

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 13, 2025

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

UTSA Roadrunners

Austin Claunch

Primo Spears

Marcus Millender

Postgame Press Conference

East Carolina - 70, UTSA - 65

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

AUSTIN CLAUNCH: Yeah, just a hard-fought, really, I thought, gritty college basketball game. Congratulations to Coach Schwartz and ECU. He's done a heck of a job in his third year there and they're a good team. We played three, really, really competitive games with them this year, and they do some things that make some things difficult, and I thought tonight you saw in the second half -- first half I didn't do a good enough job helping our guys. We guarded well the entire night. We guarded well enough to win.

In the first half, I thought we were a little stagnant, and then I thought you saw in the second half our team, these two guys and the rest, the rest of our team, really kind of focus on getting the ball more downhill in the paint, try to create some contact because when they're switching, it's really hard to create an advantage with ball screens or whatever the case may be. They're just keeping a body on a body.

I thought our guys didn't settle in the second half. We really played downhill. Obviously, you saw us come back and get the lead, and then I think it's tied at the under eight or under six minutes left, and that's what college basketball's all about.

I got to do more. I got to get better. I got to help our guys in these situations as we move forward. But, man, I'm so proud of this step that our program took this year, certainly going from an increase in win total from last year, both total



and conference. I'm proud of the work -- not just that the record shows, but the work that these guys as a group put in, our seniors, like Primo and Damari. They have been really fun to coach. If I sit here too long and talk about them, I'm going to get emotional. I'm sure I will at some point anyway.

So again, just really proud of this group. The future is really, really bright, and I'm excited to get back and get to work.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. You guys had the lead there with 1:16 left in the last period. Can you just kind of talk about what unraveled for y'all in those final moments?

AUSTIN CLAUNCH: I think that's when Felton makes a tough play. I mean, he's a great player. There was a lot of great players out there. There was a lot of just really, really good individual performances tonight because they were switching and we started switching and what that sort of forces is guys to go make plays and create plays for themselves and others. And he just made a good one. I thought it was pretty well defended.

Throughout the course of the night, we had our own, and they just kind of made the last one because I think we turned it over on the next possession. So again, give him credit. It was a tough play. But again, I thought if you look just at the numbers, we really guarded all night. He was 6-16, C.J. Walker 2-7. We did a great job on their all-league guys and it was just a high-level game and they made a couple more plays.

Q. You mentioned standout performances, of course, from these guys here. Can you just talk about those guys and the way they played tonight.

AUSTIN CLAUNCH: You know, if you watch the game, you know they played well. I think what you probably don't know is just the work that these guys have put in. These are two guys that -- I mean, I guess Primo had to come out for a few seconds tonight, but for seven months they have

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just been the first guys in and the first guys out, and they have laid a foundation now that -- obviously, especially Primo, being his last game here, I can't thank him and Damari enough for their last year of college basketball, trusting me to be a part of something that... sorry.

I wish I could have done more for them. I love them, and I'm proud of those two guys. Again, they're not the ones lifting the trophy, but they're going to be the reason. And when we build our new facility here coming up, and we do end up winning, these guys are going to be a big reason. They have been a big part of it. And I'm really proud of the work and the commitment that they have shown, and I'm indebted for these guys, and they know I love them, and if there's anything -- there's nothing I wouldn't do for them the rest of their life.

Q. Primo, your last game as a Roadrunner. Can you just talk about your first season as a Roadrunner, what it was like to be with Coach, and as you begin to lay -- you're one of the founding members of this new era that Coach Claunch is trying to build here at UTSA. Can you talk about what it's meant to you and a little bit about him.

PRIMO SPEARS: Just by far the best college year I've been a part of, the best staff, the best camaraderie we've gained in the locker room in a short period of time. I've been part of four rebuilding years, just saying, and this has by far been the best organized, the best well-coached group. It just goes to show that he could do it at any level. He got us a month, two months into getting the job, and he put together a great roster, a great group of guys that have good character and it just sucks that I came up short, you know. I love him to death. I can't repay him for the confidence and the respect that he showed me on the first day I got on campus, so...

Q. You're a first year here as well. Can you talk about it from your perspective and what it's going to look like going forward with you. You're only a sophomore.

MARCUS MILLENDER: My first year at UTSA, it's been everything that I wanted. From meeting new guys, from meeting new coach, meeting new people on campus, it's been everything I wanted and I wouldn't trade it for nothing.

Q. You mentioned the guys playing a bunch of minutes and it's been this way for a good part of the season. How difficult of a challenge has it been down the stretch for you to, especially these last three games, only play seven guys.

AUSTIN CLAUNCH: Yeah, you would have to ask them. Well, first of all, part of it is we got bit a little bit by some

different injuries. Look, these are two guys that really work, and I do think early on they both had a couple of 40-minute games. Even tonight Damari goes 40 minutes he's played himself into really, really good shape. I just felt like it wasn't something I really had planned. I just thought with the way the game was going, and I thought this particular matchup really called for Primo and Smurf to make plays off the bounce and create stuff for our team. Because, again, they do a good job of keeping bodies in front of, keeping bodies in front of bodies. And so you got to have guys that can go make plays, and obviously you've seen all year these are two guys that can do that at a high level. And a game that's going to be one possession, you know, it's hard to think you can -- Primo had, I think he had three with like eight minutes left, or four, and we were close to a media, and I thought about giving him a quick one. But you just, you can't, you know, in that moment in this high level of a game with really good players on both sides, yeah, you know, I had to have all those guys, all those older guys, and even Smurf who plays like an older guy. We felt like we needed them in there with this particular matchup especially.

Q. Wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed watching y'all play this year. Did have a question for Primo. Primo, in the very end of the game when you had come out a little bit, you fell. Can you tell us what happened on that play when you went down and just how are you feeling now?

PRIMO SPEARS: As you know, I had a surgery four or five years ago on the elbow. It just felt like that again. But I just know my team needed me. I just wanted to be out there to play defense. They called a play for me, and I gave the ball to Smurf, because he was cooking. So I just wanted to be out there and just lock up a few more possessions and try to get the dub. But I definitely came down on my injured elbow, but I'm okay.

Q. We've talked all year about some of the close losses. How are you going to remember this maybe in terms of a series of near misses or what could have been this year, how do you put that in perspective at this point?

AUSTIN CLAUNCH: I mean, I think it's impossible not to include it in the story of the team, but this, again, this is a group, like Primo said, that came together very quickly. And the thing that I'll remember most about this group is the resiliency. We have played really, really good basketball these last three weeks. We lost six, we were 4-5, we get a huge win at North Texas, which might be the best win of conference play. And then we get some just really tough luck, and we lose six games that, the probability of us losing all those games there at the end, it's



astronomical. And these guys just kept showing up and we kept playing well and we kept having great practices. I think, again, that speaks to their character and what they're genuinely trying to build here at UTSA. I told every single one of them when I recruited them that this process is better than everyone in here, and if you want to build something special, you got to have people that are going to accept that. And so, yeah, there's some close losses, we wanted to win more games, we want to still be playing, but I just told them in the locker room, you know, I was part of a really cool run last year, and we felt like we feel right now. There's one team that won't feel like we feel like right now. I don't know who it's going to be, but this is always hard at the end of the year. Certainly when we look back there's some things we got to correct, there's some things we got to get better at. But this is a special group. Every year is a privilege, every year it's really hard when it comes to a close, and I'll certainly remember way more things about this group that I'm going to miss being around every day.

Q. Marcus, Coach talked about this a little bit, but what are the challenges of playing 40 minutes in a conference tournament environment with how hard you guys are going?

MARCUS MILLENDER: Obviously, the playing 40 minutes a game, it's a lot, because I'm not used to it, but over the entire season I got used to it. And guys went out with injuries, Coach told me and Primo that he going to need to us step up, so that's what we did.

Q. What's next for you, have you decided if you're going to be back with UTSA next year or how do you size up your future at this point?

MARCUS MILLENDER: I haven't Dee sigh I dead yet but most Luke Lee I'm going to be coming back to UTSA.

Q. Marcus, I wanted to ask if you could just kind of go back over the year, what are your favorite memories from this year with the Roadrunners?

MARCUS MILLENDER: Coach just said one of them right now, especially that win at North Texas on the road. Big environment, tough crowd, loud in there. I would say that one. And then playing the big schools on the road, St. Mary's, Arkansas, and those big crowds, too. I never played in those type of atmospheres before so, yeah.

Q. We talked about this a little bit the other day, but do you feel like you maybe made a point, maybe you proved something to yourself this year? You came in and you averaged like nine a game last year, you were looking to take a step forward in a bigger conference,

do you feel like you maybe proved something to yourself this year?

MARCUS MILLENDER: I wouldn't say necessarily proved something to myself, because I'm not necessarily trying to prove something to myself or prove something to other people, I'm just trying to improve on myself daily. So that's what I would say.

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