

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Akron vs Creighton

Thursday, March 21, 2024
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA
PPG Paints Arena

Creighton Bluejays
Coach Greg McDermott
Baylor Scheierman
Ryan Kalkbrenner
Mason Miller

Media Conference

Creighton - 77, Akron - 60 Milwaukee,

MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach Greg McDermott. Coach?

GREG McDERMOTT: First of all, congratulations to Coach Groce, his staff and his team on a phenomenal year. I gained a new appreciation for the job he does in our preparation for Akron. That team was very connected defensively, very unselfish on the offensive end, and as I mentioned a couple days ago, they lost several close games that were really not far from winning 30 games this year.

So they had our utmost respect, and I think you saw, especially in the first half, you know, it's a quality, quality team that we beat today. So we're excited because we beat a good basketball team. And proud of our guys. I thought we took really good shots, and when we take really good shots, we're a pretty good basketball team. And we gotta clean up some things with some of the turnovers, but defensively I thought we adjusted as the game went on and did a much better job in the second half.

MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Baylor, what flipped in those last couple minutes before halftime? You guys go on the run and don't look back from there. What changed?

BAYLOR SCHEIERMAN: I think we were able to get some stops in a row and on the offensive end get shots. And like



coach said, we really struggled with turnovers in the first half and in the last four minutes we were able to take care of the ball and get shots and stops and when we were able to do that, that's when we really gained some separation.

Q. Felt like Akron, even though they were hitting shots, were playing at your guys' preferred pace. Did you feel like as the first half wore on and the second half got going that that started to wear into them?

RYAN KALKBRENNER: Yeah, that's kind of how we approach a lot of games is, even at the beginning of the game some pace may not give us a lot of buckets early on because the other team is fresh, but we play at that pace and practice at that pace all the time, so we can keep that up for 40 minutes. Not every team we play against can. So when you start wearing into them like that you start to get a few easy baskets or a few good looks because you're running the other team. So I think that definitely helped us toward the end of the first half and end of the second half.

Q. What changed defensively for you in the second half in the job you did on Enrique Freeman?

RYAN KALKBRENNER: I think it's a little bit getting used to how he plays. You can watch someone on film a lot and get as used to it as you can, but at the end of the day he's a really good player and just made some mental adjustments as to how I wanted to guard him in the post and did a little better job. He still got a few buckets because he's a really good player, but yeah just being able to make adjustments in the game.

Q. Mason, when did you know that something was going right for you and what kind of an impact when you're hitting your shots like that can that make on your team and on your teammates?

MASON MILLER: Honestly, I mean just every single day, I mean, I work on my shot every single day, so I kind of come into the game expecting to make shots like that. I guess just running to the corner, getting open looks and playing within the offensive kind of helps the team a lot, especially when we have great players like Ryan and Baylor over here being able to space the floor for them, it's



huge for them.

Q. For any of you guys, the experience you guys have at this stage, how did that help today and how can that help you the rest of the tournament?

BAYLOR SCHEIERMAN: I just think the game is 40 minutes long and there's a lot of ups and downs that go throughout a basketball game, and obviously in the first half there was some things that didn't go right for us and they were kind of hanging with us and whatnot, but then we were able to get stops and get a game of runs and we were able to go on ours and continue with it. So I think the experience of knowing that the game is 40 minutes and anything can happen, I think that helps us out.

Q. Baylor, is there regardless of opponent always a challenge that comes with the first game of the tournament just getting the kinks out of the way and finding your rhythm?

BAYLOR SCHEIERMAN: Yeah, I think so. Obviously it's a -- the tournament is so fun and not everybody gets to take part of it. And the start of the game, the atmosphere is just a little different than a regular game. And regardless of who you play the first round, a lot of times it can be really tough. I mean, last year at NC State it was a tough game. This year, same thing. So regardless of your opponent, the first game is always a challenge.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. Student-athletes can be dismissed.

MODERATOR: Questions for coach McDermott.

Q. I don't know what you were saying to them in the huddle as that first half was going on, but obviously both teams were making a lot of shots. Did you get a sense that because of the way the pace was going that Akron wasn't really trying to slow down and play to their style, that you guys were eventually going to break through?

GREG McDERMOTT: Some of the things I said in the huddle I can't repeat to you. And that doesn't happen with me very often. But I was not surprised that they came at us in transition. In watching them play, they're opportunistic, but they have a lot of guys that can handle it in transition and lead the break. So I was not surprised they came at us the way that they did.

We had some mental mistakes that allowed them to kind of get going, and Freeman banks in his first three. That's a nifty shot for a guy that doesn't shoot a lot. Kalkbrenner makes one, too. But if the first one doesn't go in with the

bank, maybe he's not as comfortable. The most he's ever shot in a game this year was three, and he shot 47 on the year. So we really didn't think coming in that he would be willing to shoot eight three-point shots. So we had to adjust, obviously, as the game went on.

Q. Greg, how much did you kind of bank on that, when it started to turn into kind of a one-on-one there with Kalkbrenner and Freeman that the rest of your guys, the supporting cast, would start to get open looks the way that they did?

GREG McDERMOTT: Yeah, especially when Freeman picked up a few fouls, that takes away a little bit of his aggressiveness, and that's naturally going to happen when you're in foul trouble. So as we got that lead, we made it a point to play through Kalkbrenner. And I thought the guys did a good job of picking their spots. And like I said in the open, the 17 three-point shots, we had a couple we had to take in late clock situations, but I think they were really good threes for us against a team that's been a lead all season of taking away threes and making sure the percentage, I think the team shot 30 percent against Akron on the season from three. So to do what we did offensively against what I consider a very defensive team is really a credit to our team.

Q. Coach, this is the fourth year in a row that you guys have won a tournament game and you've now passed all other Creighton coaches combined for most wins in the NCAA Tournament. To have four years in a row where you can get a win in March and to have the success that you've had, what does that say about this team that they can perform at this time of year?

GREG McDERMOTT: Well, first of all, you never take for granted getting here, because it's really difficult. What is it, 16 or 17 percent of the Division I teams get in the tournament? That's not very many. And there was a lot of disappointment on Selection Sunday with teams across the country that felt they were deserving and they didn't get in. So the first thing you do is you appreciate the opportunity, and then you celebrate the things that you've done to get here. Like I told the guys in the locker room before the game, we talk about process all year long, trusting the process, trusting your work. You know, that process is what led us to here. And that process is what's going to give us hopefully an opportunity to kind of finish the job and keep advancing in this tournament. But I've had -- really only one of those teams was an inexperienced team. The team when -- three years ago when Nembhard hurt got hurt and Trey had to slide to the point guard position and we were playing some freshmen, Alex O'Connell had only transferred in for one year, Ryan Hawkins for one year. The rest of the teams, we've had some pretty good

experience in the tournament, and I think that really helps you when you come back. You know what to expect. Teams that are here the first time are taking pictures and doing all that when they go on the court. Our guys today were like, all right, this is where we expected to be. What are we going to do, and let's do it and get out of here.

So we really appreciate the opportunity to play in the tournament, and we hope we're blessed to be able to stick around till Saturday and we'll try to give it our best.

Q. Greg, I'm just curious what you might have said to Kalkbrenner when you pulled him over to the sideline on that made breakaway that didn't exactly go the right way.

GREG McDERMOTT: Well, he had one early in the season where he attempted to break a press by himself, which was the first time that I'd ever seen that in the four years that I've coached him. Today was the first as well. So we were chuckling about -- he said he thought about going behind his back at the end. That's what brought my chuckle. But he plays the game the right way, he plays with emotion. You can tell he loves to play the game. Impacts the game in so many ways that don't show up on the stats sheet. So that was a fun moment for both of us.

Q. As the game wore on, I know it's by design defensively, I know you gave up some offensive rebounds, but you did force them to take the shots that you designed your defense to force teams to take. How did that execution ramp up as the game went on?

GREG McDERMOTT: I mean, we had to make some adjustments when the bigs were hitting threes. So we had to switch a little bit more, and then we got cross-matched a few times. But I thought early in the second half, I thought -- I can't remember who hit him. I think Johnson hit a couple tough twos where we went over the screen, we were there. He hits a 16, 17 footer with a hand in his face. That's kind of what we're trying to do. So I was happy, really, after the first seven or eight minutes of the game. I thought we settled in a little bit better defensively. But credit to them, they also made some tough shots.

Q. I know you were locked into your game. I'm wondering how much you were aware of what was going on in Omaha with Duquesne, which is the host school here, and beating BYU, and the crowd's reaction to that. At times during your game, whether the same thing was happening back home?

GREG McDERMOTT: It was a little strange to play the game with that going on, by the way because the cheers and the oohs and ahs didn't really match up to what was

going on on the floor in front of us. So that was somewhat challenging for our guys. But I had saw in the locker room before I left that they had the lead and obviously saw the reaction. Keith's been a friend of mine a long time. We coached against each other back when I was at Northern Iowa and Creighton was in the Valley and he was at Akron. We've known each other a long time. What a great way for him to go out as his career is winding down. But he's always been a terrific coach. He's tremendously respected in our profession, and good things happen to good people sometimes, and he deserved that. So I'm really happy for him and his program and, especially his family with some of the things they're going through.

MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach. Congratulations.

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