

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 12, 2026

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

UNLV Rebels

Coach Josh Pastner

Dra Gibbs-Lawhorn

Howie Fleming Jr.

Postgame Press Conference

Utah State 80, UNLV 60

THE MODERATOR: For UNLV we have student-athletes Dra Gibbs-Lawhorn, Howie Fleming Jr., Coach Josh Pastner.

Coach, we'll start with you and get your thoughts on today's game.

JOSH PASTNER: Yeah, credit to Utah State. Really good team. Obviously very well-coached. You know, I thought just the bottom line, and we talked about it, that they thrive off of live ball turnovers. I call them pick-sixes and/or bad shots. We had too many of both.

First half we were under 50% of getting in the paint. I think we're about as good as anyone in the country, maybe the best -- our average in our offense is around about getting 70% of our scoring is in the paint. Like, we touch the paint at least 70% of the time during the course of a game. That's, like, maybe the highest in the country.

In the first half we were below 50%. We just didn't get into the paint. The turnovers were just obviously a big, big deal for us. They beat us points in the paint. That was a big thing.

I would say the second half we cut it to 11, and there was a window there. They gave us a window to get through it, a door to get through, and we missed a lot of free-throws. Front ends of one-on-one, missed some layups, missed some open shots.

Unfortunately, free-throws have hurt us this year. Even though we're only 8 of 15, it probably was more similar to 8 for 20. 8 for 21 if you include all the front ends of the



one-on-ones. We struggled in that area.

I say all that to say I'm proud of our guys. You know, they have given me, us, the program everything that they've had and have laid it all on the floor. Utah State was ready to go. We had obviously beat them twice. The only team to beat them at their spot, in a convincing fashion, whatever it was, 91-60-something the last time we played them here at home about a week ago.

They were ready to go. They had a great physicality. They made some big shots, and we just did not live enough in the paint in that first half and that ended up biting us in the butt.

In the second half, again, they hit some big shots, and we just didn't convert on a couple of opportunities there and they took advantage of it.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes first.

Q. Howie, March brings emotion and chippiness. But in moments, especially in that second half, did it feel like you guys started to act out of character?

HOWIE FLEMING JR.: No, I don't think we were acting out of character. Like you said, moments get high and intense. I felt like both ends, we were just out there showing our competitive nature.

Q. If there's a chance to play postseason basketball after this, would you guys want to do that?

DRA GIBBS-LAWHORN: Most definitely. I would. Just talking to Coach Pastner, he says he's a competitor. I'm like, Yeah, Coach, I'm a competitor too. So I would love to.

HOWIE FLEMING JR.: Same.

Q. For both of the players, I know it's kind of hard to even reflect right now just because the game is so fresh, but how would you just describe this year playing for the Runnin' Rebels?



DRA GIBBS-LAWHORN: It's been a blessing to be on this. The season I had, the words got all out the window. Just to be able to play with my brothers and play with the staff, Coach Pastner, just to be able to play basketball in general at this level has been a real blessing from God for me, so I'm forever thankful for it.

HOWIE FLEMING JR.: Yeah, kind of like Dra said, it's been a blessing for sure. This is the highest level of basketball I've been on in my college career. So I'm grateful for Pastner giving me the opportunity. There's been moments where we felt the love from the city, and it's just been amazing.

So just like Dra said, I'm just grateful to keep playing the game.

Q. In wins this year, both your offense has been a big key to this team winning games. This game obviously both of you from an offensive standpoint, it was difficult. What specifically did the Aggies bring to the table from a defensive standpoint that made it difficult for both of you guys tonight?

DRA GIBBS-LAWHORN: For me, I think they played kind of the same defense they were playing. I just missed shots, and I forced shots, shots I probably shouldn't have taken. But for me it was just, I feel like I kind of defeated myself with my performance. I still played hard.

As far as a team, I mean, I thought we had great execution and offense at times. Yeah, I really feel like it was just defensively, we kind of let off defensively. Some of our turnovers, the times we didn't turn the ball over was a good possession, and times we did it was just fast-break bucket.

HOWIE FLEMING JR.: My thing for me, like Dra said, I just missed some good looks. Also, they do a pretty good job of staying in those gaps. You know, we're a downhill team. We like to get in the paint. So they did a pretty good job of being physical, being in the gap, sending doubles and sending help. So I think that kind of sped us up a little bit.

But I mean, for me, I just missed a handful of good shots.

Q. Dra, there obviously is a lot of extracurricular activity there in the second half, right, as far as both teams getting into it a little bit. Obviously capped off by you and Mason getting into it. Is it more about frustration, I guess, level for you guys having that kind of transpire there at the end of the game?

DRA GIBBS-LAWHORN: I wasn't frustrated at all. He got

up and bumped into me. So I don't know what he had to be frustrated about, to be honest.

HOWIE FLEMING JR.: It's easy to do all that when you're winning in the moment.

DRA GIBBS-LAWHORN: Yeah.

Q. Just a follow-up. Utah State mentioned UNLV as a trash-talking team twice in their presser, and I'm just wondering where is that coming from. I guess as a media member we don't see that. We don't know what it looks like. So where is that coming from?

DRA GIBBS-LAWHORN: People paint that on us. Everyone talks smack in basketball. Most of the time other teams start it first. Maybe the way we do it, I don't know if people want to be like, Oh, they're the bad guys. I don't know, but I love my brothers. I wouldn't want to go to war with nobody else this year.

HOWIE FLEMING JR.: We just protect each other. That's all I can say.

THE MODERATOR: We'll dismiss the student-athletes. Questions for the Coach.

Q. By points per possession this was one of your three worst offensive games of the season. A lot of turnovers in there. What do you think specifically caused the offensive struggles?

JOSH PASTNER: Yeah, no, it was not a good game offensively. And we've been a team that one of our issues this year has been on the defensive end, not on the offensive end. We've been scoring at such a high rate, as I mentioned those stats yesterday. Some of the times -- for the first two times we beat Utah State was because of the way we could really score the ball.

You know, we talk a lot about ghost screens or the play after the play that gets us into our -- which I call a down, which is our play after the play action, which is we're playing uphill and we're cutting and we're moving. Because of the way Utah State plays, they kind of play that switching zone and they're up in you and the physicality of it.

The first two times we played them, we really got behind the defense. We penetrated, living in the paint and playing off of two feet, two feet, two feet, two feet, two feet, two feet. Today we played a lot off of one foot.

We did not get into the paint as much in that first half. I thought we settled for a lot of shots out on midrange twos

and longer threes that were contested and plus some of those turnovers. Tyler, we're a team that has to live in the paint. We're a 70% team that gets in the paint, 70% of our offense.

Like I said in the first half, we were under 50%. Credit to Utah State, but part of that our cutting wasn't great. The ghost screens, and we were settling. I thought their physicality maybe got us a little off sorts at times there. We just weren't as fluid as needed to be.

We needed Kimani and Tyrin to be really good for us in this game to relieve some pressure off of Dra. Obviously this wasn't one of Dra's better games, but we needed those two to be at a high clip to get us into the paint area.

They switched a little bit in this game to put their big when we went into our, we call it hawk action, and got Kimani in the post to back him down and then from the cutting from there. And we just missed a couple of opportunities on the cutting that we usually have been pretty successful at. We just weren't able to put the ball in the basket today. That was the bottom line was our offense, which is a credit to Utah State.

Q. You mentioned on Cofield's radio show the importance of retention, a guy like Dra, a guy like Tyrin this offseason. How important financially will it be to keep these Rebels here?

JOSH PASTNER: Look, first of all, what I would tell you is in this first year of trying to rebuild, I mean, there's been a lot of, you know, roller coasters, as I use the word a lot. There was some turbulence, if we were flying an airplane, but there was also times where we got ourselves out of the turbulence, and we've had some great highs and some tough losses.

You know, overall I thought it was a really good opportunity to do a lot of things on the rebuilding process in year one, and we got to make a great step into year two.

Now, yes, retention is so important. I would tell you there's two ways to look at it. I'm prepared that if we lose the entire team, which I don't want to, if we lose the entire team we'll have to go sign new guys. The difference is when I got the job, it was a little bit on the later side. It was pandemonium. It was complete chaos. There was nobody on the roster. It was just a lot.

We didn't really finish our roster until the end of May and June. Actually into July, believe it or not, because we signed Walter Brown in July. It just took us a time.

Then we had the massive injuries, and guys are in and out.

We really struggled in November and December. Today wasn't a good game, but we have come a long way. I mean, our last ten games, we won seven of our last ten. We've been just so much better. I wish we could have some of November and December back.

Now that we're here, we'll be more prepared as we move forward for this offseason. It's not going to be so chaotic and pandemonium on what's going on. I have an understanding of the league and the great coaches and the styles and what we need to do to improve and get better.

But retention is important. I would love to keep our core group. I think we have a great thing. Obviously we're in a world where it costs money for retention. This is not like the scholarship thing. I want to do a great job fundraising, and I said it yesterday that, you know, I'm going to have to get out there and hustle, which I'm not afraid of.

It's sort of like an old-school door-to-door salesman. You're knocking on doors in a sense that you got to roll your sleeves up and find what you got to do to hustle, to raise money, to try to keep some of the guys. If not, we'll have to go get a new group of guys.

But you can't be upset about that. There's no being negative about that. That's just part of the profession. I've said this: If you don't like dealing with people, you can't coach in today's climate. It's impossible.

So that's going to be what I've got to do is, who can we retain. I got to see if we can retain guys, and I'm going to hustle along with my bosses and our staff at UNLV in the fundraising side to see what we can do. I'm ready to do it whenever that needs to be done. You got to try to retain guys the best that we can.

Q. Obviously the phrase has been tossed out there, it's tough to beat a team three times in a season, right? But given the success you had in the first two match-ups against this squad, to you, what are the key aspects of what changed today in this match-up against Utah State that really come to mind when it comes to the result in the Mountain West Tournament?

JOSH PASTNER: Yeah, and before I even answer your question, Paloma, and I said this on Steve's radio show last night, Hey, if anybody's got -- don't send me about a prospect in 2028, about a prospect of a recruit. I needed to get a prospect of a donor. I said, If you have somebody, email me. I'm serious. My email is -- I respond to everyone -- joshua.pastner@unlv.edu. Somebody who hasn't been tapped into or has an opportunity that they think needs a tax write-off because it's a tax write-off, email me, and I'll do what I got to do to go try and bridge a

relationship. Joshua.pastner@unlv.edu. That's just the world we're in on that.

I said on Steve's radio show, you need someone with really deep pockets and long arms, you know what I mean? That's what we're constantly trying to find.

To answer your question, I'm not a big believer in the three-game deal. I'm a big believer that every game is unique. It's its own identity, and you've got to be -- it's just part of the deal. We played really well against them the first two times. They were the tougher team today. The first two times we were the tougher team. To beat Utah State, you got to have toughness. The first two times we were more tougher than Utah State, without question. It wasn't even a debate.

This time they were the tougher team, and they beat us. Playing against them, it's just about toughness. We were able to score, as I was just telling Tyler. We scored at a high clip against them both times, high points per possession. I think if you asked Utah State, it might have been the two times the highest team someone scored against them points per possession. But this game they were the tougher team, and that's strictly why they won the game. They were tougher than we were today.

Q. You really emphasized a lot of things this season: Culture, defense, pace, even like community outreach, how you just gave out your email address. I'm wondering if there's anything about your philosophy or approach that you plan on changing for next season, anything you are pivoting from from this year?

JOSH PASTNER: Well, what you see with me is what you get. I don't care. Am I right? I'm the same. You sat in my office and did a story on me back before you had your child. I mean, right? We sat there and did a story. Is there anything different from me from when you met me today? No. What you see with me is what you get.

I'm constantly trying to improve and be better as a human being, be better as a coach. And yeah, there's going to be things we'll change, that we have to get better at. There's no doubt about that. That's just part of -- you always want to improve.

I'm a hands-on guy. I'm a down-to-earth dude. I've had the same cell phone number for my whole life. People call me. I respond to everybody. I give out my email just like I gave it out. You can put it in the paper. I asked the radio show, why don't we have people calling in, even after losses? Because this is their program, the fans. Some people email me when they're frustrated. No problem.

I'm very direct and honest and don't want to hide from anything. When things are going not good or we have a tough stretch, I think it's important that the fan base hears from their head coach on things why we did something or what we needed to get better at. So that's not changing.

We need to be better in some other areas. We need to do a great job in the portal. We need to do a great job, if we can, in the retention. If we can't, we'll do a great job on who we need to sign, because I think we've set a good foundation of what needs to be done.

I thought in this year culturally was so important for us to set this is how we're going to do it, this is who I am. Understanding about winning is more important than breathing. Understanding that it's going to take just a fight, scrap, kick, claw. Because we have a long way to go to have the fan base like Utah State has and different programs like that.

I have a vision that I want us to bring it back, but it's not going to happen by the snap of the fingers. We had a little taste of it here and there, but it's going to be an absolute kick, fight, scratching and clawing our way to get this thing continuing to build in the right way, to get this thing so we can get UNLV basketball back to where everybody wants to get it back to.

To me, part of the issues in the past, maybe you want to get to the third floor roof deck top pool without having the basement built, the first floor built, the second floor built. Then you can get to the third floor, boom. I don't want it to be forever, but we made good steps and strides in this year in how we want to do things. So we will build on that.

We need to get better in some different areas. I'm well aware of and we will. There will be some things we'll do differently in the summer and in the fall.

I think we have an alignment of what needs to be done on who are you going to recruit and what type of student-athlete we're going to go after. I like us where we're going to go to moving forward. I'm excited about the future.

All I can tell you is I'm not a guy -- I have toughness about me. I'm not a guy that sits in the fetal position, ever. I'm a guy that we will -- I'm a worker, I'm a grinder, I'm a 24/7, 365 guy. What you see is what you get. I'm an emotional guy. I wear my emotions on the sleeve. I love coaching UNLV. I have a great belief and vision that we can get this thing turned around. I so believe it.

It's not going to be easy. It's going to be really hard. Really, really hard. But, I believe we have a good pathway

and hopefully we can get it done and get people back in the stadium and have a great season next season.

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