

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 14, 2024

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

North Texas Mean Green

Ross Hodge

CJ Noland

Rubin Jones

Postgame Press Conference

North Texas - 81, Tulane - 71

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

ROSS HODGE: Yeah, first of all, I want to congratulate Coach Hunter and his team. I have a lot of respect for them. I know the regular season didn't probably go quite how they wanted it to go, but we had so much respect for them and knew how difficult they were to guard. Those guys coming back, Kevin Cross is a handful, Sion James, Forbes, they can really stretch you out and make it hard on you defensively because they can get you in some cross matches.

I thought the first 10 minutes of the game we didn't have enough hardness. It was a little too easy for them. And then I thought like that last 11-minute stretch of the first half, we upped our activity level, started getting deflections, got some easy baskets, and I thought that kind of turned the tide for the rest of the game.

Super proud of our guys. These two guys were tremendous. CJ had one of his best games of his college career and Rubin made really big shots down the stretch and just kept making the simple play. For us, 10 assists is a big stat. I don't know our exact record now, but I know Luke would probably know. I think it's like 15-2, 16-2 when we have 10-plus assists. 18 is a really good number for us. Thankful to be part of this and thankful to continue to keep playing.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. We'll take some questions.



Q. It seemed like you guys waited all season to have your whole team back. How much did that really help you guys to have everybody available tonight?

ROSS HODGE: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, it goes without saying, we feel really confident in our group. These guys have worked really hard behind the scenes to get themselves back onto the floor. Again, I think that's helped shape who we are as a team. We faced adversity all year long and just keep showing up and keep working and keep supporting each other. Yeah, it's nice. Again, Rondel was huge, first game back, and it is hard this time of year because you don't necessarily get a ton of practice time, but he's worked really hard to get back and he made some huge shots in the second half of this game today. Big ones.

Q. You have an experienced team. The guys to your left have played a lot of basketball. How important is that come tournament time in March?

ROSS HODGE: Yeah, you have to have the size and physicality to defend and rebound at all levels, but guards win college basketball games, and we have got really good ones. The way they share the ball, the way they trust each other, play off each other, you're going to have a chance most nights because you can put the ball in their hands and you know good decisions will be made.

Q. Up next round three versus FAU. How difficult are those round threes versus any team and what's the game plan looking like as you guys try to slow down some shooters when you guys have actually been successful at limiting Vlad Goldin at 13 and 11 in the two matchups this year?

ROSS HODGE: Have a ton of respect for Coach May and his group. I haven't really thought about them a ton in the last 48 to 72 hours. We did just play them, what was that? Like, a week and a half ago. So we're very familiar with them. There's not going to be like a ton of newness associated with it.

But, yeah, man, they're another team that can really hurt



you in transition with the amount of ball handlers that they have and they have a lot of collective experience together. We feel really fortunate to be playing them tomorrow. That's what you want to do. You just want to keep playing.

Q. The obvious question here is it looked like Aaron went down in the middle of that game. What happened and what's his status going forward?

ROSS HODGE: Not exactly a hundred percent sure. Getting all that figured out right now. Won't have any sort of official comment on it. Obviously I haven't had an opportunity to talk to any medical personnel, it was just like a -- I don't even know the best way to put it, like an illness. It wasn't an ankle or a knee or anything that was that. But that's what I do know. The rest I don't know. We played, went in the locker room, celebrated, and we came up here. So as soon as we get some information, I'm sure it will get put out.

Q. CJ, you had a huge dunk to extend the lead to 33-26 with four minutes left in the half. Can you walk us through that play a bit.

CJ NOLAND: I seen the two guys down there in the paint and they just kind of parted like the Red Sea and I just knew I had to dunk this one.

Q. Coach mentioned it there. You had a career night and I think something that really defined it was your toughness on the night. There was that one play where you got hit on the defensive end, got up, got the ball, and then got fouled. In physical games, how do you feel you play and does that match your game?

CJ NOLAND: I mean, that's what we are, we're tough, and that's what we're about. I just try to follow that motto and anytime you get hit or fall to the floor, pop back up and next play.

Q. Seemed like the difference in that game was the big run in the first half where you got hot from deep. What happened during that run?

RUBIN JONES: We do everything off of defensive stops. When we get stops we feel like we can play in transition. We got so many guards that can just pitch the ball ahead and get a piece of the paint, when we get a piece of the paint our offense is really good. It's basically that, we start on the defensive end.

Q. What was it that got you guys going from deep? Did you just get good looks or inside out looks or what went into the shooting performance tonight?

RUBIN JONES: We take good shots and we shoot with confidence. Coach challenged us after that, after they had their little run at the beginning of the game, first 10 minutes, and kind of picked it up from there.

Q. Four guys ended with double figures tonight. Do you feel like the team is starting to click at the right time?

ROSS HODGE: Yeah, that's kind of been a common theme when we've had everybody in uniform here. Again, I think it just speaks to the selflessness of this group, that they trust each other, they make the simple play, and the ball will find the right person. When you're playing that way, you do become very difficult to defend, because you can't just like hone in on one person. I thought Bugs had a tremendous floor game. If you look at him, 2-4 from three, five rebounds, he was close to being in dub figures, three assist, no turnovers, plus 16. So, yeah, we were close to having a fifth and, yeah, man, it's nice to have all your guys in uniform. It's a fun way to coach.

THE MODERATOR: All right, Coach, thank you.

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