

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 11, 2023

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Houston Cougars Coach Kelvin Sampson J'Wan Roberts Jarace Walker

Postgame Press Conference

Houston - 69, Cincinnati - 48

THE MODERATOR: Coach, congratulations on advancing to the final. We'll begin with an opening statement and then we'll go to questions.

COACH SAMPSON: Yes. When we get to the NCAA Tournament play, you are playing someone for the first time. So preparation, personnel, tendencies, how they guard the post, all the things that we look for in scouting, you know, is different. When it's the third time playing someone, you know, you kind of know where to attack them. You know, we learn something every game. First time we played them, you know, we beat them playing this way. Second time, you know, they knocked us back. We had to come back, win a certain way. But today it was important that we got up on our toes early. And not having played from behind. I thought our defense was outstanding. I thought our discipline and our gameplans was really good, and it centered around these two guys. You know, one from the left, one from the right, we tried to give them space to get to where they needed to get to. But they are unselfish. And they both are willing passers. Neither one really plays to the crowd. And then the rebounding. Things that we traditionally are pretty good, we defend, we rebound. Turnovers today were a little silly. It's not easy beating a good team three times. Never is. It's difficult. But I thought our kids had the right attitude and the right mindset today. And it's a good win. We'll just move on from here.

THE MODERATOR: We'll go to questions.

Q. Kelvin, can you share an update on Marcus and sort of that situation there, you know, what you saw



and what it means?

COACH SAMPSON: Yeah. I didn't really see. Marcus goes down, we didn't see he's hurt. You know, we always say pain is an opinion. Some kids have a high opinion and some kids have a low opinion. Marcus doesn't go down. He never misses practice. Never misses a rep. He's always there. So when he went down, I was concerned for him. The only thing I know, it was not his knee. I think it was -- he felt like his knee went one way and his leg went the other and it got twisted. I shouldn't even say that. The easy answer is they're still evaluating and we'll see.

Q. Yeah. Kelvin, yesterday you touched on improving offensive rebounding. How important was -- your first two baskets come off missed shots. Just setting that tone.

COACH SAMPSON: That came up a little bit in our pregame discussions. I have been around these guys since June. Yesterday was a difficult day in a lot of different ways for me personally. And these kids are going to feed off me most days about things. I wasn't very good yesterday. So I'll step up and take responsibility for that. But, you know, I had a phone conversation with a couple guys yesterday, or last night, and we met last night as a team, as a staff, and then as a team. And we got up this morning and came over here. They gave us 45 minutes. We went through the actions that we thought they might hurt us on, and we cleaned some things up. But, you know, just did what we do. And we were very disciplined on defense, we rebounded well, got the ball to where it needed to go. And again, it's a good team. You saw them last night. To be able to beat a team of that calibre three times says a lot about our kids.

Q. Kelvin, what does it say about Jarace and J'Wan as players and people that sort of respond to your challenge?

COACH SAMPSON: Well, the easy answer is I expected them to. So there was no surprise. They both are very prideful young men. I mean, they have a lot of pride. And they respond well. They have no fear. They are just -- you know, the harder you get on them, J'Wan knows me much



better than Jarace does. But Jarace since day one has always responded the right way. But, you know, Jarace is very talented and when he uses his talent in the right ways and stays disciplined and he impacts winning. And for us it's all about impacting winning. You don't have to score to impact winning. There's a lot of ways to impact winning rather than making a basket. I looked at his stat sheet. But I just thought Emanuel Sharp's defense on DeJulius. Same thing with Nolley. I think Nolley had 50 three's on us the last time and team had 100. Seemed that way. I thought we defended the three-point line with discipline. We got out to them. Lost them a couple times in transition, which, you know, we didn't want to do because that was part of our game plan was find them. But any time Davenport hits the three, it's usually not easy. He takes a lot of hard three's. He gets them off before you get your hand out there. He made one right in front of our bench that way. It's a credit to him. Nolley can shoot. And our defense was good. I just realized we held them to 25%, you know. I think we held the team yesterday to -- I can't remember. 28% or 30% or something like that. But when we're defending and rebounding at a high level and we're sharing the ball. We had 15 assists today. Jamal had 9 and 2 turnovers. You know, we're pretty good.

Q. J'Wan and Jarace, both of you. What was different about today's games for each of you as opposed to yesterday? Maybe, J'Wan, you start and then you, Jarace.

J'WAN ROBERTS: I would say from last game to this game right here, I'm not going to sit here and say I played good last game. Could have done way better. I took that personally. I know the value that I bring to this team. And I know when I don't play to my level it affects the team too. So just having a mindset to come in this game ready to go. Just be pumped up from the jump. I feel like, you know, once I start off pretty good my teammates follow me. And it just shows how good of a team we can be.

JARACE WALKER: I feel like the biggest difference was our mindset coming into the game. Being aggressive, offensive rebounding, and focussing on defense first. I feel like we were kind of offensive-minded yesterday, which is not how we play. When we focus on what we value in practice I feel like that's when get off to an early lead and good start like we did today.

Q. Ability to expand the lead even when you lost Marcus.

J'WAN ROBERTS: Shows how good our team is. A lot of people stepped up. And that's expected. Even though Terrance, our freshmen they don't play like freshmens, they play hard just like the seniors, too. Just knowing that

Marcus came out the game and we still had teammates that we know come off the bench and come with that same energy, just shows a lot about our team. And shows how everybody has eachother's back. And we never get away from what we're doing. Just staying together. And like I said, just shows how good of a team we are.

Q. Jarace or J'Wan, Viktor Lakhin had 15 points against you last time. Was there an emphasis this go around to be more physical and aggressive against him on both ends?

J'WAN ROBERTS: Most definitely. If I'm not mistaken, the last two games against us he averaged 15 and 9. And you know, I feel like once we come into the game, you know, and we play with our defense right, we're able to deal with anything that we put our mind to. Keeping Keeping him to 3 points, 5 rebounds. I think we did our job on the back-end.

Q. Coach, your bench played really well today. Ja'Vier had 3 rebounds, Emanuel had 3 rebounds, Arceneaux had 3 rebounds. How proud of you of those guys getting in and keeping the culture going even as things got tough later in the game.

COACH SAMPSON: What about the other freshmen?

Q. Jarace. I meant the bench freshmen. But yes, sir.

COACH SAMPSON: You didn't say bench freshmen. You said freshmen.

Q. Yes, sir.

COACH SAMPSON: Jarace, you can't be involved with freshmen. What, is he a sophomore now? They are all freshmen. Slow down. A lot of that has to do with preparation. When Marcus went down, nobody mentioned it. You know, he's been down before. We lost him and Tramon last year. So losing him this year -- don't get it twisted now, we're way better with him. Terrance never misses practice. Emanuel doesn't miss practice. Those guys go against Marcus. Either Marcus wasn't there today, Marcus had a hand in those guys playing well tonight because they practice against him everyday, against Jamal, against Tramon. And we have been kind of waiting on a moment like this for Terrance. But, you know, Terrance is coming off the bench for a team that's 31-2. We're not 17-16 or 15 and whatever. We're 31-2. So don't look at those guys as like they are some kind of underachievers or failures. They are on a team that's 31-2. So they have niche and a role. Days like today we hope -- no guarantees -- we hope will pay dividends maybe next week or the week after. Who knows. But we have confidence in Emanuel. Sometimes Emanuel doesn't know

whether he's pitching or catching when he starts doing stuff. He will do some not very smart things. But after he gets his butt chewed out, he usually does it. I thought he was solid today. Really good defensively. I thought Terrance was good. He had the one turnover in front of our bench. But other than that, his rebounding, he had two offensive rebounds, made a big shot. So really proud of all our four freshmen. Walker, Arceneaux, Sharp, and Ja'Vier.

Q. Jarace, how much have you picked up from J'Wan this year, and how much do you guys feed off of his energy when he's able to start fast like he did today and get into the game?

JARACE WALKER: He's taken me under his wing. He's been in the program, he knows what the coaches expect. How the game goes, flow of the game. When he gets going, I definitely follow him and feed off of him. That's basically my best friend, my big brother. We definitely feed off of each other. When he's doing well, I wouldn't be surprised if I'm having a good game, too.

J'WAN ROBERTS: My boy. That's my boy.

Q. Coach, just what are your thoughts on the number of UH fans and all the red in the building today?

COACH SAMPSON: Were you in San Antonio? You weren't? Well, if you were in San Antonio, you would be used to that. Cougar fans show out. They have been awesome. But you know, people that weren't here to begin with, they don't know where we started, and that's part of their problem. There's not an appreciation for that. And I see that. I recognize the lack of appreciation for where we started. But that happens when people get in here midstream. But, you know, we came out of the hotel today, Cougar red was all over the place. Last year it was nowhere to be seen. We didn't have fans last year doing any of this. But old Coach Sampson called the marketing people and told them to get off their asses and start doing something. And they did. Hopefully they start being proactive about some of these things.

Q. Kelvin, I guess conversations will be had between you and your staff, training staff and Marcus. Is this at a point where if a young man wants to play you play him or do you err -- I know this is a hard question to answer, but in terms of his status how would you approach going in?

COACH SAMPSON: I would probably err on the side of putting him out. Because of how important next week is. We've won a lot. But most important thing is Marcus. Not winning. It will always be the case with me. His health going forward is the most important thing here. But

regardless of whether Marcus is here tomorrow, they are going to keep score, right? If they keep score, you have to try to win. That's what we'll try to do, whether he plays or not.

Q. If I can sneak this in. The meeting that you had with the team, was that a product of yesterday's game or this time of year, that kind of deal in terms of wanting to maybe getting back on the same page?

COACH SAMPSON: It's multiple. As a coach you are constantly coaching. Most of my coaching is not during the games. Coaching during the game is like you writing a story. I have coached a thousand games. They are all the same to me, you just react to them. Getting the young men to the starting line with their best stuff. And they need to know how much you believe in them, too. I mean, my kids are my kids. Nobody else knows them like I know them. Our kids are very tuned into this program. That's why you very rarely ever see kids transfer from here unless they want to go play. Want to go play, we're the first one to help them find the right place for them. J'Wan is in his fourth year, was recruited as a freshman. Jarace was recruited as a freshman, Marcus a freshman, Jamal a freshman, Tramon a freshman, Terrance a freshman. Emanuel, Ja'Vaier. All these kids came as freshman. The only kid that transferred from another school that plays is Reggie. Reggie has been here three years. He's on the Final Four team, elite team, and now on a team that's 38-2. Our kids fit. And that's not by accident. That's not an accident that they stay and it's not an accident that they fit. That's why evaluation is far more important than recruiting for me.

Q. For Jarace and J'Wan, can you talk about how Jamal Shead impacted you guys tonight? Obviously he had 9 assists and was a key start in the game.

JARACE WALKER: Just the way he leads our team. He's definitely our leader. Our go-to guy. He sets the tone in the game with his defense. His play making makes the game so easy for us. Puts us in the right spot. Gets us the ball where we want it, when we want it. He's the perfect point guard. And I love the fact that he plays on both ends as well. He's everything you are looking for in a guard.

J'WAN ROBERTS: Just the intensity that he comes out with. Just the way he will call a play and you might not know what we're doing, he's the one to let everybody know what to do. If he sees a mismatch, or sees somebody he can go at, he does that. And we feed off that. And I just feel like the most important thing is having a point guard that you trust to make the right play every time. He's not going to force nothing. He's not going to do too much. He just stays solid. We feed off of that. As he go, we go.

THE MODERATOR: Houston, thank you.

