

March 5, 2011



Missouri State – 60
Creighton – 50

An interview with:

**COACH MARTIN
KYLE WEEMS
NAFIS RICKS
JERMAINE MALLETT**

THE MODERATOR: The victorious Bears are with us. We'll ask head coach Cuonzo Martin to give us a statement, and then questions for the three student-athletes.

COACH MARTIN: That was a physical game, hard fought game. They set the tone in the first half, and I thought we did a good job defensively in the first half, but we struggled offensively really executing. Just kind of get a gauge at how they would defend and what plays they were switching. We just made the adjustments in the second half.

I thought it was a good game and physical game, and we found a way to win it.

Q. Kyle, would you like to have a game where maybe you get out in front and have a little easier time of it?

KYLE WEEMS: By now I'm used to it. I'm just happy with how we responded. Being down five at the half, and just like coach said, I thought our defensive rotations were good in the first half. They just made a couple of tough threes in the corner. We just stayed composed like I'm sure you heard me say before. He did a great job of controlling the team, being our quarterback. And we were able to just really bite down and defend. That was the difference until the ballgame.

Q. Did you pick it up a notch in the last game like you guys did?

NAFIS RICKS: You have to have the heart of a champion. Creighton did a good job of taking us out of offense and pressuring us like getting up on the ball and stuff. Second half we made adjustments and came out with the victory.

KYLE WEEMS: I don't think it was over at any point, we've been here plenty of times. We had a lot of close games and we just had to execute at the end of the game.

Q. What I meant was, as seniors did it ever flash in your mind that this could have been your last game to be playing for the Bears?

KYLE WEEMS: Not at all, we proved ourselves through the season. We just have to execute down the stretch and really get key stops and run our stuff.

Q. Kyle, Nafis when he plays well you guys take it to another level. Nafis, follow up on that?

KYLE WEEMS: Coming into the game, we knew Antoine Young is the heart and soul of their team. Just like you guys said, as they go, we knew finding him in transition and slowing him down a little bit was going to be a big key to stopping this offense: We got loose in the first half, and took it upon himself in the second half to bite down and it helped to make shots. Nafis could find him.

But with the ball screens, our bigs didn't really have to do a whole lot of hedging because Nafis did such a good job of fighting through those ball screens. Probably the best job he's done all year. He got that ball fresh off everybody else. We might be behind coming defensively off a back screen, and he's heating that ball up and the point guard can't pass it to the guy that's open until we get back. So when Nafis is eating the ball up that's huge. I think the biggest thing was to pressure them so it wouldn't be easy going to the post.

Q. Ricks, I wonder if you took care of the ball tonight with Adam and Nathan. Is that something coach wanted you to emphasize? You only had three turnovers tonight with the back court.

NAFIS RICKS: Absolutely. Coach always said we should take care of the ball. Good thing we only had three today, normally it's ten a game, but we had to keep it under that if possible.

Q. Kyle, you guys talked about the team defense. Can you talk about your efforts specifically when you're matched up against McDermott and two of the league's better players there?

KYLE WEEMS: Like I said, I try to take it upon myself and meet the challenge. Coach Martin talks about meeting your challenge head on. He's a great player. I'm sure one day they'll be chanting his name as being MVP because he's that good. You can shoot it from the outside as you can see. You can post up, go off the dribble.

But he's a really good player and he'll be really special. I knew that as well as Nafis holding Antoine Young under his average. If I could hold McDermott under his average, we'd have a good chance of winning, and I'd just try to meet the challenge.

Q. You guys were down at halftime, and then what were your thoughts going into after you tied the ballgame and overpowering the win.

JERMAINE MALLETT: We just said this is our game, this is our game, like Kyle said earlier, we've been down and been in this situation plenty of times this year. Our main goal is to keep getting after it.

KYLE WEEMS: As Jermaine said, we always keep our composure. We've seen every basketball scenario, and nothing really flusters us. But like I said, Nafis did a good job of keeping everybody where they needed to be. We knew that the second half is our time.

They had made a couple of their own runs and we didn't make our runs. Nafis did a good job of getting everybody in the second half where they needed to be.

We knew he was capable of that. It was just a matter of him doing it, and he did.

NAFIS RICKS: From last year, getting into the situation from last year and knowing how to close out games and coming back and stopping people on defense.

Q. Jermaine, it seems like you're the kind of guy that keeps the team afloat. Most guys don't get 11 rebounds, 6 offensive rebounds. What is it you saw or got into you?

JERMAINE MALLETT: The whole year the coaching staff has been on us about scratching the board especially threes, fours and fives. Like most of the time not all of the time, but I have a smaller guard on me. I try to take advantage of it. They didn't box out well, but they did a good job of playing defense on us as a whole. And I'm just trying to take advantage of that.

Q. As players, you've been good defensively all year. You held Creighton to eight points in the last 12 minutes of that game. Is that as good a stretch as you've had?

KYLE WEEMS: I would say. I think we held them to 20 overall in the second half, besides that late three by Antoine Young. But to hold a team like that who can space you out and can shoot. They've got Kenny Lawson that can shoot. They've got Echenique down low banging around, and Antoine coming off the ball screens to hold them. That says something about our team and what special things we can do defensively to get wins.

Q. Jermaine and Nafis, tomorrow playing for the tournament championship and also an NCAA automatic bid, your thoughts as seniors of having that as a goal as well?

JERMAINE MALLETT: It will be an honor. Coach Martin told us it's bigger than us. So we've been trying to play for our fans, the community, players before us. Just everybody. Tomorrow's the day. We're just going to try to carry out our game plan, carry out our assignments.

NAFIS RICKS: It would be an honor to go out there and execute the defense.

Q. Cuonzo, what about the make-up of this team leads to the success that you've had after trailing at the half?

COACH MARTIN: I think it's our everyday approach. How we go about our business in practice. I tell them all the time, down 10, down 15 it's a basketball game. If we lose it, the other team's just better tonight. I'm not one of those guys that goes into the locker room and throws chairs around and cussing. Let's make the adjustments and win the ballgame.

I think for our guys I knew I could take coach and I could take criticism. But I think for basketball players sometimes you can say certain things to a guy and he might not respond well and he'll never bounce back from it.

So for me, I'm not attacking character. Let's find out a way to win this game and let's move on.

So I think our guys understand that they're not pressured to perform, just go out and perform. That's a big difference for a basketball player to know he's not worried or uptight. You miss shots, you miss them. Let's just play basketball.

Q. We talked about Nafis setting the tone and talk about his play today?

COACH MARTIN: Whenever he played like he played tonight, we're very tough to beat. I mean, Jermaine Mallett's good off the dribble, but Nafis is good getting to the basket. He sets the tone for us defensively. When he's doing those things, we're very tough to guard.

Now you have Adam, Jermaine, Kyle, Nathan, those guys are setting threes and getting easy baskets as opposed to us grinding down every time down. With what he's doing when he attacks the basket, it makes everybody's job a lot easier.

Q. As good a lockdown defensive performance over the last 12 minutes that you've had?

COACH MARTIN: That's tough to say. I would have to go back to look at scouting reports and games and that situation. But I thought our guys did a good job setting the tone, being more physical. Controlling the glass and boxing those guys out, securing rebounds. Just being in attack mode. And I thought we did a good job of that.

Q. Your freshman Nathan really gave you some hustle plays and quality plays. Could you talk about the local kid coming off the bench?

COACH MARTIN: The kid just battles. It's in his blood. He comes from a successful high school program. His dad coached AAU basketball and got after him. He knows what it is to be tough and physical. He knows how to battle and compete. He's a guy that took a lot of shots in high school, but he understands his role for us to be a solid defender, solid role player. He's one of those guys that can battle for us because he's been there before.

Q. 1 of 8 from the three-point line there in the first half. 2 for 4 in the second half. Did you try to settle down things offensively there in the second half?

COACH MARTIN: Well, once again, I always kind of gauge how things are going. I was a basketball player, and it's hard to tell shooters not to shoot the ball because they're on the floor. I always tell them at halftime, what do you see, what do you think? What play can we run? Because I'm on the sidelines and I see one thing.

But they're in it and it's live. So I can't say don't shoot the ball. If it's shots you practiced, then let them fly.

Q. What did you tell your guys after being down in the first half? What did you tell your team going into halftime? What are you going to do differently from today for the championship game?

COACH MARTIN: Well, the first part, what did I tell them at the halftime? Once again, make the corrections. I thought we were solid, we had two big break downs. I thought we should have switched and they made two threes. At the last play of the half, we ran a good play. I thought this broke us down and did a good job of hedging. But correcting those things. Because I thought our energy was there defensively.

The key for us was doing a better job of moving. Once we made the adjustments and they were switching actions, they made those corrections. So some plays we didn't run, or we tweaked a play to run our offense, and it worked out for us in the second half.

As far as tomorrow, we'll watch film tonight and figure out the best game plan to try to beat them. I'll watch this game today, but it's two different ball clubs. Similar in their approach, but two different ball clubs.

Q. Is there time to think of where this program is on the brink of playing for an NCAA bid in three years or just concentrate on the next game and let whatever happens?

COACH MARTIN: Well, whether your contract is up in 10 or 15 years, in my mind it's one year. I approach it that way every season. I try to do the best job possible. I think our guys put themselves in a great position. I'm looking at this 25-7, 15-3, in Valley play.

I think we're already in the NCAA

Tournament in my opinion. If it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen. We move on. But our guys have done a great job. I'm just thinking of coaching. There's no time to sit back and rest on your laurels or look at your accolades unless you're retiring. Other than that, you've got to keep moving.

Q. Coach, talk about Jermaine Mallett's play today. 18 points, 11 rebounds. Talk about him on the offensive and defensive floor for you today?

COACH MARTIN: Jermaine has always been a warrior. It could be eight points, seven rebounds, six assists. But his game because he's a soft spoken guy and he just battles, he'll guard 6'1, 6'8", it doesn't matter. He's a fighter and true competitor.

Doesn't matter. When he was switched on McDermott, he would just guard him. It wasn't like hold on him while Kyle rested. He's a defender. He's one of those guys that comes over and guys are making shots, he wants to guard whoever it is.

But it's hard to keep him off that glass. Smaller guards can't defend him. He's too tough to keep off the glass. He's so strong and powerful. He's the guy that you want in your ballclub because of what he does on the court as well as off.

Q. You mentioned the halftime adjustments. Are those adjustments as much mental as they are physical, X's and O's, calming the kids down or trying to get them going, or is it just physical adjustments?

COACH MARTIN: The physicals, if we came out lethargic and not ready to play. I don't know how much you can do about that if a guy doesn't have his legs you up under him.

But the mental part for our guys and our staff, say we run a play and they defend it a certain way, we haven't seen him defend it like that, we might put a different guy in that position or run it like this. Those type of adjustments we make in the second half.

Our guys, it's one thing about having a good, experienced team. You can make those adjustments as opposed to whatever happens happens. But our guys made the adjustments.

Q. I imagine you were pretty happy with your team's ball protection today. You didn't commit any turnovers in the first half. Three total in the game. Can I get your thoughts on that?

COACH MARTIN: We've been in the Top 5 or 10 in the country as far as taking care of the ball. And tonight we did a good job taking care of guys. I thought we did a good job with having the ball. That's why we were in the first half, it was only 30 to 25 because we didn't turn the ball over.

We didn't play well offensively, but we did a good job of taking care of the ball. But we've done a good job all season long taking care of the ball. When you only have three turnovers, it's hard to be beaten.

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