

# American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 14, 2025

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

## East Carolina Pirates Michael Schwartz

## RJ Felton

### 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.

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Yeah, first off, hat's off to UAB, their program, their players. That was a dynamic performance by Yaxel Lendeborg. As impressive as a game in terms of what he did. So hat's off to them and their program.

This is obviously always a very disappointing and emotional game when it's potentially the last game for seniors and for this tight group to be together, and that's why we spent so much time in the locker room. We love this team. This team has done a lot of very special things this season, set a new standard for ECU basketball, led right by RJ Felton next to me. And as disappointed as we are, there is a feeling of pride that this team has established something in Greenville.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. RJ, just coming to ECU four years ago, wanting to leave this place better than you found it, can you just speak on that and everything you accomplished at ECU?**

RJ FELTON: Well, walking into ECU it's a whole different staff with Coach Dooley and Coach George Wright-Easy. I still had the same mindset coming in. Like, I want to win a championship by changing the culture around here. Next thing you know we got my man right next to me, Mike Schwartz, one of the best coaches I ever had. So I would say with this coaching staff, I really thank them a lot

throughout my development, character development, and also becoming a better leader on and off the court.

So I would say me staying here for, like, my whole career, it's a huge success. This year we finished the season 19-14. We got 10 conference wins in the American, something that nobody ever really do. I would say this year was more of a success for me, even though the outcomes in the game was -- I would say, for further, like, generations and, like, for further teams, I would say I feel like we kind of changed the culture and bringing that mindset coming in for the new guys as well. Even with my departure and the seniors, Cameron Hayes and C.J. Walker, I would say it's a big up and as my career ends here, I didn't realize -- I didn't realize how our work paid off.

I came in here my freshman year just -- individual-wise just a guy that's athletic, that defends throughout the game and plays his heart out. And my training and development throughout the three years with Coach Riley, Coach Reg, and also Coach Madison as well. So I would say kudos to the coaching staff and shout out to the Minges Maniacs, shout out to all the ECU fan bases, and shout out to you Steven Igoe, even though you're out there on Zoom as well, and to everybody else, man, I love every last one of y'all.

**Q. You've been around a lot of great players, obviously. What will you remember most about RJ Felton specifically?**

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Like he said, anytime you're around somebody that plays for the front of the jersey as much as he does. He bleeds purple. I said that often. RJ's had so many special moments on the court, games that we'll remember, we'll be able to relive, we'll be able to think about, just the performances he had. But some of the things that will always stick with me with someone like RJ is how much he cared about his teammates, somebody that when you can honestly be more aware of how your teammates are feeling and the guys sitting next to you in the locker room than you are yourself sometimes, that's RJ Felton.

So to me that's a very special trait and characteristic for a big-time player to have. And he absolutely is a big-time player. But for someone to care about his teammates and the way other people are feeling I think is very, I think that's special.

Then the other thing is, again, he alluded to his player development. When we came here with him, he trusted. There was a process. We talked about his development, and what the foundation of ECU basketball was hopefully going to become, but you needed guys to put two feet into that and trust. I remember my very first Zoom meeting before I was even on campus, talking with RJ. And I remember meeting him for the first time, and he put two feet in right from the beginning and bought into that development process both on and off the court. I believe that is really something I'll remember, because when you're committed like that, great stuff happens. And great stuff happens to good people and that's what happened to RJ.

**Q. Can you just touch on how great ECU and all the guys played down the stretch in conference play and a historic season just in general for the Pirates?**

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Well, I appreciate you using that word "great." I mean, I think it's sometimes hard for coaches to be able to say that or see that, and I'm not sure that I fully see that yet. I want to take a step back and do a reset and review.

But from a numbers standpoint, winning games and winning 10 games, and for the third year in a row winning a conference tournament game here, which hadn't been done in the American. And as RJ said, 19 wins. In terms of outside of the year, that ECU won the CIT, and it won five games in the CIT and had 18 wins. I think 19 is the highest win total in the regular season, plus conference tournament, in the history of Division-I. And you know what, it's a credit to RJ Felton, Cameron Hayes, C.J. Walker, this coaching staff. And I thought February was a big month. It was a big month for ECU basketball. A lot of things -- we could stay up here a long time and talk about what happened, but there's no doubt we were playing our best basketball. And I used this term with the guys, ECU basketball is going to play meaningful games in March, and that's something that we want to make the standard, not the exception.

**Q. This is the third year you guys have made it to the quarterfinals and then saw your season come to an end. Is there anything you pinpoint there that is the next step or is each case a little bit different? Just early thoughts on that, maybe too early to dive into.**

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: No, I think that's a fair point. Year

one, man, on that team year one, Stephen, you could have been playing minutes on that team with us. And we were playing the No. 1 team in the country and we were down one at halftime in the second round in the quarterfinals. And they ended up pulling away in the second half. We were thin that year, and that's what I'm alluding to in terms of youth, experience. We were just thin. We didn't have a big rotation.

Last year we get a win versus a very good Tulsa team. And the conference champion, South Florida, a team that's as good as any team I've seen in three years here, beats us in the quarterfinals that year.

And then this year, last night another battle, another war with UTSA, we're fortunate to come out on top. UAB, I said it in the press conference yesterday after the game, I think that's an NCAA-caliber tournament team. I think they have a -- he's the Player of the Year in this league, along with PJ Haggerty, in terms of -- I mean, that performance today, for them to go out and do that and him to play like that, again, that's up there with some of the best, sitting there as a coach, that I've been a part of coaching against. I mean, he was dynamic.

But all that being said, I would say this, if you're sitting in the middle of the pack, if you're -- we finished fifth place, we got the six seed in the second round, you're going to be playing one of the top four, and you know that that's what it is. And hopefully we want this program, what RJ Felton has helped us establish, that at some point we're sitting there and we can get that double bye. And that's what you pursue.

We were in that battle late in the season up until really the final day of the regular season. We were in the hunt for a double bye. And that's, again, what we want to make the standard as we continue to build this basketball program this spring, this summer and into next year.

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