

# American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Sunday, March 12, 2023

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

## Houston Cougars Coach Kelvin Sampson Jamal Shead J'Wan Roberts

Postgame Press Conference

Memphis 75, Houston 65

KELVIN SAMPSON: First of all, congratulations to Memphis. We've played a lot of really good teams this year. They're as good as anybody we've played, and we feel fortunate to have beaten them twice this year.

But there was a big swing in the game. We got down early. We had a moment -- we had a little moment there where we got a little discombobulated. Everybody kind of had to slide over one spot. Tramon, for instance, a lot better being the third ball handler than the second ball handler because of our system. That's the way it works. We had some silly, silly turnovers and kind of lost our composure.

Then we got it back. Cut it to five, and then there was a big play where we ran our passing game stuff, and the ball wound up in Terrance's hand for a wide-open hand. The ball goes in, it's a two point game. Then on the next possession, that ensuing possession, DeAndre Williams had the same shot. It went in.

So instead of being down two, you're down eight. Then we come down and miss free throws, but we're right there.

So I was proud of our guys. I was proud of our guys for fighting. Put ourselves in position to be in position. Just couldn't get over the hump there, but kept fighting.

I do want to mention J'Wan Roberts, how extraordinary he was today with the 20 rebounds. He never lost sight of his role on this team. I thought he was outstanding yesterday, and he was outstanding again today. Huge ups to J'Wan. 10 offensive rebounds, 10 defensive rebounds. 20



rebounds, that's pretty special.

**Q. Coach, you saw your seed, saw your path in the NCAA Tournament --**

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah. I don't really remember -- I don't remember the 8-9. Who's the 8-9 in our bracket? Birmingham, right. So Auburn gets to play in Birmingham? Maybe we should have been a 9 seed.

But you know what, congrats -- first of all, congratulations to every school that made the tournament. I never lose sight of how hard it is to make the tournament, regardless of your seed. There's some really good teams this year that had great years that came up just a little bit short. Might have been because of an injury, might have been they lost a heartbreaker because of free throws or somebody throw up a shot at the buzzer, whatever. But it's hard to make the tournament.

Congratulations to every school and every coach.

I happen to be watching Northern Kentucky and Cleveland State the other night, and I was watching Cleveland State because when we went to the Final Four, that was our first-round game. And then I kept watching Northern Kentucky, and I just made a mental note thinking, boy, they're really good. Then I said, I remembered Cincinnati playing them earlier in the year. I think Jamal just said that they beat them by 13. So that tells you all you need to know.

Every game is hard. Hard to make the tournament. It's hard to win a game in the tournament.

But we're honored. We're honored to make it. We're honored to be a 1 seed. But our kids have earned the right to be a 1 seed.

Happy for our program, but more importantly, I'm happy for our kids who did all the work.

**Q. Kelvin, can you take us through the 24 hours in terms of decision making and what your thought process was on Marcus and whether he would play or**

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**in terms of how much you wanted to maybe sit him and get rehab, treatment, that kind of stuff?**

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, playing today was -- I didn't put a high priority on that. We work all year to make the NCAA Tournament. I don't think I could have lived with myself had he played today and got hurt.

We came in here this morning at 10:00 or so, and Marcus was walking around. I didn't see a limp. I didn't say much to him.

I'm sure if I had told Marcus, Marcus, you want to try to play today, but when we came back over to the arena, I knew in the back of my mind that he wasn't going to play. That was before I even approached him.

I talked to John, asked John what he thought. It's the right decision.

Obviously in some ways, the game today was good for us in a lot of ways. It got guys minutes, and we got to evaluate some things. Obviously you play to win, but we're 31-3. We'll be all right.

**Q. Kelvin, with your three games against an athletic team like Memphis, how do those games help you prepare for potential other more athletic teams that you could face in this tournament?**

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, we played a lot of athletic teams. I'm not sure -- you may be right. Is Memphis the most athletic team we've played? UCF is pretty athletic, too. Non-conference, Kent State was really athletic, Alabama, fairly athletic. I'm being facetious. So we played a lot of athletic teams, and they got us ready. Playing Alabama and Kent State, for instance. But we're athletic, too.

The most athletic team doesn't always win. It's the team that plays the best. When we had that thing down to five today, there was no doubt in my mind that we needed to make a shot. We've always made that shot.

You know, you miss 10 free throws or nine free throws and miss 19 threes, but our work on the boards, 22 offensive rebounds. We missed 44 shots, but we got 50 percent of them back. But the problem was we only scored 17. You get 22 offensive rebounds, you should score more than 17 in second-chance points.

But hopefully Marcus, we'll get him rested up. I think anybody that plays on Sunday in the championship would prefer a Friday-Sunday bracket, just from a wear and tear. Jamal played almost 39 minutes. I'm sure he played 30

some yesterday and 30 some Friday. And tomorrow is Monday, we'll leave Tuesday, get to Birmingham sometime Tuesday.

Not a whole lot we can do Monday and Tuesday because we have to rest and recover, and then we'll spend a lot of time preparing for Northern Kentucky.

**Q. Jamal, when you walked into the room to watch the selection show, you said, new season starts. Can you sort of talk about that mindset, and J'Wan, your perspective on getting ready for the big dance?**

JAMAL SHEAD: Just trying to get everybody's heads into it. It was a tough loss today, and everybody felt it because a lot of people played that are usually in big games with us. Terrance had a pretty good day today, missed some open shots. But he was playing good, and Emanuel had an okay day today, but just trying to get their heads right because we've got a lot to look forward to. We've got a good seeding, and just trying to lift their spirits a little bit.

J'WAN ROBERTS: We're not going to let one game dictate our season. As much as we wanted to win today, we didn't. You're not just going to sit here and dwell on it like that's the last game of the season.

As you get to the tournament, everybody is 0-0. We'll just go step by step, need to work on some more stuff as we get into the tournament now, and just keep going.

The kids have confidence, and that's what we're going to need in the tournament.

**Q. Coach, you talk all the time about wisdom and lessons. Is there a big lesson that you learned today or that your kids learned today?**

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, you're a lot better when you're fully healthy. I learned that lesson.

The other team is full speed, it helps that you're full speed, too.

But I was proud of our guys. We fought. We had a couple of brain cramps, and what the hell was that, a few of those, but we recovered. We got in there at halftime, got a little organized.

There were some -- those guys aren't used to playing without Marcus. Last year it happened during Christmas break. We had five or six days to prepare. He got hurt on the 23rd. We didn't play until January 2nd. So we got to practice.

Today, he got hurt yesterday. The first half you could tell we were a little bit discombobulated, but I was making mental notes. I knew once we got into halftime, I could help him a little bit. First half, things were going, ping-ponging real quick. Memphis didn't want to lose to us three times. There was a lot of motivation. They've got a chance to win a championship, too.

So once we got to halftime, we got everybody in the right frame of mind and got them organized. I thought we fought, and I was proud of them for that.

**Q. Right before the selection show, you made sure you told your team for them to have their phones on and be able to capture that moment. For you, why was it so important for your players to be able to recognize and --**

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, because it's a great memory for them because it's a tremendous accomplishment.

You know, I was looking at Southeast Missouri State. I remember the first time one of my teams made the NCAA Tournament, I think it was 1993-94, I was at Washington State, and we were an 8 or 9 seed, and Boston College was the 8 or 9 seed, and the winner of that game played -- the 1 seed was North Carolina, and the 16 seed was Liberty.

North Carolina had Stackhouse and Wallace and McInnis and a bunch of those guys. Liberty led that game the entire last two or three minutes. I think North Carolina won it right at the end, and then we led Boston College right to the end of regulation. They tied it up, and then we lost in overtime, or we would have played North Carolina.

Then Boston College played North Carolina, and I think they beat them by 12. But that's the tournament. That's why when people start betting on the tournament, I don't know how you pick teams. Literally just like UMBC beating Virginia, there's not a team in there that can't beat the other team. Every team can win the game. That's the beauty of it.

There's a reason they call it March Madness.

**Q. Coach, when you look at this season, three out of the last five, 30 or more wins for Houston and getting a No. 1 seed regardless of whether or not you won the AAC tournament, do you feel like there's national respect that's been building over the years for Houston and just what you can say about the level of play in the conference.**

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yes, there has been respect. But I

quit playing that respect stuff. You'll never hear me talking about that. The only people that matter is the people that play the games. Other people it's just an opinion. I don't deal in people's opinions. I only deal with facts.

But when you get a 1 seed, I would say that's pretty reflective of respect.

We're in the American Athletic Conference. That's the league we play. People say, well, if they were in another conference -- but we're not. We're in this conference. This is the conference we're in. So we play conference games. We were 17-1. The only team that we played twice and didn't beat twice was Temple. We beat everybody else twice. I think that's an accomplishment in itself.

Regardless of what happens next week or the following week or the following week, I'm not going to lose sight of that. There's a lot of people that you lose a game or don't get to where they think you should be, then all of a sudden they get disappointed. Well, maybe we won't be. It just depends.

I'm proud of this team. It's hard to make the tournament. But a lot of that comes from how far we've come with this program, too.

To be where we were in 2014 and now being a 1 seed, it's pretty cool. It's a hell of an accomplishment.

Proud of my team. Proud of our program.

**Q. Jamal and J'Wan, are you finding yourselves trying to build Terrance's confidence up so he doesn't hesitate on his shot?**

JAMAL SHEAD: Just with him being himself, he's kind of a guy that you need to just talk to a lot because he's trying to learn so much. It's his first year, and he's only been with us six months now.

Just letting him be himself and letting him be confident in himself, sometimes confidence has to come from within. So with him, just talking to him and just keep encouraging him. He'll get it.

He passed up a lot of open shots today that he could have shot off rip, but that was his real first tournament game that he played a lot of minutes in, and he did really good for that.

I'm really proud of him, and I'm just going to keep encouraging him.

J'WAN ROBERTS: I don't think Terrance knows how good



of a shooter he is yet. Every time you shoot the ball, even though my job is to offensive rebound, I always think it's going to go in. He's 6'7", he's going to get a shot off regardless, so any space that he gets, I always tell him, shoot it. That's going to be your confidence right there. We want you to shoot the ball.

The more opportunities that he gets to shoot and get comfortable, I feel like that plays along into the game. Once he starts shooting it, he gets real comfortable, he gets to rebounding, gets to defending, does everything all at once.

I just remember one time in the game, I told him if you get this ball right here on this possession, shoot it, and he shot it and he made it, and I'm like, that's why you shoot the ball.

Just going on into the tournament, I'm going to continue to tell him the same thing. Any window that you get, just shoot it.

**Q. Now that the bracket is set, the elephant in the room, where this thing ends in April. Do you allow yourself --**

KELVIN SAMPSON: No. Northern Kentucky is a hard team to play against. Why would I even think that? It's just who I am. I have zero interest if people like it or not. We play Northern Kentucky. What's the chances of getting -- for anybody, what's the percentage chance that -- how many 1 seeds got to the Final Four last year? I don't know, maybe all of them, I have no idea.

**Q. One or two.**

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, so that's the way -- it's a tournament. You have to win to advance. We're going back to Houston tonight, that's for sure. We've got a four-hour drive. But I'm sure our grad assistants will have pulled up tape on Northern Kentucky. I probably won't even watch this tape.

But again, getting that thing down from 20 to 5 with a chance to cut it to two, really, really proud of our kids tonight. We'll get our attitudes right and be excited to play a really, really good talented Northern Kentucky team on Thursday.

You guys will find out the times of the games when we do, so I have no idea what time we play. Hopefully it won't be 11:00 in the morning. But if it is, then we'll go play. Simple as that. Getting excited to go to Birmingham to see if we can win and advance. That's all everybody wants to do. We're no different than anybody else.

