

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Western Kentucky vs Marquette

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Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

Western Kentucky Hilltoppers
Steve Lutz

Rodney Howard

Don McHenry

Brandon Newman

Media Conference

Q. Don, if you could talk about just the run that got you here, knowing that you needed to kind of needed to run the table in the conference tournament to get here, how satisfying is it to put that together just when you need it?

DON McHENRY: Yeah, it makes it a little bit more special just knowing how much more focused we had to be, just knowing how fast it could have been over and we wouldn't be here. Just knowing what we had to do to make it through to be here makes it a little bit more special. And the focus we showed and the fight we showed knowing our season was on the line, makes it more heartfelt and more whole some for us for sure.

Q. What was the difference between the losing streak and the conference tournament where you all were able to put things together?

DON McHENRY: I'll say the difference was I'd say more of our togetherness and just -- it would show -- we kind of showed that it was a bit more important to us. I think during the losing streak, sometimes on runs, teams went on runs and things like that, we kind of put our head down sometimes. And whereas at the conference tournament, we just stayed through it together through everything, knowing if something goes wrong, we've got to bounce back from this. We can't lose. It was a bit more focus and a bit more fight to us.



Q. Brandon, you've been here the last few years with Purdue into the tournament. How much does that experience help you, and what do you have to tell your teammates who may never have been this far before into the tournament?

BRANDON NEWMAN: I mean, first and foremost, I'm happy to be back. Obviously only a select number of teams get to be here and play in this tournament. I'm just happy that Western Kentucky is one of those teams.

The guys, they've pretty much just been taking everything in. If they have a question here or there about something, if I'm able to answer it, then I'll answer it.

Q. Don, obviously being from Milwaukee playing against Marquette, what does that mean to you, and how much have you heard from people back home?

DON McHENRY: Yeah, like a lot of people back home just been talking to me and just talking about it all over the media and stuff like that. I think it's kind of special how that kind of -- how it played out that way that I'm playing against the hometown team. But I've still got the same excitement versus if we were playing anybody else.

But for it to be them, it's kind of special how it played out that way. It's kind of like it was meant to be that way or something like that for sure.

Q. Don, David Joplin from Marquette, he played at Brookfield Central but you guys played pickup games back in the day. Do you remember that?

DON McHENRY: Yeah, for sure. Me and him both, since we've been in college, every summer that's where the runs be at, Milwaukee or Brookfield, we always played in runs together. Even up at Marquette, played in runs up there and even other guys that was on their team right now was in the open runs and things like that, so I'm very familiar.

David Joplin is a long-term friend like through AAU, and we always competed against each other, so that's my guy.

Q. I know you guys are extra motivated to play



anybody, but you mentioned that extra oomph playing your hometown team. What do you think of the opportunity to do that?

DON McHENRY: Yeah, I think it's a big-time opportunity for sure. Definitely for my team just showing we can compete at any level for sure, I think it's a great opportunity to show how good we are and the fight we have and just showing the reason how we got here, why we made it here, and we're here for a reason.

Q. Brandon, in the process of transferring to Western from a Power Five school, what kind of entered your mind in terms of wanting to go there? What was so attractive about Western and maybe going from a Power Five to a Group of Five school?

BRANDON NEWMAN: Yeah, I think the relationships was a big thing for me. Obviously playing under Steve Lutz at Purdue my first couple years and then going through the transfer portal, that was kind of a big thing for me, going somewhere where there's family or going somewhere where you have a relationship. So that was probably the most attractive thing to me.

Q. Don and Rodney, what do you think of Marquette? What makes them such a difficult matchup?

RODNEY HOWARD: I feel like they pass the ball well. They share the ball well. They just defend aggressively. You know it's going to be an interesting matchup how everything plays out. But they're a good basketball team.

DON McHENRY: Yeah, I'd say on the defensive end, their length, the length they have and height they have is kind of like what they use to advantage a lot and they're pretty aggressive in stopping the ball and attacking the ball, so I think that's a big part of their success.

Q. Rodney, how did Coach get you all to buy into the possibility of getting to the tournament, even during the losing streak? And the second part of that is how would you define some of the hot and cold stretches that you all have had this year?

RODNEY HOWARD: I mean, I feel like as a collective we never thought we wouldn't win the conference tournament to get where we are today. But Coach has just always kept pumping confidence in us. It's not always going to be perfect getting to where we want to go, but he just kept on telling us, you've only got to win this amount to games to get to the tournament, and we just remained focused.

I'm just proud, our team just never gave up during those cold stretches. Going into the conference tournament

losing four games is kind of low, but winning is big time, so it's big time.

Q. Brandon, have you heard from some of your former teammates this week, especially since you're going to be playing in the same venue as them? Obviously a little bit earlier in the day. But how have you been communicating with the guys from Purdue and have they been wishing you luck this week?

BRANDON NEWMAN: Yeah, I've talked to a few guys from the team. I've talked to Fletcher, I've talked to Mason, and I've also just been receiving a lot of love on Instagram and Twitter and stuff, how everybody is still cheering and they'll be here for the game and they'll be rooting for us, so that's good to see.

Q. Brandon, about the transfer portal, what do you recall about the process? How crazy was it for you? Talk about your other options. What played into not so much Western Kentucky but what were you looking for when you entered the portal?

BRANDON NEWMAN: I would say just a bigger role, just a little bit more opportunity to contribute to winning games. It was just like coming out of high school again. Your phone is ringing every 20 or 30 minutes or so, and you've kind of got to field a bunch of calls and talk to a bunch of coaches from different schools.

I think that was probably what I was looking for.

Q. Rodney, talk about the rebounding battle. Marquette ranks in I think the 200s on the boards and you guys are ranked in the top 25 in your rebounding scheme. Talk about how that's going to affect your game plan tomorrow.

RODNEY HOWARD: I feel like we have a lot of guys who can rebound the ball. We have Brandon over here that loves to rebound, and we have plenty of guys that love to take the rebound. I feel like it wouldn't be too much of an issue. But they are a bigger matchup, as well, so we've just got to play hard, play aggressive.

STEVE LUTZ: Thank you guys for being here. Obviously we're excited.

It's been a long time coming for Western Kentucky to be back in the NCAA Tournament. But with that being said, we've got a long history. We've had a lot of really, really good coaches and a lot of really, really good players that came before us. Our goal obviously is to make them proud and do a good job on Friday and advance as far as we can.



This is what you do it for, to have an opportunity to play for an NCAA title.

Q. In regards to Brandon Newman and Khristian Lander. With Khristian specifically you're his fourth head coach in four years. When you got there, what kind of message do you try to send to people when you show up new like that and try to develop your scheme quickly?

STEVE LUTZ: Yeah, I was lucky I had known Khristian a little bit since he was young, because when I was at Purdue we recruited him early on in his career.

But my message to all those guys is always the same, that I'm just a normal person who happens to be a basketball coach. I'm going to treat you the right way as long as you do things the right way.

I knew that Khristian was a good kid from a good family, and obviously he had had some bumps along the road, and I just told him that I believe in you, I know that you're talented, but if you'll believe in us, we'll believe in you, and I think that it could work out well. Thus far he's done a good job.

Q. When you took the job, obviously you had an appreciation for the tradition of the program and such. In terms of embracing that, what were your initial expectations for getting the team back to the postseason, and how did you kind of stay on plan during a losing streak down the stretch?

STEVE LUTZ: Well, I mean, our expectations are the same every year, to win the league, to win the league tournament and go to the NCAA Tournament and win games.

Todd Stewart, our athletic director, and Tim Caboni, our president, were very forthright in discussing that on the front end of taking the job.

I knew what I was walking into and I expected that and I embraced that. I wouldn't have wanted to leave Corpus Christi if I wasn't going to put myself and my family and our basketball program in a position to be able to go win games in the NCAA.

It's great. It's what you want. If you're a competitor, it's what you want.

As far as the losing streak down the road, obviously we had a couple bad and unfortunate endings at Florida International and Middle Tennessee in terms of some

officiating things, but the fact of the matter is that we hadn't been practicing well. I always equate good practices to good performances in games.

Our biggest thing was we needed to figure out how to practice better and how to get back to doing the things that had made us successful. Then when you lose four games in a row, you have a choice, you can either say, hey, we've won five out of our last nine, or we've lost four in a row, and I obviously chose to do the first.

At the end of the day, you've got to have guys that are playing confidently, so that was our major task was to get back to the basics defensively and then get our confidence going back offensively, and fortunately we've got a good group of guys that care about Western Kentucky and care about winning, so they put their individual goals aside before we headed to the tournament.

Q. Just wondering, I know you're busy and Painter is busy, but are you guys going to get a chance to catch up at all and what the nature of your relationship is with him?

STEVE LUTZ: Yeah, Paint is a good friend. My daughter works for the athletic department, and she travels with men's basketball, so it was a blessing for me and my family to have her here at the same time. She was over at my hotel last night, and we were able to spend some time with her.

But yeah, we're very good friends. We still talk.

Coaches talk infrequently, know what I mean? He calls me if he wants something, I call him if I want something or if there's something we want to talk about whether it's basketball-wise or life-wise. But certainly Matt has been great to me, and my time at Purdue was fantastic. I was able to be around some really good basketball coaches and some even better basketball players and people.

My hope is that obviously the Boiler nation, they come and support Western Kentucky. Obviously you've got Brandon Newman on the roster. Gene Keady was the coach here at Western Kentucky, and we all love Coach. Come on over at 2:00 and then you can just stick around for 7:30, and hopefully both of us get wins.

Man, there's not a better person -- there's very few coaches in this business that are about the right things to the level that Matt Painter is, and that's not to say that there's not a lot of guys that are about the right things, but Matt Painter is about the right things to the utmost level. He's good for basketball, and we need more Matt Painters in this world.

I wish them well. I hope they win it all. Obviously I was fortunate to be a part of recruiting a bunch of guys on that team. There would be nothing better for us -- where would we meet them, maybe in the Sweet 16? Would that be right? Somewhere right there. There would be nothing better. Then it's just kind of like playing UTEP in the championship. If Joe Golding won, I'd be disappointed for my team but I'd know that a friend is moving on, and I know it would be the same with Coach.

Q. I know when you work your way through to become a head coach and such, you glean things from a lot of people, but if you could pick one or two things that you incorporate into your own stuff that you've learned along the way from Matt, would there be one or two things that stick out?

STEVE LUTZ: Yeah, number one is how to treat people on a daily basis. That's not only your staff and the administration but that's the players. Coach is not going to get caught up in the things on the exterior. He's always going to be focused on making sure that Purdue is in the best position to win. That means if player A is playing well, he's going to play, and that doesn't mean that player C can't take player A's minutes because at some point during the ebbs and flows of the season, different people play better at different points.

There's no ego involved. There's no favoritism involved. It's always what's best for Purdue. So that's one of the things that I absolutely took from Matt and try to emulate within our program is just be very straightforward, very direct, and very even keeled with what's best for helping Western Kentucky get to the NCAA Tournament and win games.

Q. You talked a little bit about what you've learned from Matt on the court, but what about off the court, and just how he runs the program and how you've tried to implement those things into your program?

STEVE LUTZ: Well, obviously I've worked for some really good coaches. Paint is the best but so is Mack and Matt Doherty was the National Coach of the Year, Jeremy Cox is really good, Danny Kaspar is good. So I stole a little bit from all of them.

The thing that I would tell you, and this is going to probably sound bad, but the thing that I would tell you about Matt and Coach McDermott and those guys is that they always have the big picture in mind, so as I made a little bit more money, they gave me more advice on how to protect myself and my family and maybe how to structure a contract and those sorts of things.

But they also talked a lot about how to manage yourself and to keep being you because there's a lot of people, unfortunately, as we ascend in whatever business, we get lost in who we are. I think that those guys have always been the same people. Like Matt Painter is still going to be on Saturday afternoon in his backyard watching the Cubs game and listening to Zac Brown or whatever, sitting out by the pool, and Greg McDermott is going to go play golf every single time he can.

They just have always stayed true to who they are in my mind. I certainly have taken that from both of them.

Q. How do you balance the dilemma of sorts with the transfer portal where you use the portal to bring guys into your program, and at the end of the season you have to work to keep guys from going to other programs, especially in the age of NIL where there are more enticements? How do you navigate that?

STEVE LUTZ: Man, if somebody has that answer when you ask that question, I'd like for you to send it to me because I don't have that answer. I think you do the best that you can.

I've said this a couple different times. To me, people talk about recruiting your own players. I don't know that I believe in recruiting your own players on a daily basis. I look at it more that basketball and athletics is a relationship business, and as the head coach you should always be striving to have a great relationship with your players. That doesn't always mean that it's basketball related.

I think that our job is part coach, part father figure, part uncle, part brother, part psychologist, and so you're constantly trying to help those young people navigate situations that they're not used to and come out on the other end of it and feel good about themselves and about the way that they're navigating life and navigating basketball, so that they're being productive players.

I think that that's more important than say recruiting them to stay in your program. Because ultimately if it's better for a young man to leave Western Kentucky and go to Purdue, since we're talking about Purdue, man, I'm going to hug them and tell them I love them, and I'm going to wish them well if that's the best thing for them.

I've always believed if those guys know that you love them and care about them and want to do what's best for them, then they'll do the right thing at the end of the day.

Q. As a smaller school like Western, what kind of challenge does it pose for your program as opposed to



say bigger programs looking at your roster and what you've done this year?

STEVE LUTZ: Well, I mean, you want the truth or you want to hear what everybody else is going to say? The truth of the matter is that people recruit our roster all the time. It happens in college basketball, and it happens in college football, and it stinks. But it happens.

You either bury your head in the sand and ignore it, or you embrace it and make sure that you always are aware of what's going on and try to treat people right so that they want to stay, and then if they don't, if it's the best thing for them, you wish them well and move on and go find somebody else.

Ultimately you've got to have the right people in the room to win the game at the end of the year, and that's the most important thing, and that room is going to change a lot.

The fact of the matter is, guys, is that we work really hard to raise NIL funds at Western Kentucky, and we have them, and we utilize them as we need. But we don't have the money that Marquette and Purdue and the Power Five schools do. You just don't. You can complain about it or you can do the best you can with what you have.

That doesn't mean you still can't be very successful. I think that that's got to be the approach that we continue within our program.

Q. You talked earlier about being able to recruit Khristian Lander and knowing him as a young man. How much did your relationship with Brandon help bringing him in this year, you're transitioning in as a new coach, he's transitioning from Purdue, how has that been this season for you both?

STEVE LUTZ: It's been great. It hasn't been out its issues. Obviously I've known Brandon since he entered Purdue as a freshman. I've seen a lot of maturation in him, which makes me unbelievably proud. Like Matt Painter and those guys, Brandon Brantley have done a great job with helping him grow up. He graduated from Purdue, has a degree from Purdue, and is going to be a successful person.

But with that being said, when I had him as a freshman and a sophomore in my academic group, there were a lot of struggles at times just with maturity. Sometimes you're his coach, sometimes you're his father figure, sometimes you're his brother. So there's a lot of different levels to that relationship.

Now he comes to Western and I'm his coach, and all that

other stuff has to kind of get tossed to the side. So there was an adjustment period with him early on. But he's done a good job. Brandon is a good kid who has a great heart. He's done well for us. He's done well for us.

We need him to continue to do well for us on Friday.

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