

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Washington State vs Iowa State

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Omaha, Nebraska, USA

CHI Health Center

Washington State Cougars

Kyle Smith

Jaylen Wells

Isaac Jones

Andrej Jakimovski

Media Conference

Iowa State 67, Washington State 56

THE MODERATOR: Washington State Cougars are with us. Head Coach Kyle Smith is joined by Jaylen Wells, Isaac Jones and Andrej Jakimovski. Comments, Coach?

KYLE SMITH: Just an awesome experience, so proud of the way our guys came out and competed to start that game, going against the Big 12 Conference Champs and top-five team.

We were un intimidated, similar -- we played obviously some teams like that. Just didn't play well enough to win to be honest, but we stuck to our game plan. We knew we had to keep our turnovers down.

I thought Myles did an awesome job running our team and getting the shots. Jaylen kept us in there making shots in the first half. Got into a little bit of foul trouble. The start of that second half, probably dug ourselves into a hole that we could not quite get out of. You're going to have to make plays to beat a really good team and you can't do it going 5 for 23.

But Lipsey hit two step backs and clutch shots and you have to give a hat tip when they do that. We don't feel like we beat ourselves, and you can hold your head high when you compete hard and these guys competed hard tonight.

Q. Kyle, you grabbed one and moved on, but this is the program's best season in a decade and a half. Where is your head in terms of processing this season



overall?

KYLE SMITH: It's really hard. I think like I said, it will wash over me in a couple of weeks. Well, a year from now, whatever. But you're trying to stay present, enjoy it and also be prepared. And there are so many distractions coming at you. And going through this, it's an awesome experience and first for me as a head coach. Honor to coach these guys. They're easy, man. They were a joy and appreciate them. Can't thank them enough. We talk about gratitude and being thankful.

We're thankful every day. And today was no different. Like I said, we started five years ago trying to build this thing into something and two NITs and now an NCAA Tournament, NCAA Tournament win. I was unaware, but people said we didn't belong. So we proved that we belonged to say the least. It's an honor.

Q. Coach, it seemed like what they were doing defensively and the amount of pressure, it threw off the rotations a little bit where you were worried maybe about turnovers or size match-ups and didn't get Isaiah in as much as you wanted and had to go with Kymany. Was that kind of how you felt with what they were doing?

KYLE SMITH: A little bit of the ball handling was important, and we did such a good job for so long in that group. We haven't seen a team like this that guards this way, and that's hard to tell the guys that the line-ups are going to be different tonight and don't get the early check-in like Isaiah may have wanted or even Reuben.

I was really proud of Reuben. He was ready to play. He sat there awhile. Isaiah got in there late. I thought he took the right shots. I am disappointed sometimes when they don't go in. He was the threat that he's been, and they just play different.

They put so much heat. They double you. They blitz you at the top of the floor. They throw everyone at you on the baseline, so they're unique.

Q. Jaylen, you guys got off to a good start. You in particular did. What were you doing well early and how did they start to take that away as the game went



on?

JAYLEN WELLS: I think we did a good job of handling the pressure, playing really unselfish, finding me. I just think we really prepared well. Honestly, we knew that they were going to stay off the baseline, drive the baseline. So you know that trap is am coming.

I think that's what it was in the first half. Obviously the second half, definitely missed more shots. We were good looks, you know, just got more work to do.

Q. How do you guys find a balance of obviously, you know, disappointing not to win and not to move on, but also kind of realizing what you guys did this season and how special the season was for Washington State?

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: I'm just proud of these guys, you know, at the beginning of the year nobody believe in us. It was just us and the Pullman community. We just proved a lot of people wrong this year. Obviously it wasn't enough to get the win today, but I'm just super proud and just thankful for this amazing experience.

ISAAC JONES: Like he said, we were proving people wrong. We had a good season. I've never been a part of a team like this before, so I'm just blessed, and I thank God for it. It didn't go the way I wanted it to, but I wouldn't have traded it for the world.

Q. Jaylen, we talked about you going to DII or DI. To go for 20 points in the second round of the NCAA Tournament, what do you think that says about your game and the way you have developed over the years?

JAYLEN WELLS: A lot of it comes from belief in the program. Coach believed in me, all these guys believe in me. So from day one I knew that was the right choice. They gave me the opportunity to work, to fight for minutes, to early earn a spot. I'm really just proud, proud I chose to go here.

Q. For Coach and then Isaac. Coach, I asked you last year after the loss in the Pac-12 Tournament to Oregon. What does the community mean to you? When I asked you this, it was not the same community that packed Beasley into the largest crowd in the state of Washington. To Isaac, I know you have been on the Palouse for quite some time. What does that support from over eight miles east in Moscow like?

KYLE SMITH: It was awesome. Like I said, I walk around town and I'm a beloved -- like I said, we were 10-15 last year and people were thankful. I can't be more excited to

be a part of it and to have people turn out and really love these guys up.

And I told the guys when I got in the locker room, some of them did, I said, man, go out there and thank the fans. We had such a good crowd that traveled out here and it's touching. They were really proud of their place, proud of Washington State. There is a love affair. It was neat to see people filling it up.

ISAAC JONES: There is nothing like the Palouse, man. I still have people text me after every game, follow me and wishing me good luck. There is nothing like it, I love every time we go there and I'm just grateful for it.

Q. As the days ahead come, what do you think you will miss most in coaching this group of guys?

KYLE SMITH: Great question. You know, I haven't really thought about what I'm going to miss, I'm still in the moment with these guys.

You know, Isaac coming over and you never know how a grad transfer guy is going to fit and he was -- he's been an awesome treat to be around as a person. He's really a quiet guy, but he's got a big heart, cares a lot, and just -- you know, I'm excited to see what they're going to do next in life.

I'm not going to miss them, they're always going to be a part of it. And Andrej, where he came from, my goodness. We got a crazy story after his freshman spring and everything. His love and his loyalty, there is not a second place. In my coaching career of 31 years -- I will miss him, if he's not back! Who knows. Every year is going to be different.

Those guys are great, and they left a mark, a legacy on the program. Everyone wants to talk about new faces but there were seven returners, and they cared a lot, and they kept the standard high. Guys like Jabe Mullins who played a lot last year, supported his teammates, never, never said a word, never did anything but support his teammates. I don't know if you can replicate that, so hopefully they have left their imprint and the next group will do something similar.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you.

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