

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Oakland vs NC State

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

PPG Paints Arena

NC State Wolfpack Coach Kevin Keatts Casey Morsell D.J. Burns, Jr. Michael O'Connell Media Conference

NC State - 79, Oakland - 73

MODERATOR: Now we'll start with an opening statement from NC State's head coach, Kevin Keatts.

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, for those who are not here in Pittsburgh, I'll start off by saying that Oakland is as good as advertised. I mean, Greg's done a great job with their program, and it was a tough hard-fought, it felt like a boxing match.

Our guys were tremendous. It was a back and forth game. We bent a little bit, but we never broke. We made big plays when we had to have big plays. I thought one of the biggest things for us was our character really shined through when we needed it. We stepped up in many ways. We had to get big stops. We had to get big baskets. At times things weren't going our way. And it just shows you the growth of, obviously, this team and how they're locked in and they're focused, and their love for one another and how they play for one another, it's been very impressive. This run we've been on is really, really good.

All the credit has to go to the hard work that they've put in, and obviously they're receiving the fruits of their labor because of that. So excited about our guys. We're going to the Sweet 16, guys. And this was a team that most people didn't think we could even make it out of DC last weekend or a couple of weekends -- I don't know how long it's been. But I'm proud of their fight. I'm proud of just who they are and how we have really grown as a team.



MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Michael or Casey, when D.J. is dominating the post getting a double double, how does that motivate you guys?

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: I think it's huge for us, obviously, when he's down there doing his thing and we just keep feeding him. We have no problem feeding him. And he brings energy and he's bringing great plays down there and we can feed off that. I think it's big time for us. When he's playing at an all time high with confidence, we kind of just go along with it and it helps us out.

CASEY MORSELL: When D.J. gets going it makes it easier for us guards on the perimeter. He draws so much attention, and all we could do is just kind of stay ready, stay ready to shoot, stay ready to make a play. But when he's going, we're very hard to stop.

Q. D.J., not that you needed any extra motivation, but you were having kind of a running commentary with the Oakland fans throughout most of the game. Did that fuel you a little bit?

D.J. BURNS, JR: Yes, sir. I enjoy things like that. That's a part of the game. The fans, they're going to really come at you, especially when they have a team like that with the capabilities that they have, you gotta talk. You gotta have some fun with it.

Q. For all three of you guys, obviously you guys have been the underdog and everyone has been cheering you guys on. It's definitely different tonight as it seemed it was a predominantly Oakland crowd. What was the mindset going into the game about that, and also during the game when you guys were, I guess, the lesser crowd, I guess?

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: I think going into the game, we don't really focus on who's the underdog or who's the higher seed or lower seed. It's kind of the match-up at hand. Obviously any team in here is a great team and they could have been higher or lower or we could have been. It doesn't really matter. Going into the game, we take the



match-up personal and we kind of go out there and play. We still had a lot of fans out there. The place was rocking. When we get going and get scoring and get stops it was loud. I really couldn't tell a difference if there was more or less fans. It was great to have our fans out there just supporting us all the way.

Q. D.J., you nodded when your coach said it was like a boxing match out there. What was the challenge that they were throwing at you in the post, and looked like you got really fired up after you hit the bucket and got fouled and stared down the camera. What was going through your mind during that play?

D.J. BURNS, JR: Again, it's one of those games where I had the choice to get in my feelings about getting fouled or continue to play hard. I just hit a point where I was like I just gotta ignore it because it's not going away. So I just wanted to try my best to keep going for my guys.

Q. Michael, final minute, you hadn't taken -- you've taken only threes to that point and there's less than ten seconds left on the shot clock and you just take your head down from the top of the key and drive it all the way to the basket, get the bucket and the foul shot. Take me through that process in the final minute.

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: I mean I was just taking what the defense was really giving me. They were pressing out. I kind of just -- he went one way, I tried to make -- go make a play. If they stepped up I was going to kick it, but I felt like I could take a lay-up and I tried to do what I could do to finish the play.

Q. Casey, you had the primary assignment on Gohlke tonight. From growing up in DC, I'm curious if there's anybody that you've played that you've seen in your career that's been a shooter like that?

CASEY MORSELL: No. I've never played anyone who could shoot at that caliber. One thing that Jack does he tests your awareness because he's always moving, and in order to kind of slow him down you just gotta be in shape and you just kind of, like I said, you just gotta be aware where he is at all times. He tested that. But it wasn't just me. It was a team effort. JT guarded him and Horne, Mike. Everyone was kind of doing their best to kind of slow him down.

Q. Like Coach Keatts said earlier, people didn't expect you to be in this position. So what's your message to those people who didn't expect to see NC State make it to the Sweet 16?

KEVIN KEATTS: Be nice, Burns.

D.J. BURNS, JR.: I'm just saying welcome back. They didn't really believe in us. They probably still don't but that doesn't matter to us. We're just going to stay together. If you're supporting us, thank you. If not, that's what it is.

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: Yeah. I think the biggest thing, honestly, is no matter what the outside noise is we gotta believe in ourselves and I think that's what we've been doing to this point since before the ACC tournament. We kind of left everything in the past and we had to take one game at a time. And I think that's what we've been doing now. Coach has prepared us really well and we've taken that message and trying to apply it to the floor. If people are with us it's great, if they're not, it is what it is. We'll take all the support we can get, but at the same time we have to rely on the people in the locker room to go out there and compete.

CASEY MORSELL: Yeah, I agree. I mean, just we're going to stay connected, no matter what goes on on the outside. For us it's been a roller coaster of emotions, but we've seen a lot, and we're not going nowhere. We're here.

Q. For all you guys, how does a team that won eight games from January 1st to the end of the regular season win 12 games in?

D.J. BURNS, JR: I think that's what March is about. Some teams got here by winning their conference just like us and that doesn't mean they're a bad team. We executed, and shoot, we just kept playing for each other. I think that's all it was about for us.

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: Yeah, I would say sticking together honestly throughout all the tough times. Things aren't always going to be pretty and go your way. But if we can stick together with the guys you're out there competing with, I think that's going to go a long way. When times are not favorable, you gotta be able to pick each other and keep competing. At the end of the day you compete with the five guys on the court and the guys that are playing with you.

CASEY MORSELL: What all those guys said is true. But also just our resources that we have, our strength coach, our doctors that travel with us, massages, to help us be ready to play and not get tired. That's something that's definitely given us advantage in March.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Questions for questions for Coach Keatts.

Q. Obviously, Casey said earlier it was a team effort to

guard Jack Gohlke tonight. How did you think your guys did? I know it was a hard job chasing that guy around. You limited him to a decent amount of shots. He just made most of them. So what did you think of their job?

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, he's dangerous and you gotta pay so much attention to him, and then when you look at the fact that Trey Townsend is really good. So they've got a kind of inside out punch with those two guys who can really shoot the basketball. And what he's done in the last couple of days is simply impressive. I want to say, what, 16 threes in two days? So you gotta pay so much attention to him. And here's what makes him really special is they know that he can shoot the ball so they do a great job of running a lot of plays for him and running all the stagger screens and trying to get elevator screens for him. I thought our guys did a really good job. We knew we couldn't stop him from taking threes, but we wanted him to take tough threes and shoot a bad percentage and I thought we did a great job with that.

Q. Kevin, in addition to D.J. having 24 points, I think you had four other scorers in double figures. What does that say about the balance of your offense and the way these guys complement what D.J. is doing down low?

KEVIN KEATTS: You know, that's the strength of our team and at one point it wasn't. Early on it was either D.J. Horne or maybe JT could have a good night. I think one of the things if you look back at the seven games we won in a row is I think that everyone has really stepped up in different ways, and every night there's someone else. D.J. Horne -- I mean D.J. Burns was great tonight. I thought Michael, even though he might not have impacted the game much with his scoring, he had a career high and assisted eight. So that's kind of what makes us special right now. That makes us tough to guard because on any given night, one of these guys can lead us in scoring.

Q. Coach, talk about just how crucial was losing Diarra and Middlebrooks there in the overtime period and the decision to sub in Jayden Taylor who had a big three?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, we were running out of players. I looked around. I was going to put Levi Watkins in at one point. We needed another post guy. We had some calls that didn't go our way and I told you before, like I said earlier, Trey Townsend had a great game. 30 points and 13 rebounds. He is as good as advertised. But it got tough at the end because we didn't have anyone else that we could throw in the game. So we decide to go four guards, and it actually helped us on the offensive game

because Jayden Taylor was able to knock down that three in the corner.

Q. Coach, what does it say or do you have any message to the rest of the country about the conference, about the ACC, just for the fact that so much is made on which conference is better and it's impossible really to equate, especially in a tournament like March Madness, but you struggled for a while in January-February and yet you're here in the Sweet 16 and ACC kind of had a rough road of getting teams in the tournament this year?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, I think it's been a common theme for three years, and it's crazy because when we do, meaning we as the ACC, we get teams in the tournament, the few five that we're getting in pretty much play pretty well. And so we try to send that message early on before we got to Selection Sunday, that we play well once we get in the tournament. But we gotta figure it out. Our league is really good. One of the reasons why we're playing good basketball is because we're battle tested. A lot of times a lot is put on the nonconference. You play 11 games. So let's say we play five or six Power 5 games and then we have five or six bye games. They're good. They'll challenge you. But you can't tell me that that's more challenging than playing 20 ACC games and playing at great venues. Pittsburgh, as you're here, and going to different places and being battle tested. So we gotta figure it out. We're deserving. Our league is going to go to 18 teams and I think we should be able to get ten teams in. And that's up to us as coaches. You know, we have to figure out do we need to win more games in November? How do you schedule? We gotta do a lot of different things. But we got a great league. I think it's the best league in college basketball.

Q. D.J. said earlier that he made the choice to not get in his feelings when fouls weren't being called, he's getting hacked on low. Is that something he's always been able to do or has he evolved as a player to not get in his feelings and play through those circumstances?

KEVIN KEATTS: He's probably -- it's so tough to referee him, and he probably gets fouled more than anybody, and I'm not saying these officials or any other officials. So he's got no choice. Very seldom do you see him get to the free throw line when you can make a case that every other possession that he touches the basketball he gets fouled. And so we've talked about the maturity of it. It's like, what are you going to do? I mean, you don't like it, you get a technical foul. Just move on and just play through contact, and I think that's where he's matured.

It didn't happen just this year. This started last year and then he's matured to the point where he's like I'm not going to get any calls, just play through all contact.

Q. Coach, since you guys were the tenth seed in the ACC tournament, where do you think that your team has grown the most between now and then?

KEVIN KEATTS: You talking about since we were the tenth seed in the ACC? I just think we've come together. Like we've been a good team all year long. We just hadn't stacked games. We hadn't stacked opportunities. You think about -- a lot of people put so much into our last four games. And they didn't talk about our first six games. We were 5-1. We had a tough schedule. And when we look back at it, it wasn't so much about the teams that we played, which were very good. It's what we didn't do. You look at those four games, we were in all of those games and had the opportunity to win them. And I just think we have cut down on our mistakes, and most of them are on the defensive end. This team can score the basketball, but defensively we were a mess at times. Ball screen coverage wasn't well. Our assistant coaches have done a great job with scouting. We wasn't doing a great job of comprehending scouting reports, and now we're doing it. And I think one of the biggest things is we believe and trust in one another. If you're not having a good night, then you gotta trust your brother beside you and I think that's one of the things that we've matured in.

MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach.

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