

Big 12 Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 16, 2024

Kansas City, Missouri, USA

T-Mobile Center

Houston Cougars

Coach Kelvin Sampson

Postgame Press Conference



Iowa State - 69, Houston - 41

KELVIN SAMPSON: First of all, congratulations to T.J. His team -- they were unbelievable today. They played hard. They played connected. They shot the ball extremely well from the 3, especially Momcilovic. When we were defending him tough, he still made it. That's what good players do. Hats off to Iowa State.

I think for all the teams now, it's just a matter of seeing if you can get as healthy as you can and get ready for the tournament next week.

Tomorrow's Selection Sunday. We'll pick ourselves up. We've had a great year. Obviously 40 minutes is not going to define three months, but we'll get some guys treatment and healthy and get back at it and see where they send us tomorrow and be excited about it.

Q. How do you anticipate your guys reacting to this?

KELVIN SAMPSON: It's similar to what happened to us at Kansas, earlier in the year. Everybody -- you sign up for this job coaching basketball, playing basketball, you're going to have moments like this.

That atmosphere out there was unbelievable. I don't remember Hilton being this tough to play as Kansas City. Very seldom do you play a home game or a road game, rather, in the championship of a tournament.

But you know what, hats off to Iowa State's fans. I think this was a great learning experience for Cincinnati and UCF and Houston and BYU. I've known how great Iowa State's fans are for a long, long time. It's not the first time I've lost to them in the championship game.

But you know what, don't lose sight of how good you have to be to get here. There's 14 teams. There's only two teams left. I'm sure people will take their shots at us.

That's okay, go ahead.

There's a lot of teams would have loved to have been in our spot today playing them. But they're really good, even when we beat them at our place I thought they were really good.

They stubbed our toe a couple times, but that's going to happen in this league. So our kids will respond, though. They've got the right DNA. We've got really good leadership. We've got great kids.

We've battled all year long. I think there's so much good fortune that goes with teams that can stay healthy, and we're struggling with that right now, so we're going to have to figure some things out.

Q. How did you balance the desire to win and get healthy with J'Wan's 13 minutes, I think Jamal rested about seven and a half down the stretch?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I haven't won these a few times. Next week is the -- Iowa State would tell you same thing. Next week's more important to them than this. But when you've got a chance to play in front of 15,000 of your fans, you're going to go all out.

For us, we would like to have played better today. They had a lot to do with that. They made us play poorly. We didn't shoot it well. I thought we got a bunch of really good looks, especially Cryer and Shead. They were the two shooting most of the balls.

But it just wasn't their day. Third game in three days, legs and all that stuff. That's the advantage of having your fans. They lift you when things aren't going well.

But really proud of my team this year. We've had an unbelievable year. 30-4, winning the Big 12, all that stuff is stuff we'll hang our hats on.

The injury thing, not a lot you can do with it. I got up this morning convinced we were not going to play J'Wan. And John Houston said there's no reason why he can't play. It's not anything structural. It's just a bruise, like he got hit.

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With the medication he was taking he felt a lot better. He went through shoot-around. He wasn't limping. But this game is not as important as his health. Wasn't Mal's tonight. We'll lick our wounds and get back on the horse and get going again.

But I can't tell you how impressed I was with Iowa State. Don't think for a minute that I'm poor-mouthing us and taking anything away from them. They're great. They're a team, they can go a long way. They can get to the Final Four. They're that good.

Q. Running a story on Jamal Shead. He told me whenever you recruited him, you told him you had two point guards and he was supposed to be the third. What was it about Jamal Shead when you recruited him that you knew he was destined to be that?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Talent and leadership. He's a very talented young man. He comes from a great family. You could tell he was used to leading. It was very natural for him.

There was a young man I had a few years ago, playing for the Rockets now, Nate Hinton. When I recruited him, I said, That kid will be our captain one day. He'll be a good captain. I remember saying that about Shead. I bet you he'll be a good captain one day because he has those traits.

Wherever he goes and whatever he does in life, he'll be successful because he's extremely intelligent. He's got great leadership skills, and he comes from really good stock.

Q. Regardless of how this game would come out, you had mentioned 30-4 regular season champion. Do you feel that this team has already earned what among the top teams in the country get as --

KELVIN SAMPSON: I think anybody that wins this league is going to get what is -- is going to earn whatever it gets. Whether it's us or anybody else. Iowa State could have easily won this league. We got very fortunate, won some games.

I remember two or three games that went into overtime that we just kind of gutted it out and found a way to win, but we did. So we get credit for that.

But the record we had this year in this league was, you know, probably not supposed to happen. And if you're surprised, then so were we. We weren't sitting here thinking we were going to 15-3 in this league.

But it shows you what kind of group of kids we have. But we don't have the same team today that we had a month ago. We don't have that same team. So we'll get some rest and see if we can't get some bodies healed up.

There's probably some feelings that got hurt today. But today was a battle. We lost it. The war is coming up. You're going to lose battles. Everybody in this league loses battles, but we're all refreshed and we get to reset come Thursday or Friday, depending on the site that they send us to. But just really proud of this team.

I think I feel better for Iowa State than I do for us. They played great today. Their fans, that was an Iowa State moment. That thing was set up for them. And Kansas City, what does this place seat? I don't even know. There were 17,000 Iowa State fans today? That doesn't happen everywhere.

Where was the Big Ten Tournament? I can tell you there wasn't a team there having 17,000 fans supporting their team. Where was the ACC Tournament? Greensboro? DC? Who is closest to there, Boston College? I'd say Rutgers, but they're in the Big Ten, right?

But this is unique. I think it says a lot about the Big 12, but more importantly it says a lot about Iowa State's fan base. Their kids were unbelievably jacked. And yes, it felt like a fair fight, but Texas Tech felt like a fair fight with TCU.

The other games all felt like fair fights. Today didn't seem very fair. But, again, that's all kudos to Iowa State's fans. They're always going to have -- did I see somewhere where they were 5-0 in championship games? Well, correct that, will you, 6-0. Good chance it's going to be 7-0. They're pretty good.

Q. I know you mentioned obviously you're dealing with injuries, but how proud are you of this team and what they've been able to do pretty much not just over the last month but over the course of the season up to this point?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I was telling someone -- I hate being repetitive, but I've said this a couple times. We lost four really important starters off last year's team -- Jarace Walker, Marcus Sasser, Tramon Mark and Reggie Chaney.

So we spent all summer trying to figure out who is going to fit what role. We were fortunate to get L.J. to transfer from Baylor and Damian transferred from Temple. But we decided to go with our young guys.

JoJo Tugler, who I think -- Momcilovic and Ja'Kobe Walter



are two of the best freshmen I think in the country, but JoJo Tugler is right there with him. He's good. Losing him to a broken foot obviously is a blow. J'Wan with his injury is a blow.

But even with all that, look at what we accomplished. You're right, winning the Big 12. Nothing takes that away. I'm going to be really -- when I think of this team years from now, when I'm sitting at my lake house having one of my favorite beverages sitting there whiling the time away and you guys are here asking some poor schlep about a game he lost by 30, I'll be thinking about you. Hope you're thinking about me too. I'll be thinking about this team. I won't think about this 40 minutes, but I will think about this year and the things that they accomplished.

So just really proud of them. It's hard to lose what we lost last year and have the kind of year we had this year. And for ever how long it lasts, you just never know.

20 years ago I would have never thought that a 6 team could beat a 1. Now it's more likely than not to happen again. So you just never know. You've got to hope for some good fortune and prepare your kids the best you can and hope you play good that night, and we'll do that our next game.

Q. I think you addressed this a little bit, but just the setting tonight. These teams, any team may not see this until the Final Four, if then?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Never. I can't imagine -- this reminds me of maybe when the ACC Tournament was in Greensboro, in North Carolina. I don't know what Greensboro seats. Probably about the same, maybe, 17, 18,000. Being in North Carolina at Greensboro is very difficult.

That's why Coach Smith and Coach Williams and Hubert and those guys win so many of those ACC tournaments. I was in the Pac-10, LA, nobody came to the games, no matter who was in it.

The Big Ten is not like that. I think this is the best conference tournament. As a coach, you say, well, you'd like to have it here, I'd like to have it there. But for our brand, for the Big 12, when people watch this game on TV, they saw one team they probably felt sorry for, but they saw an arena that was lit, and you saw the Big 12 brand. And that speaks to the job that Brett's doing but also Iowa State and T.J. and his staff and his kids and that fan base.

It gives the Big 12 a good look, and I did my part today to try to make the Big 12 look good. And Iowa State. But they're really good. We could have played well and had

everybody healthy and probably couldn't have beat them today.

Q. What did you think they did, ball screen coverage and just their plan going into that?

KELVIN SAMPSON: When we got the ball in the paint and I thought we got some good looks. L.J. especially. I didn't think Jamal's looks were that good because they're on the first side. You can't play offensively against -- that's why we're good against a lot of teams. You have to play to the third side against good defensive teams. For whatever reason we just didn't have the patience to do that today.

Q. Coverage.

KELVIN SAMPSON: I thought it was fine. It was a one-point, two-point game for a while, and then we went to our bench. When we went to our bench, we struggled. And that's something we're just going to have to figure out who's going to be in the game with what players. We can't have three bench guys in at the same time right now.

That's not good for us right now. So I don't know if we'll play Thursday or Friday. I'm hoping Friday. We really need to spend a lot of time -- playing three games in three days, it's probably not ideal for us because of our depth. But going back, it gives us something to really focus in on. Maybe we have to start substituting earlier. Get this guy in with the first group more, and then be really conscious of who's on the floor at what time with what groups.

When we had the three bench guys -- this is where it got away from us a little bit towards the end. First half was fine, it was 30-23. L.J. and Emanuel, if those guys aren't making shots, we're going to struggle anyway.

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