

CBS Sports Classic: North Carolina vs Kentucky

Saturday, December 18, 2021

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

T-Mobile Arena

North Carolina Tar Heels Coach Hubert Davis

Armando Bacot

RJ Davis

Press Conference

Kentucky 98, North Carolina 69

Q. John Calipari just told us that they kind of changed up their offense, really refocused on the dribble-drive and to get to the rim. What's the challenge in trying to defend that on the perimeter and then down in the block?

ARMANDO BACOT: Well, I'll say going into the game we knew that's what they were going to do. They did everything that the coaches told us they would do, we just didn't execute the game plan.

RJ DAVIS: To follow up on Armando, totally agree. We knew coming in a couple players like to drive, and it just came down to toughness and executing, and we just didn't do that today.

Q. Did you guys sense early on that you guys were having a little bit of trouble matching their energy? And outside of the last couple minutes of the first half, it seemed like the rest of the game their energy was a higher level than yours. What would you attribute that to?

ARMANDO BACOT: I would just say not following the game plan. The coaches told us that they were the best offensive rebounding team -- they told us that right before the game, and all the practices leading up to this that they like to get to the glass.

We knew that, but right away they came out getting four or five offensive rebounds in the first few possessions, and



then also, too, on defense we knew they would be aggressive and try to get us up out of our sets.

It's tough to try to score the ball and get in our sets when we're like catching the ball far out and just not in the right spots.

RJ DAVIS: I just feel like the last four minutes of the first half, that's when we finally started to pick up the energy. The first 15 minutes of the first half, and then the second half we just didn't execute our game plan. We weren't the aggressor. We didn't show any energy or effort.

We'll learn from this, and hats off to Kentucky, but we'll learn from this and then grow.

Q. It seemed like there were some similarities between this game and the Tennessee game. You obviously bounced back after that game and railed off five wins. What do you see as being key as bouncing back after this win, and does it erase what you guys seemed to be making progress in in those five games?

ARMANDO BACOT: I would just say it just gave us a little bit of perspective on how much better we've got to be as a team, just how much we've got to be as a team to get to where we want to be and being the best team in the country.

That's all.

RJ DAVIS: It shows that we can't take any nights off. We have to be a high energy, aggressive team every time we step on the floor. I mean, this one was definitely embarrassing. I think that's all I have to say.

Q. Armando, you mentioned the lack of execution and then the lack of effort. Which one -- the chicken or the egg kind of thing. Was it execution because you didn't come out ready to play, or did you kind of get hit in the mouth and then some things kind of went haywire?

ARMANDO BACOT: I would just say right away they stunned us. They hit us with a knockout punch early in the



game and we just never recovered.

Q. RJ, with a guy like Wheeler, how difficult is it, somebody that's speedy, just to try to keep him in front and try to figure out how to slow him down?

RJ DAVIS: He was definitely a quick guard. Try to give him space, but he played well tonight.

Q. Coach, they had 54 points in the paint, 36 in the second half. What was the issue there, and if you also add Purdue and Tennessee it's 150 points in the paint in those three games. What is the problem and how do you fix something like that?

HUBERT DAVIS: Well, one, I don't want to talk about Purdue and Tennessee anymore. That was over a month ago. I'd like to talk about this game and what went wrong this game.

You talk about the points in the paint, they got it in many different areas. Number one, we did not have an answer for Wheeler. He was faster than any one of our players and he was able to get anywhere he wanted to. We knew that he's a dynamic guard that can get into the middle and that he can make plays.

He's terrific at distributing the basketball. He's terrific at penetrating, and plain and simple, period, the end, he was better than any one of our guards.

The other area that led to their points in the paint was their offensive rebounds. They were tougher than us. Against -- rebounding is really not about technique. Whether you're going off their offensive glass or you're boxing out, it's all about will and want-to. It's about toughness.

From a defensive standpoint you have to make contact first, and the ball is up -- I always tell the guys, there's a 50/50 ball is 100 percent North Carolina, and so a missed shot is really a 50/50 ball. It's your will and your toughness that will allow you to box out and to rebound, and we didn't do that.

Then you talked about it, a number of you have brought up the energy factor. They played harder than us. If you want to compare it to Tennessee, from my perspective that's the part that I was shocked by.

Talking about energy and effort, not just in the game against Kentucky, just in the game in general, I don't get that. And so I was shocked by it against Tennessee and I'm shocked by it today. Because once we found out that we were playing Kentucky, and I told them before we got on the plane to fly here to Las Vegas, I saw the excitement

and the determination in their eyes, and I didn't see the energy and effort piece, that it would be missing in a game like this.

Q. John told us that only a month into a season, so he's still trying to learn about his team. You've talked about the same thing. Even with the energy issue it seemed like it had gotten a lot better the last five games. Is this kind of a bump in the road that you have to coach over, or do you see this as like a concern that they were not able to come out and match Kentucky's intensity from the get-go?

HUBERT DAVIS: Well, one of the things that I've said to them as a team, and I've said this a number of times, in order for us to be the best team possible and for each individual in our locker room, like in order for them to be the best individually and for us to be the best that we can be as a team, it's impossible absent of effort and toughness and energy. It just can't be. There isn't -- that has to be brought to the table every game.

I know that Kentucky played with a fire inside of them after losing to Notre Dame, and they played harder, they played smarter, they played tougher. I don't think you have to lose a game or lose a game in this fashion to get back to that.

One of the things that always -- I told the guys in the locker room after the game, and I say this all the time, what is required of all of us is for us to do our job, and you're required not only to do your job, you're required to show up every day to do it, and you're required to do it to the best of your ability.

Today against Kentucky, we did not do our job.

Q. This isn't so much about the game, but kind of the bigger picture, this not being your original opponent and we're seeing kind of the COVID outbreaks in not only college but pros, different pros. How do you feel about how we're going to move forward with this? Do you see it going back to how we had to do things last year? Do you have any opinion on forfeiting and that kind of thing?

HUBERT DAVIS: I don't have an opinion on that. How we ended up playing Kentucky was something that I'm used to after what happened last year. So being flexible in terms of schedule, being flexible in terms of who you play, when you play them and where you play is something that unfortunately with the experience of last year, all of us, with the exception of maybe the incoming freshmen, should be accustomed and should be used to that.

Right now I'm not really thinking about that. Right now I'm

only thinking about this team and where this team is going to go, how we're going to get better, how we're going to consistently be the team that I feel like we can be, and that's really the only thing on my mind.

Q. It seemed like the last five games or so one of the things that improved and kept improving was defensively the effort you guys had. Did you think that maybe some of the lack of toughness today showed up defensively with all that you guys gave up and the ways they were able to score?

HUBERT DAVIS: I think two things showed up. One, the toughness part. Also the athleticism part. Kentucky is very long. They're athletic at every position. Just because you play an opponent and they're longer and they're more athletic, that doesn't -- to me that doesn't mean anything. What means something is the energy and effort.

One of the things that I've talked to them about is I'm always motivated. It doesn't have to -- I don't need anything to motivate me in anything that I do. But I felt like I thought the guys would be motivated with the success we've had over the last month and it would light a fire inside of us to work harder, to be tougher, to build it up.

We just had a really wonderful opportunity today. Win or lose, we had a wonderful opportunity today.

Right after the game I shook hands with Coach Calipari and I thanked him. I said, I appreciate that you guys played this well because you put us in a position to be the team that we need to be, and I said, I appreciate that.

You can't walk away from this game at all and not be able to look yourself in the mirror and say, we've got to be better. You just can't.

So I'm thankful that -- I thanked him after the game for that.

Q. When things were going the way they were and you called a couple of time-outs, what is the challenge in having to coach their minds in order to then be able to coach up a little bit more energy, a little bit more effort?

HUBERT DAVIS: Well, the thing -- the reason why I don't understand and I don't like to coach effort is because you can't even get to execution. You can't even talk about this is how we're going to play ball screens or this is the type of play that we're going to run or this is the type of thing we need to execute, because if it's not done with effort, it doesn't matter what you do.

That was the toughest thing is to -- but you know, we had

been there before. I felt like what I was surprised was the second half. The last five minutes of the first half, one of the refs came over and they said, Hubert, I like when you get into it. You've got a lot of energy.

I said, well, I'll fight for them if we fight, and they started competing. I told them, if you guys will just compete, it will change. It will change quickly. And it did.

We got it to -- I don't know what was the halftime score, got it to 11, and I really felt like in the second half we would have continued to play that way, and we just didn't. It was surprising.

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