

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - New Mexico vs Michigan State

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Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Arena

New Mexico Lobos

Richard Pitino

CJ Noland

Filip Borovicanin

Media Conference

Q. Guys, obviously, you've been dreaming of making it to this point. You want to accomplish more, but how is this feeling going into this game? Obviously, you want to keep making the run you want to make.

FILIP BOROVCANIN: It's just a great feeling being here and having an opportunity to go and play the game for Sweet 16. We need to match physicality of Michigan State, and I think will be the key.

CJ NOLAND: Yeah, super exciting being here for everybody. I think everybody knows we can continue to do great things on the court, and that's what we want to do.

Q. Have you played a team that's as physical as Michigan State is, and what challenge do you think this poses?

CJ NOLAND: I think they're similar to like a USC or UCLA that we played, just those Big Ten teams that are very physical. I wouldn't say that we've played one that matched that type of physicality, though, yet this year.

Q. For both of you, was there an emphasis at halftime to really get the ball to Nelly and kind of establish him to help you guys finish off Marquette?

FILIP BOROVCANIN: Yeah, I think we saw that they were doubling Nelly every time we threw the ball in to him. So the game plan was to give him the ball and try to make a play for the other teammates, and I think he did a great job of doing that, finding the open teammates.

Q. After years of probably watching his dad on TV,



what's it been like having Richard Pitino as your coach since he kind of has a different approach than his dad?

CJ NOLAND: He's an amazing guy. Great person, obviously comes from a great family. But he's a good dude to be around every day. He keeps the vibe around. He's honestly a good guy to go talk to when, you know, you're down or whatever. But obviously, a good coach, too, and he's a really good motivator for sure.

FILIP BOROVCANIN: I just have -- great coach, getting his guys shooting the ball even when they are down, and they don't have the confidence that they need. They keep telling us to shoot the ball when we are open, everything. So that's just the type of coach that you can ask for.

Q. CJ, you came in, confidence probably wasn't an issue shooting the three. You had a good percentage last year at North Texas before the transfer. Filip, you've talked a lot about Coach giving you the confidence and building your confidence. You two yesterday, were the first half to keep things rolling when Donovan was struggling so much. I'm curious if you guys knew going in that you guys would have to have the green light and put them up, and how much Coach Pitino talked to you guys about the need for your threes yesterday?

CJ NOLAND: Yeah, I would say it's kind of the same for every game. He wants us to shoot those open shots, and the more that we shoot, the more -- he's not mad at it if the makes go in or not. But yeah, he's always told us that he's going to need us to make big shots, and so we're glad that they went in yesterday for us.

Q. You mentioned all about Michigan State's physicality, but they also get out and run. What is the complexity of a team that can do it both in the full court and the half court like that, and how much have you -- in this short prep from Coach Pitino, how much are you hearing from him in his previous game planning of what to expect from Michigan State?

CJ NOLAND: Yeah, he's played against them before, so he definitely knows their concepts and what they like to do, get out and run the match the physicality, things like that. He puts a big emphasis on getting back in transition.



That's one of the big things that we need to do and match the physicality on the boards. That's for sure.

Q. I assume you know the history of Michigan State in the tournament. Is that at all daunting, intimidating? How do you view that?

CJ NOLAND: I view it as an opportunity to go beat a great coach in the sport. That's how I look at it for sure.

FILIP BOROVCANIN: He's a great coach, and it's just an opportunity, like CJ said, to show off what we can do against great teams like that.

Q. To go back to the coaching matchup, you guys have grown up in a world where Tom Izzo has been a coach for as long as you've been alive. Your coach's dad, Rick, has been a coach for as long as you've been alive. When you hear those two names, Pitino and Izzo, what do you think?

FILIP BOROVCANIN: I think they're one of the greatest basketball coaches in college basketball history, so I think it's a great opportunity to play against those type of coaches and against teams like that.

CJ NOLAND: I mean, it's just like he was saying, they're two really great coaches, and they have a legacy that they're going to leave behind in the game, and to be a part of it is great for sure.

Q. It's been roughly about 51 years since UNM has made it to the Sweet 16. Have you all discussed that, and what would it mean to get back there?

CJ NOLAND: Yeah, obviously, we want to make the Sweet 16. Coach talks about it a lot. The program has never been there. He wants us to be there. We're going to do the best that we can to get there for sure.

FILIP BOROVCANIN: Yeah, just what CJ said. What Coach told us, I think, is that this program never made it to the Sweet 16, but I'm not sure. It's just a great opportunity for us to show, and yeah.

Q. I am a little curious, since we've been here all week long, you guys have answered probably at least two dozen Rick Pitino questions, Tom Izzo questions, what is Richard Pitino like compared to his dad, kind of questions. Are you guys surprised that nobody has really asked you a whole lot about you guys?

FILIP BOROVCANIN: I mean, I was a little bit surprised about that much questions about Tom Izzo and Rick Pitino, especially for me since I was growing up in Serbia and

didn't really have a chance to watch basketball like that, college basketball. But for sure, I still know they're one of the greatest coaches, so yeah, that's it.

CJ NOLAND: Yeah, kind of what Filip was saying, I didn't expect there to be that many. But it's part of the game for sure, the two legendary coaches, so I'm glad to be a part of it.

Q. Filip, you were on Arizona's team last year. I don't know if you helped prep for the Michigan State game, but what things did you learn about maybe their big guys that have been around, with Kohler and Cooper in particular, and what things are you able to take with you into this game from that prep?

FILIP BOROVCANIN: Yeah, we just saw and was talking about last year and this year about them two being on the big side of offensive glass, and those be the big things for us, to keep them off the offensive glass. That's pretty much it. We've got to dig in when they have the ball, and that's it.

Q. Michigan State's roster, do you have any connections with those guys, AAU teams or travel ball?

CJ NOLAND: No, no connections.

FILIP BOROVCANIN: Yeah, same thing.

Q. (Indiscernible) how challenging is it to you guys as players when you can't know for sure which of the guys are going to pop off?

CJ NOLAND: I would just say they're a really good team, and I believe we have players on our team that could pop off at any moment, too. It's just kind of fire with fire for real.

Q. For you guys, you talk about fire against fire. It feels like very good guards in this game for both you guys and them. What is it going to be like going against their guards and just could be a big matchup there?

FILIP BOROVCANIN: Yeah, I think we just have defensive concepts and don't really focus too much about, like, single guards or single players. We have our concepts, and we try to keep them, and I think we'll be fine.

CJ NOLAND: Yeah, we have our concepts as far as defense. They change, change coverages or whatever like that, but I think overall it's going to be a really good game, a really guard-heavy game, and it's going to be fun to watch.

Q. Filip, you mentioned growing up in Serbia, not knowing the Pitino name. When did you learn who your coach's dad was?

FILIP BOROVIKANIN: Actually, if you talk about Rick Pitino, I've heard of him because I've watched a lot of Euroleague basketball and he coached Panathinaikos, so I hear of him, but Tom Izzo, not really much before I came to my first year in college to Arizona.

Q. You mentioned the concepts defensively. I noticed in the game yesterday that you guys switched a lot against Marquette. Is that something that you're going to bring to the Michigan State game?

CJ NOLAND: It's kind of more traditional for us. This is more of a traditional game for us, kind of getting back to red and being in the gaps heavy.

Q. You guys are both fairly new within the program, within this year. Obviously, an Albuquerque and New Mexico is a basketball state and there's a lot of lineage. CJ, I believe your mom is pretty active on social media. Have you guys really embraced what basketball means and UNM basketball means to New Mexico, Albuquerque and the school?

CJ NOLAND: Yeah, we go out a lot in the community and do things with the community just to show our faces. We're pretty relevant in the community, so Albuquerque loves us and we love Albuquerque for sure. There's a lot of love between both parties.

FILIP BOROVIKANIN: I just think you need to be appreciative of those kind of fans. Not a lot of programs in college basketball has fans like we do in Albuquerque, 14,000 people at almost every game, so you've got to appreciate that and love it.

Q. I'm curious, with Nelly and the physicality that you guys know is about to happen in the post but that wasn't necessarily there yesterday but will be there, I imagine, tomorrow, do you change anything? Does he need to kind of be warned or is it just a San Diego State/Boise State kind of thing where he knows?

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, we certainly referenced St. John's, San Diego State and Boise as the three somewhat comparable, but obviously not. We watched a lot of film this morning. They were able to watch in person to see the physicality last night. But this is a testament to Coach Izzo. It's the same thing every year. That's a compliment because if you do not block out, they're going to rebound. If you do not get back, they're going to run.

So there's a high level of physicality, and it's always been that way with Coach Izzo's teams.

Could be a little bit of adjustment to see it. They're bigger certainly than Marquette, so we're going to have to be ready.

Q. Given the similar ages, you have a really international mix to your roster, something that wasn't around pre-Dream Team. I was wondering how you've seen that chemistry; those different backgrounds impact your roster and the changing of the game nowadays with more international players?

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, I think you're always trying to be as creative as you possibly can to put together a roster. We've obviously got -- it feels like the United Nations in there from time to time. But it makes it fun.

They all love the game. They all come from different walks of life. But that's the cool part about basketball. It just brings everybody together.

European basketball overseas, it's all gotten significantly better. Now with the transfer portal and things like that, you don't necessarily have to go overseas to be able to get an overseas player. But we really like them all. They've got a great understanding of the game and high basketball IQs.

Q. At halftime, did you make an adjustment to really emphasize getting Nelly the basketball in the second half? He had 13 second half points, and it seemed like, not only did he score, but he also helped his teammates get free.

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, we made a concerted effort, first play of the second half, to go inside and just to kind of see -- they had been really bothering our ball screens, and we needed to have other ways to offensively attack them. We felt like going down to Nelly would be a bit of an advantage.

So we definitely thought we needed to look at that, and it was pretty productive early.

Q. I know that a lot has been made about just the family ties between your family and Tom Izzo, and obviously, you've coached against him, but I'm wondering, from a stylistic standpoint, how much does the previous experience you've had coaching against his system translate into this game, in particular with short prep?

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, I think people got to realize I coached against Izzo for eight years. I don't win a lot, but I have gone against him many times. So I have, obviously, a high level of respect. Who does not? He's one of the absolute legends and icons in this game, and he's a great person, and he's always been so very gracious to everybody, not just myself.

I understand what we're about to walk into because I've seen it. I've seen it in Breslin Center. I've seen it in the Big Ten Tournament. I've seen it in the NCAA Tournament one year we played them. So I know the task at hand. Our players may not know it, but they'll feel it, certainly, to start the game.

But if you're going to beat them, it's going to have to be a traffic effort.

Q. Richard, over the past 10, 11 years, how much has Coach Izzo been a mentor or sounding board for you when you guys were both in the conference, and then now on opposite sides of the country?

RICHARD PITINO: Obviously, I haven't certainly kept in touch with him, but you see him in recruiting and stuff. He's not one of those coaches to big-time anybody. He's always been -- win, lose, he's just a coach's coach. The eight years that I was at Minnesota, it was love me, hate me, love me, hate me, it was rocky. We didn't have a great amount of consistency, and he always fought for me for guys who were on the hot seat all the time, and he didn't need to do that. He knows how hard it is at any job, and he's just had an amazing amount of consistency.

But I think more so than winning, the impact that he has on people, younger coaches, that he does not need to wrap their arms around certainly meant a lot to me as -- I was 30 years old as a head coach in the Big Ten, and you're going against a Naismith Hall of Famer. He doesn't need to spend time with me and do those things, but he does that. It just shows the type of person he is.

Q. My question is about preparation. What exactly are you doing to make sure that the guys are ready to go tomorrow?

RICHARD PITINO: Well, you've got to rest. We watched half of the game, and then we let them sleep somewhat in this morning and then watched all the edits, put together the game plan, did that -- we practiced, but not really practiced. We got some shots up and they kind of walked through what we need to do. We'll go back, let them nap a little bit and watch some more film tonight.

This time of year, it's about rest more so than practicing

because that was a war for us. That was a battle last night. We need to find a way to get our guys fresh tomorrow.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Tru Washington. I just got down talking to him about a couple moments that made him a better player but weren't necessarily good memories for him. One was the missed shot against Air Force at the end of the game in the Pit last year. The other one was, he failed to box-out against San Jose State in the loss earlier this season. But he said both of those things made him a tougher player. Have you seen growth from him from those two moments?

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, I wish he'd move on from those two moments, but yes. I think freshman year, had a really nice freshman year. This year, honorable mention all-conference. You're just seeing the growth right in front of our eyes.

I think that's where the retention piece comes into play. You saw it with Donovan. Good freshman year, even better, keep going. So the same plan is for Tru. I thought Tru, he made some huge plays in last night's game, and he was ready to go, so he's confident as ever. He's elite defensively, getting deflections, getting steals, shooting his continued to prove, and he's making some really nice drives to the basket.

Yeah, experience is huge. You don't want them to harp on too many bad memories, but if that motivates him, certainly, that's a good thing, as well.

Q. You're someone who's had your name come up in terms of being talked about for job openings in the past, and even this year. Curious how you thought Will Wade handled his situation this week.

RICHARD PITINO: Oh, you'd have to ask Will Wade that. I think that coaches are being put in different spots now than before because of the transfer portal. Teams are -- ADs and search firms are very eager to have this thing in place on Monday. I'd love to see the transfer portal window be pushed back. Coaches are not all bad guys like everybody implies we are, but you're put in a tough spot.

I don't know necessarily with the Will stuff, but sometimes it's out of coaches' control.

But I think the main message is the portal opening on Monday is the dumbest thing ever. There's no logic behind it whatsoever. Why not do it in April because school doesn't end until mid-May, so give them a month then. Can't really speak on the Will thing, but it is putting a lot of people in very uncomfortable spots.

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Q. Richard, you talked about the similarities of playing Tom Izzo before at Michigan State and playing them in the tournament when you were at Minnesota. Now here you are again, 10-2 matchup. What's the difference in those six years that you have your team in this position today?

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, a lot. You're always eager to grow and evolve and get better as a person, as a coach. I would say now more so than younger in my career. I understand it's not about an out-of-bounds play, it's not about an ATO. It's about the program that you build and the culture that you build and the accountability, whether it's with your staff, your players. It's my job to get everybody on the same page, and if there's any confusion, that's my responsibility.

So I would say I've definitely evolved to understand that's more the job than anything else. I think when you're a young head coach in the Big Ten especially, you're just trying to kind of establish yourself. Humbly speaking, I'm not worried about that anymore. I'm just worried about doing my very best to help my players and my staff to help put them in the best positions possible.

Q. Back to what you were saying about Coach Izzo and that consistency, how it's the same every year, how difficult is it to achieve that level of consistency, especially given the current landscape of player movement?

RICHARD PITINO: Next to impossible. Only the elite, elite ones have been able to do that, and Coach Izzo is absolutely one of those. As I said before, not a whole lot changes when you play them, and I say that with the utmost respect, because you're never going to get a team from Michigan State with Coach Izzo's coaching that doesn't play hard. You know you'd better block out. You know you're going to get crushed on some screens. You know they're going to be fundamentally sound.

So yeah, we all want consistency, and I'm starting to build it, not to the level of what Coach Izzo has done, but I've had three really good years in a row. That's what you're looking for.

Just the sustained success that he has had, you can't help but marvel at it.

Q. I'm wondering about the complexity of a team that can play real physical in the half court, but also wants to get out and run in transition and can do it at such a high level. Is that pretty unique, to have both facets of that, and just as a side note, when you did win at

Breslin Center that first time, what was that moment like for you?

RICHARD PITINO: That was an awesome moment. That was one of my favorites because of how hard that is to win in that building, and it was a great game. That's one of the best home court advantages in college basketball.

If you ever do beat Coach Izzo, which I don't know how many times I did it -- it's not a lot, I can tell you that, it's two or three maybe, but he's going to make you earn it. As for their style, yeah, I think for the casual observer, you would think they're a slow, plotting physical team. There's kind of that traditional belief of how the Big Ten is played. They do not play like that.

Now, they'll grind you out if they need to, but they're trying to score early, and their guards push, and their wings run, and their bigs rim run.

Yeah, he gets them to fly up the court. It's been that way for a long time.

Q. I'm curious, I believe Nelly played for your dad at IONA, and I'm curious, in an official capacity, what did he tell you about him when he transferred to your program?

RICHARD PITINO: He more told me about the character piece. I watched enough of him at IONA, and we had actually played against them in the Pit and Nelly was really good. So when my dad made the decision to go to St. John's, he had had a really good big guy named Joel Soriano, so there wasn't necessarily a fit there for Nelly to be a starter and those things, so the fit was there.

I think Nelly experienced the Pit. I think there was a trust factor, obviously, with the family. He's just grown and grown and grown and consistently improved every single day.

Q. So far in the tournament, almost all of the higher seeds have rolled pretty easily against the lesser seeds. The upset potential in the NCAA Tournament, do you see it changing? Is this just a small snapshot in time? Or have things changed with the portal and everything else?

RICHARD PITINO: Things have substantially changed, but everybody is dealing with it. To say that not a lot of upsets is because of the transfer portal -- like, I don't know about that. I think upsets are always going to happen.

But yeah, you're just seeing -- we had the Mountain West Freshman of the Year, what, the last two or three years get



taken out of that league to go on. Parity is at an all-time high right now, and it's just one of those situations where you've got to deal with it.

But I still think there's going to be plenty of upsets going forward.

Q. I'm curious, how many brothers and sisters were here yesterday, how that's going, how you're able to sort of follow -- I don't know if you know this, but there's a game going on right now that you might be interested in, and I'm curious how that's going with the family, and did you visit them at all or do you push it off to the side?

RICHARD PITINO: Well, all my brothers but one, my brother Chris is in Providence and his kids were there, so he didn't bring them down here, but there was a crew that -- they're high rollers. They've got a plane, so it's not like they're flying Southwest middle seat. They got a private plane from Providence with some cocktails. They seemed like they enjoyed themselves flying down here. And they're enjoying it. They're loving it.

My cousin was there, some friends from Louisville, St. John's, and then they flew back last night, and now they're at that game.

I think if they win today, they're trying to plan on coming back tomorrow. I didn't really see much of them. They're not staying here. They're having fun with it, and that's the way it should be.

Q. Just after looking at the film from last night, Donny had a good second half, but how much of a concern was the turnovers and just analyzing him, what did you see?

RICHARD PITINO: I wouldn't say concern is the right word because he always rebounds pretty well from that. You've got to give Marquette credit; they're physical. Stevie Mitchell is just as good as it gets at on-the-ball defense and they had a great plan for Donovan.

But I thought as the game went on, he got better and better, so he was able to adjust and adapt a little bit.

Concerned is probably not the right word because he's been so very, very consistent in the three games or the three years I've had him, but he'll learn from them. Not all of them were his fault, as well. It's always kind of connected.

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