

Big 12 Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 11, 2021

Kansas City, Missouri, USA

Oklahoma State Cowboys

Mike Boynton

Postgame Press Conference

Oklahoma State - 72, West Virginia - 69

THE MODERATOR: I think, if they would qualify this game and maybe about two-thirds of the season as a movie, they'd say it's a thriller, right? That's kind of what this team has been throughout the year, it seems like, finding ways late in games. Sometimes it's pretty. Sometimes it's not pretty, but it seems like they're all close and they're all dogfights. Maybe could you talk a little bit about what you saw today and how you felt about it.

MIKE BOYNTON: If it qualified, I'd say dramatic thriller. This is a team with a lot of resilience. When you go through this conference and play -- we're one of the fortunate teams to play all of our games in league play -- you see everything, and things get even crazier once the calendar turns to March inevitably, right. That's why everyone is so excited about next weekend because they missed this last year.

I thought today was a prime example of what you see in March, two teams duking it out. I don't think either one of the coaches would say they played well. I certainly don't believe we played well. We had 20 turnovers again, but we kept finding ways to get enough easy baskets. And then our defense saved our bacon at the end. Isaac Likekele was sensational as a rebounder. Certainly tremendous having him back, his presence.

Bernard Kouma gave us excellent minutes, and Avery was a hero again. It was a total team effort. A lot of guys gave us contributions.

Q. Mike, over the regular season, you guys had a bunch of games where you were able to pull out wins without playing your best, and today could be in that category. In a time where it's win or go home, how much of the previous games prepared you for this postseason stretch?

MIKE BOYNTON: I'd say every game we played has



helped prepare us for what we're doing now. It's just finding different ways to win, and even doing so when you don't play your best, and that's what's required this time of year.

We're playing against high level competition too here now, so any expectation that we would come out ahead and win by 15 points, I'm pretty sure we were not favored to win today. So I'm glad that our kids fought and scrapped enough and made enough plays to come out on the winning side.

Q. Mike, I know it's kind of loud in here, so I'll ask both my questions and let you answer both of them. I think it's fair to say that you guys didn't have exactly the end of the first half that you would have wanted. So my first question would be what did you guys talk about at halftime or some of the adjustments and the things you guys fixed and figured out? Then in the second half, you guys were down eight, went on the big run, got up by ten. What did you guys talk about during those two long time-outs near the 12-minute mark?

MIKE BOYNTON: So, let's go to halftime first. It started by giving up a three to McNeil while we had a lead initially. That was the first breakdown. And then we just had two just -- I mean, just head scratching turnovers. I mean, the best player in the country gets the ball just taken out of his hands for a layup, then we have another turnover, where we should literally not have been shooting the ball until like there's like four seconds left.

The thing that I say is I've had to change my approach with this group in this regard. It's very hard for me to get them to think about what's happened so many times before. We really have to focus with this group on what we do moving forward, and that was the focus at halftime, all right, is here are the things that are bothering us. We've got 13 turnovers, which is what I think we had, and we have missed, I think, seven or eight layups.

So are we good enough, the scholarship players in the Big 12, to make layups and not give the ball to the other team?

They all thought that we would. We did a better job in the second half. We still had probably too many turnovers, but



we made our layups and got ourselves to the free-throw line.

At the 12-minute mark I think we were down five and I told the team at the next time-out, Right now it's the same mentality. Let's move forward. In the next four-minute game, we have to win. I want to be tied or ahead when we come back to under eight. I think we were up maybe four or five at that time, which was a big swing for us.

Q. Mike, you kind of touched on Ice a little bit. The last couple sequences kind of, I guess, maybe similar to what he did at the end of Iowa State last year. How big is Ice in these kind of moments in this tournament?

MIKE BOYNTON: Well, it's why, I believe, that recruiting winners has to be a big priority, and he's a winner. The Boones are winners. Cade's a winner. We have guys who all won and all understand what it takes to have success as a team.

He leads us in that regard. He's always talking about the little things that maybe don't get a whole lot of fanfare. Not making shots, not about, you know, whatever. He's talking about blocking out and running shooters off the line and securing rebounds with two hands, and I'd say he's pretty close to having a masters in winning at this point.

Although he hasn't won a lot here so far -- we're having a good season now -- but he understands what it takes, and he's always in the right position to make those kinds of plays, specifically on defense.

Q. On those couple of plays, he got that quick outlet to Cade and it ended up being a turnover. What did you kind of see on that one? Then also the last sequence there where McNeil couldn't get shot off and Ice had to block, what did you see there?

MIKE BOYNTON: It's clear at the end of the game, you just look at the numbers at that point. The numbers are what they are. Cade is our best decision-making ball handler, whatever. Avery, I think, led the Big 12 in free-throw shooting. So we wanted to get one of those two guys the ball when the other team wants to foul.

Then when he's out, the thing that people don't realize, because they see us sometimes play offense better because of the floor space and we've got other guys that will shoot. But when it comes down to winning this time of year and we need a stop, unless he doesn't have a way to move, he's going to be on the court.

And I'll sacrifice whatever I need to on the offensive end, because I know that he's going to be in position to make a

right play on the defensive end, whether it be get a deflection or steal or rebound. It's not like he's a bad offensive player. He's just not a shooter, so you can't space the floor with him as much.

Q. Do you feel like he was in rhythm today offensively?

MIKE BOYNTON: I don't. I think it took quite a while for him to get going. It's a rhythm game, Jacob. It's hard to sit. He basically hasn't -- so he played the Tech game, he played a lot, but he's played one game in a month. He played at Kansas, right? He played one time since then. It's hard.

But he knew what he could do defensively, and we just had to kind of flush it a little bit for him. I think, as we move forward, he'll continue to get in better rhythm, but today was just a grind-out game for him.

Q. Mike, you obviously enjoy having Isaac around for basketball reasons. You've made those very clear. Tell me why you appreciate his presence just within the program. What about the kid that makes you happy for results like today?

MIKE BOYNTON: When I recruited Ice the spring after his senior season was over, after he decommitted from Fresno, it wasn't because like he was this highly ranked kid who I knew would be a transcendent talent. I watched Ice really for a really long time win. I just watched him win. I saw his high school team have success, and I saw a kid who would do whatever it took for his team to win.

That's who I am. That's who I was as a player. It's the only reason I had any chance to help a team in the SEC at all, right? It's because I understood that there are things that most people don't pay attention to that go into winning, and I thought I saw all those things in Ice. You know, this is maybe what people really don't know. Ice never played point guard before he came to Oklahoma State, but I was so bullish on what I thought he was about, that I told him that I was going to put the ball in his hands and let him be the face of our program while I was the head coach as we moved this thing forward.

Luckily for me, he's committed to doing those things, and he's made adjustments along the way, and now he's put himself in position where he's going to have a career playing basketball. But a lot of it has to do with his character, the type of person he is and the type of work ethic he has, more so than just his pure talent.

Q. Mike, I know you're probably not going to want to play this game, but it's the way you have to report

during tournaments. More than likely, Baylor advances, they would be heavily favored against Kansas State. Couple of questions. How do you look at the matchup for tomorrow -- and if you want to throw K State in there, go ahead -- but also because of the way the bubble is created for these tournaments, does it make preparation for a second game in 24 hours easier? The team stays together. They're not going out. They're not tempted to go check out the mall or anything else downtown. Talk about that aspect of it, because this is a total basketball trip. There's nothing else going on.

MIKE BOYNTON: We kind of approach it that way all the time, to be perfectly honest. With non-COVID, we would highly encourage our guys to not do anything except for get off their feet and rest for the next 24 hours or whatever. And I'm pretty confident that they're going to do that today, first, because they had to get up at 6:00 a.m. to do testing this morning, and we do not have a morning team. Our guys were not happy about that.

So that they get to go back and now take a nap, they'll probably sleep for most of the afternoon, which I think limits the opportunities, because by that point, we'll know who we play and get into prep mode.

As far as the opponents, I don't know. We focus so much more on ourselves. We played Baylor pretty recently, and we know how good they are. We know how good K-State is becoming right in front of us. I talked about this coming into our second matchup with them. They've gotten better, as much as any team has gotten better, from the start to the end of the season, in our conference. I thought it was on display last night. I think they were up 25 points in that game. There are very few blowouts in conference tournaments, certainly when you talk about a team that finished in ninth place.

So we won't overlook them at all. We're going to watch the game objectively, and whoever wins, we'll do our best to prepare our team to go out and get ready for what soon will be a really competitive game.

Q. Mike, on Saturday, it seemed like West Virginia was switching a lot of ball screens, and today with Cade, obviously, they started doubling them. Is that something that you're okay with, if it's four v. three elsewhere, with them doubling Cade?

MIKE BOYNTON: Yeah, we worked on our short rolls, which I thought we kind of took advantage early. We kind of got back to over dribbling and holding it too long. But, again, that's kind of what you deal with in this league. We've got really good coaches. Huggins wasn't going to

sit there and let Cade go for 40. He knows that's possible.

So I wasn't surprised. I was pleased with how our guys adjusted to doing something we hadn't done much of this year really for the first time, but we practiced it pretty much the whole week. So we'll see. We'll see how everybody plays us. There's a very small chance we'll see them again. If we do, I would imagine it will be -- a long time from now, I'll be glad to prepare for them a fourth time. But, yeah, that's what happens. Just make adjustments from game to game.

Q. I asked the guys the same question of is it frustrating that maybe you're not playing your best right now? Or is it kind of promising that you're still winning despite not playing your best?

MIKE BOYNTON: It's probably honestly a little bit of both. There's a small hint of frustration because the truth is, at some point, it's going to bite you. You can't keep turning it over 20 times, not against the competition we're playing. So you've got to be honest about, all right, let's be intentional about cutting those down to the 15-ish range. We're a pretty aggressive team. We're going to probably turn it over more than, say, a K-State who's pretty possession conscious. We want high-possession games, which lends to more turnovers.

On the flip side, I have a lot of optimism that, if we have opportunities to keep playing, this team has shown the ability to get better at things. We've gotten better at closing games. We've gotten better at playing with different lineup, and I think we'll get better at taking care of the ball. But that's one thing I'll continue to lose sleep over until we do it.

Q. Last thing from me, I don't know who hands out the Player of the Year Award in a normal year, but how cool was it that you got to do that with Cade before the game?

MIKE BOYNTON: It was awesome, man. I said it time and time again. This is nothing against his parents, right? They've done a great job, but I feel like I've helped raise him. I've been on this journey for such a long time with him. Really, I think of all these guys like my own children. Obviously, we have a really special bond. We've been through a lot. We've had to discuss a lot of hard things, and I'm certainly glad that everything, I think, he's wanted to do as a college player, many of those things are coming to light now.

And on the same token, a lot of the things that I hoped he would be able to help our program do are coming to light. So it's been a pretty good marriage. Unfortunately, we're going to have an amicable separation here soon. We won't

divorce, but we're going to have an amicable separation, but I hope it's not for a couple more weeks.

Q. Mike, congratulations. It's one thing to have the best player in the country. It's another for him to assimilate, and I know you've known him for a large portion of his life, but when did you know it was going to work out with him in the locker room, I guess?

MIKE BOYNTON: It's interesting because there were two points, Dennis, that I'll refer to. One was in our preseason workouts. So I had, in my mind, a vision of playing Cade and Ice inside, but we never talked about that in recruiting. Like that wasn't really a part of the conversation. So you kind of wonder, if you do something that you haven't talked about, the kid is going to look at you like that wasn't what we discussed. Like I'm going to be the point guard, and you'll figure out somebody else that will play inside.

But the first time I sent him to work with our bigs, I was as excited as anybody because he just embraces the opportunity to improve. So that was one of the first things, he was willing to give up the ball and help us win in other ways other than him having the ball, which helped other guys develop.

Then after his first college game -- I don't think you heard this story. The day before Thanksgiving in Arlington -- his first college game was on the road. I usually workout pretty early in the morning. I came in the gym at 6:00 a.m. and I heard a ball bouncing. I was certain it was one of our returners or a walk-on or something like that, but it was Cade in the gym by himself shooting and rebounding on his own.

That's pretty unique to see because I would imagine -- it's not like he played bad. I think he had like 25 and 8 or something like that, right? But his commitment to the process, not getting caught up in what everybody assumed, man, he's great. He's going to be gone. I think that bought him credibility with his teammates that he wasn't above doing the work or sacrificing some personal things so our team could have success.

Q. Teams in March that are successful, they develop, and they sort of reinvent themselves along the way. Is that sort of what's happening with Avery, developing as a scorer for you? Two straight games he's been huge in his ability to make shots and get to the rim. Is this just something new that we're seeing and it's really helping you guys sort of blossom into an even better team?

MIKE BOYNTON: Yeah, I would go back and reference our game against Texas as, I think, the turning point, just

from what I've watched. I can't necessarily speak to how the kid feels about it, but once he started his first game -- I think the Texas game was his first start -- I think he was relieved that maybe -- again, kids think of starting as a really, really big deal for whatever reason. I probably did when I was a player. I don't remember. It's probably convenient for me to forget now as a coach, but I know it's a big deal to guys, and I think that sometimes that gives them the belief that the coaches believe in them more, and I think he kind of was relieved that maybe that was a sign that I believed in him more.

I think he's played pretty consistently since then. I know he played well at Tech, but we had to help him understand Cade's still going to be the guy as the primary handler and Ice is going to be the secondary handler, so what we really need from you is what you do best, which is now, if somebody's putting their best defender on Cade and their second best defender on Ice, who's guarding him? The third best defender? I don't think's good enough to stop him, and I know Avery doesn't think they're good enough to stop him because he doesn't think the best defender is good enough to stop him.

He's got supreme confidence, and I think us relieving him of some of the pressure of having to make plays for others has given him confidence to just go out there and score a little bit better.

Q. What does it do for you when you have a guy that can score 31 in Morgantown or 15 in the second half in Kansas City?

MIKE BOYNTON: Well, a couple things. The way we're designed, it gives us a lot of flexibility. They wanted to press us. They really -- they needed to try to speed us up. I think it was Ice, Cade, Bryce, and Avery, so trap one of them, usually you think you're going to a secondary ball handler. Well, all of those guys, I think on a different team, would be the primary ball handler and decision-maker, and I got all four of them out there.

So the press wasn't that effective because we've got that many different ball handlers and decision makers, and it gives us another look, if we're not playing big, that we can still be effective both offensively and defensively.

Q. Mike, you mentioned the testing at 6:00 a.m. this morning. Cade and Avery said they weren't aware of it, but I think Derek Culver was playing through an illness. Does that concern you in a bubble considering how fragile everything is?

MIKE BOYNTON: Well, it's the first I've heard of this, so I don't really have a response. I would imagine that



everyone here is on the same page about doing everything we can to keep everybody safe and healthy as we try to bring this thing to a conclusion, but I'll have to get more information before I can really comment on the specifics of whatever the situation is.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, did we miss anything? Is there anything important to you that maybe we didn't cover?

MIKE BOYNTON: No. Just to quote Jimmy V., survive and advance. See you all tomorrow.

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