Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 12, 2026

Chicago, Illinois, USA

United Center

Purdue Boilermakers

Matt Painter

Oscar Cluff

Braden Smith

Postgame Press Conference

Purdue - 81, Northwestern - 68

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

MATT PAINTER: I thought we were really good in the first half. I thought our execution offensively was great. Really wanted to attack on the interior. We knew they were down a man on their front line. I thought our guys did a good job there. I thought they did a good job of just understanding personnel and defending.

Martinelli is a very, very tough cover. Knew if he could get to his spots, which you saw in the second half, that it would be difficult for us, like it's difficult for everybody else. They got away from us a little bit there in the second half obviously. They scored 47 points in the second half.

I thought our defense was great in the first half. I thought our pace, just playing that game and only turning the ball over seven times and out rebounding them by 12, just to win in that possession war ends up being kind of tougher for them to get back in the game even though they played really hard and did some good things in the second half.

I thought Braden was great, 16 assists, one turnover. He was really good. I thought our two guys on the front line, Fletcher gave us 15 points, but Oscar and Trey did a really good job on the interior of establishing themselves.

Q. Braden, I wanted to ask you about that play in the first half where you got the steal, and when you're going out of bounds, you tapped it forward and ended up getting you another assist. Just your mindset at that point. Anybody could have let that ball go out of bounds, yet you're fighting for it. Kind of take me through your thought process on that play and maybe how that may have sparked you guys tonight.

BRADEN SMITH: Yeah, when I do those things, it's not really -- it's split second to make that decision. I don't know, I think it's just more habit than anything. I try to get the steal, and then I just try to keep it alive. If you hit it in the backcourt, I think there's six to eight seconds left on the shot clock.

So, okay, if I can hit it on the backcourt, maybe take off four, they got to dribble up, that's at least two, got to contest a shot from deep. I didn't see Omer or Gicarri who were chasing it down. I just tried to hit it to try to get us more time to roll down the shot clock, and that's what happened.

Q. Braden, that's the most point Oscar's had in a game since Jan 17. There's too many matchups where he's too big and too good on the inside. Is this something where you talk about before a game like this that Oscar really needs to establish himself so we can play through even more?

BRADEN SMITH: Not necessarily. For us, it's every single game. We want him to have those games no matter who it is. Whether it's Mara from Michigan guarding him, whether it's Northwestern's bigs, whoever it is that's who we want. We trust him to go down and make plays and score the basketball, and he showed that. He continues to do that. We just trust our guys.

They put a lot of time in and work in. For us, it's just feed them the ball when they're open and go make a one-on-one play.

Q. You passed Chris Corchiani and Ed Cota tonight, and now you're just behind Bobby Hurley. When I say those names, to be mentioned in the same breath as those guys, what's that mean to you? What's the significance of that?

BRADEN SMITH: If you want me to be honest, I don't

know who either of those guys are, and that's no disrespect. I really don't. I know Bobby Hurley.

MATT PAINTER: I know him.

BRADEN SMITH: I don't know those two guys. Obviously I've been very thankful to be around a lot of great guys who can score and put the ball in the basket. They trust me. Paint trusts me. The coaching staff trusts me to go out there and make plays. When you give me confidence, it's kind of what you want as a player. You let me go out there, play free, and I'll probably throw one in the fourth row every once in a while too, but at the end of the day, they trust me with that and trust me with my decisions. Just to be able to do that, it's a great opportunity.

Q. Braden, you and Martinelli are the same recruiting class, like one of 20 high major seniors that have stayed in one place for all four years. What memories do you have of competing against him, and what was it like to go up against him the last four years?

BRADEN SMITH: He's a great dude. Actually this past summer, I came up to Chicago because my agency is up here, but I went to Northwestern and played pickup with Lance, that's where he's from. So Lance was there, Nick was there. We kind of grew a relationship and friendship from there.

He's just a good dude. Obviously he can score the crap out of the ball. Just playing against him these four years have been -- I mean, all the games we've played have been close, neck and neck, and really fun games to be a part of.

Obviously he had a great career, and he's also a great dude. I've got a lot of respect towards him and what he's doing.

Q. Oscar, you came out to a really hot start, especially on the boards. How important was it for you guys to come out and set the tone physically early?

OSCAR CLUFF: It's something that's an emphasis coming out and showing -- like being dominant on the glass, being dominant in the interior. So that's something we're going to do every game.

Q. Braden, obviously the short roll to Trey has been a huge part of your guys' offense the entire time you've been playing together. It seemed like it was really effective today. Any particular reason it was working so well in this game and it was such a big part of the offense?

BRADEN SMITH: Yeah, it's just how teams guard. Obviously different teams play different defenses, just how they guard. If they're playing kind of in between me and him on a ball screen, it's me dragging it and shooting the ball or me hitting Trey on a pocket pass or him swinging it and shooting it to the corner, whatever it is, it's just reads. We went into the game knowing that's how they're going to play, and that's how they're going to guard the ball screen with me and him.

Obviously Trey is a really good basketball player who can make those plays, and we trust each other.

Q. Braden, the last game you played against Northwestern, you struggled for much of the game before putting it together at the end. Did you like getting another crack at them? What did you feel was different tonight throughout the game compared to the last game you guys played against them?

BRADEN SMITH: Obviously as a competitor, I take it to heart every game I don't play well. Other than the assist, I don't think I played great today. I didn't shoot it well. I thought I had some defensive parts here and there that I thought I did good at.

Overall for us and for me, it was good to get them again and to play them. I thought defensively we were a lot better. Obviously we kind of let up in that second half there, but if we can do what we did in the first half in the second and make it a complete 40-minute game defensively, I think it's going to be real difficult for teams to beat us.

Q. Braden says he doesn't really know the names of Ed Cota and Chris Corchiani, but I know you do, and I know you know the name Bobby Hurley. What does it mean for you to see a guard, a Purdue guard that you're coaching go through -- you know, go up the ranks of that list in terms of assists? What does it mean to you to see that?

MATT PAINTER: Obviously you have to log a lot of minutes, and you've got to do it from day one. So you think those three guys are right in that triangle in Raleigh, Durham, one being NC State, one being Duke, and one being North Carolina.

Bobby Hurley and I are in the same grade, which I knew and he probably doesn't because he was a good player and I wasn't, and Corchiani's a little bit older than I am. I think Ed Cota is four or five years younger than I am. Ed Cota went to St. Thomas Moore. Corchiani went to Miami Senior. And obviously Bobby played for his dad at Saint Anthony's. Just to be with those names with those guys, it

was big time.

If you're in high school and watching stuff and you're seeing the guys on ESPN and CBS and you're watching, those were the type of games you were watching. Then you get to college, and you're watching some of the same guys. Corchiani was fabulous with Rodney Monroe, fire and ice, and Bobby had all those guys to pass to with the guys he played with, with Christian and Grant, and just a lot of really, really good players. Ed Cota obviously played with a lot of really good players.

That's something we've kept in perspective for Braden. You've got to have guys that can make baskets too, right? You can't get that award without good players with you, and I think that's what's so humbling about him. He'd rather pass. He'd rather set up people. For us he needs to do both.

No, it's an unbelievable honor. It's an unbelievable feat to be where he is, to have the second most assists in the history of the NCAA. He had one high major offer. He's meant a lot to our program.

Q. Coach, Oscar's been getting a little bit longer run out of those first four minutes into the second media timeout. What do you like about bringing him back on the floor instead of making that substitution you had to make in earlier in the year?

MATT PAINTER: I made it earlier in the year a little bit quicker just from a fatigue standpoint. You gauge people that you haven't coached before, and that's kind of where we're getting with TK and a couple of those. He does some good things, and you're like, man, why are you taking him out right there?

But then you've got to make it a shorter runway for the next guy, and that's not fair because sometimes they do some good things. Oh, man, that guy just hit a shot. Why are you taking him out? It's because you're putting TK back in.

It's something we've done with Oscar and just tried to gauge him as much as we could in terms of fatigue and where he's at. I think you saw a couple plays there -- he had a great game, but he made a couple plays. Shot an air ball from three feet. That's hard to do. I think that's a pretty good sign you're fatigued at that point. You're not always going to get the glaring reminders like that that someone's tired, but you've got to be able to coach the game.

I'm always talking to people around me, you've got to look in their eyes. You've got to make sure with guys with size. You've got guys with size that come in and score three times in a row, and they'll be whatever, but then you stay with them because they did that, and then all of a sudden, they make two defensive mistakes, mess up on offense, and you go back in the next game and do it again.

But you don't like taking somebody out who scores three times in a row. You're like, hey, let's keep going to them. But if that's their wall and that's their threshold when it comes to fatigue, you've got to get them out before it happens. It doesn't look right, but after 30-some-odd games, it is right. You've got to do what's best.

But we also have to do well when we sub, and sometimes we've had inconsistencies there.

Q. You talked a little bit on Saturday about what you have to do in the postseason to have success and the possibility of kind of, for lack of a better term, flipping the switch from the postseason start. Did you see any heightened level of focus from your team the last couple of days in preparation for this game?

MATT PAINTER: I thought we were better on the defensive end in the first half. Obviously in the second half we weren't. I think that's an important piece for you. Like the more stops you can get, the more you can dominate the glass, the more you can get in transition. You've got to steal points.

Today we have 16 offensive rebounds, and that's going to help you. A lot of the times you get offensive rebounds, you're getting stick backs, you're getting spray out 3s, but you're also getting fouled a lot. So the more you can do that -- to Northwestern's defense, they didn't have Arrinten Page. So I think that plays an effect. We were just trying to wear those guys down. We really were just trying to wear Nick Martinelli down. We were trying to get fouls on him, get him out of the game.

Yeah, it's a hard question to answer because we played Wisconsin, now we're not playing Wisconsin. Like you're playing a different style, different team. So I think that's what comes out sometimes when you play different styles, different talent levels, guys that make it hard. Like Nick makes it really hard for everybody in our league, so that's the focus point, but at the end of the day, they make six 3s a game. They made six 3s now.

In that second half when they're making that run and making those 3s, it didn't seem like they're only going to make six. It seemed like they're going to make 16. So now do you want to make an adjustment and stop over, helping some on him and stay home. But for the most part, I thought our guys were ready. We've just got to play 40 minutes of consistent defense.

Q. You're kind of old hat at this now, but how do you balance the rigors of this tournament, playing on multiple days in a row while also kind of making sure your team is rested and ready to go for the NCAA Tournament, like balancing both challenges?

MATT PAINTER: Really hard to do because you're just trying to win the game in front of you. Then you could make some moves strategically in terms of minutes and substitution that could help you in the long run. Well, if you get beat, there's no long run, right?

So you always come in, and people always talk about, hey, this guy needs to rest more. This guy doesn't need to get to this minute threshold. No, you just try to win the game. If you have the ability to do that, you have a damn good team, like Michigan. Maybe Michigan can do that. Maybe Illinois can do that. If you can just feel that, hey, we can dominate this, we're going to be okay no matter what, like so be it.

But the rest of us, the other 99 percent, I think that's really hard. I think you've got to do everything in your power to try to win that game in front of you. But you also have to understand that you can have a lot of success -- Michigan had a lot of success in this tournament last year, and their seed did not move. They might have slid up a little bit, but they stayed where they stayed.

So like after you've done it for 21 years, you realize that. I didn't used to realize that. You're just like, hey, this is where you are. We're going to be a 3 seed or a 4 seed. We're right there on that. But sometimes you don't play heavy hitters. We're playing a team that's a 3 seed right now in our next game. So like that could have some effect there. Sometimes when you don't play people like yourself -- a 2 seed, a 3 seed, a 4 seed. Obviously we have a 1 seed still in the tournament. Illinois is a 2 seed. Michigan State is a 2 seed. I think Nebraska is a 3 seed, and we're a 4 seed, if we're all following the same thing.

So you're right in there. You've got a chance to play some people here if you can win your next game and really help yourself. I think probably more help yourself get prepared for the NCAA Tournament because this is the caliber of teams you're going to play.

Q. I've heard the grind of the Big Ten is unique even across the spectrum of college basketball. I've heard some coaches refer to it as expletive You, February, in some respects when you get close to the end. Just because of the teams you're playing, and in your case, you're right there. Is there any way that you can take those experiences and help propel you into that tournament, or do you sometimes need to just kind of relax off of it because you're playing completely different teams and it's almost like you're unshackled because you're playing somebody who doesn't know you that well?

MATT PAINTER: Yeah, I think it just depends on like who you get. People will always ask you before like do you think this is a good draw? You don't know. Like you don't know until you play them.

But I do think -- I saw something the other day. I don't know if this is accurate. In our game tomorrow, we'll have the most Quad 1 opportunities. Not the most Quad 1 wins, but the most Quad 1 opportunities. I have come to that belief that you have to schedule as well as you can because those experiences, even in some failure -- we've had a lot of success. We've had more success this year on the road than at home, which makes no sense.

But we were 7-3, 8-3 on road games. Then I think we're undefeated neutral, if I got it right. So I think that helps you. I think that confidence helps you, of being away from home. We've had years where we're 10-0 at home and then we're 5-5 on the road or 6-4 on the road. I'm using the 20-game schedule. It's not always been that.

I think that's been the pieces, keep having experiences. Sometimes when people over schedule, they get mad about stuff, but I'd rather over schedule and be mad than under schedule and not make the tournament. Make sense? I just think that this will be -- if we can get a top 4 seed, this will be nine straight years we've been a top 4 seed. We just work towards the scheduling of who we're playing nonconference.

Now, you've got to win some games, right? People do that, and they lose games, and they get mad and say, that doesn't work. You've got to win some games.

I do think the more experiences you can have -- the travel, just the toughness of everything, a bad whistle, whatever, whatever it might be -- any adversity right there, you've got to just flip it and use that to make you a stronger team. Hey, we've been here. We've been through this.

Like I've got guys who have played -- I've had guys who have been in the championship game and guys who have lost the 1-16 game. We've been on that rollercoaster. It's disappointing at times, and it's just unbelievable. It's everything you've worked for. We're in a Final Four. We're playing for -- like this is pretty cool.

But then we look back and say, did we do our job as a staff to get them prepared with our work and with our schedule?

I think some people miss on that. You're starting to see, in my opinion, more elite high major programs doing it because they're seeing the model because they're not going to penalize you on Sunday for that. You're going to get a lot of support in that room when you say, hey, man, Purdue has the most Quad 1 opportunities. They didn't take advantage of all of them, but man, they scheduled up.

I don't think that's going to drop us. Anyone that's going to be on the C line next to us in comparison, you've got one up on them right there.

There's just so many things you can't control after you're done playing. We're done playing our games, but now we can. We're still playing these games. When you go head to head with people you're competing against on those lines, like now do something about it.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

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Northwestern Wildcats

Chris Collins

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THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Northwestern head coach Chris Collins, along with Nick Martinelli and Jayden Reid. We'll start off with an opening statement from Coach.

CHRIS COLLINS: Congratulations to Purdue. I thought they did what they were supposed to do today, playing us on the third game in three days, emotional game last night. I thought they came out with great energy.

Really their pop early knocked us back. I thought we were kind of a step slow to everything early. Their older guys really set the tone. We dug ourselves a big hole there in the first half.

Really proud of our team in the second half. I challenged our guys, we were down big, I said, guys, we're not going to tap out. We're not throwing the white towel. That's not who we are as a program. That's not how you guys are as individuals, as competitors. Let's go out. Let's try to win the first four minutes. Then let's try to win the next four minutes. Let's try and win the second half and see what happens.

If we chip away a little bit, we actually did start to put a little game pressure on them. They had to call a couple of timeouts. So I was super proud of our fight the whole way, led by this guy. I've talked about him a lot. So proud of everything he's meant to our program. More importantly this year with a really young team that was going through a lot of tough times with losses and tough play and sometimes guys' poor individual play, the big brother he was.

I just kept thinking back to the guys that were big brothers to him when he was struggling as a freshman, and for him to be that senior leader, especially when it got to a point in our season where we knew the goals that we had as team stuff were probably not going to happen for him to continue to show up every day to set the example for our younger players about what it means to be a Northwestern player, couldn't be more proud of him.

And Jayden as well, I thought Jayden played great in the second half.

It's tough to be at the end of the road for us, man. It always sucks. You're in the fight, you're in the fight, and then it's over. There's such an abrupt finality to the end of a season. I get up this morning, and you're ready to roll. You've got a big game against Purdue, and now it's over.

Really proud of this group for fighting through adversity through the year. Obviously proud of this guy. He's going down as one of the all time greats in our program's history.

Q. Nick, what's one memory you have playing at Northwestern you feel you're going to carry for the rest of your life?

NICK MARTINELLI: That's a good question. I have a ton of memories. I really think that Europe trip, getting to go out there with Ty, and I had already developed such meaningful relationships with Ty, Matt, Brooks. Getting to go out there, we just had a blast.

We really got to on a personal level connect with the coaches and the teammates and the bus rides to and from the game, just all those things. It's kind of a less stressful environment, and getting to really build those relationships in a place like that, I thought it was great.

Q. You've talked a lot about over the past two years how much it's weighed on you to not get back to the NCAA Tournament after Boo was able to get you there the last two seasons. When you think about your final years at Northwestern, how do you want to be remembered?

NICK MARTINELLI: I think for these young guys that are coming in hopefully, every person that played with me, they just look at a guy that worked relentlessly. That's all you can do, that's all you can control is work as hard as you possibly can and listen to the coaches.

So hopefully just a coachable guy who worked his butt off. That's really all I was focused on.

Q. Nick, you shared a moment with Coach Collins after you were checked out and you guys hugged for about a minute. What was that moment like for you?

NICK MARTINELLI: He means so much to me. Like he provided me with -- like I told him he's given me everything I could ask for and more. It's the way that he's kept it real with me this whole way. He's always honest with me. He pushes me to my limit, but at the same time, when I'm doing too much, he keeps it real and tells me to relax, rest.

It's a family endeavor. We talk about it. I'm super good friends with his son. His dad is reaching out to me, calling me. It's just like you just don't get that type of love, man. It's just all love, everything he's provided for me. I can't thank him enough. It's been such a great ride.

I know it's really going to hit me randomly one of these next couple days just how much I'm going to miss it, but I'm so appreciative of him.

Q. Nick, I was asking some of the younger players, I asked JR about this last night too, but the one thing they all said they're going to remember about you is your work ethic. I know you spoke in the past about where that work ethic comes from, that you learned from some from your big brothers in the program too, but why was that important for you to keep that work ethic all four years?

NICK MARTINELLI: There's multiple reasons for that. I think just, to name a couple of them, I think first is you don't want to let your team and coaches down. I was provided with an unbelievable opportunity to go to Northwestern, and at the time, I didn't really have many other big opportunities like this, like to be at the university playing in the Big Ten.

I always hold myself to a high standard, but I also always talk about my faith. With my faith comes so much gratitude. I talked about it yesterday with one of the reporters, just everyone congratulates me, you've worked so hard, you've done all this, but I truly believe it's a gift from God that he's given me.

Not everyone has that drive. Not everyone has that drive to show up each and every day. Sometimes I don't want to do it, but I have that extra voice in my head telling me you've got to push through, you've got to push through today. I definitely believe that's God, and he's definitely pushed me this whole way.

Q. Nick, no AP today. You're one of the two tallest players in the starting lineup going against Purdue, third game in three days. Where is this among one of the toughest games you've had to play?

NICK MARTINELLI: Definitely a tough one, but he talks about the guys before me, they've stepped in roles. We had Blake Smith starting in big games, at Maryland on the road, and we've gotten it done. There's never been excuses in this program, and that's something I love about it.

They have that faith in us that you kind of just think you can move a mountain because they're like, all right, you're going to do this because this is the culture. People have done it before. We have Ryan Langborg and Ty out at Maryland with Blake Smith starting picking up Jahmir Young at full court. Did you ever think you were going to see that? Probably not.

CHRIS COLLINS: I didn't.

NICK MARTINELLI: But we got it done, and it's all due to the scheme and that drive mentally.

Q. For Nick, you're finishing your college career as a four-year guy at Northwestern, which is kind of a rare breed in college basketball. Now your teammates, that's kind of the way things are now, have some decisions to make as far as with the transfer portal, NIL, so many things have changed since you came to Northwestern as a freshman. It's like not uncontroversial to say that you have to be looking at that kind of thing. What advice would you give to your teammates, those younger teammates, about what staying at a school like Northwestern for four years has given you?

NICK MARTINELLI: It's really all things that you can't see from outside the building. It's things you see from inside the building. The way they pushed you, it might not be for everybody. If it's not, maybe it's not the right place for you. But if you want to become the best version of yourself, I think this is the place to be.

You're constantly pushed, obviously in our building, but also in your classes. It's not ease to go to Northwestern as a student either, and if you want to become the best

version of yourself, no doubt.

Coach just talked about it, I was averaging two points a game. I probably wasn't even going to play if it weren't for injuries. But I just tried to be a sponge and listen to as much as possible and do it the right way.

I don't condemn anyone for looking at other schools. People get in your head. Obviously the thoughts are going to pass through your mind. Everybody inevitably wants to get the better thing, get more, do something different, try something else out. I don't condemn anybody for doing that, but for me, I found my place. This is my home. I've got so much love reciprocated because I stayed. It's been such a blessing and an honor.

Q. I wanted to ask you about in particular with Nick, here's a Chicago suburban kid, stayed four years, which now is a rarity almost. I'm sure your relationship with him goes back several more years where you watched him and different things. What's it like to watch somebody who you saw as a young boy, probably couldn't even shave, to get to the point where he's scoring 1,700 points and he's acting the part as a full grown adult that everybody respects?

CHRIS COLLINS: It's honestly what it's all about. We're all trying to win and lose -- win, not lose. I'm not trying to lose. It's all about wins and losses, and I get it. That's the business part of things is the results end of it.

One of the reasons I've always enjoyed being in college and being at schools -- like I've spent 26 years at either Duke or Northwestern, schools that attract guys that want -- you hear him -- that want those kind of relationships.

Nick went to my basketball camp when he was in elementary school. Him and my son are one year apart. Obviously when you're running a basketball camp and your kid's in it, you're always kind of watching his games more than the others. I've known Nick since he was fifth, sixth grade. His brother was a walk-on for us, who's a couple years older than him. So I followed his career. Being right in our area, we've known his family.

Just to see his progression, how he's just gotten better -- and not only that, how he's been able to become a young man. What's not lost in this -- he was a straight A student at Northwestern. I don't want to say he's done, he's got one more quarter left, but the guy never got a B. How about that? So we talk about all the time he's in the gym, but this is someone who has a standard of excellence with everything he does. Just couldn't be more proud of him.

Q. This was a game where you struggled to battle Purdue on the glass. This is the second game where AP's been on the bench but in sweats. What was his illness, and why couldn't he go today?

CHRIS COLLINS: Yeah, he just wasn't able to go unfortunately. He wasn't cleared medically to play in the game. It hurt us. I mean, obviously having him last time we played these guys -- size, athleticism, strength -- with Kaufman-Renn and Cluff, just have another big body, and it really hurt us. To their credit, they took advantage of that.

The post-ups was one thing, but it was the glass, the offensive boards, and we just didn't have the size to combat it, especially when you're on the third game in three days. Trey hurt his wrist last night. I thought you guys probably saw his shooting wrist. He couldn't even shoot. He was out there battling with one hand.

So really appreciate him just trying to give what he could give today. Yeah, it was tough. We were a little bit under manned. Obviously we were tired. Last night took a lot out of us. That was an emotional game, an emotional win.

We did our best. No excuses. We tried to prepare, get ready, and Purdue did what they're supposed to do, their energy, their pop. They came out and hit us with a hay maker early, and we're just fighting uphill the rest of the night.

Q. Coach, you spoke about Nick stepping into this big brother role and inspiring work ethic in the younger players. How exactly would you describe his impact both historically with the program and with the current roster?

CHRIS COLLINS: I think historically on the program for me, I've only been here 13 years, guys. Obviously growing up in Chicago, I followed Northwestern a little bit. I'm a basketball junkie. I know a lot of the players. I know a lot of the history of the guys who have come here before.

I just think, when you look at the things he was able to accomplish, the numbers speak for themselves, but also the winning component. He was a key part of two NCAA Tournament teams. He was a key part of our two most successful seasons in the history of the program.

He's got to go down -- I haven't looked at it, but with multiple 20-plus win seasons, 17 last year, 15 this year. He's got to be one of the winningest players in program history.

And just the way he carries himself, like I said, academic All-American, a guy who got better every year, a great

teammate, high character guy,. If you throw the upper echelon of players in a room, he belongs in that room.

It wasn't easy for him. We had higher aspirations. We didn't achieve our goals team-wise of what we wanted to do this year. We have no one to blame but ourselves. We lost a lot at the early part of the season. We didn't take care of business with a lot of close losses. We got to about a midpoint of the season, and it was kind of evident that it wasn't going in a direction towards postseason.

But his example of showing up every day as a senior and not making it just about him and not making it just about scoring records and winning a scoring title. It was always about winning. It was never about the individual stuff. It was about us getting better. It was about us trying to figure out how to win.

It's about him dragging these, Jake West and Tyler Kropp and Tre Singleton and Angelo Ciaravino -- all these guys that we're playing, trying to show them the way of what it takes to win. I'm grateful to him for that.

Q. I asked Nick this before about the moment that you guys shared when he checked out of the game, but for you, what was that like and what did you tell him?

CHRIS COLLINS: Those are always really hard. When you've coached over 100 games with somebody and had so many moments and you're just -- it's going through your head, the whole journey. It's super bittersweet because I'm so proud of him. To see the standing ovation he got and all those things is pretty cool, but it's just a personal moment.

It's a hug and to tell each other you love him, and I'll be his biggest fan forever. I'm just sad I won't have a chance to coach him anymore.

Q. You're a basketball junkie, you said so yourself. Hope you don't mind I'm going to ask about an opponent. Braden Smith has climbed up the NCAA ranks for assists, passing someone that you competed against in Ed Cota, and he's lurking on someone who is your former teammate, Bobby Hurley.

CHRIS COLLINS: I know.

Q. Can you put into perspective for me what you've seen from him these past four years? What are the common characteristics that these men and that Braden has with these men?

CHRIS COLLINS: First of all, I'm afraid to look at my phone because I'm sure Bobby has texted me with some expletives about not doing the job to keep his record safe. Sorry, Bobby.

Anyway, Braden is a special player. It's been an honor to compete against him these past four years, to admire his greatness. He's another guy kind of like Nick, unheralded recruit, last minute a scholarship opens up at Purdue, they take him. He starts every game his whole career and is going to be Player of the Year and a first team guy and potentially the all time assist king in the history of college basketball. To think about that is just an incredible, incredible feat.

His level of consistency, his smarts, and he's been a big winner. This is a championship level player. It wasn't just about assists. He's won Big Ten Championships. He's been in a National Championship Game.

It was really cool tonight just and all the day and age, and you had asked Nick about it, to look out on the floor and to see four guys -- Kaufman-Renn, Fletcher Loyer, Braden Smith, and Nick Martinelli -- four guys that have stayed with their program for four years. That was pretty cool. So I root for that because I really admire players that stick through -- I think his freshman year, did they lose to a 16 seed or a 15? It wasn't all just roses. They had to go through stuff too to get to this point.

I have a lot of respect for him. He's been a great, great player in this league, the way he's carried himself, the way he's won.

Terrific example, I have a young point guard on my team. I want to use Braden Smith as an example for Jake as he develops, as he gets better as someone you want to aspire to be like. Great, great player.

Q. Last off-season, you brought in eight new players, five freshmen, three transfers, flipped over half of the roster. You ended up during the season a little bit confused about why the team was struggling to shoot as well as you thought they would during the summer, kind of talking about the way that you built this team before. What lessons had you really learned from kind of the last transfer portal this past cycle that you're really taking into this next iteration of building the next Northwestern Wildcats?

CHRIS COLLINS: It's a great question. I think everyone is trying to navigate this landscape. Now that the season is over, you're in the fight. You're always kind of thinking about when you have a program, the future and putting things together and what.

I'm really anxious to be able to get with administration and

get with my staff. We've got to be better in what you mentioned, and that's not a knock on players. We didn't have enough. We weren't equipped with what we needed going through the grind of the Big Ten this year. Again, that's not -- I mean, I'm talking about myself. I got to be better. We've got to do a better job with roster construction, making sure we get the right kind of guys that are going to be good players here.

Also, a big part of it, it's big business now, right? The alignment and studying what some of the programs are doing around us, especially peer programs, the level of investment. In order to win now at the high major level, there's got to be unbelievable alignment from everybody, not just the coaching staff. I mean that presidential level, like people -- you've got to want to compete in football and basketball, and you've got to invest, and it's got to be important.

It's got to trickle down to the administration and coaching, and everybody's got to be in alignment in order to win because the programs that are winning, that's what they're doing. They're aligned. There's a commitment to winning with resources, with investment. There's no reason that we can't be one of those places in my mind. I'm fully convinced. But it's going to take everybody together to want to do that.

I'm excited. I love our AD, Mark Jackson. He came from Villanova. He's won National Championships there. He was at USC before that, National Championships in football. He knows what it takes. This is a big time for us. We don't have a president, right? This is going to be a huge hire when it comes to athletics. Does our new president that we bring in, is that going to be a commitment?

These are my opinions, I've always felt like if you're at a high level academic school and you strive to have the best undergraduate experience and the best hospital and Kellogg School of Business and all these graduate programs and Medill and all these things, why wouldn't we also strive to be great in athletics? There's a standard of excellence. We should want that, and we have the means to do that.

So the program has been unbelievably committed to me over 13 years they've stuck with me through some lows, and I've stuck with the program through some super highs because I love what we're trying to build here.

This is going to be a huge off-season from top to bottom. We've got to really examine because you have to evolve. Maybe some of the things that I'm doing and what I thought and maybe some of the ways -- maybe that's not what needs to be done. I want to win. I want to win. I'm a competitor. You guys know that. I want to win the right way. I want to win with good people. I want to compete in this league.

We've shown -- we had a second place finish. We had a third place finish. I'm anxious and excited to get a new president, to get together and everybody and hopefully have a commitment to saying, you know what, we want to do this. We want to do this. I'm all in on doing everything in my power. I've got to be better.

I never use index fingers. It's always thumbs, man. It's always thumbs. I always feel -- everything is accountable to me. I take accountability for what the record was this year. I'm excited to roll up my sleeves and figure out how we can get back to the upper echelon of the league. Can't wait to get started this spring with that.

Q. You said last night after the Indiana game there's no quit in this team. Obviously they showed that tonight just like they have all season. As this team goes through that evolution that you're hoping for, makes those changes that you're hoping for, how do you hope to keep that part of this team's culture, that willingness to keep fighting no matter what, keep that as a big part of this team's DNA?

CHRIS COLLINS: Hopefully a lot of you guys have been here with me -- some of these guys have been here for 13 years from the start. Some of these other guys, four or five. That's always been a fabric of who we are. That's kind of what I've hung my hat on, that you show up every day. You compete, you fight, you work, and that's what, win or lose, we always pick ourselves up off the mat, and we keep fighting.

That's not going to change. We're going to continue to find the right guys that come in here that share those values. We've got to be better. We've got to be better. We weren't good enough this year. I've got to be better. We've got to be better. We've got to upgrade in a lot of areas, and our young guys have got to get better.

We have to have key retention obviously, that's a big part of this thing. That will be once the dust settles after this weekend and get an opportunity to meet with players, and you get a little bit of extra time now. The portal doesn't open until after the Final Four.

It's going to be a really big off-season for our future, and I know my staff and I, we're looking forward to seeing what we can build for next year.

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