

# American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 9, 2023

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

## SMU Mustangs Coach Rob Lanier Zhuric Phelps Zach Nutall

Postgame Press Conference

UCF - 76, SMU - 70

THE MODERATOR: All right, we are joined by SMU head coach Rob Lanier, Zhuric Phelps and Zach Nutall. Coach, before we go to questions, could you just give us some comments about today's game.

COACH LANIER: Well, you know, any time you lose and it spells the end of the season, it's always a disappointing moment. I'm not thinking as much about the game as I am about the seniors who really afforded me an opportunity to have a great experience in the midst of a disappointing season because I have been blessed to be with a really good group that allowed us to stick together through some significant disappointments and I'm encouraged about what's ahead, but I certainly do have a great appreciation for this group as my first group. Something that as the smoke clears that I will cherish. A lot of credit to UCF. We didn't defend well in the second half. Did a good job, playing well right now, a lot of respect to Johnny for the job they do, and credit to them for the job they did today.

**Q. Rob, obviously you got off to a fast start, 21-11, what do you credit the fast start to?**

COACH LANIER: The guys we defended. Defense today, they shot 34% in the first half versus 61% in the second half. There was an energy and a connectedness that we had defensively. We were vocal. When the game got tight and game pressure got involved, we didn't maintain our poise and to their credit they turned up the defense in the second half. But I thought our defense is what set us on the path that we were on in the first half.

**Q. Coach, you talk about how this was a disappointing**



**season in many ways. What does excite you about the future?**

COACH LANIER: We're in a people business, you know, even though winning and losing. And most people look at it as entertainment. And this is the most entertaining time of the year. But when you're doing this everyday, you're with people, right? And I was blessed with the opportunity to be around a lot of good people. When you're around good people, you can get some things done. And we got to improve, but I think -- I have been around really good teams winning-wise that I didn't enjoy. And we didn't win as much but I really enjoyed this group, and I feel like we moved the needle and laid a foundation that can be built upon rather quickly. The record belies the growth that we had this year. And so in general, that's what excites me.

**Q. Zhuric, you tweeted the other day your commitment to come back here. Can you talk about that decision and what you see in the future?**

ZHURIC PHELPS: You know, just one year, built a brotherhood, a family here and I think leaving would have been the easy thing to do. I want to, you know, I want to be here with these guys. I love them. You know, I hate it for the seniors. You know, the season that we had, you know, it wasn't the one that we wanted. I mean, yeah. I just want to kind of -- trying to change things, you know, especially with Coach Lanier. The relationship we built. I feel it's special. You know, even with the teammates from the staff. So, you know, that's the reason why I tweeted that thing.

**Q. Zach, you finished with 12 points there in the first half. What did UCF do so well there in the second half to kind of take you away there? Obviously you finished with 12 points. What did they do schematically to make it tough in the second half?**

ZACH NUTALL: I think I lost aggression as far as myself in the game, period. Really focussing on trying to get stops. We were all preaching it in the huddle. I haven't thought -- I knew we wanted to get stops. And everybody was trying to preach it in the huddle but it never really came into play. Like we needed it in the second half. And I don't know. I don't know what they did differently. I got a couple shots

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off. If they went in, it would have been a different story. That's that. What we need to do to win a game was play defensively.

**Q. Zach, you already talked about -- despite the losses you kept coming back. And you were obviously a big part of that. Now that this season is over, what kind of thoughts go through your head?**

ZACH NUTALL: I have to finish this semester. I'm going to graduate. New phase in life that's going to come next. I look forward to it. Very patient with it. And the decision that I have to make in that regards. Until then I'm going to stay around Coach every day. Stay around Zhuric every day. Come in and work out as if we're playing next week. And like we all have reiterated, it's family-oriented. Staying close to those guys until I can't be in Dallas no more. If I'm not in Dallas anymore I just continue to grow somewhere else.

**Q. What have the seniors and players like Zach mean to you guys in this season despite the wins and losses not being ideal?**

ZHURIC PHELPS: I mean, everything. You know, without Zach I don't think, you know, we could compete every day, we fight everyday. Without Ithiel I don't think we fight every day. Darius didn't play much but they bring something to every practice. They could have easily took the easy way out and let their coach looked at us and said, you know, this is not what they wanted to do. They could blame it on us, but they didn't. We got better because of them. Even in Hawaii we were going on that run, they could have easily, you know, said forget this. But, you know, these seniors, they were special. And next year we're going to do this for them. That's a promise.

**Q. Zhuric, great effort today. Never fun to lose. But you definitely had a real run there, looking like you were going to pull off the upset for a bit. Going into this week just before they left for the tournament, UCF's Coach Johnny Dawkins pointed you out saying he wasn't there. He was going to be a big factor. Do you feel like you got a lot of attention from UCF defensively?**

ZHURIC PHELPS: Say that again.

**Q. Do you feel like you got a lot of attention from UCF defensively?**

ZHURIC PHELPS: Yeah, for sure. Driving, they were there. They were there, you know, everywhere. I should have, you know, made one more passes. I think I forced a little. My turnovers, I had 4 turnovers. So, you know, they

won. I guess they did what they did. I don't know.

**Q. For Coach, what's it like game planning against Taylor Hendricks and the type of player he is. Obviously, there's been a lot of talk about Conference Rookie of the Year Award with him and Walker from Houston. You faced both. Tell us about what it's like preparing for someone like Taylor Hendricks.**

COACH LANIER: Yeah, it's rare. He's a rare talent. A guy with his size and his athleticism, to be so skilled and so efficient offensively, particularly his ability to shoot the ball, you know, you really have to pay attention to detail because he doesn't need a lot of space and he's a really effective player. I was really impressed with that young man for sure.

**Q. Rob, we talked about how March is for those who want to keep playing. Do you think today's effort, simply put, validated that this team wanted to keep playing?**

COACH LANIER: There's no question. I think the biggest problem we've had is two things: One, we haven't defended well enough, and I take responsibility for that part from a program standpoint. And, you know, confidence. We were -- we have been in 14 or 15 games decided by 5 points or less. A lot of those were really one-possession games that ended up being 5 points. When you don't win those games, there's some doubt that creeps in. And so we were coaching against that and we got into a moment late into this game where some doubt kind of crept in, and we didn't maintain a level of poise. Where when you win those games, maybe at Wichita state, at East Carolina, at home against Cincinnati. When you come out on top and you have that as a frame of reference, that creates the poise that you finish games with. And in realtime you could see the doubt creeping in. And in those huddles and in those timeouts, you are trying to get them to relax and believe and focus on defense. But that will be part of our growth going forward. And I think that's what Zhuric is talking about.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much.