

Big East Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 11, 2026

New York, New York, USA

Madison Square Garden

Marquette Golden Eagles

Shaka Smart

Royce Parham

Postgame Media Conference



Then for this off-season, just get better and then just come back next year and, yeah, our goal next year, obviously, is win this whole thing.

Q. Shaka, you've talked about how you learned so much when you had your first losing season. This is your second one. What do you think is your biggest lesson and takeaway from experiencing something like this?

SHAKA SMART: It sucks. There's a lot of takeaways. When the season gets done, there's always this time where you want to evaluate everything and you want to figure everything out, like, the next day, but you need a little bit of separation from it to really have clarity. I would say as of now just to focus on the guys' continued growth and development.

I think there's a lot of basketball things where guys got better, basketball areas, but there's a lot of areas where we just weren't consistent enough this season. What goes into winning doesn't change, and we have to -- as a group, these guys as they get older and they get tougher and they get sturdier be more consistent with all those things.

So what I know to do is roll up my sleeves and once we get back together, as it relates to our team and growing, there's a lot of basketball areas and even cultural areas where in a game like tonight we can be better. And it's exciting. We have been -- I thought last Saturday was obviously a high watermark for us this season. So what we're going after is being on that level much, much more consistently. What will help with that is these guys' continuing maturation and more importantly their connection with each other, growing, and then I've got to really help them understand all the little things that we have to own and do better to win close games.

Q. Obviously a tough season, a tough game, but eight hours ago you got to celebrate Nigel winning a big award. What does him winning mean to Marquette basketball?

SHAKA SMART: It's a heck of an accomplishment for him.

Xavier - 89, Marquette - 87

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

Coach, do you want to make an opening statement?

SHAKA SMART: Congrats to Xavier. They made one more play than us. I thought our guys showed incredible fight when we got down 10 to bring us back. A couple bad bounces down the stretch and then a big, big basket by Tre Carroll to extend the lead for them. Really proud of how our guys fought. Really from New Years on we were not in a good spot, and our team got better. Sometimes that was reflected on the floor. Sometimes we, you know, looked like a really young team that needed to gain toughness and needed to gain a defensive identity.

I told the guys in the locker room, when we had a defensive identity, I think we were really, really tough to beat this year. It just wasn't consistent enough, including today. But you got to give Xavier a ton of credit for that.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Royce, obviously, you made big strides this season. What do you take away from this season and what's the off-season look like for you?

ROYCE PARHAM: Just, like, from the season, I feel like I gained so much more confidence going from my freshman year. I feel like last year I would hesitate, I wouldn't really be aggressive or look for my own shots. But all the coaches, players, staff, everything, they just, like, trusted my game and they really gave me the confidence this year to be aggressive and go after things.



I think it says so much about NJ and his development over the course of the season. It also says a lot about his teammates. I mean, how many plays was it the two-man game between Nigel James Jr. and Royce Parham?

You know, normally we're going to that award ceremony as a team and we have a bye today. You know, that's been the last few years for us. That wasn't the case this year because our regular season wasn't to our standard. So there's just a lot of motivation inside of all of us. I think I speak for Royce, his teammates, all the coaches. We got a lot of work to do, but we're very, very motivated and driven to grow and be better because we know what we're capable of.

Q. Royce, how do you see yourself taking more of a leadership role in the coming off-season, and then next year seeing the departure of Chase and Ben? I mean, you guys were the three players with the most playing time today on the court.

ROYCE PARHAM: Man, just staying connected, just obviously taking the roles. They have been great leaders for us, especially last year and this year. Just taking on that role, being, like, a big-time leader for them, for the younger guys, and then just, you know -- just going into this next year with confidence and just being more of just, like, a dude pretty much, like we say in our program. Just being a dude. Just, like, an everyday guy that gets it done and, like, a guy that can just help the younger people around us.

Q. When I spoke to you on Big East media day, I asked you about Royce and his development and how he was going to grow. Can you talk about his development this year and what he's meant to you and to Marquette and how much he's matured and everything?

SHAKA SMART: Yeah, it's exciting because I think the growth that he's shown -- Royce came in as a very young freshman. He came into summer school as a 17-year-old and he is still a teenager. So one of the great things is the next time we take the court for Marquette he'll be in his 20s.

But he's just really -- as he said, he's gained confidence, he's gained maturity, his body is changing. He's still not done. A lot of growth and progress to continue to make with that. But I think he's become a guy that in a lot of these games has been just a really terrific scorer and someone that's tough for the defense to deal with because of the different things he can do.

I know he's excited because there's so many areas of the game that he wants to keep getting better in, but what I

want him to do is just continue to grow in aggressiveness, attacking. I told him before this game, 15 to 20 shots. He got to 14. And it feels like, man, we got to get it to him more. It's such a fine line with different guys and the way that Xavier was playing, but I think his efficiency in a lot of these games offensively has been terrific. We just got to keep growing his aggressiveness because when he has the ball, good things happen.

Q. This team, you could argue, is the most improved team in the country. In the last 10 games, you jumped 40 spots. I think that's No. 1 in the country. Fourth youngest team of all power conferences. Last year the team maybe peaked a little early and seemed tired. What was different this year that the team surged -- even in the loss to Nova, St. John's with a big win, what's made the surge happen?

SHAKA SMART: I do think that the simple answer is our players. I told 'em in the locker room, I really appreciate how they stayed committed to each other and they have stayed receptive to me and the coaching staff. And then beyond that, I mean, we just -- there was a lot of low-hanging fruit, we felt like, that we could grab hold of in the last several weeks of the season, and I think our guys did that, along with gaining individual confidence, guys like Royce and NJ, Adrien Stevens.

And that's what sucks because, honestly, my first thought when the game ended was I wanted to coach these guys another day, and sometimes when you have a season like we had this year, there could be a mentality of, well, it's just not our year and let's focus on -- man, the way our guys have been growing and improving, I wanted to get a chance to play again tomorrow. It wasn't in the cards. We got some really hurt, disappointed guys, angry guys, upset guys in the locker room because they felt like that was a winnable game. But we have to be big boys and learn from it and grow from it and be better the next time we come here.

Q. It didn't seem like you guys had enough depth this season. You were relying on five or six guys for the last stretch of the season. I know you talked about taking a pause after the season, but how much have you thought about how to construct a roster differently in the future?

SHAKA SMART: Well, I thought more about roster construction this season during the season than I ever have before during a season, obviously because of just the changing landscape of everything. You don't want to necessarily determine your rotation for next year, but over the next couple months we do have to determine our roster. And those two things are not exactly the same. But

the rotation's got to come out of the roster. I do think we have some young players, Michael Phillips showed it tonight, that can emerge and develop and be part of a rotation playing heavy minutes. He was terrific tonight. I think Damarius Owens has had games where he's been really, really good. I thought in the second half he came alive and was much, much better. We've got some other young players in our program, including the three red shirts that really have a chance. But at the same time we will still have a lot of young guys next year and that's why, man, for me, the coaching staff, for these guys, the number one thing over the next several months is growth. And there's a lot of things that go into that. Really following the formula that Oso Ighodaro, Tyler Kolek, Cam Jones, Stevie Mitchell, that those guys laid out as young players when they went from freshmen to sophomores and sophomores to juniors. Exactly what they did is what these guys need to do. And then, we're not done with our roster, we will keep evolving. And you're exactly right, we're going to make sure we have more depth.

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