

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 11, 2022

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Tulane Green Wave
Coach Rod Hunter

Kevin Cross

Sion James

Postgame Press Conference



Tulane - 69, Temple - 60

COACH HUNTER: I'm proud of our guys. I thought defensively we were really good today. I thought our energy was good. I thought this guy sitting next to me played his best college game since he's been here. All our guys I thought did a great job. We have a guy out like Jalen Cook, most people don't think we can win games without him.

Our kids are playing with a chip on their shoulder to prove they're not a one-man team. And of course would love to have him. And maybe -- might have him might have him tomorrow.

But I thought these guys did a great job. Kevin got two fouls early. I thought he was able to hang in there until that last crazy play he made at the end of the first half, got his third. But that's a sign of maturity.

Few months ago no way he could have done that and still play with this aggressiveness. We're getting better, getting older, getting better. And we're glad to be in the semifinals.

Q. You mentioned Sion, career high nine assists, career high five blocked shots. Seemed like every time you needed a play, and a huge 3-point shot when they made a run, is that just kind of a preview of the future for him?

COACH HUNTER: When guys come out of high school and they go into college, one of the things as head coaches we can never predict when the light switch is going to go off. For him, the game has slowed down. The

first year, you're a freshman and everything's so fast.

You could look at Sion now, his pace, things have slowed down and he's playing to his strengths. That's what makes him a really good player. There are times he thinks he's a lot smarter than the coach. And off the court he really is a lot smarter than his coach. You talk about having another coach on the floor, that's what he does for us. I don't think there's a player in this league that has a better basketball IQ than Sion James.

Q. First two times, Temple scored pretty well on you. Was it adjustments, or something you did better differently?

COACH HUNTER: One of the things about our matchups, when we see a team a third time, we're going to lock down on sets. You're not going to score many times on sets. I thought when we played them before they were able to drive the ball at us.

Our whole mission today was to keep them out of the paint, keep them out of the paint, don't let them drive, especially when Dunn and those guys are going and the get their head down. And then it spaces our defense.

The whole focus was stopping the drive and keeping them out of the paint and making them a 3-point shooting team. I thought we did a good job of that. I don't know what they finished but our goal was to make them shoot 30 3s. I don't know what they finished up with. But if teams shoots 30 3s against us we're going to win most of the games.

Q. The team had nothing going offensively after Kevin picked up his second foul and you put him in a little earlier than maybe other coaches would and maybe than you normal would. What was your thought process on that? He scored seven points and really you had separation and were ahead for the rest of the game after that?

COACH HUNTER: When he got his second, I knew I wasn't going to go the entire half unless we got a big lead. I asked every one of my assistants, and they said, don't play him. That was easy for me, so I didn't play him



because I don't listen to my staff.

But there's no way I was going to go home and the team was going to go home with Kevin Cross on the bench. That's just not going to happen. He's played with two all year. Teams try to attack him. He did a good job.

But I would say this. I thought Nobal came in and did a great job, did a great job in those minutes where I was trying to play a little offense and defense and not get him on the defensive end. And it won't show in the box score, but Nobal Days did a great job for us defensively.

Q. Sion, besides the nine assists, five blocked shots jumped off the stat sheet, and Coach talked about stopping drives. What did you do to see it coming, not foul, get guys and send it back?

SION JAMES: I wish I could take credit for it, but really he said he doesn't want to us get beat off the drive. And a lot of times getting blocks is because I got beat on the drive.

So really just making up for my mistakes. Like we said, I'm going to go out and do anything we can at any point. Defensively we knew that's what was going to win the game. And today it happened to be blocks, and I was glad I was able to do what I could to do.

COACH HUNTER: I told you he was smarter than me.

Q. Sion, Coach mentioned playing with a chip on your shoulder. Obviously you missed Jalen Cook, but how good a team do you feel you are even without him?

SION JAMES: We're such a good team. And obviously with Cook on the floor, it's an entirely different ball game we're playing.

Truth is we can win without him, especially other guys going. We were able to get good looks all game because the ball is moving, the ball is popping. Even though we weren't hitting as many 3s as we do in some games, we still found ways to get good looks and put the ball in the basket. And we were able to do that today.

Q. With Hicks, it's one thing to tell your guys don't leave him, stay on him. It's another thing to accomplish it. What have you guys accomplished today that -- he shot well both the first two games?

COACH HUNTER: I didn't think we did a good job with him the first couple of games. And he was able to get going. It's weird because he comes off the bench so you kind of forget about the scouting report a little bit. And he was the main focus. He and Dunn were our focus.

We wanted him to put the ball on the floor. The more he dribbled the better we would be today. We really wanted him to put it on the floor. And he was one of those kids, he misses his first one, especially most freshmen, they lose their confidence a little bit, and we really told them he cannot make that first shot. And he missed that first shot. He missed the second shot. And of course most young guys start thinking about it then.

The other thing I want to mention is that, he doesn't get a lot of credit, but DeVon Baker was really good today. He replaced Cook. We didn't have 17 points coming off the bench, but now he gives us 15. DeVon Baker was really good for us today.

Q. What would you assess the chances of Jalen Cook being able to play tomorrow? And what do you have to do differently in the third meeting with Houston that didn't happen the first time?

COACH HUNTER: The thing we're doing with Jalen, if he's able to play, that's great. If not, that's great too. We're not sitting by his bedside and hoping. He's got a tough injury. If he doesn't play, so be it. If he does, if he does play tomorrow I'll probably bring him off the bench.

We're in a pretty groove. We've won two out of three without him, and really felt we had a chance to beat SMU. This group is playing really well right now. Even if he can play, we'll probably bring him off the bench.

He was close today. He was really close today. And we said let's give it one more day. And I do believe when we play Sunday he'll play. But we'll just use him off the bench when that happens.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports