

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 14, 2024

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Memphis Tigers

Penny Hardaway

David Jones

Nae'Qwan Tomlin

Postgame Press Conference



Wichita State - 71, Memphis - 65

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

PENNY HARDAWAY: Yeah, Wichita State did a phenomenal job. They were the hungrier team today. When you beat a team two times, you got to come in with way more energy because you know what you're going to face. We did it for about a seven-, eight-minute span there out of the 40 minutes and it cost us. You can't keep coming back from being down. You have to start from the beginning of the game and we got ourselves in a hole and couldn't dig out of it.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. Questions?

Q. When you look at the season in totality, I know you said it was two different teams, pre-Caleb Mill's injury and then after that, but not being able to figure it out after that, when you look back at it all, what was the biggest reason that it boils down to to you?

PENNY HARDAWAY: Man, I wish I knew. I wish I knew, man. I don't really know. We lose Caleb, who was a leader, a vocal leader and a great defender, and definitely an extension of the coach on the floor and we were definitely missing that in the second half of the season, so maybe that's the biggest reason.

Q. For the players, was there a point during the game where it finally sunk in that you guys weren't going to be able to come back? Was there like a specific point where you realized that, and then if so, how did that

make you feel?

NAE'QWAN TOMLIN: I mean, we were down six with, like, 10 seconds left to go, so I guess that's when we knew we wasn't going to come back.

Q. You've evolved how you put rosters together obviously with the transfer portal more heavily this year than any other year, but when you look at how you're going to build this thing next year, what are the biggest learning lessons and how might you change things up on how you put this roster together?

PENNY HARDAWAY: Well, we ended up getting a lot of guys late and I love all those guys. We ended up getting them late, but my teams have always been built on defense. I didn't have a defensive team this year. Guys played hard, but we didn't have the defensive guys that we've had. So that's what it boils down to. Memphis basketball is about defense, rebounding, blocked shots, the whole nine. It's not really about offense. We've used our defense to be our offense, and I veered away from that this year to get talent, and they were talented guys, very talented, and you get a major injury to Caleb Mills, I mean, it hurts you, it's devastating, and we're trying to regroup from that, and then every game becomes about offense instead of defense.

We had our moments where we showed that we were really good in certain cases, but just like today, man, we came out like we had another game tomorrow. That's not Memphis basketball. I take that on myself. It just has to be -- I'm a defensive-minded coach, and that's what I believe in. Your defense starts your offense, and that's what we've had for five years until this year. This is my best offensive team I've had, but the defensive side of the ball wasn't what I really wanted. I like to switch up defense, pressure the ball more, what the fans are used to seeing. Didn't get a chance to do that this year.

Q. Today especially speaking of the defense, on the perimeter in particular, what was it that you wish you had done more of or wish you had done better?

PENNY HARDAWAY: Well, the game plan was set.

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Everything that they did we knew exactly what they were doing. All we needed was to harden the effort into it. Every game we've gone into we've known what to do. Obviously I wish we would have got stops. The pick-and-roll hurt us today. It's hurt us all season. We knew what they were going to do. We knew they were going to throw lobs. We still had lapses. The last play when it took them up one point, when they threw the lob to Ballard, we knew that play was coming. Just got to -- just, I don't know, man. It's tough when you know exactly what's going to happen, when it's going to happen, when you see the set, and you can't stop it.

Q. You told us Monday that you think you've been doing a good job, but obviously this year was just not the result that you wanted. Regardless of what happens from this point on, whether you make the NIT, the CBI, or whatever it is, what do you think you could have done differently this year to maybe get a different result?

PENNY HARDAWAY: I don't try to shortchange myself because I take every loss as the head coach, but I work really hard. I really do. I'm working 20 hours a day to be really in tune and locked in. There's no coach that's going to outwork me. I teach, I'm a teacher of the game, so I mean, obviously, I'm a players' coach, so in some areas I let some things slide because I played the game. It just has to be different for me next year.

Obviously this hurts because I wanted to do well for the team, for the school, and the city. This does not sit well with me because it just wasn't the representation of who we should be. It's just tough, tough to watch after you prepared and not be able to do anything about it being over on the sidelines. It just is what it is, man. I've taken all the losses all year. Again, it ain't what I would change, it's just the punishment of the things that were going on this year would change and that's going to get better with me moving forward.

Q. Obviously almost a year to the day where you guys were sitting on the podium on a Sunday as champions. Historic. Now on the other side of that, unfortunately, today. What do you tell your seniors who won't be able to lace 'em up as a Tiger next year?

PENNY HARDAWAY: Just to learn from this year. It's going to get harder for them moving forward because now you make those same mistakes, then you can get cut. You don't have another year, you don't have another game. So now everything that you need to be sharp in, it's not an option. It's mandatory for you to get those things down now. I told 'em that I love 'em and if they need me, I got their backs, but harsh reality is right around corner.

Q. You said y'all came out today like y'all had another game tomorrow, like you just knew you had another game. With the season on the line, with everything at stake, how do you explain that? Like, what went wrong for y'all to come out flat like that?

PENNY HARDAWAY: You have to talk to the players. They probably can answer. I don't know. We were well prepared to play the game. Do you want to hear from them?

Q. Sure.

PENNY HARDAWAY: He want to know how at the start of the game, why were we so flat. I don't have an answer.

NAE'QWAN TOMLIN: I don't know. I don't know.

Q. Looking ahead to next year, I know Penny said a couple weeks ago he was pretty optimistic about you coming back, you're obviously going to have professional opportunities, is the door open for you to come back for another season here?

DAVID JONES: Yeah, everything's possible, that's all I can say. I like Penny as a head coach, so we're going to see.

Q. If a NIT invitation is extended --

PENNY HARDAWAY: Zero. No sir. I'm not accepting any invitations.

Q. I mean, what's the thought process behind that?

PENNY HARDAWAY: Just a decision. I'm just making that right now. I'll talk to the administration, but I'm not looking to play no more NIT's, man. I'm sorry I'm not disrespecting the NIT, it's just, it's been a tough season already. Mom been in and outs of the hospital, in the hospital now with throat cancer, dealing with a whole lot, and just dealing with basketball at the same time. I know this is my job, but that's not my first option.

Q. You just talked about it's been a tough season on and off the court and dealing with things with family. Just how you've navigated this and tried to be the leader that you work to be every single day, knowing that there's bigger things than basketball, obviously, going on in your life.

PENNY HARDAWAY: Yeah, it's very difficult being a caretaker of my mother. I have no help until I leave town, so it's just me. To deal with the basketball side of it as well has been very difficult. But I do know I have a job and I've

handled it really well.

Q. For you, when you look at this team, I know this is not the way that you want the season to end and you just talked about not accepting an invitation to the NIT, are there positives that you can build on from this season? Are there things that you feel like can help the foundation of next season?

PENNY HARDAWAY: Yeah, for sure. Obviously I got -- I am definitely a man on fire from this season. I've learned so much. There are things that I can take from this season into next season and moving forward.

Q. For the players, when you look at Penny Hardaway, I understand today's hard, but when you look at Coach Hardaway, what does he mean to you as a basketball player and as an individual?

NAE'QWAN TOMLIN: Coach Penny means a lot. He's played the game, he's played at a high level, he's a Hall of Fame player. So, for him to be our head coach and for him to teach us the game, we should have did way more to not only help him, but help the city of Memphis and help the school and just go out there and play harder.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, Coach.

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