

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

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

Marquette Golden Eagles

Shaka Smart

Tyler Kolek

Oso Ighodaro

Kam Jones

Media Conference



OSO IGHODARO: I think we found that edge all season. When we're playing at our best, we have it, and that's something that we've been really focusing on during this two-game tournament first, just having that edge and going at everyone who we're matched up against.

Q. Oso, last go-around for you. What are the emotions going into this first game?

OSO IGHODARO: I'm just really trying to stay in the present. This opportunity with my best friends in the world, just going out here competing. I'm not really focused on the future, thinking about how this could be my last whatever. Just really trying to stay in the present and make the most of it.

Q. Tyler, how does this team really put last year behind and say, we're a No. 2 seed again but we're a much different team? Where do you feel like the team got over it and really transformed itself for this year?

TYLER KOLEK: Yeah, we watched a clip from Kam the other day talking to the media, talking about how if last year wasn't enough motivation, that sour taste in our mouth going into this year, then you weren't meant for this team, you weren't meant to be on this team.

Just the trust and the care that we have for each other, to go out there and compete for one another is something that we've talked about all year. This is the most important time to do it. I feel like this group of guys has a certain connection and bond, so we're going to go out there and show people that.

Q. Tyler, can you take us through the injury? I know you had your appendix out the other night. Was it similar to that kind of pain? Take us through the process of being able to come back and play in this game.

TYLER KOLEK: Yeah, so it's a grade 2 oblique strain. It was a three-to-four-week injury, so we're still kind of on the front end of it a little bit. But I made great progress. The doctors really took care of me. I did everything that I could

Q. Tyler, we haven't talked to you in a couple weeks. How close do you feel to 100 percent, and do you feel like you can aggravate the injury when you play?

TYLER KOLEK: Yeah, I've been practicing this whole week. I feel good. I feel confident. At this point in the season, nobody is 100 percent. Everybody is battling through something. Just got to put the straps on and battle up again.

Q. Kam, I know no All Big East honorees for you. I heard the quote you gave Fana on the shootaround. How much motivation did not getting that respect from the conference give you, and how does that chip on the shoulder help you play better?

KAM JONES: Coach Smart does a pretty good job of keeping my edge there and making sure that edge is sharp. Although I didn't really -- it didn't hurt my feelings that I wasn't on the Big East team, but that was something to use and add to my edge.

I didn't work hard all season -- I mean, all off-season, do all that to make a Big East team. I did all that for where we are now in March Madness to make a deep run, and that's all I'm focused on at the moment.

Q. Oso, you talked about having unfinished business this year. Now that the NCAA Tournament is around, how have you found that mental edge?



to get back.

That first night and first day -- it's basically a core muscle injury, you don't realize how everything you do is your core.

Me and Kam, we were in class the next day on Thursday, and he had to grab my arm and help me out of the chair. I couldn't really even stand up. That morning I got in the car, I couldn't even reach out to really shut the door of the car.

It was definitely a struggle the first week just trying to even get up out of bed, sit up, just little things like that kind of throws you all out of whack. You're using more your back and then that gets out of whack.

I'm just thankful for the trainers and coaching staff, and I'm ready to go.

Q. Kam, I was watching some of your old high school clips, and you got this spin on the ball that's been so deadly this past month. When did you add that to your game, and how long have you been working on it and tweaking it to get those tough lay-up finishes?

KAM JONES: I actually worked on it a lot as a kid. Very uniquely my granddad had a basketball goal at his house with no rim. So it was a backboard, and I remember throwing the ball at the backboard a bunch of different ways, and seeing how the ball did different things when I did different things with the ball on the backboard.

Growing up, you know where the ball should be placed on a lay-up, so you can kind of manipulate it a little bit with certain spins.

Q. Oso, going up against a good rebounding team, what have you seen on film with them that makes them so good on the boards, and how do you kind of thwart that? How do you fight that?

OSO IGHODARO: Yeah, their bigs play really hard. They have high motors. I think that's probably their biggest advantage.

To go against that, we've been playing good rebounding teams all season long. We just have to rebound, us five guys, really have each other's back, help each other out. But we've been preparing all season for this.

Q. Kam, when we talked to you on Sunday, you seemed to have more of an edge, like you mentioned before. How have you kind of tapped into that edge this last month?

KAM JONES: I mean, pretty much by losing. Losing sucks, especially losing that Big East title game, how our

bodies felt going into the game and everybody sacrificing and playing hard, and coming up short in that, us sharing that feeling in the locker room after that game adds to our edge. We really just are going to stay present, take it one game at a time and really try to go after what we want to do.

Q. Oso, you're sort of this Swiss Army knife that can do a lot of different stuff, and I remember when I talked to Chase, he said Shaka lets you guys play super freely. With your unique skill set and Shaka letting you maneuver how you want, how does that help you as a player get more creative?

OSO IGHODARO: I think it helps just not boxing me in as -- most bigs across the country just have to do one thing or have to just post-up or just set screens. I think just this team and this coaching staff allows me to just play freely, like Chase said, handle the ball, but that also comes with trusting the work that I've put in and the coaching staff trusts that.

Yeah, this team and my teammates and coaches allow me to do that.

Q. Kam, while Tyler was out, how did this team kind of learn how to share the ball a little bit differently, and how much has that really helped now that he's back and you guys have been practicing? Where do you feel like that really helps you all at this point?

KAM JONES: I think when Tyler was out, everybody individually on the team just honestly played better. We knew we would have to play better in Tyler's absence. You can't really replace the best point guard in the nation.

We were mainly just going out there, figuring each other out, like you said. It was definitely a different perspective, especially with me having the ball more, making different plays. I learned a lot about my teammates and a lot of things that they like and don't like.

Q. For Oso, you guys have been here before, so guys like Tre and Zaide, what kind of time have you spent with them or what kind of conversations have you had with them for it being their first time at the tournament?

OSO IGHODARO: Yeah, I think we haven't really talked much about -- we've talked to the team about our experiences from last year and just how things felt differently, how the pressure is a little bit different, and we really tried to move forward on this year, learning what's letting your team down and what's not. That was a big issue last year. I feel like mistakes are magnified in this

atmosphere because it feels like -- it is do or die. If you make a mistake, it feels like you're letting your team down, your seniors, your coaches, everything.

We've been talking a lot about that, just making sure that we're not playing with avoidant skills, we're playing with approach skills and really going after it. The only thing you can do to let your team down is not giving it your all.

We've been preparing them. They've been great for us all season. They were great in the Big East Tournament, and they'll be ready to go.

Q. For Kam, I know you box. You've been boxing in your free time. How does that help you in terms of driving to the lane more, and then your footwork when you get around the hoop?

KAM JONES: Boxing has definitely made my legs a lot stronger, sitting in a stance for a long time -- I was about to say a bad word. But it doesn't feel good at all.

It helps me a lot more on defense, too, being able to move a lot easier and being able to stay in my stance when my legs burn. It helps my conditioning for sure.

SHAKA SMART: We're excited to be here in Indy. It's been a long time since I've been in this building. I was a young guy at the University of Dayton, I believe we played Purdue in 2002. It's great to be back.

Excited about our group of guys. Those three guys that were just up here talking, awesome representatives of Marquette University and of our team, as are the rest of our players.

Looking forward to a heck of a challenge against Western Kentucky tomorrow.

Q. Shaka, you like to say you can learn more from losses than you can from wins. After last season's loss to Michigan State, I'm curious for yourself, what did you dive into? What did you want to improve on for yourself?

SHAKA SMART: For myself as opposed to the team? Well, we asked everyone in our program after the season what did you learn from our NCAA Tournament experience, not just the Michigan State game. A lot of times people like to dwell on losses. But definitely the Michigan State game, the Vermont game, and then all the moments in between.

I have a folder in my hotel room with a file in it called "lessons from the NCAA Tournament," and it's answers

from our team, coaches, staff, support staff. Some good stuff in there. But the key is applying it.

Biggest thing for me personally, and I actually learned this from Coach Izzo after the game. I always like to learn from the coaches that we lose to. One of the things that he does a phenomenal job of is spending time with individual players, in that case, the moments in between the first game and the second game. Just made a commitment this year, I'm going to try to spend more time coaching our players individually as people than I've ever done in the past.

Q. Just wondering with Tyler getting him back ready to go, as he said here, kind of how you balanced when to push, when to step back and the decision to not play him last week.

SHAKA SMART: You know what, in retrospect, it was the right decision to not play Tyler. It was a tough decision because when we were playing Thursday, Friday, Saturday last week, he was working out during the day, and even playing one-on-one, and he looked great. He was moving great, he was shooting great.

But again, in retrospect, now having been through this week and the progression that we've gone through to get him ready for tomorrow, he needed to practice. He needed some repetitions 5-on-5, up and down. I don't know it would have been fair to him to put him out there in that situation, as much as we wanted him. We were literally playing who, in my opinion to this point, has been the best team in the country in the championship game.

You've got to be a little insane to think you can go win that game without your best player if he's available to play, but he just wasn't quite ready in terms of going through all the things he needed to go through.

I think the biggest challenge for him tomorrow is going to be the psychological part of coming back to playing after three weeks of not playing. He's a very, very thoughtful, intentional, serious person and player, and he wants to get everything right.

But as I've explained to him, he doesn't have to hit a home run on his first at-bat. If he can get on base, help our team play well on both ends of the floor, we'll be in good shape.

Q. I asked the players about how they learned to share while Tyler was out. How did that help you redistribute minutes and redefine some roles while he was out, and how much do you feel like that will help you all now, or where do you feel like it will help you?

SHAKA SMART: Well, you're talking about a guy who was Big East Player of the Year last year and arguably the best point guard in the country, so when you take him out of the lineup, there's no such thing as replacing him with another guy.

We didn't really even redefine anyone's role other than say, hey, without Tyler you're going to have to do this more than you did before, you're going to have to do that more. Then there's about 35 minutes that need to be redistributed.

I thought Zaide Lowery and Tre Norman, our two freshmen guards, did a great job stepping forward. Those guys have really grown up a lot over the last several weeks and put themselves in position where they can play significant, meaningful minutes against any opponent in the country.

Oso and Kam obviously handled the ball a lot more with Tyler out. I thought they did a really nice job.

But there's no substitute for Tyler Kolek. His passing, his vision, his ability to create pace for our team.

Q. Marquette has been in the tournament for the past -- this is the third year in a row you've taken the team to the tournament. How does that experience help you prepare for tomorrow's game and just heading into the game overall?

SHAKA SMART: It's a great point. I think the experience helps us a lot, and we've got -- between our coaching staff and then most importantly our juniors and seniors, we've got a core group of guys that have been in the NCAA Tournament now going on a third year.

Oso said it best. I think in the first year -- not necessarily me, but most of the guys were probably just happy to be there. In our second year, we had such a phenomenal regular season and conference tournament, but we still were relatively young, and I think when we got to that Michigan State game, there was a little bit of imposter syndrome of wow, do we really deserve to win this game? There we were, it's a one-point game with 3:36 left on the clock, and they outplayed us down the stretch. So there's a lot to learn from that.

But I think those experiences -- I gave our guys -- we're big on props. We've got a million props. So we created a chip, like a poker chip for every one of the meaningful experiences that we have had over the course of this season, and we have them all together, and on the front it's got the score and the opponent. Then on the back it's got something meaningful that occurred in that game, whether it's something someone said in a huddle -- we actually record all of our huddles -- the theme of the game or

something that happened in the game.

For example, last Thursday we had to beat Villanova twice. We thought we had the game won in regulation, but we didn't. So then we had to go win again. So on the back of that chip, it said, "won the game twice."

Those are valuable experiences, chips that our guys have in their pocket, that hopefully we can draw on to play well this week in Indy.

Q. I asked Kam about his tough finishing ability around the rim, his ability to get a lot of spin on the ball, and I'm just curious from your perspective as a coach, what is his ability to do that, sort of help and make him such a unique player and tough to handle?

SHAKA SMART: He is a unique player. All three of those guys that were sitting up here five minutes ago, that's a great way to describe them, unique. We could go another decade of coaching and following Marquette basketball, and I don't know if there will be guys with that type of skill set and even personality. I would throw some of the other guys on our team in that, as well. That's why we're in this position.

Yeah, Kam can really finish. It's funny, he missed a couple early in the UConn game -- it's not funny, but he had this look on his face like, how did those balls not go in? That's okay to be curious about that. You just don't want it to turn into frustration during the game.

He just has some stuff you can't teach in terms of spin, angles, English, understanding -- the spin move he has is really good to get an angle to the rim. I think he benefits from the fact that one of the years he was in high school, it might have been his senior year, he was kind of the big guy on the team, and so he had to learn tricks of the trade playing that position.

Oso is a point forward and Kam is a big-guy guard.

Q. Out of curiosity, I was wondering what's been the biggest thing for you personally after the way things ended at Texas and now you at Marquette, what's enabled you to be as successful as you've been here and how did that previous experience help you personally in your run here so far?

SHAKA SMART: I think the same thing that's helped me be successful anytime I've been successful or I've been around teams that have been successful is, number one, trying to be present; number two, trying to accentuate like the strengths of others around me because this year, this week, I'm not going to score any baskets or get any

rebounds or assists. As much as I would love to play.

I think when you're coaching and you've been through different experiences, you gain humility because you understand the longer you do it that you can't just push a button and make something happen. We're coaching human beings, and they're not going to be the same today as they were yesterday or tomorrow.

Being present, gratitude, that's probably the best thing that the COVID shutdown did for me. Ever since then, just incredible gratitude even for the opportunity to do this because it was taken away from us for a little bit, and to do it with such an awesome group of guys.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

