Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 12, 2026

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

UCLA Bruins

Mike Cronin

Donovan Dent

Tyler Bilodeau

Postgame Press Conference

UCLA - 72, Rutgers - 59

MIKE CRONIN: They told me Donny just hit the first triple double in Big Ten Tournament history, so congratulations, my man. Congratulations to Coach Pikiell, I thought his kids, to have a whole new team and have the youngest team in high major basketball, they played hard all year. He's a great, great coach. Just needs more support. Hopefully he'll get it.

Onward for us. We already know who we play tomorrow night, and I'm already thinking about that. Happy to get the win.

Q. Donovan, were you aware that you were approaching that, you grabbed that rebound and were back on the attack. Did you know that you were kind of on the brink of history, and what did it feel like to make history tonight?

DONOVAN DENT: I didn't know until the under four media timeout, and one of my teammates was like you've got to get one more rebound. I was hunting for it there at the end for sure.

MIKE CRONIN: Now I'm going to lie to him for sure so he'll keep rebounding. I'm going to tell him you need two for a triple double, and he'll keep rebounding.

DONOVAN DENT: I was crashing for sure at the end, and it felt good to finally get it.

Q. Donovan, what was clicking for you on all cylinders that allowed you to contribute effectively in all aspects of the game?

DONOVAN DENT: When you have so many weapons on your offense, the game comes smoothly. My shots get open because I have such good teammates around me that they don't want to leave. They just make the game a lot easier for me, and it's a blessing.

Q. I want to ask Donovan about your rebounds. You had four offensive boards. Was that a change in philosophy, in crashing the boards, or was that just something, a part of your game you want to explore?

DONOVAN DENT: At halftime Coach was telling us we need more second chances because we were just getting one shots, and it's hard to win games like that. Early in the second half I was just crashing. I was either in the corner, and Trent was up top so he would get back. And we were just crashing -- Trent had a good offensive rebound as well. He got free throws out of it. We just flipped our mindset in the second half crashing with the offensive rebounds.

Q. You had so many memorable plays. Two of them for me was one you saved a loose ball over your shoulder in the first half. Second half you were falling out of bounds, got an offensive rebound and got it to Eric for a layup. Did you have a favorite play out there tonight?

DONOVAN DENT: Definitely the one where Book blocked it, and I threw it over my head. I don't know how it got to someone, but it did. We were just hustling, we changed our mindset on defense, so I'm just hustling for loose balls.

Q. Donovan, how meaningful for you is it to have the first triple double in Big Ten history?

DONOVAN DENT: It's amazing. I didn't know until they told me on the broadcast. That's a great feeling.

Q. Tyler, obviously the offense didn't have it at certain times tonight. What does it say about this team that you guys are still able to keep in this game when you maybe didn't have it shooting-wise?

TYLER BILODEAU: Offense missing shots and that type of stuff is going to happen. We've got to play defense, and we've got to rebound. Yeah, stay together and try to get what we want on offense. Eventually shots are going to fall for us.

Q. You guys feel like you have unlocked something on the defensive end as a team? If so, what is it?

TYLER BILODEAU: I mean, for sure. When we're all playing for each other, playing hard, Coach Cronin style defense, that's when we're successful. We've got to keep that up.

DONOVAN DENT: It's just fun. Like we weren't hitting shots. We were in the huddle having great energy because we were playing so good on defense and just playing hard. It's a better game for us. When shots aren't falling, it's fine, just pick it up on the defensive side. I think we're doing a great job of that right now.

Q. Tyler, what's your favorite part about playing with Donovan? He obviously can impact a game so many ways.

TYLER BILODEAU: Oh, man, so many things. Just his ability to break down defense. It's so fun to watch. It makes my job pretty easy when he gets me some wide open shots. It's just fun to see him slither around, get open, get in the paint, make great passes. Also, he's a great teammate. Shout out to Donny.

MIKE CRONIN: Tyler's a politician. He likes the fact that Donny gets him shots. So do I. That's why I like him.

Q. Coach, I have this written down. I don't remember exactly what it is. 65 assists, 4 turnovers in the last six games. What's been unlocked with Donovan here?

MIKE CRONIN: It was just I've tried to hold him to a higher standard, which is what I do with all of my guys. Try to prepare them to be grown men. We try to prepare to play the best team on our schedule. That's what you've got to try to demand at all times.

Just trying to raise his level as a man and as a player. So I said this, Oscar Robertson said this years ago, you can't -- you're not different on and off the floor, and he was too careless with the ball at New Mexico. Super talented obviously. But his turnovers -- nobody with his talent should turn the ball over, period. Way too talented.

So if he can be a more responsible person, he'll be a more responsible player. He'll be way more successful in playing professional basketball and in his life as well. I think that it's congruent.

Q. Coach, when you guys only shoot 38 percent, how valuable is it to have a guy like Donny, 12 points, the rebounds, the assists. What does it do for you when you're struggling to shoot the ball?

MIKE CRONIN: He can create offense for your team. I don't think I'd call -- first of all, I give Coach Pikiell credit. Rutgers is always hard to play against since he's been their coach. They're physical. They've got fast guys. They're young, but they're strong and they're fast, and they're extremely well coached.

That said, I don't think I'd call it a good game offensively tonight, but I've been trying to tell these guys, you can't -- if you have to score 80 to win, you're going to be going home early. That's anybody in the tournament, this tournament and the next tournament.

We didn't shoot it well tonight. There was a lot of wide open shots. You thought we were going to blow it open late in the first half because you've watched us play and those guys knock those shots in, for people that usually watch us. Hopefully we saved some of them for tomorrow.

Yeah, it's just you've got to be able to take defense on the road. Your jump shot doesn't always go on the road with you.

Q. Building off of that question, this is the worst you guys have shot in a win this season. How are you able to get it done even though the offense didn't?

MIKE CRONIN: They scored 59 points. Bob Huggins 101. You got to be able to win when you don't make shots. He got in the Hall of Fame that way. He taught me that.

I think one time when I was on the bench with him, we won nine games in a row shooting under 40 percent, like the late '90s at Cincinnati. You've got to be able to win when you don't make shots. If not, you're an average team because you're not making them every game.

I want to give Rutgers some credit now for our offense.

Q. What's gone into the improved defense?

MIKE CRONIN: Just trying to do everything -- I told you at one press conference I'm constantly pushing, trying to push buttons. I've got a lot of buttons to push before 8:00 tomorrow night because they took us to the wood shed last time we played.

I think our bench has helped. Guys know that, if you don't

defend, you're coming out. I think that's reality. Just trying to get guys to realize that it's contagious both ways. It's not just defense, it's rebounding. We're standing watching the whole first half, and our guards changed the game with their offensive rebounding.

So I told them at halftime we need to be like Illinois. You know we're going to shoot. We can shoot. We spread the floor. When the guy's wide open, you should already be on the run for the rebound. Why are you standing there? What are you doing?

I thought Donny and Trent really changed the game. We had five offensive rebounds to go from up 6 to up 15 in that stretch. I don't know for sure, but I think most of them were the guards.

Q. You've been around the game a long time. You're at an iconic institution, UCLA. What's it like for you? You've got these young men that are in your program on the West Coast, a national name. What's it like to have UCLA winning and what that does for your fan base and alumni all throughout the Midwest?

MIKE CRONIN: You mean us to be in the Big Ten now? One thing we tell people with the recruiting piece, the travel is obviously harder, but your brand is going to be more Nationwide, right? More people see us now because in the old days you played Thursday, Saturday. They could only put one game on ESPN or Fox or whatever. Nobody had the Pac-12 network anyway. It was the worst run thing in history. So it was hard to see us nationally, and you're sleeping.

Being in the Big Ten has helped our national exposure, and that helps our player. I think our university speaks for itself. It's worldwide. It's not just national, it's worldwide. So for me, just being a part of our university, we're a small part of it. We're a great marketing part, and I think the university grew under Coach Wooden and surpassed a lot of the other UC schools in our system, and if you were to say -- there's ten of us. The difference in our schools is athletics. That's what separates UCLA, and it's helped propel the rest of the university to being world class and ranked Number 1 many years in a row as a public institution.

But being in the Big Ten helps with that. Again, you're playing on six nights a week there's Big Ten games. So we just get way more exposure. Just a lot more plane rides, my friend, and cold weather, which I'm not for. It was 90 degrees at my house today.

Q. Rutgers averages 71 points per game. You held them to 59 tonight. What stuck out to you that you guys did defensively?

MIKE CRONIN: We tried -- look, I thought in all fairness Tariq Francis in the first half missed some open looks. I told our guys in the first couple timeouts we're getting lucky. He was 0 for 5, and I think he had four great looks. Things we're not going to get away with tomorrow.

So the film will tell me if I'm right on that. Now, I thought early in the second half we were playing much better half-court defense, but we lost 13 a few times. Zrno, I believe you say his name. So he kept them in it.

Scouting report and just commitment. We'll find out tomorrow how good our defense is, and if we win, we'll find out more Saturday. So we'll see.

Q. You always talk about how relentless you are with Donny in terms of him facilitating the ball.

MIKE CRONIN: Taking care of the ball.

Q. Taking care of the ball. It's obvious the numbers, but how have you seen Donny kind of rise to the challenge and accept that coaching approach to him?

MIKE CRONIN: I think once he realized that it was a fight he wasn't going to win -- which I told him when I recruited him. There's only one person in charge. It's not a democracy, and you're going to take care of the ball, and you're talented enough.

But changing habits is -- but I give him all the credit. He signed on for it. I don't think he understood what it was going to entail, but he's gotten so much better along the way. You guys are talking about that, and his numbers are unbelievable, but I need him to show leadership and defense, back to defense.

Like we got Eric, Trent, Tyler, Donny, Skyy Clark is always after it, and I challenged Xavier Booker to block two shots tonight. You can't just play defense because I'm yelling at you. You guys want to win or you don't. You're tough enough to do hard things or we're going home. So it's been Donny's defense as well.

Like I said, if you dove on a floor, it might send a helluva message to your teammates -- for a ball -- because it might send the other message if you don't. He's come a long way, folks, so we'll see. Big game tomorrow.

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THE MODERATOR: We're now joined by Rutgers head Coach Steve Pikiell and student-athlete Jamichael Davis.

STEVE PIKIELL: I always appreciate the Big Ten tournament and how they run this first class. They do a great job. I always love the environment. This is one of my favorite parts of the year.

Just disappointed can't keep playing. I think this team has just gotten better and better over the last month. I wish we had another month with this group. Unfortunately, we don't.

I just brought my captain up here today, and Emmanuel's last game, and he's really -- first of all, he's getting his Masters degree, proud of him. Came in with academics and a bad knee and just kept getting better. Really proud of him. He took some grief every now and then. He came in as Cliff's backup, and he just kept getting better and better. I really appreciate him.

He became an everyday work guy and a great student, a great kid, never an ounce of trouble, never missed a day of practice, never late for anything. So really, really proud. He became an every single day you could count on him guy. We're going to miss him. We're going to miss him. He led us in rebounding, blocked shots.

He'll continue playing. A lot of agents have been calling. He'll continue playing his basketball career, and I think his best days are ahead of him. He's only been playing for a few years. So I want to thank him.

Rutgers Nation that came out, the people are awesome. The cheerleaders, and the band is always great, my favorite people. We'll miss the seniors there too and all the great things they do for us and make our environment at home one of the greatest home court environments going.

Give UCLA a lot of credit. Mick is one of the great coaches. He really is. Last time we gave up 98 points to him. We tweaked a few things today, not a lot of time to prepare. They just had too much fire power. Their point guard really good, obviously elite. Bilodeau, elite. We played hard. Proud of our guys for the fight but couldn't get it done.

Q. Jamichael, back-and-forth start to the game. You guys score the first 4, they score 11, you guys score 8, they score 7. What do you think you think allowed you guys to go back and forth at the start of the game?

JAMICHAEL DAVIS: Execution on both ends, but we can't go back and forth, you know. We've got to get stops, throw them out of their rhythm, and try to be as physical as we can.

Q. As the captain and one of the veterans on this team, what have you seen from this full season of the freshman nucleus here?

JAMICHAEL DAVIS: A lot of growth, their hard work, them just wanting to get better and just learn. They're young. They've still got a lot of time. I'm very proud of them.

Q. What does being the captain this year meant to you?

JAMICHAEL DAVIS: It meant a lot. Coach wanted to challenge me with that, and I was willing to step up. I'm excited and happy for the season we had. Proud of our guys and the way we fought, the way we've gotten better throughout these months, and I couldn't be more proud of them.

Q. Of course you guys had a phenomenal game yesterday, you came out today. What do you most attribute to where you guys fell flat?

JAMICHAEL DAVIS: Like they got a little momentum. I

don't think we did a good job of throwing them off their rhythm. They were physical with us. They were hitting shots. We didn't really make it tough for them.

But I'm proud of the guys. We fought. I think Lino, he had great minutes. I think everybody who checked in gave us good minutes. I'm proud of them. So proud of E, senior, last go round. I'm just proud of him.

Q. Coach, Lino as a freshman led Rutgers with 17 points tonight. What stood out to you in his performance, and what excites you the most about his growth and future?

STEVE PIKIELL: What I'm most excited about is his progress. From the start of the year till the end, I mean, he learned how to practice hard, became a film guy. He understood what practice meant. He wasn't a great practice player early on, didn't realize how that carried over to the games.

I think J-Mike's been a really good mentor to him too, kind of taught him to you to become an everyday guy, getting to the training room early, just the things you need to do to play college basketball in the Big Ten.

You just saw his confidence soar early in the year he couldn't finish at the rim and really struggled from 3-point land. He just continued to grow, and he put the work in. It's a hard journey for freshmen. It's the oldest time in college basketball too. Guys are 24, 25 years old, and he's 18 years old. You've got to learn through the obstacles the season brings.

He really did an unbelievable job. Like I said, I wish we had another month because it was like having a new player at the end. Looking forward to him improving. He's got to continue to get stronger and just get better. He proved that he could be a really good player in this league.

Q. Steve, obviously you want to keep as many of these guys developed as possible. What's going to be the pitch for them this off-season when you are recruiting for your roster?

STEVE PIKIELL: We have a lot of great things at Rutgers. I don't know if it's the -- Keli is here, and she's done an unbelievable job of helping us. I think these guys like Rutgers. I'm excited about our new president. I'm excited about our new athletic director. I'm excited that I have Rob Sullivan, a GM that I've never had. I'm excited about all the people that we've hired and how we've moved in that direction that is college basketball right now and college athletics.

Keli got me excited about the future, and these young guys too are part of this. They have a lot of choices, and that's what happens in today's day and age. We'll just see who wants to be a part of Rutgers basketball. It's a really good brand. Sold out every game. It's a great fan base and great league and great opportunities for them, and it's a great education. Top 15 public university in the country. It's an excellent academic school. My daughter goes there, three graduates in my own family. I can attest to that. It's a great place.

There's a lot to sell. We've developed guys. We've got guys in the pros. I was watching Ron Harper play his brother the other day, one of the awesome days I had. Ace Bailey scored a bunch of points. I was watching Cam Spencer do his thing too. It's been really exciting. That was never the case at Rutgers. We've got a lot to sell. Looking forward to sitting down with these guys and seeing where they're at.

Q. You mentioned the last month of the season. That must be a lot of improvement for you guys, especially the freshmen. How important is it to keep the freshmen nucleus that you guys have so they can continue to grow and develop over the last month.

STEVE PIKIELL: It's important to add some pieces too and important to keep the guys. I want guys that want to be at Rutgers too. That's a big part of this too. It's got to be a two way street, not a one way street. We'll see. I'm excited about the future and excited about the opportunities that we have to make our program better.

Q. As much as this sport has turned into almost a professional product, also with the travel, you kind of almost have to treat it that way as much as you guys are going on the road, especially having a younger team like you do. How did you see them grow with kind of a professional mindset taking it in every aspect? Whether it's towards academics, towards travel, it's becoming a full-fledged, almost a professional mindset in basketball, and how much did they grow in that area this year?

STEVE PIKIELL: That's really the fun part too of coaching. It's still -- you're going to say it's professional, but they're 19-year-old kids, 18-year-old kids that have issues and have problems. As a coach, you want to see them grow and see them get better and enjoy their time too in college.

You see it a lot. I had seven freshmen this year, a couple of them from overseas too. You've really got to help them with mentorship through that. They're not adults yet, and they don't have experience playing in the Big Ten and traveling and doing all those things.

I will tell you, this group, they became pros in how to prepare. They take care of business academically, they get in the training room early. They really grew in that area. Proud of them. They watch film. When they first started, they didn't realize the importance of it. Still enjoy that journey with them too.

Even my sophomore class, and J-Mike up here today, he's going to graduate, one of the first ones in his family to get a degree. That means a lot to me. I know it means a lot to our president too. Those things are still important. They get overlooked throughout all of this. Every one of my guys is graduating. E's getting a Masters degree. I still enjoy that part of it too.

I think that's an important part. I don't want to miss out on that. I think playing basketball is awesome and the experiences that they have here are awesome, but there's some great experiences here too at Rutgers. Our freshman class started to understand that.

Q. Coach, you have a history of training up these young guys, getting them developed. You talk about how old college basketball is now. With the new NIL initiatives, does that change your approach to roster construction this off-season?

STEVE PIKIELL: It's a different world. Yeah, I'd like to get older, that's for sure. That means keeping some of our older guys too. The portal is old. That's what it is. Usually kids are experienced and have played a little bit and stuff.

There's a lot of fun opportunities that are going to come up. We're going to get kids that want to be at Rutgers and want to be a part of something that's going to be really good. I'm excited about those opportunities.

Yeah, to get older is probably a good thing.

Q. Tariq was held to six points tonight. What do you think UCLA did defensively to limit his offensive production?

STEVE PIKIELL: They did a great job. They sent bodies at him. They put size on him. I think, when you watch us play, especially the night before, then you see 29 points. Mick is a great coach, and he's a really good defensive coach. He was well prepared. He really was.

Riq's got to fight through that. That's what's going to happen to you. When you start scoring the points he scored this year, you're going to have days like that. He can do a lot more than score. That was my one conversation with him in the huddles. You can pass the ball. You can rebound. You're a facilitator. He got really a lot better as the year went on in facilitating and making assists and doing a really good job with that.

But UCLA did a really good job. They did it in the first game too.

Q. You spoke with some finality about Manny, this being his last game. He said he's going to apply for a waiver next year. Do you have any update on that?

STEVE PIKIELL: Everybody applies for waivers. I don't have anything on that.

Q. If he got one and got another year, would you want him to be back at Rutgers?

STEVE PIKIELL: There's so much out there, I have no idea. He has to go through all kinds of steps. He's not the only one in the country. There's going to be a million kids figuring that stuff out.

He had a great career for us. I appreciate him.

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