

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 15, 2025

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

UAB Blazers

Andy Kennedy

Yaxel Lendeborg

Ja'Borri McGhee

Postgame Press Conference



UAB - 66, North Texas - 56

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: So much respect for Ross Hodge and North Texas program. We knew exactly what this game was going to be, survival of the fittest. I used the analogy this morning. We got back late. We were the late game, obviously. It was a little past my bedtime. I bet you stayed up later than I did.

We got back and I wanted them to get some rest. We really jumped on our preparation for North Texas, but there's really not a lot of preparation other than you better tighten those boxing gloves up, you better get that mouthpiece good and firm, and you better get ready for a fight.

And I respect the way they do business. I thought our guys were terrific in that regard. Defensively it was as connected as we have been as a group for about 28 minutes, and then we lost a little bit of composure. We let Atin Wright get going. All of a sudden it made us a little bit nervous, but we were able to close the game by getting some good defensive stops. You hold a team under 60 points in a conference tournament, you ought to be able to manufacture enough points to win and thanks to these two guys on my left, we were able to do so.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. To be able to build a little cushion there going into halftime with maybe over the last five minutes or so,

how big was that at that point?

ANDY KENNEDY: I wanted to take Yax out. He had stubbed his toe and his toe was bothering him, had some swelling. Brian Cook, our trainer, did a good job of getting him back right. I knew once he made that three, I said, That toe ain't hurting anymore, is it? And he was playing with a little bit more pace, some huge plays down the stretch.

I don't like him dancing. You can't dance against North Texas. That ain't going to work. You got to get downhill. And man, he had a couple of huge plays, him and Ja'Borri both, attacking through pressure.

Defensively we were terrific early. Again, we were up by 13, 14 points, just kind of cruising. We led that game for 33 minutes once we established some offensive rhythm in the first half. Then our defense just anchored us the entire game save for a couple of -- if we could have kept them off the offensive glass. Our first shot defense was outstanding the entire game.

But we were giving up way too many second-chance points, second-chance points, they end up beating us by 10 and that's an area that we're really good at. I was just proud that we were able to play with enough force down the stretch. The second game in a row -- I think it was six last night. It's eight tonight. That's how you win. That's how we won last year, turnovers, man. We don't turn that ball over. Don't turn that ball over, value possessions, get to the free-throw line, finish plays through contact, that's our recipe, and that will be our recipe tomorrow in the championship game.

Q. Yax, with your toe, you came out late in the first half, took your shoe off, and you went into the locker room just a little bit early. What was going on and what did you think at that point?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: I'm a little bit dramatic, so once you feel a little bit of pain in your foot, you just start thinking about, oh, my God, it's over. I can't play no more. And I just got in my head, of course.

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B Cook was helping me out pretty well with getting me right and getting my mental right, just saying it's going to be okay and stuff, and I ended up having to, like, tie it up, tape it, something like that and it started feeling a little better.

But I started playing a little bit better. After the three, it still was hurting. I told him that, but he didn't listen. But eventually it started to feel better, so, yeah.

ANDY KENNEDY: Yeah, I was concerned. Anytime you do something like that, it's where your thought process is, and I could really tell it was kind of in his head. That's why I took him out and we were able to close the half and make some plays. But second half -- did I take you out in the second half? I don't think I did.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: No, you did not.

Q. Ja'Borri, that shot down the stretch, you guys were reeling and then you get that one to go. Just describe that moment for me. And have you ever made a shot in a big moment like that before?

JA'BORRI MCGHEE: Yeah, I have, but not on a stage like this, no. Honestly, it was just a reaction thing. Like, I knew the clock was going down and I had, like, five and it was kind of close on the offense, and I really couldn't get to my spot in the lane because I had a guy there. I actually bobbled the ball and I knew I had to get it up and I really just wanted to get it on the rim for the best rebounder in the world, and it went in.

Q. Your teammates stepped up when you needed some help there. How big is it to have teammates who can step up when you're not a hundred percent?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: It's huge. I feel like I'm starting to get a lot of attention every time I try to drive into the paint, and my teammates are knocking down those threes that we desperately need and if we start to get that type of contribution every game, then there's no doubt that we're going to leave this arena with a ring.

Q. I want to ask about Memphis. Any thoughts personally for you, Yax? I know past two games there's been some Twitter nonsense going on.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: Yeah, I should have never let that get to me. I feel like I hold myself to a higher standard than some Twitter beef. That's completely on me. I let it ruin my mental space last game and it bothered me throughout the game. Tomorrow I'm going to go in there clear-minded, clear-spaced, and just remember who I am.

Q. Going up against a North Texas defense, you've already talked about it, that one of the best in the country. When they were going man on you guys, what adjustments were you able to make later in that one?

ANDY KENNEDY: We did make some adjustments as it related to our screening angles. They're a group -- we're a right-handed team, as most teams are. We've got one left-hander, Brad. We don't let him initiate much offense, as you've seen.

So they were sitting on our right hand and forcing us back to the left, so we adjusted some screening angles. Ja'Borri did a good job of maneuvering and playing in the paint. But the biggest thing is you have to play physical. You're competitive spirit's got to be such, man, you can't drive into traffic without a plan. You better go in there with a plan and playing off two feet and we were able to do that enough times.

We only go 4-16 from three, but the timeliness of them, Ja'Borri's that we just alluded to, kind of a desperation end-of-clock situation, big-time step-up play for him. And then Tony Toney, who struggled all night, struggled at the end with a missed layup, but he made a big three off an offensive rebound possession. Two huge threes for us as we were desperately searching for offense.

Q. Moving on to that Memphis game tomorrow, game plan-wise, Haggerty and Dainja have really given you guys problems in the past. What game plan adjustments are you going to look to make, especially with Dainja being one of the better big men in this conference?

ANDY KENNEDY: Yeah, they're two of the better players in the conference, evidenced by them being All-League and PJ being the Player of the Year. We just got to do a really good job of shrinking the floor, not giving them open space to play, especially Haggerty. He's incredible with his ability to drive, he's fast. We've got to shrink the floor on him, and then we've got to try to keep Dainja's touches to a minimum. He's playing great. He really started in the first time that we played them in Memphis, he played good in Birmingham. I thought he was outstanding today. He was the difference in a game, in a hard-fought game.

So they're a really good team. They have won a bunch of games. They're going to go to the NCAA Tournament regardless of what happens tomorrow. We're not, so we've got to come out and play with a real sense of desperation.

Q. Did a terrific job on Atin Wright and some of their key offensive players. What did you do so well in this

game to maybe contain those guys a little bit?

ANDY KENNEDY: Just mainly being aware of where he likes to get his shots. We made a huge mistake down the stretch. We didn't stay attached on some of their back action where they threw it to the post and then they screened to bring him back and he hit a huge three. Tony tried to beat him with an angle as opposed to just staying attached. He's a terrific player. I think he's the best hard-shot-maker, maybe, in our league. He's made them all year. He made a huge one in Denton in the New Year's Eve to knock us out in the first outing.

So we just wanted to make sure that all of his catches were tough, that we shrank the floor, we knew where he was, and we didn't allow him to get into a rhythm. I also thought we did a great job with Sissoko, not allowing him to get to his spot. If we would have done a better job, again, off cleaning up our defensive glass, maybe we wouldn't have had to sweat quite as much down the stretch.

Q. The way the first two matchups against Memphis went, do you feel like you kind of were destined for a third one?

ANDY KENNEDY: I don't know about destined. I felt pretty confident that they were going to get to Sunday. Probably I felt more confident in that than I did in whether or not we were going to get to Sunday. I felt good about -- you know, we worked desperately after the disappointment of losing to Memphis. We then had senior night against FAU and it's a good way to kind of -- because we knew we had eliminated ourselves from any chance of winning the regular season. So guys were down because that was the expectation.

But it was good that senior night because that's a thing that you can flip the script pretty quickly. People are in town, parents, a lot of emotion in a building. We were able to win and East Carolina lost, so therefore, we knew going to New Orleans we were going to be the 3, which was huge. And just in all honesty, I wanted to be in that 2 or 3 spot so that we could be in this moment. Memphis is without question the best team in this league. They have proven that night-in and night-out. We look forward to the opportunity tomorrow.

Q. For Yax, fair to say you were hoping for another crack at Memphis?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: I'm not going to say I was -- yeah, I would say hoping and really excited and eager to play them one more time and right my wrongs.

Q. Eager. That's an interesting choice of word. Why

that choice of word?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: I feel like both games I was a letdown, completely, not just to me, but my parents, of course, because we talk about that game so much because last year David Jones, it was an exciting battle to play against him. And this year, I guess a rivalry started that, you know, shouldn't have started. But I let it get to me, played bad, and tomorrow I'm going to make sure that I won't do that again.

Q. You're 11-2 in conference tournament games and you guys have an opportunity to have a shot at a third title in four seasons. What does that say about what you've built at UAB and to be able to have this moment for the guys that you have on this team, but also the guys that you have brought in over the years?

ANDY KENNEDY: I've learned Jim's a little hard of hearing. Did you say 11-2, fourth straight conference championship game?

Q. You guys have a shot at a third title in four years. You're 11-2 in conference tournament games.

ANDY KENNEDY: Yeah, I'm playing.

No, I don't -- I came back here. I'm a proud alum. Not only I went to school there, but I was a part of the Gene Bartow legacy. I take great pride in that. I came back for moments such as this. Three out of our four years, we've been able to accomplish some good things and putting ourselves in positions for games such as this, Memphis-UAB.

I think some of the reason that people think it's a rivalry, it's hard to be a rivalry when one team dominates the side, which Memphis has done, quite frankly. But I think the Gene Bartow connection's a big part of it. Obviously he had great success at Memphis and he came and started the program at UAB. So this is what it's all about. I'm going to do the best I can to put my guys in the best position possible to be successful.

Q. Ja'Borri, you've really stepped it up the past five games, just how have you been able to lock in and what's your mindset going into Memphis?

JA'BORRI MCGHEE: Honestly, it's just, you know, taking the time, being the best version of myself, putting the work in and just being confident that it wouldn't matter making mistakes and about making mistakes. It's just going out there and playing hard for 40 minutes.

Q. I believe, if this stat is correct, I believe the win



tonight you passed Mike Davis for second at UAB. Could you just kind of reflect on building a program a little bit, and is there any advice for maybe a first-year head coach coming into the AAC on how to sustain success in this conference?

ANDY KENNEDY: Thanks so much. When I got the job I can't imagine how much college basketball has changed in my five seasons. And I'm a cagey veteran. Don't let these youthful looks fool you, good lighting in here. I've been through a lot of stuff, man. But even I'm not prepared for what's happening. And it's changing day-in and day-out. So I used to go in and you would recruit, you always want to recruit quality kids, and they had to have ability. Two good kids, two talented kids, that's an A plus. But now with roster, you know, continuity and how guys are in and out, really, really blessed. I mean, Yax could have gone. He could have been playing on the other team tomorrow, amongst a number of other people. He stayed true to us. This speaks to his character and speaks to what's about. He's a big picture guy. And Ja'Borri, I'll add this, this kid's a Juco kid, Division I basketball, the reason he's playing better now is because he's garnered this much-needed experience, he knows he can do it. And sometimes even though you tell him that you can do it, just like Yax last year -- You can do it, you can do it -- until you have tangible success, it's hard to feel good about who you are as a player. Both of these guys have earned their success and both of these guys have earned this opportunity tomorrow. Big stage a lot of people watching -- Carolina, Indiana, Texas, I follow it -- a lot of people will be watching tomorrow, hopefully we can play well.

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