

# American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 10, 2023

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

## UCF Knights

## Johnny Dawkins

## C.J. Kelly

### Postgame Press Conference



Memphis - 81, UCF - 76

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

JOHNNY DAWKINS: It was a great game. I thought both teams played at a high level. I thought Kendrick Davis and Williams both were outstanding players tonight. I mean, you see why they both first team all-conference players, see why they're two of the better players in the nation. I thought at times they really just stepped up and made huge plays when their team needed it.

But I thought our guys, I was really proud of our guys. I thought our guys played hard the entire game as well. I thought C.J. Kelly who is right here with me did a great job of leading our team and we were right there at the end. It's a one, two possession game coming down the stretch like it has been pretty much every game that we've played 'em and we just came up a little short.

THE MODERATOR: Questions?

**Q. You finished the second half there with 19 points. What was working there for you to really get this team going? You went 6-7 from the field, you really have been able to turn it on in the second half, we saw it yesterday, and then did it again today. What seemed to be working for you there in the second half?**

C.J. KELLY: Just good play calls and good actions. Coach puts me in a lot of actions, get myself open. They did a good job denying me, so I really just tried to take what the defense gives me. Both teams were playing really tight and I used that to get to the basket and it kind of set up my jumper.

**Q. Obviously it's not extremely ordinary to see two guys go for 30, like Kendrick and DeAndre did tonight. Just talk about their performance tonight. Obviously, they're two of the top players in the conference. Just give your thoughts on those two guys' performance tonight.**

JOHNNY DAWKINS: Well, watching them play tonight, they're not only two top players in the conference, probably two of the better players in the nation. Both of those young men, they have experience, they're really skilled, and they played their best when it was needed. I watched the plays they made and we ran different coverages at them, different things to show them different looks, and they still found ways to make plays. That's a sign of really good players.

They were still finding ways through our coverages, some double teams, different things we were throwing at them, and they stayed focused and still made good decisions and made baskets when they needed to.

**Q. 12 of your 14 losses by single digits. What does that say about your team on this season?**

JOHNNY DAWKINS: The same thing I've said about these guys to their faces is that I'm really proud of 'em. They're a high-character team. I've been involved with a lot of basketball all my life and there's not too many seasons I've had, even with really good teams, that have gone on deep in the post-season, that they didn't have a game or two where they just didn't have it.

This team every single night has given us a chance to win and be successful in games. That's a tribute to their character and their leadership. Guys like C.J. Kelly, guys like Michael Durr, Brandon Suggs, guys on our team, the upperclassmen, Lahat, those guys set the tone for how we're going to be, and I thought they did a great job of establishing that with this team.

**Q. Obviously you would rather be talking about this concept in a win, but you guys had a bit of a rough start in the first half, had a lot of turnovers, then**



**cleaned that up quite a bit in the second half. In your mind, what was it you guys did that kind of helped to clean that up?**

JOHNNY DAWKINS: Well, they have a great style of play, Memphis does, and it's chaotic. You can get lulled into playing the way they want to play real quick. I thought we got lulled into playing too fast because that's the way they're going to play.

So what we did in the second half, we settled down. We tried to slow our guys down and take what the defense gave us. Like C.J. Kelly said, take what the defense gives you, don't let 'em speed us up because that's not our game. I thought in the second half we were able to more dictate and play the way we wanted to play through most of the second half.

**Q. With that in mind, C.J., I asked you about this the previous game. In your mind, when did you guys really start to feel like you had overcome those first-half mistakes to make this a run? You tied it up in the second half and all that.**

C.J. KELLY: When we picked up our defense and we started locking down. We were cutting down the turnovers and we started playing UCF basketball. I think that's when things started to change.

**Q. Did you kind of feel there was a competitive rivalry with Kendrick Davis a little bit? We just watched his press conference. He brought you up multiple times. He talked about a post-game interview you did after the double overtime win, and he was saying that maybe you said something when you were making your run in this second half. So he seemed to take it personal a little bit, maybe some of the things that you said in the past.**

C.J. KELLY: Just playing basketball. This is playoff basketball. Both teams going to go hard. There was a little jawing back and forth from me to him. The bigs to bigs, I mean, it's just fun basketball. Just a little talking here and there. But respect to Memphis.

**Q. What can you say about your performance? This was your last game, obviously didn't want it to end like this, just what was going through your mind and what are you thinking right now?**

C.J. KELLY: Just keep playing the right way. We have a great coaching staff. We have guys that give their all into this game. We feel like every game we've been in a dog fight. So just keep playing the game the right way. I was just saying to myself not try and do anything

uncharacteristic really.

**Q. Taylor obviously had a tough night. Did you see something Memphis did to him or was it just couldn't get his flow, what did you see from Taylor?**

JOHNNY DAWKINS: You always give the other team credit. I think when teams, when players don't play the way they played through the season in most cases you give the defense credit. So I give them credit for how they played him. I thought they were aggressive and they were up in him and they kind of got him out of his rhythm. I thought Taylor, I mean, that's been rare this season for him to be knocked out of rhythm a little. I don't think he ever could really get back in it. We tried to do different things to try to put him in situations to really get his rhythm back and he never really got it back. But he's a freshman and he's playing against two experienced seniors. You're going against DeAndre Williams who is a terrific, terrific player. And so I thought that tonight he just didn't have it. But I thought his effort and energy was good. It's just that I think he got knocked out of rhythm as you mentioned and we could never really get him going again and that's tough. We need him to be a part of what we do and tonight he just, he wasn't able to do that.

**Q. Talk about what's it been like coaching C.J. this year and all the different things he had to do for this team, from running the offense from the point guard, scoring, distributing, what he's meant to this team this year.**

JOHNNY DAWKINS: Well he meant so much to the team. I wish he had more years left on his eligibility. He's been terrific. I've really enjoyed getting to coach him. He's a student of the game. He has intellectual curiosity. He's always trying to learn and get better. He always has questions and always good questions. He's always trying to figure out ways to improve, and that's the type of young man that you root for. So just enjoyed coaching him from the standpoint he's so versatile. I think we were able to show more of his versatility more than he probably has in years past. The way we played him on the ball, off the ball and that's something that I think he was able to embrace. When I first told him he was going to play on the ball some he wasn't too sure if he wanted to do a lot of that. I think as he started to handle the ball and it was in his hands more he realized how much more he could be effective. He really gave us a huge lift as a backup point guard, as a facilitator or even in a game like this I could put it in his hands and have him run the offense. He makes really good decisions, he plays the right way and so he's a good example for the young players on our team of what it takes to be a really good player.

**Q. If this was your last game tonight what were you able to take from a special player like Taylor Hendricks over the season and just talk about your relationship with him and how special it was this season with him.**

JOHNNY DAWKINS: Well I have a great relationship with Taylor like I do with all of our players on the team. He was great. He was a joy to coach -- I said this before, it's not been one bad day coaching Taylor. And that's hard. We're intense in practices, games, and there's not one time where he looked at you or he dropped his shoulders when you have to kind of, you know, criticize something that he's doing. We are coaches and we criticize. So there was not one time where he ever did that. So it says a lot about who he is as a person. He's really coachable. I enjoyed working with him. He's a hard worker, he's a guy he comes early and stays late. Comes early before practice, stays late after practice. Always working to get better. He's a great teammate. I watched him throughout the season, like even in these interviews I listened to what he says and he's always complimenting his teammates. What a great young man because he's terrific, terrific talent and bright future. And he's always first to say, What can I do to help my teammates. How can I help 'em. Always has a positive comment to make about 'em. If you go through the records of the articles you'll always see that. And that's rare for a freshman who is having the type of year he's had. You would think he would be thinking about more of himself, but, yeah, he's always thinking about others, he's thinking about his teammates and that's why I think he's going to be a great player and is going to win a lot of games because those type kids usually do.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you.

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