

State Farm Champions Classic: Kentucky vs Kansas

Wednesday, November 15, 2023

Kansas Jayhawks

Bill Self

Hunter Dickinson

Dajuan Harris Jr.

Kevin McCullar Jr.

Press Conference



Kansas - 89, Kentucky - 84

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the players.

Q. You said that you know when it's time to shoot and you shoot when you need to. How did you get the sense this was going to be a game where you had to contribute in multiple ways?

DAJUAN HARRIS JR.: That was big boy basketball. That's always a fight. A dog fight every time we play them. But they, I think they wanted me to beat them, they left me open, and then I just had to step up and make the shot.

Q. Come back from 14 points down. How did you do it and what does it mean?

DAJUAN HARRIS JR.: We had to grind it out. That's what we always been talking up. Coach emphasizes defense a lot. We've been working a lot on defense and I think we just all bought in at the end. Some of our players was in foul trouble but we stayed together and stayed connected.

Q. When you have Hunter playing that way. How does it make everything easier for the other guys on the floor?

DAJUAN HARRIS JR.: Coach really told him that he should get 10 rebounds a game, but I didn't even know he had 21 rebounds until coach said it in the locker room just now. But we need him to be a monster, that's why we got him and I think that was probably his best game probably in college, probably, yeah, probably best game in college ball, probably.

Q. How do you guys feel about the minutes that Jamari gave you at the end?

DAJUAN HARRIS JR.: I think coach trusted him and I told him I trusted him, and coach, he's big on defense. Jamari, that's what he does, he plays defense and he gives energy. I think coach chose him at the right moment. He made big-time free throws at the end of the game, too. He put a lot of trust in coach and that was great for us.

Q. Dajuan, you said this is why you got Hunter. Curious, as a point guard, how much it opens things up for you this year compared to last year to have his interior presence in a game like this?

DAJUAN HARRIS JR.: He makes it easier for me, Kevin, and KJ because we all three playmakers and can pass the ball and then we have one of the best playbooks in the game. He's a seven-footer, what we needed last year, and he has one of the softest touches in the country. So we give him the ball, he's going to make something happen. He's a great passer too. He had a great game for us.

Q. A year, two years ago you guys were here, Sweet 16 and the Elite 8. You get this win tonight. You were on that team. What is it about the United Center that y'all figured out how to win close games late in the second half?

DAJUAN HARRIS JR.: Actually when we pulled up to the locker room for shoot around earlier I told Kevin that, like, this is a locker room we won in the Sweet 16 in. We just wanted to get another W. But really, it means a lot to us for even our fans and we really wanted to come get the W for them and we're just going to keep grinding from here.

Q. KJ's role in this game, matching their athleticism especially in the second half there. How big was he?

KEVIN McCULLAR JR.: He was huge. KJ is the most athletic guy in the country, I feel like. He's playing hard every possession. That was big to have him out there. He battled some foul trouble, but he played smart and he's an above the rim player for sure.

DAJUAN HARRIS JR.: I'm always on KJ because I know he can be dominant on the boards or even making the right



play. So I'm always on him, he knows than I want the best for him.

Q. Kevin, on that mid court alley-oop you threw to him, can you take us through what you saw there and how big that was in terms of just passion, emotion. He brings that probably better than anyone. Maybe not Hunter, I guess, but close.

KEVIN McCULLAR JR.: Yeah, usually it's Juan that throws the half court lobs, but I was trying it out today. I seen him point up to the rim, so I just a threw it up to him there.

Q. Y'all had a chance to play against Kentucky the last several years at different times. Just as an opponent what is different about this Kentucky team than the teams that you faced?

KEVIN McCULLAR JR.: I personally just think they're super talented. Their ability to get a shot off one-on-one is a big thing. I feel like they have a strength in that. They both a bunch of young guys and they're going to figure it out. They got some great pieces this year.

DAJUAN HARRIS JR.: Yeah, basically what he said. They're super talented and they're young right now and I think it's still early so I think they're going to learn from this and I think they're going to be better throughout the year.

HUNTER DICKINSON: They're the University of Kentucky. They're always going to be talented. Every team in this champions classic is here for a reason. It's the best of the best. So we feel like we're one of the best teams in the country, that's why we're ranked No. 1. So that's when, you know, you go against the other best teams in the country. So it was good to go out there and go face-to-face with one of the best in the country.

Q. Hunter, you had a Championship Classic number of rebounds to go with your points, so rank that in your career as far as how good a game it was.

HUNTER DICKINSON: I don't think I ever had a 20-20 before. But obviously you got its best PG in the nation, best 3 in the nation. That helped me out a lot. So I just, I mean we got really unselfish team that's more than willing to give you the ball, it helps a lot.

Q. Now that you settled in, it's been a few games, you been around the team for awhile. How does this compare to the vision that Bill Self sold you on when you came here?

HUNTER DICKINSON: Yeah, he said when I came here I was going to get the ball a lot. I think I did today. So he

was right about that. He also said you're going to play with some great players and have a chance to win a National Championship. So we got clearly a really good team, so I think he's been truthful so far.

Q. Is it hard as a transfer coming into an established locker room, you're a big personality obviously, how do you make that all work?

HUNTER DICKINSON: They made it easy for me when you got three vets that came back and were really big pieces to the team last year, I just tried to fit in with my big personality.

Q. Kevin, the last time you were in Chicago was for the draft combine in May. In what ways do you think you've individually improved your game since then?

KEVIN McCULLAR JR.: Being as versatile as I can. Trying to touch every aspect in the stat sheet. Trying to do things that make winning plays that don't show up in the stat sheet. When you're playing with guys like this it makes the game a lot easier.

Q. You're not one to shy away from the moment, what did this big stage, your first major game with Kansas mean for you coming in?

HUNTER DICKINSON: Yeah, coach was talking about how the bright lights playing in the Championship Classic, that's something that a lot of people dream of being able to play in. So I feel very fortunate to be able to do that. It helps that I played pretty good to be able to let him know that you're playing good.

Q. You guys were down 14 with 16 minutes to go, 58-44. Maybe each of you could just talk about Kevin you want to start, when you're down 14, 16 minutes to go you're playing against a young team, they look quicker, more aggressive, more confident. If you could discuss what was said amongst yourselves, adjustments, what that moment was like. Obviously you feel like you want to try to come back but it wasn't looking pretty at that point.

KEVIN McCULLAR JR.: We know it's a game of runs. Coach preaches that every day. He's the best coach in the reason for a reason. There was no panic with us, we know we had to chip away, stay even keeled. It's game of highs and lows, a game of runs. We finished it out in the last four minutes and that's when you got to do it.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. We'll take questions for coach.

Q. You said Hunter, a game like tonight, how does that change your team?

BILL SELF: I think the way they guarded us, they put KJ's man all around him, so he didn't get as many opportunities I don't think at the basket that we wanted to get him and he only shot a couple, what did he shoot, one long ball or two? But he's a good player, man. He rebounded the ball better. He's a terrific passer. What he does, I mean, whether -- he's not a villain, but what he does is he takes pressure off everybody else by having everybody else focused on him. So that's a big bonus.

Q. I wonder about KJ's impact in the second half there. Especially using his athleticism when you guys got running?

BILL SELF: I thought KJ was great. We never guarded them, but it was a make shift lineup we're trying to play Hunter on one of their perimeter players and put KJ on the switch 4. It actually worked good, except we never switched up and they shot the ball behind the handoffs or whatnot or too many straight line drives. But I thought KJ was great. Other than his missing free throw, I thought he was terrific. Kevin didn't have a statistically a great game, but you look up, he gets a triple double and I think that's only the second one we've had since I've been here. So he's tough and Hunter was great. And of course Juan, he was the best player in the game down the stretch without question.

Q. Not seeing a lot of Calipari teams play five out and take 38 threes in a game with these guards that he has what was your impressions of stylistically how they played?

BILL SELF: We thought that they would spread us and drive us and they spread us and drove us. We got to get better at guarding the ball or it won't always end up very good. I like their team. To me they're hard to guard with Tre playing the 5. They're hard to guard if he's playing the 5. But when they get Bradshaw back or their other guys, other bigs, that's going to be a hard team to deal with. Cal's got a really good bunch.

Q. You talked about on Monday how the season really started today. What did you learn about this team obviously with this big comeback and coming back in a game like this?

BILL SELF: I don't know that you learn this much this fast, but I thought we showed some poise late. We screwed up the game to go from winning 72-70 to down 78-72. Then I think we outscored 'em 17-6 to end it. We made all the right plays late offensively. I thought it was terrific. Really

somebody that helped us that won't be talked about was Jamari McDowell, he at least guarded Reeves well. I thought he did a really nice job.

Q. What gave you the confidence to put in Jamari for those key minutes for the first time tonight?

BILL SELF: To be honest with you, I don't know it was so much confidence to put him in, I didn't know who else to put in. It was kind of one of those deals. No, he was terrific. He was good in that limited time. He was plus nine in three and a half minutes. So that was pretty good.

Q. With someone like Hunter who from opening tip seems like he's getting booed every time he touches ball, he's not just responding to it, he's kind of playing back and forth with the crowd. What does that do in the huddle and in the locker room?

BILL SELF: I don't think it does much, to be honest with you. It may do something for him. I don't think we get fired up by how people treat Hunter good or bad. But I thought, you know, let's call it like it is, he catches some crap. Sometimes with good reason and many times with not. He catches some crap, but one thing he does, he doesn't run from it ever. So I think guys like that give teams confidence. Now, granted, when he left, I don't know, did he talk to the media? And he was I'm sure deflecting, deflecting, deflecting and praising teammates and all that. The whole deal, I mean, most of the stuff that you guys remember about Hunt, 95 percent of it are things that happened before he got to Kansas. So he's been really good since he's been here.

Q. With kind of what his past has been, how do you integrate that into a locker room with so many returning guys on a veteran team?

BILL SELF: Our guys want to win. They don't care. I mean they don't care. If a guy pumps confidence into your locker room, that's a win. So our guys don't worry about that stuff.

Q. I wanted to ask you about KJ when you brought Hunter in was he relieved to be able to not have to play there?

BILL SELF: Yes.

Q. So what does he have to do now to continue to ascend as playing --

BILL SELF: You guys watched us play tonight. The court looked pretty crowded a lot of times. I think one thing that has to happen we got to have some guys make some

shots. We made 'em the first two games, but it was a little different competition and different setting, obviously. I think that the thing that he can do in his own way is become a better short role guy and play Hunter away from the basket, things like that. So we got to figure out how to play him like we played him last year with Hunter in the game. I think that's a big key for us.

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