

NBA Finals: Knicks vs. Spurs

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San Antonio Spurs

Mitch Johnson

Media Day



Q. Last three years as Vic has evolved, how have you seen defenses change with how they've tried to defend him?

MITCH JOHNSON: Good question.

I think just his physical maturation has probably evolved some of that naturally in terms of when he first got here as a 19-year-old, the smaller, physical guy that could get up underneath him was a problem. That took some of it – just time of his body progressing and evolving, then also some fundamental things to help give himself advantages in those spots.

I think his shooting has improved, so that's also probably been an added dynamic that teams account for at times whether they're trying to take away this versus that.

I think there's also a big element of his teammates. I think his teammates have grown with him and the team has gotten better. I think a lot of times you see with a lot of the teams that were left at the last few months or so of these Playoffs, there's something you have to give up when you take something away. That's just what happens when you play great players and really good teams.

A lot of times those decisions aren't made in a vacuum in terms of not only the player but then there's a ripple effect typically of what that may lead to for the team, what you're going to open yourself up to, what you're going to be committed to knowing, that's okay because we're going to take this away.

Q. You've obviously embraced the notion that experience or inexperience or perception thereof doesn't matter throughout these Playoffs for your team. How much do you see the symmetry that applies to you as well, that this is also your first time going through this in this role? Are you appreciating the fact that experience is what you make of it?

MITCH JOHNSON: Not to get into a rabbit hole, but I do

think experience matters. I just think a lot of times we use the term 'anticipated or expecting' the use of it, not necessarily knowing how it's going to be used. I draw upon a ton of experiences, not as a head coach in the NBA, but I've been around the game of basketball for 30-plus years.

I think at times there's a lot of things we talk about every single day more than experience. When we met as a team in October until June 1, if we kept track of the amount of times we talked about -- again I've said this, not to be redundant -- habits, consistency, execution, fundamental, attention to details, style of play, brand of basketball, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. We've said all those words a hundred times more than the word experience.

I just think it allowed us to anchor to those things when we have adversity or success or instability or different things that you go through that you can't always control, you tend to anchor to something.

I think at times experience is something that's very well suited to be anchored to, if you use it in the right way, as an individual or collective group.

I just think for us it can be a negative when you use it in the right way that we can't anchor to the experience as a group. But that's assuming you're using it in its best use of the word.

Not to talk in circles, but I think there are just different things that we anchor to at different times when we can't necessarily change what we can't control. So I think that's where sometimes an area comes through. Yes, I do appreciate having clarity on some of those other things. Some of those things have been established here before me and passed down along the generations of our organization.

Q. Mitch, I wanted to ask you about Steph Castle. He's had to guard an All-Star in every round of these Playoffs. Will probably get that chance again. What are the characteristics that he has physically and his mental makeup that make him suitable for that kind of matchup?

MITCH JOHNSON: I don't know other than I just keep

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witnessing it [smiling].

I probably talk the least about him publicly. I probably talk most about him privately in terms of what he does and means for our team.

I'm not talking about performance because I don't want to get crucified. But in terms of output of energy, when you think about what he's doing defensively and offensively, it takes you to some really rare territory of names that you may not want to say in terms of because you're not comparing him to that person or this person, but the output of energy in terms of what he does defensively and offensively, it's similar to Victor in terms of he's basically in the middle of every single play for us offensively, defensively, but he's on the basketball.

That's some very rare air just in terms of output of energy. Then you start talking about the quality that he's doing it. I think the best way to explain Steph Castle is he had 20-plus turnovers in two games. If you watched the rest of the series, you'd have no idea. He did pretty good.

Q. Mitch, how close is De'Aaron to 100 percent now after having a few days of rest? How impressive was it for him to play those final four games against Oklahoma City?

MITCH JOHNSON: Very impressive. I mean, it goes actually back to Minnesota, right? He's been playing with that now for two series. He's had it reagravated at times. His mental toughness, physically, mentally, at some stage his values with being out there. I think there's certain things we learn with our group that lend to our style of play and brand.

A turnover is a stat, but not making a turnover is not a stat. So there's times we didn't make a turnover that helped our offense. So when Dylan got healthier and De'Aaron was able to play in that series, things flipped for us a lot of types where maybe we made a shot, or had an outcome we wanted, but there's a lot of other times where just not turning the ball over was really beneficial for us because it made us able to miss a shot, set our defense.

As the series wore on, his impact became greater in terms of production on a box score, but his impact was instant the moment he got back into a jersey and was available for us.

I'm not sure how to answer the question on 100 percent, but it feels like it's moving in a better direction. With rest I hope he's better tomorrow than he is today, so on, so forth, since our last game.

Q. We all talk about Spurs culture, your relationship with Pop. How often you talk to him? How involved is he with the team? The culture he established here, I don't know if you go out to dinners like they used to, have the list of restaurants around the country.

MITCH JOHNSON: Yeah, my relationship with Pop, the dynamic is/has changed with the roles we're in now, but the relationship has stayed the same in terms of feedback, discussion, challenging each other, supporting each other, me asking him a lot of questions, him giving me a lot of wisdom.

He's a pretty good resource for what I've been walking through since October and up until now. I cannot have created a better rhythm or build-out of him being a constant resource for me, but then also totally giving me the freedom and runway to try to roll this thing out in my own reflection as myself.

That's pretty valuable. To be honest, I don't know if anyone's ever had that opportunity that I've had this year. I don't take that for granted. It's not lost onto me the impact he's had, while also empowering me to be myself.

In terms of the culture, yeah, that's a word that can have a lot of definitions. He, R.C. [Buford], the whole family, people that have been in our organization for a long time, have really set an environment of how one operates and interacts with each other in our building and within our program.

I think it allows people to hopefully feel valued and be themselves while also understanding how competitive and how hard we have to work to be where we want to be.

I think there's quite a few of us, Peter John [Holt], Brian [Wright] and myself now as the leaders, along with players Victor and players that are trying to maintain and sustain that well. Being okay with modernizing things as we go.

My restaurant list and wine list may not be the same as Pop's, but yeah, we're trying to connect it all and, again, keep writing new chapters.

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