

# American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 13, 2025

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

**Charlotte 49ers**

**Aaron Fearne**

**Nik Graves**

Postgame Press Conference



Florida Atlantic - 64, Charlotte - 59

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

AARON FEARNE: Yeah, I mean, we're obviously very disappointed that it came to an end, but extremely proud of the effort that the guys showed all year. I mean, phenomenal. I said it to them in the locker room. They should be extremely proud of their fight, their day-to-day professionalism to show up and work.

We obviously know we didn't have as successful a season as we would all like, but it's obviously very easy just to quit too, and they didn't do that at all. They didn't do it all year. They should be very proud of themselves for that.

We know, obviously, it was a fantastic game. I thought we got the game into the pace that we wanted it to be. We knew we if we had to get up and down the floor, it was going to be a tough one for us with the firepower that they have. So I thought game plan-wise we did a very good job of that and we had a chance.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. This game was much more of a battle than the last two with Florida Atlantic. What were you guys able to change in your game plan that led this to be really up until the end a true battle?**

AARON FEARNE: Well, you can't run out on them and just play really loose and free and just let it go. Like, you just can't do it with them. That's the way they want to play, and we did not do a very good job of that at FAU last time we

played there. We got caught up in the hype of the environment and played very quick. Even though we were making shots, and Nik will understand what I'm saying here because we talked about it a number of times during that game. It was like, Guys, I know we're making shots, but we're not going to win playing this way. But for whatever reason we just couldn't get out of that mode where today, you know, we had to lean back on past experiences of playing them twice.

We played yesterday. We played a hard-fought game, physical game yesterday, and we just knew we just couldn't play like that anyway. So I thought Nik did an outstanding job controlling the pace of the game and getting into a half-court game, which we did.

**Q. I want to ask about Coach's comments about that effort. You guys can't deny that you guys came out here and gave FAU a game and Rice yesterday. Where did that come from? After a tough regular season, it would be easy just to quit, but you guys didn't do that.**

NIK GRAVES: Yeah, we talked about how coming into the conference tournament it's a whole new season. Everyone's starting 0-0. At the end of the day, we were the last seed, so we had nothing to lose. No one really expected to us do anything. So just knowing that we're coming out here and we're going to put up a fight no matter what. Like I said, nobody expected us to probably win a game, so just the fact that we were able to get one and try to stack that and get a second one, just bring that fight to teams and try to grind them down and ultimately try to get the win.

**Q. Nik, you took a big step this year, played a ton of minutes as that primary ball handler. Talk about your season individually and the step you want to take with your game going into this off-season.**

NIK GRAVES: Yeah, I mean, honestly, just blessed to be in the opportunity I was, that I was in this year. Like you said, stepped into a bigger role, so just trying to grow in that role and continue to work on my leadership aspect of everything. I think sometimes I'm a little bit too nice, so

getting a little bit me nerve and being able to get on my teammates and just hold other people accountable, along with myself.

**Q. You talked about kind of the journey through this season. What did you learn in I guess your first full year -- obviously you were here last year as well, but first full season as Charlotte's head coach?**

AARON FEARNE: I think you learn something every single season, right? As I said to the guys out at the back, I've been on some extremely successful teams and this one obviously was a difficult season, but I've also had some successful teams where they don't work real hard and don't really fight. They're not real tight. What you learn from this is if you just journey through it and battle and grind and just try and find ways to slowly improve and try and play the best you can possibly play at the right time of the year, that was always the message, and I think the guys definitely delivered on that. Yeah, because we played a very, very good team today. They had a very good season, they're super talented, and it came down to a play here or there.

You can't do that if you don't keep believing in each other, you don't keep working with each other, you don't work for one another, you don't inspire each other, you don't try and help -- you don't try -- you try and help guys succeed, and they did all those things, and they'll take those lessons into their life and they will remember these things. That's the biggest thing I've learned this year. And that's what you want to achieve as a coach. I think that's the ultimate goal as a coach is to get your team to work together and compete regardless of the outcome. You want to fight extremely hard and, man, I'm so proud of this group.

**Q. Looking ahead to this off-season, this past year your team has been a really older roster, a lot of players have graduated, what's the focus on improving the roster moving into next year?**

AARON FEARNE: I mean, look, we know we need to improve. We're going to have to up skill and up talent for sure. This league's tough, it's big, it's physical, it's athletic, it's skilled. So we're going to have to do a good job recruiting. Obviously in this day and age and athletics, especially in basketball and football in particular but it seems to be every sport these days, obviously the landscape and the resources required need to be there. We'll have that, and so we got to put some better talent on the floor. Because I know what we do is difficult to defend. I know we defend hard, I know we compete, I know we're very physical, we're hard to guard. You just got to have the horses. And there's some teams in this league that are really, really talented. That will be the goal, obviously, this off-season is

to get into that space where the top teams in this league are.

**Q. Going off of what you just said, how do you build and sustain in this world that we live in with NIL, the transfer portal, all these different elements that are going on with this and how do you create the team that you're speaking of? And then sustain and grow that team in a world where a lot of programs are struggling to keep a team together enough to have time to grow it?**

AARON FEARNE: Yeah, I don't even know if I can answer that question. I'll try. Look, you, A, you need major financial resources, I think you need to build an unbelievable culture, and you need to have high-level coaching. I think those three things are essential in having success in this landscape. You see at the highest level in this country with the Power 5, 4 schools, whatever you want to call it these days, they all have the same issue, trying to have sustainable success. Those true blue bloods you would call it, that every single year they're just going to win it, well that doesn't happen. So how do you do that? Look, I think ultimately if you want my real opinion is that players need to be contracted. You know what commitment they have to your university, one year, two year, three year, four year, whatever that may be. Just so you can actually build your roster, hopefully, over a little bit of period of time, because you do keep kind of a core group together. That's impossible to do. You can make a heck of a lot of money in this country right now just popping around from school to school to school, because they can. And that's what makes it almost impossible to keep any continuity whatsoever. What they are now is, you got to put a team together, you got to, as I said earlier, you got to have great dudes so you can get a culture going really very, very quickly, and then you got to coach 'em up hard and get playing and play well and do it for nine months. And then you reset, and, I mean, I know there's coaches that talk about this is the pro world. It's not. Like the pro world has contracts, it has commitment to your program, to your clubs, to your teams. This is not that. I think you can be the best player in this country, if another school's got huge resources to get you. So until some of those things start to come into place, I think you're just going to have the inconsistencies of what a lot of these programs are having right now.

**Q. So when you look, as a quick follow-up to that, when you look at Charlotte itself, what is that selling point for you of what you're building of what you're creating and sustaining, and just what you see is that beacon of light for Charlotte and what this program can become?**

AARON FEARNE: Well, last year we had a taste of what it has been in a long way back. But, I mean, it was at times magic last year, so it's there. It's a sleeping giant there. We want that every year moving forward. We want to get back to playing in the NCAA Tournament and having success in these tournaments here. But you got to have the resources to bring in talent. I know we're going to play really hard, I know what we do is difficult to defend. We have a fantastic track record the last seven years of producing and developing of the players that we have, and look where they're playing now. High-level basketball, Jahmir is playing in the NBA. We got some guys this year that have been part of the our program that have moved on to other programs, are going to be knocking on the NBA door at the end of this season. I think we develop unbelievable well. The guy sitting to the left of me the development he's made over the last three years has been sensational, too. But that's a big, that's a big selling point, a big recruiting point for us. And we can prove it. Just look at the guys that are out there. Charlotte's awesome. The environment there is fantastic. It's, like I said, a sleeping giant that's ready to really wake up.

**Q. Nik, when you reflect on the season, is there a moment that stands out to you as maybe the most enjoyable or most fun moment from this season for you personally?**

NIK GRAVES: Honestly, I would probably just say that first day of practice, official practice. I mean, that's where everything's fresh, everything's exciting. The whole season's exciting, obviously, but that first day you still, you know, you don't really know each other, so you're trying to figure out each other, whether that be on court or off the court. So just being able to experience that first day of practice and go into the locker room after the first day of practice and laugh with the people that you end up calling your brothers, I think that would be probably the most memorable moment from this year.

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