

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Duke vs Houston

Thursday, March 28, 2024

Dallas, Texas, USA

American Airlines Arena

Houston Cougars

Coach Kelvin Sampson

J'Wan Roberts

L.J. Cryer

Jamal Shead

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference



JAMAL SHEAD: I don't think that we changed any type of motivation or changed what we've been doing all year and for the past four years that I've been here. They had a winning culture before I got here, and it kind of got instilled in me playing with guys like J'Wan for four years and all the guys that were in front of us.

I feel like we do what we do day in and day out every day consistently, and we follow Coach Sampson, and I think that's the real reason we're here.

Q. J'Wan, how do you guys sort of deal with the emotional come-down of a game like that in the following days?

J'WAN ROBERTS: You know, in that game, I didn't want my two best friends to foul out, but just having trust in people that's coming off the bench and just doing their role. Coach Sampson has a lot of trust in Mylik, Damian, Ryan. Like Jamal said earlier, next man up. Having that confidence, that trust in each other to just finish a game and just take every possession at a time.

Q. Jamal, you're from Manor, a growing town, but still small enough when you were growing up that everybody knows kind of everybody. You also led them to a state final appearance as well or state tournament appearance. What's the support been like from a community like that that's so close-knit? You grew up with a lot of the football guys that are doing things in college now. What's the sport been like back home?

JAMAL SHEAD: It's been awesome. Everybody that I know from there has been supporting me every step of the way, and when you are from a little town like that, you go back a lot. I've had my camps there. I go back a lot, watch football games, basketball games when I can, and go see my coaches when I can.

When you come from a small city like that, the support is unreal.

Q. L.J., you came from a program that had expectations of being where this one has been. What's

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by University of Houston student-athletes, J'Wan Roberts, L.J. Cryer, and Jamal Shead. Questions, please.

Q. This is for Jamal. You had seen three of your teammates foul out, and you're trying to hang on in overtime, and then you foul out. What was that whole -- was that like a nightmare going through that game trying to survive?

JAMAL SHEAD: It was a little different. A little unorthodoxed for sure. Like we say, next man up. I think Ramon came in and gave us great minutes. Damian came in and gave us great minutes, and so did Mylik. When I fouled out, Ryan made the biggest shot of our tournament so far. I feel like everybody came in with the right mindset, and it was unfortunate that we all fouled out, but it went the right way.

L.J. CRYER: It wasn't a good feeling not being out there. We wanted to be out there because when all three of us are there, we feel like we have the best chance to win. We had to trust our teammates. Like I say, it was unfortunate, but we had confidence that those guys would go out there and get it done.

Q. Jamal, you've helped turn this program into a consistent Final Four contender for the first time in 40 years. You guys proved you belong in the Big 12. What's the motivation and the focus for sort of finishing the job now that you're in this position again?



the ride been like for you from start to finish, and what's it like to be here now when you probably expected that when you made the move?

L.J. CRYER: I mean, coming in it was hard definitely because both of the -- it's two different cultures. I feel like the move was worth it. I'm just blessed to be in the position I am today with these guys, and I'm excited to see how far we can take this thing.

Q. L.J., your high school career got cut short because of COVID, correct? The state championship?

L.J. CRYER: No, we lost right before the COVID hit.

Q. Regardless that, Morton Ranch team was good. Having it cut short like that, what has that been like to kind of now make up for that playing for a team that, of course, your last school as well, but also now playing for a team with championship expectations? How much does that ring in your mind of knowing how close you can get but not necessarily getting there?

L.J. CRYER: High school never rings in my mind anymore honestly, but I try to live in the moment. This is the moment we're having now. This is a special team, and we can do some special things.

I mean, I just try to come in with the right mindset every single day and just approach things the right way, and I feel like when you do that, you're going to have success, so yeah.

Q. This question is for Jamal. I talked to your high school coach, and he said when you got to Manor, your jump shot was one of the things you really needed to work on. You were shooting 500 jump shots a day during the summer to get ready for the season. How much it has that worked at Manor helped you get to the point you are today?

JAMAL SHEAD: My high school coach was one of the first coaches who pushed me in ways that I didn't know how to work. I was one of the only guys that on our basketball team came and worked out with the football guys in the summer. He's helped me prepare me for Coach Sampson.

Nothing can really prepare you for Coach Sampson, but he helped me a lot on my route here. He's an awesome coach, an awesome person. That time at Manor helped me become who I am today.

Q. Jamal, what about playing a big name like Duke? You are kind of a big name now. You've been the No. 1 seed before, and you are again. Now you face a big

name program in Duke. How do you all approach that and handle that?

JAMAL SHEAD: I think we prepare just like any other game. They're a great program. They're known for great things, as they should be. They've won a lot. They have good players today or they wouldn't be in this position to play against us.

I think we go in and we try to prepare like we normally do and just play the people in front of us and not the name.

THE MODERATOR: We'll let our student-athletes go.

We are now joined by Head Coach Kelvin Sampson of the University of Houston. Questions, please.

Q. Hollis Price, Quannas White, guys you've known for over 20 years. How have you seen them grow not only since then when you first met them, but as coaches over the past few years as you guys have taken this next step?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Awesome question. When I started recruiting, Hollis was 148 pounds. He has grown a lot. I was hoping you would find the humor in that.

He was 6-foot, 148 pounds. Four-year starter. Never missed a practice. Best practice player I've ever had, bar none.

Quannas and Hollis were high school classmates. I remember them beating Chris Duhon's high school team in the State Finals their senior year. Hollis signed with us, and Quannas signed with Midland Junior College. Then we recruited Quannas out of Midland.

Hollis was a man at 14. His maturity level was unusual for an 18-year-old. He was never a kid. He was just a man. He was raised by his grandfather and grandmother. So he lived in the Ninth Ward. He had it really, really tough. Same with Quannas. He was a Ninth Ward kid. They're both just great human beings. Hollis was a First Team All-American, Wooden Award finalist. T.J. Ford, Hollis, David West from Xavier, Dwayne Wade from Marquette, Nick Collison from Kansas. That was the First Team All-American team that year. Quannas is a winner. A tough kid. Starting point guard on the Final Four team and a team that almost went back to the Final Four that following year. We lost to Carmelo Anthony's Syracuse team that year.

Now they're fathers and husbands, and their families are awesome. I know their kids. I guess I'm kind of like their old great great uncle or something. Their wives, their

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

families, I'm just really proud of them. They both developed into extremely, extremely good coaches and teachers. I'm just really proud of those guys.

Q. This will be the last awesome of a question. What went through your mind when I think García hit the three to send the game to overtime as you're sort of running out of players, and then following that what do you think winning a game like that does for your team?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, first thing that went through my mind is I was glad we didn't foul him. Somebody asked me, should you have fouled there? Of course not. Are you kidding me? With 1.2 seconds to go?

At what point on the catch was he not going to be in the shooting motion?

But I called time-out with 1.2 seconds to go. I knew that -- and it did cross my mind that Buzz is probably going to drop one of them tricky plays of his, but that didn't matter because I had three guys that fouled out. We had two guys on the floor that would never have been on that floor in that situation are. They had not gone over that enough for me to feel comfortable. So I felt a major, major need to call time-out.

It just shows you what a great teacher I am. They screwed it up. The big thing on switches is there's a gray area with the switch. When a kid screens someone, that's easy to switch, but when he runs like he's going to switch and then keeps going, that's when the communication gets tricky. One of the last things we said is, Whether they make contact or not, switch. Now, the no contact and go rule is called Ghost. They will Ghost that. Buzz deserves a lot of credit for that. They Ghosted the screen even though we were instructed to switch the Ghost, we did not.

When García -- they set the screen for García. The guy that set the screen kept running to the corner, so Ramon and Mylik kept going with that guy, and García, who was probably the one guy you don't mind shooting -- of course, in that situation, never going to miss, which is why if there was 6 seconds to go, I would have fouled him. With 1.2, absolutely not.

You know, we get asked a lot about us in that moment. I think Buzz and Texas A&M deserve a lot of credit, too. They're good, and the way they play forces you to have a lot of collisions. You say, well, you foul a lot. Well, they initiate the contact. There is no -- you have no alternative.

When they're driving at your chest, there is going to be a collision. If you bring help, that means that you've got two people on the ball, which means somebody is free to go

offensive rebound. When you are the best at something in the country, when you are the best at something, that means you're really, really, really good. A&M, much like Duke, is right now, they were playing their best basketball at the end of the year. I think, if I'm not mistaken, they had won five consecutive games in the SEC and lost a heartbreaker to Florida that might have been in overtime.

A&M was playing well, and Buzz is a hell of a coach, and they took it to us. Now, we were up 12 with a minute and something, three minutes to go. We missed, I think, four free-throws, one and ones. We made one, missed one four times. You make two of those, and it's not an issue, but we didn't. Turned it over one time. Got a couple of tough whistles.

When a team comes back and the crowds get into it, all eight people on the court sometimes get involved, but I haven't had a chance to say this, but I was really impressed with the job that Buzz and A&M did. They were tremendous.

Q. I know that kind of one of your core philosophies is you make practices harder than the games. Big 12 this year, and nothing against the American Conference that you were in before, but how much did playing in the Big 12 for the first time and winning it -- how much did that increase the toughness of this team?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, it didn't increase the toughness of practice. Our practices never change. I didn't start practicing harder or coaching better or coaching harder because we changed leagues, and I apologize for being repetitive, but going from the American to the Big 12 for us, me in particular, I was more concerned about losing four starters. Jarace Walker, eighth pick, Sasser, the 25th pick, Mark transferred to Arkansas. Then we lost Reggie Chaney. That was probably more talked about in our coaches meetings when we started really being heavy in basketball end of August, September. Practice started end of September, October. We didn't think one minute about the Big 12. It was literally not in our thought process.

We had an 18-year-old freshman in Jojo Tugler that we knew had to play. We had stayed away from the portal because we rolled the dice on Ja'Vier Francis. We need to do give him a chance to succeed and not have him come off the bench another year. Because in this world where it's easy to transfer, if you're not going to play him, you might as well tell him to leave because they're going to transfer. So we didn't want to do that.

We believe in our home-grown players. When Jamal Shead came to our program, he was 17 years old. J'Wan was 17. Ja'Vier was 17. Jojo was 17 when we signed him.



He turned 18 May 27th. Then there's somebody else. Emanuel Sharp was 17 when he got to Houston. We like to take these young guys, put them through it, find out what they got, develop them, and then they become the stewards of our culture.

Player-led teams are far better than coach-led teams. This team is very much a player-led team. Jamal gets a lot of the credit, as he should, but J'Wan doesn't get near enough credit. J'Wan is also a leader.

He's not as loud with his voice as Jamal is, but J'Wan is so sincere. His emotion is captured in a different way. Fabian White was a great leader for our post guys, and Brison Gresham was, but they learned. Seniors leave. Next group comes. Seniors leave. Next group comes.

I've been there ten years, so we've had a lot of really good groups. The leader of this group post guys is definitely J'Wan. Jojo and Ja'Vier, their day will come too, but I can't tell you how pleased I am with the buy-in and the accountability that our kids have for each other.

Q. Damian Dunn seemed to be playing with more confidence since the postseason started. How big has that been to see that in March?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Much needed too. When we lost Terrance, we had to change channels. Then when we lost Jojo, both of those to season-ending surgeries, those were two key pieces for us. Those were two huge hits. When Ramon had the lateral meniscus injury, those three guys made us a good rebounding team. Rebounding doesn't come from one guy. It comes from a collective effort.

Damian, though, it's kind of been up and down all year. Probably down more than up, to be honest. I watch him in practice every day. I just can see it there. It's a matter of bringing it to the court. I give a lot of credit to his teammates. They've kept believing in him.

Sometimes you need your teammates to believe in you when maybe you don't believe in yourself enough. Damian has awesome teammates that help him along the way. He got 17 in the first tournament game against Longwood. I don't remember what he got against A&M. Just his body language on the court has been better, and I think that's reflective of his confidence.

Q. Even with all the injuries and your rotational changes, one guy that's been steady throughout has been L.J. Cryer. What has stood out about his game over the past month or so?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Just getting him better. I don't know

why you have practice every day if you're not trying to get better. Don't buy into that adage that once you get to February, you are what you are. That's not true.

L.J. has been on a constant battle this year to become more than just a shooter. We run a lot of sets for him where he has to come off pin-downs. Not to shoot it. If they're locking and chasing, it means they're chasing him into the paint. Once he turns the corner off a screen and gets downhill into the paint, what's your game, son? Don't show up at the party and you don't have anything to offer. You've got to have something.

He has developed his float game. He has developed a runner. He's getting fouled a little bit more. We've put him in more and more pick-and-rolls in the three areas: side, slot, middle. He's learned to read the game down the middle and in front and behind him. Just developing.

That to me is what is what a coach's job is. Just don't recruit the best players and hope you can win. That very rarely works out. Recruit kids that are really good and develop them. Once you develop them, that means they own their skill set because if they're not developed, that means they're renting it. If they're renting it, that means somebody gave it to you. It's a lot better to own it.

L.J. owns his game right now. He has really worked hard and developed it, but I have to give a lot of credit to Quannas White. He is an awesome teacher, man. The kids that have come through his program, Damyean Dotson, NBA Draft choice, Quentin Grimes, NBA Draft choice, Marcus Sasser. Marcus Sasser was Jerry West Top Shooting Guard in the nation last year. Quannas White was the guy that was his position coach. Now it's L.J. and Jamal. We just keep getting really, really guards that are being drafted to the NBA or getting national awards. I don't think Quannas White gets enough credit for that.

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