

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 10, 2023

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

East Carolina Pirates Coach Michael Schwartz Ezra Ausar

Postgame Press Conference



Houston 60, East Carolina 46

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Quite simple, just so much respect for Houston's program, for Coach Sampson, their players, their program.

They're the clear standard for this conference, and as they move into their championship program, in every sense of the word from top to bottom. Whether it be in this conference for the Big 12 next year, just an incredible standard of a program to try and emulate, and they did it again today.

Q. Just your thoughts on the job Ezra did today against Houston's front line.

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Just so proud of Ezra. Today I think was obviously a great performance in terms of what he did fighting some of the very best front court players in the country. And as a unit, again, Houston, we know how dynamic they are in the front court scoring, rebounding, defense, but for Ezra to come out and get 19 rebounds, we challenged Ezra midway through conference play to want to become an elite rebounder, and obviously it's not shocking to say this is his best rebounding performance.

So just so proud of Ezra all season and today.

Q. Ezra, your thoughts on going against the Cougars' front line and your double-double today.

EZRA AUSAR: I always prepare for moments like this. As soon as I step on the court, I don't want to say it, but I don't fear anybody. I'm used to playing competition like that, if not better. I just came prepared and I just trusted my team, myself, and I definitely trusted my staff. It just brought it

out today.

Q. When you look, you held them to their season low scoring percentage, were tied with them at halftime. What was Marcus Sasser and Houston able to do after halftime?

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Well, we knew speaking at halftime how aggressive they would come out both offensively and defensively. So it's one thing to be prepared for it, but with a team that hasn't experienced a whole lot of it to feel it. And again, give Houston so much credit with Sasser and with Sheard the way they came out with their defensive intensity.

Once the first four or five minutes of that second half went by, I thought we adapted a little bit and the game became a little bit more normal for us. But that was clearly the difference in the game was the first four to six minutes of that second half because of their intensity.

Q. I know it's probably hard to reflect on the season as a whole right now, but when you look, you guys had the most wins in the American Athletic Conference since this team has been there; you won a game in the tournament. What do you try to take just immediately off the season?

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Two things. Number one is we talked about this in the locker room, just how much appreciation we have for Dave Kasanganay and Ludgy Debaut, two seniors that opened their arms to this new coaching staff as we came in basically a year ago as we tried to build this vision and this program of what we think it's capable of being.

So those two guys were the first thought of this season.

Then all these guys, Ezra as a freshman and all the guys, whether they were returning players or incoming players, to put two feet in where they didn't know where it was going because the vision was new to everybody.

You have 15, 16 guys, some of them are freshmen, some are sophomores, some are juniors, but in reality they're like



all freshmen because it's a new start to everything. So that is really the thought is how proud we are as a coaching staff of our players, putting two feet into what we want to accomplish and what we're going to build here.

Q. Ezra, I'm just curious, what does it really mean to you to be able -- like you said, you weren't afraid of anybody and you come out and have a tournament record 19 rebounds. How do you put that performance into context?

EZRA AUSAR: You know, my biggest thing was just playing hard all game. I was chasing the rebounds. I was doing whatever it took to win. I wasn't just worried about my statistics. I was doing whatever it took for my team to win.

Obviously grabbing rebounds was one of them. Coach moved me to the 3 so I just played my role. I didn't try to do too much. I knew most of my points was probably going to come off of rebounds or stay in cuts, and I just stuck to the script.

Q. Y'all won the battle on the boards, especially in the first half. But obviously the points off turnovers, I know those were kind of the two big keys going into the game. Was that really the most frustrating thing at the end of the day, 19 points off turnovers?

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: Yeah, of course. You know it was very clear our objective was we had to -- to even have a chance to be in the game we had to keep Houston off the glass.

With the percentage that we were able to hold on defense and the amount of misses that were to hold them to seven offensive rebounds again, and he was a big part of it, but all our guys fought.

We talked about five guys rebounding, and I was proud of our guys with that.

Turnovers was another huge key. We knew we needed to take care of the basketball, and when you give up 19 points off turnovers, you're not getting shots up, you can't set your defense. Maybe if we could set our defense on just a few of those -- some of those turnovers were baskets. A couple, two drops in transition where that could be two points for us and we just let the ball go out of bounds.

But it's because of their relentless pressure. It's their relentless intensity. They put you in those positions, and that's why you give them so much credit. You don't have a huge margin for error so you definitely can't compound it

with turnovers that lead to baskets.

Q. For Coach, I'm not sure how much time you have for moral victories, but how proud are you of this team to get a win yesterday and really push Houston today?

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ: You know what, as much as anything, I really feel we were playing our best basketball down the stretch here in the last maybe two to three weeks in a very difficult stretch when you talk about all the games we had on the road, the opponents we were playing, postseason play, to come in yesterday versus a team that had beaten us twice throughout the regular season. We're down Javon Small and down Ben Bayela.

So we were pretty thin in terms of rotation and available minutes. So just so proud of our guys to stay with it. We obviously weren't fighting at the end of the regular season for a regular season championship, but if you came to practice every day, if you came to any kind of workouts with the guys, you would feel like we were fighting for a National Championship.

They continued that through yesterday, through their preparation for today's game last night, and just so proud of their approach as obviously our season comes to an end.

That would be the most thing, that we can take some positivity going into the off-season.

Q. Ezra, hitting a similar theme with you, when you look at this year as a freshman, how much growth you made, how much growth your team made from day one to now, how excited are you for the future now?

EZRA AUSAR: You know, start with my team first. I really appreciate them encouraging me and pushing me every day to -- versus how I started the season, and I trusted Coach Schwartz. It's kind of emotional because a lot of people doubted me.

Without him, honestly, and my son and my family, my coaching staff and my son's mom, they motivate me every day.

I just want to achieve my dream and keep pushing and get better.

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