

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - NC State vs Marquette

Thursday, March 28, 2024

Dallas, Texas, USA

American Airlines Arena

Marquette Golden Eagles

Coach Shaka Smart

Kam Jones

Tyler Kolek

Oso Ighodaro

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Questions for our student-athletes, Kam Jones, Tyler Kolek, and Oso Ighodaro.

Q. Kam, this is for you. Shaka, he has that next play philosophy that he preaches. You guys have dealt with so many nagging injuries this year. How have you seen that next play philosophy play out for yourself and for your teammates as well this season?

KAM JONES: It kind of just takes the excuses out of it. It takes what it takes, hurt or not. If you're hurt and you playing, we still need you to do your job to the furthest extent that you can.

We all out here trying to win, so it's a common goal. So if you have nagging injuries and you're going to play through it, we need to you play through it. We all out here trying to do one thing for sure.

Q. Oso, can you explain how Coach Smart has kind of utilized you as sort of a secondary ball handler, distributor? You're second on the team in assists. Sort of for you personally, how does that work out on the floor?

OSO IGHODARO: Coach lets me handle the ball a lot, create action for other guys. We have a lot of good scorers on our team. When I can facilitate and get them shots, it's good for our team, so Coach gives me the freedom to do that.



Q. Tyler, what does it do for the team to have -- obviously you're leading the nation in assists, but to have another guy like him to be kind of a secondary distributor.

TYLER KOLEK: It just gives teams a different look, so it's not me coming off the ball screen or Kam coming off the ball screen every time. Oso can come off the ball screens and break off his guy and make a play for other people, so it allows me to get off the ball and get some catch-and-shoot opportunities.

Q. Along the same lines, Oso and Tyler, your pick and roll chemistry has always been really strong. I'm curious how you guys view, was it always there from the start? How did you guys develop that? Just your perspective on how that came to be so good.

OSO IGHODARO: We just played a lot together. It wasn't always like that. I remember the first summer when Tyler got there, we played pick a lot, and I couldn't catch any of his passes, and it took a little bit. We've played three years together now, a ton of games, a lot of big moments, and the trust is there, just the feel for each other and where he is going to put the ball.

He's a great passer. He makes my job a lot easier.

TYLER KOLEK: I think really trusting each other and having those conversation about what we like, what we don't like. In the last game it was a side ball screen, and he wanted to catch, and I kind of just waived him off. Come set the screen. We went back on the other end, he was telling me to trust him, trust him. So we can have those hard conversations no matter what is going on either in the heat of the moment or in practice when we're trying to fix something. The ball screen connection goes to our connection off the floor too.

Q. Tyler, watching Shaka on the sideline, especially when you guys are on defense down in his crouch like he is guarding somebody, is that the way he is in practice?



TYLER KOLEK: I wouldn't say in practice because he's not trying to guard us. Maybe he's trying to guard the other team as a sixth defender out there. There was actually a clip earlier this year where he was sliding on the baseline. A lot of people had things to say about it.

No, he's giving us energy. He's in a stance. He is probably the lowest one on the floor, so looking over at him it makes us want to get in the stance.

Q. Tyler, how aware are you all of Shaka's former life as a coach for the Longhorns, and how much would you like to win for him while he's there in Texas?

TYLER KOLEK: We played Texas earlier this year, and we knew how much that game meant. We're not really looking at the past. We're trying to go forward with this team. He's trying to build a new legacy over here at Marquette. Us as players are trying to do that for him and help him continue with that.

Q. Kam, I have a question for you. I spoke to Willie Jenkins this morning. Obviously, your high school coach. He kind of raved about your growth on and off the court and how proud he was of you for putting on for Memphis, man. What does that mean for you representing your city on this stage and at this level?

KAM JONES: Well, first off, shout out to Coach Willie. Appreciate what he has done for me in my career and how he has molded me as a man and a player.

I mean, it feels great, especially not many, if any, people outside of my family and close friends thought I would be anything in this sport. I definitely keep that chip on me wherever I go, and I take people like Coach Willie and my family with me, and we ride that together. I'm very appreciative for them.

Q. Kam, with all these big performances you have in the postseason, you kind of are earning more of a national reputation. People are talking about your NBA prospects and things like that. How do you deal with that just blowing up fame-wise?

KAM JONES: I mean, right now I kind of don't even know what you are talking about, honestly. I haven't really been much in touch with anything outside of this team, anything outside of going into what we want to do.

It's been a lot more peaceful that way, not hearing from people I really don't want to hear from. So, yeah, I would say, yes, I'm appreciative for it, but I really honestly don't know what you are talking about.

Q. I just wonder what you've seen of NC State and the matchup in the middle with DJ Burns being not only a force inside, but an elite passer if you decide to double-team him.

KAM JONES: Yeah, we definitely know NC State and the type of team they are, the tough team they are, the good team they are. We know what, like you said, what Burns brings. I mean, we're not going to change nothing that we do. We're going to go out there and be ourselves.

He going to see some traps. We're going to adjust accordingly.

TYLER KOLEK: We're watching film today. He hit like a spin fade-away, kind of like Escalade from the AND1 Mixtapes. He is good, though. He is super skilled. Try to do everything we can to stop him.

OSO IGHODARO: He's a really good player, good passer, good scorer. We've been playing really good players, really good bigs, guards, whatever all year, and we guard as five. To answer your question, I mean, we're just going to guard them as a team as five and him as a player as five and just keep being us, like Kam said.

Q. Kam, two quick follow-ups. You talked about kind of your growth since getting to Marquette and obviously your development has been amazing, to kind of say the least. What's it taken for you to get to this point to get to the program and be a seven-point-per-game scorer, to now be one of the best guards in the country? How do you describe that journey?

KAM JONES: I mean, it's been a lot of faith, a lot of prayer. You know, I got a lot of good people in my corner starting with Coach Smart. I trust every word he says to me.

He knows what he is talking about. He knows me as a person. So I would just say, man, it's been a real blessing to see how a lot of this played out, and very excited to see the future and have these great people and my teammates in my corner.

Q. Tyler missed six games with the oblique injury, came back, hasn't missed a beat since that absence. Obviously seeing an impact of what he can do in the box score. For you guys, how do you describe his presence beyond the box score? You know he is going to put up the scoring, the assists. When he is on the floor, it feels like this team is a little different.

KAM JONES: Yeah, for sure. Tyler carries himself with a

great demeanor, a serious demeanor. Just wants to win. Very fierce competitor. He sharpened my competitive edge for sure just being around him the last few years. He's definitely a great voice for us. When he was out, he was a great voice for us talking to me telling me what he sees on the bench and watching games, telling me to be aggressive, take over the game, whatnot, whatever the case may be.

He's been a great voice for the freshmen. Having his belief and knowing that they're going to have to step up. He's been a great voice for us.

The coach told him we needed you just as much off the court when you've been out as we do and want you on the court for sure.

OSO IGHODARO: He brings an edge when he's on the court, and I think the ball definitely moves a lot better. Not just his assists, but when he gets the ball, it's a domino for the rest of the players.

I think when he was out, me and Kam had the ball a lot, and it was a lot of one-on-one, a lot of iso. We won some games like that, but I don't know if that was sustainable. We're definitely a much better team with him on the floor.

THE MODERATOR: Guys, we'll let you go.

We are joined by Marquette Head Coach Shaka Smart.

SHAKA SMART: We're excited to be here in Dallas. It's been a heck of a journey to this point. Our guys are doing a great job being locked in on the moment. Obviously NC State presents a lot of challenges. They're playing terrific basketball. I've known Kevin Keatts for a long, long time. A ton of respect for him.

It will be an exciting opportunity for us tomorrow evening.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach, please.

Q. Could you explain a little bit how you've used Ighodaro as sort of a secondary guy? I guess I read a couple of years ago you reached out to the Nuggets to, I guess, see how they used Jokic or whatever. And also kind of a second part. Having somebody like him, the second leading assist guy with the leading assist guy in the nation, what does that do for your offense?

SHAKA SMART: It does so much. He's a very unique player. He is unlike anyone I've ever coached. I don't think there's really anyone else in college basketball that has the skill set that he has.

There's so many great big guys around the country, so many guys that do different things. Obviously DJ Burns is an example, but Oso, he's really like a point guard out there at 6'10", passes the ball extremely well. He enjoys passing.

Sometimes we've got to twist his arm to shoot a little bit more. What we try to do is get the ball in his hands and create a lot of actions off of that, including pick and rolls for him. He's a really unique guy in that on back-to-back possessions he can set a pick and roll, run to the rim and dunk a ball where he catches it at 12 feet, and then the next possession he can handle the ball in a pick and roll and come off and either score or create for his teammates. You don't see that a lot.

He's been really, really good and just grateful to have him. Him and Tyler together definitely set a tone of unselfishness and creating for others.

Q. There were times when it might have seemed like the universe was conspiring against your team with all the nagging injuries and everything. You seem to have a very pragmatic deal-with-that-as-it-comes approach, kind of like your next play philosophy. Just where does that disposition come from for you?

SHAKA SMART: I try to learn from the stoics. You just control what we can control. There are certain things that happen in basketball. It's very, very easy as player or a coach to feel like how is this happening to us? How is this happening to me?

The reality is if you watch enough basketball and you are around it enough, things happen. Injuries happen. Bad bounces happen. Banked in shots from well beyond the three happen. Sometimes they happen in your favor, too.

So we've asked our guys to control what we can control. Certainly it's my responsibility as a coach to set a good example in that way.

Q. Obviously Chase is back in his old stomping grounds. What has he meant to this team for the first part, and what do you remember about getting in touch with him when you were back at UT?

SHAKA SMART: We have two Texas guys on our team. Chase Ross and Cam Brown. They have a lot of pride in this state, which is something that I always admire about people, when they feel pride about where they're from.

Chase has been terrific. Last year as a freshman he did better than I think even he expected, and this year as a sophomore he's continued to improve, even though he's

gone through a variety of different injuries. He separated his shoulder about halfway through the season. He's had ankle injuries, different bumps and bruises, but he is tough.

As I describe him, as much as anybody on our team or more, he's a real dude. He's the one guy on our team if -- I coached a guy out of VCU named Mo Alie-Cox that plays for the Indianapolis Colts. If a football team was looking for a guy, Chase could be that, too, but we love him on the basketball court.

When we first got in touch with him, Cody Hatt from our staff did a phenomenal job reaching out to him. The thing about this state, recruiting in this state, there are so many great players, and there's usually about a dozen or so that get the most attention in any given high school class, but then there's another maybe two dozen that have a chance to be terrific and a lot of times turn into as good or even better players.

Chase kind of fell into that second tier at the time, which was part of why we were able to recruit them. He's been an unbelievable program guy, and I think he has a chance to be a terrific player.

Q. You talked a little bit about luck being in your favor or sometimes playing against you. Kolek gets injured at the end of the regular season. Able to come back, but it did feel like kind of a "not this again". You make it to the Sweet 16 now for the first time since 2011. Is there a sense of relief for you personally making it back to the Sweet 16?

SHAKA SMART: Not really. I've been asked that question a lot. I try not to really dwell too much on the past because then all of a sudden you do something really, really fun and exciting, and your overwhelming emotion is relief.

To me it's more gratitude, excitement, joy, appreciation for our guys for all the things that we've been through together. Most importantly, we're sitting up here today playing tomorrow night with a chance to advance. Obviously that's where our focus is.

Q. Without dwelling on the past, you're on this stage in San Antonio in 2011. How have you evolved and changed, and what have you learned over that time?

SHAKA SMART: How have I changed? Gotten older. My hair has changed. I think probably the biggest transformation for me as a coach since 2011 is just understanding how much that I don't control. I think as a young coach you try to assert control over so many different things.

2011 was a unique run for us just because in a lot of ways we were playing with house money. A lot of people didn't think we belonged in the NCAA Tournament, and that group just had this incredible motivation, something to prove. Most of the times when you get in the NCAA Tournament, there's more expectations on you. Certainly this year is that for us.

You know, trying to understand what helps the players be their best and I think with that, learning that coaching your team is not the same as coaching your players. So a lot of times as coaches -- and I worked for the ultimate ball coach, Billy Donovan. We might want to do all the things that a ball coach has historically done, but one thing that he did an awesome job was the psychological disposition and helping guys with that on an individual basis. So that's probably an area where I've changed, too.

Q. Since you've gone to your home state of Wisconsin to coach, it's the second time in three years you've been back in Texas for an NCAA Tournament. What's it like coming back? I know you played the game here earlier this season, but coming back to Texas, what's it like for you, and is there something about it, especially being on this kind of stage where you wanted to be with the Longhorns?

SHAKA SMART: It's great. It's an awesome place. Dallas is a neat place. I got to go walk down to the JFK Memorial today. I'm a big history guy.

I mean, to be honest with you, when the season started, I always do this. I look up the NCAA Tournament sites. So today we could be in five places. We could be in Detroit, Boston, L.A., Dallas, or be in Milwaukee because the season is over. I would have taken any of those first four. So to be here in Dallas is awesome.

You know, you mentioned Texas. I do want to say Rodney is doing an awesome job. I think when they went to the Elite 8 last year, that was really, really special to watch and to share that with other folks that had been part of that program. It was really, really cool.

It's great to be here and excited about the game tomorrow.

Q. Kam Jones' mental makeup, it seems like he is always just focused on the here and now and has an ability to block out the noise, whether it's his comments to John Fanta about the All Big East team, and he was asked a couple of minutes ago about his NBA Draft stock, and he had no idea what folks were talking about. What does that say about the way he's wired, and how does that kind of translate to his game on the court?

SHAKA SMART: I'm going to have to get on Ben Steele about that rat poison that he tried to throw out there. I think Kam has really grown. When guys come in, they have certain experiences that they've had in their childhood, in their high school career, their AAU career. To a large extent they really have no idea what goes into being successful at this level.

I'm really thankful for his receptivity -- really all of our guys, but you asked about Kam. His receptivity to what it takes. His competitive maturity has really grown, to a large extent. He still has a ways to go, but I think particularly the last several weeks, the last six, seven, eight weeks we've seen just an increased focus in him.

He's not messing around. He's here for a reason. He's here for a purpose. At the same time, when it's time to have fun, he's definitely the life of the party. He's a guy dancing in the locker room with his teammates after games. So really, really grateful to have him.

Q. I know your focus is Marquette right now, but with the 1, 2, and 3 seeds from the Big East all moving on, does it feel like maybe a 4, 5, or 6 somewhere should have been in the tournament?

SHAKA SMART: Well, I think so. I think that the selection process has gotten so dense with information that sometimes the information and the data supersedes common sense. Now, I've never been on a selection committee. I have a ton of respect for those guys. Those guys, including us in 2011, changed my life, so different committee now, but last thing I would do was bash them.

I do think that when you have a team like Seton Hall that has beaten an all-time special team like UConn and other good teams, like us, you've got to really, really take a hard look at them even beyond the numbers. I think UConn lost three games this year. Let's see. Kansas -- at Creighton, Kansas on the road, and then Seton Hall. It's like one of these things is like the other.

To me, yes, I think a team like Seton Hall was deserving. Then it was just unfortunately an imperfect storm or a perfect storm in the wrong way for our league. We had one historically bad team that hurt everybody's numbers. We had one historically good team, and then a lot of those teams that were kind of in the middle beat up on each other, so that kind of landed us where we are.

Not surprised at all that we have three teams in the Sweet 16 because, put our team aside for a second, I think UConn and Creighton are elite teams.