

# American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 15, 2024

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

## Wichita State Shockers

## Paul Mills

## Xavier Bell

## Harlond Beverly

### Postgame Press Conference



the second half, but give him credit. They made big shots. Yaxel got free throw rebounds and anytime you're dealing with a player of that caliber, they made some plays late. So, tip your hat to 'em.

I'm just so thankful to our guys. We've had 101 practices and there wasn't a day I wasn't excited to show up and see 'em and challenge 'em and find a way to get better. But I'm grateful for all the guys in our locker room.

**Q. How hard is this loss? I know you guys just played UAB just a few weeks ago and you guys beat them there. What changed, what did you guys attack differently?**

PAUL MILLS: One, I thought from a zone perspective is they would slow the possessions down and then try to extend 'em. We were in a lot of late shot clock situations and had to make some one-on-one plays. Xavier was able to, especially down the stretch, in order to bring us back. Harlond made some in order to maintain a lead. I just thought overall they were just extended and forcing you to make one-on-one plays and fortunately Harlond and Xavier did. I just thought it was there.

I know the second-chance opportunities didn't necessarily equate to a huge margin for them, but what it did allow is the free throw opportunities. So at the end, that's kind of what the difference in the game was.

**Q. You mentioned you guys go up two and then that five-point possession and then the turnover, a three. That's eight points. It was like 22 seconds. Just little stuff like that, just how much was that just a backbreaker, how tough was that to come back from?**

PAUL MILLS: Yeah, I mean, I don't want to get into it right now, simply because, I mean, these guys have heard me talk about fouling three-point shooters, but to have two of those situations there in the final six minutes, those are hard things to come back from.

**Q. That stretch that he's talking about there, like a 26 run to finish the game, was there any technical things that you saw there, kind of just the momentum switch**

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.

PAUL MILLS: Yeah, it was a 62-possession ballgame, which is kind of what we were hoping for. Just at the end of the day, we knew that we needed to rebound at a rate that was hopefully under 40 percent, but definitely try to get 'em under 39. If you look at the games that UAB has lost, they haven't been able to control the boards and if you look at their last nine, the other team has had more O boards than them. But they're 22nd in the country in offensive glass, and they were able to retrieve 42 percent of their misses and that stuff just adds up.

You got to tip your hat to them. I mean, Yaxel with 18 and 14, you just realize the caliber of player, and I just thought that they did a great job on the glass and unfortunately we just came up short today.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

**Q. Considering where you guys were coming into Fort Worth, you look at the clock, seven minutes left, tight game, spot in the semi-finals on the line, probably couldn't ask for anything more to be in that position, right?**

PAUL MILLS: I mean, you were up two there with six and change to play and, again, all you ask is that we have a chance. We gave ourselves a chance. Again, you got to tip your hat. I mean, at the end, I thought Daniel Ortiz's threes, for him to go 4-7, I don't know what he finished in

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**that you just can't explain, they just got hot, you guys just kind of lost it for a second there?**

XAVIER BELL: I would start off by saying it started with my turnover that led to a transition three for them. I think it was maybe a one- or two-possession game before that, before he hit that. I got to be better in those situations and everything like that, but I just think we didn't really panic down the stretch, we kind of just tried to stay together and tried to still find a way to come out on top.

**Q. I know it's hard because the season just ended, but how would you summarize your first year at Wichita State?**

PAUL MILLS: Very enjoyable. Again, I enjoyed being around the guys every single day. What happens when you take over a job is you go into a locker room and you say, All right, how many of you guys are staying? Seven guys raised their hand. And you're like, All right, I need to go find six. And I can remember specifically looking at X when we went in there, and you have guys in that locker room, I know X is from Wichita, who are excited about representing Wichita State, who are excited about putting in the work. Harlond was our first commitment. So, I just know that, moving forward, we'll continue to have a locker room full of guys who represent Wichita State well, but it's a tip of the hat to how these guys have approached things every single day.

**Q. Going off of that, Coach Mills, how do you plan to rebuild going into next season, what is that starting to look like for you now?**

PAUL MILLS: Yeah, I think if you talk to any coach in the country, that's a constant thing. You're, like, how do we get Xavier better, how do we get Harlond better. I can go through all the players in that locker room. So, it's something that you think about constantly. No different than any other program, we'll meet with all of these guys in the next 72 hours and, unfortunately, this is the last time this group will ever be together, and you have Dalen and Jacob who will move on. We have been able to sign good high school players, but as we get older we'll have a really experienced team next year, we'll find the guys who can vault us back towards the top and win championships.

**Q. Xavier, being from Wichita, yesterday you see the pictures and videos of you guys celebrating that win. You watch Shocker basketball, does that give you a glimpse of what this program can be?**

XAVIER BELL: Absolutely. Not just yesterday though, it's been this whole season, it's not been what everybody expected, but at the same time everybody's come in with

the right attitude day-in and day-out for practice, just trying to find ways to get better. And then just looking forward, knowing the coaching staff we have and the group of guys that we have now and just knowing that it will continue to get better. I think that's just what's been exciting the most, for sure.

**Q. I know the win/loss record doesn't always reflect how coaches value things. So, in your opinion, did this team, did you guys reach the potential with this group?**

PAUL MILLS: That's hard to assess. It's, again, I didn't know these guys. I didn't know that X was so gifted in his ability on tight spins. I didn't know Harlond's level of athleticism. So it's really hard to gauge without really having a base, an understanding.

Then also didn't know the league. Just, I was familiar with the Big-12, and what it took to succeed there, but you kind of understand the caliber of players that we have, and then you also understand what their ceiling is. Then you understand what the competition looks like. So, you kind of gauge it and you move forward. But honestly, I just showed up every day and just tried to go 1-0.

**Q. Harlond, you made a big leap going from Florida to over here, into Kansas, how has the experience been over the last year just being on the Shockers?**

HARLOND BEVERLY: The experience was the best one I've had in college. I want to thank Coach Mills for taking the opportunity to taking a chance on me. I averaged maybe three points last year, so just for him to have that faith in me and really trust me like every day regardless of -- it was very up-and-down for me. I had games with six turnovers. Next game, he still believed in me. So I really appreciate that. I feel like I really have grown as a person. I got much better. I learned a lot, basketball-wise as well, so this was a very enjoyable and meaningful year for me.

**Q. With NIL with the transfer portal and everything now, coaches always talk about having to recruit their own players. Do you put a lot of focus in that in the off-season or do you feel like the year together kind of helps sell, be the pitch that you want to bring 'em back?**

PAUL MILLS: Yeah, at the end these guys, I mean, other than Harlond, the guys that we retained, I mean, I came into a situation where they told me, hey, you're only getting one player who averaged more than four points a game a year ago. The rest of these guys, you don't know. So, when you walk into it, all you're trying to do is earn their trust. The guys that stayed, they didn't sign up for me, you

know, that was somebody else's choice. Do I want to retain 'em? Absolutely. But at the end, you understand, as this thing goes through and what the process is, and I want these guys to benefit. Whatever that looks like for them, I want them to be in a situation moving forward that benefits them and their family, whatever that looks like. I've been fortunate to be able to retain really good players over the years, and so moving forward we'll evaluate everything individually, but I just, again, these guys have been tremendous the entire year.

**Q. Curious to get your take on the growth of this season. Obviously probably doesn't reflect in the win/loss record, so how do you assess the season as a whole, what's your take on that?**

XAVIER BELL: For sure, just being an older player now, I do kind of want to piggyback off what Harlond said and thank Coach Mills for taking that chance on me and still keeping me around and trusting me and putting me in certain situations as the season went on. I just think there's still a lot of opportunity to grow. I think we have a young club, a good young class coming in, I think Coach and them will do a great job building a great roster, like they did this year, just bringing in the right guys to create the right atmosphere.

As far as this season, it didn't reflect on how we wanted it to, but day-in and day-out, everybody came in and just put in the work and just made the environment something that you wanted to be around, something that you wanted to continue to get better with. So just that's all I would say for the season right now.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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