

# Big East Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 14, 2024

New York, New York, USA

Madison Square Garden

**St. John's Red Storm**

**Coach Rick Pitino**

**Joel Soriano**

**RJ Luis Jr.**

Postgame Media Conference



And they did a beautiful job. So I'm real proud of them, real happy for St. John's.

They're a terrific team. We beat an outstanding team tonight and we scored 91 points, which leads to what we want to do. Real proud of them. Big fella here did an outstanding job. RJ is getting better and better. Now he's practicing, for the first time, every day. So that's really, really good. Joel told them, he said it's about time to start practicing.

**Q. What's it like to win this game and get to Friday night? St. John's hasn't played in Friday night in the Big East tournament since 2000. I remember talking to you last year after (inaudible). What does it feel like?**

JOEL SORIANO: It feels amazing. We knew today was going to be a hard-fought game. We knew if we wanted to beat this team that we had to play our style of basketball and play a full 40 minutes. So I was just telling the guys when we got the lead to keep their foot in it, stay locked in.

And I mean it's unbelievable feeling, man. We play on Friday night. Everybody that I've known from St. John's and coaches -- Coach P even said, he said, playing Friday night at Madison Square Garden, there's no other feeling, there's no other tournament bigger than the Big East tournament. Just blessed. Thank God.

RICK PITINO: And we got a lucky draw. Easy game. (Laughs).

**Q. Rick, do you have any idea what your deflection total was, especially in the second half? It looked like you really --**

RICK PITINO: Yeah, we were close to 30, but it was key moments. And that's what they did to us in two games. They were the ones in the gaps making the steals. Guys were really, really locked in. At the beginning of the game, they made some threes, and all I kept saying is pace, pace, pace. And I believe Dawes played all 20 minutes. I think Davis, who's been on a great run, played 19, 20. So we felt if we could sub, the pace would be great.

St. John's 91, Seton Hall 72

RICK PITINO: We're extremely happy for St. John's fans and the university. You know, about three weeks ago, I don't know the exact date, the administration, we were talking and they said, look, Coach, everybody's behind you. But I want to correct that and make sure I say it verbatim, so I don't look back.

They said, you know, you started so well and I think everybody's expectations were a little too high. And I just kept thinking. And they kept saying, so, you know, it's a good season, and let's just finish up, and it's a good season.

I could sense in their thinking that in their minds it was over. In our minds it was just beginning, because March is what it's all about in college basketball. We told the guys, you gotta play your best basketball going into March. And we knew we had seven now, I think, six or seven, elimination games. Seven. And these guys arose to the occasion on all seven.

They knew if they lost to Creighton, lost to Butler, lost to DePaul, lost to Georgetown, it could be over. So we decided to change our whole offensive scheme in terms of pace in three days, because we felt Seton Hall was better from the top of the key to the back board game.

We knew we had our rebound. We knew we had to get in the gaps like they do, because they're really an outstanding basketball team. And we thought that they would play their guys a lot of minutes. And I told our guys, we're going to substitute right away. Run the floor, run the floor, run the floor.



**Q. Rick, when the administration talked to you guys, why did you think differently? What did you see in this team that you thought --**

RICK PITINO: It's not necessarily what I thought at that moment. I just said that there's so many games to be played. I remember one time I was at Louisville, looked like we were down and out and we had to beat Pitt on the road. Another great road game. And we won I think seven out of nine, seven out of ten games to make it.

It's never over if you keep getting better, keep improving, and we were playing really good basketball. We were losing to outstanding teams by one, two, three. All close games. So, you know, I wasn't -- I told the guys, you know, March is what it's all about. Going into March in the last two weeks of the season, if you get better, then you're going to be a March team. And they kept getting better. And it's a credit to them.

**Q. Coach, Nahiem Alleyne played amazing today. Do you think he was your secret weapon because he's played in the tournament before?**

RICK PITINO: He had zero turnovers, two assists, five for five, three for three from three. So I think you're right on that. I think he's a veteran basketball player. We needed him. But I thought all the guys made great plays tonight. You know, it's very difficult for us to play without D.J. But Na and Jordan did a fabulous job, and we've got a third point guard and that's RJ. RJ is a man, he plays power forward for us. He plays the wings. RJ can play all four positions, and it's not easy to do and he does it very well.

**Q. RJ, this one is for you. You had two plays in the first half. You got the steal and the lay-up and the buzzer beater obviously before halftime. What was that like when you felt the fans come to their feet in those moments there.**

RJ LUIS, JR.: I mean, it was an amazing feeling. I just give everything to God for allowing me to have a positive mindset going throughout this season. You know, Coach P believing in me, even though I was only practicing twice a week, basically. But it felt great.

It was nice to get a buzzer beater. I don't think I've done that in college yet. So that was amazing. It was just wild. It was very surreal, the crowd, the atmosphere, the energy. Credit to Seton Hall. They played really hard. But we had to get them back. So it felt good.

**Q. Rick, when did RJ's practice regimen change?**

RICK PITINO: Just this week. He came to me and said, Coach, this is the important time. This is March, and I need to practice.

I said, well, how are you feeling?

He said, doesn't matter. I need to practice.

So he's a special talent. The big fella here was great tonight. You know, he's great, because you know, the style of play we tried to play tonight is not exactly the way he can play. But he did it. He's sprinting up and down the court. He got in the low post, made good decisions. If he plays like that going forward, we're going to be tough to beat.

**Q. For Joel and Rick, obviously you've got at least one more game here this weekend, but do you think you've done enough at this point to see your name up on Sunday?**

RICK PITINO: We're trying to win the Big East title. We know Connecticut is a great team. We know they're one of the best teams in the country. I can tell you from being in Iona, the second unit is as good as their first unit. But we know that.

But certainly we've had a great year. We're a hot team. That would be something you would answer. We're going to try to win this Big East crown.

**Q. To follow up what Mark said, we asked you about the Big East but does this make Sunday, 6 p.m. a little pleasant thing to look forward to?**

RICK PITINO: I will tell you what I've told them for, what, seven games now. I told them this is an elimination game, guys. You go to DePaul -- and Villanova found out last night. You go to Butler, you don't win, it's over.

**Q. But you won tonight?**

RICK PITINO: But we won all seven games. They've had that feeling all the games. I guess it speaks volumes of what they think of pressure. They look at pressure as a great thing, you know.

**Q. Question for both of the players. When you guys were looking around in the locker room before the game, did you guys see anything that indicated to you and your teammates that you were going to get a performance like the one you got today?**

JOEL SORIANO: As in what, like the crowd you're saying or just like?

**Q. No, among yourselves.**

JOEL SORIANO: No. I think, to be honest, this whole week in practice, we've been very locked in. Not to say that we haven't been the whole season. But guys know what was at stake. Like Coach said, we're pressured. We knew that if we didn't come out here and win this game, then we wouldn't be hearing anything on Sunday. We'd be going home.

So I think a lot of guys, we just bought into what we needed to do. We found certain things that they do well, we tried to exploit them. They're a great team. Very well-coached team. We just tried to come out and play our style of basketball.

This tournament is amazing, man. It gives you a different type of feeling playing here. All the greats that come here. How many times he's coached here. This is the best tournament in the United States. So we just tried to come out here and play our style of basketball.

**Q. What did you think, RJ? What did you see in your teammates?**

RJ LUIS, JR.: I think that was a great answer. (Laughs).

I'll say the same thing. Guys were really locked in, have been. Six seniors, nobody wants to end the season on a bad note. I feel like we want to keep the season alive. So it was just really just coming together, sticking it out, how Coach P said, seven games. Just not letting the pressure get to us and just looking on to the next game.

**Q. With you having six players scoring double figures today, with this win streak you guys have had different contributors kind of stepping up. Having all of them do it today, what does that show about the progress this team has made?**

RICK PITINO: Well, we had three tough practices, and the message I had to them -- I gave them two messages. I said this time of year some teams get really, really tight and they rely on their half court basketball. And I said I want you to do the opposite. I want you to go out and try and score 100 points tonight. I want you to play race horse basketball, get a high number of assists, and get in the gaps and play them.

But we've gotta play a different style come March. It's gotta be race horse basketball, because I feel that takes the pressure off teams. When you're in the open court and you're running and you're having to move the ball, pass the ball and cut, you're not overthinking in the half court.

And we did that tonight. We gave them two messages. Pace, we're going to sub right away. And then the second thing I put, I just put on the board, I said, we got dinner right away. Then we have the Connecticut film, then we're bringing you back for more Connecticut film. And then we're bringing you back at 1:00 for Connecticut film. (Laughs).

**Q. Joel, the last month obviously I'm sure has been up and down for you. Today, probably your best game in a while. What worked for you today and how did it feel to play the way you did?**

JOEL SORIANO: I don't try to look at that, man. I mean, I came into this game, and I knew that my team needed me and I was going to do whatever I had to do to get the win. So I mean, my performance is my performance. I wasn't really too like creative. I knew I had to come in here and play and dominate my position.

I think Bediako the last six times we played, he dominated me on offensive glass, blocking shots, doing every little thing for their team. So I just tried to be the better matchup in my position today. And that's what I'm going to try to do tomorrow.

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