

Big East Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 14, 2025

New York, New York, USA

Madison Square Garden

Marquette Golden Eagles

Coach Shaka Smart

Stevie Mitchell

Postgame Media Conference



St. John's 79, Marquette 63

THE MODERATOR: We have Stevie Mitchell and Coach Shaka Smart.

SHAKA SMART: Congrats to St. John's. We played them six days ago. That was about as close to a back-and-forth game throughout the game as it could be. Tonight was different. I thought our guys did a great job playing with terrific force for the first seven, eight minutes of the game.

St. John's really turned the tables. Their aggressiveness ramped up, their physicality, their ability to win the elbows, their ability to get to the foul line. They cut off a lot of our drives. It actually wasn't rebounding as much this game as it's been in previous games against St. John's.

Zuby Ejiofor was the best player on the floor. He was terrific today.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Shaka, what do you think you guys could have done to sustain that hot start?

SHAKA SMART: I think just the force with which we played early on both ends. You know, we were able to get stops. We had a look in our eyes of determination. I have to watch the tape. I'm not exactly sure why we got less aggressive.

St. John's deserves a lot of credit for how they played, but you have to -- you know you're not going to necessarily make as many shots in every round, but you've got to play with great force.

We started turning the ball over. I don't know if that took away from our spirit at all. We missed some shots around

the basket. But at the end of the day on the defensive end, we had to be much better in the second half than we were to have a chance to win.

Q. Open the game 24-9, up 15, and then it seems to kind of fall apart from there. You mentioned that you have some tape to watch. Just off the top of your head, what do you think needs to be addressed in order to have this happen?

SHAKA SMART: Same thing I just told Ben. We have to sustain our level of force if we start the game that well. We've got make sure we're winning the elbows on defense. Kadary Richmond starting getting downhill. Zuby did a heck of a job creating seams around the basket along with Luis and Richmond.

Then on our offensive end, we missed some shots around the basket, and we had some turnovers. We just got to control the controllables better.

That being said, we're up two at the half on their home floor. We didn't give ourselves enough of a chance in the second half with keeping them from getting in the paint.

Q. Shaka, I know you are focused on your team, but how dangerous is this St. John's team going to be in the tournament? How deep could they go? Obviously defense travels, and they play great defense.

SHAKA SMART: I mean, I think they're about as dangerous as anyone. I'm not on the selection committee, but their seed should be very, very high. Like you said, with the way they defend, it gives them a chance against anyone. What you have seen from their team is they've gotten better and better on the offensive end as the year has gone on because they've got guys that have really, really bought into their roles.

Q. Coach, can I ask you, you finally got to play non-conference again. This is the only power conference where you play everyone three times, and this is the third time. This is the second year you've been top-ten in nonconference games. Just anything

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about finally getting to play a team again that hasn't seen you for 12 times?

SHAKA SMART: Well, it changes things. Less familiarity both ways. I don't care what conference you're in, by the time you get to this time of year, you obviously want to play in the conference championship game, which we won't tomorrow, but you're glad to be moving on to playing teams outside of your league.

Let's be honest, the majority of college basketball is done with their season after the conference tournament, so we don't want to lose sight of the fact that Stevie and our guys have earned our way into the big tournament. We'll find out on Sunday who we play.

Q. Coach, what would you say that you can take away that's changeable, that you can change before the tournament? What did you learn from these past few days that maybe you would like to adjust going into the tournament?

SHAKA SMART: Well, you always take away good, and you take away things you want to do better. I think for us it starts with winning the spiritual battle. And that's an individual thing, and that's a collective thing on our team, which means being fully in the moment, present, unbothered by circumstances, and connected with your brothers to go after something that is very, very hard to do.

I thought our guys just did a phenomenal job of that yesterday against Xavier, particularly when we got down, and there was no flinch from them. Today was in some ways the opposite because we got up early in the game. We had a lead. Sometimes when you get up early, it almost is fool's gold. It's like a false sense of where you need to be, but you know it's going to be a long game.

So this is our 33rd game. We've had so many great experiences that we can learn from, both humbling experiences like tonight and also big wins. Now we need to combine those together to make us the best version of us when we play on Thursday or Friday or next week.

Q. Coach, obviously disappointed in the loss, but maybe tomorrow or Sunday afternoon -- you guys won this thing two years ago, lost to UConn who won an NCAA championship. How proud are you of these guys for playing here?

SHAKA SMART: I told the guys before the game there's no one I would rather be in the locker room with, and there's no place I would rather be. I'm a nobody who played Division III basketball. So to have a chance to coach our guys two years in a row in the championship

game, win it one of those years, this year in the semifinals, came up short of going to the championship -- which obviously stings and hurts.

But our guys, they've been incredibly committed to our way of doing things, which is unique and different than maybe others. Not that it's better.

For us I think we don't want to lose sight when you lose a tough game of the gratitude for the opportunities that we have had and that we continue to have.

Q. Stevie, you know playing against St. John's they're going to be super physical. There's a lot of fouls out there. How do you think you guys dealt with that?

STEVIE MITCHELL: Not good enough. I think we can be better. I think we're going to be better going forward. We knew obviously coming into the game -- we played them before -- they're a good team on defense. They get their hands on the ball. I think, like Coach said, we just got passive, stopped being aggressive, and that plays into their hands.

Q. Stevie, this is for you. This was such a tough loss, but such a great game. What are you most proud of?

STEVIE MITCHELL: I would say I'm most really proud of everybody on our team. We've been through a lot this year, and we got a lot more going forward. I'm just proud of how we came together, were able to go on a run.

I'm proud that I know everybody in that locker room is looking at themselves in the mirror, everybody is wishing they could have some plays back. There's no pointing fingers.

I'm proud of who we are and how much we love each other. I think that's going to pay dividends something forward.

Q. Shaka, yesterday I asked you what you need to do to beat these guys or play with them. You talked about your last game with them on Saturday. Today they were relentless. Their pressure just wears on you. Was it you guys not doing what you did on Saturday, or did they ramp it up to the point that it was hard to compete with them in the second half?

SHAKA SMART: It's always a combination of both teams. That's the nature of competition in team sports. One team affects the other team. What the best teams do is they affect the other team in a very negative way on both ends of the floor. St. John's has been doing that all year. They did that to us tonight.

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That being said, there are some things certainly when we look at the tape that we will feel like were controllable on our end that we can do better, starting with playing with more force on the defensive end, putting our chest on guys, and then on the offensive end we had some turnovers that were unforced.

It's hard against a team like St. John's if you have 17 turnovers, and then we had some shots around the basket we would love to have back. Absolutely, they deserve a ton of credit for that.

Q. Coach, you said obviously when you make it this far, it stings when you lose at this point. What is going to be your message to the locker room for the NCAA Tournament, how to lift their spirits?

SHAKA SMART: I got a long plane ride home to figure that out. Our guys, they truly value winning. So when we don't win like tonight, it hits all of us hard, but I don't think we would want it any other way.

So the key is that we come closer together, and we make sure that whatever goes into being our best that we lacked tonight or that we were able to bring forth last night or yesterday to win, we have to have that in our next game. We don't have a choice. We don't have an option. The difference is now moving forward. As we say in the NCAA Tournament, it's kill or be killed.

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