

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - TCU vs Utah State

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Gainbridge Fieldhouse

Utah State Aggies
Danny Sprinkle
Ian Martinez

Isaac Johnson

Media Conference

Utah State - 88, TCU - 72

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the players.

DANNY SPRINKLE: Unbelievable win. Just the toughness and the grit our guys showed against a Big-12 team. That's a physical -- that's a really good team. We knew what we were in for when we drew that seed. I really think playing San Diego State last Friday prepared us for this win. We practiced hard this week, we practiced physical, because I felt like we didn't play as physical and as tough as we needed to against San Diego State, but sometimes losses help you win the next game. It happened tonight. We had so many big plays by everybody that got in. Almost everybody that got in scored, had a rebound.

Really proud of our guys. We knew we couldn't turn the ball over more than 10 times. TCU is so lethal in transition and when they go to the offensive glass, it's hard. They got a lot of offensive rebounds. Too many for my liking, as these guys will tell you, 21. But that's what they do.

I thought offensively we kind of controlled a little bit of the game by not turning the ball over, so we didn't allow them to get easy buckets. They got a couple early, but I thought our guys really adjusted after the first five minutes and just played fantastic.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Isaac, you've been in and out as a starter all year. Today you showed that you can take your game to the



next level in the Big Dance. What do you think of that and how -- what do you think of your game play and how are you going to translate into the game on Sunday?

ISAAC JOHNSON: First off, I appreciate it. Thank you. I think this coaching staff has done a really good job of being confident in all of us. We all have some special abilities and special talents on this team and it's been showcased throughout the year. So, first off, that's a big kudos to our coaching staff. Coach came to me before the game and said, shoot the ball and be confident. So I took his advice.

And I think going into this next game Zach Edey is -- he's got national attention for a reason. He's not just a big body. He's a really good player. So we have to continue to be physical like we were with this TCU team and then take care of the ball and I guess I can continue to shoot the ball well and be confident in that and then the rest of the team same thing. We share the ball and when we do, we're successful.

Q. Isaac, there's been times when you've had games like this, where you've shown some meanness. How can you bottle that up and do that every timeout? I'm sure Coach is wanting you to do that.

ISAAC JOHNSON: I think it's more so just my mindset and belief in myself. That's something that I've really been working on. That's actually the reason that I decided to redshirt last year. There's been a bit of a mental battle going on and this year has really taught me how to believe in myself and have that confidence in myself and it's been such a great help to have my teammates and coaches have that confidence in me. And so when I have these games, I think it teaches me the player I can be, and I'm just going to try to continue to believe in myself and rely on my coaches and teammates when it's ups and downs.

Q. It looked like you guys were lobbing the ball around a lot, doing some crosscourt passes and it seemed like it made a big team be small. Was that part of your strategy going into the game?

DANNY SPRINKLE: Yeah, they try to side you in kind of



their ball screen defense, and even overall, they really load to the basketball when the ball's on outer third, and so we told our guys, we have to skip the ball. Like, we have to skip the ball to relieve some of that pressure and make them have some long closeouts, and then we either have shots or we got to attack 'em and then we got to try to play the back side again.

I thought Darius had some great passes, skip passes, in the first half, but then everybody started doing it. These two started doing it, Mason, Josh. I felt like we had -- we kind of got them scrambling a little bit because of our skip passes and then you have to make the shot, which these guys did.

Q. You guys started off shooting a little cold. You were, I think, 3-10 to start the game, but then you made like six straight, seven straight later in that first half. How did you turn around a bit of a slow start to finishing off the half really well offensively?

IAN MARTINEZ: Like Isaac mentioned, Coach always tells to us keep shooting the ball and be confident in ourselves, and between the players, we always try to keep each other up. Darius was out there making good plays at the beginning, getting guys open, hitting the open guys, and we were like, hey, if you're open, be confident and shoot it, step into it. And, yeah, that's what we kept doing and eventually they started going in.

Q. Can you talk about the physicality. Coach talked that it was going to be a physical game. It seemed like there was several times you got roughed up in there.

IAN MARTINEZ: Ain't nothing but a little bit of work. We knew what was going to happen. We knew it was going to be a physical game. It was expected. Yeah, we had the right mentality, the right mindset coming into the game. We knew what to expect. Yeah, I got roughed up out there. I'm a little bit of a lightweight, but it's all in the head.

Q. At halftime you guys were up. What was the talk going into the second half of play with that lead? How did you guys keep the momentum? What was your message to the team?

DANNY SPRINKLE: The message was I felt like they had 11 second-chance points in the first half and we only had four. I think they had 37 points. So it seemed like every time they got an offensive rebound they scored it. We knew that was -- that's their game. So we knew we needed to up the ante, making contact boxouts. Like, a couple times we were leaking out, especially when we went to our 1-3-1, we didn't have all five guys like going in there to rebound and whenever you're playing TCU or a

Big-12 team, like, you got to go -- all five guys got to go rebound that ball. So that was the main message and then telling 'em I was proud of 'em. We only had three turnovers at halftime, which got us that lead.

Q. Isaac mentioned taking the redshirt last year, coming back a different player. What have you seen from him in terms of that development?

DANNY SPRINKLE: Yeah, he's grown so much since June, our first practice. I've said it before, he has improved maybe more than anybody I've ever coached in whatever it is, a seven-month span. I'm proud of him because he gave himself up for the team. Like, some of the stuff he was -- it was uncomfortable for him because he had never played the style that we play. There was a lot of new stuff for him. It was his third coach in three years, and he just kept fighting, he kept fighting, he kept fighting.

And he's won us so many games this year and anytime he shoots it, like a couple guys on our team, I think it's going in every time. He's got a pure stroke and he's a weapon. There's not many guys his size that can really shoot like that.

But I'm more proud just of his progress mentally and being a great teammate and all that stuff because it's what our team is as a whole and he's a huge part of that.

IAN MARTINEZ: It was just his willingness to buy into what the team is doing. He's had some stuff and mentally up-and-down, some bad games, some good games, but he always stay ready for it. We're really proud of his effort, like Coach mentioned again, all the new stuff and new playing style that he was introduced to and he just took everything as a challenge and just got better throughout the whole year.

Q. You guys definitely came into this game with a chip on your shoulder after losing to San Diego State. I know you guys already talked about this a little bit, but how are you going to keep that going going against Purdue?

ISAAC JOHNSON: I think we just got to continue to look at what we have as a team. We work really well together as a team when we decide to work together as a team. A lot of teams have difficulty with us when we do that. So I think no matter that they're the No. 1 seed or been ranked throughout the country for however many weeks, I think we have the capability to hang with anybody. Our coaching staff does a really good job scouting and when we lock in and are aware of what the teams can do and how we can stop them, I think we have a good chance.

DANNY SPRINKLE: Obviously a tremendous amount of respect for Purdue. Like, Coach Painter is one of my like favorite coaches to follow because he feeds the post guys too. We like to do that. So we take stuff. And then I have assistant -- we have to be very, very careful in our scout the next 48 hours because I have a guy on my staff who played at Purdue, so I got to make sure because I know how crazy Indiana is. So we might have to keep Coach Johnny Hill out of our staff meetings for a couple days.

But they're a tremendous team. We know how physical they are and we're going to have to play like we did tonight. We have to play with a little bit of a chip on our shoulder. We know the place is going to be rocking, and they got unbelievable fans, and so it's going to be fun, but we have to be really good offensively and defensively to have a chance to win that in the last eight minutes.

Q. You guys weren't around, probably not even born, but it's been 23 years since Utah State won an NCAA game. Has that been talked about at all about the streak? And also the Mountain West, you guys and San Diego State are the only ones left now.

DANNY SPRINKLE: Yeah, we don't talk about it. I'm proud of the tradition that we have at Utah State. Yeah, there's been some -- they haven't won a tournament game, but we've been to the tournament a lot, a lot more than a lot of other teams. It's so hard to win a tournament game. Like, yeah, it takes some luck, but it takes guys making big-time shots and big-time plays like tonight and it's awesome for our program and our community.

Q. Darius Brown tied the single season assist record at Utah State. Can you talk about that accomplishment, what it means for him to be able to accomplish something like that.

DANNY SPRINKLE: It's awesome because you think of all the great point guards that played at Utah State and for him to do that in his only year. I mean, he's already a Utah State legend by some of the shots he's hit and just the type of person he is. You know, I'm proud that he got that because he's one of the most unselfish players. He would rather pass than score. There's not many kids like that in the country. He's a point guard. There's a lot of points guards out there that want points. He's not one of those. He's a true point guard, and he makes our team go.

Q. Isaac, have you faced a player similar to Zach Edey before or I guess looking back at your season, is there any games in particular or players that you look at as a point of reference going into Sunday?

ISAAC JOHNSON: Kind of. So in high school, there was

a guy who was sort of an internet sensation. His name was Matt Van Komen. He played at Utah first and then St. Mary's after. He wasn't as big as him, but he was like 7'4". So it's a very unique presence there in the paint that you got to -- and you can't ignore it.

So we'll just try to do our best against him and root him out and get low. It's hard to compete with him up high, so you got to compete with him down low as best as you can and do as best as you can on the perimeter to stop the entry feeds. So we'll see.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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