

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Sunday, March 13, 2022

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Houston Cougars

Kelvin Sampson

Fabian White Jr

Josh Carlton

Postgame Press Conference

Houston 71, Memphis 53

THE MODERATOR: Kelvin Sampson, The American Tournament's Most Outstanding Player senior Fabian White Jr and senior Josh Carlton.

KELVIN SAMPSON: First of all, congratulations to Penny and his Memphis team. They've got a good team. There was two really good teams playing today. And that's good for the American Athletic Conference. When your two teams playing at such a high level at both ends, people across the country could see how good this conference is. I didn't really see the bracket, all the brackets after we did ours. We left. I have no idea even -- I know we play UAB and we're in a bracket with Illinois. That's about all I know.

But just really proud of our team. We've had a tough year in some ways. You know, we got caught on the tail end of some tough scheduling. But to be able to win the regular season and then win the conference tournament -- and our kids said it in the locker room, they didn't want to leave any doubt who the best team in the conference was. They needed to do that today to cement that, especially against a team as good as Memphis.

And again congratulations to Penny and his team, but just proud of my guys. We fought and scrapped and our kids play the right way. They play hard. We're tough. We rebound. We defend. Sometimes we shoot it better than others but our defense and our rebounding and our culture, you know, it's there every night. So for this team to win 29 games this year, you know, it's just amazing to me what these kids have accomplished. So hats off to them. Really proud of this group and our staff.



Q. Coach, when you look at winning the regular season and the conference and your metrics, did you think you should have been a little higher than a 5 seed? How do you sort of look at that?

KELVIN SAMPSON: That's probably a fair question, Chris. I think, when we set up our nonconference schedule we scheduled Virginia non-conference, Alabama non-conference Oklahoma State non-conference. And if you look at preseason projections Oklahoma State was picked to finish in the top half of the Big 12. Alabama was picked to finish in the top of the SEC. We played Oregon, who was picked at the top of the Pac-12. Had those three teams had good years, I think we would have been a 3 seed. We beat Virginia, we beat Oklahoma State, we beat Oregon. But because those teams had down years, we didn't get any credit for it.

And then we're a whistle away or a couple more free throws away from beating Alabama. That was a very wonderful game. We had the ball at the end with a chance to beat Alabama. A chance to beat Wisconsin. So had the ball with a chance to beat SMU. So we had our chances.

But I have no regrets about anything we did. There are so many things that are not in your control. That's why you don't worry about certain things.

It will all play out. What seed were we last year by the way? So we were a 2 seed. And we could have went home the second week -- first weekend. We beat Cleveland State and Rutgers had us in trouble.

So I don't think there's a whole lot of difference in the top 13 seeds. I mean, I remember being a 13 seed and beating Arizona when they had Jason Terry and Richard Jefferson. We were a 13 seed and beat them. So everybody said it was a huge upset. Not really. You know, if you look at the teams on paper, if you look what people -- perception -- perception is what creates upsets. Reality is is that everybody's good. I saw that we're playing UAB. Their best player -- or one of their best players played at Tulane last year, the Walker kid, he had 46 the other night. The kid, we couldn't guard him last year. I don't know how

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we're going to guard him this year.

Whether you're 4 seed, 5 seed, 6 seed, go try to win your first game. You know, I don't have brackets and I'm picking winners. I'm actually doing the work here coaching, playing. We're just trying to win our first game because you can lose your first game if you don't go in it with the right mindset. So we just want to -- whatever seed we got, we just want to win our first one

Q. Along those lines, is there a level of perhaps some respect that you are in the South region, where if you are fortunate enough to advance, you get a next round in San Antonio, a closer region to Houston?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah. Yeah. I guess. But when you got UAB staring you in the face, it's hard to think past that.

You know, we've got a tough bunch. I think the thing that's most important to me about when the bracket came out that we played Friday. That was important. If you think about, you know -- you know, last time we played these guys, we were playing our fourth game in eight days. You saw what we looked like. It's hard when your main guys are playing 37, 38 minutes four nights out of eight. And then now we just played three straight games. If we were playing Thursday, we would have to leave Tuesday. Have the mandatory public practice on Wednesday and play probably Thursday, and what if they stuck us with an 11:00 game, 11:30 game? That's how important Friday was.

We need to rest, you know. This team plays hard. We play with so much effort and energy and these kids are human beings. So I think more important than what you said, Joseph, and you bring up a great point, if we were fortunate enough to get there, but I think more importantly not having to play until Friday. Whoever we played didn't play today. I think the Big 10, our conference -- who is the other conference to play.

Q. SEC.

KELVIN SAMPSON: SEC. So if we'd have got stuck on Thursday, there would have been a huge advantage for the other team. That's why it's a blessing for us that at least it gives us a chance to rest our legs and get our kids rejuvenated for Friday

Q. Fabian and Josh, both of you, can you talk about what it means to be wearing those championship hats and have that championship trophy going home with you?

FABIAN WHITE JR: It means a lot. We faced a lot of adversity through the season. We all had to come together

as a team to make up for Marc and T, instant offense and their defense. So just a lot of culture that goes into it

JOSH CARLTON: T just feels great especially I know how we felt in December. You know, after hearing that Marcus and Tramon would no longer be playing with us, and the amount of doubt that people had about us and how we would finish the season, and just to finish up the conference champion winners in the regular season and the tournament is great, you know.

Q. First for Kelvin: What change or what was the sequence after you left here yesterday and the decision for Fabian to be ready? And then Fabian, how did you feel out there? And obviously you wanted to play, what was that like going out there and after not playing yesterday?

KELVIN SAMPSON: For me, I just kept it complicated: I asked Fabian, was he okay? He said yeah. I said, okay. That was it. I mean, I know an unsung hero on our program is our trainer John Houston. John made a couple -- we actually had a couple guys, I won't mention their names, that had temperatures, they were sick. So John and Dr. Li and Dr. Shupe, our two team doctors they were out at the pharmacy getting medicine, getting in these guys, getting them hydrated. Fabian was taking muscle relaxers and all kind of stuff. They were giving him treatment.

And then when we got in the bus and came over to the arena this morning, I think at 9:00 -- 8:45 we got here and we just, you know, wanted to go through our game plan, how we were going to attack Memphis. Fabian went through it, you know. I knew if he could play, he was going to play. But I wasn't going to make the decision. I was going to make the decision if I felt like I needed to help him or save him.

But I mean, I've been with this kid five years. He's spent a lot more time with me than his mother and father and the multiple girlfriends he's had. My bad, Fab

Q. Josh, you had a really good second half. Up in the first half there was a moment where you got called for a moving screen, you got an earful from Coach Sampson. Immediately on the defensive end you dove for the ball made a great effort there and then you got the dunk and the and-1. What's kind of the motivation, the fire that Coach Sampson puts in you? Fabian, you can answer this as well?

JOSH CARLTON: You know, knowing Coach, just he's going to get on me. He wants the best for me. So the plan was to ghost all screens. I made contact with a screen,



and I ended up getting a foul call. So I just wanted to be able to bounce back and finish the half strong after making a mental mistake like that. So just knowing Coach and knowing how he's going to push me, I always want to be able to respond to when he gets on me.

FABIAN WHITE JR: Coach Sampson is a Hall of Fame coach, so he's always going to keep you held accountable, he's going to hold you accountable with everything you do. If you mess up, you're going to hear it. If you do good, you're going to hear it. He always makes sure we're in the right mind space and just wants the best out of us.

Q. Coach, for this team, after the injuries to Tramon and Marcus to win both titles, where does it sort of rank among teams that you're proud of, when you look at this group and what they've accomplished?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Boy, it's hard for coaches to rank championship teams. It's like asking -- I mean, who I like more Kellen or Lauren. I'd get in trouble no matter what you answer. I just know how hard it is to win a game. I just have never taken that for granted. I think when -- on December 23rd, when I got the call from John, Marcus -- I'm sorry, Tramon had surgery the morning of the 22nd. So we were prepared for that. We were prepared. Taze Moore was going to give us depth. Ramon was going to be our fifth guard. It was just kind of a plug and play when we needed him. So I was prepared for that. But when he called and told me that Marcus was out for the year, that threw me for a loop. But I didn't think -- I never thought we could or couldn't win. I just focused on how do I help put these guys in the right position to be successful.

And then short term, Kyler didn't play. So we played Temple on the road, no Kyler, no Marcus, no Tramon. Our first guard off the bench was actually our starting 4 man, was Fabian. He played the 3 in that game. And I think that's where Fabian's will to win came out. He willed us to win that game. His defense, his rebounding and his -- you know, Fabian is a quiet guy, unless we play Memphis. Then I see him talk more in the Memphis game than I see him talk all year. But I think that's retaliatory, if nothing else. But it's all good in competition.

But, you know, I think most people thought we were going to still win the league. It shows you how crazy coaches are and media. You lose Marcus, you lose Tramon, you lose -- people forget we lost Quentin Grimes, we lost DeJon Jarreau, Justin Gorham, Brison Gresham and Marcus and Tramon. Those were our leading scorers against Cleveland State, Rutgers, Syracuse, Oregon State, Baylor. We lost all of them. So we were kind of starting over a new team. So talk about winning the league, I never thought about winning the league. I just started thinking

about, okay, got to get Josh more involved in the offense. Got to get Fabian more involved. Fabian's evolution as a face-up player became more in play. And then the growth of Taze and Kyler, and Jamal.

When people go down, it's an opportunity, you know. What people saw is long faces and blank stares and woe is me. We saw it as an opportunity. I say we can still win, you know. That's why, I mean, they keep score. Somebody is going to win and lose. You should try to win and here is how we're going to win.

And I'm blessed with a great staff. Our staff is tight. They do a great job with our kids in development. I just don't think we missed a beat. We just kept going. And we just tried to win our next game. And when it was over, we were 15-3 regular season. And once we got here, you know, we knew we were playing Tulane. If we won that, we knew we'd probably play -- no. Who did we play first? Cincinnati. We knew we were playing Cincinnati. If then we won that, we'd probably play Tulane or Temple. But we played all those teams twice. And if we won, we were going to play either SMU or Memphis. We played them twice. So we felt like we could beat any of the teams. We just had to play better.

But the good thing is that in the Tournament, everybody is kind of on an equal playing field. Everybody is playing their first game or their second game in two days. Everybody is playing their third game in three days. You know, there's no rest component involved in tournament play. Everybody's on a level playing field.

Q. Coach Sampson, new team, new tournament. Which experiences that happened in this season will you feel like help this team win a game in a tournament, then continue to advance?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I wouldn't say there's one experience, Da'Yon. I just think our -- it's a blessing that we don't have to play until Friday. So tomorrow, these guys will do nothing. We'll meet tomorrow as a team. As a program, we'll have a meeting. But we can't practice tomorrow. The guys just need to rest.

Fabian played 30 minutes tonight, Jamal played 30, Taze 32, Kyler almost 38, Ramon almost 20. So just get some rest tomorrow.

We've got to get on a bus and drive three and a half hours back to Houston right now. So we'll get back. By the time we get to Houston, I'll have watched probably two -- at least two and a half of UAB's games. That's our next opponent.

So our next opponent is our next opponent. We're not going to spend time talking about it's our next opponent in the NCAA tournament. It's our next opponent. This time yesterday, our next opponent was Memphis. This time today, our next opponent is UAB.

Coaches and players don't make it any more than what it is. If we win, we get to play another day. If you lose, you go home. That's the way it is this time of year

Q. Congratulations, Kelvin. Just real quick. Because Memphis is such a tough opponent, they've beaten you twice earlier this season and played so tough today, does this win, the way you guys won it bolster your team's confidence going into the tournament?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I mean, we've won 29 games, Matt. We've beat a lot of good teams this year. We're 29-5. But we have great respect for Memphis.

I don't know whether it does or not. You'd have to ask the players that.

Q. Fabian, what does this last tournament run mean knowing this is the last one for you? And what approach are you taking? Do you feel like you guys are still sort of doubted a little? Or what's your approach going in?

FABIAN WHITE JR: You always want to end your senior season on a good note. So win the regular season conference and the conference tournament is always a good note. But we're celebrating today, and tomorrow it is back to business. We've got to get ready for UAB. And they're a good team. We've got to watch film, just get ready take it game by game. We really don't know how it's going to go. But we're just going to play hard, play the culture, play defense, and we're going to see how it goes.

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