

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Omaha vs St. John's

Thursday, March 20, 2025
Providence, Rhode Island, USA
Amica Mutual Pavilion

St. John's Red Storm
Coach Rick Pitino

RJ Luis, Jr.

Zuby Ejiofor

Media Conference



St. John's 83, Omaha 53

RICK PITINO: First ten minutes, we didn't play particularly well. Both of these guys had very mediocre performances for great players, both guys. They did not play well tonight, neither one of them, but they were the best on the lot so we were appreciative of that. So they were both much better than they played and they still did a lot of good things.

We didn't play particularly well. They're a tough team to guard. Because we played great defense and kept giving up, got them to take a lot of bad shots and we didn't chase the loose ball rebounds. What I told them basically, they're going to see a team the likes we haven't seen all year from a size and athleticism standpoint. You can't give up 24 second shots and play great defense like we did.

Q. For RJ or Zuby, what did it feel like to play in an NCAA tournament game and advance? It took a really long time for this team.

RJ LUIS, JR.: I want to thank God for this opportunity. The whole team. We came out very tight. This is their first time playing, so I think it was a little bit of nerves but we cleaned it up in the second half and we got back to our identity, which is defense, and we brought up the pressure and just got to go back and learn from our mistakes this game and prepare for Saturday.

Q. RJ, you said you guys were tight in the first half, do you think you were able to breathe at halftime and that's why things seemed to flow a lot better in the second half?

RJ LUIS JR.: Yes.

Q. Can that be helpful going forward that you have this game under your belt and you're not going to be as tight on Saturday?

RJ LUIS JR.: All these games are important but like I said, learn from our mistakes and get prepared for Saturday.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. Right here to the right.

Q. Zuby, what about the second half surge? Why do you come out of the locker room the way you do, especially in the first four minutes of the second half?

ZUBY EJIOFOR: I think once we settled down and just got right back to our identity, which is getting stops and getting on transition and just ball movement, we just got right back to what we did best. It shows, the ball was hopping from side to side and guys were engaged on the defensive end a lot more, too. We start off slow pretty much the entire season, so we got some things to figure out. And like RJ said, just watch film and figure out the mistakes so we can't repeat those Saturday.

Q. RJ, how big was Sim in this game, coming in and knocking down threes in the double figures? What's that mean for you guys when he's locked in like that and producing?

RJ LUIS JR.: That's big time. I always tell him to keep being aggressive. Sim is a great shooter, so having the confidence to keep on shooting. When we do a good job moving the ball and getting him open looks, he's going to knock it down, so.

Q. You guys equalled season high with 14 threes. You set a program record with 14 threes. The three-point shooting, how much is that a big confidence booster for you guys.

RJ LUIS JR.: I didn't know we hit 14 threes. We're not bad shooters, it's just about moving the ball and getting open looks and shots and shooting the ball with confidence. Definitely if we're able to keep shooting the threes, it's going to be pretty interesting going down and we have to



pick up our defense and get back to that, which is our identity.

THE MODERATOR: Any more questions for Zuby or RJ?

Q. You guys, obviously mentioning feeling tight, was there a specific moment tonight where that went away and you felt more at ease?

ZUBY EJIOFOR: It's just a matter of getting in the flow of the game. We have been starting out pretty slow. Once we all talked to each other and got more engaged and got back to our game, especially in the second half when ultimately it matters the most, we just came together and did whatever it takes to win and we just locked in and increased our level of focus and that's what it's going to take to keep advancing in this tournament.

Q. Zuby, usually after a win, like, when we're talking to you, you seem very upbeat. You do not seem upbeat tonight.

RICK PITINO: Are you a psychologist now? (Laughter)

Q. Well, I mean, on the side. You don't seem as upbeat as usual. Is there a reason for that?

RICK PITINO: Tell him you and your girlfriend broke up, give him psychological issues.

ZUBY EJIOFOR: No girl issues. You'll always see me with a smile on my face. Especially when we get a big time win like this. It's the road to a national championship. We got one down. We got five to go. I'm pretty much happy for what we accomplished today but there's more work to be done.

RICK PITINO: Any Prozac out there for Zuby?

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach Pitino.

Q. Rick, seems like you're not thrilled with how you guys played tonight. Do you think your nerves were a big part of that?

RICK PITINO: I'm not thrilled with the rebounding. I'm thrilled with everything else. We got them to take a lot of bad shots, defense was excellent. We changed our defense in the second half which helped us a lot but wasn't happy giving up 24 second shots.

But very happy with the win. Very happy we're advancing. Even when I had the number one of number one seeds with I thought the very best team ever assembled at Kentucky, if I remember correctly, against San Jose State,

I think we were the largest favorite in the NCAA and I think we were down one at halftime. They had a 6'7" player, Olivier Saint-Jean, I think was his name. We were down one at halftime and I think we won by 40. So it happens, coming out a little tight, the low seed so we adjusted and did a lot of good things in the second half. We had a lot of confidence making threes right off the bat coming out the second half.

Q. I wanted to ask about that. What are the biggest keys to surviving games like this as a high seed and making sure that you obviously build in the second half, in your experience?

RICK PITINO: I think it's keep on playing, make adjustments and be relentless in the pursuit of excellence defensively and I think we did that, we accomplished that.

Q. Rick, you get John Calipari again, you guys play together again, a whole bunch of different scenarios, different teams, different leagues. You said yesterday that Jim Calhoun was the only person you consider a rival..

RICK PITINO: I'm talking about disliking each other rival. John was at Kentucky, at Louisville. It's normal. I have always had great respect for John. We have not seen this size and athleticism all year. Creighton has a 7'2" center but athleticism wise, we have not seen this this year. We know what we're up against, obviously. They had a lot of injuries, that's why they opened up 0-5. I don't know where they finished in the SEC... eighth or ninth. I'm glad we're not in the SEC. That talent level in that conference is amazing to me.

Q. Is that a chess match you enjoy? The planning to go against each other?

RICK PITINO: I don't go against coaches, we go against teams. He doesn't have to worry about me. My jump shot is long gone. We're preparing for his players. He's preparing for our players. John and I don't play one on one anymore.

Q. You have been saying this is a better three-point shooting team than what they have shown on the court. Was tonight a full display of that?

RICK PITINO: I don't think we're a great shooting team. I think we're a decent shooting team. I think we shot well from the foul line tonight. We have improved as the season has gone along. Ruben's gotten a lot better. Lefty's gotten a lot better. Vince has gotten a lot better in certain areas.

We're going to have to play the best game of the season to beat a team like this. We know that. They're very, very big, athletic. Their bench is athletic, they're fast. This is a whole different ball game for us but they know we're a good team as well.

Q. What was your mindset going into halftime with the slim lead, and was there a message that lead to that dominant second half?

RICK PITINO: No, the one thing about our team all season long, we have never panicked about either being down or being up by a few. I think that the players were correct. I think they were a little tight. This is all new to them. Zuby played at Kansas but didn't play and the last time Kadary played, he wasn't shaving, he was at Syracuse. It's first-time experience for them. They will learn from this night, get a lot better but it's been a great season for us. We haven't panicked at all. We came out and changed our defense in the second half and what we tried to do against them. They're a really, really good offensive basketball team. They may not show it with their percentages tonight but they're a very good offensive basketball team.

They scored 91 points in ten straight games and we did a very good job on that point guard who dominated just about everybody this season.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks for your time, Coach. Good luck Saturday.

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