

American Athletic Conference Women's Basketball Championship

Wednesday, March 9, 2022

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Houston Cougars

Ronald Hughey

Laila Blair

Postgame Press Conference

USF 58, Houston 50

RONALD HUGHEY: You know, hats off to Jose and South Florida. They played very well and were the better team today. But I'm extremely proud of our team. Again, nobody expected us to be here, especially after we didn't finish in the top three, like last year. They kind of counted us out and we knew that. So we wanted -- had a point to prove to be able to come back and show them who we were. And who we can be.

Tonight we didn't have the shots fall like we normally do. We didn't get the chance to play the pace. Didn't take care of rebounds. And I think South Florida outrebounded us by 12, 14, something like that.

Other thing we need to do was in the zone take care of giving up second-chance points, rotating better and taking care of some of their shooters. But at the end of the day, you have to have that grit and heart when you're playing against the top teams. I thought we fouled a little bit too much, put them at the free-throw line early. That's how they were able to stay in the game in the beginning. And we just got to be better offensively. I thought defensively we were solid and just got worn down a little bit because all the empty possessions that we started to have on offense.

But like I said, especially for Laila, Tiara, Bria, Tatyana, Julia, Kamryn, Fatou, Eryka, Jazmaine, all the girls that's on the team, our bench, our staff, just super proud of, elated and the future is very bright for who we are at the University of Houston

Q. Hey, Coach. Just a week ago you were in Tampa playing USF and it was a 33-point game and you come out here and play them tight kind of. How proud were



you of your team mentally to be able to bounce back?

RONALD HUGHEY: Exactly. And, you know, part of it was, 75, 80 percent was them, you know, saying that wasn't who we knew we were supposed to be. We're 10 times better than that. So we want to show up and be able to show exactly who we are. We didn't come out with the win but we played 10 times better. We cut down on some of the mistakes, had a chance to fix some of the things we didn't do well. I mean, both games at home and at their place.

So like I said, I'm really proud of our team, because, again, that fight, that tenacity and that relentless effort that we have, you can't take that away from them. Really proud of them for competing today

Q. And then Laila scored half of your points then the rest of your team combined for the rest. What were they doing defensively on the rest of your guys to kind of contain the bleeding?

RONALD HUGHEY: Yeah. You know, the thing after our first two games we shared the ball a lot. Laila was able to get clean looks. They zeroed on her on everything. So again starting with ball screen action, they tried to trap her and get the ball out of her hands. Any other time they brought an extra defender, most of the time it was Mununga, on any kind of any drive toward the basket. They wanted to pick her up early in transition, so she didn't have a chance to get close to the three-point line so she could get into her shot, like the one she had at the end of her game.

So they were really effective trying to do some of those things and we tried to combat some of that with trying to screen with a different player instead of our 5 so they couldn't trap her, put her into moving situations to where they got to search and find her through some screening action. But they did a good job on trying to take care of her.

The thing that happened with the rest of our team is, you know, we always talk about X factors have to step up when your opportunity comes. Now whether that's one shot or



one rebound, one steal whatever the case may be, but you have to do your job and you have to perform. That didn't happen consistently for us tonight. You know, that's the thing because again at the end of the day, you don't let Mununga catch the ball at the high post and turn around, and we doubled her too high and then she get a dump-off to Leverett and we don't cover down on that. You have to take care of those things. You have to do your job. You have to rotate, especially against a good team like them. It's a reason they beat Stanford. It's a reason they beat a bunch of teams this year. They're good. They're good.

We aspire to get to where they are, winning the conference, being the top team here and we're still learning and growing but extremely proud of who we are.

Q. And, Laila, I know you're disappointed with the result, but you scored 70 points over three games. What was this experience like bursting out on to the scene?

LAILA BLAIR: I would say it was a heck of an experience. It didn't end like I would have wanted it to. I know even for me and my teammates, we wanted it to end with a championship. But I would say it was a great experience.

I learned a lot. And I just -- I'm thankful that I got to have an opportunity to go out there and play. So I would say it was tremendous for me just being able just to play and being able to play with my teammates. We had a lot of fun even though we fell short.

Q. Coach, just talk about at what point during the season and conference play did the team rally around each other after the hiccups that you all suffered early on and said let's finish this, let's get to the tournament and see what happens?

RONALD HUGHEY: It was the second half of our conference season when we knew we had to start playing the second round of games in February. At the beginning of February, we wanted to just kind of say February has been really good for us. I think over the last couple of years, we've either gone undefeated or only lost a game in February. This year we lost two.

But it was at that point in February they said, okay, we already know teams get better or get worse in February. So we focused up and they rallied around each other and said we're going to take care of business in February to be able to lead us into March, have an opportunity to get here, win some games, get to the championship, and try and attack postseason play. But, yeah, it was around the beginning of February.