

Emirates NBA Cup

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Houston Rockets

Ime Udoka

Semifinal Practice Day



Q. Ime, there are fans tuning into the NBA Cup who aren't familiar with the Houston Rockets and what you guys have done so far this season. How would you describe the identity of this team right now?

IME UDOKA: I'd say we're a deep, athletic, physical team. That's what we're trying to build. Been good on the defensive end, defensive minded, like to junk it up, be aggressive on that end. Unselfish and balanced on offense. Yeah, that's the reputation we have kind of formed. The identity we want to form is playing with effort and traditionally getting stops and playing good defense.

Offensively, we're a work in progress. Some young guys coming along and making strides. That's why we are where we are.

Q. On the subject of the offense making progress, do you feel that -- it's No. 15 now in offensive rating. Do you feel it needs to get closer to where your defense is to reach the goals you've talked about?

IME UDOKA: Yeah, I'd say we have to be more consistent, for sure. There are things we do really well that have helped us in those numbers. Sometimes it simply comes down to shooting, and if those numbers increase from the shooting aspect, obviously we'll take a step there as well.

A lot of teams are trying to keep us out of the fast break situations. Our defense turns into offense, which has been really good. But in the half-court at times, when we get bogged down and the ball sticks a little bit or we're missing shots, it affects us there.

Shooting numbers strictly can help us improve there. But I think we do some things really well -- crashing the offensive glass, getting out in transition when we can. That will be the biggest step with our young guys, like I mentioned, taking steps in growth as far as facilitators and understanding what the defense is trying to take away from them.

Q. In terms of defending Shai in the half-court, is there

a different level of aggression that you need in order to slow him down? It seems like in the past two games he's had a lot of success.

IME UDOKA: I think he's one of the best scorers, obviously, in the league. A lot of teams are sitting back and trying to make him beat you at jump shots, specifically threes, and I think he gets a head of steam and kind of he's on his front foot and you're kind of in retreat mode.

So we want to pick up a little bit higher, be more physical, I think, show him a crowd a little bit more and give him some indecisiveness as far as that. Just don't want to leave guys on the island the whole time. He's had his way there a few times against us, especially in the first game, but did a little bit better the second game.

He's a tough challenge, no doubt, because of his pace and his patience, and he usually makes the right read.

Q. I wasn't there obviously, but the game against Golden State the other night, you could feel through the screen the level. It was just a different regular-season game. Going through that, coming here, playing for money, there's a trophy at the end, all that good stuff, just what can this week do to help your young guys see what the big thing really is that you're ultimately chasing?

IME UDOKA: Yes, I think it's good to play in those different situations that you mentioned. For a lot of guys that haven't tasted the playoffs yet, it's the closest thing to that as far as intensity and physicality and something on the line.

Meaningful basketball is really good for our young guys. They haven't had a ton of those games. We did last year somewhat at the end of the season, playing for something. We were still in the mix. To make it here and obviously try to take another step will help us grow in those areas in going through those things for the first time.

We have vets that have been there, done that, as well as coaches. For them to go through it for the first time, they said they could feel the intensity. The crowd was different. The environment was different. To pass that step and to

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have to take on another good team here will be a good test for us. But all these things are invaluable for our growth.

Q. What does winning the Cup mean for your team? Like the whole experience and winning it all, what does it mean?

IME UDOKA: Just accomplishment, a feather in your cap. It's something obviously new to the league, but for us it's growth for our young guys and a chance to play in, like I said, some meaningful, different games.

In general, just something that I think players have really responded well to in the league. Kind of takes the dull moments of the early season away and gives you something to play for.

It's an honor to be here. We felt we did well in our group to get here. Now we just want to make some more noise while we're here and not just be happy and satisfied that we're here.

Q. When playing the league's top defense, do these matchups feel like they're more a test of discipline or creativity?

IME UDOKA: I'd say you definitely have to be disciplined against them. We're the top two defenses, so very stingy on that end.

Do it in a different way. But they're one of the best at creating turnovers and drawing you into a crowd. They give up some things as well, but they really protect the paint at a high level.

So making the right reads is big for us and being disciplined as far as that and not playing in the crowd or over penetrating, getting off the ball one dribble too late. Where they really hurt us in the first game was creating turnovers and getting out running. For us, it's the discipline to make the simple reads, simple play.

When Alpie is in the post and the double comes, invite that and create shots for other guys. So I think the discipline for us is huge.

Q. A lot of players, when they talk about you, they say, man, you've got to defend the play for Ime. In terms of defense, how can you speak to -- especially the youth. We have a lot of top prospects playing out here as well and a lot of aspiring people in the draft. What can you say about them being able to play on both sides of the ball and how important that is? A lot of times with the youth, everybody is focusing on offense instead of being able to be a two-way player.

IME UDOKA: I'd say there's only one or two high-level scorers on every team, guys that are averaging in the 20s most of the time. So not to limit yourself or anything, but understanding ways to impact the game. You can do that with defending, obviously, and that's an effort thing, a mentality thing that everybody can have.

Then the guys that are natural scorers do their thing, and we're trying to encourage them to be more well rounded as well. For us, it's just ever since I played, that was me, but also the teams that I've coached with understand the importance of that and how it impacts winning.

For me, something simple as that is non-negotiable. If you're going to win at a high level, you have to be able to do that.

All of our, quote, unquote, non-defenders that have really grown in those areas, we've seen them grow in the last year or two. In general, there's only a few guys that can really score at that level that really impact the NBA game like that. But there's other ways you can get in and carve out a role and a niche in the league.

Q. Going back the other night against the Warriors, all the focus on the foul with a few seconds left overshadowed the fact that you guys shut them out the last few minutes. What do you think of there being so much focus on that foul, and what did you see from your guys in the last few minutes?

IME UDOKA: I saw some great effort. Obviously, we had to make some shots to get back in it, but we really locked down on that end. I think we were pretty stingy all game for them to only have 90 in general, but the last minutes when we had to have stops, we got them.

Our activity was great, especially on Curry. I think Alperen did an amazing job of moving his feet and taking him away from his shots there.

Yeah, it was more so than me focusing on the last foul, it was everything that led up to it, which was getting the stops, getting those rebounds and getting the scores, but also timely possessions, time-and-score that we attacked and got quick baskets and got us into that two-for-one situation late in the game.

I love how Fred got on the floor and Jalen got on the floor to even be in that position. The refs call what they call, and you kind of live through that. But also to take and make those big free throws late in the game. Jalen did that; credit to him.

I love how we guarded at the end. Overall for the game, we have six or so 24-second violations against a pretty high-level offensive team, you're doing some good things.

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