

2024 NCAA Men's Lacrosse Championship

Saturday, May 25, 2024

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

Lincoln Financial Field

Maryland Terrapins

Coach John Tillman

Luke Wierman

Colin Sharkey

Media Conference



Maryland - 12, Virginia - 6

JOHN TILLMAN: Proud of our group. I thought they had a great week of preparation, the players, everybody, whether they played today or not, just got great efforts and the coaches. Jesse's defensive game plan was great. These guys executed it extremely well.

And offensively, just to get off to such a good start, I felt like Luke did a tremendous job with his possessions, then we were able to capitalize on some of those, whereas a week ago we had possessions and we had so many turnovers. I thought we were better. We weren't great, but we were better. So a credit to them.

Obviously hats off to Lars and his staff. They do an awesome job. Super talented. Obviously one of the great programs in the country. Honor to play them. Obviously just delighted to have a chance on Memorial Day to take this thing to the end.

Q. Luke, the first five faceoffs in a row, could you tell us how it sparked your afternoon and gave you guys extra possessions you were able to capitalize on?

LUKE WIERMAN: I thought the game plan was very well executed in the beginning. I thought we had a good game plan and we just kind of stuck to that. I think the offense scoring, like Coach said, and capitalizing on those opportunities definitely helps that. Gives confidence to the whole team, confidence in myself and our wings and the chemistry we had kind of building.

We just stuck to that game plan. Have been working on it all week.

Q. Colin, you guys had some problems with them particularly in their midfield the first time around. How did you manage to flip things this time around and kind of short-circuit their offense the way you guys did?

COLIN SHARKEY: A lot of what we were focusing on was get them 6-on-6. They're a team that excels in uneven or 5-on-5 situations, and that's what they look for. A lot was it Coach Tillman implementing a new ride that helped us get them to 6-on-6 and that kind of stuff. I think as soon as we were able to do that stuff, we were immediately able to find more success, get stops.

Q. Luke, this is obviously your third national championship game with Coach Tillman. How much confidence does it give you to play against him when it gets to postseason and final games of the year?

LUKE WIERMAN: Obviously a lot of confidence, for sure. Been here for a long time. We just trust him so much. He trusts us. And I think that's a big part of it all. He always says he's been doing it a long time, likes to make jokes about it. Obviously he has, and he's had a lot of success, and we just stick to his game plan, we're confident in that, and makes ourselves confident.

Q. Colin, when Ajax shuts down the opposing number one as well as he does, how much does it open up and free the rest of the defense to be yourselves, simple it out for you guys?

COLIN SHARKEY: Ajax is incredible. We have the utmost confidence in him to win his matchup and do his job which allows us to kind of do our own thing and not worry about that as much, and being able to take a player like Connor Shellenberger and put him on an island with Ajax. Shellenberger is going to get his every now and then, but we trust Ajax to continue to do that, and it allows our defense to succeed and puts us in a great spot. It's amazing.

Q. Luke and Colin, great defensive effort today. Two quarters, they only scored one goal. The other two quarters, they scored two goals. They scored 14 goals

against you two months ago. You shut down Schutz, four points, two assists. I want to turn the page to Monday. Will Lynch had a great game at X today. And Monday's going to be, you know, a slog, I think. It might be raining. So in that game, your defense was fantastic today. And when you go up against Notre Dame, they gave us this sheet, and it says on here that Notre Dame, this is the seventh time this season they've handed an opponent its worst loss of the season by goal margin. They're on a 13-game consecutive winning streak, their longest since 2009. I mean, this team is on fire. What's the game plan for Monday?

LUKE WIERMAN: I think that's a question for somebody else up here. The game plan is to stick to his game plan. That's the game plan for us.

JOHN TILLMAN: And then go to Chipotle or Maggiano's --

LUKE WIERMAN: Yeah. But they're a hot team. They have a lot of great players, All-Americans scattered throughout the roster. The question from earlier, we trust each other, focusing on sticking together as a team no matter what happens. That trust goes a long way.

Q. UVA took 37 shots today, only put 17 on net. How as a defensive group were you able to force those poor shots?

COLIN SHARKEY: Goes back to this week in practice. Our scout guys gave us a fantastic look, all of their guys, their looks. We were able to go in with kind of a sense of we've already seen it. So it wasn't like going out there the first time we've seen a look, which is huge for us and allows us to be successful.

Along with that, as I said earlier, we have guys like Ajax we trust. We trust everyone. Everyone did their job today. We don't ask anyone to do too much. That's what helps us win.

Q. Shellenberger opens the game with that backhand over Ajax. What's the defense huddle like after that, what are you saying to Ajax, and what does he come into the defense huddle saying?

COLIN SHARKEY: Like I said, we have so much faith in Ajax he's proven what he can do over the past four years. But at the same time, Shellenberger, he's an incredible player. He will get assists and score goals. That doesn't change our game plan. Jesse put in a game plan so we're going to stick with that no matter what happens. If he gets one or two, great, let him get three, four, before we change it up. Ton of faith in him. He's the leader of defense. He's

been doing it all year. Nothing's going to change that.

Q. You mentioned wanting to keep them 6-on-6. You had a couple of transition plays today. Just two points, what went into that? Did you feel an extra oomph getting upfield today?

COLIN SHARKEY: Yeah, maybe. I guess so. No, I was just in the right place at the right time. I scored a goal, but credit goes to -- I think it was Colin Sharkey put the ball on the ground and threw an incredible check and allowed me to pick up the ground ball for a clean 4 v. 3. That was awesome. The second one, Eric Spanos made one heck of a catch. Not my best pass. It was a team effort. It was far from just me doing anything.

Q. What was said at the halftime that allowed you to come in the second half and shut down Virginia?

LUKE WIERMAN: Just what we were saying was kind of look back at some of the games we had this season, especially a couple weeks ago against Princeton. We didn't start that second half very well. We were just reiterating that to the guys in the locker room and on the field, just saying we can't start slow especially against a team like this, with the firepower they have.

So just focusing on pedal to the metal stick together and to the game plan, like we're going to start getting tired. It was hot out there today, and especially this time of year teams are run down. And just playing through that tiredness, making a smart play, that was our focus.

Q. Luke, after the two games, if we can call them games, against Hopkins and Penn State in Columbus, what happened? What changed? What was the message from the coaching staff and team leaders that allowed this insane turnaround that you had?

LUKE WIERMAN: I wouldn't say it was one thing that changed or one message that changed this team. We just knew that we needed to keep working. It was not just going to happen overnight. That was really the message that we focused on, was it's not going to happen overnight. New guys in new spots. We lost a lot of guys over the last couple of years. We just needed to keep chipping away at things, chipping away, really sticking together.

Early in the season against Penn State we were down big there at their place. We stuck together and came back and found that identity. And coaches have been putting us in great spots. That's really what it is. Our scout team during the week, I mean, what they come out and do every week and what they execute, that's a massive part of it.

Q. When you're facing a team like that that thrives in transition, does getting the goal that you got at the end of the half where you have a pole goal, does that almost feel like two goals for you?

JOHN TILLMAN: I just think anytime you get -- everybody loves Colin, and when you get a goal from somebody that's a little unlikely, it does go a long way. Especially defensive-type guy. So that was definitely a lift because to get that and then go into the half, right, you're up four now.

And just, again, in a game like that, just changes your mindset just a tad. You know at halftime we just went back in said they're going to dial up the pressure. We might see Nunes. We tried to figure out who was going to play.

The way they rode last week was very different than what they had done all year. So we weren't sure whether that was specific to Hopkins or that was based on the goalie. So we can live scout, so I went up on Sunday. And biggest thing I tried to do, I sat way up. No one wanted to sit by me anyway. But just sitting up, trying to figure out what is going on in the back end. A lot of times on the films you get to scout, you only get half the field.

And they played more quarters back there where a lot of the other games they were playing man-to-man, and I couldn't tell if that was because Nunes wasn't in or something they did to Hopkins. Because they rode incredibly well, but if you look at the other games, it was different, from what I could see. Again, you can't see everything in the back.

We had to have a number of plans based on which goalie, because we thought the rides would change, so we had a number of things. And the kids did a really good job of it. We dialed back on a lot of the banging this week, the 1-on-1s and the 4-on-4s and 5-on-5s, but did more full field.

We didn't do a good job against the ten man last time. We didn't do a good job getting back, the subbing, things like that. So most of the week it's really the unscripted lacrosse.

And I thought we did a great job. The guys followed the plan. We really tried to platoon guys and not get offensive guys caught, and they crushed us on that. They crushed a lot of teams. And when they get to 5 v. 5 or 4 v. 4, they do such a good job.

We butchered one. The ball went out. We ran two guys off. We gave them a quick 6-on-4, and Chizmar got it, credit to them.

But for the most part I thought our guys got back. It was just about get to 6-on-6, get to 6-on-6. And still you have to defend a great group. Obviously Kevin does a great job with the offense, and they're still going to put six great players out there. When they reduce it and they have more space and they kind of -- you have offensive guys or faceoff guys caught, it does make it hard. They do such a good job.

Q. To build off that a little bit, getting your guys into 6-on-6, that's clearly how you guys are most comfortable playing. But were you kind of selling that this week? We need to be buttoned up that way and then things can go a little better than the last week?

JOHN TILLMAN: Big time. Some of the goals they got last time, again, give them credit. It's what they do. We had like Luke caught on defense one time and the ball, like, we had a slide, and then the ball gets thrown inside. And their faceoff guy picks it up and scores. Luke's not really in that spot a lot.

And one time I think Erksa was in there, we slid and they got another one. We failed a couple of clears last time. We just didn't set up right. And part of that was a byproduct of they were playing the 5 v. 5, and then we got a stop and then we just didn't line up right. So then we fail to clear, and then they come back, and now they kind of grind you down. Not only are they going to get a second chance, but maybe unsettled.

They did such a good job. Give them a lot of credit. Obviously their attack rides, 39 is awesome. He's so disruptive. They're just different. So you have to -- I think the second time certainly helped us, just the kids had a reference point. So it wasn't like we were doing it from scratch.

Q. Aside from Notre Dame's ride and the Kavanagh brothers, what most concerns you about Monday's match-up? And you obviously had a tremendous run at success at Maryland. What makes this unit different than your other tournament and Memorial Day Monday teams?

JOHN TILLMAN: I'll go back to, each team is different. Each team is special. To me, especially having done this for a while, to me it's all about the journey. It really is. You start in August, and you have this brand-new journey that you go on.

And then there's so many things that happen on a daily basis that some are lacrosse oriented, some are not. And you get these wide-eyed freshmen, and by the end of the year you see a lot of growth and maturity on and off the

field, and you go through a lot of ups and downs.

We play a great schedule. We play so many good teams, and we certainly -- we've had some bad moments, and I'll own that, and obviously that's my responsibility. At times we've not played well.

But we've owned it. We've always tried to go back and try to improve. We try to stick together, and I think that's the thing that I think is most rewarding is like these guys didn't point the finger. Everybody stuck together. Everybody kept believing.

And to me that's what they need to know going forward in their lives. They're going to deal with bigger challenges, more adversity, and like these experiences hopefully get them ready because they're going to be dads and they're going to be husbands and have to figure stuff out. And when things don't go well, you have no choice, you have to figure out what can we do, what can we control and how do we make the most of this situation.

So those are things that I really appreciate from being an educator is it does mirror life, and again these guys have handled it well. And, again, we've just kind of stuck together. And some of those moments were bad.

And then Notre Dame, I don't have enough time to throw all of the compliments I could because they're so good everywhere. Everything is good. Like they have the best goalie in the country arguably. He's finalist for the Tewaaraton. They have a great faceoff guy. Their defense is tremendous. Short sticks are great, push the ball in transition. They play three midfields, and their third midfield scored today. They scored a lot in the ACC tournament. Rarely can you see a third midfield, and they are really, really productive. And the first two are tremendous. And the Kavanaghs, the way they play, so much passion and energy. They're competitive. They're unselfish.

And, again, they're well-coached. Coach Corrigan has been doing it a long time. He is awesome and his staff is great. They have like just a staff that complements each other, and they have a lot of experience. They don't beat themselves.

We'll have to put a lot of time in over the next two days to try to get ready. We'll try to put together a plan. But we know how good they are. They've been the best team all year. Obviously they were the best team last year.

So we've just got to kind of look at ourselves and look at them and figure out what can we do to put ourselves in the best position to win. Recover, hydrate, and start our prep,

and just make sure we're doing everything we can to put the team into position to win.

But I want these kids to enjoy the moments we have because we only have two days left, and on Tuesday and Wednesday guys are going to start leaving. So they needed to appreciate the moment. Still be hungry, but also realize, like, it's all going to be done soon. So make the most of this time together.

Q. You've been on a good run these last few games, also a very clean run. You haven't been called for a penalties since the third quarter of the Princeton game. Has there been a point of emphasis for you guys that we have to play mistake-free, penalty-free lacrosse, and what's enabled you to play such clean lacrosse?

JOHN TILLMAN: We've been decent this year. We had a few early. We had a couple lacrosse checks where I think against Syracuse we had two two-minute penalties.

We do practice some of those things just to avoid leading with your hands and crosschecking. Jesse Bernhardt does an awesome job with our defense. In terms of the fundamentals -- if you ever watch Jesse play now, he's not a big checker. He neutralizes guys. It's about staying in front of your guy, checking when you need to, but not beating yourself.

So there's a big emphasis on, listen, let's play clean, let's not beat ourselves, let's not be reckless, and be detail oriented. So Jesse deserves a lot of credit.

But also our offensive guys. The last time we played them, they got two man-up goals, one offensive guy got a push and they scored. And then Luke got one, and they scored. It's everybody.

But even in that game, you can't, like, non-defensive guys shouldn't be getting penalties. And the guys have just been more disciplined with it. I think the guys also realized, when we haven't played well, we've not been clean, and we've been undisciplined. So let's just stay disciplined, do the right things, don't go for that home run check. And hopefully, if we could give Logan a shot, maybe good things can happen.

Q. You deflect credit unlike anybody I've ever seen. Everything you say, it's the assistants, it's the players, it's everybody. And I love the way you do that. But at the end of today, when everybody left the field, many of your former players, their parents, their families were chanting your name. And you came over and gave them some high-fives. What does that mean to you how this program loves you?

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

JOHN TILLMAN: I love those guys. To me the relationships are everything. You guys get them for four years, but you're preparing them for 40. But, man, these guys just being with them keeps me young. Sometimes it makes me feel a little old, depending on how bad we play or maybe a bad practice or something like that. But I'm fortunate to coach at a place like Maryland, and I don't take that for granted.

Obviously there's a great responsibility. So I do my very best to just kind of give everything I can every day, and obviously that's really important to me. But I also have great assistants, great support staff. Shawn is here. It's really important at Maryland.

So we get a lot of support. We get support from our alums. And it means a lot to our state. So that's not lost on me. So, again, we have so many good people that are pulling all in the right direction that gives you a chance.

But those guys, man, they're awesome. To see Matty Rambo and all those guys here, to see them being successful and doing great things, making an impact on their communities and just having success, it's awesome. It's why you get into coaching and teaching.

Q. What's the impact of Luke winning the first five faceoffs, especially after Colin scores a minute into the game, and then also what he did overall to set up opportunities the rest of the way?

JOHN TILLMAN: Like getting that first faceoff win, it's like, okay, good. When we didn't maybe get off to the greatest start at first. But with Luke, like knowing that, all right, this feels good, gives you a lot of confidence, and he seemed to be locked in and ready to go.

So offensively, I think it gives definitely some confidence, Luke is awesome. And I think the last game, they did a great job of tying him up and at times, just not letting him get out, being physical, the wings getting involved.

And I don't think, if you ask Luke, he definitely didn't have his best game. So I do think he was focused. I think last time he lost his poise a little bit. He got frustrated. That led to the penalty. And partly because he wants to help the team and he knows that he's a leader for us. And he still played pretty well, but I know for him like his level is really high.

So I think he was dialed in. He was ready to go. Tim O'Branski, works with our faceoff guys, he does a great job. But the other three guys -- Shea Keethler, Mitch Lloyd, and Sean Creter, they compete so hard in practice.

They give Luke the looks of the guys he's going against. They are huge for us. They just do an awesome job getting Luke ready, and I think Luke would tell you the same thing.

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