

Big 12 Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 12, 2021

Kansas City, Missouri, USA

Oklahoma State Cowboys

Isaac Likekele

Cade Cunningham

Postgame Press Conference



Oklahoma State - 83, Baylor - 74

Q. Let's talk about this run here at the end of the season. This has been unbelievable. Cade, what is making this possible?

CADE CUNNINGHAM: I think our togetherness as a unit. Everybody's stepping up and everybody's trying to find ways to perfect their role and whatever that is. I think the staff giving us great game plans and just us buying into those, I think that's really translated to us winning more. And once we won a couple big games I think our confidence it's only growing. I think it's through the roof now. So we're still going, like I said, we're trying to see how far we can take this.

Q. So Ice missed some games, obviously to injury there a little bit ago. Getting him back in the lineup, like the pace, getting up-and-down the floor especially after made baskets on the other side is apparent. Cade, what does the guy next to you bring to this team?

CADE CUNNINGHAM: Leadership. I think the biggest thing is just toughness. Like his will to win is second to nobody. Having that on the court with us, I know even if he's not making shots or whatever, I know he's going to try to make as many winning plays as possible and that's when we need. You can always find room for that type of guy on a team and he's one of the best of them.

Q. Same question Ice. What does Cade bring to the time team?

ISAAC LIKEKELE: Man, he's a clutch player. He's that guy. His will to win is the same, if you ask me. He makes big-time shots, big-time rebounds. If you seen him in there boxing out the other guy, 6-10, so it's just like he's just as tough and just wants to win as much. And whenever you

have a group of guys, especially your two leaders that just has that will to win so much, it's a recipe for victory.

CADE CUNNINGHAM: He's the same way. We got a bunch of those type of guys.

ISAAC LIKEKELE: All 15 if you ask me.

CADE CUNNINGHAM: That answers that question as to why this run has been like that. I think everybody's starting to make those.

Q. Cade, you guys have played Baylor shorthanded twice. You didn't play and Rondel didn't play the first time. Ice didn't play the last time. How much did you guys want to prove that maybe that was a little bit of the reasoning that they won the first two matchups and prove something different tonight?

CADE CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, I know me and Rondel were really hurt the first time we didn't get to play them boys. Our guys fought for as long as they could. They just kind of went on a run at the end of the game that kind of separated them. Second time, not having Ice out there, like I said, somebody that's continuously making plays to win. We look forward to this matchup. We knew that we were ready. We knew that we had all hands on deck and we wanted to see how we weighed up against them and I think it showed on the court.

Q. Ice, do you feel like you guys are close to peaking or have you peaked or what?

ISAAC LIKEKELE: If you ask me, this team really don't have no ceiling. I don't want to put no limit on us. We don't have no ceiling. I feel like every day we can just get better and better, no matter what it is or who it is, especially like a competition against ourselves, we just got to keep pushing ourselves to get better. Whenever you have a peak, that means that you have a certain limitation, but us, I believe we have no ceiling, so I can't really say that we can reach a peak, but I can just say that we keep getting better every day.

Q. What did you guys do so well defensively -- they

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only made six 3-pointers I think and they really struggled from three-point today. What did you do so well defensively against them?

ISAAC LIKEKELE: Defensively we tried to stay stretched out and tried to make them make plays in the lane and different things like that. I still feel like those six threes that they had came off of a lot of miscommunication from us. There was a stretch where we just gave up open look after open look and luckily we were able to, actually not luckily, just us coming together and being able to talk it out or communicate and stay focused and get stops. That's what helped us win the game. That's what set up those six threes.

I feel like also Cade's big-time communication the whole entire time, I know he's playing a lot of offense but people don't see how intense he is on the defensive end. He's real intense down there. So from KB, Avery, like he said earlier, everybody, man, the whole 15 guys.

Q. Cade, back-to-back 3-pointers you had, walk me through that stretch there late in the game.

CADE CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, I feel like I'm a really confident player. Every shot I shoot I feel like is supposed to go in, so I find space, I know my team has trust in me to shoot those shots and make them, so I try to put us up. I try to shoot them and, with confidence, and make the plays that my teammates need. So, yeah, I was blessed to make those shots, for sure.

Q. Both you guys, it was a tight game with about four, five minutes left. Then you spurred away. When you guys, for each of you, when you look back at this game, what's each of you's favorite play from tonight?

ISAAC LIKEKELE: It's tough.

CADE CUNNINGHAM: I would say my favorite play was probably the Avery and-one toward the end. I think we were.

Q. 2:09 left?

CADE CUNNINGHAM: We might have been up one.

Q. You were down two.

CADE CUNNINGHAM: So that put us up one. That was my favorite. That was the play that had me the most hyped for sure.

Q. Isaac?

ISAAC LIKEKELE: My favorite I think was Deli and one. I don't know who passed to him.

CADE CUNNINGHAM: I passed it to him. That was my second.

ISAAC LIKEKELE: He passed to him, went up a layup and it was an and one and then that got me up. That was a crunch moment. So it's fun. Just being back out here, I just enjoy being back out here, it's fun, regardless if I'm a hundred percent or not, I just enjoy coming out here and playing for my teammates.

Q. That was back-to-back plays. Back-to-back possessions, those plays.

CADE CUNNINGHAM: That sequence was probably our best sequence.

Q. After the OU game in Norman I think part of the talk among the players, and it might have been you, said greater things are yet to come. And obviously we have seen what's gone on here since then. Is moments like this, is this why you came to college?

CADE CUNNINGHAM: Definitely. Definitely. It's why I came to Oklahoma State is why I came to the Big 12. It all starts with the head guy, Coach Mike. He puts so much confidence in all of us as players, and just our whole staff, they prepared us for this moment. Nobody, I keep saying it, nobody thought we were going to get to this point right now. To have everybody stay with the program and see how far we could go, it's fun. We have fun on the court, we compete, I think that's the biggest thing, everybody wants to win, we want to prove everybody wrong. And like I said, Big 12, we got all these tough teams, Baylor, Texas Tech, Texas, I can name them all, but those are the moments that you come for, you want to get better. I didn't want to hide from any of these moments. And having guys like this on the roster, Oklahoma State, last year wasn't the year that they were proud of, but I know there's a bunch of guys that wanted to win and were going to do everything that it took to win. So having a group of guys like that, with the coaching staff, that's what I want to surround myself with.

Q. Going back to favorite plays. Isaac, around the 12-minute mark, you poked the ball away from Davion Mitchell and dove on the ball for the steal. How much pride do you take in being able to make those type of plays for your team?

ISAAC LIKEKELE: Man it was, I take pride, big-time pride in those type of plays. Anytime we can steal possessions like that and try to shift the momentum that's what you got to try to do, that's part of making defensive plays. So just

trying to do anything I can for the team and luckily I was able to make that play.

Q. In the last, 11 of the last 15 points for you guys were at the free-throw line. How big is it to know that you guys can step to the line and make those big free throws down the stretch?

CADE CUNNINGHAM: That's what it takes. Free throws win games, for sure. We missed five. KB was huge for us at the free-throw line and MA made two huge free throws when we needed them. That's kind a testament to the work they put in. MA started off the year not making very many free throws, but he was in the gym like every day like after practice -- it's almost like he never went home. He stuck in there and rep'd it out and it all shows that it pays off. Ice has a hurt thumb, doesn't even feel right for him to shoot the ball, but he's finding ways to put the ball through the net for us to put points on the board of the that's a group effort and that's what it takes to beat a team like that.

Q. You've been able to win games when you haven't played your best, you've won games when you have played your best, how much confidence does that give you guys going in, continuing in the post-season to know that you can pull games out and in different ways?

CADE CUNNINGHAM: Ton of confidence. Just because, it's a team. I know that if I'm not playing well, I know my teammates will pick me up, mentally, and they will go make plays on the court to keep us in the game. Eventually -- we all have a lot of pride in ourselves we all want to make as many plays as possible to win games, so nobody's going to stay in a slump for too long. And we play this game without even having Bryce who is one of our main contributors out on the court. So to have other guys step up, Rondel came and gave us huge minutes. To have guys like that step up and fill in for his absence was huge for us. And it's only going to give us more confidence down the road.

Q. For both of you, when you first got together for your first practice several months ago, how far away as a team were you from a night like this? I know you had talent and potential, but how much growing did you need to do to get to a point like tonight?

ISAAC LIKEKELE: We had to go through different trials and tribulations, for instance, different types of losses taught us lessons. You can't really simulate learning lessons through playing basketball, so we don't been everywhere from dropping an eight-point lead at home first game of Big 12. Then we spin back again, come home, up 19, lose that. It's different lessons like those that really

taught us. So those trials and tribulations that we went through is what built us to get to where we are right now. So we tried to learn from them and we are here.

Q. What would you say to that, Cade? How much growth did this team just together have to make back in even October, November to get here?

CADE CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, like he said, we had a lot of lessons along the way, but I think the biggest thing is everybody continued to buy in and nobody let themselves separate from the group, we stayed a family throughout. We have had bad days, definitely, we have had bad practices, bad games, all that. But to come back the next day and be ready for practice and want to get better, I think that's the biggest thing that we have done and I think that's what's made us get to this point.

Q. Cade, you guys, this seemed like an emotional game for you guys playing against Baylor. You and Avery talked yesterday about how bad you wanted to play them. How do you reset and take that emotion up another level for tomorrow night and kind of avoid a letdown?

CADE CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, like you said, we were definitely tight for this game, but we didn't come to play Baylor, we came to win a national or a Big 12 championship. So that's where our focus is. We're glad we got this game out the way. It's one game at a time for sure. But from early in the year it was, I don't know when it was, but coach had us practicing cutting down nets, just to manifest something there. That's what we came here for. We didn't come here to try to improve seeding in a National Championship or any of that. We take it one game at a time and enjoy each moment. Last year was a true test of you never know when you're going to play your last game, so we're trying to make the most out of each one.

Q. Ice, for you, Rondel, he's been in a little bit of a slump lately. What does it say about his maturity as a freshman that he's able to bust out of that slump in a really big game for you guys?

ISAAC LIKEKELE: It's crazy. We talked last night, me and him, talked last night and I told him, I said, I said, But I'm not worried, you're going to play good tomorrow. He was like, We'll see. I was like No, it ain't no we'll see. I'm telling you you're going to play good tomorrow bro, just watch. So after the first half when he started playing good, I was like, I told you. He was like, That's only one half, bro, just wait and see, just wait I said.

CADE CUNNINGHAM: He stays so grounded throughout. He's never too high, never too low.



ISAAC LIKEKELE: I was like, bro, I'm telling you, bro, this is the second half, you're still going to play good, and he went out there and did his thing so I was just happy for him, everybody goes through it.

Q. Who is faster, Avery or Rondel?

CADE CUNNINGHAM: I think in a dead sprint Rondel is crazy fast.

ISAAC LIKEKELE: But with the ball?

CADE CUNNINGHAM: With the ball, just quickness side to side, all that, they got to be Avery. Avery is ridiculous.

Q. Everything going on with Kansas, you guys as players have gone through the same protocols the entire year and then to see another team have their season taken away so quickly, like you just said earlier, you never know when your season's going to come to an end. So for you guys, what's it like seeing another team go through those same situations?

CADE CUNNINGHAM: It's how the world is right now. We just try and take care of ourselves, test negative as many times as we can, and stay positive, I guess.

ISAAC LIKEKELE: Their season is done, like, done? Oh, just for the Big 12 tournament?

CADE CUNNINGHAM: Yeah.

ISAAC LIKEKELE: I was going to say, that's crazy.

CADE CUNNINGHAM: They (Texas) didn't have to play today. So we're going to keep a positive mindset, try to lock in, get our legs back right and see what we got tomorrow. But like I said, it can all end at any moment so we're trying to make the most out of each game we play and play as hard as we can each possession.

Q. Isaac, your like the older guy of the team, just a Junior, but you've been through some good times, bad times. Was there a moment in this season where you saw things coming together? You mentioned the blowing the lead against TCU at home earlier in the Big-12 race and some other things, was there ever a moment where you said, things are coming together for this team and you can go on this kind of run late in the year?

ISAAC LIKEKELE: Yeah, it was whenever we came back from KU. We had a personal talk within the team. Since I wasn't playing at the time I was able to sit back and

observe the whole situation. Whenever you're not playing you get a different perspective. And it was just great to see what was going on, the win against K-State, Iowa State, and just so on and so on, I just seeing the guys build something so tight, so together. It was to the point where I was telling coach, I was like, Man, these boys on a roll, I'm thinking I should just let them do their thing. But them boys they wanted me to come back and play and they knew -- they gave me the word and so I'm out here just trying to win games and stuff. So just to see them go out there and build such a strong bond together without me being out there, I knew adding me back to the piece it would just be another great thing.

Q. You guys mentioned the cutting of the net practice. Can each of you kind of walk me through that and kind of what that's like and how that works?

CADE CUNNINGHAM: It was on picture day. Manifestation is key, man. So if you do something and see it through, you can kind of manifest it for the future. So coach had us all go up on the ladder with the net-cutting scissors, cut our piece off of the net, and he told us, This is what the goal is. It's going to be a long road, there's going to be a lot of ups and downs for sure, but the goal is to be best at the end and see how far we can take it. So I think we did our work early preparing ourselves to get into the tournament. But, yeah, we're taking it one game at a time. We got one more game to win a Big 12 tournament championship, we just got to lock in for that, for sure.

Q. Ice, does Mike normally do that each season? You've been around a couple years now.

ISAAC LIKEKELE: Yeah, he do it each season but the thing is, this year, the biggest difference was there was actually a vision, there was actually -- I don't know how to explain, it's just a different feeling this year. The past two years we most definitely, we believed, we worked hard, no doubt, but coming in this year, this is like all one through 15 had the same belief that we actually could, and not saying a lot of nobody from the past, we had great teams in the past, for sure. Unfortunately my freshman year we had to cut some people so things got thrown off. Then my sophomore year we had so many different injuries and sicknesses and different things like that. But this year it's kind of the same with just the COVID, but guys just able to still see it through without the people that wasn't playing the whole entire time. MA missed a game early, Cade missed a game, Rondel missed a game, I missed a few games, but, a couple, and whole entire time everybody was able to stick together and keep our eyes on the goal.

Q. Ice, how satisfying is all of this for you and how much fun are you having because of those



experiences over the last couple of years? How much more does this mean to you?

ISAAC LIKEKELE: Honestly, I have fun even like as bad as it sounds I even had fun even when we was losing because I'm just blessed to even be here. I'm just blessed to even be here. I feel like I shouldn't be here. So but winning, it feels good, and honestly, right now, I just, I don't really just feel too much because I'm trying to focus on the bigger picture. If I feel too excited right now, I feel like we'll come short of our goal. I know there's always something bigger to tackle, just got to wait until we get to the end of the road. So I can't feel like we're satisfied, that's how we feel as a team, we're not satisfied at all.

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