

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 15, 2025

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

North Texas Mean Green

Ross Hodge

Brenen Lorient

Atin Wright

Postgame Press Conference



At this time of year, you got to play good. We didn't play well enough. I didn't do a good enough job as a coach. And you got to give them a lot of credit. I love the fight of the group. I didn't expect anything else. I thought throughout the whole game, it was a group that fully anticipated we were still going to come back and win the game. We just didn't play well enough for the totality of the 40 minutes.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

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.

ROSS HODGE: I want to start out by congratulating Coach Kennedy and his group, defending tournament champions. To bring back a good amount of those guys and navigate the season as they did and put themselves back in position to do it again is commendable.

As far as the game went, I felt ultimately the close of the first half was probably our demise. Neither team was playing great offensively for a good majority of the first half. I thought both teams were playing really hard defensively, two physical teams. It was 17-17 and then they closed the half on a 13-3 run to go up 30-20, which ended up being the final margin of victory.

During that stretch we did not do a good job of executing against their 1-3-1 zone. It's something that they go to. We've played them twice and played them a ton through the year, so it wasn't something that necessarily surprised us or caught us off guard. We just didn't execute great against it and felt the squeeze a little bit, and I wish I could have -- as a coach, you just wish you could help your guys out a little bit in those situations. It was a little bit uncharacteristic of this team. We had nine turnovers in the first half and then really played pretty much a mistake-free game in the second half up until the very end when 10 slipped and B-Lo stepped out of bounds. The game was kind of decided at that point as well.

Just didn't play good enough to win against a quality team.

Q. You took the reins from a Grant McCasland-coached North Texas team and you've built it back to a really great squad this season. When you come into -- when you go to where it could be the end here, do you guys see a future where you maybe possibly look at a NIT bid?

ROSS HODGE: Haven't thought a lot about it, to be honest. It's one thing we've kind of preached with this group is to just be fully present and not look too far ahead. To be honest, everybody in our program was fully anticipating playing tomorrow. So that's something that we'll certainly -- this group loves each other, they love being around each other, it's one of the closest groups I've ever been around as a player, as an assistant coach, and as a head coach. So I'm sure if those opportunities come our way, we're certainly not in any position where we're going to like turn those opportunities down. But that's not what really any of us anticipated. I think we anticipated sitting up here with somebody with a cowboy hat on and getting ready to play Memphis tomorrow. So we'll have to kind of wrap our heads around that and move forward.

Q. Looking into today as well, Yaxel Lendeborg, just one of the best talents in the American Conference, what was your response to him in that first half? You were able to shut him down for a low scoring half and then he was able to explode in the second half, so talk about what changed there.

ROSS HODGE: Yeah, I just think the game opened up for him. He's a great player. It's really hard to stop great players. In the first half I thought we did a good job of

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making him play in crowds. We were physical with him. He had a hard time kind of finishing with some of our size and physicality. But he can just hurt you in so many different ways. Coach Kennedy does a good job of manipulating where they put him. He'll bring the ball up in transition, they will run isos for him, they will run some pick and pop stuff for him, they will run rip stuff for him, and it's really hard to get a bead on exactly where he's going to be at all times. On top of that, when you do make him miss, he can rebound it and stick it back in.

Q. You mentioned about how they were able to get you guys out of your rhythm offensively. You mentioned the zone there. What did they do so well to maybe keep the ball out of Atin's hands and some of your best offensive players hands in some key spots like that?

ROSS HODGE: Yeah, they have done it all year long. They have done it historically through Coach Kennedy's tenure. We just didn't execute very well against it. We got a little rushed. They do have good length up there, Chris Coleman at the top of it and Yax in the middle of it. We air mailed a couple passes. They just kind of keep you off balance. You got to really, really concentrate. Especially in the first half, it's away from your bench, so it's kind of hard to get everybody where they're supposed to be. A couple times we got caught with bad spacing in our four out. And again, to their credit, they turned us over in those segments and honestly that was probably the game.

Q. Atin, seemed like they were able to really crowd you and keep the ball away from you, what did you see today as far as your offensive performance and what they did against you?

ATIN WRIGHT: I mean, they have a good zone or whatever you want to call it, matchup zone, 1-3-1. Like Coach said, it just keeps you off balance sometimes and makes you think too much. Our spacing was bad, like he said. Yeah, honestly, they did that, like Coach said, they have been doing that all year and it's something we kind of had a hard time adjusting to. Yeah, it was just one of them days.

Q. Going into halftime down 10 what was your message and what adjustments did you want to see there in the second half?

ROSS HODGE: The message was I thought we played like extremely hard. And I thought we defended at a really high level to keep us right where we needed to be, despite some of our offensive deficiencies. I actually have to go back and look at it, but I actually thought we had some decent looks in the first half around the basket that we just

couldn't get to go. Then you kind of start pressing a little bit.

So that was the message, like, regardless of what's happening with our offense, like, let's get back to not letting it impact our defense. Worst case scenario you would have liked to have been down 24-20 at the half instead of 30-20. So that was really the message.

Again, this group, we were down at halftime yesterday. We were down to the same team 18 points at home. And so certainly it's not like you're thinking you're not going to come back and win the game. It's just more like, how are we going to win this game this time around. I thought we did a much better -- like I said, we did a much better job, didn't turn the ball over really hardly any in the second half, and rebounded the ball, and eventually you got some threes to go down. I just wish I could have helped them a little bit better during that stretch.

Q. Obviously we talked about it after the senior-day game, but can you talk about the impact that these seven seniors have had on the team this year?

ROSS HODGE: Yeah, I mean, to come in and make the sacrifices that they have all made and to form the level of bond that they have formed in such a short amount of time, not only with each other, but with the university and the community of Denton, and to approach it like not that they're just like a little bit of -- this is, like, a six- or seven-month stop. They legit took ownership of this program. They took pride in it. They took pride in the Super Pit, which is why we have one of the best records in school history at home, second most regular season wins in the history of the school and did marvelous things, and you don't do those type of things unless you're getting an incredible investment from a lot of people, and I'll remember them for that.

Q. For the players -- each of you can answer. What will you kind of remember most about North Texas from this year?

BRENEN LORIENT: I think I'll say what I'll remember the most is just how much I love the guys that we have around and we all try our best every day and we all want to get better and that's something that we should continue to do.

ATIN WRIGHT: I was going to say the camaraderie of the team. Like Coach said, we're all new coming in here, and it's sometimes -- most of the time hard to get guys on the same page, especially for a few months, couple months. But we all loved each other, honestly, and that's definitely the one thing that we'll all miss, honestly.

Q. You guys are right on the cusp of a potential at-large, but it looks like it will be just short. Is there anything you may do differently next year schedule-wise or potentially you would want the conference to get involved with to make that at-large closer than it is now?

ROSS HODGE: Did Tim put you up to that question?

Q. No, sir.

ROSS HODGE: (Laughing.) No, honestly, I think we had opportunities in the non-league. We had opportunities to get some Quad 1 wins. Now, the hard part is when you're bringing a brand-new group together like we did, you really got to fast-track, and so you end up and you go play a team like McNeese on the road, who had half their team back and it's really early, but that is a Quad 1 opportunity. We played a really good Utah State team on a neutral floor in Disney. Had a chance to win the NIT championship. Obviously we scheduled Oregon State at home. Went and played on the road at Minnesota. So we've always really challenged ourselves in the non-league. It's something that I do think we try. We try really hard. We're really patient in scheduling. We went to High Point. And again, there's just not many people willing to go play that game, but you had an opportunity there. And if, and again, if you -- maybe you don't have to win all of them, but if you're able to beat McNeese, if you're able to beat Memphis on the road, then you're sitting there and you got a couple quad wins and your metrics are really nice and you probably are on the right side of the bubble.

Q. Brenen, what did Coach and this team do to help you develop your game this year?

BRENEN LORIENT: I think this year he -- it wasn't about the basketball, it was just more growing as a man, and taking care of my responsibilities every day, every single day. My teammates, they always showed love and I love them for that.

Q. I want to ask you about those first couple threes in the second half. You were held scoreless in the first. Just how much energy you saw the team kind of regain, the momentum you saw when you saw the first one go down.

ATIN WRIGHT: Definitely gained a little momentum. I think honestly it was just about us getting stops, at the end of the day. It could have been anybody scoring we would have gained momentum. Yeah, I just think getting stops gave us more momentum than really scoring.

Q. What was it like as a player to play these games?

This is your third contest against UAB this season, and these close tight games, what's it like playing in this atmosphere against that kind of competition?

ATIN WRIGHT: It's a great atmosphere. Shout out to all our fans, all their fans. They always bring the energy. We always compete. Great coaching, great players.

Q. Speaking about Yaxel Lendeborg, what was it like being able to guard him and just what were the keys to that matchup?

BRENEN LORIENT: Yax is a good player, knows how to do a lot of things really well, and I love matchups like that. It's a challenge and I love to rise to the occasion, but he got us today and that was that.

Q. Seems like all season there's kind of been a difference in the first half and second half performances for this team. What is the biggest difference that you see from the first half to the second half, where the team comes out a lot more composed, as you said, limits turnovers, and all that.

ROSS HODGE: Yeah, I don't know if I would a hundred percent agree with that. Because there's been games we've gotten off to really, really good starts. We got off to a great start against Wichita State both times. We got off to a great start when we played UAB at their place. So it's like -- what I think it speaks to more than anything is this group's ability to stay together for 40 minutes, knowing that there's going to be ebbs and flows in basketball games. It's an experienced group, they have played a ton of college basketball, we just had to figure out how we wanted to play together. There's just a, there's a calmness even when we're down at halftime, from everybody, myself included. I think there's really, like, I mean, these guys could -- there's probably only been once or twice when I've really had to challenge us in a manner louder than what I'm speaking to now at halftime. I know that's crazy. Like, people are, Man, what did you say at halftime? I'm like, you know, Play better (laughing). Make some adjustments. But, honestly, like this group doesn't really need that, but they have shown the ability to come back. We came back today, we gave ourselves a chance. We cut it to a two-possession game, made them miss three times, couldn't grab the rebound, and then Ja'Borri McGhee hit a monster shot there. But when you dig yourself holes you kind of need everything to go right. So a ton of respect for this group, and I always, I love coaching this team, I love sitting in huddles with them, I love watching how they communicate with each other during those moments, and there's a genuine belief amongst everybody at all times that we're going to find a way to win these games and it's impressive.

