

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - New Mexico vs Clemson

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FedExForum

New Mexico Lobos Coach Richard Pitino Nelly Junior Joseph Jemarl Baker Jr.

Media Conference

Clemson - 77, New Mexico - 56

RICHARD PITINO: Certainly the wrong day to go cold. We just couldn't make a shot. Clemson has a lot to do with that, give them credit. They're big, they're disciplined. You have to make shots against them because they really pack the paint.

So it stings right now, but extremely proud of the growth in this program from where we started to where we're at now. To make the NCAA Tournament in year three, to win a conference tournament championship, all great.

We'll keep it in perspective. We're disappointed, obviously, but very, very grateful for an amazing year and we're going to continue to build.

Q. Nelly, you were doing some things inside, very active inside. I know they had some big guys. Why were you able to find the success you were able to find around the rim?

NELLY JUNIOR JOSEPH: I mean, I just want to play hard, like (indiscernible), get going as a team. I just do what I have to do as a big man.

Q. Just a really awful start. You're down 30-11. I'm curious, what's the mindset coming back from that. How do you try to bounce back?

JEMARL BAKER JR.: Just stay confident and try to bring as much energy as you can and try to make them uncomfortable. We feel like we ran around, we tried to scrap around. And we weren't able to make them



uncomfortable the way we wanted to. That's why we couldn't really fight back.

Q. I just finished speaking with some of your teammates in the locker room. They said Clemson was able to really just play at their pace. Would you agree with that? And why was it so hard to kind of maybe get your rhythm going and running how you guys like to as a team?

JEMARL BAKER JR.: For sure. We didn't turn them over the way we wanted to. Usually when we play scrappy, we turn teams over. That's when we can get out and run, make the plays that we make. But we didn't make them uncomfortable, and it ended up being a tough game.

Q. Points off turnover stat, you guys averaged 18 in the Mountain West Tournament run you guys had. They flipped the script and go 19-6 on you. Both sides of that, why were they able to turn their turnovers into points against you, and why were you guys struggling just to turn them over?

RICHARD PITINO: We had some, definitely some uncharacteristic turnovers. I thought their size for sure bothered us. It's a big ACC team. We've certainly talked a lot about size all year, and I think as we recruit we've got to get bigger for sure. But their length bothered us.

You have to hit shots against them. The way they defend, they back up, they're in the gaps. And if you don't hit shots, that lane is going to look real small. That's why we're able to at least throw the ball inside and get something good out of there.

But obviously just offensively we were so out of rhythm and couldn't hit shots and it really hurt us.

Q. Obviously this is not the result you wanted, but in your third season you improved every year, losing record to the NIT to the NCAA Tournament. We talked about building. What do you think this means to your program, to get New Mexico back to the winning culture that they experienced for so long?



RICHARD PITINO: It's one of the biggest rebuilds in the country when we got here. Year one we were not able to go recruiting. We added eight players off of Zooms due to the pandemic. We're just trying to establish a culture year one. We go to the postseason in year two.

We're looking at two years of, what, 46 -- 48 total wins. Phenomenal. Won a conference tournament championship, cut down the nets. It's a special fan base. They love basketball.

Hopefully we can taste this success and continue to build off of it because our fans certainly deserve that. So really, really proud of all the progress that we made. And take a little time off and we'll just get back to work, see if we can go compete for a championship next year.

Q. Jaelen fouls out in his last game in a Lobo uniform. Mash sits on the bench the last few minutes of what might have been his last game. What are your thoughts on those two players, and did you have any kind of dialogue before you came out here?

RICHARD PITINO: I'm sure Mash doesn't know exactly what he's going to do. And all the guys, this is just the world we're living in right now. It's crazy. But for Jaelen, he certainly knows he's done. He was great. He thanked everybody for getting him to the Big Dance. It's a special experience.

And Mash, he knows he didn't shoot the ball very well. I'm sure he's disappointed with it. But those two guys, like we've talked about, they brought New Mexico basketball back, and they've got nothing to be ashamed of.

Q. Mash mentioned to me yesterday the spark that you guys had during the conference tournament. Jaelen kind of started all of that. I know this isn't the outcome he wanted to finish his season, but when you look at the three years when he came here with you, can you reflect on what he meant to you as a player?

RICHARD PITINO: Yeah, so much heart, so much spirit. He's grown so much as a leader. Our fans embraced him. There was never ever a question of effort ever. Never had a bad practice. Never looked at him and said you're not playing hard, never. And so like with things we talked about, to go from sub-300 in The Net to Top 25, to two postseason appearances, NCAA Tournament this year, and a conference championship we, don't do that without Jaelen House. He's a special type of player and a great person and he's going to continue to play for a long time.

Q. Their size was what it was and House and Mashburn combined 5-for-25. Did you consider going

with more Tru Washington in the first half or Jamal Baker Jr, bigger guards and just bigger minutes than they played?

RICHARD PITINO: A little bit. Not sure it mattered a whole lot. I thought Tru was giving us good minutes. JB obviously wasn't hitting shots either. We were just trying to hope that one of them could make a couple of shots to pull the game open. We got it to 14 a couple times, but we just couldn't break through. I don't know if anyone really could on that bench.

Q. Donovan just didn't exactly have a Donovan Dent type of game. Was he healthy?

RICHARD PITINO: He's probably a little rusty, right, because he was sick. I just thought their size really bothered us. And if you don't make a bunch of shots, you make three 3s, they're able to slap down, I think that's why some of the turnovers happened. And there wasn't a lot of room on the court. And a lot of that was them, but a lot of it was us not being able to hit shots.

Q. You may have already addressed this. Could you just talk about how physical that game was, because when you get into one of those, if you get punched, you've got to punch back, punch back harder?

RICHARD PITINO: We battled. We rebounded the ball well, 17 offensive rebounds. We were able to speed up, turn them over a couple of times. But that's a big team. We have talked over and over again about our lack of size, and I think the transfer portal is open. We're excited about the recruits we've signed. We'll see who is coming, who is going, and with an understanding we've got to get bigger and stronger for sure. But our guys certainly fought that physicality because that's an ACC team, and really well-coached team.

Q. They were so loose yesterday. Was there some stage fright early in this game?

RICHARD PITINO: I don't know. It's hard to say. We went cold. We really went cold. I don't remember making two shots in a row. You put so much pressure on yourself when you don't hit shots like that. It's a big stage. Hopefully the guys that do return to go along with the guys we had are just dying to get back here and continue to build off it. We haven't been here in 10 years. So can't fault them if they were a little bit nervous, but I don't know, I just thought the rim seemed small tonight.

Q. You talked a lot about the difficulty in scheduling. Is this kind of an indication that maybe at some point next year you beef up the schedule, if at all possible,

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get ready for games like this?

RICHARD PITINO: I don't know if the schedule -- I don't think we weren't ready. We were plenty challenged in our conference. I do think moving forward -- I've always believed that the schedule will grow as the program grows. Year one nobody wanted to play us because we weren't good enough. This year they didn't want to play us because we were a little bit better.

I think the more consistency you have in your program, you'll be more desirable to play. So I think our MTE will improve. We'll look for a really good neutral site game. It's always going to be hard to schedule in The Pit, and see if we can go from there.

Q. I know that you don't have a crystal ball, you can't predict the future, but do you anticipate losing some of the guys because of how things are right now?

RICHARD PITINO: How could you not? They're all free agents. We'll have conversations with them next week. I'm sure people are reaching out to them. They're people. They've got all the freedom in the world right now. And if we do lose somebody, the beauty of it is you can go get somebody.

And it's just part of the ever-changing landscape. I don't think anyone likes it. But it is what it is. We'll go home tonight, visit with some guys throughout the week next week and give a little time off, get back to work. But if somebody leaves, it's not going to be an indication of what's wrong with them. It's happening everywhere. We had an amazing year, and they've got the choice to go look elsewhere, fine, we'll support them, and we'll go find a way to replace them.

Q. Part of your answer is what I'm asking about. When size has been the biggest issue for three years, Jaelen House now moving on, Jamal Mashburn Jr. may or may not come back, not asking to discredit anything they brought to this program -- you already said they brought the Lobos back to this level of relevancy -- but does this give the Lobos a chance to basically be a normal-sized team at the guard position and in the backcourt?

RICHARD PITINO: You had to sell out certainly with Jaelen, Jamal and Donovan, especially with the injuries in the non-conference. They brought us to the NCAA Tournament. We're not going to be ashamed of that by any means.

But losing Jaelen, obviously that 3 spot will get significantly bigger. We'll see what Mash wants to do and go from

there. You never know what you have until you go through it, and I think we see, especially going through the league, what we need to improve on, but also with an understanding we won 26 games and made the NCAA Tournament, won the conference tournament.

So it's not like we're far off and we need to hit rebuild or reboot by any means. But we certainly know anyone that we bring into the program in the spring has got to be big and strong and provide some length.

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