

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 15, 2025

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

Colorado State Rams Coach Niko Medved Nique Clifford Jalen Lake

Postgame Press Conference

Colorado State 83, Utah State 72

THE MODERATOR: For Colorado State we have student-athletes Nique Clifford, Jalen Lake, Coach Niko Medved. Coach?

NIKO MEDVED: I mean, our guys really came ready to play today. They just had an unbelievable mindset, and they were aggressive on both ends of the floor. They were flying around. They just had the mentality you have to have this time of year to find a way to win.

We got in major foul trouble again in the second half. It was a very physical game and they were scoring a lot at the line and our rebounding probably wasn't what was needed here today. But, you know, you look at the game and they're a great team, you know, and they were going to make a run.

Tonight probably the free throw shooting was uncharacteristic. We are the best free throw shooting team in our league and the top-20 in the country and tonight we missed a lot of free throws that probably would have iced the game. Are you kidding me, an 11-point win against a team like that in the Mountain West semis? I'm ecstatic, and tomorrow we get to play for a Championship.

Q. Jalen, you struggled last night; you came out hot tonight. How great was that to see them going in?

JALEN LAKE: No, it was nice to see shots going in. My teammates were able to find me thankfully, so I was able to get hot in that first half. Just had to flush yesterday and come in with a new mindset for today.

Q. Nique, the lid goes on the basket for you guys in



the last ten minutes. What's the focus to finish this out?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: Yeah, like Coach said, we knew they was going to make a run, they're a great team, so they not going to quit.

I think we got stagnant offensively a little bit and got into their game. We just found a way to get stops at the end. They made some big-time plays, but at the end of the game we found ways to get stops and seal it.

Q. That first 30 minutes, first half especially dominant defensively. How fun is it to be playing in that type of flow for you guys?

JALEN LAKE: Oh, yeah, it's awesome playing with the flow of the game. Like Coach said, they're a tough team, and I thought we really started out just really physicality on the defensive end to start and that helped us offensively.

Q. You guys are playing for a Championship tomorrow; what does that mean?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: It's what we worked for all year, so, you know, we just going to get back to the drawing board and get ready to go.

Q. 62 fouls called in this game. How much do you think that attributed to the lack of flow offensively at the end?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: I think it played a part, most definitely. There were a lot of fouls called, some questionable calls in there, but it was both ways. You can't complain about that.

But it definitely, definitely made the game a little more slow-paced, and we just had to find ways to be smart and figure out a game plan to be aggressive to get ourselves to the line.

Q. What can you say about this team's resilience this season?



JALEN LAKE: I mean, it's awesome. I mean, just the growth that we've shown and the resilience, the maturity, I feel like we have grown so much from November and December to now. It's awesome. It's just a testament to the work that we put in every single day and just staying consistent.

Q. CSU hasn't won this game, this semifinal game since the 2017 season. How does it feel to be part of the team that broke that streak?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: Can't ask for more. It's pretty special. We're writing our names in history. So if we go out and do what we're supposed to tomorrow, I feel like, you know, that's what you work for all year. That's what you want to do as a collegiate athlete.

It's pretty special to be a part of, and just to see where we came from at the at the beginning of the year nobody thought we was going to be in this position, so it's been cool to prove everybody wrong and do what we knew we were capable of.

Q. Last time you played Utah State, it was really advantageous to have a hot start for you guys. Do you think you used that to your advantage in today's game?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: Yes. I think we came out the same way almost that we did at home against them, and I think they're probably one of the best, if not the best, offensive team in our league. So we knew defensively we had to come out with an edge. We had to make it tough on them, be physical and aggressive.

We knew the offense would come as long as we take care of the rock, and I think defensively our mindset was really good to start the game.

Q. For both of you, you guys looked like you were having fun out there tonight. Would you say this is one of your favorite games in your career?

JALEN LAKE: Yeah, for sure. I would say it was definitely one of my favorites. I've been -- this is my third time being in the semifinal game and we haven't got past that, so it's definitely one that you can stamp for sure.

Q. You guys in the three games against Utah State you have shot incredibly well, north of 50% from three. What do you feel like contributed to how well you played offensively against the Aggies this season?

NIQUE CLIFFORD: I think we have good game plans going into the game and trusting ourselves. They played a

unique zone. It's a little different, like a match-up zone, so we just try and find our spots, and then, you know, when we run the offense that we're capable of, we get open shots so everybody is confident taking those shots and knockin' 'em down.

Q. Do you think maybe the increased aggressiveness out of the gates opened up the floor a little bit more in terms of spacing, passing lanes?

JALEN LAKE: Yeah. I mean it definitely did. It opened up a lot of guys to get a lot of open looks. I thought we did a good job in that first half staying on the attack, and we settled a few times. But I feel like we stayed on the attack for the most part in that first half so it opened up shots and getting foul calls.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, guys. Questions for Coach?

Q. Niko I thought there were countless moments in that first half that contributed to that run. Was there a run that stood out to you as you were building that lead?

NIKO MEDVED: I don't know, I thought right at the end of the first half, you know, we stole a pass on the inbound and Nique dunked it in transition. I thought our spirit was at an all-time high.

There was another one that stood out. There was a loose ball and both Ethan and Bowen were diving for it and it showed where our mindset was and where we needed to be. These guys fought really hard to get here.

They've really put everything they have into this team and each other every day to get where they are and it pretty cool to watch.

Q. Obviously just saw Boise State a week ago. Does the quick turn between match-ups facing them impact anything or do you guys all know each other so well it doesn't matter?

NIKO MEDVED: I think all the teams know each other so well in the league. I mean, we play in, what, less than 24 -- whatever it is. Here tomorrow. So there's really not a lot of time to think about it too much.

You know what they do well, they know what we do well, and we gotta get as much rest as we can and show up, get a few shots up, touch our toes a couple times and throw it up and see what we got.

Q. Is there anything specific you do? It's almost like AAU style of quick turnaround of games.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

NIKO MEDVED: A little bit. We get out of here late, you get back, guys get treatment, they will be wired but you try to get 'em to bed and let 'em sleep as long as we can, get up, get something to eat, watch a little bit of film, just to get clarity on what we want to do tomorrow.

But, listen, Boise State is like us. They're incredibly well coached. They got great players. They're tough. They're just going to try to go out and do what they do, right? And we've got to do the same thing.

There will be tweaks in the game plan and all that stuff, but it's who can get to their game quicker tomorrow on the court and who can make more plays than the other.

Q. Nikola Djapa was probably one of the tallest guys on the court today. Was he originally part of your game plan?

NIKO MEDVED: We've got a lot of guys that get minutes there. Nikola, Kyle, and Rashaan, Crock will slide over there. Again, there was a lot of fouls called. It was a really, really physical game that way, so we needed it.

But I thought those guys came in and he gave us a good spark.

Q. Speaking of that defense Utah State averages 38% from the field, you held them to 36 of 21 from three. How important were your defensive players today?

NIKO MEDVED: I thought defensively we were really good. Other than the fouls. But I thought we challenged the guys. It's hard. When they're in the double bonus late like that we probably couldn't be as physical as we needed to on some of the those plays because really they were scoring from the free throw.

They're a tough team to zone, but I thought our zone defense was great late in the game for us. If anything, it made them take time off the clock and we weren't fouling so much. We just needed to -- the clock was our friend at that point. If we made a few more free throws, took care of the ball a little better, it wouldn't have gotten as tight as it did.

Q. Last night Kyan and Lake were about five of 20 from the floor, combined for 28 tonight. How big of an offensive catalyst were those two?

NIKO MEDVED: Huge. You gotta flush it. You heard 'em say that. You've got to flush it. If it didn't go your way, you've got to flush it and move on. I think that's what these guys have learned. They move on to the next play and

they find other ways to help.

Jalen has had a great year for us and it was great to see him come out and be aggressive. I thought he really set the Toni today for how he played and sine has been playing like that for a couple of months.

Q. You've preached defense for years, and especially this season. Steve Alford said yesterday that's kind of what separates this team from the CSU teams of the past, they defend at a truly elite level. How rewarding is that?

NIKO MEDVED: It is. And I thought last year we had statistically maybe our best defensive group and last year we struggled to shoot the three down the stretch and this year where we are at we've got it clicking on both ends. We're able to beat people in different ways, depending at a high level, sharing it, and a lot of guys knocking down shots but anyone who is in this situation the team we're going to play tomorrow is going to say the same thing, they've got a lot of guys playing really, really well.

It feels good. That's what changed it for us, us committing on the defensive end.

Q. For all ten guys who touched the floor tonight to score, does that surprise you at all?

NIKO MEDVED: If you ask me how we had success against Utah State, they're a really good team, but I think against a match-up like that, we're a very unselfish team. We move the ball, we share it, and the guys trust each other.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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