

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 15, 2024

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

East Carolina Pirates Michael Schwartz Ezra Ausar RJ Felton

Postgame Press Conference

South Florida - 81, East Carolina - 59

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: Yeah, we all saw why South Florida was the champs in this league. I thought they played really good basketball today. They were dynamic on offense, shot the basketball very well, made 14 threes at a high percentage, and I thought that was a big piece of the game. We see why they are the team they are and why they have the Co-Player of the Year in the league in Youngblood.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Questions?

Q. Obviously, just knowing that they can shoot from so many spots, but Knox hitting five threes, how much of a surprise was that and how much does that maybe change things when they got so many other guys that can also shoot?

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Well, there were times that they had four guys on the court and even five that could all stretch the court out and shoot the basketball. RJ and I were just talking as we walked in and he made the comment, Man, Knox was really a big X factor in this game. In terms of anytime someone goes 5-6 and he's not their primary guy that obviously stretches your defense thin because you start to stretch out and now other things open up for other guys. But he did a fantastic job and you give him credit for making shots.

What we were trying to do was to protect the paint. We



didn't want to get in rotation versus South Florida. Being a good shooting team, we thought taking contested threes or threes off the bounce, and they made those too. I think some of the shots that Youngblood hit and Selton, really good shots.

Q. I know it's early in the game and we talk about this sometimes, but just when you kind of get in that early hole, just how, I guess, maybe difficult is it just to kind of play uphill throughout that game?

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: You never want to be in an uphill battle. When we played South Florida in Greenville, they started the game on a 11-0 run and ended up winning the game by 11, and three minutes into the game it was a game again, so we basically played an even game. But the reality is we never were able to get out of that hole. We basically played an even game for 37 or 36 minutes.

So, yeah, that hole does start. Again, it's like anything, a run at the beginning of the game, a run at the end of the game, that closes a game out, and at the end of the day, it's a team having a lead on you. And so, yeah, it is difficult to do that, especially when we're not a team that's going to rely on the three ball. We were not able to turn them over today. It's something that late in the season we haven't done as well, turn teams over, as we did earlier in conference play. So to get those baskets and fight an uphill battle is definitely not something you want to be in versus the top team in the league.

Q. For the players, there was a stretch in the first half definitely where y'all were doing a good job getting into the paint off the bounce and kind of scoring consistently there. But then they kept hitting threes kind of to answer those. How frustrating was that and to not maybe press and try to force things when y'all were kind of having some offensive success during that stretch?

RJ FELTON: I would say it like this, they hit, I think they went 8-15 in the first half and we went for 4-11 in the first half for three. So, I mean, those were pointed daggers. Like we'll come down and score like a two and then they will hit a three. I feel like that's just basketball. Basketball's

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a game of runs. They went on their run early and they kind of built on that.

Q. For the players as well, I know you guys got a tournament win yesterday, but just kind of finishing the season 6-7 losing, can you guys maybe point to anything that just kind of felt different at the end of the year for you guys?

RJ FELTON: I just felt like at the end of the year we played against the No. 1 team, yeah, we played against the No. 1 team in the tournament, I'll just say that, kudos to them. I'll just say that we need to build off this going through the off-season, saying like, hey, we got to build off this.

EZRA AUSAR: Same thing RJ said. Basically just build off this. No excuses. I'm proud of me and my whole team. We did the best we could, no excuses, we're just going to have to swallow this one. We lost.

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: And I know what you were asking, I'll give you that answer. Late in the season in this stretch late February and early March, the two areas that plagued us a bunch, number one was turnovers. We went through a stretch where we didn't play our best basketball and we turned the ball over way too many times. The SMU game, the Charlotte game, and the Memphis game, three games in particular down the stretch of when we were not winning ball games, it was turnovers that was the biggest thing on offense.

Then on the other side it was defensive rebounding that was something that hurt us late in the season versus some very good offensive rebounding teams, particularly Memphis and SMU, but offensive rebounding allowing those, so that was the back end of our defense. So those two areas, to answer your question, about maybe things that we didn't do as well in the final two and a half weeks of the season, was that, was turning the basketball over and defensive rebounding.

Q. This may be an easier question to answer in the weeks ahead, but as you kind of look into your crystal ball, look at the off-season, what are the real areas you and your staff want to attack to continue to take ECU basketball to the next level?

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: No, I think that's a great question. I think you're right. I think that's what it's going to take moving forward. But number one is going to be the continued building of the guys that we have. We're not going to change our philosophy of development and getting better, it's something that has provided some good moments and good results, stuff that ECU has not done

prior, including winning conference tournament games back-to-back years, where prior to that they had not had an American Conference win at ECU, in terms of the post-season tournament. It's because of these guys and it's because of the guys in the locker room. So there will be a continued effort of development. We will do absolutely self evaluation, evaluation of myself, I will look in the mirror, look at the coaching staff, we will all look at how we can be better this off-season. Not only X's and O's-wise, but recruiting is a huge piece of that as well as we all know, that's one of the life lines of college basketball, so we will attack it that way. Again, there is nobody sitting at this table or in the locker room, and it starts with me, that is happy with where we finished, how we finished, or where our record overall record is. Does that mean there isn't progress at ECU, does that mean we're in a place that ECU has not been in before, in the third round of the American Conference tournament, with seven wins and eight total, yeah, we've done some things that have been positive that we will build on, as RJ and Ezra talked about, but we will absolutely self reflect, evaluate and make the necessary adjustments to be even better next season.

EZRA AUSAR: In addition to Coach Schwartz' response, he did a hell of a job getting us better this season, him and the coaching staff, so definitely want to tell him, me and my teammates, we all appreciate you and the coaching staff, for sure.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you.

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