Southwest Maui Invitational

Tuesday, November 24, 2026

Lahaina, Hawaii, USA

Lahaina Civic Center

VCU Rams

Phil Martelli Jr.

Blake Harper

Postgame Press Conference

VCU - 84, Colorado State - 81

Q. Coach, we like to call that Maui magic, that last shot.

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: I was going to say, I don't think you need to introduce Blake today.

Q. How did you think your team played this evening?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: I thought our players did a really good job. And as I just told them, I was not good enough. But the players, they made the plays, they did what they needed to do.

They're a really well-coached team and a really tough team to play regardless of the prep, but to have a hotel ballroom walk-through trying to prepare for what they do is really difficult.

We haven't seen anybody like them this year. We will see some teams that play like them later in the year. So good preparation for that.

But as I say often, we have really, really good players. This guy's one of them (referring to Blake). He was meant to be a VCU Ram. I knew it the first conversation we had in the spring. And again, I've said it before, I'll say it again, we have really good players that made a mediocre coach look good today.

Q. Walk us through what happened on that last play?

BLAKE HARPER: To be honest, I'm still processing. But Coach drew up a play. He put the ball in my hands and trusted me in that moment. And that's all I can ask for is the opportunity.

And the rest was my angel upstairs, my mom. That's all I can think of, those renegotiation. Just right after that shot went in I could just feel all the emotions. Just everything we, me, the team, like, we all worked for, just came back in that moment. It was just a lot of emotions.

Q. When they switched to a zone on defense what kind of difficulties did that make for you and the team?

BLAKE HARPER: Yeah, I mean they just gave us a different look, some we weren't all the way prepared for. But in basketball you've got to adjust on the fly, no doubt. I felt like we did that. I feel like we came out with the win. So that's all we could ask for.

Q. Thinking more beyond this and in the past, what is something in today's game did you see or notice quicker that you wouldn't have noticed in the previous season? What is something that you notice quicker on the fly in this game that helped you produce as if you were back in the past? Like something that was hard for you to understand, the shift on defense, or today, what kind of stood out to you as, like, oh, I wouldn't have figured this out until this game?

BLAKE HARPER: I would probably just say last night after -- the quick turnaround with the games and all, last night it was a heartbreaker for us, for real. We expected to come to this tournament 3-0. But stuff happens.

Last night we had a players' meeting, and I feel like just coming in today with a whole new fresh mindset.

And I feel like that's really what was different. I feel like the whole vibe of the team and just coming up and being so positive after a loss like that, and just being able to turn the page on the next day. I feel like that was the brand newest thing for real.

Q. You mentioned your team. Is there someone on your team that kind of keeps you grounded or is your rock when you're going through hard times?

BLAKE HARPER: Yeah, I mean I feel like I could say that about everybody on the team. But I feel like mostly it would be Coach, just being the calm voice. (Laughter).

I probably would say it's Coach for real.

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: That's a bogus answer. You already played 35 minutes and took 15 shots. There's nothing else I can do for you.

BLAKE HARPER: No, all good, all good.

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: He never brings me food, though. So I keep telling him every time he walks in with food and he doesn't have any food for me, he's going to get benched. (Laughter).

BLAKE HARPER: But for real, he really keeps us calm in the huddles. Whether the other team goes on a run or we go on a run. I mean there's a lot of ups and downs in a game. And I feel like Coach Telli does a great job of keeping us grounded.

Q. Was it a point of emphasis to get out of the gates hot in the first half given how the last two games have gone?

BLAKE HARPER: No doubt. It was a big emphasis, especially with the first four minutes of each half. It's a real tone setter. I feel like it's a game of punches for real. And if you get punched you gotta get back up. And if you do the punching we try to keep their foot on their neck. So I feel like that's really our emphasis that we've been trying to keep going.

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: A cool, fun fact. I did my pregame. I just told Blake we were walking down, I did my pregame radio with our local radio in front of Tyler Thornton's picture from the shot he hit in 2011. And Tyler Thornton's a Gonzaga grad. Gonzaga High School in DC, one of the great programs in the country, where Nyk Lewis and Blake played.

I said to Robby Robinson, our radio guy, when I was walking away, I said that will be a good omen for our Gonzaga guys. It's about the one thing I got right today.

Q. From your vantage point, what did you see on Blake's shot?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: It's an action that we've run. We always have our late-game plays. We do them in shoot-around. Obviously we're not shooting around in the tournament setting like this. But it's something we've practiced and at least 100 times at this point in the year.

And it's an option to go either side. And Sammy picked Blake. And honestly, when it left his hand I was, like, oh it's on line. I just didn't know if it would be too hard and hit the backboard and hit the front rim and go off or not. But I could tell it was on line.

Q. What difficulties did the zone pose to the offense?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: I mean, it just got us a little bit stagnant. We weren't getting in the gaps as much. Good move by them. We had talked some about it, again, like we haven't seen much zones.

And then you come in and we're trying to do it in a ballroom walk-through. It doesn't have the same pop. And we've practiced against it. But we don't play a lot zones. It's different when you see somebody else that's running it.

I actually thought we got pretty good shots. We were making shots in the first half. Then a little bit stagnant in the second half.

Q. Looking at the stats, your bench outscored their bench. What is your mentality with bringing in bench players? Your whole team is great, but a lot of teams don't use their bench as often as you guys do.

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: We have a pretty deep roster. We have a bunch of guys that don't play that are good players. I say it all the time, like, on a team like ours, just because you don't play doesn't mean you can't play. We have a bunch of guys that are ready to go at any point.

I always like having pop off the bench. We had, I don't know if he was the leading scorer in the country off the bench last year or not -- gotta be one of the top.

I've always kind of had that with my teams. I like having that pop off the bench.

You know, some guys like Torey Alston has given us a big boost when he comes in the game. Ahmad Nowell, in the first half, gets going. And it's a credit to those guys. They put in a lot of work. And we have a lot of trust in them and I think they have a lot of trust in us.

Q. Ahmad's improvement offensively and defensively, 17 points and I think three steals today. What have you seen from him?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: Yeah, I mean, that's who he is. He's a very confident guy. He's been through a lot of these games. He's been in big moments his whole high school career. He played an outstanding program Imhotep Charter in Philadelphia with a great coach, Andre Noble.

And he's such a relentless worker, sometimes too much. Sometimes he works to his own detriment, like, he works so hard and wears himself down.

But the work he puts in, the confidence he has, he has a knowledge of the game. He knows what other teams do. He just knows it. He watches it. He studies it. And he brings a big boost with that.

Q. We had a conversation on Sunday, and you were just talking about what are you going to learn this week. Over these first two games, what have you learned about this team that you really like and some areas that you want to continue to grow with this team over these first two games in the tournament?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: We have a resilience about us and an edge to us. And I've known that. We need to continue to find our discipline on both ends of the floor a little bit. We have it and it looks great, and then it wanes a little bit, and then it seems like we get beat.

But it's what these early games are for. We play as tough a schedule as anybody in the country. We play really good teams. And we've played, what is it, is this our seventh game? What have we played, six games? We've played four really, really good teams in that stretch, like, four teams that could be NCAA Tournament teams. Last year, four of our first seven were against NCAA Tournament teams.

Not everybody does that. A lot of people talk that talk. They don't walk that walk. We do. Because I feel like that gets you better. It gets you sharper. It finds those things that, hey, we need to really dig in on and get better at.

Q. You talked about recruiting and finding that right player. I think we posted one of your interviews with one of our RSG podcasters. Then you talked about how your first conversation with Bryce in the spring, you just knew he was that right fit. Can you expand a little bit more about the kind of fit, the kind of kid that you're looking for?

PHIL MARTELLI JR.: At VCU, we're very lucky. We are super well supported, super well resources in every aspect. Because of that, there's a certain standard that needs to be held in everything.

There's a standard of talent that needs to be there. Like we should get and do get really talented players. Along with that, there has to be a high level of character. And there are places -- I've worked at a bunch of them, like lower-level schools, where you're scratching and clawing, where you have to sacrifice sometimes talent for character. And sometimes you sacrifice character for talent.

Really at VCU you don't have to do that for either. I've been saying that since day one when I got the job. We're not going to sacrifice any of those things. We're going to get high talent, high-character guys.

And that first conversation with Blake, I knew that's what he was. I knew he was about the right things, not just talking it. A lot of people talk it, oh, I want to be a winner, I want to be on a good team and all this. But you can kind of read between the lines.

The one thing I know about Blake and really all these guys is they're not just great players, but they are great people, great people. Like, we're one of the eight teams here, we're the only team that did community service the other day. The only one, which no shock to anybody. But that's in the fabric of who we are and what we do.

Those guys, they get out there. It was hot and it was before practice. On that court, that outdoor court right out here, and they gave everything on that court with those kids and then gave everything in here in practice. That's who they are, and that's why I'm really damn proud to be their coach.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports