

NBA Western Conference First Round: Nuggets vs Warriors

Wednesday, April 27, 2022

San Francisco, California, USA

Denver Nuggets

Michael Malone

Game 5: Postgame

Warriors 102, Nuggets 98

Q. (Stream started in progress.)

MICHAEL MALONE: Incredibly proud. I really am. We lose a series 4-1, it's hard to find that silver lining because we didn't win. That's what we came here for tonight, was to win the game.

But as a head coach, I couldn't be more proud of a group that could have rolled over after the third game. They fought at home to extend the series and put ourselves in a great position.

All these people out there, no one gave us a chance to win this series. I think there are a lot of people saying tonight was going to be a rout, we were going to get blown out. That's not who we are.

As a coach, for every player in that locker room that played, didn't play, extremely proud for getting through an 82-game season with 48 wins in light of different injuries and circumstances, and then playing a team that is battle-tested in the Golden State Warriors. In Game 3, 4 and 5, we gave ourselves a chance every night.

I'm going to go home with my head held high as are my players, and we knew we will continue to work and put the time in to come back a better team next season.

Q. Nikola gave you everything he had. Was he battling anything throughout the game?

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, I think going into the game his hamstring was really tight. He was dealing with that a little bit. Let's be honest, just the cumulative toll of the bubble last season, this season, everything that has been placed on his shoulders. I'm sure he was definitely fatigued mentally, physically, emotionally.



But he fights through it. I mean, that guy is a warrior. I just don't understand the people that find a way to criticize Nikola Jokic. Is he perfect? No, I'm not saying he is. But the guy is the definition of a warrior, competitive, consistent. He impacts the game in so many ways.

Hell of a season. Hopefully he'll win the MVP again. I think rightfully he deserves it.

Q. The defense by both teams, full throttle tonight. How tough is it to avoid seeing the free throws missed?

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, it's funny when you bring that up, man. I know you can simplify this game by saying it's a make-or-miss league. We leave nine free throws on the board, 20 of 29. Look at the three-point shooting. We were 6 of 29, 21%. They were 13 of 31. That was probably one of the things that it came down to.

We out-rebounded them, we dominated the glass, we beat them on the break, we beat them in the paint. I thought we had great defensive possessions. To hold that team to 102 points in a closeout game in this building... I think phenomenal effort.

I think we just needed some of those open threes to go in to kind of get us over the hump. We just didn't have it unfortunately.

Q. Austin has been a huge part of what you have done defensively. He's not out there in the second and third quarter. What stood out about what you did in those two quarters?

MICHAEL MALONE: I think just like we have done for years now, one guy goes down, someone else steps up. Austin is a guy that every time we've beaten this team, regular season and post-season, he's been a very key part of that.

When he goes down, I extended Monte, Will, got Bones in the game, played Aaron obviously at the three. Guys just stepped up. That's the biggest thing, man, like human



nature. You're staring a 3-1 deficit in the face, human nature is just to roll over, man, I'm ready to go home. Our guys don't have that. I wouldn't let them have that. Everybody just stepped up.

I think we were physical. We made them work. We had some breakdowns. Steph hit three threes in a row. We were down the floor. He's a two-time MVP winner himself. He's a great player. You have to give Gary Payton a lot of credit, man. That guy made really key baskets for them. I think he had 15 points, made three threes. It is tough when you give so much attention to Steph, Klay, Jordan Poole, and other guys make the plays. You have to tip your hat to those guys.

Q. Nikola is never going to complain. Could you get a feel throughout this season how tough the load was that he had to carry, if that weighed on him...

MICHAEL MALONE: Honestly, no. It's not in his nature. I mean, I think the most appalling trait of any human being is self-pity. That's one thing you're never going to see Nikola Jokic have in his heart and mind. He's not a guy that feels sorry for himself.

Was he tasked with a tremendous responsibility? Yes, he was. I think all those guys in the locker room tried their best to help him throughout. That's what makes him such a special player. 48 wins for this team. I think people look at that and don't give that enough credit. I think that locker room, winning 48 games in the Western Conference, is incredible.

Once again, last four seasons, nobody in the West has won more than the guys in that locker room. Obviously Nikola is a very, very, very big part of that.

Q. DeMarcus, 19 points in 15 minutes. How satisfying, given your history, was that to see? He's a free agent this summer. Do you want him back next season?

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, I mean, we'll let the -- I'm going to go to a private island in the South Pacific somewhere and drink some mai-tais and think about the season in review.

All I'll say is this: I gave him a big hug in the locker room. I gave him a shout-out in front of his teammates. He was be a guy hanging out at home in Las Vegas after being released by Milwaukee.

He goes out in an elimination game and puts up, as you said, 19 points in 15 minutes. Nikola is in foul trouble. We need somebody to steady the ship. DeMarcus did that.

The biggest thing is I'm just really, really happy for DeMarcus Cousins and I'm so proud of him for staying with it. He had an impactful run with the Denver Nuggets. We'll figure out the off-season in the coming weeks as me, him and Josh sit down and talk.

Q. What is this team going to be like when it's fully healthy?

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, I think it's scary to think about that. I go back to last season before Jamal's injury in this building. We felt we had a legitimate chance to win a championship last year. Unfortunately it just wasn't in the cards for us. Jamal suffers the ACL. Earlier this season Michael Porter Jr. suffers a back. You're playing without two max players that have both helped us advance out of the first round the last three years.

When they're getting back and they're healthy, I think that's going to make us a deeper, more talented team. I'm excited about that, I really am. I think the future is very, very bright for the Denver Nuggets.

Q. Aaron Gordon, at times he went beast mode tonight. What triggered that change in aggressive play?

MICHAEL MALONE: I really think it was when we left San Francisco after game Game 2, I think Aaron was really, really hard on himself. I think he realized in Game 1 and 2, he didn't have the performance or impact that he, his standards, he didn't live up to.

It was really simple coming back. I felt not just tonight, I felt Game 3, 4 and 5, I felt Aaron Gordon was the Aaron Gordon we need for the next three, four years as we make our run for the championship. An aggressive Aaron Gordon, a physical Aaron Gordon, a guy sitting down in the post, getting big, attacking the basket, running, defending, everything we asked him to do.

15-9 tonight, two blocked shots, got to the foul line eight times, six offensive rebounds. An aggressive Aaron Gordon is an effective Aaron Gordon. That's what we need from Aaron every night.

Q. You mention the future. Can you expound on how you see this group the next couple years?

MICHAEL MALONE: I think, as I mentioned, the future's definitely bright. I think we also have to understand that Jamal Murray to start the season next year is not going to be the Jamal Murray right away. I think it's going to be a buildup, him getting comfortable and confident out there.

But I did it during the first two games here, I went back, couldn't sleep one night. At 3:00 in the morning, I was looking at Jamal's stats in the bubble. Wow. I knew he was good, but sometimes you forget how good he was. That's the thing about Jamal, when the stakes are at their highest, he steps up. He's never afraid of the moment.

Michael Porter, what he did last year in 10 playoff games, 17 points, six rebounds, more importantly shooting a high clip from the three-point line. Shooting makes up for so many things. Jamal and Michael can do that.

With all that being said, I don't want to spend all this time talking about Jamal Murray and Michael Porter. The guys that played this whole season, gave their all, put us in this position, I think deserve so much love and respect. I know I have that for those guys.

Whenever the season ends, it's really hard. You're on this long journey since September non-stop. I always use the analogy, it's like being on a subway car. Somebody just pulled the emergency brake. It's hard.

For those guys, for me, the coaches, tremendous staff, David, Jordy, the guys behind the bench, Ryan, Charles. I couldn't ask for a better staff that works their butts off. Tough to go out. Losing sucks.

The last thing I'll say, I'll leave on this, congratulations to Golden State, their whole coaching staff. Good people over there, great coaches. Wish those guys well.

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