

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

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FedExForum

Houston Cougars Coach Kelvin Sampson Jamal Shead

L.J. Cryer

Media Conference

Houston - 86, Longwood - 46

KELVIN SAMPSON: I thought that most important thing for us after the Big 12 Tournament was rest. We just needed to rest. Because of all the injuries we had, we're just not made for three games in three days. That was tough for our group.

I was proud of them. Winning two games in that tournament is not easy. But we got to practice. The problem with playing, condensing your schedule where you're playing game, game, game, that means you're probably having slippage in some area.

So it felt great for me that I was able to just work on us. Normally I would give them Tuesday off -- I'm sorry -- Monday off but I didn't. We came in on Monday, worked on our defense. Worked on our defense on Tuesday. And we started working on Longwood on Wednesday.

We just needed to tighten some things up. I could see us slipping against -- the Texas Tech game. I could see us slipping. And then we just got steam rolled on that Saturday.

But it felt great to go back and work on our fundamentals, get back to doing the things that made us a good defensive team.

Then get some guys healthy. J'Wan Roberts wasn't really able to play in the Iowa State game. Ramon Walker was out. He wasn't able to play. So having those bodies back tonight, I thought, was good.



And I thought our kids were sharp the first half. Our defense was really good. We watched film on Longwood, winning their tournament, especially beating High Point at High Point is not easy. We had a lot of respect for them and we played accordingly.

It's the NCAA Tournament. You don't take anything for granted. Our kids came in with the right attitude. Our best players approached it the right way and our team followed.

Q. This was a five-point game in the first half. Then you guys ripped off, I think, 20-4 run. From your perspectives, what fueled that run?

JAMAL SHEAD: Our defense. We started getting stops and were able to get run-outs and easier baskets. And we forced a lot of turnovers. We got a lot of good shots in that run. And we played to our culture during that whole stretch. So I think mostly our defense fueled it.

L.J. CRYER: I would say the same thing. We just let our defense lead to offense instead of just worrying about offense. We locked down and forced turnovers and that led out to easier buckets.

Q. When you are a heavy favorite and the higher seed and all of that, how important was getting off to a good start in this one to not kind of give them any life there?

JAMAL SHEAD: We don't really look at favorites or the seeding. They're a good team, and they were here for a reason. So we looked at it like another game where we have to have the right approach or we could have lost.

So I felt we were prepared the right way. Our coaching staff got us prepared. And we went into the game with the right mindset.

L.J. CRYER: I felt like we tried to get off to a good start no matter what game it is. I feel like that's very important. And Coach preaches that. That's what we went out and did.

Q. Coach said he could feel or see some of the things slipping a little defensively. Did you guys sense that,



too? And how good did you feel you were defensively coming into tonight?

L.J. CRYER: We definitely could sense it. We have a smart group of players. We hold each other accountable and we don't really make excuses. We definitely could see it, and coming into the game we were confident because we worked all week.

JAMAL SHEAD: Exact same thing he said. We hold each other accountable. And we got some rest this week. We got rest and we didn't make any excuses and we came into this game with the right mindset.

Q. I know he's sitting right there, but even up big in the second half he's always coaching. Does he ever let up or go easy on you guys?

JAMAL SHEAD: Never. He coaches 40 minutes of a 40-minute game. I think that's what makes us good. He coaches everybody off the bench the same way, from Ryan to me. And holds us to the same standard, day in, day out, practice or game.

L.J. CRYER: As long as time is on the clock we're out there to compete. We can't let up. Yeah, he just holds us to that standard, holds us accountable.

Q. You heard me ask the guys about getting off to a big start. You've been in a lot of these tournaments, and you know what happens if you let people hang around. How important was getting off to a good start? And was that something you that emphasized?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I don't know how many times I've had teams that were a 1 seed, or a 2 seed, or a 3 seed, but if you have a good culture and you have high standards, you never have to worry about the question you asked me. That's a question that every 1 seed will answer into eternity. But if you've got a culture and a discipline in your program, you don't have to worry about that.

And I mean this sincerely. I never mention the seeding. I just talked about how we had to play. Last Saturday -- and a lot of it is because I don't have subs. Saturday had a lot to do with that.

J'Wan Roberts didn't play the second half. He's probably our most important guy. He's not our most valuable guy. Our best player is Jamal. Most important -- most valuable is probably Jamal and L.J., but our most important guy is J'Wan. We can't win without him. He only played seven minutes Saturday.

So being able to rest him Sunday and Monday -- I don't

think I let him practice Monday, I can't remember -- but I thought our team responded well as they always do.

We had a game similar to the one on Saturday at Kansas. Now, Kansas, we kept fighting. I think we lost by 13 but it was never that close, which I didn't care about. All I cared about was getting them home and getting them right.

After the Kansas game we won 11 consecutive games in the Big 12, which, trust me, is not easy to do. After the Iowa State game we didn't overreact, like a lot of other people did. What we did was get back to our gym, close the doors where nobody can come in, and we focused on what we had to do to get better. And we know how to do that.

Q. You hinted yesterday that Ramon was getting close. Did you expect him to be able to go tonight? What kind of lift does that give you?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I thought he could play the first half. I wasn't quite sure he could come out in the second half because when he hurt his knee, I don't remember the date of the Baylor game, but we played Baylor on a Saturday at 11:00 in the morning. He hurt his knee that Thursday.

And we were told by the doctors and our trainer that he was going to have to have surgery and that he would be done for the year. So you can imagine how elated he was when he found out it was stretched but not torn and that it could heal in time. So I think that was about a month. It's been about a month since he even played in a game.

But just having his body tonight. When you play three games in three days, you need more bodies. We just didn't have the bodies on Saturday.

But having him back -- Ramon's never going to lead us in scoring or any of that stuff, but he is a tough kid, and he's a really good offensive rebounder. And our players like playing with him. They respect him a lot.

He gave us a lift tonight. And the Lath kid, who didn't play at all until Tugler went out with his season-ending surgery, he's just getting a lot more comfortable. He's a long way away from where JoJo was. There's not a lot of difference between JoJo and Ja'Vier. They're both about the same, which is why we were really good there for a long time. We had two starting 5s.

But just happy for Ced. I don't know what his numbers are. I know he missed two free throws. I don't think that was a shock to anybody that's ever seen him shoot a free throw. I don't think these numbers are right. He hit the rim twice. We'll go from there.

Q. Just what's been the most rewarding part of the run with the team this season, the adversity that you've been through, things you can't control, just the pride that you have in this specific group of guys and what they brought to the table as you step forward to the round of 32?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, last year's team I thought was probably more talented than this group. Last year's team we had the number eight pick in the draft in Walker and the number 25 in the pick in the draft in Sasser. And Tramon Marks is a talented young man. And we had a kid who passed away; his number is on our jersey -- our kids and coaches think about every day.

I think this team is more connected. June, July and August was important for this group. We went to Australia and played -- we were together -- we practiced 10 times and then we were together for 10, 11 days. Played four games over there. Some years you go just to go.

But it was really, really important for this group, especially for L.J. Cryer and Damian Dunn and JoJo Tugler. We played the Australia national team with Josh Giddey and Joe Ingles and Patty Mills and that bunch. And I thought our two best players were JoJo Tugler and L.J. Cryer. And that told me something about this group, that we could be pretty good.

After we left there, we won four games, but -- we won three and lost one -- but the one we lost, I got a lot out of that one. That was really good for us.

And then Jamal's leadership is respected. Just because you're the team's best player doesn't mean you get to be the captain. I've had a lot of teams where my best player was not the captain because I don't let the players vote.

A lot of times they don't vote right. I know who the captain should be. That's why we always have the right captain. But Jamal's leadership is important on this team.

J'Wan Roberts' maturity and his day-to-day approach is important, and they embrace work. You'll never hear him complain about work.

There's a lot of people that are never successful in life because they don't like to work. They're complaining about something dealing with work. Our guys aren't like that.

Q. J'Wan sat most of the second half. Looked like maybe he banged it again. Was that more precautionary with a big lead?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah. If we would have had -- as you saw, Ryan Elvin, when Ryan Elvin starts going against other walk-ons that's not a fair fight. Ryan can play. I've seen him do it a lot.

There's not many walk-ons you would trust to put with 5, 6 minutes left in the game in. I trust him. To be able to take our starters out, we've just been banged up with so many injuries, especially with Arceneaux and Tugler out. But sometimes that brings your team closer together. Our kids are, we don't ever worry or complain about it, we just go play.

Q. What are your first thoughts on Texas A&M coming on Sunday?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, if I had to be in the locker room before the game, I would much rather be in theirs before the game because they have the advantage of revenge. It's not going to be hard to motivate their kids. They're going to want to come in here and get some payback.

But Texas A&M is a much, much better team today than when we played them. The Radford kid, I think, is terrific. He didn't play against us. The Boston (indiscernible) kid, I think he played but not much.

And Buzz, like all really good coaches, has figured out how to win the game. He just spaces the floor and let those three guys shoot all the balls. And when they shoot and miss he plays sic-'em with the other ones.

They're a great offensive rebounding team, and they have three guys who can control it. There's a reason why they have won five in a row. The only one -- I think they lost to Florida in the championship -- was that the championship game, I can't remember? Semis. They lost to Florida in the semis.

If you look at the SEC right now, probably the best team in the SEC right now is Texas A&M. They're a team that can get to the Final Four. They're that good.

I think we're a lot better than we were in December with our guards. But not up front. The guy that we really need in this game is a guy like Tugler because he's such a good rebounder.

I say that because A&M is elite, elite offensive rebounding team. We're good, but we're not elite. They're elite. They're a much better offensive rebounding team than we are.

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