

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 16, 2024

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

UAB Blazers

Andy Kennedy

Eric Gaines

Efrem "Butta" Johnson

Postgame Press Conference

UAB - 93, South Florida - 83

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

ANDY KENNEDY: Just excited that we're not having to go home. This is the ultimate survive and advance for us. Really proud of my group, the way they have grown throughout the course of the season, the way that we've been able to respond to adversity, the way that we've been able to bounce back. That was not who we were a couple of months ago. It's definitely who we've evolved into becoming and that's just a direct tribute to these guys on my left as well as those teammates in that locker room.

Physical game against a team that won the league in a pretty dominating fashion in South Florida. Kudos to them for a terrific season. My hope is that they have an opportunity to continue into post-season play and I think they certainly deserve that. But they're a really good team and as I sit here and look, I would dare to say, I don't know it off the top of my head, but I would dare to say South Florida has not lost many college basketball games where they made 15 threes. They made 15 tonight, we would take the lead, they would respond, we would take the lead, they would respond, and then when they had all the momentum, really proud of my guys for gut checking, getting downhill, finishing some plays through contact to come away with a terrific win.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Your team hasn't exactly shot too well from three during the tournament, but you guys have found ways



to get inside and score. So how has that been a big factor in today's win and also yesterday's win?

ANDY KENNEDY: It's just who we are. As I look up, points in the paint are a huge factor for us. We're plus 22 points in the paint, and get to the foul line where we're plus six on the night. That's who we are. That's how we're built, it's how we're designed to play. We have to be timely in our shot-making and I think we were. E with a huge three, Butta with a huge three when we desperately needed it. I know a lot is made about South Florida's offense, and they're outstanding because of their ability to space you and shoot the ball from all five positions. I think what carried them to a league championship was their defense. They're very physical, especially on the perimeter. They got big, strong guards and at times I thought we were giving in to the initial pressure. Once we started puncturing the paint, getting through it, I think we had some opportunities in the back and, again, we were able to finish.

Q. What's it going to take to finish the job and win this championship tomorrow?

ANDY KENNEDY: You know what? I just think we played pretty good basketball. Last night, as I anticipated, we were a little shaky out of the gate because it's been five days since we played, so your rhythm is off and we hadn't been in the building, and a lot of factors, but I thought we closed very, very strong today. We started great, we had great energy, and I thought that was like a heavyweight fight. It was kind of going to the scorecard, going to the scorecard, and in about the 12th round, we finally got the knockout.

But I think the thing was back and forth, back and forth, and that's just two good basketball teams battling. That's what we got to do tomorrow. We got together with this group in June and our mantra was best version of self. That's really all I really ask about these guys, just be the best version of you. Eric, Butta, Yax, whoever it may be, everybody was brought here as a piece to this puzzle and we just got to go out and be the best version of self.

I thought we won the physical fight tonight. I thought

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mentally we were tough enough to respond when needed. That's the formula that we'll need tomorrow.

Q. In that first half, your 1-3-1 kept getting broken down and Porter was getting that open three every time. So at halftime what adjustment did you make so that South Florida wasn't getting open threes from your press there?

ANDY KENNEDY: I'm not one to be argumentative, but actually, in the first half, we stat this, they were 3-18 versus our 1-3-1. Second half they started figuring it out. They had some open shots and we're going 1-3-1, especially when they had -- I'm terrible with names. I don't want to mispronounce anybody's name -- especially when they had the little guard, Reid, Jayden Reid, when he's out there we were really trying because it's more effective with size versus smaller guards.

I thought early it kept 'em out of rhythm. They are such a rhythm team and I think their spacing is so good and their skill level is so good. We continue to try to mix and match just to keep 'em out of rhythm. They still made some plays, but I thought mission accomplished for us.

Q. For both the players, that second half was just so many momentum swings, technicals, fouls, foul trouble, and guys fouling out. What was the key or how did you stay emotionally there during that instead of getting caught up with all the craziness that was going on?

ERIC GAINES: Just keeping your composure. Coach tells us all the time, just stay true to yourself, and when the guys get kind of rattled, as a leader on the team, I try to keep the guys together so we can just get the win the easy way, not going through technical fouls and all the other stuff, just play the best game, be the best version of self.

EFREM "BUTTA" JOHNSON: Yeah, I think down the stretch just got to be poised. When pressures on, you got to be poised. Coach talks about handling pressure, doing all right things, catch swiping, stepping to the ball. I felt like we did those things tonight and we just came out with a good win and we just handled the pressure. Even when they started to come back, game got close, we stayed together, we stayed one on the court, and we executed well offensively and defensively to pull out a tough win.

Q. Eric, you talk about being poised there in the last few minutes. Just talk about those last two shots you got off the layup and the three-pointer to kind of really push you guys ahead and kind of really seal this game up.

ERIC GAINES: Yeah, just like you said, staying composed. There was pressure in the whole game and it was forcing me to my left, and I seen I had it open, I tried to put him on my back and that's what I did and I made the layup.

The three, it just came down to the last-second shot. I seen the shot clock, I put it up, and it went in. I mean, thank God, but, hey, we got the win.

ANDY KENNEDY: Amen.

Q. Second straight game that you had 1-3 in the first half and then had some really key threes in the second half. I think it's happened a few other times this year too. What goes into that, just kind of keeping the guys in there that -- just still shooting the ball-type thing. Is that something that you consciously talk about?

ANDY KENNEDY: Yeah, ultimately you got to take what the defense gives you. You got to game plan and then you're going to have to be able to make adjustments based on what South Florida was doing. I think they were the second highest defensive efficiency rated team in the American Conference. As I said, they've got rim protection in Pryor and they've got big physical guards on the perimeter. I thought in the first half, I thought our offense was more downhill, trying to establish paint. In the second half, when the threes became available, we had different guys, two of 'em here to my left, step up huge for us and knock down big plays when they were needed.

Q. A lot of records kind of broken in this game. Not only you get your 100 wins at UAB, but Yax breaks the double double record and he sets the AAC single-season rebound record. Is this something you kind of -- I mean, is this anything you really thought could happen with his transition into DI coming out of JoCo?

ANDY KENNEDY: Let's get back to the hundred wins. Did you say a hundred wins? I think the volume was a little down.

Q. Yes, you got your 100th win at UAB.

ANDY KENNEDY: In four years, is that right? A hundred wins in four years? Wow.

No, listen, when we brought Yax here, did I know he was going to shatter every record as it relates to rebounding the ball? No, but we did feel like he had an opportunity to come in and be a very, very valuable contributor. That's what he's done. Everybody on our team has contributed to us being sitting here still alive with 22 wins, and everybody

continues to make plays when plays are needed to be made. We're playing the ultimate game of rhythm. You try to establish yours and you try to disrupt theirs and our guys have done a tremendous job down the stretch of doing just that.

Q. I know that obviously the job's not done here. You won't settle for this. But to go to the championship game -- the conference championship game three consecutive years with really three different teams, just three kind of different makeups of teams, what does that say about your program?

ANDY KENNEDY: I don't know if you heard, somebody said we won a hundred games over the last four years and now we're back to three straight titles. When I came here, obviously, I played at UAB. I played for Gene Bartow, our founding father, and this was what my expectation was. I wanted to get this program where it was back nationally relevant and we're working towards that daily. Tomorrow will be a huge opportunity to take another step.

Q. With Yax getting his second foul so early and you just kind of had him moving in and out in the first half, just sort of trying to keep him away from that third, but how frustrating is that when he gets his second foul that early?

ANDY KENNEDY: Well, I mean, he's a really good player. I want my guys out there. He got in foul trouble, he picked up three pretty quickly in the second half, but I just kind of trusted him. I'm usually a two-foul-and-you're-out-in-the-first-half guy, but not when it's win or go home. We had J.D. in foul trouble, he picks up his fourth and his fifth with the fourth on the foul, fifth with the technical, bam, bam he's out of the game. Chris gets his fifth on a technical. Yax is playing a majority of the game with four, E's playing -- I mean, we had fouls across the board, as did they. Chris Youngblood fouls out as well as you look up, I mean it wasn't the cleanest game because I just think it was two teams scraping and fighting for their lives. 42 fouls called, and physical game, and our guys are veteran enough, we've been doing this long enough they understand the magnitude of the moment and they responded.

Q. For both players, you are 1-6 from three-point range in the first half. But come out in the second half, both of ya'll hit big 3-pointers there to open up that second half. What were you able to see from their defense and to kind of get y'all going there in the second half?

ERIC GAINES: Just being ready for the moment. Coach told us at halftime, got to stay composed, got to say

together and win the physical battle, and that's what he did. He also told us to keep our hands and feet ready. That's what we preach and that's what we did, stepped up made big shots, but we won the game.

EFREM "BUTTA" JOHNSON: Yeah, I think first half we came out a little jittery, rushing certain shots, but I felt like coming back out in the second half we found out how they were playing defensively and saw the schemes that they were doing and we was able to just calm down and just play our game and knock down shots. That's what we needed to do and we came out with a good win.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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