

Asheville Championship

Friday, November 12, 2021

Asheville, North Carolina, USA

Minnesota Golden Gophers

Harrah's Cherokee Center

Coach Ben Johnson

Eylijah Stephens

Press Conference



Minnesota - 73, Western Kentucky - 69

THE MODERATOR: Good evening. Welcome to the Asheville Championship. We will start with opening comments from Coach followed by questions from players.

Coach, we'll turn it over to you for opening comments.

BEN JOHNSON: Yeah, I think, first off, hats off to Western Kentucky. Coach Stansbury does a great job. That's a really good team, well-coached team, veteran leadership, veteran players. They're going to win a ton of games, so hats off to those guys.

And also hats off to our guys. I thought we battled from start to finish. Guys showed a great resiliency, toughness, both mental and physical. Played a bunch of guys a lot of minutes, and they just kept coming, and they didn't break. We just keep learning the mental piece every single day, and our guys know that we have to play with that edge, we have to play with a chip on our shoulder, we to play with that fight, and they're starting to really embrace that.

I thought our bench was unbelievable. Hearing guys that didn't play or guys that played limited minutes were into the game. We talk all the time about how that affects winning. Our guys feel that. Our huddles were great. All that energy translates into culture wins, and I just -- credit to our guys for persevering against a really good team and being able to play with the confidence and play with the lead and finish the game with a big road win.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. Questions for Eylijah?

Q. Can you talk about, obviously, Jamison (indiscernible) when he wasn't getting shots in the second half, other guys needed to step up.

EYLIJAH STEPHENS: Jamison, he was going crazy in the

first half. He is the one that got us really started off in that big run. We had the juice coming. We were getting stops defensively, and then when he cooled down a little bit, Eric Curry stepped up and hit some big midrange shots, Payton Willis hit some big threes, Luke hit big threes, and I had some big shots.

Coach talked about earlier, it's just a great team effort. Guys just stepped up.

THE MODERATOR: Anyone else? Questions for Eylijah?

Q. Second game in a row where you got the big lead, and then the first (indiscernible) what was the reason for that, and, obviously, you've been in situations like that. Again, you guys stepped up.

EYLIJAH STEPHENS: Like Coach said, Western Kentucky is a good team. When you play against a good team, they're going to have runs. We said before the game start, you got to fight through adversity. It's not when it hits -- it's not if it hits. It's when it hits. Just guys to stay composed mentally, physically, and when our time came that we needed to make a run, we needed to make big shots, and we were able to do so.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Eylijah.

EYLIJAH STEPHENS: Appreciate it.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach?

Q. Coach, like I was asking Eylijah (indiscernible) but at the same time you guys finished it off with free-throws, and Eric rebounding and things like that. Can you just talk about the way you finished this one as opposed to K.C.?

BEN JOHNSON: The thing I keep telling our guys, and I think they're starting to realize is, you know, there's going to be adversity. Luckily, the last two games we've been able to build a lead, but that's not always going to be the case, and every team we play is good, and so we can't take any lead for granted.



And we know that it's going to be a battle, whether you are up 10, 12, 15. Teams are going to make runs. It's college basketball. Like I said, they're a very good team. We knew they were going to make a run. I just loved the resolve that our guys had, and they just find ways to win. I think that's the name of the game. It's not a beauty contest, right? You just got to find a way to win the game, and today was free-throws and rebounds.

Really proud that we out-rebounded that team. That was a point of emphasis for our guys. The physical toughness part. They just found a way to win.

Q. You know, Dayvion McKnight (indiscernible) in the second half. What allowed him to (indiscernible) what was the key to him slowing down everyone else?

BEN JOHNSON: They have a talented team. Hamilton is a really good player. Frampton can shoot it. McKnight is really good. Butz, I know he is talented. We just got it going. We did a really good job, I thought, on their other guys, but you knew somebody from them was going to step up and spark it, and it's one of those things where he got in a rhythm, and, you know, when we got in foul trouble, he just kept getting downhill and getting to the line.

But credit to him. I think we have shot 14 free-throws. He was just aggressive, and he did a great job of just driving us and driving us. But like I said, I think our guys did a good job on everybody else, and luckily, only one guy went nuts and not multiple.

Q. Coach, Jamison's performance in the first half, no surprise. We knew the first two games (indiscernible) business. Obviously, in the second half, what they did.

BEN JOHNSON: Obviously, Jamison can really shoot the basketball. He had it going. And like I said at halftime to the guys, you know, they're going to make an adjustment. They're going to play him differently. Then I thought he did a good job of staying in the game. I think he takes shots when he is open. I don't think he forces much. Obviously every shot he took was a big one for us to get that lead, but I thought the other guys stepped up. We all knew defensively that they were going to probably lock in on him and try some different coverages, and I thought Payton Willis stepped up, E.J., Eric Curry.

We're going to be a team, we can't rely on a guy for an entire game, and I think Jamison played -- what did he play? All 40 minutes. That's tough to do, and he was battling defensively. It was good that he got us off to that lead, had a good first half, and the other guys kind of picked it up and took it home in the second half for him.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

BEN JOHNSON: Thank you.

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