

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 14, 2024

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

East Carolina Pirates

Michael Schwartz

Ezra Ausar

RJ Felton

Postgame Press Conference

East Carolina - 84, Tulsa - 79

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

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: First of all, just a lot of respect for Coach Konkol and the Tulsa program and their players. I thought that they have been playing as good as anybody in the league, particularly the last couple weeks, and so we knew it was going to be a great challenge and test for us.

So I feel very fortunate. Very proud of our guys, these two guys and our whole team, because this win today really defined resiliency in terms of the flow of the game and that's something that our players exemplified today.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Ezra, 28 points tonight. You guys dominated them in the paint 42-16. Really, a question for both of you guys. How were you able to be so successful in the paint and was that part of the game plan going in?

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Absolutely. We knew we have to get to the paint, whether it's offensive rebounding, whether it's driving the basketball, or throwing the ball down low to Ezra, Brandon, and RJ. These are our three guys that we post. Brandon is not up here with us, but those three guys we have full confidence in. And a lot of teams use a double team, like Tulsa did tonight, and I thought our guys did a good job getting it out of there.

But we're not going to win a 3-point shooting battle versus anybody. Tulsa hits 10 threes or 11 threes, whatever they



hit tonight, that's never our game plan going in. We're going to shoot it, but we knew we have to get to the paint and I thought these two guys and Brandon did a great job of it.

Q. Your next game is going to be up against USF and I just wanted to know what the feeling is in the locker room as you look to knock down a top seed.

EZRA AUSAR: We're just remaining confident and humble. We're just going to prepare ourselves for tomorrow's competition. Ain't nothing much to be said.

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: They're the league champs, they have had a great season, just their whole team, their players, a lot of respect for them, and so we know it's a great test for us.

Q. When did y'all notice the rim was maybe off-center or the goal and it looked like it happened on that dunk earlier and then kind of take us through that weird sequence and then having to finish the game after that.

RJ FELTON: I'll answer this one. It was that breakaway dunk that made the rim crooked, man.

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: It definitely wasn't me hanging on the rim.

EZRA AUSAR: I noticed it at the free-throw line. When I dunked the ball with power, Coach Schwartz said it was going to be hype for me, so I had to go punish that one.

Q. Y'all played four minutes of game action with it like that. Do you think that maybe affected anything and was it hard at all to refocus after that? Because it was a pretty long delay.

EZRA AUSAR: No. We just needed the rim to be adjusted. I know the free throws weren't falling, so...

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: It's one of those things. What are you going to do? It's what it is. We had just missed a couple free throws. I'm glad that Ezra noticed it. I didn't even realize what was going on until the officials talked

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about it. So I'm just glad that in terms of being aware and observant. And you just have to go ahead and keep moving forward and I thought our guys responded after -- things happened and our guys responded. Again, that goes back to the resiliency piece.

Q. RJ, you've been on a tear lately scoring a bunch of points, but when you got guys like Ezra having a season high and Brandon pitching in, what does that kind of do just for the floor? How does that open up everything for you?

RJ FELTON: Wherever they find me or focus on me that's going to open up for the guys. Like, when I drive and when the defense collapses, that's going to allow Brandon and Ezra to go to work. That's what happened today. When two guys came in, it was an open kick and they knocked down shots. Ezra had a hell of a game and I hope we can carry that over into the next game.

Q. Ezra, what is it about that building? Does it give you some confidence? You obviously played well there last year. Did you kind of know going in maybe this is a chance to really play well again?

EZRA AUSAR: I'm just out there playing hard. I'm not playing for no points or anything. I think I'm more focused on the defense and just my intensity to just play hard all the time, and the game just came in to me.

Q. Going into this tournament, obviously I know it wasn't the way you wanted to end the regular season, but you kind of touched on it with the resiliency aspect, but coming back and winning today, how much does that mean to your team and now maybe going on a run in this tournament?

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Well, I'm definitely not thinking about it in terms of a run. I'm thinking about it in terms of what you just said, that we knew playing one of the hottest teams in the league, we had obviously lost five straight, the last two very heartbreaking, gut wrenching, losses, the SMU game on the road and Charlotte at home. And you know what I've always loved about this team, these two guys next to me and everyone else in the locker room, is that every day in practice, every film session, whatever it is, there's an excitement and an energy to try and get better and be ready for the next game.

I thought for the three days we prepared for this as we traveled here the guys showed that and I don't think we win the game if they don't have that, so I give them all the credit in terms of their mindset, mentality. Would we have liked to have not ended the season that way? Of course. But you know what? It's a fresh season, we're in the

conference tournament, and you have to go try and go 1-0 today and we got that accomplished.

Q. Going off that, you mentioned it, you go into that tournament losing five in a row, but was there a sort of a sense that this isn't us, we have a new chance, a fresh slate to just kind of reset a little bit and just kind of do what you can do?

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Sure, of course. I think everybody in the country goes with a reset. I think the only time you don't want a reset is when you're playing your very best basketball down the stretch, and even then it becomes a reset. I've been apart of those programs too where you have extreme winning streaks, are playing really good, and you almost feel like you just want to keep it going. But you have to reset. You get three or four days off, you travel, it's a totally different feel and environment.

Again, the maturity and I believe the resiliency of our players is what allowed us to reset, and we got back to doing some of the things that we had done well when we were playing our best basketball in early February, which was assisting on made field goals, we had 17 assists, offensive rebounding, defensive rebounding at a high level, we won the rebounding battle today, and those were the areas we focused on going into this game.

Q. I'm sure you guys are now taking it one game at a time, but obviously four games in four nights that's what you have to do to get to the NCAA Tournament. What do you believe this team needs to do, both preparation and rest-wise, to put themselves in the best position possible to do that?

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: One of the most simple questions you can ask me, and it's do everything we can to prepare for South Florida tomorrow. That's all we can do. That's what's in front of us, give ourselves a chance to be in position to be able to answer that question one more time.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you.

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