

State Farm Missouri Valley Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 8, 2020

St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Enterprise Center

Bradley Braves

Coach Brian Wardle

Postgame Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Champion Bradley Braves are here. They're champions in the tournament for the second straight year. From my left to my right, it's Nate Kennell, Darrell Brown, Jr., the head coach, Brian Wardle, Elijah Childs, Koch Bar, Ja'Shon Henry, and Danya Kingsby.

BRIAN WARDLE: What a great memory to have. A lot of hard work. A lot of adversity we've been through this year to be in this position. The belief was always there in that locker room. I'm so happy for our seniors that they were able to do this again and repeat it. A lot of people thought we got lucky last year, and we knew that wasn't the case. We knew our high level of play can play with anyone. They were on a mission to come out this weekend to prove that, and we were able to do that.

I want to give Valpo a lot of credit. They had a great weekend. They're a well coached team. Matt did a great job with his group to get them to the championship game. They're a competitive team. Obviously, the future is bright there. Just very proud how we were able to pull out the game and finish the game in the last 15, 14 minutes. I thought we played very well and played smart. Obviously, defense wins, and we buckled down and got a lot of stops at the end of the game.

Q. Darrell, you're going to the line there toward the end of the game, amid the chance of MVP. How difficult was it for you to keep your concentration during that time? Obviously, you knocked down the free throws, but take us through your mind during those moments.

DARRELL BROWN: It was special, man. It's something you see on 2K. I don't know if you play 2K or not. When your player going off, you get the MVP chants. It's something special you see on TV growing up. The fan base at Bradley and Peoria had supported me from day

one. Me and my teammates, through the good and the bad times. It was just special seeing where the hard work has brought us. So I appreciate that.

Q. For all three seniors, can you all talk about what this means for the program to be from where you came in to where it is now, winning back to back championships.

THE MODERATOR: Nate, you're first. Koch is second. Darrell is third.

NATE KENNEL: It means a lot, especially to do it with these guys. These are some of my best friends right here, just making memories like this. We've been through the hard and the good and the bad. Being able to do it with these two other seniors, it's special. It's something I'll never forget.

KOCH BAR: It means a lot to us as a team. And also to the new group that's behind us, like Eli, that's going to, you know, continue carrying the torch and to be able to do this again hopefully again. Overall, it just means a lot for us to win a game and also set a good example for the youngest freshmen in our team, just give them that experience to take home the trophy.

DARRELL BROWN: I think they said everything. It's been special, man. It took many bad losses, had some great wins, and it's just nice seeing the hard work pay off and the new guys following along. Eli's been special, Ja'Shon's been special, Danya. It's just a great thing to see come true. Dreams come true day in and day out. Coaching staff has been great for us.

Hopefully, this program just keeps going up each year.

Q. Coach, I know Darrell is sitting right next to you, but I wanted to awkwardly ask you about Darrell. Can you just put into words the engine that he is for your team, notably tonight from the point guard position?

BRIAN WARDLE: He's been -- just know this; Darrell and I have been through some ups and downs, but our relationship got stronger and stronger and stronger, and



we have a real true relationship. A lot of coaches, they just talk to their players once in a while, and they go to practice. Me and him, we know each other inside and out, and I think to see where he's come, he's put so much hard work in. He's so consistent. He's so durable. These three seniors are winners. They don't miss practice. They don't miss games.

I don't take that for granted. I understand how important that is to set an example and have the expectations every day of we practice hard and we get after it every day. These three guys led by Darrell are there every day doing it and putting the work in. I just think his leadership -- I told him the other day. His leadership the last month has been unbelievable. It's the best of his career, and he's kind of really took it under his wing, and these three seniors, with Elijah and those other guys, and just kind of rolled with it.

We were a very tight knit group coming into this tournament, and the expectation was there. We were on a mission, and we were all on the same page.

Q. Brian, it obviously worked. Switching to the zone, just what was your thinking about that? And why did you turn your hat back around frontwards?

BRIAN WARDLE: I'm not sure, but the zone -- I wanted to get one or two possessions of zone in the first half. We did it the very last possession of the half, got a stop. I liked what I saw, how they were trying to attack it. We talked about it at halftime. My staff said we definitely had to go back to it. I agreed. It was just the right time and the right lineup to do it.

I thought we put it on them at the exact right time. I think it was around the 12-minute mark or 11-minute mark maybe. We could tell they were a little frustrated, slowed them down. We didn't have to chase them through their motions so our guys could stay in zones and areas and save their legs a little bit, to be honest.

From there, we went out and started a run again, and we started to get out in transition and get some baskets. We're a 95, 98 percent man team, but you've got to have a zone in your back pocket for these types of situations, and it definitely helped us win.

Q. Harry stole my question, but I just wanted to ask you a little bit more about going to the zone. They had made half of their threes to that point, and then I think they missed their next eight in a row. What -- I mean, can you describe a little more intricately, just in terms of how -- what you did defensively that flummoxed them during that period?

BRIAN WARDLE: Their motion is good, and Valpo can score the ball. They curl you, pop backs, do all different kinds of actions in their motions to get threes. They've got five guys on the floor at times that can shoot it. So They're hard to guard, and you're chasing them around a lot. Third game in three days, it's hard to guard.

Our zone, we know where they're going to get threes. We know specifically the spots where they have to attack us from three, so we can shade towards those areas a little bit. I thought we did a great job of communicating, the players did, on the court of where their shooters are, and we just contested. Deep corner threes with Elijah and Ja'Shon and Koch flying at you are really hard shots. The guards did a great job of picking up the rebounds, and we got out and ran.

Q. For the seniors, what does it mean, when you came in, you're coming off a 5-23 season, and last year the seniors, D. Lo, Van Bree, Luqman led you there, and now you're following in their footsteps. In fact, I heard coach worked it out that if you guys got down, Luqman was going to come down out of the stands and give you another pep talk. But to follow up on what D. Lo and Van Bree and Luqman did and to carry it over, how much does that mean to you?

THE MODERATOR: Koch first, Darrell second, Nate is third.

KOCH BAR: It means a lot. It means we bought into what Coach Wardle put in front of us. It was like the recruiting process. He got that vision for this program, what he want to do with it, and we just came in and just bought into the culture, and we just took from there. Especially see like the group in front of us, like D. Lo and Luuk, and then bought in also. We just followed their footsteps.

When they're gone, we just took from there also, and we knew exactly what we needed to do. I think it means a lot for us, and it also means a lot for the group behind us to set an example of what exactly it takes to win.

DARRELL BROWN: I mean, it's been special, man. The seniors last year were a special group of guys. They lead in different ways. They were different players than us definitely, but at the same time, we all had the same vision in our eyes and as the coaching staff. Just showing the younger guys the way like they showed us the way. Just putting in the work consistently, coming ready to go every day to practice and stuff like that. All the days you don't see behind closed doors are the days that lead to moments like this.

Just carrying the legacy and passing it down to guys like

Eli and Ja'Shon and showing the next group of guys the way, that's how you build something special and build a program.

NATE KENNEL: Yeah, especially just from the seniors, just learned a lot of things from them. Their vocalness, vocal leadership was huge, and I think that's something we were able to take care of that -- or take after that, especially down the stretch, just continuing to be local leaders and helping in these moments when other guys haven't been here before. So just continue to lead with our voice and by example.

Q. For Elijah and maybe Darrell, you obviously had a lot of pieces here today that were part of it last year. I'm just wondering, did you feel like in the second half everyone was really at ease, calm, confident, even when you were down two, maybe halfway through the second half?

THE MODERATOR: Elijah first, Darrell second.

ELIJAH CHILDS: Oh, yeah, most definitely. Once we got comfortable into the game, I feel like everybody stepped up, you know, everybody be the star in their role. From the first game, we knew once we got our feet wet a little bit, our newcomers got the feeling and the people that's been here before, they got their feeling back, we knew we could do something special, and we knew we could lock in and win this.

DARRELL BROWN: Yeah, what Eli said, man. After the first game, I think, after we got our feet wet and just got ready to play and got a feel for the arena and stuff like that, we were good to go. We just kind of took it one possession at a time, one stop, one possession on offense at a time. Each game, man, I think, as long as we did that and stayed together throughout the adversity and stuff like that and as long as the guys that have been here stayed calm throughout whatever, the new guys would follow along, and they did a great job, man. They made big plays, play in and play out.

Q. For Darrell, since last year's NCAA Tournament game, have you thought about that game at all? Like over the past year, do you think about it and how close you guys were at some point?

DARRELL BROWN: I think that's been a common topic between all us returners, man. We talk about, if one play would have went this way, how different things would have been. I think we definitely would have made it to the Sweet 16 if we'd have won that game.

We talk about it a lot. We've been itching to get back there,

and we're here now, so it's time to make some noise.

Q. I asked the same question yesterday, but you guys just made more school history. You guys did something that nobody else in the storied school has ever done before. This could go for any of you. What does that feel like? What does that mean to you?

THE MODERATOR: Danya, you're first. Ja'Shon, you're second.

DANYA KINGSBY: It's a great feeling. I've been waiting on this moment all my life. Playing on this stage, winning a tournament championship, and playing in a March Madness tournament. So it feels good. It's special. I'm just proud of my teammates and the coaches, and we're ready.

JA'SHON HENRY: First off, let's start by saying that I'm so happy to be playing alongside these guys. Especially these seniors, their leadership, their hard work, it's just a good example for all our young guys, like me, Eli, and all the freshmen. Just being able to do this two years in a row, it's a great feeling. Super proud of these guys.

Q. This is for Elijah, Brian, and Nate. After that regular season finale loss to Loyola, your guys' message, all three, basically, was that you're still hungry, and you're not done yet. So how much of that was like a motivating factor for this tournament?

ELIJAH CHILDS: I think that's definitely a motivator. We felt like we should have pulled that game -- we should have pulled that "W" out, but then again, I feel like the seniors got disrespected with the awards and all that. We really followed Darrell's lead. He tweeted out something, be there on the weekend, and here we are now. Everybody followed that lead. Everybody had that hunger. He's really a sign of a leader, a sign of success, and we just followed his lead, and he brought us home.

NATE KENNEL: Could you repeat the question again?

THE MODERATOR: Motivation after losing to Loyola.

NATE KENNEL: Oh, yeah. I think we played well that game. We did a lot of good things. I mean, it really carried us into this tournament. I think, as long as we keep going -- we still haven't peaked. We still haven't played our best basketball. Those games and these games here are just leading us to even better basketball. I think we have a lot more to do here in March. This is the best time to be playing your best ball and be peaking as a team.

BRIAN WARDLE: We were motivated. We were very motivated, led by these seniors. Like I said, we were all on

the same page on what we wanted to prove to everybody and accomplish. We went through a lot this year, a lot more than I think most teams in our league did when it comes to injuries, and we sustained it. We kept winning. We kept finding new ways to win.

Guys like Ya and Ja'Shon stepped up big time. Darrell missed a couple of games for like the first time in his career. Elijah was out for a while. Koch had huge games. Ari Boya had big games. Antonio Thomas had big games. We had a lot of guys -- Sean had big games. We had a lot of guys step up.

When you go through that as a group and you all get healthy at the right time, which is what I was hoping for, anything can happen with this group, and we've just got to keep building off that.

Q. Brian, I'm sure you haven't thought about where your team might go, but would it be fun to come right back here in two weeks?

BRIAN WARDLE: Absolutely. We love this arena. I'll tell you what, the hospitality, the professionalism of everybody here at this tournament is first class. I've said it before as a coach and player, I've been to a lot of different tournaments, but the security guards are the best. Three of them say, we've got you winning this, Coach, on Friday. They're making predictions, and we're having a lot of fun talking. They've been wonderful to us, and we love this arena, we love being in St. Louis.

Q. Coach, I feel like I have to ask, will the red shoes be making an appearance in the NCAA Tournament?

BRIAN WARDLE: Yes, they will, and they're comfortable this year. Last year, not very comfortable. They're comfortable this year.

Q. Darrell, this might have been asked already, but near the end of the game, you're at the free-throw line. The whole arena is chanting MVP. What's going into your mind at that time?

DARRELL BROWN: I mean, it was special. The city of Peoria and the Bradley fans have supported me from day one, supported my teammates from day one, and I mean, just seeing where we've come from, what we've come from, and all the things we've been through, it's just a blessing hearing that while you're shooting free throws and really just winning the championship over. That was the best thing and the best feeling.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you. Congratulations.

