

# American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 12, 2022

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

## Houston Cougars Kelvin Sampson Kyler Edwards J'Wan Roberts

Postgame Press Conference



Houston 86, Tulane 66

**KELVIN SAMPSON:** Let's address Fabian first. You know, we came in this morning, we had a 9 to 9:45 shootaround. He was fine. We just walked through some stuff. Sometimes you take your morning shootaround just to get your kids out of bed more than anything else, get them up and going. Just walk through some stuff, shot some free throws.

But when we came back for the game, Kellen came in and said Fabian's back tightened up on him. And then when I saw him in the locker room, he was getting some treatment from John Houston, our trainer and he said it wasn't easing up. But Fabian being the warrior he is, he wanted to give it a try. So I said I'm going to find out about his back now.

So if you remember we called something out of the huddle. I ran a set just for him, and he shot a three-footer from four feet, for you that are math challenged, that meant he missed it by a foot, an air ball. That's not Fabe. That's his money ball. Left shoulder, jump hook, that's his shot and he didn't even come close.

So I went down to the bench and got our next guy, next man up. We've been doing that all year long. Guys have been going down with injuries. We're fortunate to have a guy like J'Wan Roberts who's worked hard and put himself in a position that he can step in and do that. So J'Wan replaced Fabe. And hit 13 rebounds, 10 points, an assist and a steal. It's a pretty good day for a left-handed relief pitcher out of the pen.

So proud of J'Wan, proud of our team. Proud of Kyler

especially. Kyler had kind of a tough day yesterday. Today I just thought he was in total control of his emotions. Total control of his game. Kyler works hard. He's a hard worker. One of the things that we tell these kids is, because you work hard, you're not guaranteed to succeed. You just have to be patient with your work. It will pay off, but you've got to keep working. You can't let a bad day or a bad shooting night or adversity affect the effort that you put in. It's just the way we operate with things.

So when I see him come in and make six threes today, and I can say the same thing with Ramon, he struggled shooting the ball this year too. But it's good to see them have a good night because of the effort that they put in. It's good to see our kids react the way they react to these kids' success too. It's a great thing about being on a team. That's a team. Everybody pulls for each other. Everybody plays for each other. And we had a lot of good performances tonight.

But Kyler 8 assists, 1 turnover, 20 points on 13 shots, 2-for-2 from the line, 7 defensive rebounds. It's hard to be more solid than that. That's an outstanding night from one of our senior leaders.

**Q. Coach, when Kyler's shooting like that, how did it raise your overall level and what this team can do?**

**KELVIN SAMPSON:** I think one of the ways our kids get confidence I used to tell Quentin Grimes this too, I think this really helped Quentin is, don't ever worry about missing a shot with us. We missed 33 shots tonight, and we had 17 offensive rebounds. That means we rebounded over 50 percent of our misses. We scored 30 points tonight on second-chance points. That takes a lot of pressure off your shooters and we told our guys that, shoot with confidence. If it goes in, cool. If it doesn't, we're going to play "sic 'em" on the boards, go get it.

Josh had 5 offensive boards, J'Wan had 5, Taze had 2. You know, sometimes you score 30 points on second-chance points, but I think with Kyler it was just -- he was due. He was due, man. Some of his tough shooting nights, he had so many balls go in and out.

Your target's not the rim. One of the things -- I learn a lot from other people. Jack Nicklaus used to talk about everybody looks at the back of the golf ball, but Jack Nicklaus picked out a dimple, one dimple. I tried to apply that same logic to shooting a basketball. So we used to take little pieces of blue tape and put them on the rim, and told our guys to focus on that little piece of blue tape from different angles.

So there's different ways to teach things. But Kyler's -- when he's shooting well, whether it goes in or not he's usually on target. His misses are where they should be. When the misses are where you should be, you're going to have a good shooting night.

But I think rather than what it did for us, I think everybody was just so happy for him because we all know how hard he's worked

**Q. Kelvin, I'd like to go back on Fabian, from what you saw, is it a feel thing now for him or are you more inclined to maybe rest him knowing that the Tournament's right around the corner?**

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah. That's not out of the realm of possibility. Obviously win or lose tomorrow, I think our seed is set. I mean, we are what we are. But I'm going to see -- I haven't really talked in-depth with John yet. I asked Fabian after we just left the locker room, I asked him how it felt and he said it was still locked up. So may not be a decision to make. He may not be able to go tomorrow. And if he can't, he can't. We'll just proceed the best we can. It's not like we haven't dealt with injuries over here.

**Q. You started the game down 9-2. It didn't take you nearly as long as it did yesterday to get the game back in shape. What did you tell the team in the timeout?**

KELVIN SAMPSON: Nothing. I think there's a simple explanation for that: We had Fabian on the guy that was scoring all the points, we had to get him out, so we could play 5-on-5. With him out there it was 6-on-4. It wasn't his fault obviously. He was just -- I didn't know how bad his back was. Players are never going to tell you the truth because they want to play. "Coach, I'm fine." Well, obviously he wasn't fine. So I had to get him out. But that had a lot to do with the 9-2 lead, was we were playing 6-on-4.

But the Baker kid, he played really good yesterday against Temple and he got off to a fantastic start today. He's going to be a good player for them.

The key to us tonight was defensively limiting cross. I thought Josh did a good job on him. Reggie came in and

did a -- Reggie just started -- the tide was coming in on Reggie's defense. It was pushing up on him too much instead of staying vertical. But I just thought we were solid. Tulane is a good offensive team, they're going to score on just about anybody. And when you play two games in two days, you just get to the next game. We're a little thin right now but we've been thin all year.

**Q. Kyler, how were you able to keep your confidence up? Is that something you get better at over the years?**

KYLER EDWARDS: I think just trusting my work and the process I have every day. Just getting my shots up and just knowing that I'm a good shooter in my mind and just believing in myself

**Q. Kind of like you said when you talk about believing in yourself but when did you feel it kind of coming today? And how important was it to have that kind of game when Fabian went out?**

KYLER EDWARDS: I mean, you always want to step up when your teammates go down, like next-man-up mentality. I talked to Fabe before the game. He wasn't feeling good and he said the team really needed me. So I felt the emphasis to come out and play hard today.

**Q. J'Wan, it wasn't too long ago that we spoke to you and you were talking about that next man up, got to always stay ready. Seems to be true with you every time we talk. What's that like for you to know that when it's your turn, when it's your time that you've got to go out there and you guys don't miss a beat, you've got to step up?**

J'WAN ROBERTS: Most importantly just accepting my role. Knowing what I'm in the game for. Because I know if help Josh on the offensive rebounds, help Taze, they give our team a big boost. Give a lot of our players confidence to keep shooting the ball; we're going to give it right back to them.

So my drive when I go in is just play hard, get every rebound I can get. Just have fun.

**Q. Coach, just what you can say about this conference in and of itself in the American and how it's challenged you this season and what you think of the strength of the conference throughout?**

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah. I think every conference is -- every conference is good. Some better than others obviously. But every conference is good. You know, COVID affected a lot the last few years. I always think

about Brian and Anthony at San Diego State and Dayton, the years those two teams was having. But we had some teams in our league that was having great years too. Tulsa, what Haith did at it Tulsa, COVID year was outstanding. Then we had three teams tied for our conference championship. I think it was us, Tulsa and Cincinnati.

But Memphis, once they got everybody healthy and got right, you know, as a fellow competitor, we kind of knew how good -- how talented Memphis was. Kendrick Davis, rightfully so, was the Player of the Year in this league, but don't get it twisted the best pro prospect in this league by a mile is Jalen Duren. He's the pro. There's maybe only one pro for sure in this league. If there's one pro for sure, Jalen Duren is not just a first-round pick, he's a lottery pick. He's their best player. Forget stats. You know, stats are for mommies and daddies. Players, you tell the players, you know, Jalen Duren is a difference maker. You put him on any team in this league and that team is going to win the league championship probably. That's how good he is. That's the difference that he makes for them. And with Jalen Duren healthy, Memphis is going to play with anybody because of him.

Now, they've got other good players. Jalen Duren is a horse. Kendrick Davis is the Player of the Year in this league. You take him off that team, it's not the same team. You put Kendrick Davis on just about any team, he's a great outstanding college point guard. Can do a lot of things to hurt you. And like most little guys, he's got a swagger about him.

And our team, the strength of our team is our team. We've got a lot of good players, maybe no great players. Jalen Duren is a great player. We don't have a great player but we've got a lot of good players and that's why we're 28-5.

**Q. Coach Samp, on another question for Kyler: Speak to his overall game. You talked about yesterday his defense and even when he isn't making shots just talk about his all-around game what he brings to the team?**

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah. That's why the coaches in this league voted him second-team All Conference. I would have probably voted him first team All Conference because of that. I also would have voted him Player of the Year on defense. I thought Kyler was the best defensive player in this league. I told our team that and I'll tell you that, on the best defensive league, the Number 1 defensive team in the league, Kyler is our best defensive player. That should mean something. We put him on the other team's best player every night, best guard. We don't put him on Duren. Maybe I should.

But Kyler's tough. I fuss and cuss at all of them now. I don't discriminate. But I know the tough ones. Kyler's tough. If you want to go down a dark alley, back alley somewhere, you want -- I can tell you the guys I want beside me, and I can tell you the guys I want sitting in the car with the heat on with the motor cranked up. Kyler, though, I want him beside me because he'd have my back. I like guys like that.

**Q. Coach, three different players with six or more assists. What does that ball movement do for you guys?**

KELVIN SAMPSON: I think that just starts from day one about us. Teams that have very few assists usually have bad shots. Shot selection has a lot to do with it. We scored 32 baskets today and we had 24 assists. We've done that a lot. We have a lot of 30 baskets, 22, 24 assist nights. We do that a lot. That's a credit to our players. They buy in. Coaches can have game plans and establish things. But we play team basketball at Houston. And we have good teams.

We're not the best team in the country. A lot of teams are better than us. But that's not our deal. We just try to be the best we can be. Some nights it's going to be pretty good. But there's never going to be a night we don't give great effort. And that's important for these kids to understand. Without Marcus and Tramon that allowed us to grow some other guys. Without Fabian you can see the work that we've done with J'Wan.

But I go back to our culture. If you water a tree -- think about watering a tree, you don't water the leaves, you water the roots. Culture is roots. That's how you grow your program. Have strong roots. And that's what culture is.

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