

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Illinois vs Kentucky

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Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

Fiserv Forum

Kentucky Wildcats
Coach Mark Pope

Amari Williams

Lamont Butler

Koby Brea

Media Conference

Kentucky 84, Illinois 75

THE MODERATOR: So we have an opening statement by Amari Williams.

AMARI WILLIAMS: Just everything we have been through, the adversity, it's kind of paid off, and today it showed. I want to say shout-out to guys like Jaxson Robinson and Kerr Kriisa and just all the injured guys. It's tough not being able to play 100%, not being able to be on the court at all. But the love they showed to us and the togetherness and them having a smile on their face helps a lot too. So I just want to say shout-out to them.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. You're right, Amari, people kept thinking they can't keep overcoming, this might be where it all ends. Why didn't that happen?

AMARI WILLIAMS: I just want to say it's just the love we have for each other. I feel like everybody just wanted to be on the court fighting for one another, and it showed tonight. We don't worry about anything else, just the people we have in our circle. And that's the way it's been the whole season, and that's what got us to this point.

LAMONT BUTLER: Definitely echo that, but I also feel like we got a lot of underdogs on this team. People who have been doubted throughout our life. Growing up in basketball, not a lot of us were highly recruited and nothing like that. For us to be on this stage, we wanted to seize



the opportunity and just be great out there.

KOBY BREA: I agree with them, and I feel like God has a plan for this team. We've gone through a lot this year. We have faced a lot of triumphs. And for us to be here, a lot of people didn't think we was going to be here. So just a testament of what God has done for us.

Q. Y'all are going to play Tennessee. There are a bunch of other SEC teams at this stage as well. Playing in that conference, how much did it help you these last few days, what you had seen during the season?

LAMONT BUTLER: We're just battle tested, throughout this whole conference. Conference was a beast. We had a lot of good teams that we played, but we stayed resilient, stayed together. And it showed today. Everybody was playing with love and passion for one another, and we can't focus about anything but the next game.

We just have a lot of love, and we're going to win that game.

Q. Lamont and Koby, how much do you think your experience level helped in a game like this?

KOBY BREA: I think experience is everything, when it comes to college basketball, just being able to have a couple years under your belt and not be phased by the moment. Kinda feels like we been here before, doesn't feel too new. We've been through a lot. This upcoming game is going to be new to me, but excited to be a part of something special.

LAMONT BUTLER: Experience is big, but a tournament like this, it doesn't matter. You've got to go out there and play your hardest, play your best, listen to the scout, execute the scout and do the things we have been doing all year long to win games.

Regardless of experience or not, we went out there and just played hard.

Q. Eight turnovers in the first twelve minutes, what was the strategy behind that?

KOBY BREA: We have Lamont Butler as the head of defense. So I feel like for any team, when you see him pick you up, it has to put something in your stomach, some nerves or something. He makes you a little nervous be.

Our team is mature, but not all the time, as you can see.

But, yeah, he's the head of the snake for us. And we see how hard he goes, and it makes us want to go just as hard. He sets the tone for us.

Q. You guys are the first Sweet 16 team to return no points from last year to make it to the Sweet 16. What does that say about how quickly you gelled and came together and made this run?

AMARI WILLIAMS: Like you said, we fight for one another. We play together basketball. I feel like we gelled a lot throughout the year, even from the first time we're seeing each other in June. Just knowing that and knowing how together we are, that's really the reason why we made that possible.

Q. Koby, for those of us who couldn't hit three shots in a row if our life depended on it, what's it like to be in that kind of a groove on this stage?

KOBY BREA: Obviously it felt really good, but at the end of the day, you're focused on the game and winning the game. Those things happened as you're competing. My teammates -- I felt it this whole year, honestly, but today they kept confiding in me. And I can see how much they trust me and how much confidence they put in me. They want me to keep going, especially when I get hot like that. It means everything to me, and makes me a better player just to know they have my back.

Q. Obviously Kentucky is known for going on deep runs late in the tournament. The last few years haven't been like that. Did that weigh on you guys? How did you approach this tournament?

LAMONT BUTLER: I will say from day one our focus was winning a national championship. So any way possible we are going to do that. The expectation here at Kentucky is to win. And we got a bunch of winners here, and we want to continue that tradition.

Q. Lamont, was there anything that necessarily clicked for you? Was it the shoulder feeling better? You seemed to be more aggressive in that first half. Or was it Otega in foul trouble?

LAMONT BUTLER: No, I was just playing my game. I got a brace today that was a little less restrictive. So I was

able to be more free today. I was just out there playing my game, trying to be aggressive. I got some open looks that I took, and that's what went into it.

MARK POPE: Lamont told me before the game that he was rolling. He did!

Q. They say that the first game of the tournament is the one that's the hardest to win. You guys came out today looking a little bit more relaxed. Is that true? Was that something that Coach Pope had been telling you that made y'all chill out?

AMARI WILLIAMS: I just want to say that I feel like Coach Pope and the rest of the coaching staff did a great job of making sure we was in the moment. And I feel like that definitely showed today, and we was ready from the jump. So just having those guys have trust in us and helping us relax, definitely it helped us go out there and get the W.

Q. Amari, what did Coach Pope do to -- talking about being able to overcome the adversity throughout the season, the multitude of injuries. What did he do, say to help lead you all through it?

AMARI WILLIAMS: You can kind of see his personality, he's always positive regardless of the situation. That's just the kind of guy he is, and that's what he's brought to us all year. I feel like there was never a moment we felt down because we lost players. He always kept our heads high. And when you have someone like that leading the way, it's easy to go out there and fight as a team.

MARK POPE: That's actually not the real answer.

AMARI WILLIAMS: Yeah, I had Weetabix this morning.

MARK POPE: Tell the whole story. Amari Williams, guys, is 10 rebounds, 8 points, 6 assists, 1 turnover, 3 blocks. Incredible energy on the floor. Go ahead, we're working on an NIL deal right now.

AMARI WILLIAMS: On Friday I had four pieces of toast for breakfast, and they thought that wasn't enough. So what was it yesterday?

MARK POPE: I was like, Amari, what do you usually eat?

AMARI WILLIAMS: He asked me what I usually eat growing up, and I had something called Weetabix, which is from England.

MARK POPE: If you've had Weetabix, will you please raise your hand? Keep going.

AMARI WILLIAMS: It's like Shredded Wheat. Me saying this is crazy because my parents always forced me to eat it growing up. So (indiscernible) did a good job of finding an international store out here in Milwaukee, and he got me Weetabix. I had about three of them this morning. Coach Pope joined me too, and Brandon Garrison. Yeah, I feel like that helped my performance today for sure.

MARK POPE: We will have mandatory team breakfast this week every morning featuring Weetabix.

Q. Lamont and the other guys, big steal by Lamont at one point when Illinois was mounting some serious momentum to get back in the game. What did you see on that play? Looked like your teammates fed off of it.

LAMONT BUTLER: Yeah, I saw -- I was behind the play. It was a rebound that went long, and I was behind 32. He just dribbled up the floor, not knowing I was right next to him. I went, reached, got the steal. I saw it. It was a 2-on-1 with me and B.G., gave it to him, he finished the play. And that gave us energy finishing the rest of the game off.

It was just an instinctual play, nothing more into it. But I'm glad we got the win because of that.

KOBY BREA: He's a game changer. I remember backpedaling, trying to get back on defense. And as soon as I saw him get that steal, I think it led to an and-one. It completely changed the game in my head. I feel like we got 'em after that. It was a testament to him and how good he is. It was a crazy play.

Q. This breakfast meal, does it taste good, or is it tolerable?

AMARI WILLIAMS: It doesn't taste too bad. Depends how you make it.

You're right, it tastes amazing. It definitely tastes amazing and it gives you a lot of energy throughout the day, for sure.

MARK POPE: The trick is -- what was the secret ingredient?

AMARI WILLIAMS: Sugar.

MARK POPE: The warm?

AMARI WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. That's another thing. Ever since coming to America, I've never seen people have cereal with warm milk. So I feel like that's something you definitely need -- why are you shaking your head? That's

something you've got to try if you have Weetabix and warm milk, for sure.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, gentlemen. Coach will stay and entertain questions.

Q. Yesterday you said that you felt like Lamont was going to have an amazing game today. Were you trying to will that into existence, or did you have a premonition, or did you know about the brace?

MARK POPE: No, I just felt like -- we talked about it. Lamont hadn't had a single live rep since three games ago. Hadn't had a live rep from practice, no contact. So going into the game two days ago, it was a miracle that he was able to function the way he is, because you lose timing and rhythm and feel. You just do. That's why you practice.

He's such a quick study and a big-moment guy. I felt confident he was going to be special. It doesn't always happen that way, but he was really special tonight. My goodness, he was really special for us and important.

And he's a winner. We said it since day one, guys, we were really blessed to have a winner walk through our doors at the University of Kentucky that cares about winning. And we talked about this yesterday, somewhere, I can't remember where, what media group it was in front of, but I don't know if I've ever coached a player that is more desperate to -- I don't want to say the negative, but I don't know how -- to not let down his team.

It is in his soul from a deep, deep place about like I am going to rise up to the occasion for my team. I can't remember if it was Amari or him that said it was love that kinda helped these guys, it's helped them manage all the chaos they've been through. But that's a real thing. He loves his guys, and he wants to perform for his guys. It's pretty fun. It's great.

Q. Coaches sometimes talk about end of the first half, start of the second half, you had the play by Noah drawing the foul. And I could be wrong, but it looked like you scored on 10 straight offensive possessions to start the second half. I assume that was a key part of the game. Talk about those plays.

MARK POPE: It's not really plays. I mean, we have plays and whatever, but it's our guys' mentality to dig into the emotional reservoir and bring it to start the game.

The game is so taxing and the season is so taxing, everything that all these players, our team, Illinois, everybody goes through, it's so taxing. Our guys find strength in each other. There were a couple of

well-executed plays, but mostly it was our energy that our guys brought into the beginning of the second half and their intensity that was really important.

Q. Mark, the word courageous gets thrown around a lot. Thinking about Lamont, if we knew how much he's been hurting, how impressed would we be?

MARK POPE: One of the reasons he played well tonight is because he tweaked his ankle in the first half, and so he's balanced now. He's got no shoulder and no ankle, and I think it just works out.

Courage is real, but I keep coming back to love, man. He loves his guys, and the guys love him. Who knows where we're going to go from here. But this group, what a blessing to be around this group.

I'm glad that (indiscernible) gets to see it. I hope they feel it. I hope they feel it from these guys. They deeply care about each other, and Lamont is the ring leader.

He started this, it was about two weeks into the summer, and I know I haven't given specific details on this, but I was on the road recruiting. One of our guys was going through something really terrible, a terrible family situation. And we had set up something for that player to do, and I called in to check with that player and see how the day went, and he had scrapped all the plans because Lamont scooped him up and they spent the day together. And Lamont did that because that's who he is. He cares.

His courage comes from a ton of skill and a ton of work and a ton of love.

Q. Coach, Will Riley, emotional after the game, someone you know from the recruiting trail. What was your message to him after the game?

MARK POPE: What an incredible season he's put together with a great Illinois team. I'm so happy for him. His family is terrific and -- am I allowed to talk about Will? I am. He's a beautiful kid, and he's got a huge future as a big-time pro.

And the only negative thing I have to say about it is -- well, maybe not negative, he's also smart enough not to come play for me. So really good. But he's a beautiful kid with a great family, and he's played unbelievable basketball. He's super impressive.

Q. When you were putting the team together this time last year, how important was it to get a Lamont in terms of his pedigree and that kind of experience at the point guard position?

MARK POPE: For me it was really important. It was really early. I think we had half a staff, and we threw the whole staff on a plane. I think the turnaround from our first conversation to us being there in person was twelve hours.

Winners are special. We talked about it in the locker room before the game. Everyone has heard this over and over. But most of us, you know, talk about what happened to us. We talk about what happened to us. And champions, winners talk about what they made happen. It's just the truth. It's true.

Lamont Butler is spending his whole lifetime talking about what he makes happen, and that's a champion's heart. And he doesn't spend anytime talking about what happened to him. He talks about all the stuff he makes happen. When you have a guy like that leading your crew like that, it's pretty special.

Q. After the Old Miss game, you were 110th in defensive efficiency, you guys are 45th now --

MARK POPE: You bring that up every time! I'm kidding.

Q. Hey, you're 45th now. With or without Lamont, you guys have steadily improved for over a month now. What was the switch that flipped to hold an offense like that to 75 and 20% from three?

MARK POPE: It's the players. It's our guys. Certainly we're gathering data, and we had some slippage, and we had to rethink some things. But the easy answer for me is it's Koby Brea. He all of a sudden started saying I'm taking this personal. I'm going to take every single defensive possession personal.

And after we came home from Ole Miss, he went through two straight practices where -- we start practice with banner behavior, which is essentially some skills, but it's before we got fully warm. And he came out in banner behavior and was flying around, diving on the floor. And he just changed. It became not a job but it became something insanely personal to him.

When things didn't go right defensively, he was going to take it incredibly personal. And he's an example of one of the guys on our team -- we have a player-led team. We have unbelievable leadership on our team, and it comes from a wide variety of guys, different slices of it. And when you have players that are leading the charge, things get better.

I've never seen -- and I haven't dug into the data, so somebody check for me, but I have never seen a team that

has gone from 112 to 45 in the last six weeks of the season. I've never seen it, and that is a credit to our guys. Gives you a sense of our players.

Q. Did you try Weetabix with warm milk? You talked about Koby defensively, but that offensive spurt in the second half, how big was that to create some separation?

MARK POPE: The Weetabix were extraordinary, actually. So it comes in a biscuit that looks -- it looks very unappetizing. But then you -- I learned today that you crumble it up into tiny little things, and then you put some warm -- the warm milk is key. I've never had cereal with warm milk. Shout out to Xaymara, our nutrition specialist, for making that happen.

And then Amari gave me permission to put some sugar on it. He was nervous. He put four packs of sugar, I put one, because if I put more than one Lee Anne was going to kill me. It was actually fantastic. I like it so much more right now than I did this morning.

Koby Brea. I will talk about Koby Brea for two minutes, okay? To do what he did tonight is extraordinary. And Illinois is -- Coach does an unbelievable job of game planning, a really incredible job. So they made some calculated decisions where they were going to clog the middle, protect all the backcuts, all the curl cuts, and lock and trail on guys and try and force them inside the three-point line.

And Koby Brea, I think he is the best shooter in college basketball. And he's in the process of becoming an elite-level cutter. And to his teammates' credit, guys were setting big-time screens. And then he just has incredible poise.

I appreciated the question about making three in a row. I don't know if any of us ever at the rec league have felt what he felt tonight in the second half. We don't win that game without him on the offensive and the defensive side of the ball.

And the best thing about Koby is he jumped into the interview right after the game, and just started talking about God's plan. And that echoes a sentiment from all our players. He is a deeply faithful young man, and he is loving every second of exploring what God's plan is for this team. And all of us are grateful that God's plan is not done for this team yet.

So his core, the core of him, the courage of him, the faith of him, his incredible skill set, his recovery from a massive, massive, massive, massive setback injury, I think he would

point back to his faith on all those things.

Q. Mark, I asked the other guys about Lamont's steal. Could you feel that slamming the door on the momentum there?

MARK POPE: I don't know, NCAA Tournament, so everything happens. But that was a massive play. It was unbelievable. Lamont Butler, not just his explosive ability but his breaks, also, he covered ground in a special amount of time, was able to get through that clean. He came from clear across the court.

It was a brilliant play by him. But there were so many brilliant plays, Koby's run, Andrew Carr's play, couple stops, like so many guys. But certainly that was a massive play to kinda stem the tide a little bit. Really proud of him.

Thank you so much.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you, congratulations.

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