

2026 Phillips 66 Big 12 Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 13, 2026

Kansas City, Missouri, USA

T-Mobile Center

Houston Cougars

Kelvin Sampson

Chris Cenac Jr.

Emanuel Sharp

Postgame Press Conference



row, and he was wide open on all five. He just couldn't make one. And that's not easy to do. But I've seen a lot of players go into Phog Allen and do that, but I thought tonight that he trusted the work he's put in. Kellen does an awesome job with our fours.

Nobody works harder than Chris. Chris never has a bad practice. His attitude has never wavered. He's an easy kid to coach. I look forward to seeing him every day at 3:00. The greatest ability you can have, especially this time of year, is dependability. And Chris is extremely, extremely dependable. He's got a great leader, a guy that's been through a lot of winning big games in Emanuel. And our leadership has done a good job helping bring our young kids along.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions.

Q. Chris, I just want to know what sparked the aggression from you tonight. Was it something that you liked in the matchup or did you just feel the need to impose yourself a little bit more offensively because of the stakes of the game?

CHRIS CENAC JR.: I just knew they was going to sag off. That's what they did last time we played 'em. So, I mean, going into the game Coach told me just come in and shoot with confidence when I get it and I'm open, let it fly. So I just shot the ball with confidence, trusted the work that I put in every day, and just kept going.

Q. Having the lead early in the game can be a very critical game-winning strategy. How did you manage to get that lead heading into the game and how did you manage to keep it?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, I think our defense -- you know, whatever your pace is, it reflects how many possessions you have per game. So we don't play to a lot of possessions by design. It's just how we play. So I'm assuming there was probably 63 to 65 possessions tonight on offense, which means there's 63 to 65 possessions on defense. Against a good defensive team you're going to have 10 possessions where it's going to look bad. You

Houston - 69, Kansas - 47

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions.

KELVIN SAMPSON: I just thought we had a good plan going in. Obviously we had played 'em earlier and they had hurt us on some things. That was in the middle of our -- I think we had played Arizona on Saturday afternoon, then got on a plane and flew to Kansas on Sunday, played on Monday. And Bill's such a great coach and he had figured out how they wanted to attack us, and so we had a good plan. Our kids did a great job of executing. Emanuel made it tough on Peterson, as tough as you can. I mean, the shots he hit were tough shots. But that's what guys with that level of talent have.

But I thought we got in the gaps, got in the gaps and showed bodies. I thought we did a good job showing our hands and not putting 'em on the free-throw line so much. Then our attention to detail offensively -- Kansas started switching one through five and with their length, it reminded me last year of when we played Duke. Duke was really long, had great positional size. So we had had some experience playing someone that long and was switching one through five, and if you're not careful, they will get you playing side to side.

So we got the ball downhill with our drives. Mercy made a drive to his left hand. I liked the drive, but, you know, you just can't go in there and shoot a regular layup against Bidunga. He's too good. He's elite.

But really proud of Chris tonight. Chris has been shooting the ball well for a while now. Now when we played at Kansas, he had those shots that I think he missed five in a

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know, we've been a good defensive team for a long time and we've played against a lot of really good offenses that just had a lot of bad possessions. Sometimes you credit the defense and sometimes kids just miss shots.

But I thought our defense was connected tonight. Last night, the second half against BYU, it was connected in a different way. BYU doesn't play out of a lot of pick-and-rolls, whereas Kansas does, and they like to get to the short roll. And we did a good job of tagging, loading early, which the key to guarding pick-and-rolls is your point of attack has to be coordinated. The guy that's calling the screen, getting to the line of scrimmage, and the guy that dictates to the screen, all the stuff that we work on.

But who has got the roller? Is it a short roll? Is it a medium roll? Is it a long roll. And those are just hours and hours and hours of tedious preparation when nobody's watching. Just a lot of work, just a lot of sweat. You know, we've always had a lot of veteran teams, whereas we had to start over this year. We weren't very good early, but we were playing four freshmen in our top nine. Chris and Kingston started. Isaiah was our sixth man at the time. He's a true freshman. Chase is a freshman. So we have four freshmen that played, so we had to be patient with 'em.

We were winning some games early, but we weren't very good. But I was okay with that because I knew that January would get here eventually and turn into February and turn into March, and if you come in every day with the right attitude and the right mindset, and you have high-character kids, that you can focus on coaching basketball. If you are worried about attitude and effort, then you're not coaching basketball. You're being a disciplinarian. And we don't have discipline problems at Houston. We have great kids, and I'm very blessed with that. I'm very thankful. But that also is very intentional.

Q. We've seen a growing effort to let the bigs start attacking and scoring a lot more, and as they're attacking and being aggressive and scoring like they did tonight, how does that impact your team moving forward?

EMANUEL SHARP: I mean, it's just a part of our team that is really important. We can't just be all jump shots. I feel like sometimes, like, if our offense is stale, that's -- a great way to get a great shot is to go inside. Joe Joe, Kalifa, Chris are good down there. We got to give them a chance to work. They work every day at that stuff, so what's the point in them working on it if we don't use it at all.

So we've been making it a point to go inside more to Joe, Joe especially, and he's been really good. He's good in

the post. I feel like people don't give him enough credit for the work he does down there. He bangs, he's good off the dribble, and it's helped us a lot.

KELVIN SAMPSON: But it's also matchup-driven. Joe didn't score and Bidunga tonight. Bidunga is hard to score on. That's why Joe didn't score. It's not a knock against Joe. Sometimes you just have to give the other kid credit. It's not going to be easy to score on Awaka and Krivas. It doesn't mean we got a bad post game. It's just that Krivas and Awaka are elite defenders. There's a reason why they're a top 3 team in the nation.

So if we don't score tomorrow, don't ask me what's wrong with our post scoring. It's them. It's not always you. So, you know, Chris didn't score in the post tonight. He scored from 20 feet out. So a lot of it has to do with matchups. Some guys Joe can score on a little bit easier than others.

But when you start playing guys like Bidunga and Krivas and Awaka, no, there's a reason those teams are elite defensively. You have to just pick and choose, and the shots you get, you're going to have to knock 'em down. You know, third game in three days is always a crap shoot. I mean, we're sitting here at 11:15. We got a game at 5:00 tomorrow.

Q. Regarding the fans and the band and spirit groups tonight, how did they support you guys throughout the night tonight?

KELVIN SAMPSON: You know, I've been -- you know, this is my 15th year coaching in the Big XII tournament. 12 years at Oklahoma and three years at Houston. Every year it wasn't in the -- Kansas City. There was a couple of those years, like 2003, 2004 -- 2003 it was in the American Airlines Arena in Dallas. I remember the Big XII tournament there.

But one of the things that makes this tournament so special is this part of the country. Iowa State fans. If this was a state fair, they would get a blue ribbon. They're special. Kansas fans. I mean, I think it's the best basketball program top to bottom in the history of college basketball. And I say that because that's the way I feel personally. Kansas has always been the bell cow of the Big XII. It was when I was in it from '95 to 2006 -- or '94 to 2006. 12 years. It was Kansas.

And when your best programs are great, it's important that they be great. When I was at Washington State, it was important that Arizona and UCLA be good because those were the programs. Now, you know, because of this era, things change a little bit. But Kansas is never not going to be Kansas. But our program has just gotten better and

better and better and our fans have too. It's never going to be like Iowa State.

But I remember we played Arizona in San Antonio a few years ago, I think 2022. They were a 1 seed. I think we might have been a 5 seed. We just had beat Illinois, beat Arizona, then we lost to Villanova to go to back-to-back Final Fours. And we had 18,000 Cougar fans. Our fans are great in our area. This area is all about Iowa State and Kansas. Of course, when Norm Stewart -- some of you guys probably never heard of him, but I love Norm Stewart. Norm Stewart's a legend, just a legend. I was so lucky to get to coach against Norm for a few years.

But those Missouri fans were awesome too. They showed up and they showed out. Kansas State -- when Kansas State's good, they have great fans. That's why Kansas is -- Kansas City, you know, a lot of people say, why don't we move it? I hope they never move it. They should always keep it here. Sometimes it's bigger than the school. Kansas City owns this tournament. And I've talked to Commissioner Yormark about it. Would I like it in Houston? Yeah. But it just ain't Kansas City. I hope it does.

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