

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday March 16, 2019

Brian Dutcher

Devin Watson

Jeremy Hemsley

Jalen McDaniels

San Diego State Aztecs



game. But to Utah State's credit they didn't let that happen.

And I'm disappointed. I love this team. I love how hard they play and I love how hard they play for San Diego tonight, not for themselves but for their university. So thank you, guys.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Jeremy, I noticed in the first half the kind of defense you played on Merrill. You forced him into that front-court timeout and chased him sideline to sideline. And he was really struggling and working to try to score early on. Could you just talk about that first half, what you were trying to do. And I know when you forced that timeout you were pretty emotional and knew you were being effective on that end?

JEREMY HEMSLEY: I was just trying to use my length to my advantage. He's a player that doesn't stop moving. So you've got to frustrate him when he has the ball in his hands. And that's what I tried to do. I just tried to frustrate him.

Q. Jeremy, at the end when you fouled out, it seemed a few minutes before you were frustrated with the call -- I saw almost like pull up your jersey on a call on Sam Merrill towards the end. But it seems like at the end you walked over a little bit more calm, and just I saw you hug a bunch of your teammates, coaches. What were those last moments like just knowing this was the final game?

JEREMY HEMSLEY: It just -- it's just crazy to think how fast it goes by. But, yeah, I hugged my teammates because I knew I won't be on the court with them again. And I have my family here. I have my mom, my dad, my little sister and little brother. And this is the first time they got to see me play in a conference tournament.

So of course I was emotional. I wanted to win that game really bad. Going to the tournament is something you dream about as a kid. That's something that I've dreamt about since I've picked up a basketball. So sometimes it doesn't always go your way. There's worse things that can happen in life than

Utah State - 64, San Diego State - 57

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by San Diego State head coach Brian Dutcher and student-athletes Jeremy Hemsley, Jalen McDaniels and Devin Watson. Coach, an opening statement.

COACH DUTCHER: Well, congratulations to Craig Smith and Utah State. Got a really good basketball team, obviously. That's an understatement, having won 17 of the last 18 games. The only blemish was the Aztecs, seems like a month ago. They have a good basketball team.

With that being said, I love my team. I love my seniors. Jeremy and Devin, they know what it's like to cut nets down. But it's not always cutting nets down. It's the hard losses too, and lessons to be learned in everything. And I know they're disappointed because they wanted to cut them down again. They wanted to hang another banner.

But when they come back to Viejas some day. And I know they're not thinking about it. When they have kids of their own they can come back look in the rafters and show their kids the banners they hung. So I'm proud of both of them.

Jalen, obviously, has been a key player for us all year. And he couldn't get any to fall tonight, but it doesn't mean that he doesn't compete at a high level every time he's out there. So proud of how hard he competed.

And, you know, we them sneak out on us in the second half, and I took an early timeout. I just felt they had a little momentum going right away. And we couldn't stem it early. They got out ahead of us -- I don't know what it was. But to our credit, these guys' credit, they never gave in. They fought to the bitter end. Had we had a 3 maybe fall and make it a two-possession

losing a basketball game.

So emotions are just me realizing that it's over with; I'm not playing with these guys that I love anymore. And that's just what it is. And that's okay.

Q. Devin, in those last five minutes with Jalen out they really put their defensive focus on you. I know you were grinding it out to try to get a good look, and you were able to hit a couple of big 3s late. Just take us through the last five minutes, what was going in your head, how you were trying to get a shot and will your team back.

DEVIN WATSON: I don't know. Just five minutes left. I was seeing if we could keep chipping it down. I was trying to pick and choose my moments where I could get my shot off or my teammate could get a shot off. But, really, it was just trying to keep the game close, make shots.

Q. I know you guys set a very high standard of reaching the NCAA Tournament. The program's been there seven of the previous nine years. How do you look at this season? Obviously you're not going to the NCAA Tournament but you played great basketball down the stretch. And you got to the championship game. You're 20 minutes away from getting there. Do you look at this as a positive season? Is it a disappointing season? How do you balance that?

DEVIN WATSON: I mean, during the season there were a lot of ups and downs, but I felt we overcame a lot. A lot of young guys, new guys, guys who have been here before. And we made it to the championship. And we just -- we wanted to win that game so bad and it got away from us a little bit. But I'm proud of my teammates and how far we came and getting to the last game.

JALEN MCDANIELS: To go off of what Dev said, we had ups and downs. Proud of the young guys for stepping up, AG and Nate, our freshman. First time playing college basketball at this stage. I respect them for stepping up. And my two seniors right here, they've been playing their heart out every game. And it's just disappointing.

Q. Devin, could you just kind of explain to people who don't see him as much as you saw him every single day what kind of a defender Jeremy has been during this time at San Diego go state?

DEVIN WATSON: Jeremy has been doing that ever since I've known him even in practice, that's what he takes pride in defense if it's locking me up in practice, anybody. So I knew every time we went out there I knew Jeremy was going to be the best player and he was going to give the dude a run for his money that's

what he does. And his defense gets the offense going I'm proud of what Jeremy has done all year, guarding the best players, how many games we've played and he does it with a smile on his face and a chip on his shoulder.

COACH DUTCHER: I remember Jeremy, first scrimmage at UCLA. We finished and he said, I don't know what just happened. It seems like it was just yesterday; four years later. Here we sit and he knows everything that's going on on the floor. Such a great teammate, such a great captain. And such a great young man.

Q. Jalen, when you fouled out with I think it was five minutes left, what did you see from the team? It seemed like Matt Mitchell had a bunch of open looks. AG had wide-open 3s, where you guys had an opportunity to come back, what did you see those five minutes from the bench?

JALEN MCDANIELS: Thought we were trying to compete at the highest level possible. We had some opportunities. Obviously we didn't convert. I mean, that's the game of basketball. You're not going to make them all.

Q. What were your thoughts when you walked to the bench after fouling out not knowing this might be your final game at San Diego State? And what's the process going to be for you going forward I know it's early what's the process going to be?

JALEN MCDANIELS: I just had belief in my teammates that they were going to get it done. I was on the bench cheering, doing whatever I could, being in the huddle, being there for them even though I was out. Not really focused on that right now. Just have to see what happened.

Q. What does Queta mean to Utah State and what do you see of his development?

COACH DUTCHER: He's a high level big man. Protects the rim so you can make mistakes on the perimeter. You can extend your defense and pressure knowing he's protecting the rim. He's a gifted passer for a young big.

Nobody doubles him because if you do you're giving up a three instead of a tough two. So I think the first time we played him we kind of wrote the script on that -- stay extended, don't double Queta; make him earn what he gets. He's gotten better since then. He's used to that coverage now and he takes his time. He's an elite big man. So they're very fortunate to have him and we're fortunate in the Mountain West to have a quality big man in our league.

Q. A lot was made this year where the conference

is nationally ranked and the lowest ever and yet. And as disappointed as you are you'll have two teams in it that appeared to at least prove themselves the best teams in the league this year. Is it right these are the two that will represent?

COACH DUTCHER: No question. You know, they tied for the conference title. Both of them were red hot. Nevada lost four games all year. Two of them to us. Utah State hasn't lost since we beat them seems like two months ago. There's, what, 16 of the last 17 or 17 of 18. They're playing incredible basketball. So two really good teams.

If we could have found a little magic at the end maybe we would have been a three-bid league again and everybody wouldn't be talking about it. But that didn't happen and I think anybody who sees these two teams in the tournament should be very concerned.

Q. Jeremy's defense in the first half, I don't know how much you were keyed in doing all the things defensively as you were monitoring the whole game, but he really did frustrate Merrill for long stretches and made him work. For a pure scorer what did you notice about what he did in that first half and what does it say about the kind of defender he's always been at San Diego State?

COACH DUTCHER: Jeremy has always stepped up to the task, no matter who it is. He guards the best player on the other team -- every night, every night. He knows that. We take comfort in that, saying this guy may score but it's going to be the hardest points he's ever earned.

And our defensive game plan was very good. I think they averaging close to 80 a game. And we extended our pressure -- everybody with the ball we pressured, so we could maybe disrupt their timing a little bit. And they're such good passers, we want to be up on them so the passes would be as easy.

And we didn't give Jeremy much help. He had to really defend them on his own. Down the stretch I wished we maybe helped him a little more, maybe from the perimeter. We knew Queta rolling to the basket was always dangerous. But we leave Jeremy on an island and we just say, get it done. It's a tough job, and he does it as well as anybody in the country.

Q. Utah State had the last bye in the conference season, went nine days in the tournament without playing. Your last bye was mid January and played 14 straight games without a break. You would expect tired legs to show up in the second half. Your team fell behind in the second half. How much do you think that might have been a factor? And they look pretty fresh out there, didn't they?

COACH DUTCHER: Fresh and good. Yeah, the time off they obviously took advantage of. They put a couple wrinkles into set plays they run all year, so they had some counters. We saw them ahead of time; they didn't just spring them on us. Obviously the first couple opponents in the Mountain West saw them. But they put that time to good use. They added some stuff offensively. They have been solid defensively all year. And they're hard to score on. And we found that out.

And that's by and large because Queta's back there. They don't have to help on the perimeter. They just stay extended on the perimeter and say if it gets inside, Queta, you take care of it, and we'll stay extended everywhere else.

So having Skylar Spencer at Ohio State, the all-time leading shot blocker in conference history, we know what that is. I think Nathan has a chance to get there some day. He's not there as a young freshman. Queta is a better shot blocker right now. He makes all the difference in the world.

I think they used the time off wisely. We played banged up. Devin is banged up. Nathan is banged up. Adam Seiko played today on a wrist where he said, I can't take a shot but I'll play, just so he could guard and give us a couple of minutes. But we knew he couldn't shoot because of his wrist. So it's -- that's this time of the year and most teams are dealing with it and we're one of them.

Q. You guys had 15 offensive rebounds against a team that's one of the best in the country of keeping the offensive glass clean. I was wondering if that was a focus coming in and is it frustrating when you get those many offensive boards but you can't turn them into second-chance points?

COACH DUTCHER: Obviously rebounding was the number one key to the. They outrebound their opponents eight in the conference by eight a game. Last five games they've been outrebounded by 10 a game.

Even though we didn't win the rebound battle, it was 39-37. We kept it respectable. We got a lot of offensive rebounds. And I think obviously the biggest one, we have a steal and we had a couple looks inside. Devin, a couple of layups late in the game, that could have maybe kept a little more heat on them.

But to their credit they didn't let us score on a lot of the second-chance opportunities, it didn't appear. I'd have to look back to see exactly. But even we got the rebounds, they did a good job of getting back on shooters and not letting us score on putbacks.

Q. During the five minutes when he fouled out, what did you see from the court? Did you see missed opportunities, just open shots not falling in?

COACH DUTCHER: Obviously, you know, we went small down the stretch. We were playing Nate and Nolan, and we just said we're down eight, nine, ten points. Let's go small. Let's pick and pop. Let's give Matt some 3s. Let's give AG a couple looks at open 3 because we knew they weren't switching.

So we got those looks and we didn't make them. Matt got I don't know how many open looks in the last three or four minutes. And all by design. We were screening stepping him out. And maybe that's tired legs as much as anything. Three games in three days. Matt's a pretty good shooter. He got looks we wanted but we didn't make enough of those down the stretch. We felt we had to go small in order to get back in the game. Press, go small. Try to spread them out a little bit more. Move Queta away from the basket.

You can't play that way all game because he's so big and strong in there. It's hard for Matt or anybody that size to guard him. But we thought to try to get back in the game we'd try go small, try to spread them out a little bit more. We gave ourselves an opportunity; we didn't take advantage of it.

Q. Could you talk about how Devin, when Jalen went out, just how he kind of seemed like he willed your team to stay alive in this game with his 3-point shooting?

COACH DUTCHER: Devin? He's a warrior. Devin was -- I mean we came in the locker room, and I'm trying to basically put the wrap on a season, and he was still mad as a hornet. He's mad.

If we told him he could play five more minutes, he would go play five more minutes. He's a hard competitor. We took the loss very hard and he was extremely frustrated. But good players are supposed to be frustrated. So Devin is a high-level competitor.

And I think you saw him blossom. I mean, Devin's always been a scoring point guard. But, my goodness, some of the plays he made in these last two or three games and the leadership he showed, it just shows you stay with it, you stay with it and you can get better from season to season. You can get better during the season.

You can get better game to game. And I thought Devin was just -- he was the best I've ever seen him these last two or three games, as far as leading the team, playing the right way, making really hard shots and obviously you'd like to cap that off with a conference

title. But it didn't happen. But it doesn't take away for how hard and how well he played down the stretch for us.

Q. You yourself set a very high bar for a mid-major, which is make the NCAA Tournament every single year. You've come close but you don't; how do you look at this season? Do you consider it a success? Do you consider it a disappointment because you didn't make the tournament?

COACH DUTCHER: It's always a fine line, because our goal is to make the tournament. So if we don't make the tournament, then we're disappointed and it's not a success. But it's a success at other levels because the team worked, got better all year. Competed at a high level. They played together. They played the right way. So at the end of the day when you go to the tournament seven of nine years and you don't go this year then it's a disappointing season because that's what we wanted to do.

But it doesn't take away from the work they put in so they shouldn't be disappointed in their effort. They shouldn't be disappointed in how hard they played. They shouldn't be disappointed in their teammates or what they put into this year.

But obviously if you don't make the ultimate step and there will be teams next at the end of this month talking about. Was it disappointing you didn't make the Final Four. Yes. Was it disappointing you lost in the national championship game?

So everybody is going to be disappointed at some level. And you have to take whatever satisfaction you can with the work you put into it. And I always tell them hard work's always rewarded.

Maybe not at the time but in the long run for the rest of your life, for our season from now or whatever it is, hard work will be rewarded. So were we rewarded with a trip to the tournament? No. But they were rewarded with being the right people that played the right way and hung together with a bunch of young kids.

I mean, I know no one wants to hear but when you're playing with eight of top 11 are freshmen and sophomores, there's a lot of work that goes into it. I thought we got better and I think it bodes well for the future of San Diego State.

Q. Two years at the helm since Coach Fisher retired. Your thoughts of the program and the general direction you guys are going into.

COACH DUTCHER: That's what Coach Fisher always said we're not a one-hit wonder. We have a program at San Diego State. So we're disappointed we didn't go

this year. But we'll be back here fighting and trying to put ourselves in a position to be back in the tournament next year.

I mean, I think everybody knows -- I'm not trying to Bragg -- we have more conference titles than anybody in the Mountain West. More conference tournament titles. So we have a high standard for our performance.

So when we fall short of that, we fall short of our standard. And so am I disappointed? Yes. But do I think the future is bright and will continue to be bright at San Diego State, yes, because we're about the right things.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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Craig Smith

Sam Merrill

Neemias Queta

Utah State Aggies

Utah State - 64, San Diego State - 57

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Utah State head coach Craig Smith and student-athletes Sam Merrill and Neemias Queta. Coach, an opening statement.

COACH SMITH: Well, what a fantastic game. Obviously San Diego State is -- I mean, they're very, very good, first of all. They're incredibly talented. They're strong, physical, athletic. They're well-coached and they have experience in these types of games.

They've won the most Mountain West men's conference championships in the history of the Mountain West. Obviously they're the defending conference tournament champions.

And so it was a heck of a game. I'm so proud of our team. Obviously just the camaraderie, the chemistry that we have. I've been coaching 23 years. And I've been very fortunate to be on some very good teams, coached an NAIA school that played in the national championship.

These guys, I've never seen a group just bond together and just come as far as we have over the last 10, 11 months or so. And you have to have a great catalyst in your program and these are our two catalysts in Sam Merrill and Neemias Queta.

And Sam's accolades speaks for themselves and Neemias being the Freshman of the Year and Defensive Player of the Year. They played like warriors tonight. What doesn't get talked about enough is the rest of our guys, they're stars in their role. I think that's the key ingredient to being really good. You better have a couple dudes like these two guys, but you better have guys that are stars in their roles.

I can't say enough about the rest of the guys on our team, how we just kept accelerating and getting better game in, game out and week in, week out. And that was the theme of our year, let's just keep getting better.



Let's just keep getting better.

We're playing our best basketball. I don't know, we won 17 or 18, or 18 out of 19, whatever it is. But this game, to be able to hold a team like this -- this has been our calling card all year -- we're pretty good on offense. I think we're fifth or sixth in the country in assists on the year, but it's been our defense.

To hold a team like that to 33 percent for the game and 27 percent in the second half, that's how you're able to close out games and that's how you're able to close out championships.

So want to thank the Mountain West Conference. This league is incredible. The leadership at the top with Craig Thompson, Dan Butterly and the whole administration is just remarkable. They're always there to help a guy out and help our programs out.

And to win this and make history, it's Utah State's first ever Mountain West Tournament championship and obviously regular season as well. And we're proud of that and we're going to carry that and represent the Mountain West in a great fashion in the NCAA Tournament.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Sam, the last couple of nights all you've talked about is wanting to cut down a net. Could you tell us what it was like to finally be able to do that?

SAM MERRILL: I still -- I don't really know. You know, for those of us that have been here for the last few years, it hasn't been easy. I don't really know what to say. Eleven months ago, almost a year ago, Coach Smith was hired, and we felt right away that we were going to have an opportunity to be pretty good.

And as someone who grew up a Utah State fan and grew up watching Utah State go to the tournament and win conference championships, it means the world to me. And it means the world to us as a team.

We've put in so much work. And like everything Coach said, we've worked so hard and we've come together as a team. And I'm still sitting here thinking from where we were, I just -- I don't know. I still can't believe it. It's an incredible feeling.

Q. Queta, a year ago you were in Portugal and you had this decision to come to Utah State. Were you expecting to have this kind of success when you made that decision?

NEEMIAS QUETA: Before I came here I didn't know what I was getting into. But as soon as I practiced, I knew we were going to be this good. And we just kept on working the whole year and it felt awesome just to get win after win after win.

And that doesn't happen like that. You have to work for it. And we did. I'm pretty sure we did and it shows.

Q. Sam or Queta, in that first half you guys struggled. You were up by two at halftime. Then you open up the second half with a 13-0 run. What were you talking about at halftime and how did you implement that to go on the big run, kind of decided the game in the end?

SAM MERRILL: We felt pretty similar to the New Mexico game in the quarterfinals. We didn't feel like we played all that well in the first half. And yet we were still up by two. So we were pretty confident coming out of the half.

But Coach gave us a couple of adjustments we needed to make that were obviously very helpful and stressed the importance of those first five minutes of the second half. And that's when we went on that big run.

So, it's something we've been doing all year. We close halves well, start halves well for the most part. Fortunately we were able to hang on from there.

Q. When will you get to talk to your family about this? And how much does it mean that you get to share this news with them?

NEEMIAS QUETA: Right now it's probably midnight around Portugal. They're probably asleep. So tomorrow. But it's going to be really good to talk to them and share my happiness with them.

Q. Sam, I was curious your thoughts in the first half. Jeremy Hemsley for San Diego State had the reputation of being maybe the best defender in that program's history or certainly in that discussion. What was he like in that first half as you were trying to find some offensive rhythm? And what does he do on a night-to-night basis that's unique defensively if anything?

SAM MERRILL: He's a great defender. The last two games he's made it real tough on me. He does a really good job of mixing things up. When I'm coming off of hand-offs or screens, he kind of keeps me off balance by sometimes going over the top and sometimes going underneath. And obviously he's long and athletic.

So he did a very good job, and give him credit. Fortunately as a team we were able to open things up a little bit there in the second half and we were able to knock down some shots.

Q. Sam, with about four minutes to go in the first half, you had four points. You stepped up. You missed a free throw. You walked away. You kind of said something to yourself. Was that kind of like you, I need to do this now or never moment for you?

SAM MERRILL: Yeah, I feel that way every time I miss a free throw. But, yeah, I had gotten a couple good looks. And I missed them. But I don't know for some reason I missed that free throw and just felt like, hey, like you said, it's time to go, time to get things going. And fortunately I was for the most part able to make some shots there in the second half.

Q. Sam, do you have any distinct memory in particular of that 2011 championship game that you attended?

SAM MERRILL: Just remember they won. I just remember that was an incredible year for that team. I think they finished the season 30-3 or something like that. And I do remember the next day being really upset that they only got a 12 seed.

But it's been a while for Utah State. Obviously eight years since we've been to the NCAA Tournament. It's been probably five or six years since we've been to any postseason. So to be a part of this with this team as a team to kind of help the resurgence of this program, it's been a pretty fun ride.

Q. Sam, Coach mentioned that you held the Aztecs to 27 percent shooting. Could you talk about the adjustments you made in the second half compared to the first half?

SAM MERRILL: We didn't do a great job on Watson in the first half. We fouled him on a 3. Obviously he's great on pump faking, we fouled him there. Fouled him on two 3s. But he had 12 or 13.

So we stressed keeping him off of his right hand and trying to limit his space. And then just Coach stressed to us the toughest team is going to win this game. And that was a game of two very, very tough and physical teams. Obviously San Diego State, that's what they're known for, that's what they do so well.

But we were able to control Watson a little bit better in the second half and didn't rebound as well. But got the rebounds that we needed. And that's part of the reason why we held them to such a low percentage.

Q. Sam and Queta, in that first half, Abel Porter was really integral to you guys keeping pace with San Diego State. He went 4 for 4 and 2 for 2 from 3-point range. How big was he to help you guys get your footing in this game before San Diego State might have built a large lead there?

SAM MERRILL: Abel is a gamer. I've been playing with Abel since eighth grade. And I know exactly what kind of player he is. He's hit a lot of big, big shots for us this year. The New Mexico game, hit a ton of big shots at Boise. Hit a big shot against San Diego State.

So I could -- pregame I could feel that he was locked in and ready. And obviously he's made such great progress throughout the season and his confidence has gone up so much. And to be honest, it wasn't a surprise to us, because we know that Abel's that type of player.

NEEMIAS QUETA: We know Abel's a really good player for us. He's just always with a smile. He's always trying to calm us down whenever we're nervous or anything like that.

We weren't surprised about that. We just kept on playing and he hit some big shots and did whatever he needed to and helped us a lot.

Q. Sam, you mentioned a couple of times throughout this season that your biggest goal in college basketball is to make it to the tournament. Was this kind of a dream come true to you that you're in the NCAA Tournament and you know it's a guarantee at this point?

SAM MERRILL: Actually my goal is to win an NCAA Tournament game. It's been, what, 2002, 2001, something like that, almost 17 years since Utah State's won a tournament game. So this was obviously -- this is incredible. But I feel like we have a lot more left in the tank and we're going to definitely try and show that wherever we end up this next weekend.

Q. Queta, what was your expectations for the season when you made the decision to go to Utah State? What were you hoping for? Follow-up, Sam, the first time you got to step on a court and play with him, what did you think?

NEEMIAS QUETA: I just wanted to get better and improve every day. Coach told me that when he was recruiting me. And I think I did, every day I stepped on the court and tried to be the best player I could be. And I think my teammates helped me a lot improve, to improve and grow, grow a lot from this year.

SAM MERRILL: Practicing with Neemi is great when he's on your team. (Laughter) but you guys have seen it all year. He's a monster inside. And to be honest,

we've been on the same team a lot in practices. But every time I'm not, it's like you don't even want to drive to the rim because you know it's going to get blocked or you're going to have to put up a tough shot. Not only that, but --

COACH SMITH: He might foul, too.

NEEMIAS QUETA: Nah. Nah. I never foul. (Laughter).

SAM MERRILL: Before he got here, I wasn't fully sold because there were a lot of guys -- not as long as him but guys in our league 6'11", athletic, pretty long. And they don't quite have the motor or whatever. But as soon as he got here the first couple of practices you could tell this dude has an absolute motor and he's probably the second-most competitive guy on our team behind me.

But it makes life so much easier playing with him. And we're grateful that the coaches were able to make that late find with him for sure.

COACH SMITH: Tell you one story. First practice, Neemi gets here. We throw him in the first practice. He wasn't here over the summer. And I just told him before practice, "Neemi, we're just going to throw you out. Figure it out." It's five on five, some of our local guys have heard this. And so we're going and we kind of just want to see what he could do, too.

And Sam's right. He's like a Greyhound going from rim to rim. And he just moves so well, defending screen and roll. And then there was a play. I think Sam got beat off the bounce. And -- I'm just kidding, it wasn't Sam; it was someone else. But Sam goes to rotate and Neemi is, "stop, stop. Don't worry about the paint. I got the paint."

I was like, whoa, I like that swagger. And he does have the paint. So he was a prophet and he knew exactly what he was talking about. I've got more stories if you guys want.

NEEMIAS QUETA: I want to go home. (Laughter).

COACH SMITH: We kept Sam way past his bedtime last night. I was a little worried because the afternoon game Neemi likes the afternoon nap, but Sam likes the afternoon game. I was like how are we going to be? But we're good to go.

Q. Queta, obviously you've had a lot of success before coming to Utah State, playing internationally and Europe. Where does this accomplishment and going to the tournament rank amongst your accomplishments so far in your basketball career?

NEEMIAS QUETA: I mean, it's probably the biggest accomplishment in my career. I hope it's not the biggest of my overall career. I will work to get even more of these and improve as a player and get as best as I can be.

Q. Sam, last year after the Boise State game in the tournament you had a really great quote. You said you're not out here to win quarterfinal games; you're out here to win championships. You win a championship tonight. I want to know how it feels sitting next to that trophy compared to what you thought it would feel like? And is it every bit what you thought?

SAM MERRILL: Like I said, I don't really know what to think right now to be honest. I'm still in disbelief. Not disbelief, but like I still can't believe that we actually did it. But at the same time we as a team, we all bought into our system and we didn't have one guy that was trying to do his own thing or was focusing on getting his own numbers or whatever. We all bought in and that's what helped us get here.

Compared to how I felt after the New Mexico game last year in the semifinals, I would say sitting right here feels definitely much better for sure.

Q. Queta, not a lot of players from Portugal have come through the Mountain West Conference. But you're lucky in you get to play with another teammate from Portugal. You grabbed and hugged him, lifted him about five feet in the air. You went up on the stage with the Portuguese flag. How special is it to be able to share this moment with a guy from your home country?

NEEMIAS QUETA: It's very special. Before I came here I didn't know Diogo. But having a Portuguese player and Portuguese-speaking guy here it's really nice. And he knows everything -- he knows a lot of things around here. He teaches me a lot of things around here. He's basically my dad. He takes care of me.

SAM MERRILL: [Inaudible].

NEEMIAS QUETA: No, he's basically my dad. Not you, Sam. But he just takes care of me. And I really love him and we're just going to keep on working to get better.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. Questions for Coach.

Q. Last season, with South Dakota, the past couple of seasons, you've had goals and dreams of winning the Summit League Tournament. The last season you guys lost in the conference championship to also a rival as well. Does it make

it a little bit sweeter having been through those experiences, those hardships, does it make it sweeter to now be on top of the mountain?

COACH SMITH: That's really amazing you just asked that question. When we were on the podium taking pictures with our family, with the team and then our coaching staff and family and I said to our coaching staff, I get a little choked up here, that group at South Dakota was a really, really good group.

And I mean we flipped that thing in two years, and win the regular season title in our third year. And we won 26 games last year. We lost on a last-second shot two years ago.

And then just kind ran into a buzzsaw in the championship game. And those guys believed in us. And I said to the staff I wish these guys -- I wish those guys could feel what we're feeling right now.

You just, as a coach, everyone operates their program differently. We truly operate like being a family. And these guys have been unbelievable. Our team at Mayville, the year before we got there, they won one game. We make the national tournament the first year, get to the Elite Eight the next year, play in the national championship game our third year.

And year before we got there they won one game. And we got three guys that played on that Mayville team at this game tonight. Flew in to be at the game. That means so much. But our guys, God, you just can't stop talking about our players. They're just -- sorry.

It's just an amazing group. When you look at the growth that these guys had and we've talked about our youth and all that kind of stuff. You really think back to the year and not one time did we lose back-to-back games this year. Not one.

You play -- what's our record, 28-6. You play 34 games in the schedule that we had and all the travel, to not lose back-to-back games is like incredibly difficult to do. And I think that just tells you like just the mantra, the toughness, the togetherness, because if you're not connected -- from day one somebody said to me today pregame how are you going to handle it?

We played playoff games all year, literally in terms of being a bubble team. The first time the -- what do you call it, the bracketology started or whatever, we were on the bubble or just outside the bubble.

So every game truly matters and you can't afford slip ups. So quite frankly today -- maybe you can ask the guys -- but today didn't feel any different than any game all year until you come out and see the fireworks. I said to one of the refs, the "Pomp and Circumstance"

and the spirit and atmosphere, fireworks, we've got to get those in Logan, was incredible and that had a big-time feel.

And San Diego State had a good crowd. And every day our fans got better and better. We had a good crowd against New Mexico and an even better crowd day two against Fresno. And obviously tonight, like, I was worried it was going to feel a little more like a road game. Felt like a home game to me. Our fans are incredible.

And from the start of the year our guys really wanted to bring the spectrum magic back. No doubt we did that. And to get to this point is really, I mean it's almost a Cinderella story. And certainly it's been beyond the magical ride for this year. And our journey is not done yet. And that's the whole thing.

We talk about winning and finding a way to win and how do you need to win. But at the same time it's a balancing act of it's the process. And you just gotta keep getting better every day out.

And I can't -- I bet it hasn't been five -- maybe five, I don't know, less than ten for sure, where I just kind of lost it on our team. Not lost it like crazy lost it. But it's just very rare. Our leadership is so good and they know when to pick each other up. And good programs are coached by the coach. Great programs are coached by the players.

And that's what we have. And that goes into the leadership of our upperclassmen and Sam -- and Quinn Taylor I've said it many times to the local media, he's like the godfather, or like EF Hutton -- when Quinn talks people listen.

He's been such a rock. Never too high. Never too low. He's been an amazing mentor for Neemias, just to teach him the ins and outs and some tricks of the trade. He's a veteran of the league. So he knows all the players.

And Quinn is so smart. Every time we put in a new play -- I'm not very bright. I always gotta come up with these quirky names or something. I'll say what do we need to call that. Quinn like on point will just figure something out with a hand signal.

So he's got that talent for him. But to be able to do what we've been able to do has just been really remarkable.

Q. Obviously in talking about the whole bubble and playoff game, you know obviously what was written about the league all year in terms of where it was ranked. But do you think today, as we asked

Coach Dutcher, the deserving two teams are going? And are you proud of that the teams who have set themselves apart will now be representing this conference next week?

COACH SMITH: Nevada obviously had a fantastic season. And for both of us to be tied and the way we came down -- we lost a tough game at San Diego State. And now to -- today was our tenth win in a row, to be able to do that, we knew we had to make a big-time push. But it's not something really talked about. But I mean the two best teams all year have been Nevada and us, certainly.

And so you always want more. I truly believe our league is a league that's on the rise. I really believe that. And so now you get in a field of 68 and we want nothing more than to represent the Mountain West Conference. And a first-class fashion the right way. And obviously Utah State that way and the Aggies.

So we'll be pulling for Nevada like crazy. I would assume they would be pulling for us. And hopefully we can make some noise. But coming into tonight, the tournament, people kept talking about the NCAA Tournament. All we were worried about was this tournament.

And let's validate, let's leave no doubt. Let's validate what we did in the regular season, because it's incredibly difficult. I don't care if you're Mountain West, Big Ten, to go 15-3, that's incredibly difficult to do in conference play. And so to be able to do that and follow it up playing three games in three days.

And you hear teams, Utah State is a good matchup for us. And I think I said this yesterday or the day before. But you look at our team sometimes and maybe in the warm-up line you look at us like, really, these guys are -- you know? But we have so many things that you cannot teach that are difficult to have or find, and it's courage, it's heart, it's passion, and it's just an internal pride to represent our program, themselves and their teammates in a first-class fashion.

And to do some of the things that we've done this year, truly is remarkable and such a credit to our team.

Q. Despite all the favorable projections, your team battled today as if winning depending on going to the NCAA. Was that the mindset?

COACH SMITH: Like Sam said, like our guys said, we were here to win a conference tournament championship. And we weren't -- I never heard -- obviously like people have asked do you think you're in, do you think you're in? Not worried about it.

That stuff doesn't matter. Like we can't control any of

that stuff. All we can control is the schedules that's in front of us and let's go play our best.

And this is as good of a team -- you coach for 20 -- I think this is 23 years. You get a little bit -- some years you've got to really coach effort. And we still coach effort.

But you go into the games and you're, like, gosh, are we going to overlook these guys? Are we going to be ready to play? And then I'm just, like, I think back I take a step back I'm like when haven't we been ready to play? It's been very far and few. Not that our guys are perfect.

And sometimes you've got to call timeout and get them back straight. And sometimes they'll take a few plays off. There's a couple instances yesterday, we're up by 25 and we step in the lane on a violation. Miss a free throw, box out. Those are concentration plays.

But it's been very far and few between. But it wasn't just lip service for our players. When they say something, they mean it. And so to be able to come here and validate and leave no doubt was really what we were looking for.

Q. I wanted to ask you about sharing the net with your family. Some people were like, Coach, you're doing it wrong. They're telling you to cut it down but you took the time to cut off individual pieces for your kids. Why and what did that mean to you?

COACH SMITH: You're trying to get me emotional again. Well, we all know I've been so lucky to be married for 23 years, I think, 24. Don't tell my wife. We have four amazing children. And we leave South Dakota. And I always said it was going to take a special place to leave there because we loved it there. And this is a special place.

And my oldest son is a senior in high school. So you're moving your kids going into their senior year.

And a lot of the public, they don't think about all this stuff. It's always this or that and the other. And your oldest is a senior. I went to Landon, his name is Landon. He's 18 going on 35. And I mean that. Like he's so much smarter than his dad. And a little bit smarter than his mom.

But he's got an unbelievable perspective. And he's like, dad, you've worked so hard for so long and this is something that, if this is something that you really want, like let's do it, let's make it happen. He goes, I'll just pretend like my senior in high school is a freshman year in college. I'm like how many 17 years old -- he's 18 now, he was 17 at the time -- how many 17-year-olds think like that?

I move my eighth grader is now a ninth grader and he was kind of the guy. He was so tight with his friends and now you're moving to ninth grade and you're dealing with all that. And now a seventh grader. My daughter doesn't matter she's running the show anyway. She's a third grader.

They're a huge part of it. When mom is not happy, nobody's happy. When mom is happy, the kids are happy and so is her husband. So I can't -- the lives of coaches' families -- and we do really well and beyond blessed to coach and chase, be passionate and get to make a living doing what I truly love to do. But there's sacrifice that goes along with it. I missed so much of my kids' stuff that's part of the deal. But my wife doing this and doing that and nights at home when you're gone recruiting and your team is gone, to be able to celebrate it together as a family. My parents are here and like I said with the former players, it's just incredible.

So if that little memento, just cutting it down, that's something the kids will remember the rest of their life. I told my daughter -- I told her I was going to teach her how the NCAA Tournament, she thinks she knows. She's researching. Now she's got the word "bracket" in her vocabulary.

She keeps talking about -- she went to her first Final Four last year. She was like dad if we win this game can we make it to the Final Four. Yep, we can. A chip and a chair, like we say, like a poker player. Fitting in Vegas.

That's what we believed: A chip and a chair. The other night against Boise we're down five with 21 seconds to go. And we found a way to get that game into overtime and win that game, and kept our mojo going.

And so anyway, for our kids to be able to have that little piece of memento and they'll keep it in their nightstand or whatever, that will just always be a memory that we'll have forever. And that's what's so amazing about basketball. Not to get a tyrant here or a soap box, but you look at basketball or football, a lot of people say it's just the game. It's so much more than a game.

It's something that unites people. It doesn't matter who you are, where you're from, if you're rich or poor, whatever your ethnicity or background. It doesn't matter. You all come together and you're just people.

Sean (phonetic) and I met because of the game of basketball. It's just amazing how you meet so many incredible people from all walks of life because of a game and you have a platform to use it however you want to hopefully make a huge difference in the world.

Q. How much more difficult is this journey if Queta doesn't make the decision he makes in August and what has he meant to the team?

COACH SMITH: I love the country of Portugal. Certainly Neemias is just -- you see his enthusiasm and his spirit. He just has that -- and like Sam alluded to and every guy on the team there's not one guy that doesn't love Neemi. Obviously a game-changer on both ends of the floor.

If you look at we jump on that 13-0 run to start the second half. And what did we do the first two or three possessions? He was getting the ball. That first half, even when Quinn got the ball down low early, good things were happening for us.

So our guys we made a concerted effort to get it to them. Made it pretty easy. I say easy. It was a still of degree of difficulty. Right shoulder left hook shot that he's really developed the course of the year but the second shot he hit was ridiculous.

And he had that look in his eye. And but then at the end of the day defensively he's just such a game-changer. You forget that he's a freshman. And so but he just has this courage, this charisma, this toughness.

When he gets that look in his eye, look out.

Q. You mentioned you've been feeling like you've been playing on the playoff games all season long. Knowing that you're in the tournament give you some time to celebrate this win and celebrate some of the accomplishments you've had throughout the season?

COACH SMITH: Up until the Selection Show tomorrow. So we've got about, I don't know, 18 hours, I guess. We'll probably give the guys two -- we'll see. We don't know if we'll play Thursday or Friday, but we'll give the guys for sure a day off and probably two days off. But then we've got to get back at it.

It just never ends. We have an unbelievable staff up and down our lineup. Eric Peterson and Austin Hansen and Dave Ragland and all our administrative staff have been absolutely incredible. When the announcement comes tomorrow night, we will immediately find out who are our next opponent is and then we'll see if we survive and advance.

We win that game and then our next two opponents, the one assistant will be in charge of the one game. And then we'll divvy up the other two. And I'll start watching film on those and we'll get rolling right away because it's a quick turnaround.

That's what's been great. These guys will enjoy it for a little bit but we will be on to the next thing really, really quick. And that's where these guys can really -- they're as good as any team that way of not beating their own chest but enjoy it with their teammates and then move on to the next thing.

It's been a great journey. We'll enjoy this for a little bit and hopefully we can survive and advance and make some noise in March Madness.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.