

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Sunday, March 16, 2025

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Memphis Tigers
Penny Hardaway
Dain Dainja
Moussa Cisse

PJ Haggerty

Postgame Press Conference



I thank the Committee for respecting us and our work that we put in this year because we heard so many things. I'm so proud of this team to be going out and playing a really good Colorado State team.

Q. Do you almost feel like that they had to respect you, given everything you did -- I know today didn't probably matter to the seedings, but that they were left with no choice but to respect you, given the stuff you had accomplished?

PENNY HARDAWAY: Yeah, it's a great feeling because -- again, I keep saying I know God is real. We heard so much 8, 9 -- as bad as 8 and 9 for the last month, and that's what kind of pushed us through, even though there was nothing we could do about it. But it does make you feel good to see the 5. That's respecting us a lot. We put the work in, though. We earned it. Very happy to see that.

Q. I don't know if shocked or surprised is the right word considering what you have done through the season, but were you caught a little bit off guard, maybe, by the 5 seed at all considering all the talk that's been happening for the past month?

PENNY HARDAWAY: A part of me I would say yes because of the talk that happened. But at the end of the day, if they're going to go by resumés, we have one of the best resumés in the country. It's hard to win games on this level. When you win games, whether it's non-conference or whether it's in the AAC, it's tough. I'm just thankful for them respecting that.

Q. If you can just reflect a little bit. Sitting here now versus sitting here when you guys were leaving a year ago, what's the biggest difference for you as a coach, as a person, and the feeling?

PENNY HARDAWAY: I think growth. Growth as a coach, growth as a person, my faith, again, like I say. Through the storm, that was a huge storm last year, you know, losing this game, the first round at the tournament, my mother having throat cancer, and just really just going through it.

Memphis - 88, UAB - 72

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

PENNY HARDAWAY: Again, giving all the glory to God. To me, this entire seen and post-season so far has been faith-based and such a wonderful season that we're having right now and we understand why. We are a praying team, we're together, we play hard. These young men have given me everything that they have had all season and we're being rewarded for our hard work.

So again, kudos to UAB. Tough game again. It's hard to beat a team three times. For us to pull that through is nothing short of amazing.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. In a season déjà vu going back out to the West Coast where you got your first conference ring against a team you beat to get your first NIT championship in the final round. What does this mean? It's almost correcting a lot of things that didn't go right the first time to get it right the second time.

PENNY HARDAWAY: Colorado State, I've watched them this year. They're a well-oiled machine, they play hard, they're well coached. We know what it's going to be like. Right now, we're celebrating the conference championship and getting a 5 seed.



To be here now, happy, winning a regular season and the conference championship, man, I feel blessed and grateful for this situation.

Q. What did you see from Baraka tonight? Are you confident in his ability to lead the offense against Colorado State if needed?

PENNY HARDAWAY: I think obviously for Baraka, he was ready for his moment. He never wavered from his work ethic, his attention to detail, being prepared. And when I called on him today, I knew he was going to be ready. He's a pure point guard. He knows how to run the show. He's one of the best on-ball defenders and defenders in the country. So he showed us today with the minutes and opportunities what he was made of and I'm super proud of him.

Q. And we were in the room with you guys when you found out you were going to be the 5 seed, but before that, I saw you kind of shrugging a couple of times and slouching or whatever when, for example, Ole Miss got a 6 seed and other teams that you had beaten or had better resumés or whatever as they came across the ticker and you were maybe assuming you were going to get maybe shafted there at one point or another. How satisfying was it for you to see Memphis come across the 5 seed line there?

DAIN DAINJA: It was a good feeling just with all the talk, the seeds this past couple weeks. It was just a good feeling for us and the team to know that we got a spot for the tournament.

Q. We saw Tyrese on the bench today coaching. We saw him standing up doing that. What was that like, the kind of adjustment to have him in that role?

PENNY HARDAWAY: Yeah, obviously, it hurt me to see him go through that. We understand that injuries happen in sports, but he's a leader and that's what you saw today. Even coming back out on the court in a boot when we in danger of losing that game yesterday, he came back out and used his voice with the guys and was still a leader.

We don't know what his future's going to hold for the rest of this year, but we do know he's with us 100 percent and he has these guys' back and he can lead from the bench as well and that's what he's been doing.

Q. Describe your emotions going through this season being two-time champions for PJ and Moussa.

MOUSSA CISSE: For me, I would say, like, it's a blessing because I think -- (audio cut out) -- go to a lot of colleges

and then to come back to where I started, and where I started, I already won and I thought that was enough, and then to come out and win twice, that's a blessing. So I'm very grateful for everything God give.

PJ HAGGERTY: It's a blessing from God. We've been through a lot this whole year with each other, grinding it out, just been through a lot. For us to come through and achieve what we always wanted to achieve back in the summer means a lot.

Q. Moussa, two things. The first one might be awkward because he's sitting right there, but you've played for him twice now. What's the biggest difference that you see in Penny now compared to first Penny? And then secondly, personal satisfaction for you to be able to have such a big part in this weekend?

MOUSSA CISSE: I mean, I would say the difference is, like, I was young and he was letting certain things slide because I was young, but now I'm really adult and he hold me to a higher standard, so I got to match that. So I would say that's the difference. He really coach everybody, like, the same and then he give us, like -- what do you call it? Energy. So that's probably the difference.

Q. PJ, you've been a part of a team where the city really isn't about that team. It's not the number one focus. Now in Memphis, I think that Tigers team is, like, tops it in the city. Is there any pressure to that or is it kind of support that you need from when the city's like that?

PJ HAGGERTY: No, I would say it's a lot of support. As y'all can see, we had the most fans out of every team. That means a lot coming all the way from Memphis. There's a lot of support. I love the fans, they love me back, so at the end of the day, we do it for the team and we do it for the fans.

Q. You were asked about how the feeling is different this year. You got recognized by your peers earlier this week as Coach of the Year. You had to work through some injuries in this tournament and you got the results. What does that do for you about the recognition and then the job you've been able to -- the results you've been able to have by what you've done this week?

PENNY HARDAWAY: I pretty much owe it all to my staff. I have an unbelievable staff of guys to help support me. Can't do anything alone. They're my backbone. They keep me locked in and wherever I'm weak, they're strong. Iron sharpens iron. So I can't take the credit for all of this. Obviously, it's God first and then, secondly, my staff just



has been phenomenal, from Darrell Turner, the trainer, he's keeping these guys healthy, and just the entire -- everybody. Todd Forcier, the strength and conditioning coach, getting those guys weights and getting them stretched out. It's just a full effort from everybody. The managers, the GAs. So for me, this week we tried to keep everything together. It was all of us together to get this done.

Q. What did it mean to get recognized by your peers? They said you did the best coaching job in the conference this year.

PENNY HARDAWAY: That's unbelievable when your peers give you the nod. A lot of those coaches texted me, which made me feel really good because I've kind of paid my dues in this league. This is my seventh year. I've learned a lot of stuff. I love this league. It doesn't get the respect that it deserves. So hopefully we'll represent this conference in great fashion. But it's amazing to be, you know, honored by your peers and I'm definitely proud of that as well.

Q. Last season, putting together the team that you were putting together, I know you said this season going into it that you made some changes looking for more than just sheerly talent and bringing in the character, bringing in the right guys for the program. Just what it's like to be in this moment with those guys after all the adversity from last year and just what it means to you to do it with them.

PENNY HARDAWAY: Yeah, it means a lot. Character was the number one thing. All these young men are purely good human beings. They really care, they have a care factor, and that's what I really wanted for our city and for our university, not just be transactional and come in for nine months to get an NIL check and not care about the city or the name on the front.

We really targeted these young men. They responded to the bell every time. They showed that they really cared. We never lost two games in a row. It was right back to where we needed to be every time we lost and the leadership on this podium is what really carried us through all season.

Q. To the leadership at the podium now, to each of the student-athletes, what's it been like to be on this road together and to now know that you have a 5 seed and an opportunity to make sure that this season doesn't end for a while.

PJ HAGGERTY: No, being a 5 seed it's amazing. I seen the predictions they had us 8, 9. But for us to be 5, all the

hard work we put in to get there, it means a lot. But the job's not finished, though.

DAIN DAINJA: Definitely a good feeling, for sure. We can't take the season for granted at all. It's going to be a fight regardless, so we can't look at this game as just an easy game. Every game's going to be hard, so...

MOUSSA CISSE: That's it. We don't take it for granted. It is a great feeling. For me, this is my first year in the tournament, so I'm going to give it everything that I got because I'm not going to take it for granted. So, yeah, I'm really happy about this.

Q. There were a lot who said that this championship game didn't matter that much because the seeding was set. You obviously didn't coach like that. They didn't play like that. Can you address that a little bit?

PENNY HARDAWAY: Yeah, I kind of, you know, we are winners. We want to keep that winning edge and start the Tradition going again of Memphis being associated with winning. Not just Memphis University or University of Memphis. Just winners when you think about us. And it was personal for us to come in and handle our second goal, which was to win the conference championship. We don't want to leave anything on the table that we have an opportunity to win. We'll never, as long as I'm the coach here, we'll never look at a tournament as just something to do just to get to the next thing. It will always be the focus of understanding that you respect everything, but you go hard and you try to win everything and that's what they gave me today. We wanted it for our city, for our university, and for ourselves, and it's a great feeling to have done so.

Q. Dain, third time playing Yaxel, and seemed in the second half you really had your way. Tell me about that matchup, and a couple times you hit him with the, "little too small."

DAIN DAINJA: Definitely a good matchup, for sure. Like I said the very first time, he's a good player. I'm going to give it my all every single game this whole tournament, it's not just about him, I'm going to give my all every single game, so...

Q. What did it take for you to get the guys to believe, you had nine players available today, two of them one was a true freshman, one was a walk-on four months ago, they played I think 90 combined minutes. How do you, if you believe, how do you get them to have that same belief?

PENNY HARDAWAY: Again, it's faith-based, to be very

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

honest with you. Again, I keep saying that, it's just understanding that we're together, we're united, we are as one. And again it speaks to the character of all the young men. They want to win. And Jared and Dink, Damarion Yates, those guys, they want to stay ready to be available for us to win. And we were short handed today, but we never wavered or had a threat or felt like we couldn't win the game. We knew the next man up because 1 through 13 work as hard -- they all work hard, there's not like we just favor PJ or Dain or Moussa, we're pushing all of them. Pushing all of these guys. Because anything can happen in the game. So again it just speaks to the character of these young men on how they really care about the city and how they care about one another. They're going to play hard, no matter where we're playing.

Q. To win by 12 in this title game against a tough UAB team, how does that only increase your faith about what you can do in the NCAA tournament?

PENNY HARDAWAY: Yeah, we're confident in who we are. We knew that UAB game was going to be really tough, that they are a really good team, they're a tournament team. It's the third day in a row. I played these guys a ton of minutes. It was just that will, that willpower today to come out and just fight as hard as they could. And we got the victory. So at the end of the day we give all the credit to God and then we just continue to take what we have and our abilities and go and just fight.

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