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An interview with:



THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and take questions for the student-athletes.

Q. A lot of you guys have talked about how you need a win in this tournament to kind of validate your season. Do you still feel that way going in?

CAMERON CLARK: For sure. We're not here just to make the tournament, we're trying to win this two game tournament. We're just focused on the first game, so far. So, yeah, we're not just content with just getting here.

RYAN SPANGLER: I don't think we're content to be here, just to be here. We worked hard this year to be where we are. I think that to keep building this program we need a win and to get more wins. So, like Cam said, it is two game tournament this week, focus on the first one.

Q. For both you guys, so many of these games come down to the wire, have you guys talked about as a team just not taking any team too lightly. Of course, you might have not known too much about North Dakota State, but is that something that you guys have discussed a group?

CAMERON CLARK: For sure. Everybody that made the tournament is a great team. So, we got to figure out ways to close it out. I think we

learned from situations, from teams that we played, that we lost in certain situations, but this team we all bought in and we're just ready to play.

RYAN SPANGLER: Going off what he said, every day in practice, the last 10 or 15 minutes we work on last minute situations and it doesn't always work what you practice, but we're ready for the last minute, if it comes down to that.

Q. The roster looks like a lot of younger kids, but do you guys consider yourself a young team still at this stage of the season?

RYAN SPANGLER: I think we have matured a lot this year. There are still places we need to mature, but yeah, on the roster it seems like we're young, but I think everybody on this team has played a lot of minutes and I think that we're starting to be a veteran group. But, we're still young and need to mature a little bit.

CAMERON CLARK: Like Ryan said, we're still a young team, but we all learned, we have grown so much just from our young players like Buddy, Ryan, they have made so much progress. So, yeah, we're ready for it.

Q. Some of the experts have kind of chosen North Dakota State to be that 12 seed that picks off the 5 seed this year. Your guys' thoughts on that and your thoughts on Obama, the President picking North Dakota State over you guys.

RYAN SPANGLER: I think we can control what we do. We're ready to play, both teams are good, it's going to be a well fought game, but we're going to try to play our best, do what we do every game this season and see if we can get the best outcome.

CAMERON CLARK: Everybody has their opinion, they feel like they can win and we feel like we can win. So, we got to go out there and show it tomorrow that we're the better team and going to get the win.

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Q. Offensively, you guys can both score, they can shoot the ball, you guys can shoot the ball, so this game could be won on the defensive end. What do you guys need to do defensively to key on them and make sure you guys come out tomorrow with the win?

CAMERON CLARK: Just play tough defense. They got a lot of guys who can score. They're big, athletic, they crash the boards. So, our main focus is just rebounding and defense. I think as long as we control those two we'll come up with a win.

RYAN SPANGLER: I think we just need to keep playing defense like we have the last month of the season. Just play together, help each other. Like he said, they got a big guy that's agile in there, he's crafty, the offense kind of runs through him, so we need to slow him down. Then they got Braun, the shooter out there, we can't let him get easy shots. But, just play together, play hard, and we'll be fine.

Q. Talk about how much playing San Diego State and losing to them, how much that motivated you this season and when you saw that they were in the same bracket maybe could play in the second game, how much did you welcome that?

CAMERON CLARK: I thought about it, just losing last year, making it to my first time in the tournament, losing to them. They're a great team, but we're really not worried about them right now. We're focused on this game and maybe we'll meet them next game or something like that, but we're just focused on this game.

Q. For Ryan, obviously you have a history here. What was your reaction when you saw that you guys were coming to Spokane and how do you view your time that had you at Gonzaga?

RYAN SPANGLER: It was nice playing here, I had a great time, but I needed to get closer to my family. It's one of the best decisions I made in my life coming to Oklahoma. It was nice coming back up here, seeing some friends that I haven't seen in a couple years. But, now it's time to play a basketball game, get focused and try to help my team win a game.

Q. What's it been like preparing for a program or a team like this? You probably haven't heard of and from a league, you probably don't see very often.

CAMERON CLARK: It's tough. We really haven't saw what they can do. We saw some of the players, but every game's going to be like that. But, we're just going to get after them and play some good basketball.

Q. As a 5 seed in this NCAA tournament do you guys face any additional pressure against a 12 team that people might be picking as an upset or is that something that you guys try not to pay attention to?

RYAN SPANGLER: I think like Cam said earlier, every team in the tournament's a good team and can beat anybody. So the biggest thing is just control what you can control. We need to work as hard as we can and try to get a win.

Q. For both of you, I understand that Coach Kruger opened his practices, not just to the media, but to fans as well this year. When he said that he was going to do that, was that kind of a distraction or did you welcome that and what was it like?

CAMERON CLARK: I think it was a great idea. Just to get the fans in the gym to see how hard we really work. And just to get their appreciate aches from us. And I think it was a great move by coach.

RYAN SPANGLER: It also allows us to show how much we appreciate them. We take pictures with them, just talk to them, let them shoot with us. So, yeah, I think it just shows how much they appreciate us and how much we appreciate them.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. We'll excuse you to the locker room and we'll take questions for coach.

Q. North Dakota State has become kind of a trendy pick Nationwide. And even President Obama picked them among his upsets. When the president is picking against you to lose your first round game, how does that change anything or change the way you think about it?

COACH LON KRUGER: It changed our entire practice this morning.

(Laughter.)

No. I can understand. North Dakota State's a really good ball club. Coach Phillips does a great job and they have got a lot of experience. They have got guys that make shots, they have got

Bjorklund inside, Braun on the perimeter, other really good players around those two. They're a good team. They're a good team. They have had a great year. And our guys respect that and if we don't play well, then we're not going to win. I think we have to play well to win and that's what you expect come tournament time, so no big surprise there.

Q. No offense to the president then?

COACH LON KRUGER: No, not going to buck his wishes, no.

Q. Folks around here, and excuse me if you've been asked this, I was just back talking to Ryan Spangler, but folks around here are familiar with Ryan. Tell me about what sort of impact he's had with your program.

COACH LON KRUGER: He's had a huge impact. Obviously, led the conference in rebounding, great instincts for the ball in that area. He scored for us in double figures, but more importantly than that, he's given us a level of toughness, competitiveness that has elevated everyone else. He's been a big impact on our program. When he got his release, we immediately called Mark Few and his staff, and they said all the things about him that turned out to be true and Ryan loved his time here. He loved this staff here, he was just a little far from home and we were delighted he wanted to come back.

Q. In this day and age of social media I think a lot of coaches are closing things off to the media. Why did you open things up, not only to the media, but to your fans, too. I'm talking about practice?

COACH LON KRUGER: We have done that for 30 years. I kind of feel like it's not our program, it's the community's program and it's the University's program and I think it's good for the players. We have always done it that way. We never thought twice about it. We have a lot of families, a lot of young kids at practice every day and our players love that. And they shoot around with them afterwards. I think we sometimes take ourselves a little bit too seriously, but we try not to do that and we have always had them open.

Q. Coach, is there anyone that you've played this year that North Dakota State reminds you of?

COACH LON KRUGER: Well, a lot of good teams in the Big-12. And North Dakota

State's a very good team. So, I don't know that necessarily style, in particular, a little bits and pieces of a few different people. They have got again a lot of weapons, they appear to be a team that can score quickly on the clock or go later in the clock if they need to. They're very physical on the boards. They execute things very well. Again, they probably remind us of any one of a really good team in the Big-12.

Q. At this stage of the season do you still feel like have you have a young team, even though they're freshmen, sophomores?

COACH LON KRUGER: At times, it feels like we're a young team. Other times we have made a lot of progress from start to the finish. When you get to this point they're not really -- we got a bunch of sophomores playing a lot of minutes, they have got two full years under their belts, so you can look at them as being a little bit older. But, they have done a good job. They love to play, they love being in the gym, they have been able to focus on trying to make progress one day to the next, not just game to game, but they have practiced well. I think that's resulted in the progress that they have made. But still a relatively young team compared to North Dakota State who has got a lot of seniors and obviously, have played very well together.

Q. After the Baylor game in Kansas City, you said that you hoped the team could learn from this in a positive way. Whatever it was, lack of energy or whatever, last couple days of practice do you feel like they have made those strides that you were looking for?

COACH LON KRUGER: I feel like it. The Baylor game, any time you lose or win, you hope to gain from the experience. Baylor came out and popped us really good early and played with more aggressiveness than we did. And I think at this point in the season, it's a one and done format, of course. The significance of every possession opening a ball game aggressively and all of that, our guys have done a good job of that all year and Baylor beat us to the punch last week and hopefully, we do learn from that.

Q. You touched on this earlier, but with some people picking against you, do you kind of like the role of almost being an underdog in this game? Is that something that you as a

veteran coach can maybe use a little bit in practice or wherever?

COACH LON KRUGER: Perhaps a little bit, but it really doesn't make any difference in the long run. North Dakota State's going to come out and play well and we hope to come out and play well. And the players will kind of decide that maybe leading up to it makes for good conversation, but the players kind of get a feel for what's going on early in the ball game and probably if they're better than us they will probably win and if we're better than them then we'll probably win. That's just the way it works.

But, yeah, players, they're their fans and they listen to all that stuff and, but they have been under the radar pretty much all year long and they have been okay with that. They have played pretty well from the underdog's role. Haven't played quite as well from a favorite's role, so we'll see how it works out tomorrow.

Q. There's a lot made about the 5-12 matchup and how that matchup seems to be prone to upsets. Is there anything that strikes you about that matchup that lends itself to a lot of 12s beating 5s?

COACH LON KRUGER: Not anything that I know specifically. I know 12s typically are really good basketball teams and again if you get off to -- one team gets off to a good start and the and gains a little bit of a margin and advantage, the pressure probably switches a little bit on the 5 squad. But, I'm sure each case is a little bit unique and different.

Q. Over 40 years of coaching and playing in NCAA tournaments, can you talk about how it's changed, how things are different than they used to be from the '70s?

COACH LON KRUGER: Well, everything has changed. Of course, arena's weren't sold out, interest level wasn't nearly as much, 32 teams in the tournament, 16 teams in the tournament way back there. So it's all changed. It's so much bigger event, so much more widely covered, so many more good players in the tournament today than back there 40 years ago. It's a great event. It's a great time, it's a great experience, young players have memories for a lifetime as a result of this and fans do too. So that's why it's such a good event.

Q. You had Marvin Menzies on your staff for a year, could you talk about, have you

ever encountered a character like him in basketball? And what do you remember about him?

COACH LON KRUGER: Marvin and his family are great. We, he was with us our first year at UNLV and just a great energy, great enthusiasm, great passion for the game. Does a terrific job. It's nice to see him have the success that he's had at New Mexico State and I'm sure will continue to have. Terrific, terrific guy and terrific family.

Q. Last year when you went to the tournament, obviously you guys Oklahoma hadn't been there in a while and players didn't have experience. What did you learn in that game by San Diego State? They beat you by 15. How much of that was motivation to get back here and maybe possible play them again?

COACH LON KRUGER: Any time you play in a tournament it's always a good experience. If you lose, you're anxious to get back there and have another opportunity. Several of our guys did play on that squad last year, they worked really hard in the offseason, made a lot of progress, delighted to be back. It's not easy to play in the tournament. It's not easy to earn the opportunity to play in the tournament. So guys have done a good job and they deserve to be here and now they're looking forward to that opportunity to try to get one in the right column.

THE MODERATOR: Okay. That you, coach.

COACH LON KRUGER: Thank you very much.

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