

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Vermont vs Duke

Friday, March 22, 2024

Brooklyn, New York, USA

Barclays Center

Vermont Catamounts Coach John Becker Aaron Deloney Shamir Bogues

Media Conference

Duke 64, Vermont 47

JOHN BECKER: Tough loss, it obviously always hurts a lot when your season ends, especially when you've had a season like we've had this year. Just a special group of guys and people that achieved so much this year, and you know we won't be defined by this loss. But it obviously hurts on a lot of levels. You know, season came to an end. Careers came to an end. And that's always hard. That's always really hard to deal with.

I thought we battled. I thought we did enough defensively even though we weren't perfect, but we battled on that end of the court. We kept their All-American at bay, so to speak. He took some really good pass plays and took what we were doing to him, which is a credit to him, but we just couldn't find the magic. We could never get on that run, string a bunch of shots together.

But credit to Duke. They made a lot of nice adjustments. Obviously a very talented team. Well-coached team. We wish them luck as they move through this tournament, and we will continue to work, develop, recruit, do whatever we can so we can start advancing in this tournament, and that's all we can do. And we'll pray for TJ Long and his health.

But I'm proud of my team. Especially these two guys up here with me today who are just winners, warriors, and have meant so much to us this year. And Aaron Deloney has meant so much to the Burlington community. It's hard to put into words what he has meant to us as a basketball player, us as a person, us as a leader. But what he does in the community -- working with kids and being available,



he's a special, special person that is going to do great things in life. But it's hard to see him go.

Q. How close is this team to getting over the top and finally winning that round of 64 games?

AARON DELONEY: I think we were really close. I think we honestly had it tonight. Duke made some good adjustments but we've just got to I think just look further, like Coach said, develop, recruit, whatever we've got to do to find it.

Q. You guys got it to two. Missed a three to go ahead of them, and it was McCain hit a three on the other end. Did that feel like the turning point there, could have gotten ahead?

SHAMIR BOGUES: I think our main message was just stay together. I think we really don't get too high. We really don't get too low. So our main message was just stay together and that's what it was all season. So yeah.

AARON DELONEY: There was a lot of plays here and there that kind of changed the momentum of the game. That was one of them. But what can you do?

Q. Do you have an update on TJ?

JOHN BECKER: (Technical interruption).

Q. A game like this, the fouls that mounted up and Duke got into the bonus pretty quickly, was that something you couldn't overcome there?

JOHN BECKER: Yeah, I mean, we knew we had to play close to a perfect game. And like you said, to start the game we were super undisciplined defensively, jumping on the ball, fouling, they were in the bonus almost immediately. Our starting front court had two fouls almost immediately. Then we missed two front ends, and then we had that stretch in the first half where we had live ball turnovers that led to points.

That being said, it's a five-point game at half. So I'm like, you know, we played the farthest thing from a perfect half



and it's a two-possession game with our ball coming in, and that's been the story with this team all year. It has not been as clean a team as far as our execution and some stuff, but they compete like hell and we have some really, really good players that can do some stuff.

And so we've been able to overcome lack of execution more this year than past teams. So we showed that again tonight against a Top-10 team in the country. And then in the second half, you know, they made an adjustment where they were just switching. They put Mitchell on Shamir, they were switching everything on and off the ball, and made us very perimeter-based. And a lot of possessions, you guys were watching the game, just came down to our guards trying to score on their bigs and taking tough shots.

And part of the roster composition piece that's on me was, you know, we just didn't have anyone to throw the ball into, a big guy to throw it into to just play inside out or get easy baskets or force them to double like we did with Flip tonight. And you saw he generated a lot -- put two on him and he did a good job of generating wide open shots for his teammates.

That was the thing we were up against for most of the year this year, and it kind of unfortunately reared its head tonight in a 5 for 23 point game, where it's a good shooting team but when you're one-dimensional, teams are either able to switch or take away your 3-point opportunities, run you off the line.

Like I said, we never found that magic that we've had for a lot of the year where we've struggled offensively for people who have followed our program. And TJ Long has made -- whatever, five minutes to go, TJ has that wing three in transition that he's made all year to cut it to three, and we miss it. And then they kind of just started milking the clock at the end and did a good job with that.

I guess that's a long way to answer your question that we made too many mistakes. We have done that all year and still, even against a really good team had an opportunity to make up for that. But again, we just were not able to in the second half.

Q. When the season ends like this, are you able to appreciate what you guys accomplished or what you've done not just this year, but was it ten titles in 20 years? You'll appreciate it now or is it something that happens a little further down the road?

JOHN BECKER: You know, not many advantages to getting older, but one of them is, yeah, you start to appreciate things a little bit more and are able to put things

in perspective a little bit quicker. And I'm certainly enjoying this and appreciating this much more than when I was first starting out as a head coach.

And so, yeah, I mean, look, we were 28-7 this year. We replaced four starters for the second straight year, won 15-1 in the America East, which was the best year and the strongest year in the America East in a long time. We were 21st as a conference in Ken Pom and our commissioner Brad Walker has done a great job with our conference. It's a conference that's on the rise. And we navigated that 15-1, replacing four starters and some of the flaws that I mentioned as far as my recruiting and roster composition.

So, yeah, I appreciate it, and you know, the hardest part when the season ends is just like I'm not going to see Aaron Deloney every day anymore. That's the part that sucks.

Q. Couple of questions about TJ. Did you get to communicate with him at all when you came off the court and can you tell us what he was like, what his demeanor was?

JOHN BECKER: He was clearly in pain and clearly upset. And when I addressed the team after the game, he was on the training table kind of in the shower/bathroom area, you know, the glamorous situation that he was in there on the training table.

He was, you know, upset. Upset. His parents made it down. So I just kind of let them be. I didn't talk to him. I gave him a kiss on the head and just, you know --

Q. As far as the game that he played, I know that it wasn't a good shooting game. Do you think that that was more about the defense that Proctor played on him, or do you think that it was more about, like, the way that you guys were running things to try to get him looks?

JOHN BECKER: I mean, I've got to watch the tape. I mean, listen, he's had five game winners this year. He's got the magic. He's had the magic all year. He came here to have this opportunity, and his first year, plays at the Barclays Center, 20 minutes from his house. The kid is an awesome kid and awesome basketball player, and he gets a lot of attention from the other team.

They face guarded him the whole game. They didn't leave him. And that stuff has been happening for a long time, so it's hard. He knows he needs to make shots. We know he needs to make shots. It's hard to run stuff when you've got a guy 6-5 face guarding you all over the court.

And so that one -- that one with five minutes to go in transition, you know, we can finally get him loose a little bit. He's made that all year. He didn't make it tonight, but, you know, I'll go down with that kid every day of the week. And we're not here today without his season, without his heroics.

And, you know, I thought he did a lot of other things really well. Like when he got here, he wasn't a great defender. You can't play for me if you don't do that. We battled. We battled a lot, me and him, earlier in the year, and now he's a good, dependable defender and a really good rebounder. Like he's one of our best. Sam Alamutu also rebounded, but these two guys really rebounded out of their areas and from the guard position.

Yeah. You know, he was awesome this year.

Q. John was in a few minutes ago and he said that the crowd was definitely on your side. Did you sense that -- you're nodding.

JOHN BECKER: Yeah.

Q. Did you feed off of it, and was it fun, up until the end result?

JOHN BECKER: Oh, it was fun. And listen, what this program has become, like I knew that's what -- we were playing close to home. But like this is -- what this program has become is amazing, and to see all the alums, basketball alums that flew in from all over the place to be here in this game, and all the families and all the fans, you know, it was -- it's incredible. And that kind of support and loyal fan base, it all goes hand-in-hand with what we've become.

We've become what we've become because, you know, hopefully everyone gets to go to a game at Patrick Gym at some point in their life, but it's an experience. And those people travel, and they are just such a smart, compassionate fan base, and it's folksy and everybody knows everybody.

Yeah, it was awesome. Yeah, we fed off that. And we wish like hell we could have gave them more to cheer about. And they were ready to explode on every basket we made and did. We just didn't make enough of them. But God, I just was hoping -- we did for the most part, just could have found the magic and just could have made a run late.

The roof would have came off the place. Our guys were tired. We're playing NBA players, you know what I mean.

Like we don't have NIL. We don't pay anyone anything. These kids are zero star recruits.

So we had to expend so much energy against this team, and to fight like that. We needed the last piece to get over that hump. We just needed some magic and let the crowd just carry us home. It's not always a storybook Hollywood ending, but we feel very, very fortunate and blessed to have an opportunity to do this in front of just great people and great fans.

Q. One last question on Aaron. About a year ago, he enters the portal, decides to come back, steps into the leadership role, starts, comes off the bench, start, comes off the bench. His career arc as a whole and his journey for this past 12 months, how much of Vermont basketball, what of Vermont basketball does he best represent to you?

JOHN BECKER: He's a perfect example of the people in our program and what a career. I mean, it just seems like yesterday I was flying out to Portland to recruit him and meet his family which is an incredible family, and grandparents. And they are just pillars of that Portland community. You know, he was just really obviously this super undersized kid. Cool as hell. Tats. Sweet as could be and could play and just had the "It" factor. He came to Vermont and didn't play his first two years very much.

As the years went, then he became Six Man of the Year and won. I don't know how many in the history of our conference or any conferences are two-time Six Man of the Year which he became last year. They usually become starters. He did start the next year and then it wasn't the right fit. We didn't have the right mojo. So he came to me and said he wanted to come off the bench, or if I wanted him to come off the bench. So he did and had another great year and we had another great year. He's got four rings.

Then this year, he goes into the portal, comes back, turns down a bunch of money, comes back. Asked him to be the leader, which is hard to be the leader of anything -- and there's some leaders in this room. It's hard to be a leader. You don't get any days off, and it's always got to matter to you. You've always got to be -- you've always got to be on. Like most of the stuff that happens in a team, like happens back at the house, when they are not at the court. When they are there, they are on their best behavior, right, because I'm there and I can take that from them then.

But you know, how guys are acting off the court, are you able to confront your peers. And that's not something that was always natural to AD. And it took a little while this year, but he became an incredible leader. And by the end

of the year, he was running huddles, he was running practices. Not running them but like you heard his voice. And the guys all respected him.

And he offered to come off the bench again this year after Myrtle Beach, and I brought him off the bench. And then we had a bunch of injuries, so he got reinserted ^ in the starting lineup, which is the best thing for this year's team. But he was willing to make that sacrifice again. I was like, you know -- so I love that kid. He's everything that you could ask for (tearing up).

Thank you.

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