

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Drake vs Washington State

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

CHI Health Center

Washington State Cougars

Kyle Smith

Myles Rice

Isaac Jones

Jaylen Wells

Media Conference

Washington State 66, Drake 61

THE MODERATOR: Washington State Cougars are with us first tonight. We have Head Coach Kyle Smith with us, Jaylen Wells, Myles Rice, Isaac Jones.

KYLE SMITH: That was just an awesome postseason game. Really physical. Really competitive. A lot of respect for their program. They won 28 games this year. They've been here before. They've been to three out of the last four NCAA Tournaments.

We really hadn't seen very few players as good as DeVries. Then they really complement each other. Their small guards were giving us problems and pressuring us, and we were able to cut down to eight, and these guys were able to find a way to get a couple of big threes down the stretch, and got a lot of stops and took care of the ball down the stretch.

Couldn't be more proud of a group. To be able to advance in this tournament, it's something special.

Q. Isaiah's three helped you break out of that slump offensively. Tell me what you saw on that play and just the importance of that shot.

MYLES RICE: That's just who Isaiah is. He has a lot of guts to take shots like that. I have full faith in him when he takes those type of shots. That's the type of player he is. He comes in and brings the energy for us.



That's not the first time he hit a shot like that. Throughout the course of the season he's hit plenty of shots like that, and I'm just glad he is able to hit it on the biggest stage for us as well.

It definitely gave us a little boost and I don't want to say comfort, but a little cushion down the stretch. It was definitely much needed.

Q. Coach, I'm going to ask you the exact same question. You saw Isaiah do it against USC. He has made a bunch of big threes this year. Probably none bigger than that one, though. You see him pull up for that. What's going through your head as he, A, takes it and B, as it hits the net?

KYLE SMITH: Part of our ballad, as Coach Smith always says, pull that three. It was on brand. I thought it was a good shot for him. That's kind of how he is. He will give you a little jab three. It's not the most orthodox thing.

He is one of the most resilient bouncebacks. Last week he obviously struggled in Las Vegas. Turned the ball over a few times. Wasn't himself. He always been very fearless. Like Myles said, we all have faith in him. He is a confident guy, and he's bounced back and gave us an NCAA Tournament win. He had a big hand in it.

Q. Isaac, 20 and 11 for you. Down the stretch they made it a point to have you go at the basket. What was the mentality down the stretch, especially trying to go at Brodie in that span?

ISAAC JONES: I just had to use my quickness, I'm faster than him, and he was in foul trouble. I know he didn't want to foul. For someone that big to guard me, it's hard to keep him in front, so I wanted to keep pushing him and get the lead that way.

Q. After Isaiah hit the three, they have just one more layup the rest of the way, and it was an uncontested one. Just overall the ability to keep DeVries to 6-of-18. Brodie got his, but it wasn't as much a quantity as it was just in the quality of the looks. What do you guys feel like you did well defensively to held him to 6-of-18 for DeVries?



KYLE SMITH: We game planned we were going to have four guys rotate on him, and Andrej just delivered in a big way. He had him about 85 percent of the time, and just made it hard for him to catch. I know late we had a little -- who was in it? Jaylen might have been in there with a little pick and pop and they're switching. I could see Andrej is dying. He is denying him and just made him work.

He's a really good player. He had six assists. We were blitzing him a little bit on the ball screen. We had to call that off because that's not the first time he's seen that, and he hit us for a couple of layups.

Just it was really Andrej. Kind of a one-man band.

Q. Myles, that first three goes in for you. When you see that go in, what's the first thing that goes through your mind?

MYLES RICE: Same. Kind of emotion and everything when any other shot goes in. It was only a matter of time. Just trust your work and trust your craft at the end of the day.

But my teammates, they found me. They always encourage me when we're at practice and shoot-around keep shooting because we see you working on it. Today I hit it, and it feels good to see one go in.

Q. Jaylen, you guys shot 38 percent from the floor, 5-of-17 on layups. It seemed like most of the game you were trying to break out of this offensive kind of funk. You guys obviously broke out of it in the end, but during that stretch what are you guys doing to kind of make sure you're not getting too down and kind of what are you guys dealing with when you are trying to break out of that?

JAYLEN WELLS: I think a lot of our identity comes from defense. Just locking down and making sure they're not getting too far of a lead when we're not scoring.

We always stick together. We never lose confidence in anyone else. We have our captains. They always keep us together, always motivating us. We never get down. We're always together. We're always a family on and off the court.

Q. Free-throw shooting was obviously a factor tonight. They're just 6-of-14. You are 17-of-22. Two weeks ago we saw that flipped, and the result was flipped as well. How much has Coach Shaw basically forced these guys to shoot free throws every single minute of every single day?

KYLE SMITH: We don't change. It's the same routine. I'm sure if anyone watched us use our shoot-around time here, they're probably, like, I can't believe they use one basket for free throws the whole time, but it's important to us. Because we preach, it's what wins close games.

Coach Shaw picked that up in his time with Kelvin Sampson with Oklahoma. It's something that I learn from him every day.

You have to be so persistent, and these guys will tell you. They don't let themselves off the hook. They get their free throws in, and it paid off today in a big way.

Q. You guys tried about 1,000 different lineups in this one. Started small in the second half. Got away from that after a while. What was the thinking in terms of line-up construction, especially late in the game?

KYLE SMITH: Analytics said we should probably play small against these guys a little bit. That was it. We still played our solid eight guys, but you're right, it was harder. We just played Isaac's mismatch with Brodie or the other, Ferguson. Just thought neither one of them -- I thought they would have a hard time guarding him.

Then for Isaac got in foul trouble, and we went to Rueben, and we came up with a big stop. That's just kind of where we were at and just kind of those -- Rueben seemed to be -- he was plus 2 for the game. He was on the glass. He had a big block in the first half. It was just kind of the matchups.

We had to get shooting out there because they doubled almost every time Isaac put the ball on the floor, as I thought they would. I was laughing because they hardly ever doubled this year. I said, they're going to. They watch film too. They got physical with us, and they doubled, and we had to get that shooting out there. Isaiah made a big difference.

Q. Coach, talk about the importance of Brodie fouling out in the last few minutes and Isaac being able to make it to the end of the game with four fouls?

KYLE SMITH: It was great. He was pushing us around. He was exerting himself pretty well and then Isaac had four, and we were just fortunate he played pretty smart with trying to play four down the stretch without fouling and fouling out, and made a big difference and probably made the difference in the game.

Q. Kyle, and any of the players who want to answer, for folks who haven't seen you guys play a lot this year, was that kind of a hard-working kind of win that



maybe you guys are accustomed to?

JAYLEN WELLS: Yeah, we've had a lot of ups and downs this season. I think we started off the season well. We had a little hiccup at the start of Pac-12 play.

But we had a lot of tough and gritty wins. A lot of us stepped up. I think we have a very deep team. As you see Isaiah Watts, he had a big shot. I think it kind of goes to how deep of a team we have. Anyone on our team can hit a big shot, can step up in the big moments.

KYLE SMITH: I just think as teams scout you and everybody has film on everybody, they've just tried to make it ugly against us a little bit. I think going back to Washington game, UCLA game, conference tourney against Colorado, it got that way a little bit. We're growing, and we've had a little target on our back since we kind of -- we had a chance to win the league and got ranked, and it's just part of the experience of going through it.

These guys are averaging 34, 35 minutes a game, but they've been so tough for us. Just a big win. It's that time of year. Just have to do it. It's ugly ball. Get on the glass. Don't turn it over.

Q. Myles, it seemed like you guys playing here in Omaha there is a very large contingent of Drake fans, but despite maybe being outnumbered you guys were really having fun out there, especially you Myles. Can you sort of speak to that?

MYLES RICE: We're in the NCAA Tournament. What do you want me to say honestly? I mean, this is every kid's dream playing in this tournament, so you can't make the moment too big or more than what it is. It's basketball at the end of the day, but you always have to have fun with it.

There was a lot of chirping going on from the crowd. I feel like that makes me a little lock in a little more, but yeah, we just go out there and play our game. We always just try to have fun with it. I think we did that tonight, and I'm just grateful that we got the win.

Q. Kyle, to play Isaiah, a true freshman, 22 minutes in the NCAA Tournament and to trust him to hit a shot like that in crunch time, what kind of trust do you have in him in that kind of moment?

KYLE SMITH: I didn't know what to expect. I was surprised. He struggled down in Vegas, but he had a really good week in practice. We needed him. We needed his quick feet. Watching Drake, they're very quick.

When he is going, you've seen him, he is pretty good. He's

a light bulb as a personality, and he kind of plays with that spark. He's talented, and it's good to see.

We'll play the guys that help us win, and he was helping us tonight.

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