

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 11, 2022

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Houston Cougars Coach Kelvin Sampson

Fabian White

Jamal Shead

Postgame Press Conference

Houston - 69, Cincinnati - 56

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Houston.

COACH SAMPSON: I think when you're playing in tournament play, neutral court, I don't think there's any such thing as really an upset. I watched a bunch of games yesterday, and either team could have won just about every game I watched.

And I think the team that plays the first day usually has an advantage early. And that next game was the new team's trying to get their footing or whatever.

But I think Wes Miller has done a really good job with that team this year. I think they had a stretch there where they lost five or six, whatever, in a row. Keeping those kids together, keeping them playing hard. That's not easy. But they did.

But I was really proud of our kids. I thought the second half we looked like us defensively. When we can get stops and get out and go -- first half was just, the game was a slog because they just stayed on the free-throw line.

When the other team shoots -- I think they shot 15 free throws the first half, what was that -- yeah, they were 12-for-15 from the line. That's just too many free throws. But that was our fault. It wasn't the referees. We were fouling. Gotta take responsibility for that. Just gotta play smarter.

But I thought our defense was really good. Holding that team to 28 percent from the floor for the game, we knew



that Davenport -- Davenport is going to make some hard 3s because just about every one he shoots is a hard shot. And he makes them.

But if he's going to make them, I'd rather them be 3-for-11 than 3-for-5. He took 11 3s today, made three. We can live with that.

The other one was DeJulius, he's 1-for-9. Kyler Edwards is a really good perimeter defender. I was surprised he didn't get on the defensive team because he's our best defender. I think he's our best shot blocker. But our best defender is Kyler. Kyler did an awesome job on him. Jamal, I thought, was solid.

So good first game. You just kind of move on down the road.

Q. In that first half, Josh plays 5 minutes, I believe, and you're able to get him in there the second half and start doing some stuff. How much did not having him obviously in the first half change things up and then the ability to sort of go to him a little bit more?

COACH SAMPSON: Offensively, we were really good. We shot 54 percent for the game. Josh never takes a bad shot. He's 4-for-4. But I don't want our guys to lose their aggressiveness by trying so hard to get the ball to Josh. Sometimes you need to let things happen organically.

I think Josh is a lot better when he's playing through flow versus targeting him or calling a play for him. Because referees let defenders play way more aggressive on the post than they do on the perimeter.

So all three of our guards can play out of pick and rolls. And everybody guards you differently. Everybody has different kind of athletes or different strengths and weaknesses. We try to go, if Fabian got a certain matchup we try to go with Fabian. If Taze had a certain matchup we try to go to Taze. But those are our two best one-on-one players because they can go get a shot.

Now, when Jamal gets downhill, he becomes really good because he's got a floater and he's a good free-throw

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shooter. The first half, we didn't make free throws very well. We had the wrong guys shooting the free throws.

Taze was 4-for-4. Jamal was 3-for-4. And Fabian was 2-for-2. If those guys shot all our free throws you'd say, hey, you're a good free-throw-shooting team. But if your worst free-throw shooters are shooting all your free throws, hey, what's wrong with your free-throw shooting?

Nothing, it's this guy right here. We'll call him out. He's a bad free-throw shooter. It's like the Rockets when Dwight Howard is shooting all the free throws. You're a terrible free-throw shooting team. If James Harden is shooting the free throws, hey, you're a good free-throw shooting team. It's not the team; it's the guy shooting them.

Q. Could you talk about how Fabian White Jr.'s veteran leadership just changes the game sometimes like that whenever you --

COACH SAMPSON: That's a great point. At some point we just had so many sloppy possessions. When you're handling the ball and you're getting down to the end of the shot clock, that means that for 10, 12 seconds you did nothing. And they weren't pressing us. They were pressing up on us the first half. But we just didn't have movement.

Second half we came in at halftime and I said, look, we'll play through Fabian. First play of the second half was to Fabian. Every time we made a run, we played through Fabian. You've got to have somebody you can play through.

Josh, we don't want to spend time having to fake like we're throwing darts at a dartboard, trying to get the ball to Josh.

But Fabian can catch it on the block and he can catch it further out. And when he faces up, he can drive it. And Fabian's worked really hard to develop his left hand. So if you take the middle away or his right hand drive, he spins back and he's got his left hand. So he becomes a tough matchup.

But, also, I didn't think we had great leadership early in the game. I thought we were just out playing in a tournament -- like we're in the park and we called "next." You know, 40 minutes away from going home. Then you can go get next tomorrow.

But second half, Fabian's leadership is his leadership. Our kids look up to him. And Jamal, Jamal is a good player. I think there's a lot of chicken on the bone with him. He can be a lot better. But that's why you have coaches, to get him to play at a level where maybe he doesn't want to.

But Jamal is one of those kids that's so talented. He's got a lot of talent. But sometimes he's got to want to be great. He can't settle on being good. Sometimes the enemy of great is good.

Q. You were down five at half. What was the message to this team going into the locker room and what adjustments did you see you had to make in the second half?

COACH SAMPSON: Offensively it's play through somebody. Just not play a democratic offense -- whoever got it dribble and shoot it. Our offense first half was kind of BS. And a coach has to take responsibility for that, too. And we could have run something, run something better.

But, you know, Jamal's still a freshman point guard. J'Wan Roberts is a freshmen. Ramon Walker is a freshman. We're still playing a bunch of young kids out there. Josh got into early foul trouble. Who else -- Taze got in early foul trouble.

Our starting five is the strength of our team. We don't have great depth. But we spent most of the first half playing with our bench. Two of our best players spent a lot of time on the bench.

But once we got to halftime, we just came up with a new plan. Said here's what we're going to do. We're going to play through Fabian, and we're going to stay on our pick-and-roll coverages; instead of pushing up, we're going to stay at the line of scrimmage. They're a pick-and-roll team. And I thought our pick-and-roll second half was outstanding, and our shot selection second half was good. Second half was good.

Q. Last week, Cincinnati played you tough in the first half as well. Was it different, the same thing? Do the same thing both times or adjustments on there?

COACH SAMPSON: Because we're going to get on them a little bit, they're going to make tough 3s. They made some tough 3s the first half. Second half they didn't make any of them. Push up on them -- Davenport is not going to create a shot for himself. And anytime he's in the paint it means it's going to trigger a pin-down from their big man.

So they were setting pick-and-rolls and rolling instead of rolling for the basket, rolling into a pin down. And we were getting there on the catch. They were just catching it and shooting it. Those were hard shots. He made a hard one, DeJulius, we went zone -- thought we could have done a better job -- he made a tough one.

But Cincinnati played with a lot of confidence that first half, too, whereas we played like this is our first game in the tournament. Second half, I thought we looked more like us.

I know what it's like to take over a new program. I think Wes has done a wonderful job. It's only going to get better as he goes along.

Q. Jamal, when you guys go down 10 early in the second half, did you take it upon yourself to do anything to steady the group? What was that series like?

JAMAL SHEAD: We just came together and we were, like, this is not us. We've got to do better as a group. Somebody had to spark us up, and I think I did a pretty good job of that for a while. But we've got to start better, start games better just with just our energy.

Q. Fabian, they alluded to just your presence and the veteran part of it. But did you feel like you wanted to take it upon yourself there and, look, you got going during that stretch in the second half when you all pulled away? Was that sort of what you were thinking in your mind, sort of take it upon yourself?

FABIAN WHITE: I was just trying to be a better leader than the first half. It wasn't exactly just scoring, it was our energy and our effort, really. So I just tried to lead by example with that. And Moore does a real good job leading by example too. With both of us doing it, the whole team is going to do it eventually.

Q. Jamal, last year you were on the team during a conference tournament. This year obviously you're a starter. Speak to what it's like being the starting point guard and the responsibilities as far as in the conference tournament for you this year versus last year?

JAMAL SHEAD: Last year, I played a big role and just being the energy guy for everybody in practice and on the bench. I tried to just continue that same energy while starting and while doing what I can.

It's obviously a bigger responsibility. But you want things that come with that. So it's been more fun, and I keep looking forward to advancing in this tournament.

Q. Fabian, did you have to speak to any of your teammates who had not yet been in the AAC tournament, about just what to expect?

FABIAN WHITE: No, we already knew we was going to

have a target on our back when we was coming into the tournament. We had a target on our back all season.

And just talked to the more experienced guys, all the fifth-year seniors, transfers, telling them we have no more tomorrows, literally. And we just gotta keep winning, and we don't want to lose so we got to go back home, be sad on Selection Sunday. So I just said mindset is to keep playing games as long as you all let us.

Q. Fabian, just watching the game, seemed like you were more aggressive on the post [inaudible] and it was a focal point to feature you in that second half. Were you more like, you can't guard me, let's just get busy?

FABIAN WHITE: No, it wasn't like you can't guard me. It was teammates putting me in the right spots, coach calling the right plays.

And when you have good guards, they find you it's a testament to Coach's recruiting and all the work that we put in throughout the days and the months of this year.

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