

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - McNeese vs Gonzaga

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

Delta Center

McNeese Cowboys Coach Will Wade Shahada Wells Christian Shumate

Media Conference

Gonzaga 86, McNeese State 65

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by McNeese, head coach Will Wade, Shahada Wells and Christian Shumate.

We'll open it up with a statement from Coach Wade.

WILL WADE: I mean, give Gonzaga a lot of credit. They played really, really well. Their length had a lot to do with it, we missed a lot of layups at the rim. They did a good job baiting our post trap and skipping it out for open threes early.

It was deflating. We were missing layups and they were hitting open threes. That's deflating for a team. But you could tell, they were a team that's been here before, a team that's been in these moments. We're still a program that's building and trying to play well in these moments.

I'm not going to let one bad night ruin a lot of really, really good nights. I told our guys that. 30-4, we're going to keep perspective on that.

We ran into a buzz saw. They're a tremendous program, tremendous team. We see where we need to try to get to now.

Give them credit. I'm proud of all of our guys. Been an unbelievable season. Just sorry we couldn't keep it going a little bit while longer.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up for questions for our student-athletes.



Q. Talk about what the season was like, what you'll remember looking back?

SHAHADA WELLS: This season means a lot to me. Just being along with these guys, man, this team is something special. When Coach Wade brought us, he said it was going to be something special. Looking back at it, like he said, we can't take away what we did.

Things didn't go our way tonight, but we did incredible things not just for ourselves but the city of Lake Charles, the Southland Conference. It's a good thing.

CHRISTIAN SHUMATE: Yeah, kind of really the same thing. Can't really take away from what we did. I was part of last year's team and the year before that. What we did first is turn the program around, giving people something to be excited for.

Everything that we did, winning 30 games, it was a lot of compliments that we had this year. You can't really take away from that. That's what we'll look back to. Just being around this team, we kind of became a family, being around our brothers every day, going through tough times. Just embracing each other, embracing the community.

We're just proud to be here.

Q. Shahada, Coach talked about it was deflating to see them get off to a good start. How hard was it for you to keep up with them?

SHAHADA WELLS: I would say they were ready for what we had. Our post traps, like he said, the open threes, it was hard for us to come back with us missing layups, shooting threes that we couldn't make, that we didn't make. I feel like we dug ourselves in a hole at the beginning. We tried to dig ourselves out. We all seen the outcome.

Proud of this team. We've come so far, but sad to say it comes to an end today, but I'm proud of us.

Q. Christian, talk about the impact Shahada has had on this team, what he's meant to you personally, as well.



CHRISTIAN SHUMATE: I mean, personally, he's been a brother to me since we got here. Like I said, we all embraced each other. Me and him, we kind of became brothers. We had to do some things together, figure out some things together to kind of bring the team along. We had a lot of long talks. We just had to figure things out.

Once we figured things out between me and him on how we were going to lead, we relate that onto the team. Got them along with us.

He's just been such a big part of the team, scoring, defending, his vocalness. He's just part of the team. He's everything to us.

Q. You said in Wednesday's press conference that you wanted to make the community proud of you. The fans, everybody in the stands, were proud all night long. What do you have to say to them?

CHRISTIAN SHUMATE: Well, I just want to say thank you. I love our fans. I love the community. I wish we could keep on going. Still, I just want to thank them. Everything they've done for us up until this point is just one big family in the town. We all love each other. We love y'all. They love us.

I mean, it's an amazing feeling knowing that you got that many people backing you. We had like a real McNeese section out there. Just an unbelievable feeling. No amount of words that you could say to show the appreciation that I have and I know that the team has for everyone.

So, yeah, thank you. We love you guys.

SHAHADA WELLS: Just say thank you to everybody that supported us this year, man. It's been a long journey. It's been a special journey. We changed the coach, we changed a lot of things. If it wasn't for the people of Lake Charles, we wouldn't be in this position that we're in. We just want to say thank you with all our hearts and Go Pokes.

Q. Shahada, talk about the impact Coach Wade has had on your career.

SHAHADA WELLS: He's had a big impact on my career, not just my career, my life. We talk things outside of basketball. But basketball standpoint, he just taught me a lot. Just the different reads he shows me, everything. He shows me he's a winning coach, things of that matter. He just taught me a lot.

THE MODERATOR: We'll excuse our student-athletes and continue with questions for Coach Wade.

Q. You're clearly getting a little emotional. This team has meant a lot to you. Talk about the season, what Christian and Shahada have meant to you, as well.

WILL WADE: I mean, I cried in the locker room afterwards. I'm not the most emotional guy. All of them, man. They chose us when we didn't have a whole lot going for us. They turned around a basketball program. They've turned around a school. They've turned around a community. I'm just sorry we're not going to be able to keep it going.

They've been just incredible, all of 'em. All of 'em have been just phenomenal. Very, very appreciative of everybody.

Q. Obviously you had to double down because of their size. What did you think when they hit the six out of seven to start it? Was there anything you could do at that point?

WILL WADE: I mean, look, if you're going to pull an upset, we got to make a bunch of threes and you have to hope they miss a bunch of threes. The exact opposite happened. We missed a bunch of threes; they made a bunch of threes.

It's pick your poison. I was worried if we didn't double the post, we were going to get in foul trouble all night. We just didn't have enough big bodies. I mean, their three man is bigger than our center. We just had limited options. We were going to try to let them bomb us away from three. Credit to them, they did a phenomenal, phenomenal job.

Q. What was kind of the message at halftime to rally them up?

WILL WADE: We just talked about, look, we've been in this situation at Corpus, at Southeastern. Obviously we weren't playing Corpus or Southeastern. We just tried to chip away at it a little bit.

First couple plays of the second half, we missed the layup at the rim. We missed another layup in transition. Just backbreakers where we could have tried to chop it down a little bit. We could never get our feet underneath us to chop it down.

Their length and athleticism had a lot to do with us missing. We got to go back and get to work. We see what it is now. We're going to land tomorrow afternoon in Lake Charles, and tomorrow afternoon when we land at Lake Charles the staff and I are going to be working. We're going to try to

keep as many of these guys that want to stay.

We got to look a little different. If we want to get to that stage again, we have to look a little different. I kind of knew that coming in. We got to go get some dudes. That portal is open. We're going to be ready to roll.

Q. Do you think you were ahead of schedule this year going 30-4? This was unexpected.

WILL WADE: Yeah, look, I think today our lack of experience in the tournament showed. I was extremely pleased with how we played in the conference tournament. I was worried going into the conference tournament about how we would play on that stage with guys who haven't been in those big of games, outside of Hada really.

I was thrilled with how we played. Having the thing at home probably helped quite a bit with how we played. But when you come to these environments, it's different. It's different. Gonzaga looked like a team that's been to the second weekend eight straight times in 25 straight tournaments. We looked like a team that's coming for the first time in 22 years. That's just what it looked like.

You can try to explain it, do all that all you want, it's just until you experience it -- and that's the part for us. I mean, it's hard as hell to get here when you're from a one-bid league. We have to go back to work. The first step is to go acquire some talent that's going to help us get back here. Because we do have to replace Hada and some other good players. We have to acquire talent, because talent is the price of admission to get to this thing. We got to bow up and get better.

They exploited some of the stuff that, quite frankly, in some of the games in our league we can be sloppy on some of the switches, we can be sloppy on some things, and it still works because we got better athletes than some of them.

When you got to this stage, you've got to be really, really tight. And we weren't tonight. But a lot of that is a credit to Gonzaga.

Q. For you personally, what was it being back on this stage?

WILL WADE: Great just because it was with our guys. It was awesome to see how excited they were, to see how fired up they were for it.

It's fun. Anytime you can go to the tournament, man, it's a good year. I wish we'd have played a little bit better today. I mean, 30 and fricking 4, man. We'd have all signed up for that. I'm not going to let any of this take away from the

incredible year we had, incredible time we had with the guys. I've never had more fun with a team in my life. They're a blast.

Just wasn't our night tonight. We got to get back and make sure we get back here and try to make it our night this time next year.

Q. I know you're a perfectionist, you're already thinking about getting off the plane tomorrow. Tonight, before you go to bed, are you going to tell yourself you did a good job?

WILL WADE: I don't know about that. Look, we got here. That was step one. Now we've got to prepare for step two and move forward to next year.

Look, I got to help Hada. We have to help him move forward with the NBA. We've got some stuff out there with Felder and Collum on their years of eligibility, whether they can come back or not. We got to get that solved. I got a laundry list of things I got to go through.

We're going to get it right. We're going to put our team and our program in the best position to get back here and have a chance to win.

Q. Things move fast in this world. How do you anticipate approaching conversations or opportunities should other schools show interest in you in the coming weeks?

WILL WADE: I plan on being back at McNeese next year. How's that? Short, sweet, to the point (smiling).

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

