

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 10, 2022

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

USF Bulls

Brian Gregory

Russel Tchewa

Caleb Murphy

Postgame Press Conference

UCF 60, South Florida 58

BRIAN GREGORY: Hard-fought game between two teams that obviously competed very, very intensely for 40 minutes and give them credit. They made a couple key plays at critical times.

But we wanted to make sure that we did a good job of defensively stopping them in transition. I thought we did a good job of that. We wanted to do a great job on the glass, and we did. Wanted to make things difficult for their scoring guys on the perimeter, and I thought we did a pretty good job of that, especially in the second half.

But they made, like I said, some critical, critical plays down the stretch, and so did we. We just had two good looks there at the end and just weren't able to put it in.

Proud of the way our guys fought and competed. But it just wasn't enough this afternoon or this evening. So give them credit. Obviously some of their players, as I said, made some big, big plays for them. But I thought our guys fought and competed and did a lot of good things. Both these guys played very good games at 15 and 8 for Caleb, and double-double again for Russel.

You know, just really two guys that have really blossomed and had great years for us.

Q. Coach, could you walk us through that last play obviously the two looks for Corey and one for Javon. Tell us what the play call was and how the play panned out.



BRIAN GREGORY: Yeah. Only being down two, we just went to spread the court and put the ball in Caleb's hand, and he made a great decision. He drew three guys to him and kicked it out for a really good look for Corey. He'd just made a 17-footer from that same spot. And just, you know, kind of rimmed out. And then great effort in intensity on the glass there to tip it out. Russ was in there banging. We tip the ball out and Corey made a really good play in making an extra pass to Javon, who's hit two or three of those similar shots, game-winning shots. And it was right there. And unfortunately just not able to get it done.

But I thought our guys in the possession before, being down three, we didn't need a three on that one. They executed really well. Caleb got to the basket. Had a good look. And because of that penetration, the help came over, that led us to getting an offensive rebound and a putback.

And you're in the foul game, they miss one and you have a chance to tie it or in our case we had a chance to win it on two pretty good looks.

Q. So as we've noticed over the season, the team sometimes struggles coming out of the half to match the pace of the other team. After those first four minutes you responded three connective baskets made. Can you tell me how they've responded to what's been a pattern over the season?

BRIAN GREGORY: Yeah, I again I thought there was a little dip in our defensive execution to start the second half. And again -- and we talked about it and the guys really responded because we weren't scoring. I thought we had to dip on the defense. And then they kind of regrouped and did a very good job after that of making sure that we were still playing our defense.

Again, you know, you outrebound a team 49 to 36 and you hold them to 36 percent from the field. Now they did shoot 10-of-22 from the three. So it was a three-point shot again that was the difference in the game. And we gave up two or three -- two in the last four possessions of the game. Johnson hit a big one at the top of the key and then obviously Perry hit the one on the right wing.

So I thought again our guys responded. We were down six or down seven. We got multiple stops in a row and got some transition baskets as well. And again just the fight that the guys had was impressive.

Q. Coach, this is a predominantly young team. Could you walk us through the locker room after that hard-fought loss?

BRIAN GREGORY: Yeah first and foremost you want to address Javon Greene and the sacrifices and effort that he's put forth for us this year and also recognize what a great career he's had over the five years. And it's bittersweet when you -- it's an abrupt end, as young guys you still never think it's going to happen, then when it does it kind of hits you square in the jaw, you know,

And at the same time I talked to the guys about the effort and the passion that we played with over the last six weeks was really good. Just not a lot of tangible evidence. Just a couple big wins for us. But at the same time, guys need to take a look and say, okay, what areas do I need to improve in? And this is, you know, a time now that you reflect and say, okay, I've got to do this better, be it guarding the basketball, reading off the ball screens, finishing plays, knocking down shots, free throws, whatever the case might be. So we're not in a position again where we're, you know, in games, multiple games through the year with eight, six, five minutes to go and not able to finish those. Because those little plays are the key and development and improvement is going to be very, very fortunate for us

Q. This is a question for all three of you guys: Obviously you are two of the few returners. A lot of roster turnover. Tell me what you're proud of from the team overall this season?

CALEB MURPHY: The year didn't go how we wanted it to go, but instead of letting it get to us and not coming to practice ready to go or just looking -- we kept our same energy, we kept going regardless of what our record was and how we was playing.

And some of the games that I felt like we should have won, we lost but we're still making good strides and improvements in a lot of areas. I'm proud how we stuck together. I ain't going to say found a way but we stuck together through adversity really.

RUSSEL TCHEWA: Yeah. First of all, this was a whole new team so, you know, it takes time to build a team. And we did a pretty good job with the chemistry of how we came together every day, how we practice. So I think it was pretty good, you know. We learn from this to get better and better.

CALEB MURPHY: I've been on both sides of this, winning and losing and learned a lot this year. So definitely everybody on the team learned a lot of lessons this year, so.

BRIAN GREGORY: I think the message that we send on a daily basis is if you go about and do things the right way every single day and give great effort and have great focus, and you said we're young, so there's times where we're not as consistent in those two areas as you need to be. And that comes from experience. You know what I mean?

I tell the guys, there's two results usually, you win games or you learn stuff that if you really embrace it, it's going to help you win down the road. And I thought our guys every day, came to practice, didn't let the win or loss the night before or two nights before stop us from continuing trying to improve.

I think Caleb over the last two weeks has had his highest assist total in games. Eight again today, 8 points 2 turnovers. You saw the development of Russel from about the sixth, seventh game mark of our league until now. Outside of maybe Josh Carlton, he's been the most productive big guy in the league. You know what I mean? And it's just seeing the confidence grow and all that. And you can't do that unless you bring it ever single day. You know what I mean? You can't do that unless you bring it ever single day.

And it's hard. You know what I mean? But give these guys credit because they kept doing it.

Q. Coach, you didn't take a timeout at the end but that's a double-edged sword. Yeah, you can set up a play but they can also change their defense. Is that why you just ran it at them because you knew they had to scramble?

BRIAN GREGORY: Yeah. We had talked about it in the timeout before what we wanted to get into without using a timeout. And, you know, Murphy got to the basket on the one, which was exactly what we wanted to do and then we talked about probably whoever drove the ball, most likely Caleb, was going to have to make a play for somebody because they were going to converge on to him. And he made a really good read in finding Corey open in the corner.

Q. Coach, this game is a microcosm of your season, isn't it?

BRIAN GREGORY: Yes. You know, we fought, we

scrapped. I thought the last three or four possessions in the first half hurt us a little bit, you know. But the guys bounced back and kept fighting. Again, you can't -- give them credit for making the threes but our overall defense, you can't complain about an effort and a fight if you hold a team as potent as they are offensively to 36 percent and you outrebound them by 13.

One of the things that we've got to get better at is we had 17 offensive rebounds but only 10 second-chance points. We've got to turn our effort -- and this is kind of the point you're making, the effort and the attitude that we approach things with didn't always create tangible results. 17 offensive rebounds for only 10 points. They had 7 offensive rebounds, had the same amount of points. So we give a great effort, but now we just need to finish some of those plays. And that's the next step for us to take.

Q. This one's for Caleb. On Darius Perry's last three-pointer, it looked like Jamir kind of got lost on a screen. And I saw you had your back turned to the play until the very last second. Walk me through that last screen for Perry when he made that game winning three?

CALEB MURPHY: I was kind of, just, like, trying to focus on the ball, trying to be in the help at the X in the middle. And at the last second, I seen him set that flare screen for Perry. And when he shot it, I ain't going to say I knew it was going in, but I was just like, damn, so -- simple mistake.

Q. And you brought up a great point about being on both sides, winning and losing. You won a lot of games during your time at Grayson High. You know, for you just -- if you could expand on those lessons that you've learned being on the other side of that and what it takes to build resiliency and things like that to be a better player?

CALEB MURPHY: One thing I can say is that -- honestly, I don't even know. I'm sorry. My head -- I'm sorry.

Q. I gotcha, Caleb. And, Coach, one for you. Obviously, just, you know, not the year that you wanted to have, but just with so many new guys, what's your ultimate biggest takeaway from the year that was?

BRIAN GREGORY: I think again, in this -- in particular with -- you look at the nonconference schedule that we put together with some of the teams that we played, obviously, Auburn and Florida and BYU and Wyoming and, you know, you had a pretty tough nonconference schedule. And, obviously, this league, as I always say, never gets enough

credit. For anybody to be talking about Memphis, Houston or SMU not being securely in just hasn't watched not only our league but the rest of the country play because those three teams are definitely NCAA caliber teams. And not only that, those three teams are all capable of winning multiple games in our league.

With that being said, it is a difficult league not to have multiple upper classmen that have played years in your program. And we're going to have to make sure that as a program we understand that. But in this day and age, sometimes it's going to be difficult to do, just have that upper classmen that have been through the battles with you and know exactly what needs to be done.

So I thought, you know, the fight was there. But at times, the experience and the understanding of critical plays just because there was a lack of continuity and senior leadership and upper classmen, leadership guys who have been through those battles before. You know, last year was a very abbreviated not only practice but regular season schedule when you lose 35 days in the middle of the year due to a COVID pause.

Both these guys were -- obviously, their development and their experience was greatly impacted because of that. But it is something that teams are going to have to look at and go through right now.

And, hopefully, we'll be able to build on some of the things that we did well and become that team where these close games that we have not been able to finish, you know, next year you're able to finalize those games and make the plays. We call them winning plays, we call it winning time the last eight minutes of the game. You've got to make some plays during that time. And we've made some, but we just have not made enough.

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