

Big 12 Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Wednesday, March 13, 2024

Kansas City, Missouri, USA

T-Mobile Center

BYU Cougars

Coach Mark Pope

Fousseyni Traore

Richie Saunders

Postgame Press Conference

BYU - 87, UCF - 73

THE MODERATOR: Coach Mark Pope is here along with Richie Saunders and Fousseyni Traore. Coach?

FOUSSEYNI TRAORE: It was a fun game, fun team, you know? I think everybody can see how we play for each other, you know. We don't have any selfish players, that's the beautiful thing about this team. Richie?

RICHIE SAUNDERS: I don't know. Two halves of hard-fought basketball, that's all I got to add.

FOUSSEYNI TRAORE: Appreciate it.

MARK POPE: Take any questions, guys.

Q. Richie, what was working for you guys in the second half to pull away after they cut it down to 3 points?

RICHIE SAUNDERS: Yeah, every second half the focus is we're going to win it on the defensive end and it was no different for this game, getting stops in transition, protecting the ball, being strong with the ball. Fous did an incredible job. He had some early things, but he came back and was the man with the ball and was so strong like Fous is. That's what it came down to. Awesome win.

Q. Richie, every time they kind of made a run at you, Darius Johnson playing incredible, you guys seemed to have an answer. Where did you find that response from?

RICHIE SAUNDERS: When I'm protecting the ball, the first thing that comes to my mind, just like I just said, because



we protected the ball we were able to do what we do offensively and either push it in transition or get into our half-court sets, which because people like Fous were protecting the ball we were able to get open shots that we thrive on.

Q. Coach, you guys jump out to the 14-0 run. What was working for you early and Richie and Fous, talk about what it was like to see the shots fall in the opening minutes?

MARK POPE: We had some good fortunate and some good ball movement. The guys came out on the floor on attack from the very beginning of the game. Playing on our toes is something we talk about every day.

This Aly Khalifa has really complicated the guard and he made a couple of shots early and Dal made a couple shots early, and kind of got us going in a good direction. But most exciting for us was our defensive focus to start the game I thought was excellent.

RICHIE SAUNDERS: I don't have much to add to that. You know --

MARK POPE: That's the first time that Richie hasn't had something to add to what I said.

RICHIE SAUNDERS: People made shots. It's always good to see the ball go through the net first. When we have a five-minute run, we have 35 other minutes of basketball we had to play.

FOUSSEYNI TRAORE: They said it all. I got nothing.

Q. Mark, the run in the second half after they had come back to get close and you guys went on a 12-0 run, Spencer draws a charge. What are some of the elements of that defensive that work?

MARK POPE: Yeah, I thought it was -- for us all night long it was a defensive -- like we had to find a way to guard against a team that really is talented at putting down their head and getting to the rim and Darius Johnson was a massive problem tonight making shots. He made difficult



shots that were incredible. And it all started from the transition. You think about how they opened their game yesterday. The first three or four possessions when you watch 'em on film they are just racing down the floor in transition. So I felt like our guys really shored up the transition part of it and finished with rebounds and a lot of rebounds were being finished with our undersized guys which was really important.

Q. Coach, you played three tough games with this UCF team. They have to wait until Sunday to find out if they're going anywhere. What makes them worthy of an NIT entry?

MARK POPE: There is no doubt they should be playing somewhere, they are incredible. It took them a minute to find themselves in the nonconference for sure, but this team is -- this is an incredibly well-coached team. Obviously Johnny Dawkins is one of the best there is in the country with unbelievable toughness and resilience. Their physicality, they can beat you on the glass, they can beat you in transition, they can definitely beat you by turning you over and guarding you. You think about the teams in this league that they beat this year, they won 4 out of 6 coming into this game. This is a good team. I'm so grateful we don't have to play them again. I have nightmares about this team, actually, because they scored 15 points in the last minute of our last game.

I didn't share this with the guys before, but this is really important. When I was in this building seven months ago I talked about how we were excited to be picked 13, because it's Taylor Swift's favorite number. This morning I found out courtesy of the greatest statistician SID ever, that our first game against UCF was on January 13th, our second game was on February 13th, and so we knew that with our third game on March 13th, like, the deck was stacked against these guys, man, it's not even fair. It's not even fair. Plus we're in Kansas City. I mean, what? It's beautiful. If I had told you guys that before the game would be like, our dude has lost his mind?

FOUSSEYNI TRAORE: A little bit.

MARK POPE: This UCF team is great. I'm excited to see how they do the rest of the way.

Q. How with you assess the impact of Dallin, despite the foul trouble in the first half?

MARK POPE: He does what Dallin Hall does. He stepped up and made a couple huge shots, his ball protection under incredible duress was fantastic. I thought he was really special that way. And then sitting most of the first half, for him to come out, he came out right away and just banged

another shot to start the second half. Didn't miss a beat and I thought he was incredible. And him and Richie and Fous really set the tone. The challenge for us in a game like this with a team that is so athletic and so physical and so aggressive and made such big shots is as things are starting to get hairy and complicated, do we stay aggressive? And Dallin helped us stay aggressive. Richie Saunders was a star helping us stay aggressive tonight and Fous definitely helped us stay aggressive security wise, and I thought Dallin was the leader of that push and probably the deciding factor in the game.

Q. Fous, what does Richie Saunders bring to this team? And then if I could follow up with Richie. I got to ask about the headband, where it comes from, how he gets his super powers. First, Fous, what does Richie bring to this team?

FOUSSEYNI TRAORE: Oh, man, never seen anybody like Richie, you know. Like I'm just trying to live with him, he's got no chill. He's got something going on all the time. Sometimes I would like to feel like him, how he's flying around everywhere. I should never play anybody hopefully as hard as Richie. I say amazing what he adds to the team. He just help everybody, you know, try to be like him.

RICHIE SAUNDERS: I mentioned earlier some of the big things that Fous does and you know, like, it's my little brother right here.

MARK POPE: Here we go.

RICHIE SAUNDERS: Come on, man. Really, I look up to him like none other and I don't show him that enough. But Fous is just -- he's a monster. When you need two points you go to him. When he's flying up and contesting every shot, I don't want any other shot blocker behind me. I love playing with him.

Oh, my headband. You know, it's strictly utility, my hair gets in my eyes. Yeah, you know -- my wife -- it was a together decision to grow out my hair and now I need something so I don't drown in my sweat.

Q. (No microphone.)

RICHIE SAUNDERS: It does, it does. I should have added that, yes.

MARK POPE: Can we talk about what we talked about after practice? Or did you want to leave that alone?

RICHIE SAUNDERS: Let's leave that alone.

Q. Mark, quick turn around, maybe you haven't



thought about it, but what are you going to do the rest of the day? What will that entail?

MARK POPE: I'll be long-winded so you can think of the second one. So we will go back right now. The guys, really important hydration. They're working on that right now. We will go back, do a little bit of postgame treatment, let the guys get a little bit of rest and then we will clearly get them food right now, except for Aly and then we will meet at 4:30 for game prep, pretty much the exact same schedule we had yesterday.

Q. How do you feel Aly handled things, with what was going on with him?

MARK POPE: He was incredible, and he sure didn't miss a beat to start the game. He threw one pass today, guys, that little pocket pass around the wrong side. I was like, what is happening here? I thought he was absolutely terrific. He was great and, you know, he's a believer. We're all believers, so let's go.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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