

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Wednesday, March 13, 2024

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

UTSA Roadrunners

Steve Henson

PJ Carter

Christian Tucker

Postgame Press Conference

Temple - 64, UTSA - 61

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

STEVE HENSON: Yeah, thank you. Really a tale of two halves. They dictated virtually everything in the first half. We struggled. You always look at your defense and it didn't feel like our defense was quite good enough, but in reality, it was. In the first half, just offensively we couldn't get anything going. We really struggled on the offensive end. We held 'em to 40 percent from the field. We won enough battles on that end. We just couldn't get anything going. They were physical with us.

And then at halftime we kind of flipped it. We started executing better, we started defending much better, and kind of turned the tables on 'em a little bit, made a nice run there. Really proud of our guys, showed some toughness, won a lot of battles. We've been switching a lot of things the last five or six ball games and it turned into a lot of one-on-one defensive battles. Little guys have to battle the big guys in the post, big guys have to fight the dribble against the guards, and they've continued to do that pretty well for about six straight ball games now. We just came up a little short.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll start with questions.

Q. After the last-second loss to the same Temple team three days ago followed by another close defeat today, what emotions are you and the team experiencing right now?



STEVE HENSON: I think all the normal emotions, extreme disappointment. We were playing really good basketball for about four games leading into the Sunday game against Temple. It didn't feel like we played as well -- anywhere near as well in that game as we had the previous four games.

Yeah, just extremely disappointed. The nature of post-season play, it just ends. You're out there and you're fighting your tails off and guys are in the huddle playing with a lot of emotion, talking with a lot of emotion, rallying each other, pumping each other, and then that horn goes off and it's over. So it's a very disappointing feeling.

Q. Christian, despite falling short in the end, the team showed a lot of fight in the second half. What was the mindset and mentality in the locker room during halftime?

CHRISTIAN TUCKER: Our whole thing this last three weeks has been believe, and we didn't give up. We knew that we can compete with this team. We didn't do enough of it in the first half and we knew we had to bounce back in the second half, so we just came out fighting. I mean, we won the second half, but we dug ourselves into too deep of a hole, so...

Q. Can you just take us through that last possession. What was the play call and what did you see from your perspective?

STEVE HENSON: When we had the ball on the offensive end? We were out of timeouts. We had already talked about exactly what we were going to do. It's a play we had in for quite awhile. A little slip on right side to give Tuck a chance to turn the corner, try to peel back a shooter on one side and a seal in on the weak side. It's a play we've been spending a lot of time on, ready to run it. We didn't have any timeouts, so we had talked about it the previous time, if we can get that stop, this is what we're going to run.

It kind of got broken down a little bit. We went early enough that we were able to get an offensive rebound, try to kick it out and get another look, but we were trying to get a three there and just couldn't get it down.



Q. What happened that Juice was unable to play today and how much of an impact was that for your team?

STEVE HENSON: Juice injured his arm/shoulder against SMU, very end of the game. It was extremely swollen. We had a week off after that one, I think. We had several day days off, anyway, and he tried to get a ton of treatment and tried to practice a little bit. We put him in the game on Sunday and he was pretty immobile. His arm's extremely swollen up and he just couldn't contribute the way he wanted to and the pain was continuing to increase. It's really hard to get the swelling out of there, so he just wasn't able to play.

And I guess the second part of that question, yeah, I think the first half when we were struggling so badly offensively, Juice would have helped us there. We've got some good offensive players at times. We're a terrific offensive team. But there was a stretch there where we could have used a guy just to go get his own basket and that's what Juice does best. He creates his own and can go down there in the middle of the paint and pop up and score some points for us. We could have certainly used him in the first half.

Q. Have you talked with Lisa about your future? If not, when do you expect to have that conversation?

STEVE HENSON: No, we have not talked about that at all. We've just been -- had our heads down, grinding away, trying to get better. Loved the way our guys played at the end of the season. Lisa and I always talk at the conclusion of the season, so I'm sure we'll do that again in this case.

Q. I know it's maybe hard to look at this in the moment, but how would you say you did coaching this year? It seems like you got the most out of this team.

STEVE HENSON: Well, thank you. I appreciate that. I love this team. One of the most enjoyable groups of young men I've ever been around in all my days as a player or a coach. I've been doing it a long time. I bounced around with a lot of teams, had a lot of teammates, a lot of players that I've had the good fortunate to coach. I love this group, but honestly, I didn't think we played anywhere near our capabilities on the defensive end. We built this roster with a two-year plan in mind. I thought we were going to be pretty good this year, Coach Peck and Coach Hood were just unbelievable putting this roster together. I love this team on paper, I love the potential of this group. We just didn't defend well enough until the South Florida game, to be honest with you, and then all of a sudden we looked like the team that I thought we could be. So, yeah, we lost a lot of close games, which always that's going to skew your record, you got to find a way to win those games. If we go

back and look, there's just so many close games that went down to one shot or one call or one rebound and that just changes everything. I love this group, we just didn't win enough games.

Q. What is the path going forward to turning this program around? What has to happen to get it to the level that you would like this thing to be at?

STEVE HENSON: The trends, if you study the teams that are having success, it's a real fine line. You got to have -- most of the teams that have success find the right transfers, and then they retain a percentage of them. You look at the teams that are at the tops of their leagues all across the country, they have some retention. This group here, again we set it up so that most of them would be back. Virtually every guy in that locker room wants to come back. Retention is important. Then piecing in the right transfers is very key. Again, I thought we did some of that this year, we just didn't win enough close ball games.

Q. Christian and PJ, you guys, as you look back on this season and today, what are some things that y'all can build on, and what are ya'll's reflections on how this season went?

PJ CARTER: First, I just want to say, I just want to thank Coach Henson and the rest of the staff for just believing in me and, honestly, just giving me a chance. That's all I wanted.

Second, my teammates, they put a lot of confidence in me. They also believed in me. That's all I ask for is just a group of guys who believe in all of each other, who want to win. So that's what I enjoyed most about the group of guys. I feel like it's a lot to build on. These last four weeks we figured out something defensively, that switching, you know, like Tuck said earlier, the last four weeks has been about belief, and every guy in that locker room believed in one another and we wanted to win for each other. So I feel like we just, if we just piggyback on that, come in with a different mindset from the beginning about belief and trust in one another, then things will be a lot different.

CHRISTIAN TUCKER: Yeah, like he said, just proud of everyone on the team. Everyone in the organization. My teammates never gave up the whole entire season. The coaching staff believed in all of us. We had a rough stretch at the beginning of the season trying to figure it out, we had three returners and all the rest were new people, transfers. Coach Henson doesn't get the credit that he deserves for putting that together, and the rest of the coaching staff, too. So, I'm proud of this team. We didn't accomplish what we needed to, but we got a lot to learn and a lot of room to grow.

Q. This being a unique season in the transition to The American, just talk about what the experience was like for you and the level of competition that you've gone up against in this conference.

STEVE HENSON: Yeah, it's a terrific jump. The talent was improved. The competition every single night was terrific. People talked about the physicality, leading into the season we heard a lot about the physicality, how physical this league would be. I didn't notice it necessarily up front with the 4s and 5s and around the rim necessarily, but the perimeter guys in this league were just so much bigger. All the guards in this league look like linebackers. It was a lot of fun to get out and see all these other arenas, the facilities, the traditions in this league. It's an excellent basketball league, and we enjoyed it immensely.

Q. To the student-athletes, you heard your coach say that he loves this team. What is it about your head coach that makes you want to fight for him night-in and night-out? What's so special about the leadership that he has?

PJ CARTER: Same thing like Tuck said, like we feel like he don't get enough credit. He just believe in all of us. Like, it's that -- I really can see, day-in, day- out, you know, he put a lot of confidence in us. It's the whole staff, I'm not going to lie, like they all believe in us, and we trust them. They make it easy for us to go out there and play. They really think they can get it done. We also believe we can get it done, so with them putting that trust and that confidence in us it makes it easy for us to go out there and play.

CHRISTIAN TUCKER: They got a lot of belief in us and we believe in them, too. They put in so much work. Sometimes I'll come to the gym late at night and they will still be in there. So I know that they trust in us and they trust in themselves to get the job done and they put us in the right position to be successful.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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