Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 15, 2026

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

Purdue Boilermakers

Matt Painter

Braden Smith

Oscar Cluff

Postgame Press Conference

Purdue - 80, Michigan - 72

THE MODERATOR: We are now joined by Purdue head coach Matt Painter along with student-athletes Braden Smith and Oscar Cluff.

MATT PAINTER: Obviously playing four games in four days is something we haven't done before. We've been aligned to do it before but not getting to this point.

I thought our guys had a great effort and concentration because that's hard. It's hard to get back up and play another game and do it four consecutive days. I thought we put ourselves in a good position. They scored, I think, like four to six points to finish the half while we were trying to juggle lineups with foul trouble. Really wanted to have an advantage there.

Kind of how you finish the first half and start the second half is such an important piece of the game. We did a good job starting the second half, a little bit of a roll of the dice with Oscar having three fouls and starting right there. He gets a quick foul there, it can change some things for our team. So you do that and he doesn't foul, you're a genius. You do that and he does foul, you're a dumb ass. So there's just nothing in between right there. That's kind of a hard call at that time.

He had some discipline and did a really good job for us. Then we just kind of tried to rotate that. We thought Jack Benter really spread the defense out for us. Oscar's ability to rebound. When we got a couple lineups there and we were able to get to some action where TK was one-on-one with his floater and his drives, I thought that gave us a lot of confidence.

Braden did a good job of manipulating the defense. We set good screens. We had good spacing. And I thought that gave us a lot of confidence in that stretch right there. Then we just kept the lead and kept building on the lead.

We're not here and celebrating this tournament championship if we didn't play better defense the last four days. We had some moments in the regular season where really good people beat us and like we played great offensively. We just had to be better on the defensive end. I thought in this tournament we were much better on the defensive end. That's something that hopefully can help us in the NCAA Tournament.

Q. Oscar, how did you manage to play those last 5:31 with four fouls? You're not somebody who's out on the perimeter the whole time. You're banging around in the paint.

OSCAR CLUFF: It was just like staying focused, making sure I got my hands out of there and wasn't doing anything stupid or silly that you could pick up a random foul. Just trying to stay as disciplined as I could for the last five minutes while playing physical.

Q. Braden, you're now one assist away from Bobby Hurley's record. What does that mark mean to you, and what does it mean to kind of be alongside somebody like him?

BRADEN SMITH: It's awesome. Obviously it would have been a little bit better to get it today, but at the end of the day, we won, and that's important to me. Obviously it goes a long way when you have a lot of good people that surround myself.

I thank all my teammates obviously throughout my four years who have helped me achieve that. It goes to them just as much as it goes to me.

Q. Braden, what is it about you and Trey that work so well on that pick-and-roll that you guys use so often at the beginning of the second half?

BRADEN SMITH: I think it started going in our junior year, that summer, maybe actually the summer before. We started working on it, and we just clicked. Obviously he trusts me to get it to him, and I trust him to catch it and then obviously go make a play or make passes or score out of it.

Obviously when you have a play, not necessarily a play but a short roll like that that we're able to get some mileage out of, it helps.

Q. Braden, you started 0-for-3 today. You've been struggling a little bit with your jumper. Then you make 6 of your last 9 shots in this game. Was there anything in particular that started going well for you, or just kind of water finding its level?

BRADEN SMITH: I think, when I ripped my jersey and switched to 41, that helped. Maybe wear 41 the next game. Maybe that will help a little bit. Been in the gym fixing it and trying to figure it out. Obviously shots don't fall, and I've got to figure out other ways to help these guys win. If shots aren't falling, we still got to win.

If I can't make a shot, my job is to get out there, play defense, hustle, and help guys out and get them in a successful position.

Q. Braden, can you tell us more about the circumstances that led to your jersey getting ripped and then switching to No. 41? How did it rip and take us through the sequence of changing jerseys.

BRADEN SMITH: I ripped it fully with both hands like Superman style. I was really frustrated. A lot of misses these past four games, and I was really frustrated because I put a lot of time and work in. When you don't see the result, it gets to you.

I figured I'd take it out on the jersey rather than take it out loud or to somebody else. That's kind of just what happens. Just frustration.

Q. For either of you guys, how does it feel coming in as the 7 seed and taking down the 1 seed?

BRADEN SMITH: Obviously for us, there's no surprise. We've been in positions where we've been Number 1 in this tournament and we've won it before and we've lost. I think for us it doesn't matter what number is in front of our name. We know what we're capable of because we have a lot of good pieces on our team.

Obviously you have an older core who has been in a lot of different games. Obviously like having an OC and Omer and those guys come in and help us, I think it doesn't really matter to us because we're still going to go out there and compete and win basketball games.

Q. Can you talk about how nice it is to have four, five people that really are playing right at the right part of the season really great basketball and making it really hard for you guys to be scouted?

MATT PAINTER: I think more than anything just being efficient on the offensive end and then doing our job defensively. Like when you play one of the best teams in the country and you only have two turnovers, that's a big statement. They're one of the best offensive teams in the country, but they're also one of the best defensive teams. That's what obviously the collection kind of amounts to.

So that's pretty impressive, especially from Braden's standpoint, to play that game and not turn the ball over, have 11 assists, and to keep putting the ball in positions to score. That's something I talk about a lot. People just think, hey, you're scoring or you're making or missing, but the ball has to get in position to score and then we've got to make a decision.

So when we get to that pocket pass, since you guys asked that question, now Trey Kaufman-Renn has to make that decision. There's not a lot of 6'9", 230 pounds guys that can make floaters from 12 feet. A lot of times guys will hold or cat and mouse that from the corner. Now he's got that drive, and he's physical enough to get to somebody and score, he can make that shot.

Just really impressive, but our defense has improved. It's not something where we have to be able to have presence on the ball and guard the basketball. It's like when we started in the first half, like the success they were having is when they broke us down and got into the paint. When they didn't do that, we had a lot more success.

So just impressed with our guys' improvement and just the discipline to be better defensively and believe in themselves and keep pushing because we really haven't shot in this tournament. We've played better. We've played stronger. We've been more physical. We've done really good things. We just haven't been lights out shooting from 3. I think it's something we can improve on and really help us in the NCAA Tournament.

Q. How close is this team over these last four days to what you thought you guys had at the beginning of the year?

MATT PAINTER: It's a great sign. There's a lot of teams -- and we've been one of those teams before that have just

played great and then all of a sudden get into tourney time and not play as well. It's a little bit of a mix, like you've got to keep working towards getting better.

So the fact that we've been able to put four games in four days, that's tough to do, especially when you go up against the talent and the size and the athleticism that Michigan has.

Four different games, I don't think we were at our best against UCLA. I thought we had some fatigue there, but I also thought UCLA was really, really tough. After playing Northwestern and playing Nebraska and then playing that game, to be able to respond like we did against those gladiators, that's impressive. My hat's off to our guys for being able to execute but also be physical and box out. Even though we didn't win the rebound war, when you only turn it over two times, you steal some possessions in that category.

Q. It's pretty well established that Michigan has one of the best, most physical front lines in the country. Trey and Oscar combined for 41 points and 60% shooting. How did they get that done? How easy was it to match Michigan's physicality?

MATT PAINTER: Some of it is decision making on our guards. Getting into them. I thought late Fletch had a couple of really nice plays on OC when he subbed back in. I thought that was a key stretch for us, just because Oscar was out and had fouls, but he was pretty fresh at that time to kind of have that energy.

Getting to their bodies was important. If you just let them, if you just go at them and try to shoot over them and there's no physicality with it, you're going to have blocks. You're just going to have it.

At our place, I just didn't think we were the more physical team; I thought Michigan was. Today I thought, especially on the interior, our guys were getting to their bodies. Trey did a good job of getting to their bodies, then going up and shooting the basketball. When you do that, now it freezes them on their feet. When you don't do that, now they're light on their feet. I thought that was key for OC.

Then you've got to use shot fakes, and you've got to use your up and under. TK had a really nice one. OC had one where he got fouled. You've just got to keep them off balance with shot fakes, step-throughs, and being physical.

Q. When you talk about being difficult to scout, also winning four games in four days, how much of that goes into having guys that have played with each other for three, four years like Braden, that have been in this program, been with you for four, three years.

MATT PAINTER: And it's something for us where we've had individual players be physical, but collectively, I don't think you would label us across the board a physical team, and that's what we have to have. We have to have guards that are stopping the basketball, using their chest, or you'll see they'll just go right through you. They're very, very difficult to stop.

You've got to move the feet and square the basketball and use your chest right there.

We switched some things, and we don't have the best matchups. You saw some times where we were getting posted and they didn't have all their skill in the game and we were able to play off of them. Now when they put that skill in the game, now we can't play off of them as much, but now maybe they don't have another big in there to rebound.

It's like you just don't know how it helps you, but when we get cross-matched because we switch things in our action, sometimes it's very difficult to rebound. Very difficult to rebound. So you've got to have other people fly in there and be able to get the basketball. I thought we did a good job of that. Even though we got outrebounded, I thought we did a good job of that collectively.

Q. In an era where guys are one-and-done or they go into the transfer portal, Braden's kind of an anomaly there. Given that, is there any extra gratification when you see a player like him on the verge of a record like the one that he's about to match or break with Bobby?

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, I think it is. I think kudos to him. Like he was able to stay and keep growing and keep getting better. Now he's chasing history from an individual standpoint. It's also something that we share with him because these are passes that other people have to make shots.

I said it yesterday, maybe two days ago, things run together, with Ed Cota at North Carolina and Chris Corchiani at NC State and Bobby Hurley at Duke, one of you guys need to write a story about all the people that have the most field goals. Because I know the guys -- Trey Kaufman-Renn, Zach Edey, Fletcher Loyer -- the guys that had the most field goals for them, I'm pretty sure you're going to have really, really good names there that they had to pass.

You can't get award, you can't get the record, I should say, if people can't make baskets. Just because you're a good passer, you pass to a bunch of bozos that can't shoot,

you're not getting that award. It's not happening.

It's an individual thing because he walked in the door being able to pass, and P.J. Thompson's done a fabulous job with him in terms of knowing how to play, pace, but he walked in that way. He was a great passer, and he's just gotten better each year. So we're happy for him.

Q. You sort of talked a little about this, but that pick-and-roll with Braden and Trey, what is it about that that works so well with those two particular players?

MATT PAINTER: It just depends who's guarding them and what they're giving up and what they're doing. If they're going to switch something or blitz ball screens and get aggressive or come with a high hedge, or they are going to play in a drop, we're trying to figure out what they're doing and then take advantage of what they're doing. Sometimes that's difficult, right?

When people do the same thing, they're better at it because that's what they do, but it's also a hair predictable. So like now the people that mix things up, they're not always good at anything, but the change sometimes can bother people.

So like you live sometimes in that gray area right there, and P.J. always talks about it. Just read the floor, read the defense, take what they give you, keep it simple. Then like when he does those things, sometimes involved in that is him shooting the basketball. Sometimes he has predetermined thoughts, and that's where he gets in trouble. He has great instincts, and sometimes he goes away from that and says, well, this has happened. This is going to happen again. Then when it doesn't happen again, he already has the predetermined thought. When he plays off his instincts and just takes what they're giving him, that's when he's at his best.

Now, TK is really good at opening up the pocket pass. He's really detailed in what he does, and he opens up things right there. Now when people take that away, it gives Braden a little bit of an advantage to go. Now when they don't do that, now he's going to get the ball to him, and now they've got a decision to make.

It comes off a little bit better than it actually is because TK is so good at making that little shovel pass. We just want him to shoot it around 10 to 12 feet, not 15 to 17 feet. He's had a couple of those this year.

Now when you do that, like we played Northwestern where he kept passing it. That's how C.J. Cox got a lot of those shots in that game. Now when people stay at home, now they play one-on-one. Well, you've got to have the physical specimens to play one-on-one, and obviously Michigan does and now they do. TK, he was great when they were back getting to his floater, and then he was great getting to them and driving at them and getting into their body and scoring that ball.

Q. What was your thought process in bringing Oscar back after he picked up the fourth foul? Especially because in the first half he picked up that third after getting the second.

MATT PAINTER: Like I said earlier, those are dicey because he goes and gets one right there. Now you're going down -- Jack Benter has four too and Trey has three. Now you're in a tough spot.

When you get up like that, you can't hold on. You've got to keep playing. You've got to keep putting pressure on them. So we're going to roll the dice.

Foul trouble is when someone has five, but if they get those right there, you feel like a fool. There's just no in between there as a coach when you make those decisions.

He's had games where we've told him, absolutely don't foul, and he's fouled. But I'd rather do it that way than hold on because sometimes you get where play continues and there's no whistles. Then all of a sudden, you're at 5:30 and then the next whistle -- and it's rare, but it happens. I've had it happen to me. Now the next whistle is at 2:50. You're like, man, I didn't know that. But if you put him in, now you got a better chance. You got a better chance.

But the foul issue, we were going to double with Mara no matter what. There at the end we didn't double a couple times with him, and you see when you don't double him, he scores. He's a terrific player.

Q. Matt, you're a student of the game. You've been around this league. You're Big Ten champions. What does this mean to you, this one specifically, and your three seniors that have been in your program so long?

MATT PAINTER: More than anything, we didn't have the regular season, Big Ten regular season that we wanted. Michigan is the Big Ten champs, by the way. We're the tournament champs, right? What you do in 20 games and go 19-1 and go 10-0 on the road, you got to give respect. That's big time. That rarely is going to happen. That is rarely going to happen.

So being able to win four games doesn't mirror winning 19 games out of 20. Even though it's impressive. Our guys are doing great. We're playing well at the right time. It

helped us get a 2 seed in the NCAA Tournament, there's a lot of great things.

But you can't take that away. One of the hared things to do is to win the regular season tournament. We've had the Number 1 attendance in the country as a conference since 1976. It speaks volumes. We go into real values and packed houses, and it's difficult. Give Michigan their just due with that.

To our guys, I think, when we played Texas Tech earlier in the year, we played really well. When we played Iowa State earlier in the year, we didn't. When we played about four teams at home, go back and look, we scored 48 points against Michigan in the second half. Go look at how we played against Michigan State, Illinois. There's someone else in there that beat us. We played really well offensively, but defensively we weren't good enough.

So our guys being able to make that jump and be better defensively but also give us the confidence to be able to beat -- you know, Nebraska had a helluva season. We had a great game against Nebraska. Michigan is a 1 seed, and they've earned that 1 seed. Then we had a great game today. So just building that confidence for those guys and feeling good about that.

Because that's what you want as a coach. You want to do everything in your power to help them, but they need that reassurance to build that confidence to keep going that they are a really, really good team, and they can beat anybody. You've got to be able to do it. We didn't do it in the regular season, in my opinion, like we're capable. When you're the head coach, you're responsible for that. You've got to get it figured out.

You never have enough taking care of the basketball and rebounding. We just turned it over two times. You don't go in the next game, and say we're good in this area. It just doesn't work that way. That's the game of basketball. It will humble you. So we've got to keep focusing on our job. I thought today in this tournament we did a really good job of focusing on our job.

Q. Just incredible consistency with your program the last decade plus, 11 straight NCAA Tournaments, nine straight years as a top 4 seed. Can you talk about a little about that and the success you've had over the past decade.

MATT PAINTER: I'm yet to meet a good coach with bad players. You have to get good players. We've been able to get good size through the years. We've been able to get skill. Now like in the last four years, we've had the best point guard in the country. We've had the best big man in the country, the best player in the country for two years. We have the best 3-point shooter in the history of Purdue basketball. We had the best rebounder in Zach Edey. I can keep going. Jaden Ivey is a lottery pick, Trevion Williams.

We've had really good players. To me, you've got to be able to develop guys and help guys, but you've got to be able to evaluate the people that are sliding through the cracks, that people are ranking places that's they shouldn't be ranked. Jaden Ivey was like 90 or 105. He is just too talented. To me, I was so excited when we got him.

That's what it's about. It's about getting good players that are good guys and bringing them together and keep working and staying with it. But proud of our staff for the work, but also proud of how we've gotten it done. Education is still a part of it at Purdue.

Those guys are all getting their degrees. It doesn't mean we haven't had a handful of guys in 21 years not get their degrees, but 95 percent of our guys have graduated. That's a big piece, man. I hate when people diminish that because education has helped a lot of people. It doesn't mean you have to play basketball. It's helped a lot of people.

It doesn't mean you're going to be successful too because we know a bunch of fools that have gotten college degrees, and I know people that have been brilliant in what they've done and didn't go to college. But if you play it by the numbers, man. You got a scholarship to play college basketball at a Big Ten university, you've got an advantage over a lot of people. It doesn't mean you're better than anybody, but you've got an advantage.

Use that. Don't let basketball use you up. Have balance in your life and understand the big picture. Those are the things we really try to sell.

I'm cool with it. I'm cool with guys making money. I'm good. Make money, make good basketball decisions, and get your education. Do it all, man. Pimp the system. Get it all. Those guys are just chasing money and they're just doing that, they're going to have a couple all-conference plaques, they're not going to invest their money. They're not going to have a degree. That's our job, man. When you're a coach, that's your job.

You've got to go out and sell it so they know, now you're not having a basketball career and you've got a little extra money, now you can take the opportunity to have a great life. That's the mission at Purdue.

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Michigan Wolverines

Dusty May

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THE MODERATOR: We're now joined by Michigan student-athletes Nimari Burnett and Aday Mara.

Q. Nimari, what do you think went wrong during that run to start the second half, where Purdue kind of seized control?

NIMARI BURNETT: Braden Smith and Trey Kaufman-Renn just get into their, I guess, bag. We definitely prepared for it and planned for it, and those guys have really, really good abilities, and they work off each other well. They just really got hot. And we just failed to get stops.

Q. It's a tough result, but it shouldn't necessarily affect the seeding in the NCAA Tournament. Not exactly what you guys wanted, but how do you use this as fuel and do the quick turnaround the next few days to lock back in and try to go perfect the rest of the way?

ADAY MARA: I think we've got to feel this pain right now. We've got to use this for the next month. We know the month that we have ahead. We've just got to be ready, be better, and feel this right now because it doesn't feel good, and use it to be better in the Tournament.

Q. Nimari, your basketball career has taken you a long way, kind of around to be here playing in United Center in your hometown. What are the lessons that you've learned that's led you to this moment?

NIMARI BURNETT: Besides the loss tonight, these are dreams that have come true. To play for Michigan, to play for Dusty, to play in the United Center, I mean, go out, playing in Chicago, my hometown, these are dreams that come true, and these are times that I pray for.

Q. Particularly Purdue had a really strong showing inside the paint tonight. I think it was 40-plus points they were able to score inside the paint with the frontcourt really dominating. Can you talk about what they were doing effectively, consistently inside and converting, and what you guys can do going forward to mitigate that?

ADAY MARA: I think we let Cluff get in deep catches. So he was able to score like really easy baskets around the rim. Also, they went, as he said, they went to the goal move, I would say, with Smith and TKR. I think that would be why they scored so many points, just letting them get to the paint and score easy baskets.

Q. This question is for both players. All losses aren't really losses. You can learn lessons from these losses. What's some of the lessons you guys can take away from this loss, I guess?

NIMARI BURNETT: The lesson that we'll take away from this will be applied directly to practice as we go and get ready for NCAA Tournament, to be more physical in areas that we need to and to fight through ball screens with a little bit more aggression as far as guards and the bigs doing what they do.

Although we didn't want this to happen, we plan to go 3 of 3: Big Ten, Big Ten tournament championship, NCAA. But this is a part of the process, and we're going to use this as fuel into this next month of basketball.

ADAY MARA: As he said, we're going to watch film, and we're going to try to know what we did wrong and just keep getting better as a team. I think that this loss and, well, all the losses we had this season make us know that we are not unbeatable. We can lose games too.

So we cannot relax during the games. I would say that, just keep learning, keep improving, and make sure that we

don't relax during the games.

THE MODERATOR: Let's now take questions for Coach May.

Q. Same question to you, Coach May. Despite the loss, team has to really turn around really fast over the next few days. How do you instill in your team to use this as fuel going forward knowing that you don't have many days to rest and you have a few days of practice before you've really got to lock in and be perfect?

DUSTY MAY: We'll have to get back and get our opponent and start preparing the scouting report. We'll refer back to a couple lessons we learned in this game.

I want to begin by congratulating Purdue, four games in four days, and their three seniors that have been together for a long time. It looked like they really found something deep inside. When you start the year preseason Number 1, you have two first-tem All-Americans, and it doesn't go as planned and you come in as a 7 seed with your back against the wall and perform the way they did, it's impressive.

Especially I thought TKR, I thought his force around the rim, I thought Braden's ability to manage the game, 21 assists to 2 turnovers against constant pressure was very admirable.

Overall, they earned it. Obviously we weren't at our best, but obviously Purdue has something to do with that.

Q. Dusty, it feels like as the season has gone, teams have gotten increasingly physical defensively against you guys. I feel like that was the case this weekend. How do you feel like that kind of disrupted your rhythm maybe, just other teams' physicality, and what do you do with that adjusting, moving forward to the NCAA Tournament?

DUSTY MAY: I don't know. Typically, the NCAA Tournament, I don't think is going to be quite this physical, but you never know. We've got to do a better job of adjusting however the game is being called. If it's called close, we need to adjust. If it's prison ball, we need to adjust. We have to do a better job.

Q. I'm sure you don't have a ton of information, but what happened with Yaxel? It looked like left ankle. Was he trying to stay in the game?

DUSTY MAY: He came back in the game, yeah. I think on that last spin, he stepped on Loyer or Braden Smith's foot.

Q. What did you see from him in general in this game? It seemed like when Purdue was taking control, he got a little more aggressive and ended up with 20, I believe?

DUSTY MAY: Yeah, he was aggressive. He had a couple opportunities around the rim that just didn't drop. He made really good plays. I thought he guarded Braden Smith really well, and obviously the stat sheet doesn't show that.

I thought his energy, I thought Braden never wore down. Obviously you could tell he was fatigued, but it didn't faze him. He just has that much mental strength and capacity.

Q. Dusty, talk about Nimari, this guy is playing in Chicago, his hometown. You have a lot of players that have a lot of experience in different ways, shapes, and forms. He might get overshadowed by guys like Yaxel obviously, Big Ten Player of the Year and all those other kinds of things, but what kind of role has Nimari carved out for this team?

DUSTY MAY: He's carved out a role, whatever the team needs, he needs to bring it. I thought he did a nice job on the offensive glass tonight. He finished shots with power around the rim.

I thought he played well tonight. Obviously we're a team that's very balanced, and these guys have sacrificed a lot to get to this point. So very, very proud of him and to be his coach. Most importantly, he's an A-plus human being. He's got a heart of gold, and he continuously just gives to other people and represents our team, our athletic department, our university in the highest esteem.

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