

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 11, 2023

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Tulane Green Wave Coach Ron Hunter Sion James

Postgame Press Conference

Memphis - 94, Tulane - 54

THE MODERATOR: Coach, just begin with your opening statement and then we'll take questions, please.

COACH HUNTER: Congratulations to Memphis. I thought they played extremely well. Played like a tournament team. Actually played like a Sweet Sixteen team. I think they are playing extremely well right now. Two best teams right now that are playing well in our conference are playing for the championship tomorrow. So just wasn't our day. Wasn't our day. I thought we kind of got hit early. We just never really recovered. And then I just thought, you know, this morning I was concerned because I thought normally we just took fatigue when we were at break breakfast this morning. We didn't get back until midnight. We looked fatigued and played fatigued. But that's no excuse. I thought they played well. The reality is we were a tired basketball team today.

Q. When Jaylen Cook is throwing up air balls in the first half on regular 3-point shots, could you tell the legs weren't there today?

COACH HUNTER: Yeah, you know, I was concerned again. Last night I was concerned. And I thought we got to sleep in a little bit later than we usually would do. Again, I don't think that had much -- it affected how we played. But again, I think that Memphis -- especially after -- when you beat -- they are a really good basketball team. We beat them twice this year. They had that little extra edge going into it a little bit also. It's not like Houston beating them twice; it's Tulane beating them twice. I felt like they had a little bit more juice. I could tell by Penny's demeanor coming out at the beginning of the game. That's what it's supposed to be. We won't let anything, absolutely anything deter what we have done this year. Again, I woke up this



morning with my wife telling me you took over a 4-27 team that didn't win a league team a few years ago, and now with 20 wins and we have been to semi-finals three straight years. Still got to crack that. I'm proud of these guys. We continue to build this program. It's not the same old Tulane, and I'm really really proud of that.

Q. Sion, I think you guys ended the first half 2/25 from the floor after being up 10-5 early. What was going wrong offensively for you guys?

SION JAMES: It's a difficult question, honestly. I might have to go back and watch it and tell you exactly. It seemed like we were getting the same shots we usually get, just weren't going down. We seemed out of rhythm. And then determined what shots we were getting instead of the ones we wanted. Even with that, I feel like we're great basketball players. We have opportunities to play and to make shots and to stay in it. But sometimes they go down, sometimes they don't.

Q. How would you assess the year that you guys had?

SION JAMES: It was incredible. It's hard that this is such a negative thing, so close to the end of the year. But it's really been incredible, the growth that we've had as a team, just the way we have been able to stay together, play together, just how we've all grown up together. A few years ago we were one of the youngest teams in the country and now we're probably one of the oldest. And we've just really grown together as teammates, as brothers, as families, and on the floor.

Q. Ron what are you proudest of that you have accomplished this year?

COACH HUNTER: These guys. You know, we started recruiting him at Georgia State when I was there at Atlanta, and he told me "no". And I got a job and he told me "yes". COVID recruits I call them. These kids were just terrific. So many great things. And this next week I'll take some time and really reflect on some of those things. When you're in the moment, it's harder. We have worked our butt off to get this program off to what it is. As I told you before, we didn't come here to build a team, I came here to build a program.



I feel like that's what we got now. I feel like we have the respect of the people in this league. When I first got here, there was no respect for Tulane. Just keep building. Every year we have gotten better and as long as we have guys like this we're going to be just fine.

Q. Georgia Tech -- stuff like that, do you have any comment on that right now?

COACH HUNTER: The last time I checked, and I think it was March 1st I looked in my bank account and it said Tulane University signed my last check. As long as they are signing my checks and they are clearing, makes sure they clear, I will be the basketball coach at Tulane. As long as they will have me, people know me -- I love these guys. I love the city. And I love Tulane, man. I'm flattered, to be honest with you. We have a lot of work to do at Tulane.

Q. All these guys are eligible to come back. Do you feel like -- but they also have other opportunities. Do you feel like it's a chance to have your team back next year?

COACH HUNTER: We'll sit down individually with all of them and decide what's best for them. Also what's best for us, for the program. That's the nature of college basketball right now with the portal and the other things. We would hope to have a lot of these guys back. But we'll have enough of them back here, we'll be pretty good, that's for sure.

Q. Sion, I talked to Coach last night about your performance and overall you as a player. He called you one of the most underrated players in the country due to your athleticism, what you are capable of doing. How great does it feel to hear that from a Coach and guy like Ron Hunter?

SION JAMES: It feels great. Obviously I decided to sign and play here for him for a reason. It's definitely good to hear those sort of things. All I want to do is win. That's all. That's really important to me. I have been blessed with different skills that allowed me to help our team win in different ways. And I am glad I have been able to use them to push us further towards our goal.

Q. The conference don't get a lot of respect nation wide and this conference should be more than a two-bid conference. I know you don't want the season to end this year. If asked you would play in NIT. What do you say to the people out there to try to respect the conference more and also get a bid for the NIT.

COACH HUNTER: I really think we have to get away from what's on the front of the chest. I really believe that --

again, we can talk all the other things that we want to talk about computerized. At the end of the day, we're concerned if you're a blue blood and what's across here. And we really don't dig deep about how good these -- the American is one of the best conferences in the country. We would play the SEC the Big 12, the Big 10. If we played them on neutral ground from top to bottom, we would hold our own. And I don't think because of our name -- I honestly believe if it wasn't Tulane University and it was another university, that we would be a bubble team, regardless of all the other stuff. I truly believe that. I think again that some of the teams that you look out there and you just kind of question. But you can make numbers look any way they want them to look at the end of the day. Until we change that, the only way we probably can change that is by adding more teams. I said this before I took the job here, and I really think it here in this conference that something needs to change with that. I really believe -- when you got football and everybody goes to a bowl game, I have a hard time where schools like Tulane and the success and the things that we bring, that those things are overlooked. I really do. So I know people that are a lot smarter than me are going to talk about numbers and all that other stuff. I know basketball and I know coaching. I know when a team is better than the other team. I know when a program is on the rise and those things -- there's no question we should have at least three teams in it. That's the saddest part of basketball. So I just -- I have a hard time with that. I'm glad you asked that question because I really believe that there's a lot of bias about the name on the front, and that hurts our league a lot.

Q. Coach, going off of that, why do you feel like there is so much disrespect for a conference like the American that's, like you said, put a lot of things on paper but because of the name of some of the schools doesn't get the credit?

COACH HUNTER: You know, I think that goes back a lot longer than I have been coaching. But again, I think that what sells? You know, and who do you want in a tournament? So college basketball has taken a little hit because I think that right now we're losing some of our appeal. Outside of the NCAA Tournament we don't get much in college basketball. We don't get a lot of the fanfare. We got to do a better job with college basketball in doing that. More importantly, we talk about what's fair to the student athletes. Everything is about the student athletes and their welfare. This young guy should be playing in the NCAA Tournament and not be biased because he's wearing a Tulane Jersey. And if he had a Georgia jersey or if he had a Kentucky jersey and we would have had the same type of deals. I have a hard time with that. I know that people come back and say -- I have sat on the committees. I have been the president of the

NABC. I sat in the rooms before. I know exactly what happens a lot of times in the rooms. You can say the emails and texts to me and all those other things. I know how these things work. And that will never change. That's just part of it. I wasn't even mad about the game until now. I'm going home pissed now. [Laughter]

