

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Idaho vs Houston

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Paycom Center

Houston Cougars

Coach Kelvin Sampson

Media Conference



In the late '70s, early '80s Donny Newman, who was on my staff for five years as an assistant coach, Donny deserves a lot of credit for helping us turn that program around at Washington State. He did an awesome job. One of my best friends is Gregg Popovich, and Donny worked with Pop as an assistant coach I think for 12 years.

I remember going over to the Kibbie Dome when we first got to Washington State. I think our third year we went 7-22. I never forgot that. We weren't very good, but you know, they hired me when I was 31. I mean, it wasn't a great job. It was a good job, they would have never hired me. They would have hired somebody else.

So we weren't very competitive early. Our last four years we got pretty good, but early on -- it was a great experience. Even the year we went 7-22, that was a great experience. It humbles you. It keeps you humble.

I told someone this last year. We've had a bunch of seasons here where we've won 30 in a row. I never forget going 7-22. I don't get carried away with the success, because I remember where I came from, and that's important that people do. That keeps you humble, and that keeps you in a position of gratitude. If you live your life in a humble way every day, you'll be in a position to learn.

Start thinking you're more important than you actually are and you start thinking you know everything, that's when something bad is getting ready to happen. So my learning days, my humble days, in the Palouse set a great tone for my career going forward.

Jim Livengood was my AD. Today I would have been fired. I would have never had another chance. My career probably would have ended after that year, but I had Jim Livengood as my AD. He never called me Kelvin. He would call me K-man. He would say, K-man, I saw some signs tonight. K-man, getting a little better. K-man -- how about that as your AD? We couldn't beat anybody. We tried, but the Pac-10 that year was full of pros. Gary Payton was at Oregon State and Sean Elliott, and Steve Kerr was at Arizona. Todd Lichti and Adam Keefe were at Stanford. We couldn't beat any of them. We could play with them, but we just didn't have enough horses.

THE MODERATOR: We are now joined by Houston Head Coach Kelvin Sampson. We'll start with an opening statement from Coach Sampson and then get to questions.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Excited to be here. Every team in this tournament has had its own journey full of ups and downs. It's always a long year, regardless of whether you're winning a lot or not. It's a long season, but I think the fact that you have kids you enjoy being around every day is what I'm grateful for.

I have great kids, great staff. They work hard. They care about winning. They care about doing things the right way, and that's been indicative of the success we've had.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. It's been a couple of years, but Idaho is back on the other side of the bench from you. You obviously had a seven-year stretch at Washington State where you played Idaho every season. What's that like for you for them to be back in The Dance to see the Vandals back here in March Madness? What are some of the memories you have from that time that you were in Pullman?

KELVIN SAMPSON: The two people I remember the most was one of the greatest Vandals of all time. His son is one of my best friends, Don Monson and Dan. Don was a great role model for my generation. I used to look up to Coach Mons and Jud Heathcote. They were best friends.

Dan, I was a head coach for one of the USA teams. I think we went to -- where did we go on that team? I think it was Halifax, Nova Scotia. We won the gold medal. I remember that, because I had Chris Paul as my point guard. That helped. But Mons was my assistant coach -- one of my assistant coaches on that staff.

After that year, we recruited a little better and a little better, and eventually we got to the NCAA Tournament, but the two things that helped me, number one, an opportunity, because nobody in a major college would have hired me except Washington State.

I wouldn't have made it with any other AD except for Jim Livengood. So I had a great opportunity and had a great athletic director.

Then the next year we had a winning season. I think we went from 7-22 to -- I don't want to misspeak. Was it 17-11 maybe? Something like that.

I know I was a Pac-10 Coach of the Year, and I told my wife the reason they voted for me as the Pac-10 coach of the year is they didn't want me to get fired. As long as we keep him over there, we'll have a chance. That was just to tell them to keep that dude around so we can keep beating him (laughing).

Q. Kelvin, much has been made of this freshman class really across the country, but especially in the Big 12 with Kingston a part of that. You've been around this league a long time. How does this maybe freshman class and who you saw night in, night out in the Big 12 compare to maybe some of the best classes we've seen in the conference?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, I don't remember the other freshmen when Texas had TJ Ford. Whoever was with that class was a great class. I remember Paul Pierce at Kansas. I'm sure that was a great class.

It's the volume now of all these guys. We played against the Dybantsa twice, Peterson twice. I'm know I'm going to leave somebody out. Arizona's freshmen don't get enough credit because their team is so good. But Brayden Burries and Koa Peat and Kharchenkov, those three guys are -- I think people forget they're freshmen, they're so good, and they're so mature physically. They don't look like freshmen.

We recruited Koa, and getting to know him, I always felt like I was talking to a senior. He's so mature in every way.

I think it's also a sign of the times, the way the summer basketball is structured. These kids are on planes from the time they're in the 9th grade. They're flying from wherever they're from to Phoenix to Atlanta, Orlando, New York, Dallas, all up Chicago. I mean, they travel. There's nothing new for them, and they play against each other.

So there's probably X amount of pros every year, some years more than others, like this year there's more, but

they've been playing against each other. So if Peterson's week is Flemings, Dybantsa, Boozer, whoever, over the course of two weeks, when it gets to college, you know, mostly sophomores, juniors, seniors aren't better than the kids I played against in high school. So the adjustment is easier.

The maturity comes from the media landscape we have today. They get sniffed out early, and so they've had a spotlight on them. Then here comes all the podcasters. Here comes all the -- you walk into an event. I'll walk into EYBL Tournament, Peach Jam, that's covered like a college basketball game. The media is all over the place, for the coaches and the players.

So they're able to, because of their experiences in today's world. It wasn't like this when I had Hollis Price. Hollis Price's team won the 17-and-under nationals in Orlando, AAU tournament at Disney World. That was just a sniff. If he had won the 17-and-unders today, Hollis would be a household name all around the country in the college basketball circles.

But these guys are more prepared to handle it. The freshmen I have, especially Kingston Flemings and Chris Cenac, Isiah Harwell. I had four freshmen we played this year. Chase McCarty is also a freshman, but I red-shirted him. Those three guys all came in. Two of them were McDonald's All Americans, and the one that was not was Flemings. So these guys have had microphones and cameras in their face since they were 10, 11 years old.

Q. A feel-good question, if you'll allow me. You got a lot of great memories around here. Oklahoma fans, State of Oklahoma were excited to see your team was selected to come here because of their fond memories for you. Any extra tingles for you or Hollis this week?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah. So like all the teams, we sit in front of the cameras. They put the brackets up there. I've seen a few of those now, but you're always excited because these kids have never seen it.

I remember I was listening to Cenac that morning talk about when the name goes up. He had only seen it on TV. They're a little naive, some of them more naive than others, trust me. I knew Oklahoma City was in play. I didn't talk about it. Maybe to Karen, maybe to Kellen or Lauren, but not anybody else.

I knew Oklahoma City was in play, but we had a tough stretch there toward the end where we lost three in a row. I never overreacted to that because I understood it.

I wanted to make sure we played well in the tournament,



so after we beat BYU and after we beat Kansas, I thought that probably put us in Oklahoma City. That put a smile on my face.

You know, Kellen and Lauren are both University of Oklahoma graduates. They were raised with "Boomer Sooner." We'll go somewhere and next thing you know from 100 feet away somebody will scream "Boomer" at us. There's very few basketball games that I go to, especially in the Big 12, that I don't get a "Boomer." And I always scream "Sooner" back at them.

I was born and raised, I was the son of a basketball coach. My kids are daughters and sons of basketball coaches, but when we moved here from Pullman, Washington, Kellen was in the fourth grade, and Lauren was in the seventh.

They both graduated from the University of Oklahoma. Kellen's best friends are from Norman. He vacations in Oklahoma every summer.

Lauren and her friends... and I have so many dear friends. When we played at Oklahoma State last weekend, Zane Fleming and Stan Ball, Kevin Bookout, I'm going to miss somebody. I had a bunch of friends come up to see me in Stillwater. Last night at practice Alex Brown and Stan and some other people said, Can we come to practice? I said, Heck, yeah, you're not going to crack no codes coming to our practice. We're not smart enough to do anything complicated.

But, no, this place will always be near and dear to our hearts. Joe Castiglione, I know everybody knows he's one of the all-time greats. He's also one of the all-time great mentors, too. He works in anonymity a lot, but how he's helped coaches find their balance and then keep their balance.

Bob Stoops, I get more texts from Bob Stoops after winning. I think Bob must watch every game, because he's a big Cougar fan. He texts me all the time after games.

John Underwood, who was a big part of our early success here. Donnie Duncan hired me. John Underwood was kind of my go-to guy when I needed something. Donnie and John were unbelievable for my family and our success when we first started here.

Yeah, I mean, I'm a Cougar, man, but I'll always have a little Sooner blood in me.

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