

Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 14, 2026

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

Wisconsin Badgers

Greg Gard

John Blackwell

Nick Boyd

Austin Rapp

Postgame Press Conference



Michigan - 68, Wisconsin - 65

THE MODERATOR: We are now joined by Wisconsin head coach Greg Gard as well as student-athletes Nick Boyd, Austin Rapp, and John Blackwell.

GREG GARD: Obviously a heck of a comeback by our guys there in the second half to a terrific team. Both of our games with them have been great games and terrific battles.

Obviously we're extremely proud of our guys of how we couldn't get shots to go in for the latter most of the game, and then we got a rhythm going. Extremely proud of them and how we played this week here. This will be good for us because now we'll get healthy, get some rest, and get ready for next week.

This group is battle tested, and I think hungry to make a deep run. We know we start with one game, but like I said, couldn't be prouder of how this group has grown together over this season, and we've turned into one of the better teams in the country.

Q. Austin, I wanted to ask you about the run. You had six 3-pointers, five of them in a row. At some point does it look like the basket is the size of the ocean? What's kind of going through your mind when you start hitting -- after you hit a couple of them and you're still open? No matter if it's a transition or a set or whatever.

AUSTIN RAPP: I started off a little slow, missed a couple of easy ones in the first half that I should normally knock

down. Came in at halftime, and Coach did a good job of making sure me and Carrington, like keep letting them fly. When we're open, keep shooting.

I came out and air balled my first three that I shot in the second half. I knew I was good from there. I don't air ball very often. That next shot went down, and I made a couple after that. Then yeah, it felt like I was throwing it into the ocean by the end of it. It was kind of cool.

Q. Austin, just kind of building off of that, is there something that clicks for you that allows you to -- was there any moment where you were like, oh, I kind of -- oh, I feel this right now, or is it just an accumulation when you get going like that?

AUSTIN RAPP: I trust myself that I put the work in. I trust my work. I've been a pretty good shooter my whole life. When I see a couple that don't go in, I kind of try to bounce back and know how good of a shooter I am and keep letting it fly.

My point guard and JB do a really good job of making sure, when I'm hot, they find me. They found me like five times in a row going in.

Q. Nick and John, what was it like to watch Austin do that? It seemed like, like he said, throwing in the ocean.

JOHN BLACKWELL: Proud of him for that because, when he's shooting like that, it's because his defense, it's because he's playing defense, he's active everywhere. That's what gets him going.

I think he's matured and figured that out, and I'm proud of him. It's only going to carry over to the tournament.

NICK BOYD: Like he said, just a breath of fresh air to see him knock them shots down and kind of pick the team up, give us a jolt in a tough stretch.

I see him working on his shot every morning, so it's just good to see it pay off.



Q. Nick and John, you guys hoisted a lot of shots the last couple days. You played into overtime. Did you feel that at all on your legs today? Did you feel any wear and tear on your legs from playing the last couple days?

NICK BOYD: Not really. Playing a game. I had a lot of fun out there just hooping. Got to be better. That's it. The.

JOHN BLACKWELL: For me, just a little bit. I got hit in my knee, and my contact fell out. It's basketball. It's March. It's part of basketball, and we're just going to fight and leave it all out there.

I told the guys when we were down, I said, we're not going to go out without a fight. We're going to go out swinging. And I said that to Aussie, that was the last one I said it to, and he did what he did right after that.

Q. Austin, how do you think your growth as a player over the course of the season reflects how you all are growing as the season's gone on?

AUSTIN RAPP: I think we've all grown to be honest with you. I wouldn't say there's a single person on the roster that hasn't grown. Will Garlock came in this time and played great minutes. Hayden Jones came in and and played great minutes. We've got guys that are stepping up with Nolan and JJ out. We've got guys that are stepping up -- Hayden is just a freshman. Aleksas is just a freshman. We had a lot of growth this year.

Even with these two, we know that they were talented coming in this year, but they've grown so much. It's because of the work they put in outside of practice. They're in the gym every day. They've got workouts in the morning, workouts after practice. It shows this team works really hard off the court, and it's starting to show we can compete with anyone in the country, and we've shown that.

Q. Nick, I think you had four steals pretty quickly there. Where do you feel like you've grown the most defensively this year?

NICK BOYD: I would probably just say just our connection on the defensive end just growing has rubbed off as a team. Man, just my plan today was just to go out there and lay it on the line, whatever that looks like. For me, it's not really about wins or losses, it's more about respect.

I think we did a good job earning some respect around the country, and it's a blessing to play in March. Not everybody gets to do this. Got people biting their fingernails and stressing right now trying to get into this

tournament. It's a breath of fresh air to sit back, relax, rest up, and make a good run in March.

Q. Greg, it looked like Yaxel had been pretty quiet through basically a game and a half. At the end of the first half today, he gets a 3 and really starts to assert himself in the second half. How difficult of a guard is he when he's taking the ball and being aggressive in terms of getting the shot?

GREG GARD: He's a complete player at 6'9". So you've got a guy that can put the ball on the floor. They can try to post him. He can shoot the 3. They move him around, put him in some gap driving at times. He can ball screen. They can ball screen for him.

Like I said, the skill set is one thing, but when you combine that with his size, it obviously makes it a very unique matchup. I thought for the most part our guys, we didn't give anything easy. The 3 he got at the end of the first half that we over extended out top and got caught too high and allowed the top to corner pass to become too easy, and it slowed our rotation where we couldn't rotate fast enough.

But he's a really good player obviously, but that's not the only guy they have. They have a lot of really good players. Yeah, he's a unique matchup because of the size and his versatility.

Q. Obviously Aleksas and especially Aussie really had that 3-point shot going at different times. What stands out to you most about what they did? Obviously, again, without Nolan.

GREG GARD: I think both of those guys, you talked about the growth, somebody asked about the growth, those two guys have grown as much as anybody on the team. For Austin to have a really rough start, and as he mentioned, air ball the one. I think I looked at one point and he was 0 for 7 or 1 for 6 or whatever, and then he got going. So the confidence to keep shooting.

That's one thing we try to embed in these guys is just, yeah, you've got to keep shooting. You've got to stay with your confidence. I even thought we turned some down at times. Mara blocked a couple and got some hands on it.

I don't want them gun shy. I don't want them overthinking it and becoming hesitant because obviously when we are spraying 3s, it opens up so much more, and then the guards can get downhill. It plays into the overall plan.

Q. How likely did the jump that Austin made seem at the start of the year with how he started the year?

GREG GARD: The jump Austin's made? Tremendous. I think JB touched on it. It's not just the 3-point shooting. Everybody gets caught up, and that's what everybody looks at and talks about, it's the other parts of his game that have grown -- the defensive awareness, the embracing of physicality, the embracing and the importance of rebounding. All the things that have nothing to do with shooting have improved, which have helped make him a better shooter and a more confident player.

His growth, like I said, has been terrific, and that's a credit to him to stay true to it. He started early in the year, and he wasn't ready for that. I thought we needed to make a change. He's taken that and used that to his advantage and grown his game and improved immensely as a player.

Q. Coach Gard, can you speak a little bit about how your team kind of poses a unique threat to Michigan as far as like the pick and pop game and just making those big guys kind of stretch away from the cup, which they've been able to do really well, but you guys seem to be making them the most uncomfortable of any team.

GREG GARD: I think we probably make a lot of teams uncomfortable because of that attribute to our team. We've been doing that for -- we do it in a little different way now, but we've been doing that at Wisconsin for 25 years, different system within what we do within the swing.

But we had bigs that shot it and shot it really well. We just get them in a different way. There's more ball screens. Obviously the spacing has changed a little bit, but in terms of having bigs that shoot, we've been known for that around the country. If you're a big that can shoot, Wisconsin's a good place to go because we're going to let you let 'em fly.

Q. Nick mentioned the connectivity on defense. It feels like that, especially with the guards, has really grown over the last month or two. Rohde is a guy whose hands have been really critical for this defense. Can you talk about that connectivity and just how important it is for Rohde's role with that defense and how he's played the last few weeks?

GREG GARD: Yeah, it's a piece of the growth of this team that started back in the summer. You look at 7 of the 8 guys that played tonight or today weren't here last year. So the newness of everybody coming together, it takes a little time, more time than probably I would have liked. I'm a little impatient in that regard, but the connectivity is a part of that.

You have to go through some adversity. You have to

figure out what doesn't work and how much better you need to do things, how much harder you need to play. I don't think we had a great vision or understanding of how hard we had to play earlier in the year. We did in stretches, but we didn't do it consistently. We're doing it consistently now.

Obviously when you play hard, you're never going to play perfect, but if you play hard, you can cover up for a lot of imperfections and make up for things. This group has understood and embraced how playing hard is to our benefit.

Q. You kind of alluded to this earlier, but what would you say you guys have learned over the last couple times in terms of in the games here that you can apply forward as you get ready for the NCAA Tournament?

GREG GARD: Obviously you always come into these things to win, and I get asked about that a lot, right? When they're keeping score and there's a trophy at the end of the road, it's all guns blazing towards it.

But I think the benefits coming out of this, obviously our younger players because we're playing without two, our starter and rotational guy in Janicki and Winter, so some of our younger guys have gotten a little more experience in brighter lights than they would have normally got.

Same thing for a guy like Austin Rapp. Now he started X number of games since Nolan's been out. Those experiences all pay dividends. Aleksas Bieliauskas has had to carry a bigger load up front. That's going to carry dividends going forward into next week and for his career. It's not just a small snapshot. You're looking at how this can benefit younger players going forward.

I think this group understands how good they are, but you get to this point and time of the year, they're all good. No matter who we play next week and where we get sent, we're going to play a really good team. So just understanding and keeping in mind what makes us good and stay true to that and do it better and keep getting better.

That's what I said a week ago when we won at Purdue, this group has gotten better. I think we can still get better. This was a good 'nother step for certain guys to continue to improve and get more confidence, and ultimately it makes the team better.

Q. You've mentioned past seasons about how teams playing on Championship Sunday shouldn't play Thursday in the NCAA Tournament. How does this extra day of recovery, rest, preparation kind of help

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you guys moving forward?

GREG GARD: If we would have won, it didn't matter, right? It is what it is. Whether you play Thursday or you play a Friday wherever you get sent, I assume we won't be in a play-in game in Dayton. I think we've accomplished quite a bit to be above that line.

You want to be playing tomorrow, but at the same time, yeah, we have to use it to our advantage. So we've obviously played on Sunday the last two years in this tournament. It had an effect. I'm not going to be naive enough to think that it didn't. Four games in four days takes a toll. But again, you balance that drive to compete and win, but we know the big fish is coming now.

These guys are ready for it. I think the buildup to this, the growth they've shown getting in this environment is good. Getting some experience for guys that normally wouldn't play as much had we been completely healthy, it all will pay dividends if we use it and point it in the right direction and know we've got to get back, rest, get healthy, and get ready to attack wherever we get sent and whoever we have.

Q. Nick mentioned the idea of you guys getting a lot of respect over this last run. What does respect mean at this time of year?

GREG GARD: I think Wisconsin's never been one that gets a lot of bells and whistles. We're a blue collar -- I've seen this program grow immensely and evolve and stay so consistent, and I think that's one thing that gets overlooked. There's flashes in the pans in programs. Around the country you see it. They'll have a blip on the radar.

But for this program to stay so consistent over 25 years -- and it doesn't mean you're going to play in the tournament every year, but the culture and the way we go about things, I think the players that come here have a great experience.

So we don't get maybe the complete -- we have to earn it, and that's okay. That's okay. We have to earn the respect. I thought Boyd and Blackwell maybe should have been a little higher on the All Conference list, but this league has as much talent as it's ever had in my 25 years. Part of it's the 18 teams, but the depth of the talent across the board, this league hasn't seen anything like it.

Just got to keep -- respect is least. I'm going to pull a little quote from JJ Watt. It's about respect. You can look it up. But rent's due every day. So we've got to continue to pay rent to continue to play well. Your play will get you your respect.

I think internally within the basketball communities across the country, Wisconsin is extremely respected, and you go back to Coach Bennett, you go to Coach Ryan, the foundation of the program and what those guys did, but you have to continue to earn that. Sometimes we don't get the attention maybe, that that's what he was talking about, but that's okay. We'll earn it, and we have to go prove it on the court when the scoreboard is running.

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