

Big 12 Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 13, 2021

Kansas City, Missouri, USA

Texas Longhorns

Shaka Smart

Postgame Press Conference

Texas - 91, Oklahoma State - 86

SHAKA SMART: First of all, Oklahoma State has a helluva team. I think Mike Boynton has done as good of a job coaching his team this year and helping them grow and improve as any coach in the country. We knew coming into this game it was going to be a heck of a battle. We knew there was going to be a lot of plays made both ways. I thought our guys did a good job in starting the game with good energy, good juice.

Throughout the game, we were going to have to withstand some runs, withstand some made shots by Cade and other guys on their team. Cade was phenomenal. He kept making shots at the end there to keep them attached and in the game, but I thought our guys were just poised against the press, and ability to make free throws was a big, big difference.

Q. Shaka, congratulations, man. You know, I don't know if you heard what all Matt said, but he's right. You've taken a lot of shit the last six years. What does it feel like to finally come out on top for Texas?

SHAKA SMART: It feels great. It feels great. More than anything, I'm happy for our guys. Someone asked me, like what do you say to those people or whatever? One of the most impressive people I've ever been around was Augie Garrido. He once said in a similar situation, this is a gift to them. So that's kind of how I feel. This is a gift to everyone, whether they've supported us or not.

And there's a lot of people that have supported us, and we're grateful for that, but the most important thing is our guys stayed connected, and I'm just happy that they get to experience this feeling.

Q. When you talk about the guys, but how special is it for Matt? He talks about you like a father.

SHAKA SMART: Yeah, I mean, he's playing at such a high



level right now with so much confidence. This is what he came here to do. At the end of the day, he had to decide between us and Duke, and when you're a kid coming out of high school and a program like that wants you and a coach like that, I mean, it takes a special type of guy to say, no, I'm going to do something different. And he did that, and he believed in us and our program.

I'm just so happy that he's being able to live out what we talked about during the recruiting process and what we talked about over these last three years.

Q. Shaka, what sustains you when you're fighting COVID, when you're practicing with two guys, when you're losing four out of five? What or who sustains you during those down times?

SHAKA SMART: That's a great question. For me, personally, just trying to focus on the people around me instead of the circumstances because I knew that our guys and our staff and even my family, they need a certain energy and a certain vibe and spirit from me. I just -- I learned from my mom when I was young, during tough times, that's when it's most important to focus on others. It's hard to do because it's easy to be woe is me.

That really helped, and I told the guys that all the adversity and the challenges that we were going through, if we can really just stay together, those things can turn around and actually help us later on in the season.

Q. Shaka, just a couple years ago, we're sitting at MSG talking about how you go from cutting down NIT nets to cutting down nets in the Big 12 Tournament, NCAA Tournament. What does it mean to have this moment with guys like Matt and Jericho and Jase and Courtney, who were there for that, and now you all get to deliver this history to UT? What's it mean for you to accomplish that with this group?

SHAKA SMART: Those guys have grown up a lot. You know, Nick, it was the NIT, but it was very important for us to go win a tournament or a championship. Those guys feel what it's like to step up on a ladder and cut down the nets, feel what it's like to win the last game of the season.



Coming out of that, there certainly was an understanding, okay, now we need to do more.

Last year we went through a lot of adversity. There were moments where we were nowhere near where we needed to be and wanted to be, but our guys responded when we had injuries, got us here to Kansas City in a position where we could fight to make the NCAA Tournament. Then the tournament gets cancelled. Obviously, this past off-season has been so unprecedented.

But our guys' confidence in each other, in our ability to have a really, really good team, has been so much higher because of the work that they put in since they got back on campus in July.

Q. Shaka, a two-parter on Jericho. First thing for you, how have you seen his confidence over the years or even over the last month change? And second part, how can playing aggressive help him in this tournament?

SHAKA SMART: He knows how talented he is. As well as he played tonight, I don't think any of those individual plays anyone was like, wow, that's surprising that Jericho did that. It was more all of them together, putting all of those plays together.

I'm proud of him with the way -- the best word I can use is how much his resilience has grown. He's so much more resilient. These games are hard. These games are -- there's a lot of things that don't go your way, there's calls that don't go your way. In the past, that had been debilitating for him, and it had kept him from being able to string together a bunch of really, really good plays like he did today.

I saw a fire in his eye in the Tech game. I don't know who was voting or what it was, but for him to not make the All Defensive team in our league, it's a joke. He's one of one in this country in terms of a guy that size that can defend that way in different ways on that end. So I think that really motivated him. You never know with Jericho because he doesn't say a lot, but I could just see it in his eyes.

Tonight he was huge. Kalib Boone had outplayed our bigs at their place in Stillwater in February, and, again, Jericho will never say it, but that was clearly a motivator for him, and he played well.

Q. Shaka, looks like schematically you guys did some things that really worked well, kind of that middle ball screen action against the zone and things like that, your personnel decisions in Kansas City, looked like you hit gold on everything. Where does that come

from? To play a Brock Cunningham down the stretch in both games, to put a Courtney Ramey on the bench in certain situations, to start a Kai Jones tonight and to have those guys have success, what do you attribute that to?

SHAKA SMART: Dustin, we have more than five good players. In fact, every guy on our team is capable of helping our team in different moments, different ways. But you just try to look out there and see, okay, of the guys on our team, who gives us the best chance through the combination of, first and foremost, the spirit they're bringing to our team, the energy, the fight, secondly, what they're doing on the defensive end, and thirdly, obviously, it helps to put the ball in the basket. So we need someone who can help us do that.

I just think Kai's energy has been really good. I love the second half that he played against Tech. I thought he played with desperation of I've got to go get the rebound. When he does that, he's so good. So that's part of why we started him. He was phenomenal to start the game. His energy, man, that was a big lift for us to start the game.

Brock, it's really easy to see, when you look at Brock out there, he's either overthinking things and a little little skittish, or he's the ultimate warrior, man. I mean, like ultimate. When he has that look of the ultimate warrior, that guy's going to play heavy minutes for us. I don't care who else we have on our team.

Q. Shaka, I'm going to ask you two questions. The first one was I saw during the trophy celebration after it ended, you were over on the side, and you took a knee, and you kind of looked up, and it was like you were taking it all in. I'd like to know what was going through your head there. Number two, how gratifying is it, after coaching lottery picks, that the dogs that remained behind -- Courtney, Andrew, Jericho, Matt Coleman -- are the ones that are giving you your greatest success as a head coach so far?

SHAKA SMART: Well, answer to the first question, I just -- I was just trying to take in the moment and really be present and be still and watch our guys and enjoy seeing them celebrating a championship. As you know, Cedric, we've been through a lot of ups and downs. Like every other team, we faced a lot of adversity this season. I just wanted to just really soak it in and be a thousand percent present in that.

Yeah, I mean, you win in college basketball with older guys. We all know that. If you can get a transcendent young player, then, obviously, that can change your team. Look at Cade. But you still have to have some guys that

are grizzled, tough, and that's what Courtney, Andrew, Matt, Jericho, Jase -- that's what they bring for our team -- Brock.

You know, it's interesting. We think about talent as just athleticism and the ability to put the ball in the basket and all the skill, but experience is a talent too. Toughness is a talent. The ability to affect your teammates in a positive way on the defensive end is a talent. Those guys have gained that over these years. Hopefully, we can put it to use in Indianapolis.

Q. Shaka, taking nothing away from what you did today, it was historic. It was fantastic. But how advantageous was getting that fortuitous day off yesterday after Kansas couldn't play? It was almost like a tournament setup where you play and have a day off.

SHAKA SMART: Yeah, it was certainly one less game we had to win, Dennis. I mean, I was actually really looking forward to the game, as were our players, but it's out of our control that it got cancelled. I told the guys when we found out, I said, guys, now we've got to have a great practice. We've got to treat practice like it's our game today.

I thought our guys took a really business-like approach towards practice. Certainly, Oklahoma State beating Baylor yesterday, what an unbelievable win for them, and that took energy, that took effort for them. I certainly acknowledge that.

We're here tonight in the championship game. It was us against them. They had been playing so well that a lot of people said we were the underdog, but our guys played and came and got and went and grabbed the championship.

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