

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 14, 2025

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

UAB Blazers

Andy Kennedy

Yaxel Lendeborg

Tony Toney

Postgame Press Conference



UAB - 94, East Carolina - 77

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: Great to be back in this venue. When we came in Wednesday, I guess it was, man, it had good vibes for me. I like this place. I understand the Commissioner's desire to move it. But it's been good to us.

I've always said, you know, we worked hard to get the double bye and with that, you don't have to play until we're obviously the last game in the initial round of the tournament. It makes for a long couple of days in waiting. You can't really get ahead in the scouting because you don't know who you're playing until late last night. We knew it was going to be ECU and we knew what they had done to us earlier in the year in Greenville. They're a very physical team and I think between Felton, Walker, and Riley, they are as potent a trio as there is in our league. And, man, those guys keep coming at you.

So I thought they would have the advantage early. Why? Because they won a game in here last night. It's going to take us a little bit to kind of get our legs under. So I didn't think we started great, but about the 15minute mark I think we settled down. I really pressed Yax to -- I said, Man, let's make sure you get 15 shots up. He got 16. He did a great job of just dominating the game. Look at his stat line. Incredible. Incredible performance.

So he started leading us and as a result, the floor started shrinking and we were having angles to make plays. So really proud of my guys to get No. 1 in our journey to

repeat.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Obviously a team effort tonight, but when you get an effort from Yax like that, how important is that and you kind of need those type of efforts to make a run in a tournament like this?

ANDY KENNEDY: Well, it's do or die. You need your All-League players to play like All-League players. He was the pre-season Player of the Year for a reason, because of what he had done throughout the course of last season. And I think he really made improvements throughout the course of this year. People are guarding him differently and that took a little bit of an adjustment because it's a new role for him. But I was really proud that he came out and played assertive. I talk about it all the time. Play with force, do everything with authority, and I thought he certainly did that tonight.

Q. Yax, it seemed like nearly every play was running through you. Is there any pressure to that or is that just what you enjoy?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: I enjoy doing that. I watch a lot of big guards play and the way they facilitate the ball, and that's one of my favorite things to do. So whenever I can get one of my teammates open, I would always do that first.

But Coach here wants me to go score first, so I'm still trying to adjust to that. But today was a good example for me to see what I can do when I get the ball that much.

Q. Tony, you've been around here for a couple years and you guys bounced back from some early-season struggles. How did you guys pull the team together and where are you guys at right now in the locker room?

TONY TONEY: Really just coming together and telling each other that the five on the floor, give it your all. And being able to take our coaching -- Coach A.K., he going to

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push you to be the best you can. Really just giving it all we got.

Q. With what they did to you offensively in Greenville, how motivated were you to play defense in that first half? It seemed like you were communicating better than you had in awhile and just really played better defensively, especially in that first half. How much of that was just motivation of what happened?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: It was super motivating. Before we came into the game, Coach A.K. told us our road to try to get to another championship is going to be them, who beat us, North Texas, who beat us, and Memphis, who beat us. So we want the road to be like that, want it to be tough, and we want to get revenge on everybody that beat us. So going into every game we're going to look to try to get back and get the win.

TONY TONEY: It's always motivation to come out and play against a team that you lost to. Just coming out with that pop that we didn't have in the first game and continue to do what we know how to do.

Q. It seemed the second half or later in the game you seemed to get a little frustrated with -- I don't know if you kept up the same edge late as you did early. Were you frustrated late with some things?

ANDY KENNEDY: Yeah, I tend to get frustrated from time to time. I just didn't think we closed. They're a dangerous team. RJ Felton is one of the most prolific scorers in the history of this conference. He's playing with a sense of desperation. I felt like we were leaving points on the floor. We did a horrible job a couple times. We ended up with 22 assists and only six turnovers. We've been really good all year not turning the ball over very much.

We had a couple there that led to easy baskets, missing layups. Yax missed only two free throws in the game, but missed a front-end down the stretch, and I just thought we were losing our focus. Thankfully we were able to get the stops. Then we had about a three-possession stretch where we got stops that led to baskets for us, which, obviously, got us the margin that I was looking for.

I wanted to win the second half. It wasn't exactly how you would draw it up. But we did win the second half by a point. So pleased, man, pleased that we got number one under our belt. I know our guys are playing confidently and looking forward to having an opportunity to participate in the semi-finals.

Q. We saw you talking to RJ Felton at the end. What were you telling him when he was walking over there?

ANDY KENNEDY: He's a tremendous player. He's really a good basketball player -- good college basketball player. I really like the way they play. They play with a lot of force. They're always attacking you, attacking you. I thought the first half -- to Steve's point, I thought we were doing a really good job of shrinking the floor, trying to take away those angles.

In the second half, I thought we were playing a little more tentatively, almost like prevent defense, and they were attacking us. Tremendous player. I was just saying, Hey, man, I've enjoyed competing against him.

Q. Yax, toward the end there started to notice you glancing up at the scoreboard a little bit. Was there any times you would jump towards those rebounds trying to get those numbers up a little bit?

ANDY KENNEDY: Oh, he's very aware. He's very aware. He's very aware.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: Well, it wasn't me, to my defense. Butta came to me and said, You need two more rebounds. So I looked up, and I was like, Okay, I do, yeah. So tried to get my first 20/20 game outside of Juco, and I ended up getting it. Hopefully, I can get that triple double that I've been harping on all year. But if not, then it's cool. As long as I get a ring, I'll be perfectly fine.

Q. You get North Texas again. You guys have had some really epic battles with them over the years. What are your initial thoughts on playing UNT again?

ANDY KENNEDY: It's going to be a slugfest. You got to win the physical battle to have a chance against North Texas. It started with Grant, and then Ross has taken the reins, and they play the same way. Atin Wright, man, what a terrific newcomer to this league. This league is full of newcomers, and he's as good as there is. And with the ability to make shots late in the clock from Tylor Perry to Edwards to now him, they're a good basketball team. They're not going to give you anything free. It's been a minute since we played them. We'll get back, we'll immediately try to get right physically, and then our guys know what to anticipate as it relates to style of play. We know it's not going to be easy, nor should it be when you're playing for survival in late March.

Q. It's kind of a contrast in styles, is that something that's a little different for you guys to play against such a defensively-oriented team like North Texas?

ANDY KENNEDY: Yeah, I mean they're going to grind you up as it relates to possessions as well. We're a pretty

high-possession team, one of the highest in the country. They're not going to give you as many of those, especially if you don't do a good job on the glass. We hadn't been doing as good a job on our offensive and defensive glass as we did tonight. I'm glad to see that improve as we're plus 14 off the glass against a physical team. We're going to have to win those areas again tomorrow to have an opportunity to advance.

Q. This one is for Coach. Wanted to see -- maybe from your bench guys, what would you like to see them maybe contribute more as you head into tomorrow's game with North Texas?

ANDY KENNEDY: I played Yax 40 minutes. I would have played him 41, if 41 were needed. I think with TV timeouts, they're about two and a half minutes at this stage, so you're going to get an opportunity to -- I don't even think you were that tired, I'm sure you'll feel it tomorrow. But I was going to play my heavy-minute guys -- Ja'Borri seemed a little off early in the game, so we went to Tyren Moore off our bench, and I thought he really settled us down, just from an experience standpoint. Bradley Ezewiro gave us good minutes. But again, I was playing Yax, I thought he and Chris were anchoring us, so there was really nothing Brad did wrong, he just didn't have the same opportunity. And then we go with Butta, you know, we're going to play eight guys. I'm always looking for bench tenacity. When we go to our bench, the pace of play, the intensity, everything needs to ratchet up, and I thought they delivered today.

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