

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Sunday, March 17, 2024

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

UAB Blazers

Andy Kennedy

Yaxel Lendeborg

Alejandro Vasquez

Postgame Press Conference



UAB, 85 - Temple, 69

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: I know it sound cliché when coaches get up here after winning a championship and talk about just how proud they are of their team, but, man, anybody that knows me, I'm a non-BS guy. I am really proud of this group. I've been doing this as a head coach for 17 years, been in the game over 30, and I don't know if I've ever had a team that grew as much as this team throughout the course of the season. I think they really started to trust and believe in one another and once we found our formula and we developed the discipline to stay to that formula, I think we showed what we were capable of doing.

So incredibly proud for these guys, of these guys. I think they were a testament to the true value in perseverance, and I'm glad that we're continuing to play. When I came back to UAB, we talked about it yesterday, my goal was to get this program back to the Bartow standard and some people that aren't really as familiar as Gene Bartow as others would say, What do you mean by that?

These moments. Having an opportunity to compete for championships, having an opportunity to climb that ladder and cut down nets, having an opportunity to play meaningful basketball in the month of March, and then putting these kids in a position where they can fulfill a childhood dream of being a part of March Madness.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. We'll take some questions.

Q. For both the players, just the feeling of the buzzer sounding, getting the net, holding the trophy, can you try to put it into words?

ALEJANDRO VASQUEZ: It's you unspeakable. It's a good feeling, good moment. We work hard for this, so it paid off.

YAXEL LENDEBORG: I would say it's probably one the most amazing days of my life, pretty much. Sometimes you think that you won't be here and you don't really deserve to be here, but in when you're in that moment, you forget about all those tough times and everything you went through and just embrace everything that's happened to you.

Q. Yaxel, you looked a little emotional after the game. Can you explain to me what was going on with you there?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: Yeah, man, I'll say it in every interview from here on out. I'm just a kid from JuCo, man. I never thought that I would be here Division I, the biggest stage, just making it happen, especially winning the MVP. This is really something I'm really proud of and I hope my family is really happy for me and I'm just grateful to be their son and grateful to play for Coach AK.

Q. Coach, your defense was really the stopper for Temple tonight, just forcing 14 turnovers. Speak on your defense and how well you guys played in that tonight.

ANDY KENNEDY: Yeah, I thought the 1-3-1 was effective for us. Again, shout out to Adam and his staff. What an incredible run. To try to go 5-5, you have to play near perfect and they came really close to doing so. So nothing but respect for Adam and his staff, those players, Hysier Miller. We knew coming into the game he played 148 of their 160 minutes. I chart those things. And he plays 30 some odd -- or 40, he played all 40 tonight. That kid is incredible. He made every big play.

So nothing but respect for Temple and their program and



their lineage. But we knew coming out, again, we got to establish the tempo early. Let's establish that point. I thought we did that early offensively. AJ was on an incredible tear to start the game, making shots, making shots, because I thought Temple had a lot of pop and they were defending at a high level. The 1-3-1, once we were able to score the 1-3-1 was problematic for 'em. Had 'em playing late in the clock. Once we starting cleaning up our defensive glass, we were able to get the separation. We lead the half by 16. Our goal was to win the second half. I love these guys win or tie. We tied the second half. So you get to cut down the nets. Tremendous effort from our team.

Q. You seem to really play well in the metroplex from your old Conference USA days and coming here. How does it feel to come back to the Dallas/Fort Worth area and get a big game?

ANDY KENNEDY: I love it. I think this arena is fantastic. I think the American Conference, we're very, very excited to be a part of, and what a way to crash the party, right. Get right to the middle of the dance floor, and that's what these guys did.

Q. Obviously, AJ, you get ejected in the first game. You come back, you're on social media, you give a public apology, and then the next two games you come out and just perform the way you do. Talk about having that confidence, and I guess just accepting responsibility and then coming out and just playing great. And to you Andy, what does that say for a guy like that?

ALEJANDRO VASQUEZ: I would just say just trusting myself. I think my teammates just were helping me, pushing me, keeping me poised. I just felt like we worked hard and we pulled it out.

ANDY KENNEDY: AJ -- I want to say this for the record -- that was non-prompted. Nobody on the staff went to AJ and said, Hey, man you need to do that. That was him. It speaks to his character as a kid to bounce back. He was very, very disappointed. It was a super weak punch. Did you see the punch? I mean, you may have to give back your New York driver's license after that punch, but it was kind of a weak punch. He deserved to be ejected, to the letter of the law. Kid responded in a big, big way. Early in championship games, again, these guys haven't been there before, a lot of expectations, a lot of nerves, you don't want to make mistake. I thought Yax was very, very tentative to start the game. AJ carried us, gave us the separation we needed to play with confidence.

Q. As a coach, obviously you don't have a lot of time

for idle thoughts before this game, but when you did, you're facing a team that seems like a team of destiny. North Carolina State last night won 5-5. Did any of that creep into your mind? How apprehensive were you, I guess, going into this about that whole situation?

ANDY KENNEDY: I was really at peace. I know sometimes I looked disgruntled. I'm just always trying to think about the next play. I know I've got this look on my face like I'm mad at the world, but it's really not that. I was really at peace. I hold these guys to a standard of playing the game a certain way. We're trying to develop championship-level habits. We won a championship. I'm trying to develop championship-level habits, especially out of guys that -- again, this is their first year with us and we're just trying to develop a mantra that this is the expectation.

So I was at peace with it. I felt like we were going to come out and as long as we played to our potential, I felt like we would be sitting at this stage.

Q. To go a little bit deeper into the American Athletic Conference, the level of competition that you saw and just what it means to you, like you said, to crash the party being atop everybody in your first season.

ANDY KENNEDY: Well, again, we're excited to be here. I've got nothing but respect, I've known Mike Aresco for a long time when he was back at CBS and I was in the SEC. We met many, many moons ago. What a tremendous job he's done in putting this conference in a position of relevancy. We're certainly going to miss him, but we have faith that the next leader will continue to move this thing forward. For us, I think it's a shame a bit, but I think we're all smart enough, I don't want to get on my soap box again, we've just got a few minutes before we see where we're going -- hopefully Friday, I don't care when, but we need Friday, we don't want to play Thursday. But I think everything is tilted with this NET towards Power Fives, and I got nothing against Power Fives's, I was there for 12 years, but everything is tilted so much towards these Power Fives. I saw something ridiculous like FAU may be the last four in. That's a joke. They will be in the tournament safely, we got two bids out of this league, but I think South Florida, despite some early bumps in the road. Obviously Memphis, incredible team, incredible program, they had their swoon as well. But I'm just happy that we got an opportunity to continue to play. Life-long dream for these kids. We're going to enjoy this moment, we're going to see where we're going and who we're playing and we're going to go try to repeat this.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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