

# Big East Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 11, 2023

New York, New York, USA

Madison Square Garden

**Marquette Golden Eagles**

**Shaka Smart**

**Kam Jones**

**Tyler Kolek**

Postgame Media Conference



Truthfully, did you guys believe it then and there, or were there certain moments that came along where you finally understood what he was talking to you guys about and how he helped get you on the path to where you are tonight?

TYLER KOLEK: Yeah. Everything that we go through, whether it be the retreat that we went on before the season, all the workouts in the summer, he's preaching his culture, and he's showing his leadership every single day and just trying to impart that on us and kind of put it into our DNA because it's definitely in his DNA.

All the stuff that he's about is really good stuff. As a person and as basketball coach. So he's just trying to give us some of that and rub off that championship DNA that he has on to us, and I feel like we've really been receptive to that.

**Q. Going off of that question, Shaka Smart is a phenomenal coach, particularly on the defensive end. How does he guide -- how does he inspire you guys to play defense in a tournament like this where you're playing on to back-to-back nights?**

KAM JONES: Just as simple as it takes what it takes. We wanted to win a championship. That's what it takes to win a championship to defend at a high level. Like you said, we're coming off back-to-back games. So is the other team. So we just come out, have an aggressive mindset. And we live with the results.

**Q. When you start playing basketball, you try to get into a rhythm. You came in with a scheme, pushed them fast. Do you think that was the outcome of the game because you made them play faster than they wanted to?**

KAM JONES: I'd just say we played harder, honestly. We came out on defense with a lot of energy. That fed into our offense. That was pretty much the story of the game, throughout the whole game. We just preached basically keep doing what we're doing. Don't let the team off the hook by easing off the gas. So, you know, we just played hard the whole game.

Xavier - 51 - Marquette - 65

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations, Marquette.

**Q. Tyler, you were hugging your dad after the game brother after the game and everyone around your basketball life. What were those moments like with the confetti falling on Madison Square Garden?**

TYLER KOLEK: All the moments they've been through with me have led up to this moment right here. To share that with my high school coach, my brother, my dad, my two best friends, it's special. There is no better feeling.

**Q. For both guys, how would you describe what you turned into and how you've evolved defensively over the course of the season to where you are now?**

KAM JONES: I mean, it's just a lot of hard work, belief in each other that we can guard everybody. You know, we just fought around for each other. We make a lot of mistakes, but we make up for it with our effort and how we play together. I feel that goes a long way with how we guard and play defense.

TYLER KOLEK: I want to give credit to him this past week. Him on the defensive end is the best I've ever seen. He's locked in from the very jump. When he's turned up on defense, we're all turned up on defense.

**Q. This is for both players. I want to ask about your leadership from your head coach and if you can go back to either last summer or the preseason, clearly, there would have been conversation or conversations where he imparted a vision for this team.**



THE MODERATOR: We've been joined by Coach Shaka Smart.

**Q. You committed to be a coach and decided to stick around. What does it mean to be part of a team that won the first regular season championship and now first tournament championship?**

KAM JONES: Means everything. We made history. Can't take that away from us ever. Like you said, I was committed under (indiscernible). I can't imagine it being better than with this man right here. Grateful for him and everything he's done for me. I'm forever grateful for him.

**Q. Coach, congratulations. You got off to a great run, 19-2 run. How important is it this time of year to get off to a run like that?**

SHAKA SMART: It was huge. Third game in three days. You know, we felt like we did have somewhat of a depth advantage. You know, Xavier obviously missing Zach Freemantle. Our guys played with real force to start the game, and that kind of allowed us to have the aggressiveness advantage in the first couple rounds of the game.

Then we just continued that. I think that set a tone early. You could tell they had some guys that you could see they were playing their third game in three nights. You know, Xavier's a phenomenal offensive team. So it was a combination. We were able to take them out of some things, and they also missed some shots they probably normally would make.

But our guys just deserve a ton of credit. This is the best backcourt, along with Stevie Mitchell, that I've ever coached. Normally, and you've got a great backcourt, you always have a chance to win. That's what's happened for us all year long.

**Q. Tyler, back at Big East media day in October, when asked about picked ninth in the preseason, you had some choice words and words I can't and probably shouldn't say over this microphone. 144 days later, how satisfying is it for you to have that payoff and, you know, back up the talk by walking the walk?**

TYLER KOLEK: Yeah, that's one thing everybody was saying. Well, he can talk now, but we'll see what happens. They're seeing it now. We're living it. But we still want to play every day, play every game like we got that chip on our shoulder, like we were picked ninth. We want to go in the NCAA tournament like we're the underdogs every game. That's been our mindset all year, and that's what it

needs to be moving forward.

**Q. What did Stevie Mitchell bring in the first half? He had the big battle against Nunge, led to the offensive rebound and won. He also had the big 3 during the long, extended stretch.**

KAM JONES: I mean, he means everything to our program, what he brings. He's guarding the best guard on the other team every day in and day out. He brings us energy. Especially me. Gives me confidence to see him playing that hard.

I know if he's playing like that, I don't have a choice. I'm sure that's how the rest of the team feels.

That raises the level. Obviously, he was on Boum the whole game. I would say he had his number tonight. Yeah, he just means everything to our team and what he brings to the table.

TYLER KOLEK: Yesterday, he was struggling a little bit on offense, not shooting an open shot. I told him at halftime, he's the heart and soul of our team. He's what gets us going. He kind of is our engine on the defensive end, and that turns into great things on the offensive end. Even if he's not scoring the ball, he's the one starting the offense because of his great pressure and great presence on defense.

**Q. Shaka, whenever we ask about how good this team was, you said you wanted to be playing your best basketball in March. With the defensive improvement that's been coming the last month or so, how close are you to seeing the idealized version of this team?**

SHAKA SMART: These guys know how I am. I always feel like we can play better. But I get mad any time Kam misses a shot. How the heck can you miss?

KAM JONES: I feel the same way.

SHAKA SMART: But I think that most important part of us playing our best basketball is our connectivity, communication, the way the guys are playing for one another. And we really have that going for us right now.

But we don't want to take it for granted. We talk about certain inhibitors that get in the way at different times. The first half against St. John's, there were some inhibitors going on. We're out there and really weren't at our best.

But our relationships is the number one way to overcome the inhibitors and play free and play an aggressive style of basketball. The guys the last two nights have been

phenomenal with that, the second half against St. John's. Tomorrow, we'll get our name called, we'll find out who we're playing, and it's a new season. It's a new opportunity for us. I just can't wait to see the way this group approaches it.

**Q. Shaka, how would you articulate who your guys are defensively right now?**

SHAKA SMART: Violent. You know, we try to play with great violence, energy. We don't have the biggest, strongest guys. Depending on the team we're playing, sometimes we're over-matched in terms of size at almost every position.

But our guys have heart and they have incredible fight to them. I've never seen someone like Stevie Mitchell in terms of just the energy that he's able to bring outside of what he has in his body. O-Max Prosper has been phenomenal, feeding screens and taking on tough match-ups like Colby Jones and Hawkins last night.

On the defensive end, it's tricky because most of the year we're playing at such a high level on offense. The tendency can be to trade baskets if you feel offense is coming easily. Coming up here to New York, we've really played for the most part very, very sticky, tough defense. We're going to need that if we want to advance in the NCAA tournament.

**Q. Shaka, can you talk about your emotions, winning this tournament. You've won other conference tournaments. Is there any difference with this one?**

SHAKA SMART: It's twice as nice being here in

New York. Being in the Garden, I mean, this is the best. I remember my first time being in here as an assistant coach and just being like a kid in a museum, just walking around.

I'm a history guy, so just thinking about all the great players that have played here, all the great moments that have been here. And I think for these guys, getting that experience, there's nothing like going and doing something together in a special place and then having that in your pocket for the rest of your life.

So it's an awesome group, and we just want to keep building.

**Q. Shaka, I don't know if you can sum this up in a post-game, but why has this fit so well for you here at Marquette?**

SHAKA SMART: Because of the players we have. I

mean, the players fit. The best coaches in college basketball, a lot of attention is paid to coaches, for better or worse. The best coaches have one thing in common, they have a captive audience. The guys are locked in, and the guys try to go execute the plan.

This group here has been unbelievable in terms of just their willingness to not only follow our coaching staff's plan, but follow the guidance of each other. I mean, the best thing that these guys do is the way that they lead each other, the way that they make each other better.

So that's why it's been a good fit. Marquette's a special place. It cares about basketball very, very deeply, and we're happy to share this championship with everybody back home in Milwaukee because this is a prideful, passionate program.

**Q. Shaka, there's conference tournament champions getting crowned all over, but this is probably the only scene where a university president was the one to climb the ladder last and hold the net and look out. Dr. Mike Lovell. How fitting was it that he's the man who had that moment?**

SHAKA SMART: That was important to us for a couple reasons. One, Tyler didn't let Dr. Lovell and me cut down any nets in Milwaukee last Saturday.

TYLER KOLEK: Had to get him on that one.

SHAKA SMART: We said, hey, we'll have to cut down another one. While he was taking the net off, Dr. Lovell and I were waiting.

He is -- I've worked for six college presidents, and he stands apart in a lot of ways. His compassion, his character level, his integrity. A lot of those guys are cyborgs, man, they're not real people. He's a real person. He has a genuine care and concern for every single student at the university, but he's got a special place in his heart for student-athletes because he's an athlete himself.

And the way that he feels about these guys and his willingness to even hit these guys with the real, I think he hit Tyler after the grades came out and said his grades need to be better.

But, you know, it's all love. With what he's been through personally over the last couple years, we felt like it was fitting for him because he puts a lot into our program, and you don't win -- another reason it's a good fit. You don't win at the highest level without true alignment from the top down.

We have that at Marquette. Very, very grateful for that.

THE MODERATOR: Marquette, thank you.  
Congratulations.

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