be with those names with those guys, it

was big time.

If you're in high school and watching stuff and you're seeing the guys on ESPN and CBS and you're watching, those were the type of games you were watching. Then you get to college, and you're watching some of the same guys. Corchiani was fabulous with Rodney Monroe, Fire and Ice, and Bobby had all those guys to pass to with the guys he played with, with Christian and Grant, and just a lot of really, really good players. Ed Cota obviously played with a lot of really good players.

That's something we've kept in perspective for Braden. You've got to have guys that can make baskets too, right? You can't get that award without good players with you, and I think that's what's so humbling about him. He'd rather pass. He'd rather set up people. For us he needs to do both.

No, it's an unbelievable honor. It's an unbelievable feat to be where he is, to have the second most assists in the history of the NCAA. He had one high major offer. He's meant a lot to our program.

Q. Coach, Oscar's been getting a little bit longer run out of those first four minutes into the second media timeout. What do you like about bringing him back on the floor instead of making that substitution you had to make in earlier in the year?

MATT PAINTER: I made it earlier in the year a little bit quicker just from a fatigue standpoint. You gauge people that you haven't coached before, and that's kind of where we're getting with TK and a couple of those. He does some good things, and you're like, man, why are you taking him out right there?

But then you've got to make it a shorter runway for the next guy, and that's not fair because sometimes they do some good things. Oh, man, that guy just hit a shot. Why are you taking him out? It's because you're putting TK back in.

It's something we've done with Oscar and just tried to gauge him as much as we could in terms of fatigue and where he's at. I think you saw a couple plays there -- he had a great game, but he made a couple plays. Shot an air ball from three feet. That's hard to do. I think that's a pretty good sign you're fatigued at that point. You're not always going to get the glaring reminders like that that someone's tired, but you've got to be able to coach the game.

I'm always talking to people around me, you've got to look in their eyes. You've got to make sure with guys with size. You've got guys with size that come in and score three

times in a row, and they'll be whatever, but then you stay with them because they did that, and then all of a sudden, they make two defensive mistakes, mess up on offense, and you go back in the next game and do it again.

But you don't like taking somebody out who scores three times in a row. You're like, hey, let's keep going to them. But if that's their wall and that's their threshold when it comes to fatigue, you've got to get them out before it happens. It doesn't look right, but after 30-some-odd games, it is right. You've got to do what's best.

But we also have to do well when we sub, and sometimes we've had inconsistencies there.

Q. You talked a little bit on Saturday about what you have to do in the postseason to have success and the possibility of kind of, for lack of a better term, flipping the switch from the postseason start. Did you see any heightened level of focus from your team the last couple of days in preparation for this game?

MATT PAINTER: I thought we were better on the defensive end in the first half. Obviously in the second half we weren't. I think that's an important piece for you. Like the more stops you can get, the more you can dominate the glass, the more you can get in transition. You've got to steal points.

Today we have 16 offensive rebounds, and that's going to help you. A lot of the times you get offensive rebounds, you're getting stick backs, you're getting spray out 3s, but you're also getting fouled a lot. So the more you can do that -- to Northwestern's defense, they didn't have Arrinten Page. So I think that plays an effect. We were just trying to wear those guys down. We really were just trying to wear Nick Martinelli down. We were trying to get fouls on him, get him out of the game.

Yeah, it's a hard question to answer because we played Wisconsin, now we're not playing Wisconsin. Like you're playing a different style, different team. So I think that's what comes out sometimes when you play different styles, different talent levels, guys that make it hard. Like Nick makes it really hard for everybody in our league, so that's the focus point, but at the end of the day, they make six 3s a game. They made six 3s now.

In that second half when they're making that run and making those 3s, it didn't seem like they're only going to make six. It seemed like they're going to make 16. So now do you want to make an adjustment and stop over, helping some on him and stay home. But for the most part, I thought our guys were ready. We've just got to play 40 minutes of consistent defense.

Q. You're kind of old hat at this now, but how do you balance the rigors of this tournament, playing on multiple days in a row while also kind of making sure your team is rested and ready to go for the NCAA Tournament, like balancing both challenges?

MATT PAINTER: Really hard to do because you're just trying to win the game in front of you. Then you could make some moves strategically in terms of minutes and substitution that could help you in the long run. Well, if you get beat, there's no long run, right?

So you always come in, and people always talk about, hey, this guy needs to rest more. This guy doesn't need to get to this minute threshold. No, you just try to win the game. If you have the ability to do that, you have a damn good team, like Michigan. Maybe Michigan can do that. Maybe Illinois can do that. If you can just feel that, hey, we can dominate this, we're going to be okay no matter what, like so be it.

But the rest of us, the other 99 percent, I think that's really hard. I think you've got to do everything in your power to try to win that game in front of you. But you also have to understand that you can have a lot of success -- Michigan had a lot of success in this tournament last year, and their seed did not move. They might have slid up a little bit, but they stayed where they stayed.

So like after you've done it for 21 years, you realize that. I didn't used to realize that. You're just like, hey, this is where you are. We're going to be a 3 seed or a 4 seed. We're right there on that. But sometimes you don't play heavy hitters. We're playing a team that's a 3 seed right now in our next game. So like that could have some effect there. Sometimes when you don't play people like yourself -- a 2 seed, a 3 seed, a 4 seed. Obviously we have a 1 seed still in the tournament. Illinois is a 2 seed. Michigan State is a 2 seed. I think Nebraska is a 3 seed, and we're a 4 seed, if we're all following the same thing.

So you're right in there. You've got a chance to play some people here if you can win your next game and really help yourself. I think probably more help yourself get prepared for the NCAA Tournament because this is the caliber of teams you're going to play.

Q. I've heard the grind of the Big Ten is unique even across the spectrum of college basketball. I've heard some coaches refer to it as expletive You, February, in some respects when you get close to the end. Just because of the teams you're playing, and in your case, you're right there. Is there any way that you can take those experiences and help propel you into that

tournament, or do you sometimes need to just kind of relax off of it because you're playing completely different teams and it's almost like you're unshackled because you're playing somebody who doesn't know you that well?

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, I think it just depends on like who you get. People will always ask you before like do you think this is a good draw? You don't know. Like you don't know until you play them.

But I do think -- I saw something the other day. I don't know if this is accurate. In our game tomorrow, we'll have the most Quad 1 opportunities. Not the most Quad 1 wins, but the most Quad 1 opportunities. I have come to that belief that you have to schedule as well as you can because those experiences, even in some failure -- we've had a lot of success. We've had more success this year on the road than at home, which makes no sense.

But we were 7-3, 8-3 on road games. Then I think we're undefeated neutral, if I got it right. So I think that helps you. I think that confidence helps you, of being away from home. We've had years where we're 10-0 at home and then we're 5-5 on the road or 6-4 on the road. I'm using the 20-game schedule. It's not always been that.

I think that's been the pieces, keep having experiences. Sometimes when people over schedule, they get mad about stuff, but I'd rather over schedule and be mad than under schedule and not make the tournament. Make sense? I just think that this will be -- if we can get a top 4 seed, this will be nine straight years we've been a top 4 seed. We just work towards the scheduling of who we're playing nonconference.

Now, you've got to win some games, right? People do that, and they lose games, and they get mad and say, that doesn't work. You've got to win some games.

I do think the more experiences you can have -- the travel, just the toughness of everything, a bad whistle, whatever, whatever it might be -- any adversity right there, you've got to just flip it and use that to make you a stronger team. Hey, we've been here. We've been through this.

Like I've got guys who have played -- I've had guys who have been in the championship game and guys who have lost the 1-16 game. We've been on that rollercoaster. It's disappointing at times, and it's just unbelievable. It's everything you've worked for. We're in a Final Four. We're playing for -- like this is pretty cool.

But then we look back and say, did we do our job as a staff to get them prepared with our work and with our schedule?

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I think some people miss on that. You're starting to see, in my opinion, more elite high major programs doing it because they're seeing the model because they're not going to penalize you on Sunday for that. You're going to get a lot of support in that room when you say, hey, man, Purdue has the most Quad 1 opportunities. They didn't take advantage of all of them, but man, they scheduled up.

I don't think that's going to drop us. Anyone that's going to be on the C line next to us in comparison, you've got one up on them right there.

There's just so many things you can't control after you're done playing. We're done playing our games, but now we can. We're still playing these games. When you go head to head with people you're competing against on those lines, like now do something about it.

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