

# NBA Western Conference Finals: Lakers vs. Nuggets

Saturday, May 20, 2023

## Michael Malone

Denver Nuggets

Game 3: Pregame

**Q. You guys used Jokic up in screens. You had him down in screens in Game 2 against AD. What do people not see or recognize about Jokic as a defender?**

MICHAEL MALONE: I don't know. I don't know what people see. I'm not really worried about it. To your point, I think when you're playing against LeBron and AD, you have to be at different levels. You can't give them a steady diet of any one thing.

I thought, you look at Game 1 and Game 2, just some of the things we switched up to try to protect our guys a little bit more, and our guys did a great job of being disciplined throughout that game.

But I think Nikola, he may not be the most athletic guy defensively or he may not be the player that is going to go and block a shot into the third row, but I do think his anticipation, his hand-eye coordination and his IQ allow him to be a better defender probably than advertised.

**Q. Calvin Booth, you've seen his ascension. What relationship have you guys had and what has he meant to the franchise?**

MICHAEL MALONE: First off, our relationship is a great one. I remember first meeting Calvin when I coached in Cleveland many, many years ago and he was in the area as a player still. For him to be in the organization the last four or five years and to move up when Arturas (Karnisovas) left to go to Chicago and then to move up once again when Tim (Connelly) left to go to Minnesota. That was really important for me. I said that to Josh (Kroenke) when Tim had left. I really felt that Calvin was more than ready to take over and lead this franchise.

And the relationship that he and I have, the trust and the friendship, I think allows us to have honest conversations, to challenge one another and to help one another.

I couldn't be more thankful for not only my relationship with



Calvin but I think the job that he's done, going out and trading for Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, signing a guy like Bruce Brown, DeAndre Jordan. So Calvin has been very, very important to what we are doing on the floor every night.

**Q. For the playoffs, LeBron is 1-of-20 from three in the fourth quarter. The other night he took a lot of three-point shots in the fourth, and that gave you guys more momentum when you were coming back. Is your strategy to tire him out so he resorts to those type of shots when his legs are not there?**

MICHAEL MALONE: I can't say that's part of our game plan, that we are going to tire LeBron out and make him settle for shots. He's a great player, and as I mentioned before, you have to give great players different looks throughout the game.

LeBron is so smart. If you give him a steady diet of one thing, he's going to find a way to beat you. I'm not aware of all his three-point shooting numbers. I know that he's more than capable of making those shots. I felt our fourth-quarter defense the other night, and the fact that we started 20-5 to start that fourth quarter, gave us a lot of life. We made big threes, as well, in that stretch.

But we understand what we're getting ready to face. You know, this is a must-win for them, and I fully expect LeBron and everybody else in that team to come out ultra aggressive. We had 17 turnovers for 21 points the last game. If we do that on the road in front of this crowd, this is going to be a really tough place to play. So we have to be really clean tonight and not fuel their break as best as possible.

**Q. Is there anything you guys learned from going to Phoenix up 2-0 for those Games 3 and 4 you want to apply to this road trip?**

MICHAEL MALONE: You go back to the first round, we went to Minnesota up 2-0 and we were able to win Game 3. We went to Phoenix 2-0 and we lost 3 and 4. If you look at the Phoenix series in particular, the thing that stands out is our three games at home and Game 6 in Phoenix, our defense was there, and the two losses that we had, we didn't guard anybody, especially in transition.



So once again, home for me, my biggest concern tonight is they know that they have to get out and run and attack and score easy baskets. So they are going to be really aggressive in transition. We have to defend without fouling, because that's a by-product of their aggression. They are averaging 26 free-throw attempts against us. AD getting there 11 times a game. The one thing that I can take is that if we have any chance of winning Game 3, it's going to have to be a hell of a defensive game for us for 48 minutes.

**Q. What do you think ever since Aaron Gordon joined the group a few years ago, what has he done so well to fit in and are there parts of his game that are underappreciated?**

MICHAEL MALONE: I think the greatest thing that Aaron has done coming here is that he's tried to fit in and not stand out, you know what I mean? He came from Orlando and I think he realized at that point in time, I'm coming to a really good team that's got a chance to win a championship when healthy, and let me come in here and do my part and help Jamal, Michael, Nikola, whoever it may be. And I often reference a game we played here in this building against the Clippers soon after acquiring Aaron. We beat the Clippers. They were healthy, as we were, and I think that's when we felt we had a real chance to win a championship. Unfortunately, Jamal got hurt soon thereafter, and now here we are back finally healthy again.

I think Aaron, truly being a selfless player, his versatility on the defensive end of the floor, his ability to complement Nikola Jokic and play off of his skill set has allowed us to be a team that has had a tremendous season to this point in time.

**Q. We have seen Jamal after big games he's had in the past, in these playoffs, sometimes follow that up with a lot of shot attempts. How do you balance being aggressive versus looking to set up other people and making sure the ball continues to find everybody on the road?**

MICHAEL MALONE: I think it's for all of our players, I think the defense is going to tell you what to do. If Jamal has got looks, where they are good shots, we want him to be aggressive. If they are putting two defenders on him and giving him extra attention, then he's got to do his job and get off the ball in a timely manner and trust his teammates and trust the pass.

I think there's something where Jamal is aware of that, and with the playoff performance he had in Game 2, you fully expect to give him a little more attention. And now it's just reading the game and making the right play and trusting

those around you, and I think Jamal is definitely capable of that.

**Q. Anthony Davis, 4-of-15 shooting in Game 2. What did you like about how Nikola Jokic played that matchup defensively and how you guys defended him?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, I think Nikola did a really good job. Obviously we made some adjustments in the pick-and-rolls, especially in their drag screens and early. It was a huge difference from Game 1 and Game 2 in how we guarded them and their productivity more importantly.

But not one player is going to guard Anthony Davis, you know what I mean? Nikola did a really good job, but I felt that our help and our shrink-the-floor mentality was a lot better in Game 2 than it was in Game 1. He still got to the foul line 11 times, something that we have to clean up. But when you're guarding great players like LeBron and AD, it's really five guys working as one out there.

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