

2025 NCAA Men's Lacrosse Championship

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Gillette Stadium

Maryland Terrapins

John Tillman

Bryce Ford

AJ Larkin

Media Conference

Maryland 14, Syracuse 8

JOHN TILLMAN: Obviously, first want to congratulate Syracuse on a great year. Gary and his staff have done an awesome job. If anybody doesn't know, they are back, and they are really good, and so they have done a great job with that program. We knew it would be tough today. They have been lighting up the scoreboard and just doing an awesome job, but certainly proud of our guys. Excited to have two more days together, and obviously, a lot of work to do to play a really good team.

Just proud of the effort today, the unselfishness, kind of what these guys have done all year. We are here because of guys like this. We have great players, super dedicated, and I couldn't ask for a better staff. We are here because of them. Thanks for what you do. I love you guys.

Q. Bryce, can you take us through that 8-0 run that gave you some separation? What was working during that stretch?

BRYCE FORD: The same thing that's been clicking for us all year, just be selfless. I think if you break down that run, a lot of different hands, and not scoring, and I think every single time we came back to the sideline, it was kind of just be patient, make sure we make the extra pass and get the best shot at the possession. That kind of worked for us, and we continued to do that for that 8-0 stretch.

Q. AJ, last two weeks, you've held, Spallina and Aiden Carroll in check. Something Coach Tillman mentioned last week was the effort of your scout guys, your scout team guys, and really just mimicking those guys. Can you just talk about their performance this week and how they helped you guys throughout the tournament,



throughout the season?

AJ LARKIN: Yeah, hundred percent. Like Coach Tillman says all the time, we all know our role and our job on this team and our scout team is fully bought in. They are a gritty group of dudes, and they know their role, and they try to maximize that every time we are on that field, whether it be in the film room, at practice, off the field. They are just a bunch of guys that just do such a good job for us week-in and week-out, giving us the greatest looks to help us be prepared on the defensive end.

We wouldn't be there without them, and especially the coaching from, obviously Coach Phipps, but Coach Bernhardt is a mastermind. He helps us out so much. He's a perfectionist in the best ways, just helping us stay dialed in at every moment. And without him giving us the great game plans and the scout team giving us such good looks every week, we would not be able to have the success that we did the past couple weeks.

Q. It felt like, especially early on, every time Syracuse made a mistake, you guys just pounced and punished them. Walk me through your ability as a team not to beat yourself and wait for the opponent to make a mistake.

AJ LARKIN: Yeah, I would like to say, like Coach Tillman said, they are a very skilled team. A bunch of guys that we had to do a lot of scouting on. Like I said, our scout team, they do such a good job of giving us good looks. We know they wanted to speed up the game for our defense, and they wanted us to make mistakes. So we tried to flip the script almost and try to counteract those and make them make the mistakes. Trying to sit back on our fundamentals and be patient is mainly what our game plan was, so yeah.

Q. At one point, the team had three goals in a 20-minute span and with less than ten seconds left on the shot clock. What was the game plan going in, knowing that you wanted to dominate the time of possession?

BRYCE FORD: Yeah, I think, again, they are a very talented offense. As AJ was saying, we prepped for that all

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week and we wanted to control that middle of the field. As much as stopping them on the d-side has to do with those guys, also, we can help them out a little bit by making smart decisions and not giving them free transition. For us, we realize that's a good defense over there. We weren't going to be able to dodge once and just score. It was going to take moving the ball, spin to Rex.

I think once we did that, we got the shot clock down, then we started to realize, okay, this is when we are getting our best looks, maybe not in the first five seconds, we're taking a like grade B shot. Because if that is the case, then they are probably going to get it up and out, and they are going to get some talented dudes on the attack.

That was our mindset, play more like a team game. The defense was helping us out getting stops. That was our mindset going into those.

Q. A play early in the game, Eric scores, there's a hit that's not called late, but you all seemed to really take a lot of energy after that play culminating in your first goal, AJ. Can you guys talk about that point in the game that really seemed to flip the energy of the game?

AJ LARKIN: Are you saying after Spanos got hit? I would like to say, I think that's just a testament to how united and close we are as a group. Obviously, the refs make great calls and they are the officiators of the game, but sometimes, you know, they might miss a few things.

We just saw that and it got us fired up. We wanted to stay as close as we could together, and we just were like, it doesn't matter. You know, there's going to be calls that we may not like but we're just going to keep on playing our game, stick to our game plan and stick to what the coach keeps on telling us to do.

Q. You talk about that system and that confidence in the back end. How much does Logan have an impact for all of you poles and just your confidence on the back end?

AJ LARKIN: I would like to say, Logan helps our confidence beyond words. He has years of experience, as we all know. And him being in those moments in previous years is really just a testament to how he'll perform and help us out these past couple weeks, and knowing that we'll be able to slide or -- we're not perfect. We might miss a few things, but he's going to be behind us with confidence.

Like Coach said, every team is going to score. It's a lacrosse game. We're playing some of the best teams in

the nation. But one of Logan's best qualities is picking us up so we don't get down, and we don't slip in those slopes. He's just a good confidence-builder for us, which helps us attack the next play and just stay to our game plan.

Q. As many options as they have, Spallina is still the top guy on the team, and the work that will be able to do, and you guys collectively, just to deny him opportunities to set things up, how important was it to short circuit them that way?

AJ LARKIN: I think Joey is such a good player. His game speaks for itself. But having Will be as fundamentally sound as he is and, like Logan, one of the backbones of our defense, us being able to have confidence in a guy like him is super important for us.

I think being able to have a guy like Will guard dudes like that and us being able to roll with our game plan and roll with the punches is super important, and helps us a lot.

Q. I noticed during that run, that 8-0 run, the goalie high to the stick side -- or high to his left side, was that something guys had a plan going into or once it was going to the left side, you guys kept firing?

BRYCE FORD: Our goalies do a great job preparing us. In the middle of the week, they will analyze the goalie we're playing against, if they have any tendencies or whatnot. Jimmy McCool was a great goalie. He was making a lot of saves in the beginning of the game. We were shooting low and it wasn't working out for us. We came back to the sideline and reset and was like, what we talked about all week, and where is our best opportunity to score, and we kind of believed that was the spot on the goal to go against him. I didn't know it was an 8-0 run, but that's awesome.

Yeah, that definitely sparked it. We honed in on where we were placing the ball. We weren't placing it great in the beginning of the game. That's something we have to clean up a little bit, our shot placement. But that top right centre of the cage somewhere we were attacking.

Q. You obviously had the goal in transition; can you talk about the confidence of some of those guys who are not usually scoring as much but the confidence in transition to get some extra ones for you guys?

AJ LARKIN: Yeah, I think regardless of any player on your team, if you're playing or not, a lot of the guys, I think Bryce could back off me, we have confidence in them. It's a testament to our culture and what Coach Tillman has built over the years. We are so tight that no matter who goes out there, we are ready to go and stand behind them, even if they make a mistake or not.

I know I, and I could probably speak for Bryce here, we have all the confidence in the world in those guys, and for them being able to step up in a stage like that is huge for our team, and like you said, huge for the momentum to swing our way and give us the upper hand.

BRYCE FORD: Second that. A lot of trust in those guys. It starts with guys like Aidan and Elijah, you are always seeing them in practice taking shots, the last group of guys there. There's no real doubt when they go in the game, and it was great to see a couple fall, like we're usually seeing during practice all the time. Have all the trust in the world for those guys.

Q. When you look at that run and there's transition goals; just how important was being able to get those quick scores or just those opportunistic scores to be able to create some separation?

JOHN TILLMAN: They have been playing good defense. They have good players. John has done a really good job with the defense and Mullen has been excellent all year. Any time you can get an opportunity, go for it.

You know, I thought we had a good one, great play by George Stamos, we throw an outlet and he looses it to Spanos, and we throw it to Daniel and we have a three-on-two and Jimmy makes a great save, but it was like, oh, man, those are the ones that you really want to try to capitalize in games like this. They are good momentum plays. You just don't know how many you're going to get. Some timely goals.

The biggest goal of the game I thought was Spanos's goal from J-Mac. They had really controlled that third quarter for about six minutes. They had the ball, long possession, some resets, just were grinding us down, and you could tell. And then we fell clear, and then they come back and score. So at that point, oh, man, the momentum from 10-2 to 10-5 like that, getting that goal was huge. We needed to give our defense a little bit of a break because those guys were just getting gassed. I think that was huge.

We scored in a variety of ways, a lot of different guys, but that's been our identity all year, different guys, we don't want to rely on one guy. These guys are so unselfish and Michael does such a good job with the offense that it's, make the extra pass, share it. If you have a good shot, go for it, and no regrets once you shoot it.

Q. To hold Syracuse without a goal for 27 minutes, what went into that, and especially after they had scored 19 last week against Princeton.

JOHN TILLMAN: Obviously, AJ mentioned Jesse Bernardi is as good as there is on the defensive end, but even you look at some of the things I mentioned last week, the game plan he puts in, the scout team, what they do all week to kind of give ourselves a chance.

Then we really do have, I think, really talented guys, maybe some guys people don't talk about. We think the world of those guys. They not only are good on the ball and are good at covering, but they are really good off the ball. You know, they always have six guys out there, whether it's first midfield or second midfield. The attack is as good as any attack you'll see. More skilled than any attack you'll see all year. Joey, in my book, he's one of the top five players out there. You look at what he did last week, a guy that just gets it done.

But everything else, like English, probably the best midfielder this year. So they put six really skilled guys, Hiltz is going to be great. They put you under pressure, so you have to be in sync. You have to hope that you're giving up some shots, that Logan has a chance, and they had some good looks. And Logan getting 14 saves from him was huge.

You know, sometimes when we make a mistake, he bails us out, and it's not lost on me, eight saves in the first half and five in the second, that's probably a big reason. Listen, a big part of this game that we were putting a lot of time in, and Tim O'Branski does a great job with those guys. Our face-off guys and wings were awesome today. Johnny Mullen is elite, he is awesome; just put on the Harvard film. Put in last week. He is excellent.

And to hold our own, I thought Shea Keethler did a tremendous job. He was a guy I was trying to solicit a little bit yesterday to some people I know that are in the finance worlds. He got the elite 90 award for having the top GPA at the Final Four for the second straight year. Trying to reach out to some people and say this guy is a winner. He's not only an excellent student, he's a really hard worker and a great human being, but was amazing today and didn't have a great week last week and stepped up.

Obviously, that goes a long way. So those two guys and Jonah were terrific as well. We lost Sean Creter early in the year and that was a big loss, but those guys kept working. Mitch Lloyd does a great job with those guys. And again, Coach O'Branski, great plan this week.

Q. What was the challenge of dissecting Mullen and his strategy and how were you able to neutralize him?

JOHN TILLMAN: He's an animal and I say that the in most complimentary way. He goes so hard. He's big, he's

strong, he's fast. He's got a variety of moves. He's good with the ball. You saw that on that goal. But they do a lot with the subgames with him. So he's a weapon because if he wins it, now your guy is caught out there, and now you're praying 5v5, and if you run him off, Johnny can handle the ball really well. I know reading things early season, they talked about him being a weapon, and he certainly is.

But man, he's a guy that could be playing on offensive midfields. That is a huge weapon. Today's game, we felt kind of the same way about Luke, but you know, with that offense, if you're going to give up that many possessions, it's going to be hard. To hold our own -- and again, we got good wing play today and got a good one. From AJ, we came down, and I thought we had a good look at it and didn't take it. Again, 3 on 3 was going to be a work in progress, and we actually maybe exceeded things a little bit getting 14 of 24. Listen, we would take that just about any day of the week, certainly a guy of his caliber, that is huge.

Q. In your opening statement, you said Syracuse is back, but what does it mean to you and what have you been able to do over the years for quite a few years now, having Syracuse's number? How have you been able to do that so efficiently for such a period of time now?

JOHN TILLMAN: Yeah, I don't look at it that way. I don't. You know, each year is kind of a year of its own. We've been in some tight battles with them that could have gone either way. And sports is funny, sometimes you have teams that you feel like you walk away and you probably should have won, and there are games where you kind of walk away and you're like, man, I'm not sure we should have won that game. Vice versa.

I don't feel that way at all. They are one of the best programs out there. I mean, look at all the Final Fours, all the championships, they have great tradition. They, obviously, through the coaching change, there was a little bit of transition, and if you look at the great job that Gary's done, they have gotten better every single year, and they are doing a great job, whether it's the portal, a guy like Grace comes in, English, they have done a really good job and recruited at a really good level. You see those guys everywhere.

During a transition, there's always a little bit of, you know, kind of a transition point where you're establishing a new culture, and I think they are now at a point where they are ACC champs. They are in the top 5. Like, they are kind of where they have always been, and sometimes programs go through that. But I don't really look at it that way. We

have won some close games, but some of those could have gone the other way, and we'd probably be about the same in terms of the record.

Q. You talked earlier about Maryland being a deeper group of guys, but Spanos has started to step into the spot light. If I did the math right, that's 11 goals tied for the most with Traynor. What is the feeling as a coach to see a star of your own really emerging on this national stage?

JOHN TILLMAN: Yeah, I mean, obviously, our guys work so hard. Whether it's Eric, who obviously had a big day today, he's so invested. He's so selfless. I thought he was amazing last week for maybe what he didn't do, right. Like, he gets matched up against Ty Banks and thank you Banks is a stud. He is really good. He is a big, strong physical dude, and Eric is a big, strong, physical dude.

The concern there was, it wasn't like we were scared of Ty because he's really good, but you can't be scared going into a game. But we didn't want that to become the focal point and slow down the offense and make that, like, you know, like a situation where we get caught up in that matchup. He just took what they gave him, and I thought he was smart and just really like efficient with things.

And he's good at picking his spots but not making it about him, and the ball didn't die, and that was a huge thing for us. Talking to some people around Georgetown after, they actually like it when people do that because Ty is so good. He wins that matchup a lot and he's hard to get around, and that can get in your head.

So now you get caught up in the matchup and not so much playing the offense. So again, really smart last week, and then this week had some opportunities, and certainly canned them. That goal when they got it, a 5, to get it back to 6, was huge. I thought that was super timely. I thought he did a good job in the riding game and had some huge ground balls. I love him. I wouldn't trade him. He does so much for us, and maybe he doesn't maybe get seen by some other people the way we do, but man, I wouldn't give him up for anybody. He's around for another year or two. So he's an absolute winner.

Q. What has will meant to the defense and how has he approached taking on that role that Ajax had last year of taking on the opposing team's best defensive player?

JOHN TILLMAN: When you think of leadership and culture, you look at where Will is now, and I give a lot of credit to Jesse, the other defensemen, the guys that live with him, obviously his parents. But man, you see so much

of Ajax in Brett and will. Talk about two great human beings, not just great lacrosse players, but two great human beings. Guys that -- their preparation was incredible. They are high-character guys. They are team-first guys. They are high-energy guys. Their work ethic, you know, Will is a tremendous student. In high school, when I got his transcript, it was one of the best I've ever seen, and I've spent a lot of time at Harvard and Navy. He's a ridiculously cerebral guy. I think Patrick spent some time with him this week. But he watched those guys and took a lot from them.

There's a lot that anybody who wants to be a good lacrosse player, Ajax and Brett are two guys that every day you knew what you were getting. They were consistent. They weren't guys that were taking a playoff. You knew they would bring the juice and hold guys accountable and hold themselves accountable. But man, that guy has worked so hard and made so many juice plays for us this year. All that said, he's about as bright and articulate and thoughtful guy you'll find. He spends a lot of time in the weight room, which is not something that's seen in all of someone's maybe strengths, but he's a guy that seems that whatever he's doing, he's doing it really well and really hard.

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