

# NBA Western Conference Finals: Lakers vs. Nuggets

Saturday, May 20, 2023

## Michael Malone

Denver Nuggets

Game 3: Postgame

Denver Nuggets 119, Los Angeles Lakers 108

**Q. Michael, what is the attitude or the mindset that you guys had to have to come into Los Angeles in not a must-win situation for you guys but to pull it off and take a commanding 3-0 lead?**

MICHAEL MALONE: I think the mindset is you have to go out there and take it. I think at this point of the season, I just told the guys after this win, you're fighting human nature. Up 3-0, what's the natural inclination? Take a deep breath, relax -- and that's when you get yourself into trouble.

We said the same thing going to Minnesota in Game 3, and we did it. We didn't do it against Phoenix, but tonight I give our guys credit because this game was so many games within a game. The Jamal Murray first half, 30 points, played unbelievable basketball. Nikola Jokic gets in foul trouble. This is a key time of the game. Are we going to survive with Nikola on the bench with four fouls? But we did. I thought KCP was unbelievable during that stretch. Made big plays, made big shots. Our defense stepped up to hold water while Nikola was out.

Nikola, you can't keep him down for a whole game. The end of the game, him and Jamal were playing two-man game. I have to (give) credit where credit is due: That was Nikola's call. He said on the bench, let's go to this play. Let me and Jamal play whole side of the floor, and we'll make the right reads. We milked that down the stretch. Coach Jokic did a great job tonight.

So proud of our group. Again, second half, 42 percent for them. Fourth quarter, 41 percent for them. I think the greatest stat for this night was 30 assists, only six turnovers. On the road against that team, who you knew was going to be very desperate and urgent, we did not beat ourselves tonight.

I'm proud of our group. We're not celebrating. We have to get another win and to close this thing out.



**Q. You referenced Minnesota, you referenced Phoenix from this year, but obviously your team has been through a lot of playoff battles over the years. How much do you think that experience has helped this team in this series?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Oh, I think a lot. I think this team is playoff tested. This is five years in a row. We've advanced out of the first round most of those years except last season, when we lost to the eventual world champion in Golden State.

Most importantly for me is when we're healthy, what this team did a few years ago in the bubble. Obviously we lost to these very Lakers in the Western Conference Finals, but to come back from 3-1 deficits, to win multiple Game 7s and to have Jamal Murray healthy and Michael Porter healthy with a great crew around Nikola. Bruce Brown has been unbelievable for us. That guy, what a great pickup. Give Calvin Booth a ton of credit. The trade for Kentavious Caldwell-Pope. Getting Aaron Gordon a few years ago. This group is capable of doing great things. And they believe right now. Belief is a very powerful thing.

**Q. The maturity and the poise that you guys played with tonight, the raucous atmosphere, the Lakers kept charging, kept charging and it didn't seem like you guys buckled. Is that a maturity that you've seen all season with this group?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, it is. I think we've been in first place since the middle of December. This team has gone on the road and beaten some really good teams. Last season, we set a franchise record for road wins. So we have the ability and the confidence to go on the road and beat really good basketball teams.

And I think the word you used is very appropriate: I did see poise tonight. Foul trouble. Nikola going out. There wasn't a panic. It was, okay, he's out, that means somebody else has to step up. I think that's something our team has done time and time again. I know it's cliché, but that next-man-up mentality has really served us well over the years.

**Q. Five turnovers from you guys tonight. Who sets the tone in that department?**



MICHAEL MALONE: Well, I think Nikola and Jamal. Those are our primary ball handlers. Those are the guys we play through a ton. Especially what's even more impressive about that is because the amount of attention that Nikola and Jamal get. Those guys are being hounded everywhere. Anthony Davis is just playing free safety sitting in the paint for eight seconds at a time and showing an extra crowd.

So to only have six turnovers for eight points in a game of this magnitude, I really felt -- that was my fear going in. On the road if we fuel their break, this place is going to get crazy, LeBron getting downhill, throwing lob dunks. This could get out of control quickly. We never allowed that to happen off of our mistakes, and that's what you have to do. Good teams do not beat themselves on the road.

**Q. How important was it for your team to get off to a fast start?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, and you have to give Jamal Murray a lot of credit in that regard. I thought Jamal, what did he have in the first quarter? I know he had 30 at halftime. 17 in the first quarter. Shooting into a big basket, and his teammates were finding him. That's one thing I love about our team as well is that, there is no sensitivity. If a guy has got it going, we're going to ride that guy, knowing at some other point in the game we are going to need somebody else to step up and make a play. I thought tonight was a perfect example of that. It was Jamal early, it was Jamal and Nikola late and a lot of guys in between that stepped up.

I have to say, I thought Michael Porter tonight was outstanding. That to me is a snapshot of Michael Porter's potential greatness: 14 points, 10 rebounds, six assists, and no turnovers. One of my favorite plays of the night, he caught the ball in front of the Laker bench. He could have shot the ball contested. Makes one more pass to Bruce Brown, wide-open corner three. Good to great. That shows Michael's continued maturation as a player.

Very proud of Michael and the game he played tonight.

**Q. We saw Murray last game didn't really have it going until boom, fourth quarter he dominates. You mentioned the adjustment by Coach Jokic. What else did you see from him in the fourth quarter to really take control of that game?**

MICHAEL MALONE: From Nikola? Just demanding the ball. There was a little stretch there I think early where AD was out, so we made a concerted effort to post up Nikola every time, to get into the bonus early, which we did, and

just play through him. That's the thing about Nikola: You can throw whatever defense you want at him. His IQ is just through the roof. He's going to figure out what you're doing and how he can play his game, but also now he can make those around him better, which is what I think ultimately makes him the great player that he is. He uplifts everyone around him on a nightly basis.

I just saw a guy that even though the game throughout wasn't his game, in the fourth quarter demanding the ball, calming us down and making right play after right play. Sometimes I think it's a beauty to watch him out there.

**Q. On top of that, we don't see Nikola struggle like that for three quarters. It's almost the first time we saw him being human. Why do you guys not get rattled in a situation like that, especially on the road?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Well, it helped that Jamal had 30 in the first half. So as Nikola is struggling and Jamal is thriving, we're okay. We're holding water.

I think our defense in these Playoffs overall has been really good. When Nikola goes out and you can hold a team to 42 percent in the second half with the MVP not being out there, that says a lot about your defense. That got us out and we ran and we got some easy baskets at times. But Nikola is not going to have a bad game. He missed some shots that he normally makes. Sometimes you say, wow, he never misses that shot. But he's got the complete trust of not only myself but everybody in that locker room, knowing he's going to make the right play and he's going to come through for us because he's done it time and time again.

**Q. We often talk about the maturity leaps the players make in their third or fourth season and I remember having a lot of those conversations about Jamal at the time. What's the maturity leap now that he's in his sixth season, because there's another level, right?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, I think -- I hope that we're all getting better. I'm trying to get better. I never want to stop learning. I never want to stop growing. You could say the same thing for Nikola, who is a two-time MVP, finding ways to improve. And for Jamal the biggest thing this year was getting healthy, and then being back healthy but getting over the mental hurdle of reminding myself, I can get back to not just a level I was at in the bubble, but how do I surpass that?

I remember being on the bus with him, going to the airport after he did the injury in Golden State the next day and he had tears in his eyes. That was the message, hey, man, you're going to come back from this, and not only are you



going to come back, you're going to be better.

In that moment, that's really hard to believe that. His first thought was, man, are you guys going to trade me? Really that was his -- I am damaged goods. Are you going to trade me now? I hugged him, I said hell no, you're ours. We love you. We're going to help you get back, and you're going to be a better player for it.

I think what he's doing in these Playoffs is just a reminder of a guy that we drafted seven years ago that has continued to find ways to improve and really show out on the biggest stage in the world.

**Q. With about two minutes and 30 seconds left in the third, Aaron Gordon skies for like 10 feet and grabs a big offensive rebound, gets it around for a three-pointer for MPJ. I think the next possession he has block. Can you tell me about some of the little and big things that AG does for you?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Well, I think you just said it. The little things he does for us are big things. Aaron is a guy that is always flying under the radar. If you want to talk about one guy that really embodies a huge part of our culture about being selfless, Aaron Gordon is a tremendous poster child for that. He has checked his ego at the door. He knew coming into this year with Jamal and Michael back that his role would be different, and he never fought that. Rather, he embraced it.

He said, okay, I want to win a championship. I want to help everybody in this locker room win a championship, and for me and us to do that, I have to be the best version of myself within this role -- defending, rebounding, offensive rebounds, making plays for other people. His impact throughout the Minnesota, Phoenix and now Lakers series is tangible. We would not be in this position if it wasn't for Aaron Gordon's play, his attitude and just how unselfish he is.

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