

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 9, 2023

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

UCF Knights

Coach Johnny Dawkins

Taylor Hendricks

C.J. Kelly

Postgame Press Conference



UCF - 76, SMU - 70

THE MODERATOR: Okay, we're joined by UCF Coach Johnny Dawkins, C.J. Kelly and Taylor Hendricks. Coach, before we get to questions, could you just give us some thoughts about the game.

COACH DAWKINS: It was a great game. I'm sure everyone realized it was a hard earned win for us. SMU started off great, got a lot of momentum leading at the half, and I give our guys a lot of credit, show a lot of character, kept battling. Finally took a lead and was really able to close the game out well. I give coach Lanier a lot of credit for how his team played. I thought they played with great energy, great effort, and they were very tough about 40 minutes of the game.

THE MODERATOR: Okay. Do we have questions from in here?

Q. Johnny, you touched on it a little bit. The start from SMU. Obviously you guys beat them by 32 the one time you played them previously. What do you credit the slow start for you and the fast start for them?

COACH DAWKINS: I think they played really well to start the game off. They didn't have Phelps. One of their best players offensively. And he makes a huge difference. You have guys absent, things can become more challenging. And I think he has done a really good job considering what he has to deal with. I thought our guys made the adjustment as the game went on, I think we started recognizing what Phelps could do. You know, started gaming planning better in the second half against him. I think he made a big difference in their team. Lead guard

and gives the guys experience. And that was one of the reasons why the game was different from last game.

Q. C.J., you really started to turn it on in the second half, finished with 18 points in the second half. What seemed to be working for you in the second half? Obviously, you had to make some adjustments there after trailing at the first half. What was working for you there in the second half to get going like that?

C.J. KELLY: Well, they went zone most of the first half. When they went man second half, we decided to start using a lot of pick and roll coverage. And take the bigs off the screen using my speed, and we just -- that was working so that was working. We kept rolling with that.

Q. Taylor, you guys outrebounded them significantly last time. This time a little bit closer and they had an advantage in the first half.. did you maybe sense they kind of came crashing the boards a little bit. And maybe more emphasis from them to get some rebounds?

TAYLOR HENDRICKS: Definitely. Compared to the first game, those guys were crashing a lot harder. Sam Williamson, he had 6 offensive rebounds. And I was guarding him. He was doing a good job getting around me. But, you know --

COACH DAWKINS: We're going to make Taylor run a lot of sprints after this interview.

TAYLOR HENDRICKS: Yeah, definitely the emphasis was on the rebounds for sure for them.

Q. For both Taylor and C.J., you guys lost a lot of single possession games, single digit games during the regular season, but heading into the tournament you talked about how you guys were so close coming over the edge. And you did that today. You guys were down and came back, and it was a single possession game towards the end there. What was different and what does that do for your confidence the rest of the tournament?

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TAYLOR HENDRICKS: You know, in the last timeout we were up and we were talking about how we need to close it out. We have been in that position some many times. We just talked amongst ourselves and you know, tell each other that we just need to close it out this time.

Q. Taylor, this one is for you. You come out here, this is your first conference tournament here. Had a big part of it, you and C.J. both. What was it like to come out, and finally get over the hump from the close game and have your first tournament experience here today?

TAYLOR HENDRICKS: It's great. Definitely give us a lot more confidence heading into the next one. We're going to watch film on this game, try to improve like we always do and get ready for the next one.

Q. Coach, first for you, your team did a much better job of getting to the free throw line in the second half. What do you attribute that to?

COACH DAWKINS: We were more aggressive. Trying to touch the paint. Get open more. Guards get downhill. And I thought we did a good job at it. We wanted to get more opportunities in putting ourselves in position to get to the basket and finish while we're getting fouled. I thought our guys were good playing off each other in that regard.

Q. C.J., for you, you were clutch at the free throw line. Talk about your confidence especially in the last few moments.

C.J. KELLY: My teammates believe in me at the free throw line. Just telling me to take my time. Knock it down.

COACH DAWKINS: Trying to say your coach don't believe in you?

C.J. KELLY: My coach believes in me as well. We go over free throws every day. Sticking to my same routine, not switching anything up, and watching it go through the net.

Q. For Coach and Taylor. Coach, I want to get your thoughts about the American Freshman of the Year Results that came out yesterday. I know there was two really good freshman in this conference. Taylor won the Rookie of the Week I think nine times, and his stats are excellent. Wanted to get your thoughts whether Taylor was clearly deserving of Freshman of the Year.

TAYLOR HENDRICKS: Jarace is a really good player, so either way it could have gone to me or him. Either way was deserving. I'm not tripping about it because he's a great player. His team had a great season. He deserves it.

COACH DAWKINS: I'll say something similar. In this game to the victor go the spoils. I thought Taylor had a terrific year, and we could make a case for either one of those two men. We all know that. The deciding factor is what team is on top of the other team when it's close like that. And they had a really good year. They won our conference. And so to the victor goes the spoils. That doesn't diminish anything that Taylor accomplished this year. I think people around the country, people in our conference, everyone realize how good a player he is, and for me as his coach -- and I was the same way as a player -- I use those things as motivation, personally. And I hope he uses this as motivation to continue his journey of how good he can become as a player.

C.J. KELLY: My vote was to Taylor.

Q. For C.J., take me through that play where you drive and kick it to Horton in the corner for 3 to go up 4, 72-68 from what you saw there.

C.J. KELLY: We run a lot of pick and roll the whole second half and I was looking -- I was looking to the corner for a lob the whole time. For a split second if it's not there, I'll try to get the lay-up. They were doing a good job of not really -- I don't know if it's a good job. They wasn't really coming over. That one time that they helped out and I seen Ithiel in the corner. We work on those passes all the time in practice. I should have taken off on two feet. That's what we work on. I got it through I found Ithiel in the corner right where he usually is.

Q. Coach, obviously, you and I have talked about all year with Darius's injury. C.J. has had to at times run the offense. It really seemed to pay off today with his great decision making in the second half, not just looking for his shots but looking for his teammates.

COACH DAWKINS: Definitely. I told him that all season. He hasn't been on the ball as much in college, and I'm like, "You're going to be on the ball a lot more for us, because we have a guard that goes down, he's going to be out the start of the season for five weeks. You're going to have to learn on the job very fast." To his credit, he really embraced it. I think he enjoys being more of a combo guard, playing off of it. He's realizing all the things he's capable of doing because not only is he a really good scorer, he's a good facilitator. We saw that in the workouts and practice. That's why we didn't hesitate moving him to that position when Darius went down earlier in the season. I think we benefitted from it now because when we're in situations, I can put anyone on the ball like -- not anyone. I can put C.J. or Darius or Jayhlon on the ball and feel confident.

Q. Coach, in the second half obviously a lot of things bounced back there. Of course mentioning in particular, Ithiel Horton, he hit the big shot that took it to free throws there at the end. What do you say about this group with Ithiel or even C.J. guys getting back and getting big in the second half. What in your mind does that change, or what does it say about your group's resolve?

COACH DAWKINS: They live in the moment. A lot of times when you can't break out of something, like, oh I missed a few shots. It's because you are living in the past. You're not going to the next play, the next thing that's going to happen on the floor for you. I think these guys have a short memory and they have the ability to kind of move on after one play, whether good or bad. Whether missed shot or make. To move on to the next play, and I think that's really helped them.

Q. For any of you guys, is there a particular moment or play where you feel like you felt the spark kind of happen in that second half that really got it going?

TAYLOR HENDRICKS: I would say when C.J. Kelly wrapped around that pass to Ithiel in the corner and he hit the 3. That was the spark right there.

C.J. KELLY: I felt like when we started getting defensive stops. I appreciate him. When he started actually playing defense and we started getting stops and the team start to believe, hey, let's turn this up a notch. I'll give credit to Jayhlon Young. He's been our spark when it comes to that, picking up full court.

Q. You guys now have a quick turnaround with Memphis tomorrow. This is a team you played well all season. Beat them in double overtime. You lost to them by one at their place. What are you guys looking forward to do this time around, and what do they do that makes them such a special team?

COACH DAWKINS: Well, we have to go back to the tape and see exactly what we have to do. Study them and build out our game plan. Right now it's all about watching tape and figuring out what we have to do in this next game. These games are always uniquely different, as you know, because everyone is making adjustments. We need to find out what adjustments we need to make going forward to tomorrow's game.

Q. Coach, you talked earlier about the slow start in this one. What do you have to do differently to get off to a better start and not have that mountain to overcome throughout the game?

COACH DAWKINS: To be quite frank, I thought we had some really good looks to start the game. Our first three to five shots were really good shots that we really wanted. It's hit and go. It's going to be like that some nights. We came to the timeout and we just talked about don't worry, the offense is running well. We're getting good looks. And we have to settle into the game, it's a long game, and just keep defending. And that's what we were preaching throughout a lot of timeouts. We saw the shot selection and the shots we were getting, and we felt good with a lot of them. It's one of those things we get out to a better start. Just need to see the ball go in a little more earlier in a game like this and that will happen.

THE MODERATOR: All right, Coach, thank you.