

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Morehead State vs Illinois

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

CHI Health Center

Morehead State

Preston Spradlin

Riley Minix

Kalil Thomas

Drew Thelwell

Jordan Lathon

Media Conference

Illinois 85, Morehead State 69

PRESTON SPRADLIN: Well, first off, hats off to Illinois, a very good team, and they played extremely well, and if felt like we played well, also.

But this has been a great experience. I can shout out the city of Omaha. This has been awesome to be here and everything that these guys have dreamed of.

Really proud of our team. I thought we played well. We tell our team early in the year that there's going to be times that we don't play very well and we win, and that's happened to us a few times this year because of our talent level.

Then there's going to be times that we play extremely well and we come up short. That's that instance here today. That's a credit to Illinois. They're a very good team.

If you're going to have your season end, we want to check three boxes: Number one, we want to play well. We did that. Number two, you want to stay together. I felt like our team really, truly did that despite the score or anything. Then you want to lose to a worthy opponent. Illinois is a very worthy opponent, so hats off to them.

Really proud of our guys, especially these four guys that got an opportunity to come up here and talk to you guys.



Q. Coach, just talk about the impact that the Illinois big man No. 42 Dain had on the game, especially in the second half.

PRESTON SPRADLIN: Yeah, he had a big impact. Again, when we talk about playing well, right, it's no disrespect, but you had a guy who'd had six threes all year hit two of them in the first half. We're okay with that. A guy that averages six points a game in Dain Dainja is a good player, coming in and have a bigger impact on this game than he'd had all year.

We look at that and say we made a very good Illinois team play a totally different way than they'd played over the last 20-something games to beat us. We look at that as a win. But that's a credit to them, and they're very talented. They're big, they're strong, they're athletic, and a guy like Dain Dainja is very good, if he gets an opportunity to catch it in his spots where he's comfortable.

So credit them for being able to figure that piece out.

Q. The start of the game, is that what you envisioned in terms of threes, because they were raining down, and then the start of the second half when it started to turn, what did you think then?

PRESTON SPRADLIN: You know, this is a team that's gotten off to a good start in a lot of games, and that's a credit to them because they've made getting practice off to a great start every day very important to them, and they've believed that that would translate. So we've done that all year, and we did it all week leading up to this.

They were doing a phenomenal job executing, playing with confidence, and doing the things on the offensive end. We only had six turnovers in this game, 14 assists on 26 made field goals. We hit 11 threes. Those are numbers you can win with.

In the second half, it kind of got away from us just a little bit. Some of our floor balance, gave up a few transitions, and again, they kind of scrapped their playbook and went iso.

At the end of the day we made them play a different way, and that's when the game kind of broke open just a little bit.



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Q. Riley, you came here from a lower level, if you know what I mean, but it was for this reason, wasn't it? It was to be able to play on this kind of stage?

RILEY MINIX: Yeah, so I came from an NAIA in Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida. I wanted to challenge myself to play at the Division I level and make it to this point. I just credit my teammates for allowing me to come in every day and pushing me and just competing at the highest level. We got to where I wanted to be, and they allowed my dream to come true. I'm truly blessed to be in this position and that goes for the coaching staff and everybody that's been a part of this program.

It's meant a lot to me, and I'm just, as I said, truly blessed.

Q. At the end of the game, the emotion was real on your bench. You could see it. Just talk about what this experience has been like for this team, a veteran team like this.

KALIL THOMAS: It's been a dream, really. It's just been so fun like coming to practice every day, being around these guys every day, the bus trips, meals, just everything. It was fun.

So there was a lot of emotion just off the strength -- not because we lost but because we weren't going to get another day with each other.

Once we came to that realization, the emotions, just they poured out.

DREW THELWELL: Going off what Kalil said, I look at these guys like they're my older brother, and not being able to do one more close-out drill or whatever the case may be, I think that's what hit the most. I don't know when I'll ever be on the same basketball court again with these guys. So it's just missing that brotherhood, even just things in the locker room. Even just the little things, I'm going to miss it.

JORDAN LATHON: For me, it's been a huge blessing. I always wanted to play in March Madness and play for a winning head coach, and playing for Coach P has been nothing short of special.

I wanted to play for a God-fearing coach and he's helped me tremendously in my faith and growing in spirit. He told me when he was recruiting me, God will not protect you from what he's using to perfect you.

I'm thankful for him and I'm so thankful for this program, and I'm blessed to be here.

Q. Drew, you have worked your tail off to get to this point. You are Mr. Morehead. How special is it to sit where you are right now and to go out with these guys knowing that you've done everything possible?

DREW THELWELL: If you would have asked me could I see myself in the future doing this, I would have told you no immediately. I would say four years ago I just wanted to play like two minutes. Just to be able to do this is special. I have special guys around me.

It wasn't just me. I have special coaches. I've stuck with them for four years, they stuck with me for four years, and I really have to give all the credit to God because he made me stick through it. He made me have patience, and it just paid off. I really can't take all the credit. I've had great teammates throughout the years, a great coach for all four, and I just want to say, Coach P, I love you, Riley, I love you, Kalil, I love you, Jordan, I love you.

Q. Preston, you're an old team. You've seen a lot, been around. You were around a lot of the Big Ten. You played Purdue, you played Edey and now you've played Illinois. I'd like to ask you how good Illinois is in that context, what you think. Are they as good as Purdue, for example? What did you see? What did you think?

JORDAN LATHON: Got nothing but respect for those guys. They're very well-coached. They defend well, and they really crash the boards. They've got size at every position. I don't think any team we played in the Big Ten had that much size at every spot. They're just a really good team, and I hope they do well in the tournament.

RILEY MINIX: I think their physicality was top of the charts. Like they were jamming us off ball screens. They were doing all they could, locking and trailing. It was hard to screen them, stuff like that. As J too was saying, they're a bigger team 1 through 5, not just with a Zach Edey type player, but their point guard is 6'6". He's backing you down. He's tough to match up with.

They're a great team, well-coached, and they just went out there and they could adapt, they could change on the fly. We were blowing up a lot of their stuff, and the way we were blitzing the post, they couldn't really get anything out of that, and then they went into one-on-one ball, and they had to figure it out, and credit to them, they did.

PRESTON SPRADLIN: Those are two pretty good answers from guys that understand basketball; wouldn't you say?



I think what makes them really good, obviously any Big Ten team is going to have size and talent and physicality. I think they're a very non-conventional team. You look at Marcus Domask, he played the 4 at his last spot and plays point guard here. They've got a guy in Ty Rogers who hadn't taken a three all year and he might bring the ball up.

They're a difficult team to prepare for because they're unique. Exactly what these two guys said, give them credit, they found a new way to win a game. They did not beat us here tonight the way that they won the Big Ten Tournament, the way that they finished second in that league. They found a new way to do it.

I have a lot of respect for them and their staff and the players for being able to do that. I think they're a very good team.

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