

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Charleston vs Alabama

Friday, March 22, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena

Charleston Cougars

Pat Kelsey

Reyne Smith

Ben Burnham

Media Conference

Alabama - 109, Charleston - 96

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

PAT KELSEY: First of all, I want to start off by congratulating Alabama. They have a very good team. Nate is a terrific coach. They played exceptionally well tonight. I just feel really blessed to have coached this team this year. There was such high expectations and a bull's-eye on our back following up last year's team. We struggled early, stubbed our toe early, but the resiliency that this team showed and the togetherness, the chemistry, it was a special group and I had so much fun coaching 'em.

Frankie Policelli and Bryce Butler, our two seniors who are grad transfers, and they only played in our program for one year. I felt like they were here for five. They're going to leave a lasting legacy because of their leadership, maturity, example they set for younger players. So I just really want to know those guys because I love 'em. They did so much to add to College of Charleston basketball.

But God is great. Obviously disappointed, tough locker room. Those are always very, very difficult speeches to give as a coach when it ends abruptly, when you got to say good-bye to seniors, and that's just life. That's basketball. But the disappointment that we feel up here right now and that we felt in that locker room doesn't take away from an exceptional season that we had. Made our fan base happy, proud, made our university proud, and made the city of Charleston proud.



THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Reyne, you guys got off to a 19-12 start. You got off to a pretty quick start. Hit shots. It looked like the flow was really good. What happened after that?

REYNE SMITH: I feel like some actions we could have done a little bit harder. Mainly it starts on defensive end, just kind of digging down and getting stops. Obviously, a super talented offensive team. Just kind of digging in and trying to get the stops and let the offense flow a little bit more. I think we did a good job of that early and just try and do a better job of keeping that more consistent.

Q. Coach mentioned the fans there. You guys had a big crowd out here tonight, whether you were down 30 or you were up, they were there with you the whole game. Just what it meant to be able to play in front of them here tonight.

BEN BURNHAM: Yeah, we got a great crowd, like you said. The city of Charleston is amazing and the fans, they are amazing as well, so I'm just grateful to play in front of them and them to make the trip all the way out here is crazy.

REYNE SMITH: Yeah, same thing. I think we work every day and to have that support behind the entire city from watch parties back home or them traveling out all the way to Spokane, it's incredible having them and hearing them being loud throughout the entire game. Just really fortunate we have a great fan base following us.

Q. You seemed to be a little bit more aggressive today. Was that part of your mindset just going in or was that kind of what the offense was giving you?

BEN BURNHAM: I think a little bit what the offense was giving me. I kind of got going there and Coach kept going back to me, so I'm thankful for that. And, yeah, I just got going a little bit there.

Q. Reyne, just talk about, you were one of the guys who had to stop Sears and it just didn't seem like it mattered who they put on that guy, he's elite.



REYNE SMITH: Yeah, he's an incredible player and he's an All-American for a reason. He gave us a handful tonight and maybe let's take a little bit more pride defensively as an individual and really studying maybe a little more on personnel. But, yeah, he's a handful to guard and unfortunately just couldn't get stops when we needed, fouled a little too much on his drives, kind of being a little too handsy. But got to give him credit, he's one hell of a player.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. We'll take questions for Coach.

Q. The same question I asked Reyne about Sears. He was just dynamite tonight, I thought.

PAT KELSEY: Terrific player. First Team All-SEC for a reason, NBA prospect, can score at all three levels, gets fouled, which new age analytic basketball free throw generator is very, very good, scores at the rim, scores from distance, great burst, strong. They run really good actions for him, and he got going. You let a great player like that get going early, the rim starts looking really, really big. You let him shoot 15-foot charity stripe shots to get his confidence up even more. He got on a flow. He had 20 at half, I felt like he had 40. So, yeah, very, very good player.

Q. Two-part question, Frankie Policelli, you mentioned him in your intro, just what he's meant to this team and just this season alone. I know you said it feels like he's been there for five years, so to go a little bit deeper on Frankie. And you mentioned God is good, just your faith carrying you through this season and just what your faith means to you.

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, I appreciate that question because that's the center, that's the foundation. It's where I get my strength. God's the answer. He's the reason. He's the reason, He gets all the glory through all of our triumphs and big wins and championships, that's all Him. That's all God. It's the center. I'm about my faith, my family and hoop. Faith, family and teaching. And it's always centered there. God surely is great. So maybe my favorite question of all time. I really appreciate that.

Frankie Policelli is an extremely high-character young man. Whatever he's going to do with his life as he moves forward y'all should buy stock in it, because it's going up. Bryce Butler, I could say the same exact thing about him. I said it, like, he was only in our program for less than 12 calendar months, but I just think a kid like that leaves a lasting legacy just because of the way he carried himself, the way he treated people within our department, the way he treated other students. He and Bryce both, they came

in and they were just about winning, Coach, what do you need us to do to win. Selfless, selfless guys. I was very blessed to be their coach.

Q. Same question I asked the guys, just the city of Charleston being out here, so many fans, just what that meant for you guys tonight.

PAT KELSEY: We have an amazing, amazing fan base. I said that from the moment I got the job here. Our crowds at TD Arena that we call The 6, basketball really, really matters in Charleston. At the College of Charleston, it really matters. Fans are passionate about basketball. Just unbelievably blessed to live in the city of Charleston, work at an institution like the College of Charleston. And you're right, that's a perfect example as to the love and passion that people have for our university and our basketball program that they traveled like that. Now I didn't see Alabama's section because our section was right across from me, but I thought they made an impact on the game. Got us off to a great start. But hundreds and hundreds of people traveled all the way across the country and I'm very appreciative of that.

Q. The last two seasons 58 wins, two NCAA appearances, what do you take from the last two seasons and then did you think you played better this year as opposed to last year on the same stage?

PAT KELSEY: I mean, again, you got to give Alabama a ton of credit. They were terrific tonight. Like, whatever they shot, 60 percent from three, I think they were shooting 60-plus from three at halftime. That's hard to do with nobody in the gym. I mean, I felt like every time it left their fingers the ball was like going in. The rim looked really big. They hit us in the mouth. You asked the question to Reyne, you got off to that 19-12 start, what happened. We couldn't get stops. We couldn't get stops. Our kids continued to fight, which didn't surprise me. They scrapped. You look at the rebounding numbers, our rebounding percentage from an offensive standpoint was very, very good. We did a good job of limiting their second shots. We scrapped. We played hard. They're better than us tonight. You got to tip your cap. There was a point there we were down by a bunch and it just felt like a good old fashioned butt whipping. But what our guys did is we break the game into ten, four-minute increments that we call wars. And we just said, Look, this is two wars left, what we call winning time, and don't pay any attention to what the score is, let's win these next two wars and guys were like, screaming out the score of the war, We're plus two, let's get a stop. Love that. You play for me and you play for the College of Charleston, you aren't going to lay down, you're going to freaking fight. To their credit, they punched us in the mouth, they were really, really good, but

we continued to fight. We're celebrating this team this year at this moment in the locker room, celebrating the seniors, letting those guys know how much we love 'em, but unbelievably bullish and excited about what's on the horizon in our program and what's coming back next year. Obviously, Kobe's injury is unfortunate. I got to get the word from the docs, I just, when I went out and saw him after he got hurt, the look in his eye didn't, you could tell something was wrong. So I'm not a doctor, I don't have any report on what's going on yet, but just my heart goes out to that kid, just pray, if something is wrong, for a quick recovery. He's a world class kid, played his butt off, had a phenomenal year this year. Kid's been through so much adversity in his life. Tore his ACL in high school, Kobe's father passed away of cancer when Kobe was in 7th grade. Kobe's dad was a professional baseball pitcher for the Cincinnati Reds and was a radio personality celebrity in Cincinnati. Was raised from 7th grade on by a single mom. He's overcome a lot. And when something like that -- I heard him, when he was talking, he was praying, he was talking to God, he was laying there, like, this can't be happening, this can't be happening. It's gut wrenching and it breaks your heart. Just love that kid so much. I want the best for him. But whatever it is, adversity makes us stronger and Kobe is a fighter, so no matter what happens he's going to continue to fight and be better because of it. So, pray everything works out okay.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you.

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