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An interview with:



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

Q. For the other three of you, what have you seen different from Branden? Maybe, particularly, in the last couple weeks.

ADREIAN PAYNE: I seen his energy. He's been playing with a lot of passion and just a lot of energy. When he's doing that, he's an incredible athlete and incredible player.

KEITH APPLING: Pretty much same thing. His energy level. He's the type of athlete where if he plays with a lot of energy, he's able to do a lot of things that many players can't, because of the abilities that he has. So, that's the main thing is his energy level, it's been off the charts.

GARY HARRIS: Yes, he's definitely increased his intensity which causes us as a team to improve our intensity because he's one of the main guys on the team. When we see him raise his game to another level, he forces us to raise our game.

Q. Same three guys, what about off the court, though? What about in the locker room, on the floor, seemed like Branden was very vocal at times on the floor in Indianapolis.

GARY HARRIS: He's just -- off the court he's a leader off the court as well. He gets the guys to -- he holds everybody accountable, makes sure everybody does what they have to do. He's just become a great leader for us.

KEITH APPLING: I would have to piggyback what Gary said. He's been very vocal these past couple of weeks, which he's tried to carry that on to the court and it's helped his play out.

ADREIAN PAYNE: And I think the main thing is his focus. Just coming into our practices, walkthroughs, he's been locked in and just been more in tune into catching onto things and just picking it up and helping each other out.

Q. How are y'all dealing with the sudden jump in expectations just in the last few days, the President picking you to go all the way, compared to just a few weeks ago when you seemed to be on death's doorstep.

ADREIAN PAYNE: That's a tremendous accomplishment. Just having him be able to say that about us, because we're playing well right now, and we just have been through so much adversity and stuff. So, it's been hard to really see our team and be able to show what we could do in the Big-10 tournament.

It's just been great for us to be able to continue to play with each other.

KEITH APPLING: I think it's great that people have such high expectations for us as a team. But, heading into the season we had goals as a team that we wanted to accomplish and winning a National Championship is one of them. So, we're just trying to stay focused with the task at hand and accomplish one of our team goals.

GARY HARRIS: We had high expectations at the beginning of the year. We hit a little rough patch there at the end. But, we stuck together as a team, held each other accountable, and we knew we could count on each other and we would work our way out of it. And we showed what we could do in the Big-10 tournament. Now,

we just got to keep it going here in this tournament.

BRANDEN DAWSON: Well, like they said, we have been through a lot of adversity in the beginning of the season and now that we have our chemistry back and we're starting to play together as a team and we have our rhythm back. I think it's great because it builds our confidence and definitely for our teammates.

Q. Adreian touched on it, but Keith or the others, what were your reactions when President Obama picked you guys to win it all?

KEITH APPLING: I didn't even see it. I knew nothing about it until Coach brought us all together and told us that he had picked us to win it all. So, I'm glad that he has such high expectations for us, but nothing has been accomplished yet.

GARY HARRIS: I found out when Keith found out. I had no idea either. But, that's an honor for him to say that. It's not going to be handed to us, we got to go out there and prove it.

BRANDEN DAWSON: Obviously my TV stays on ESPN. I'm always watching the games and I'm always watching basketball, so when I saw that, it was just bizarre that Barack Obama picked us and he was talking about Keith, and injuries, and us getting back and just playing together as a team. So, I think it was great.

Q. I was just wondering how much all of you have watched of Delaware. They came in here a little bit ago and they seemed like a pretty confident team, planning on being here on a business trip, like to fly up-and-down the court and they played Ohio State and wondering if you guys saw any film of that game and what you saw out of that.

KEITH APPLING: We're well aware that Delaware is a pretty good team. We know that they're not in this tournament for no reason. They have three players that average over 18 points, so they have every right to be confident. But, at the same time, we're playing some of our best basketball right now, so we're a pretty confident team, as well. So, it should be a pretty good matchup heading into tomorrow's game.

GARY HARRIS: We're playing with confidence, as well. We like to get up-and-down the court too. So, if we come out and do what we're supposed to do, listen to the game plan, listen to what Coach has to say I like our chances.

Q. Can you guys explain beyond injuries, which was the obvious factor, the rough patch you guys went through. I think 5-7 through that stretch. What was going on? Was it simply injuries or was there more going on now that you have the benefit of hindsight?

GARY HARRIS: It was injuries. But, we had to constantly switch up the lineup. It was getting our chemistry down, really. Once we got everybody back, we lost two games as well, and we knew it wasn't going to come back just like that, so it was going to take some time. We stuck with it and we stayed steady and came to practice every day with a good mindset and that's how we were able to get our way out of it.

BRANDEN DAWSON: I would agree with Gary. Coming back we didn't have -- Coach kept switching the lineup up and we had different guys coming in. I think when I came back, Coach went back and he could switch off the different guards because I'm the type of guy that can guard different positions. So, I think that helped us a lot, just our rotations and things like that.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse the student-athletes and take questions for coach.

Q. You talk about the NCAA tournament being about matchups and right away you face a team that's small. Plays kind of a 6'6" guard at the four, your ability to have that with Branden Dawson as a four, how important is that, and I'm not using Kentucky as an example, but a team with size later on to be able to switch back. Can you talk about that versatility?

COACH TOM IZZO: I honestly think that that's been one of the keys to our success in the tournament over the 17 years. I've always believed that playing a tough schedule, so you learn how to play against zones and presses and big teams and small teams and it just helps get you ready.

Then we have always been able to play slow and play fast and we can play Wisconsin to a 50-49 game and Florida to an 80-70 game or 90-80 in the same weekend. So, I think that's been a plus with the big and small. That was one of the problems during the year, when we were missing Dawson for those eight or nine games, he gives us that ability to guard and switch differently and can put him on different people. I can move

him around a lot. And this day and age where you're getting these hybrid fours that are pick and pop guys, having a guy that can cover that kind of guy and Usher is a heck of a player, is, that's at least some kind of a benefit for us, if nothing else.

Q. Wanted to know if you had a chance to see Coach Heathcote and also, I know this isn't a sound bite kind of question, but things that still exist today, and what you do, from what you learned from him.

COACH TOM IZZO: Well, I did see Coach. I called him right after we got -- we won on Sunday and then we watched the pairings and I called him and let him know we were coming out here. And he asked me if I didn't think they had televisions out here, you know. I know you're coming out here.

So we had -- he came to our practice yesterday and Mark Few took Jud and I out to the old Stockton place here, I guess, where Jud has had a beverage or two in his day. And we sat and talked for an hour and a half. That was fun. Then he went out to eat with us last night with our team and did a bunch of interviews back at our hotel this morning.

What do I do that's the same? A lot. I do a lot. He was a special guy for me. I'm not sure I would be here, in fact I know I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for me. Not only helping me get the job, but more importantly keeping me sane. Jud's a funny guy. There's times I think he thinks that our team is the worst team in America until I start thinking that way and then he's letting me know that it's a lot better than I think. He gets confusing to me sometimes.

But he is a great sounding board on tough decisions, on -- and he's a very, very -- he watch he's more games than I do. So, he still gives me different pointers on different things and I still listen, because I value his opinion, I value his knowledge, I value his friendship, and he taught me more than anybody about the game of basketball.

Q. Injuries obviously are always a convenient excuse for teams that go through rough patches. That problem applies for you guys more this year than just about ever. I wonder if there's a more nuanced explanation, especially with hindsight of whatever you guys went through?

COACH TOM IZZO: I gave up talking about injuries and officials for Lent, so I kind of

don't know if I want to talk about it. But, the truth of it is I've never been part of a program that had that many to key guys. My five starters, most of them missed -- we talk about three games, five games, seven games, nine games, it's not the games, it was the number of practices. Sometimes we had a by week and we just couldn't -- so, I think we lost our identity, I think we lost some confidence, a couple guys lost their confidence and there were times I don't think I did a good job handling it.

Because if I was to be honest with you, I've had my sprained ankle, or a guy might blow a knee and he's out and you know he's out. It's the guys that are coming back, three, four, five weeks later that you don't want to change your system, but you have to make some adjustments. We're 18-1 playing really well and then things caught up with us a little bit, and I think I would have taken some blame for that. But it's been unique, it's been different, I learned some things, I don't know what I would do differently. But, this isn't your normal sprained ankle guy misses two weeks, bruised hip he misses two weeks. This was a lot of things we went through. And Applying the biggest, because he only missed the three weeks, but he had missed three weeks before that where he just couldn't work on his shot and he really lost some confidence, I think, as much as anything.

So, we lost our defense and rebounding identity. I say well, why aren't we rebounding? Payne and Dawson are averaging almost 18 boards between them and they're missing eight and nine games or seven and eight games. That's pretty easy to figure it out.

I have been disappointed with the way we played in some games that I don't care who we had, I thought we should have played better. So, those are the things I'll take blame for and I thought we were a team that could make a deep run when the year started. We were ranked that way, we played that way. I thought we could make a deep run when we were halfway through and we had three starters out. I thought we could make a deep run at the end of the year when we were starting to get them back. I was hoping we wouldn't run out of time.

The Big-10 tournament, and I don't want to put too much into it, because who says Michigan played well? Or who says Wisconsin played well? Or Northwestern? But, I thought that we got some of our identity back. And that's what you need if you're going to play and make a run in any kind of

tournament. We were consistent defensively, we were consistent rebounding the ball, we have actually shot the ball very well, and so what have I learned? I've learned a lot.

You're right about the excuses, that was the hardest part of my year every time I met with our media, trying to figure out what's an excuse, what's a reality. And that's the part that I wouldn't want to go through again, because it was hard.

Q. What it seemed to do for you now is give you a number four seed as opposed to maybe what you were going to probably be before that. But, now you guys are the experts' choice to maybe win it all. Do you like that position and how do you deal with that with the kids?

COACH TOM IZZO: I'm trying to get ahold of the President right now and see if he has any pull with the officials, to be honest with you, since he picked us that high.

You know what? I like it. I like it. I look at it, at some of the programs that they have done with consistency. Duke and Kansas, what have they done to stay so consistent for so many years? Carolina, you know. And, they have had to deal with pressure and they have had to handle it. I think that's part of our growing process, we have to learn how to handle that. And we have had it before.

The problem is, two weeks ago, around our place, people were sticking a fork in just trying to figure out which area to stick it in. And then two weeks later -- but isn't that the way the world is now? What did you do for me today? It's so much more instant gratification and I told our players, this will be a good learning curve for them to figure out how to deal with the things they're going to have to deal with their whole life. I think it's a privilege, I really do.

I hope we can live up to it, I'm most worried about us, though. I did have a meeting about it, I was a little worried on how do your kids handle getting barbed on the Internet and on the social media two weeks ago and then some of the top people in sports and then the No. 1 guy in the world in the United States is picking you. I said, man, that is awesome. And I think that that's what we're going to do. We're going to embrace it and just see if we can do our job without getting too full of ourselves, because we are a four seed. We have lost a lot of games, seven or eight games. We have been down in the bottom before and we have been up on top before. Early in the year we

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were a lot of people's picks especially after we beat Kentucky. So, that's the way I've tried to handle it.

Q. Since you mentioned the officials, I'll go ahead and ask, what concerns do you have heading into this tournament just given the rules emphasis this year and the way things, the uncertainty early on? Do you worry that maybe it goes back to that maybe that uncertainty even more?

COACH TOM IZZO: You guys are making me go against my Lent. You guys think that's not true, it is true.

Every year that I've been in the tournament different things happen. Usually it goes back to more physical brand of ball, and I just think there's more unknowns this year. Because to me it's been a lot less physical outside, a lot more physical inside, but my biggest worry is that we make -- I don't have any problem with the decision that they made, but should there be six fouls? Should there be -- I mean you always have to worry about your best players being on the bench much. And that can change a game faster than three point shooting, bad defense, anything else.

So, my concerns would be trying to figure out how the game is going to be called and adjust to it without making my players fretting over it, if that makes any sense. And this is the first year of the absolutes that the way we have done it, and it's going to be interesting to see how it goes.

Q. Jarvis Threatt missed eight games late in the season for Delaware, so I'm sure you had to be careful which video tapes you watched and which ones you didn't so you could see him. If you saw him, what were your impressions of what he brought to the floor and what you guys have to be wary of tomorrow?

COACH TOM IZZO: Phenomenal athlete that is as good with the ball and getting into the paint as anybody we have played against. There's a kid at Minnesota that's really good, but this kid is bigger, even more athletic. How did he get to the free throw line the number of times those two guards do? I mean like 16 between them. That's unbelievable. So, those are my concerns. Transition defense, getting into the paint, where it's not like he makes as much happen on kick outs like some point guards do, he makes it happen by

getting fouled. And very, very, very good at it. So, that can change a game drastically. And that is my biggest concern.

Q. One of the strange things that came out of not having a rotation all year is you really didn't get a chance to have a true sixth man. Do you think that you talk about finding your identity a little bit over the weekend, do you think that Travis Trice kind of became that sixth man? Did that happen a little bit more last weekend?

COACH TOM IZZO: It did and that is why I still think we're a team that's in the process of, you know, we don't have a great rotation yet. That's maybe the last thing that needs to come for this team, to get back to where we were.

And Travis Trice, we have always had from the Morris Peterson days on, a very good sixth man, someone you could rely on. Travis is becoming that. But it's hard when players, at least in our system, they always new when they were coming out, when they were going in, at least the first half. It was pretty much like the NBA where it was slotted and guys knew and now it's been by foul trouble or guys fatigue. It's been by necessity, not by plan, and that's not as good for us, the way I've done it, so getting that back and we started to get it back a little bit this past weekend. I think it's just another step we have to take to getting back to where we were the first month of the season.

Q. Can you quickly comment on the job Tim Miles has done this year at Nebraska?

COACH TOM IZZO: I love Tim. He's a -- I think that the one thing I will say about our entire league, when I came in, it was Bobby Knight and Gene Keady and Tom Davis and Lou Henson and Clem Haskins and I used to go to the meetings and hide in the corner, because it was pretty wild in those meetings. And then we got where God, it seemed like every program guy would be here, three, four years and he was out. And it's been weird. But right now, I think we have some of the best collection of coaches that we have had in a conference since the Bob and Gene days and Clem days. Those were special days. I just hope to stay in a game, it was so difficult back then. Tim is one of the new guys on the block and Pat has done a great job at Penn State. Somebody's got to lose, it doesn't mean they're not doing a hell of a job. And Pitino know has done a good job at Minnesota. I think Chris Collins as gone a great job. So, we got some good new guys. But, when I

look at Tim, he's had successes as a head coach, he's been a Division III, a Division-II guy, a lot like myself, and so I get caught pulling for him even more because he's, to me, a pretty humble guy that just gets the job done. He's got a great perspective and he does it the right way. So, I'm happy they made it and I think there will be a lot of great things that has been. Nebraska has a lot of great fans and a new arena, so now the pressure will be on him a little bit, he'll see what it's like.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you.

COACH TOM IZZO: Thank you.

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