

# American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 15, 2024

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

**UAB Blazers**

**Andy Kennedy**

**Yaxel Lendeborg**

**Daniel Ortiz**

Postgame Press Conference



UAB - 72, Wichita State - 60

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

ANDY KENNEDY: I thought coming into the game -- and I said this prior. I've been in both of these situations. Don't let these good looks fool you. I've been around the track a few times in my career. I've been the first seed, the second seed, and all seeds in between.

But I knew that coming in, and I told our team this, I felt like Wichita State was going to have the advantage to start the game. Why? Because they have been in here for two games, they have had success coming off maybe their biggest win of the season in knocking off Memphis yesterday. So they were going to come in confident and playing really good basketball. We haven't played in five days. Today, this morning, is the first time we were actually in the Arena. So I knew it was going to take us a little bit to settle in, but I knew if we could stay competitive and really -- and try to win the physical battle, because Wichita State is a very, very physical team, and if we could engage notice physical battle, I felt like then the advantage would be ours in the last eight to ten minutes of the game simply because you can try to psych yourself up all you want, playing three games in three days is difficult on your body.

I felt that luckily Yax kept us in the game, hence the cowboy hat. He kept us in the game throughout by giving us second-chance opportunities, making timely shots for us. We were grinding, we were grinding, and I said if we could ever put some real game really. Daniel Ortiz

stepped up huge for us, made some big shots down the stretch to allow us to advance.

THE MODERATOR: The hat is a good look.

ANDY KENNEDY: It's a good look, yeah.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll take questions.

**Q. The shots weren't necessarily falling for both teams, but you get to the free-throw line. How important was that especially to finish the game?**

ANDY KENNEDY: We've been pretty average in a lot of areas throughout the course of the season. We're really good in two areas. We're really good off our offensive glass, one of the tops in the country in offensive rebounding percentage, and we're really good at the percentage of points we score. We're getting just under 78 a game, so it's not like we're at a snail's pace. But we get a large percentage of those from the free-throw line. It's kind of how our team is built. We're always trying to put pressure on the paint, play inside out, a little bit of old school basketball, but it's how we're built.

We just wanted to stay aggressive and we were hoping again down the stretch tired legs would give us an angle and then we had to finish some plays inside.

**Q. You beat South Florida before they went on their big run. What do you remember about that game and what can you take from that, if anything, going into this matchup tomorrow?**

DANIEL ORTIZ: I would say I remember it being physical. They got a lot of big guards and just a big team overall. I would say it was a battle, so I expect it to be another battle for either team to advance.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: To add to that, they have a lot of skilled players. Like, Kasean Pryor, for sure, he's skilled big guy that can do everything on the floor, so we just have to take advantage of him and try to get him in foul trouble as quickly as we can and just try to use our Will, play physical like we always do.

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ANDY KENNEDY: Two JuCo guys going at it. We're bringing it back.

**Q. You look at Gaines' game, he only had 10 points, but you just look at the seven assists, two blocks, five steals. Just how important was he in just guiding this offense, especially in the second half when y'all were able to start taking over and pulling away?**

ANDY KENNEDY: The biggest play of the game was the fact that Eric Gaines at the top of that 1-2-2 got his hand on a ball, Daniel picks it up after he just made one three in the corner, and comes down in transition and shot another three. That was really our first two-possession plus separation in the game, Eric being active, one of the five steals, as you mentioned. And when we've got AJ Vasquez, when he got eliminated from the game, they said for throwing a punch, you know AJ. I don't think there was anything malicious. There was a lot of grabbing and holding and they were just following the letter of the law.

So we were really tight. We play typically eight guys. We don't have a super deep bench as it relates to our backcourt, so we're taking out a guy that was coming in off four consecutive double-figure games for the First Team All Season, meaning AJ, and playing really good basketball. The other guys really had to step up and it started with Daniel stepping up huge for us down the stretch.

**Q. What did you guys do different with Colby Rogers today and how big was that for you guys that he didn't go off like he did the first game against you guys?**

ANDY KENNEDY: He played 40 minutes. Wow, what a kid, man. Just for the record, I voted for him All-Conference. I think he's an All-Conference player. I think he's probably one of the best three level scorers in this league. He can really go get it for himself.

Honestly, we just tried to keep his touches to a minimum, make him work off the ball. Gaines wanted the assignment and his quickness allowed him, again, to make Colby have to really work before he got the ball, and then we tried to shrink the floor like we always do. And, again, playing three games in three days, the kid's played almost 120 minutes of basketball. He is a high jump shooter. The way he shoots the ball he really elevates kind of old school. He's got kind of a Walter Davis to his jumper, you know the Hound, doesn't he? The way he brings it up, elevates.

I thought the fact that there was a very, very physical game, the fact that we were working hard to keep the ball off of him, I think all of those things contributed to him not being his best.

**Q. Daniel, what were you able to see there in the second half? You really started to get hot, you were able to make some open threes. Just what were you seeing from their defensive alignment there in the second half?**

DANIEL ORTIZ: I mean, I knew I was going to get opportunities. It just came down to we was going to make 'em or not. Just me being confident and shooting the ball. So I mean, it hasn't been the year I wanted it to be, me shooting the ball or me just being as a player, but at this time of the year, you get the mindset of kind of forget all that, it's time to win, and however you can advance is all that matters. So this time of year you kind of got to forget about everything that happened during the season and try to impact your team winning and that's what I came out there and did today.

**Q. When you're playing in a situation you're playing, game after game after game like that, how much prep is just rehearsing your stuff and how much is trying to get ready to evaluate the next team's stuff?**

ANDY KENNEDY: Today's game, because we had just played Memphis and we had just played Wichita State recently, you said it in the first question, is the fact that we haven't played South Florida since early January.

Now, obviously, I have seen them just as a fan of the league and watching their success, but also in scouting other opponents. Amir's done a tremendous job. He should be in serious conversation for National Coach of the Year with what he's been able to do and it's a shame that a few non-league losses early is keeping him out of a serious at-large consideration.

But I think they have got a tremendous team. I think they have really maximized who they are, how they're built. So for us, to answer your question, we'll get back, we'll refresh these guys on actions, and ultimately it comes down to dudes, though, man, who can sit down and guard the ball, who can make plays. We'll try to give them a few nuances here and there, how they're going to attack our different looks because we throw a lot of looks at you by design and we have to know how they're going to attack a lot of those things.

But it will really be about hydration, rest, man. All these guys are excited about the opportunity and the victory, but you got to take care of yourself between now and 2 o'clock tomorrow for 2 o'clock to be what you want it to be. We'll get 'em as prepared as possible.

**Q. With moving Christian Coleman in the starting**



**lineup, what went into that decision and how big was he early on with his energy early on?**

ANDY KENNEDY: I thought it was two-fold. Number one, JD's been struggling a little bit with early fouls. I thought Chris had been playing very well down the stretch, and you don't want to say deserved, all these kids deserve it, you're just trying to put the best pieces out there systematically that give your team the best chance to win.

But I thought Chris was playing good basketball. I thought the matchup was one in which it was not going to be problematic for us and I wanted to give JD a new perspective off the bench. He still had a couple of fouls. He's just not playing to the way that he was earlier in the season. But just as Daniel said, it really doesn't matter now. He could be the man tomorrow wearing the hat. Do we have multiple hats here or do we have to share this one? I'm hoping JD can get the hat tomorrow. You never know.

**Q. Only four turnovers in the game. What can you say about your performance, how well you guys took care of the ball?**

ANDY KENNEDY: It's pretty amazing against a team like Wichita State, which is pretty handsy, and I say that in the most affectionate way, they're pretty handsy and for us to be under control and not really put ourselves in harm's way. Once again, once we started making shots, I felt like we could get the separation needed. Thankfully we did that down the stretch. But the only way that you can overcome when you're not shooting the ball well, second half we shot 48 percent but in the first half we were under 37 percent. The only way that you can stay in the game, we play a possessions game, you got to live off that offensive glass and you got to eliminate your turnovers to give you enough possessions to hopefully catch a rhythm and thankfully that worked for us today.

**Q. A question on Vasquez. Is it just a one-day thing? I mean, is he in trouble for tomorrow at all or is it just a one-game thing?**

ANDY KENNEDY: It's my understanding that it did not evolve into a Flagrant 2 or Flagrant 6 or Flagrant 9 or whatever we're calling it now. It's my understanding that it's just a one-game. He had to be out for the remainder of the game. If you remember, it wasn't even really an advantage. It was kind of double technicals back and forth they were both tangled up and I have not seen it obviously but then evidently he extended his arm, i.e. punch, i.e. the ejection. It should not affect tomorrow.

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