

March 22, 2014



Michigan State - 80
Harvard - 73

An interview with:



THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

COACH TOM IZZO: I thought it was a heck of a game and there's enough adversity in it, we played so well early, one turnover the first half is a record for us. I thought our break was so good and Gary and Zel were hitting Branden on that break and they both had four assists the first half. We were running well and playing real well. I think you got to give Harvard a lot of credit. I kept telling my guys two things, and my staff, when we're up 12, 13, to start a second half it seemed like we were up 16, 18 and I said every time I sit down I said we're only up 12. And they said yeah and I told these guys, they're going to keep hanging around.

So, they're very well coached, they did a great job, but the difference in the game in the second half, we got sloppy. We turned it over 10 times in the second half and they scored I think on six of them.

A couple break aways and that, they deserve credit for it, we deserve blame for it. If we can learn from it, I think it's going to help this team and yet, we had a couple guys with incredible performances. Branden having a career high after

AP had one the other day, and Gary had a couple of big plays when we really needed buckets.

THE MODERATOR: Take questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Coach said that if you guys can learn from this, it would be a really good thing for you guys down the road, so what exactly for each of you can you learn from this game, from this experience?

GARY HARRIS: We have to know the time, the score and time of the game. We have to be smart when we have a lead. That's the time where we have to bear down and defense, just be more cognizant of what we're doing on offense and taking better shots so we don't give them time for them to come back and take a lead like they did today.

BRANDEN DAWSON: Honestly, I think we kind of dug ourselves a hole tonight and we got comfortable with our lead. So from this game I think we -- so should have to know to keep playing solid and don't get comfortable with a big lead.

ADREIAN PAYNE: They basically said it all. So there's really not too much to say.

Q. Gary, talk about the clutch gene tonight it looked like Harvard was on a roll and you stepped up and made some big plays?

GARY HARRIS: I was able to -- my teammates set a great screen for me. I was able to get open and knock down a three. So I was able to get the ball in spots, my teammates found me and I was thankfully able to knock down some shots.

Q. For each of you, given how easy it looked for you guys in the first half, how surprised were you when they came back? And it seemed like there was one moment in particular after a timeout in the second half where they kind of just upped the intensity way higher than it was in the past.

ADREIAN PAYNE: We knew that they

were going to go on a run. Coach kept talking to us and telling us that they have been through this before and they fought through it and won the game. So, we knew that we just had to continue to stay together and just go out and play hard and try to get stops on defense. And that's the main thing, is trying to play good defense, because in the tournament it's always you got great players that can step up and make shots, you just need it play defense.

BRANDEN DAWSON: I think those guys are definitely a disciplined team, like Adreian Payne say, coach kept telling us that those guys been in that position plenty of times and they had veteran guys that have been through situations a lot of times. So, I think that they just kept fighting and never gave up.

GARY HARRIS: They're a very good team that's well coached. They stayed poised and we knew they were going to make a run, because they're here for a reason. They made that run, but we stuck together as a team and we were able to fight through it.

Q. Gary, did you have any doubt what you your guys response would be after they took the lead?

GARY HARRIS: I didn't have any doubt at all. I could just tell by everybody's body language that we were sticking together, we weren't arguing, we knew that we were going to find a way to get it done.

Q. Gary, you mentioned a little bit about the shots you made late. Also, I think one coming out of a timeout as a slice cut and a down screen and it went right to you, if I'm not mistaken, during a timeout. What was it like knowing that a big play was going to be coming to you and then delivering on that one?

GARY HARRIS: That's the play we love, that play from the sideline out of bound, because there's many options. I was one of many options. I just happened to be the option that was open and I was able to knock down a shot.

Q. Branden, I think down, they posted you up against number 0 late for a key basket also. What was it like having the offense come to you in that situation and execute?

COACH TOM IZZO: Obviously, it all starts with my teammates and I think Gary Harris and Denzel and all the rest of those guys, they did a great job. And Adreian Payne and I, we got the

ball out and we got key points in transition. When they got the ball to me in the post, coach just kept telling me to attack, attack, and that's what I did.

Q. Branden, the Harvard players gave you guys a big compliment by saying the mark of a good team is to get battled back on to the ropes and take a punch and then come back off it. What do you guys think this will do for you going forward to respond the way you did?

BRANDEN DAWSON: Honestly, I think it was a huge test for us and it all falls back from the Michigan game at home and away, and Illinois game, when I think, as a team, we got down as a team and we started blaming each other and started pointing fingers. So, I think, honestly, this is definitely a big test for us because we stayed poised, we just kept fighting as a team. So, I think that we were happy to get better at our mistakes and just keep playing hard.

Q. Adreian, when the guy hit the three from the corner to put Harvard ahead, what was going through your mind at that point when Harvard had reclaimed the lead?

ADREIAN PAYNE: We got to stay together as a team. They were here for a reason and we just knew that we had to stay together as a team and just to fight. And defense was the main thing that we needed to get stops.

Q. Follow-up with Gary, you guys have obviously won a lot of ball games this year, but we haven't really seen you blow anybody out. Talk about needing maybe to get that next level as far as being able to put teams away in games like this.

GARY HARRIS: It's just the way it goes. At this point in the season we're not worried about blowing anybody out. It's survive and advance. And that's what we did this weekend. We survived and we're advancing. So, at this time of the season it's just, it's all about winning no matter how we do it, just get the win.

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

Q. Talk about the response when it was 62-60. Were you eager to see what they would do at that moment? Were you curious to see how -- because you guys dominated the last

nine days, haven't really been in this kind of mental fortitude situation?

COACH TOM IZZO: Well, it was interesting. When you watch games in this tournament, you see some teams have big leads and blow them, and you see a team get a four point play with three seconds left. I mean this is the NCAA tournament. This is what it's all about.

As I said, I thought we were playing really well and we were only up 10 or 12. You look down the other end, and I got a good friend that's down there and I just, as I said, I kept saying we're going to -- they're going to come back. You better realize that.

When they went up or when we were down, when they caught up, I was disappointed because we weren't executing as well as we needed to execute. A couple big play, momentum shifts. I thought Adreian had a couple shots down there that normally go in, didn't. I thought we got a little complacent. I said the greatest thing that happened for me is we did enough bad things, and give Harvard some credit for that, mostly the 10 turnovers in the second half. But, we found a way to bounce back and win, and so it's always a better learning experience when you win and do some things that will maybe get their attention now in the film session tomorrow night or whenever we start doing it.

Q. Gary's obviously had a very good year, but tonight was a night where we really saw the clutch team. We hadn't really seen him take over a game how important was that?

COACH TOM IZZO: I think it was really important. I've been saying that. He's almost too unselfish at times, because it was funny because Denzel said, coach we got to go to him, in one of the timeouts. And I said, yeah, I could just see it in his eyes. And it sounds crazy.

But I told him many times, you got to be more aggressive, I thought he made some key plays, the block charge one where he made the basket. That was a charge, but it was a close play. He needed to do some things. But, hitting those couple of big shots late, we went right to him and our guys executed -- we weren't executing as sharp the second half. Partially it was Harvard.

I really like his team. In fact, to be very blunt and honest, I thought the first half they had some shots that I've seen them make that they didn't make. A couple of open, open ones. And that would have changed the whole dynamics of that game, early.

They played really well, I thought, but didn't shoot as well. I'm anxious in the next couple of days to talk to Tom and see what he thought. I do think they missed some shots that I've seen them make in a lot of the film I've watched.

Q. A few of your guys were in foul trouble late down the stretch. What were you telling them and how did they kind of overcome the adversity to kind of pull it out at the end?

COACH TOM IZZO: Yeah, there's a negative right now that I'm concerned with, we're in foul trouble all the time. I question some of it. I have all year. But, I also appreciate that we're just doing some things that aren't as disciplined as they need to be done.

When we went through all those injuries, we were moving so many people around, nobody has a real comfort level with each other and every game we play it gets a little better.

So, that's something we're going to have to shore up, because when you put Keith back, and we had some guys out in that first half, and that's just hard. And we're figuring out ways to do it. But, I would like us to get a little smarter, when you got to foul you can't be reaching, just put your arms up. If they score, they score. Couple guys like Adreian doesn't understand, Gary didn't understand last week, that he's more valuable than the two points they make. And that's been something we haven't done a great job of.

Q. Trying to decide which question to ask here. I'll ask this one, the obligatory Sweet 16 question. I think your 12th Sweet 16 in 17 years. The first one was against an Ivy League team, this one Ivy League Team, not much easier, but is it still sweet? Are you enjoying this, Sweet 16 still sweet?

COACH TOM IZZO: That's right. The first one was Princeton. You know, this one was a good win because of what we have been through and the fact that I, I mean who knows, I like Cincinnati, but I told my guys I thought Stanford would beat them. I just, I like his team. And I think he's got a really good team. And we had to play pretty good to beat a really good team. Even though we made some mistakes.

So I don't know, I never keep track. Those kind of things are for retirement and I don't plan on doing that right now, or in the near future.

So, some day I'll have a grandson sitting

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on my lap and I'll say hey, your old grandpa went to 12 Sweet 16s in 17 years and he'll say, who gives a damn and I'll probably say, you're right, and we'll move on, you know.

Q. You see teams like Florida and Mercer and all these upsets, even Harvard against Cincinnati, how important is it to have Senior leaders that have been through this before?

COACH TOM IZZO: That's what I said, the guy that won't get enough credit for us this weekend will be Applin. Because he got in a lot of foul trouble. But, the other day he played great and didn't hardly score five points. But defensively, running our team, fast breaking, pushing the ball, he was kind of an unsung hero this week. Because he didn't have the stats -- even had some turnovers tonight -- but he does some things well, and I think he's the Senior.

Tonight AP struggled, he really did. And it was a good lesson. I said, if you think that guy, that I know well on the other team, is not going to be sitting up nights figuring out how to make it harder on you, when you scored 41 or 42 points two nights ago, I said, this is not going to be easy. And it was very, very difficult. They did a good job, I love what they did with -- some guys on our staff said they will probably double. I said, no, they won't change what they do, they will just do it better and that's exactly what he did. And hats off to them.

Q. You had a moment with Chambers in the handshake line. What did you say to him?

COACH TOM IZZO: Well he's from Minnesota which is, when you're in Harvard, Minnesota is more in our neck of the woods. And we recruited a couple kids from his AAU team, know his AAU coach really well and he's a tough kid. And I just told him I enjoyed watching him on film, I enjoyed playing against him, I'm glad I don't have to any more. Because he too missed some shots that I think he's made, but he's tough. He runs their team, he's going to be a really good player for them as time goes on.

Q. Apologize, but can you just take us through the late huddle, some of the guys in the locker room were saying like let's calm it down and did you like what you saw? Did you see composure there?

COACH TOM IZZO: I did. I did. I think it's always hard because Adreian is Adreian. And he's the one that I think gets the most frustrated, but Gary and Zel and Travis, B.J. did a great job in there. Great job.

We got some things out of those huddles. We did score some baskets out of timeouts. And that's what we were so good at in the years past. And we had a couple big plays out of there and that was good, but it was disappointing too because we played sloppy for awhile. It was just turnover after turnover there for that stretch. And that too was disappointing.

But I think there is some good to having a team go through that, a team as good as Harvard come back, and he's got to feel good about his team too, because those guys could have been down and out. We were playing pretty well in that one stretch and should have been up more than we were. Every time they would hit a big three, they would get a steal, they would hit the corner, they did some really good things.

When you ask the question, or I think Mike asked the question to Gary about blowing somebody out. At this point in time with the parity there is now, if I could take four or five or six one point wins and keep moving on, I would take those any day of the week. It's just, there's too many good teams and as I said about Harvard, that's not a 12 seed. It's not. It just isn't. They play in a league where the RPI isn't as high, and so the way the system works they don't get seeded as high. But if you want to talk to coaches, nobody would have seeded Harvard as a 12 seed. They are, they're good. They're legit. And as I said, I thought they missed some shots early that I seen them hit. So it was a good win for us, trust me.

Q. Branden hurt his hand late? Have you been able to check on that? Is he all right?

COACH TOM IZZO: I think he wanted some sympathy, personally, and he hasn't been on the floor diving on the floor for six months. So you think he just wanted to enjoy the moment and he laid there a little bit and he you didn't see me running out there. Because if it was broke I would have said you're still playing, I'm tired of these injuries.

I don't think he hurt it at all. I think he just hit it and it was sore. But it wasn't anything to deal with the break or anything. So, no, he's good. You can't score that many points and get hurt even if

you wanted to. So he's fine.

Q. I apologize if this has already been asked. So late for you guys to finally all be healthy. Do you feel like you're still, are they still kind of figuring out how to still be object the same page consistently?

COACH TOM IZZO: Oh, yeah. I told our media, we're not going to get back to maybe where we could have been. It's, can we get back to a level -- I mean you saw it tonight, there's some times where the consistency or we didn't have a feel for one another, we didn't do a good job, when Tommy went small, we didn't do as good a job handling that, we just haven't been in those situations with certain lineups in the game.

So it's going to be a good learning thing, I think we're going to be able to get a lot of coaching points in for the next two days as we start to work on our next opponent and it will be really good when you can do it at this time of year it will actually be kind of fun. Usually this time of year you're just massaging everybody. We're still working. We still got a lot of work to do to kind of get us back to where we were three months ago.

Q. Completely different topic. Lacey's relationship with AP has gotten a lot of press, but she's important to your whole team. We see stories like this a lot, why do you think she has kind of stuck around?

COACH TOM IZZO: AP. It's solely AP. I mean, it has gotten a lot of national publicity. And I think you're right, sometimes you see these kind of stories and sometimes the stories are for the publicity. There's so many things that kid does with her that never meets any media and never meets anybody. So many nights he goes over to her house when she's sick or is at the hospital. I've spent a few with him there. I will never ever be prouder of a guy than I will be of Adreian Payne for a lot of reasons. The academic success he's had, coming from the position he was in. But what he's done, I think that's why we're on the planet, to make other people's lives better. And he's made this girl's life better. He's included her in every major thing, because we don't know how much longer she has. We're hoping, but we don't know.

And it hasn't been great the last six months. And he's just made it better for her. And our team has embraced it too and their family has embraced our team. But it's hung on because of Adreian Payne solely. Solely.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you.

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COACH TOM IZZO: Thank you.
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