

# NBA Western Conference Finals: Lakers vs. Nuggets

Monday, May 22, 2023

## Michael Malone

Denver Nuggets

Game 4: Postgame

Nuggets 113, Lakers 111

**Q. Coach, NBA Finals, how does that sound?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Amazing.

**Q. To do it in this way, to dominate and win against the Lakers, the same team you lost to in this position before in the bubble, how did your team come together to get this job done?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Well, I think it starts with a belief in themselves, but probably more importantly in the collective, the man next to them. I've seen that belief all year long. We know that middle of December we ascended to first place in the Western Conference, and through the ups and downs, we never lost first place in the Western Conference.

To beat this team in the Western Conference Finals and to get the first sweep in franchise history, to get the first Western Conference championship in franchise history, it means a lot.

But I speak for 17 players in that locker room and the entire organization: We are not satisfied. We're going to enjoy it for a moment, and I think it's going to be a hell of a plane ride home. But we have a lot of work to do.

You have a great player in Nikola Jokic, who continues to show how great of a player he is on whatever stage. You have the return of a Jamal Murray, coming back from an injury, missing significant time, playing at the level he's playing at. A lot of other guys who have stepped up to put us in this position. From Michael Gordon and Aaron Gordon to KCP to Bruce to Jeff to all the guys on our bench.

We have tremendous ownership, we have a tremendous front office and I have an outstanding coaching staff. I just hope that David Adelman is able to get a head coaching job, because that young man is ready to be a head coach



in this league.

**Q. What was it like for you to have to stare down LeBron James in order to get to this point and seeing Nikola make all the big plays down the stretch there?**

MICHAEL MALONE: You know, that first half was vintage LeBron James. Having coached him for five years in Cleveland, he understood what time it was with their team, firmly back against the wall. In that first half he showed why he's one of the all-time great players, literally put his team on his back and just went at us. Challenged our guys at halftime to become the more physical team, to become the more aggressive team and stop playing on our heels. I felt that third quarter saved us.

I think the score in the third quarter was 36-16. Got us back in the game. That's who we are. That's how we need to play for four quarters if we have any chance of winning an NBA championship.

**Q. I think Nikola played every second after nine minutes and 16 seconds left in the second quarter. Do you go to ask him if you can ride him that much or does he come to you and tell you he's good for the rest of the way?**

MICHAEL MALONE: I learned a long time ago if you ask somebody something, they can say no. So I didn't ask. It was one of those situations. They weren't taking their guys out. Nikola, and I'm not joking when I say this, is just an ultra-conditioned athlete. The guy can play for minutes on top of minutes and play at a high level. You saw the plays he made down the stretch.

For that game to go down to the wire and for the ball to be in LeBron James' hands, those seconds were an eternity. When the buzzer went off, it was almost surreal for a second.

But again, couldn't be more proud of our group. This is for all of our fans back in Denver who come every night to make Ball Arena, just an incredible place to play. All of our fans around the world. We know that we have a lot of fans over in Serbia supporting us. This is a special moment, so we're going to savor it for a moment and get back to work, as I mentioned earlier.



**Q. Can you talk about the way your team has been able to play defense throughout this series, and how did Jamal, the last play of the game, come down to your team playing defense?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Well, we knew at halftime, they didn't feel us at all in that first half. They were getting whatever they wanted in transition, in the paint, on the glass. We turned the ball over, fueled their break. We just did not like who we were. To our guys' credit, I think we understood what was at stake. You don't want to give a team like that life. I know that the record is 0 and whatever, but that's LeBron James over there. If anybody is capable of doing something special, it's LeBron James.

The way we came out in that third quarter showed me that we have a maturity about us and an understanding of how we need to play at this stage. I thought Jamal Murray, 25 points, made big plays. He and Nikola, another triple-double out there. Just a tremendous roster, and those guys stepped up when they needed to.

**Q. Michael, the message from your guys have been we still have four more. It's not just this one. So it's rare that you have a week before The Finals start. What does this week look like for you in terms of turning the page? What do you do to watch the game tomorrow, and anything can happen, but your early impressions of Jimmy Butler these Playoffs?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Well, I'm trying to figure out where I'm going to go. I might go to Cabo for a few days, have a margarita on the beach. Sounds good, right? Yeah, we'll take tomorrow to get some rest. Obviously to your point, the Heat are playing an unbelievable high level. Jimmy Butler, what he's been doing since round 1 against Milwaukee, continued that round 2 against New York and now what he's doing against Boston is just historical in nature.

And Erik Spoelstra, if they're able to win this series, and obviously that series is not over yet, but obviously Spo is one of the best coaches in the league, who I have a tremendous amount of respect for as a coach but also just as a friend.

Whoever we wind up playing, we'll prepare like we have all Playoffs. We'll get our guys ready. It's also about us doing us and being the best version of ourselves going into the NBA Finals.

I guess we'll see what happens tomorrow night.

**Q. What do you think Joker has proven so far with this playoff run?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Hmm. Man, that's a really interesting question. For me, he hasn't proven anything. And why do I say that? Because I already know he's a great player. Like when you're with a guy for eight years, and I think people have short-term memory. He wasn't this player his first year, his second year. That third year we lose to Minnesota in game 82. He and Jamal both had great games, and we lost in overtime.

But I think he's showing other people nationally that he's real. Like what he's doing is real. The MVPs are real. The triple-doubles are real. The narratives, the silly narratives this year are just what, silly and somewhat ignorant. I think Nikola has gone through three rounds now where he's averaging a triple-double in the Playoffs. Have you seen any stat padding out there? I'm serious, enough of the silliness. The guy is a great player; give him his damn respect. Stop chopping him down at the knees. He's a great player, and give him the respect he deserves.

**Q. For you personally, someone who grew up in the league, with your dad, I know he's probably watching this, what do you think this means to him, and knowing that he had been to a couple of Finals himself, so you have a pretty good frame of reference.**

MICHAEL MALONE: Yeah, I was lucky growing up the son of a coach. Whether it was him being an assistant for Jeff Van Gundy in New York, him being an assistant with Chuck Daly and the Bad Boys winning back-to-back championships. Just being a young kid around that and seeing some of the greatest players to ever play the game, for me it was one of my favorite eras of the NBA.

So I know that my father and mother back at home, watching, proud, it's special. I'm a coach's son.

**Q. Nikola passed Wilt Chamberlain for most triple-doubles in a Playoffs tonight. Do you ever think back to the player he was when you got to Denver, the kid he was back then, and just how long and kind of how this journey has gone for both you guys in moments like this?**

MICHAEL MALONE: Oh, definitely. I think life is about moments, and you have to enjoy them. I think it's important, to your point, to reflect, how did we get here? And I was now just hugging Josh and Stan Kroenke because we all know in this business patience is not a word that comes easily, and for them to have patience after that third year, 46-win effort that came up just short of the Playoffs, they saw something in Nikola, in Jamal, in myself, and allowed it to come to fruition. That's a rarity in this business.



You talk about Nikola, I always think about this and laugh because that first Summer League in Vegas, 300 pounds, out of shape -- he's a nice player. No one, and if anybody tells you different, they're full of s---. No one ever could have seen that he'd be a two-time MVP, passing Wilt Chamberlain it seems like every other night. That speaks to his dedication to his craft, getting in great shape and understanding that for him to fulfill his potential, he had to work harder, and he's done that.

What I love most about Nikola, aside from his great play and the consistency, is that he's never changed. Success, money, fame has never changed that guy. That's a rarity in this business, as we all know.

Celebrating with he, his brothers Nemanja and Strahinja, having gone over to Serbia so many times, I'm just so thankful for the relationship, because like I try to have with all my players, it's not just coach-player. I love Nikola. I love who he is as a man, as a husband, as a father, and he's a great representative of our organization.

**Q. Following up on Tim's point, what's he proving, he doesn't show a lot of emotion. I don't know how much he heard any of the narratives that were said about him, but did any of that affect him this year? Does he feel like he has something to prove, just the way you've dealt with him and seen him around?**

MICHAEL MALONE: You know, this is the first year where I think -- I don't know this for a fact. He never told me this. But in my opinion, I think the negativity around the MVP race I think did get to him. I can't blame him. The guy goes out there and does his job every night and he is being criticized. All these arguments coming into it.

So I don't know if it definitely did, but I think there was a part that was probably, like you're attacking my game. Listen, if you don't like my game, that's fine. If you want to vote for Joel Embiid, great. Joel was a well-deserved winner this year. Great player. Giannis, great player. Champion your horse, whoever you love. But the negativity and the knocking that happened this year, I know it pissed me off, and I wouldn't be surprised if it got to Nikola a little bit. But I think that's a question probably better served for him.

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