

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Grand Canyon vs Alabama

Sunday, March 24, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena

Alabama Crimson Tide

Nate Oats

Mark Sears

Rylan Griffen

Mouhamed Dioubate

Media Conference

Alabama - 72, Grand Canyon - 61

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

NATE OATS: Character win, I think. We had a chance, could have folded, had a lot of things that didn't go our way, a lot of foul trouble. They lived at the free-throw line. Our guys started to show a little frustration and I thought we pulled it together and showed a lot of mental toughness. We've been using the word next a lot lately, next play, just go to the next play, like, forget about the call that didn't go your way, forget about the turnover, forget about the offensive possession where you missed or your teammate missed. It doesn't matter, just play hard on defense. This is one of our best defensive games of the year.

We fouled too much, they shot 37 free throws, we obviously benefited from them not shooting it great at the line, but when we didn't foul, we got pretty good stops. Tyon Grant-Foster is the real deal. But he scored 29, went to the free-throw line 16 times and took 22 shots.

So I thought our guys weren't bad on him. They forced him into a lot of tough shots. Mark, on the other hand, had 26 on 18 shots, only 11 free throws. So probably a little bit more efficient. But I thought Rylan did a great job on Tyon and Mo Dioubate came in late and was great on both ends, scored eight straight points. After Jarin fouled out, we needed a boost. His boost he gave us right there



defensively and offensively. Rylan was in foul trouble. Jarin's fouled out. I thought he was great.

So we're playing next Thursday. There's only going to be 16 left. I think our non-conference schedule got us ready for this. Four teams in the non-conference are all in the Sweet 16 and we lost to all four, but I thought we got better from it. So our defense is getting better as the year goes on. This might have been our best defensive performance of the year. It's been our best for awhile and Wrightsell will be able to play with us Thursday. He got elbowed in the head, had a head injury. He's had some real bad luck here lately, but we're going to be playing again and he can play with us again on Thursday.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Let's open it up to questions.

Q. We saw No. 12 leave to the locker room. Can you give us an update?

THE MODERATOR: Let's go to questions for student-athletes first and follow protocol.

Questions for student-athletes. Right here.

Q. Rylan, you mentioned the fouls that were called there before Coach got out here. Just how were you able to stick in the game for those final four minutes when you were in foul trouble late?

RYLAN GRIFFEN: Mo Dioubate was able to guard Tyon Grant-Foster, so that helped me from picking up my fifth foul. So just like it's March, like, you need everybody to step up. Like, Mo, he probably didn't play as much as he wanted to until the end, but he came in and he was ready. So just being able to have guys like that to be able to help me keep me on the floor, not only just me, but pretty much everybody, is just great and that's something that Coach preaches every single day.

Q. That final stretch, Mo, you came in and had eight points and I think eight in a row over the last four minutes. What sparked that for you in that final stretch and did you realize the magnitude of what that run



accomplished?

MOUHAMED DIOUBATE: I was just playing hard and I got lost in the game, honestly. I wasn't thinking about scoring. I just let the game come to me. Coach put me in with a few minutes left in the game because Jarin fouled out and I just tried to play as hard as I can and let my defense contribute to offense, and that's what I did.

Q. You guys were going back and forth with the crowd there late. I know SEC has some great crowds. What did you think of the GCU fans and also the Alabama fans were going back and forth as well?

MARK SEARS: It was fun. That's what basketball is all about, when the fans are going at it, and as a player, that's part of the game and we love it.

RYLAN GRIFFEN: Yeah, it's March. They had a definite home -- they had a good crowd. But like I said yesterday, the game is played on the floor. So just love the atmosphere. It doesn't matter if we got fans for us or against us, just love the atmosphere. And they were ready to go. As soon as we got on the court they were out there. But we just have to make sure we won the game on the floor, not in the stands.

Q. How would you describe what Mo provided for you guys that last five minutes?

MARK SEARS: He won us the game the last five minutes. I think he had a stretch of like eight straight points or something like that and he got O boards and he did it on both sides of the floor. We don't win this game without him.

Q. Mark, GCU only made two of 20 three-pointers. What were you doing on the perimeter to get them off their mark? I don't know if they were tight or you guys were doing a great job defending the perimeter.

MARK SEARS: I'd say we did a great job of defending the better, but we also tried to be in the gaps because we know number 7's a great player and we wanted to make him pass ball and they really didn't excel in that area.

Q. For each of you, over the last couple days y'all talked about how y'all have come together, how tight this group is. Your brother in Wrightsell goes down. How did you all rally around him and go into survive and advance here?

MARK SEARS: Could you say that again?

Q. How did you rally around Wrightsell when he went

down and get the win?

MARK SEARS: Once we came in at halftime he was there dapping us up and when we were in the locker room we said, we're going to win this game for him so we can play on Thursday, and that's what we did.

RYLAN GRIFFEN: That's my brother, for real. He came from the West Coast. That's where he was at last year, so he got some friends and family out there. So I came in the team, and I was like, there's no way that was his last game for the season. So just made sure we had to get through -- for me, personally, I know he wants to play. I know he didn't want to get hurt today. He went out there and gave everything for us for the time he did play. So I was just like, let's make sure we make sure Trely has a chance to play again for us this season.

MOUHAMED DIOUBATE: We play for each other every game. We know how much Trely wanted to play in L.A., and so we seen how hurt he was once went out game, so we just tried to do everything we can for him.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse the student-athletes and take questions for Coach.

Q. Can you give us an update on No. 12?

NATE OATS: Latrell Wrightsell's got a head injury, so he couldn't play in the second half.

Q. You mentioned it was kind of your best defensive performance of the season. That final four minutes you guys didn't allow a single point. What happened in that stretch that maybe sparked that run defensively?

NATE OATS: I didn't realize they didn't score in the final four minutes. What did we get down? We were down three? Four? We got down four at one point. Yeah, I think our guys -- well, one, Mo Dioubate came in, and I'm looking right now on our defensive chart. Like, we were .64 on defense when he was in the game. Look at his regular stat line and 12 minutes he had five O boards, nine points, was a .64 on defense, just a tough player. He's never afraid of the moment, just does all the dirty work all year. I'm super happy that he was able to come in and really help close this thing out for us.

So I thought Nick Pringle's play was as good as he's been all year. He didn't necessarily score it a bunch, but he had nine rebounds, four O boards, Dioubate had five O boards. We ended up with 20 O boards on them. They were big plays, both of them, when they're getting O boards. Mo Dioubate was not a great free throw shooter, he goes 3-3.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

So I thought Nick and Mo really helped set the tone and this is as good defense as Mark Sears has played all year. First double double of the year, he had 26-12. He played so much he was cramping there at the end. I didn't feel like I could take him out much with Wrightsell not available in the second half. But we were .79 when he was in the game. So he was really locking up and leading and talking to guys and getting them to play hard.

So I think you had a group in there with Sears, Rylan, Aaron -- Aaron's been a really good defender all year, Mo Dioubate, and Nick Pringle that it was all about getting stops and then taking care of the ball and then we were able to step up to the free-throw line and make some free throws.

Q. You talked about how character won you the game. Can you just explain how important attitude is going into big games like this before during and after the game?

NATE OATS: Listen, I thought our attitude was good coming in. We were focused on the right things. And you heard Mo talk about losing himself in the game. Focus on making the tough blue collar defensive-minded O boards, great screen assists. Focus on that. The offense will come. Our offense, this was one of our worst offensive games. You got to give Grand Canyon a lot of credit too. They got great athletes, they got rim protection, they made it harder on us. So they're a good defensive team, but we just missed some shots too. Some guys missed some free throws maybe.

So I thought when we got a lead, we didn't do a great job extending that like we could have. They took the lead and we could have folded easy. There was a time when I got the -- like, we got to change our energy. So attitude during the game -- it's basketball. There's going to be tough calls, I mean, just tons of marginal calls. Some go against you, some go for you. You can't live and die on every call that goes against you. I thought our guys did a pretty good job, some calls that were marginal that they got, and then we had calls that were marginal that we got.

Like, what our guys did a better job tonight just moved to the next play. Whether it was a missed layup on their own, a turnover on their own, a call that didn't go our way, like, we were able to just next play, next play. We'd get down -- they got a great crowd here. Shoot, whatever their administration, their school's doing to get the crowd -- I played once there when I was an assistant at Buffalo a long time ago. They had a great crowd then. I think it's much better now. But they had a lot of people here. That thing got loud when they got the lead and then our guys just hung in there and got stops and just the whole attitude

of we got to get a stop and move to the next play was big.

Q. I know you're in foul trouble and you don't have Latrell, but what was the thought of going to Mo in that situation there with like five, six minutes to go? And as you're watching him contribute that way offensively are you like, where has this been all season kind of thing or how were you looking at that?

NATE OATS: He's been a tough player all year. He's struggled sometimes on offense to grab some of the concepts and he even said it happened in high school. It took him a little while to get familiar with the system and he ended up being NEPSAC Player of the Year, which is a really good league.

So we knew we needed some tough plays. We also knew they'd give up a lot of threes. So analytically thinking we need some three-point shooters in, Sam Walters, Griffin, Sears, Estrada, Mo doesn't really fit that bill, and we were lacking some toughness there, and let's put a guy in that's going to make some tough plays. And shoot, he played 12 minutes, had five O boards. I thought Pringle made some really good reads in the pocket. Sears hit Pringle, Mo cuts, scores, got to the O boards. He just made some stuff happen. I'm super happy for him. I mean, he literally has the greatest attitude. I mean, NEPSAC Player of the Year doesn't play a ton as a freshman, some games he doesn't play at all, and never had one second of any kind of poor attitude. He's just been an unbelievable kid all year. So super happy he came in and won this game for us.

Q. Your theme is blue collar basketball. This game in particular what were your thoughts on how physical and how emotional this game played out for you team?

NATE OATS: Yeah, we let our emotions get the best of us, myself included, with the T that didn't help, and then Pringle got the T. We said at halftime, like, we're not giving away any more free points. So you got to be emotionally invested in the game without doing things that cost you points and stuff. That way we were good, I thought our bench was great. We went a little over the line a couple times, but as far as the blue collar stuff, like, we chart blue collar stuff both ways. This game, we had 115 and we had them with, like, 95, so we had 20 more than them. This is almost a season high for us with 115 blue collar points. And you kind of look, like, Aaron Estrada rebounded it great. He ended up leading us. He was diving on the floor for loose balls. He made a bunch of tough plays.

But Sears was over 20, Nick Pringle was over 20. We had multiple guys in there putting their nose in and making tough plays. Sears has a double double. Sears wasn't going to lose. He wasn't letting us lose tonight. A lot of

that was how blue collar and tough. You know, he was great on defense. I thought it was his best defensive game. So we kind of get the -- we lead the country in scoring, we play fast, our offense has been No. 1 in the country for a large part of the year, but we really try to build the program on toughness, blue collar, and it hasn't been what we would like to see all the year. It was there tonight. Without it, we don't win tonight.

Q. In your opener, you mentioned the 37 free throws. Do you think that was more of a matter of you guys being too physical at times or maybe some whistles that you didn't think were fouls?

NATE OATS: Probably a little of both. Look, to be honest with you, we fouled two three-point shooters, that gave 'em six. I looked at them, we fouled 'em, those are correct calls. So we had two T's, that's another four, so take 10 off and all of a sudden it's 37 or 27-22 and it's not nearly as big a discrepancy. So we've got to do a better job not fouling jump shooters, Sears fouled a jump shooter, you know, they got eight free throws off jump shooters and four off T's, like, don't foul jump shooters, don't do stupid things to get T's and, you know, take those 12 away and it's pretty even. So, they were physical, we were physical, if it had been 25-22 nobody would be talking about it, we got to do a better job not putting them to the line on plays that we shouldn't be putting them on the line, like three-point shots and jumpers.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you.

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