

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 9, 2023

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

East Carolina Pirates
Michael Schwartz

Jaden Walker

RJ Felton

Postgame Press Conference

East Carolina - 73, South Florida - 58

THE MODERATOR: We'll get started. We'll start with an opening statement from coach and then take some questions.

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Yeah. Just great respect for Coach Gregory and the South Florida program and their players. We've had three hard-fought games this season, just the ultimate respect for Coach Gregory and the his program.

Very proud of our guys to come back and fight, especially after a little bit of a slow start in terms of the first four minutes, particularly, but very proud of these two guys and our whole group for fighting the rest of the way and we were fortunate to be able to win this game.

THE MODERATOR: Do we have questions?

Q. Jaden, RJ, it felt like you guys just took over this thing after that slow start. What seemed to be working for you guys? You both finished with 22 points. What seemed to be the momentum there heading into that final stretch after that slow start?

RJ FELTON: Yeah, Coach talks about it all the time. When Javon went down we had a new man step up. Ja Walk stepped up in that role, stepped up the PG spot. He's prevailing in the role and I'm learning how to play off of him. We built that chemistry over the past times and we are looking on setting each other up on and off the ball.

Q. For you guys to turn them over 14 times then to score 19 points off of those turnovers, I guess how



important was that to coming back on them and also just keeping that distance against them?

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: I don't know about keeping the distance, but defense was definitely what we knew we had to do to have a chance to win this game. They're an extremely explosive offensive team. Both our first two games we talked about that we had guarded well for a lot of the game, but we had two stretches in both games where we allowed them to go on 10-0, 12-0 runs that ended up being the difference in the game.

So we couldn't allow that to happen. Turnovers obviously, if you can force some turnovers, that's probably the number one thing you can do to stop a team from going on a run, especially if you can convert on those turnovers.

But defense was such a huge aspects of our game plan going into the game and once we stopped turning the ball over ourself within the first four minutes of the game, we were able to set our defense. You can't set your defense if you're turning the ball over because they're out running. So once we could set our defense, even if we didn't make the shot, we could set our defense and I thought our guys were excellent on that end tonight.

Q. Jaden, the first time y'all met South Florida, the first two times, you were playing more off the ball. Playing point guard tonight, how did that maybe change things for you guys as far as game planning and obviously just kind of change the flow of the game and how it came out?

JADEN WALKER: Piggybacking of what RJ said, we took a loss from Javon Small. He got injured earlier in the season, and I started playing point guard, so I had to step up, and tonight I just had to keep being aggressive and once we got through that little shaky start we had at the beginning of the game, the game started to slow down. I just was looking for my teammates to be in the right spots and we was able to capitalize off of that.

Q. Harris ended up scoring 26, but he had to take 22 shots to do it. So were you happy with kind of just how much y'all made him work to get those points?

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MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Well, you and I talked about this before we headed to Fort Worth. You just can't shut him down. You can try and you're going to do that, and that was obviously our focus. But if you put, if you put it on shutting him down and that ends up being what your barometer is of success you're not going to come out on the positive end of that a lot because he's that dynamic of a scorer.

But what you can do is you can try and make him take shots on our terms, which I thought we did tonight. We got him off the line a few times, whereas in the first two games he got those threes up, and when he can shoot the ball comfortably, he can put a 6-0, 9-0 run on you in a hurry.

So to make him take 22 shots, that's an advantage for us because not only that, but maybe Tschew's a little bit less involved in the game, because he's a huge part of their offense too. Great credit to Ludgy Debaut and what he did. Obviously he started. I would venture to say, without looking at it, this is probably as close to a career high in minutes, if not it, for him tonight and for him to battle on that end defensively versus their big fella, I give great credit to Ludgy.

Q. How important was the perimeter game for you guys just even offensively? I know Dave hit three 3-pointers in the first half and then obviously RJ hit four more in the second half. Just I'm sure spacing the floor-wise, but how important was that for you guys offensively?

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Yeah, it's really important. But again these guys to my left are the ones that did it. They knew -- we went in with a game plan of understanding what we wanted on offense, to play with a purpose. We tried to execute and we just turned it over. It doesn't matter how much purpose you have, if you give the ball to the other team you're not going to have good results. But once Jaden kind of felt and got comfortable in the game reading their ball screen defense I thought Jaden, as he has done the last six or seven games, did a fantastic job picking apart in terms of where the pass needed to go. That's all he can do. Once he's reading the coverage of their post defender, reading the coverage of the on-ball defender he makes the next play and then RJ, Dave and other guys stepped up and made shots today. You can't count on shots going in all the time, but what you can count on is making the right read, and Jaden and RJ did that and we capitalized by making some shots, which is big for us.

Q. Got a big test on board tomorrow against Houston, a team you guys just saw very recently, just a couple weekends ago. What can you guys kind of take out of

that game and seeing them in person to help you get ready for tomorrow?

RJ FELTON: Against them the first time it was more of a learning experience than anything. They had beat us on the glass a lot. We had to focus on rebounding and learning, matching up to the physicality to 'em. Yes, they're a No. 1 team, kudos and I'll give respect to them, but I just feel like we just got to match their energy as we play against 'em.

Q. The women's team is playing for the conference championship tonight. Anything you have to say on their behalf?

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Go Pirates. Let's get a championship tonight.

JADEN WALKER: Yes, sir.

RJ FELTON: Yes, sir. Go ladies.

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