

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 12, 2022

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Tulane Green Wave

Ron Hunter

Jaylen Forbes

Sion James

Kevin Cross

Postgame Press Conference

Houston 86, Tulane 66

RON HUNTER: Well, first of all, I am extremely proud of these young men and our entire program. As I told them in there, no matter the outcome how things turned out, these guys did a lot of great things for Tulane University and the future is really bright at Tulane. So I'm just ecstatic to be able to coach this group. You know, the tough part is that when we took this job, we looked at Houston as a standard because since we've been in this league, they've been dominant. So we beat every team in this team except for Houston. So we want to climb that mountain. And we knew it would be tough without having all of our guys there today.

But I'm proud of this group. I think from a local level and a national level, Tulane is back. I'm not quite sure what that means, but as you just mentioned, I looked out there and I had two sophomores and three freshmen on the floor playing against grown men, and the team that was in a Final Four a year ago, and in my opinion a team that easily should be in the Sweet 16. Houston is really good.

And one of the reasons that I wanted to -- we don't want to emulate them but their success has been terrific. And as I've talked to Coach Sampson before the game, he made me think about something. He said, hey, when we got in the league and I took the job, we had to go catch some teams. You always got somebody to catch. We'll continue to do that and as I told him, if I can't catch you, can you go to the Big 12 next year? (Laughing) That's the best way. We'll take over the Houston spot, and move to the Big 12 next year.



Again, I can't tell you how much I'm thrilled to be able to coach this group, this group of young men and to have them back next year.

Q. Ron, if someone had told you that you'd be shooting 60 percent in the first half, their top player would be on the bench and you guys had a pretty good lead there early, what would you have said?

RON HUNTER: I don't know if it would have surprised me. We've had so many different things happen to us this year, and one of the things we talked about is consistency and we knew that if we were have a chance to win it, it wasn't about our start. Can we play this way consistently for 40 minutes, especially without having your first -- one of our better players not play.

And so I thought there were six possessions where we had wide open shots and we missed them. And I thought that was the difference. Early we made them, but in the middle of the game when they made their run we had wide-open looks and we didn't make them. We missed some key free throws. We're the best free-throw shooting team in the league. One of the top teams in the country and we missed free throws today. What that told me is we were exhausted. We kind of ran out of gas. We ran out of gas.

Q. Last week I talked to Aaron McKie from Temple and he said you guys shared a conversation and shared a laugh about where you guys were set preseason-wise, how they had you falling, 8th and 9th in the preseason polls. How do you feel you defied the odds and how do you feel this season is set up moving forward?

RON HUNTER: I think we were picked 10th or 11th, I don't know. As I told our guys, we're not defined by what other people think about us. I know I had a good basketball team. We got off to a slow start, and we talked about that in the locker room, what if we hadn't had the slow start, we'd be sitting on the bubble. So we learned from that.

But again, we're going to have a hurricane meeting when we get back because I didn't know anything about hurricanes. So we're going to go back and have a



hurricane meeting because that's part of our life. When you don't know that, that's a big deal. So think about this, if you had to spend 27 nights with me in Birmingham, Alabama, with your coach, just me for 27 days without any underwear, how would you feel? That's what these guys had to do.

Q. Jaylen, you went 7-for-14 from the field tonight with 19 points. What was working for you here tonight versus a very tough Houston defense?

RON HUNTER: I mean, my teammates did a great job of just getting me the ball in places that I'm comfortable scoring in. I just tried to keep going toward the goal to begin with and shots was just falling at the beginning.

Q. Coach, you talked about Houston as sort of the mountain. What makes them such a tough mountain? Is it the talent the way they go about things?

RON HUNTER: It's the culture and that's the first thing -- when you see good teams and good programs, it's about the culture and it starts with the head coach. Again, you don't try to reinvent the wheel. So it's truly about the culture, and even today when I woke up this morning, I thought for us to win this game I wanted a tight whistle. If you let Houston just foul and grab, we can't win that battle. And as you can tell, not being able to get to the free-throw line, we needed a tight whistle today, which is another reason I wore this shirt, looked like a referee shirt, I wore this to look like one of them. That didn't work. We'll see what happens next time with that, but we didn't get that tight whistle

Q. Jaylen, Ron mentioned the open shots you missed, I think there was one in the second half you had that looked like it was going in and rolled out. I think it would've got you within 10. You showed a lot of frustration. I think they went down and hit a three. What was the feeling like when shots felt good and they weren't falling at times?

RON HUNTER: I mean, when that shot left my hands, I felt like it was going down. But as you can see, it rimmed out. So, I mean, it was frustrating, but I mean, you're going to have games like that so. I mean, I had my teammates and my coaches just keeping confidence in me to just keep playing hard.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Kyler Edwards, Kelvin mentioned he's the type of guy on the defensive end he'd want to go down a dark alley with and have him next to him. Defensively what he brings but also he had a pretty good offensive game as well today.

RON HUNTER: Yeah, you know, again you asked me a question before about them. It's a culture. I don't even know who their guys are. It doesn't matter. Doesn't matter who is in and who's out, they play the same way. So whether it's Edwards or whether it's Moore or -- I mean, they're all the same. I mean, that's what having a good culture is all about. And that's why I thought we took a step this year because we had to play three or four games without Jalen Cook, and most people would say we'd probably wouldn't win any of them, and if you have a good culture, it doesn't matter who's in and that's what we emulate.

Houston can go play tomorrow and you wouldn't know who the five starters are. That comes from the head coach and comes from building a program. He's got a great culture. When you start knowing certain guys and all that, I didn't even know until one of my assistants said it, that one of their kid didn't even play because he had a back problem. That shows how good they are. Edwards is a good player, but they're up and down the line with good players, the culture, they play hard, they play defensively, they make open shots and they don't make mistakes.

Q. Ron, will you guys be interested in one of the minor tournaments? Has that been discussed yet as to whether you would play or not play in one of those?

RON HUNTER: No disrespect to any of those tournaments, but I didn't come to Tulane to play in the CBI, CIT, CSS, SPEN, ESF. No. That's not who we are. That's not what we want to do. That's no disrespect. We want to play in the NCAA Tournament. And that's what we're trying to build for.

So, no. So we won't play in any of those tournaments. I haven't really talked to these guys about it. We're going to talk about it. But these guys want to -- we're playing big boy basketball. And so I came to this -- I came to take this job to win games in the NCAA Tournament, not in the CBI. And, again, that's absolutely no disrespect to those other tournaments. But absolutely not, not Tulane.

Q. Sion, just your thoughts on the season, first conference winning record for a long time. Freshmen and sophomore lineup, the future, how bright do you feel like it is?

SION JAMES: Start by saying tonight or today definitely hurts. Like I say, we step into every game expecting to win. So any time your expectations -- it doesn't line up that way, it hurts. But overall, the season was a total success. We did a lot of things that people said we couldn't do. We shown that we're growing as a team and that there's a lot of growth left for us to do. And the future is incredibly

bright. Just like you said, freshmen and sophomores all over the place. We're only getting better. We work together. We work together well. And the longer we play together, the better we'll be.

Q. Kelvin Sampson said their game plan going in was to first try to take you away. That's how far you've come along in one year. How good do you feel despite today about your season, and how optimistic are you about the future?

KEVIN CROSS: I mean, I feel like going in every game this year towards the end of the season, their game plan was try to take away me and try to get me early in foul trouble away and stuff like that.

Q. Jaylen, you too. Just looking ahead to the future. Obviously, you guys really wanted to win today. But just the prospects down the road for this team?

JAYLEN FORBES: I mean, I'm proud of our guys, what we did this year. Even though we got off to a slow start, I mean, you can see what we did in conference play. I mean, nobody expecting us to be top four in this league. Everybody was expecting us to be last. So, I mean, we come back this summer, work out -- I mean, everybody's in the gym consistently. So that's one thing we don't have to worry about is somebody not working out. So everybody's going to continue to get better.

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