

GEICO Players Era Men's Championship

Monday, November 24, 2025

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

MGM Grand Garden Arena

Houston Cougars

Coach Kelvin Sampson

Milos Uzan

Emanuel Sharp

Postgame Press Conference



winner in him, too.

I thought they had a good game plan coming in. They did a good job of executing it. Really impressed with Syracuse. Really impressed with Coach Autry and his staff. I thought they did a great job.

Q. Kelvin, speaking of weathering things, that stretch down at the end of regulation I think the last five minutes, no field goals, was that a product of just shots weren't going or did you feel like --

KELVIN SAMPSON: Some of both probably. If you go look at it and look at the shots we were getting, I was okay with those. We tried to keep the ball in Emanuel and Milos' hands as much as we could because of the free-throw shooting. Outside of those two guys, we were 2 for 9.

We're going to have to be real smart to keep the ball in those guys' hands. And they had good looks, too. Believe it or not we executed some really good stuff tonight, especially out of time-outs and dead balls, our execution was good. But you can execute all you want. The ball doesn't go in, it's not a good play.

But both teams played hard. I don't think both teams are as good now as they're going to be a month from now. It's November the 24th, and it's our sixth game. It was a good experience for our freshmen to be out there in that kind of environment. Hopefully it will pay off for us down the road.

Q. Milos, to have 26 back home in Las Vegas, how does that make you feel?

MILOS UZAN: I mean, it feels good. Feels even better with a win. Just happy we got that win.

Q. Kelvin, this tournament you know you're playing Monday, you know you're playing Tuesday. How difficult is it to focus on the Monday team when you have a big-time matchup like Tennessee coming tomorrow?

KELVIN SAMPSON: It's not hard. I've got freshmen. You're coaching freshmen, bruh. You don't answer that question. We're not good enough to look ahead. You saw the way we played tonight. I see it every day. Some days we're better than others.

Houston 78, Syracuse 74 (OT)

Q. Kelvin, in that kind of environment, how important is it to have experienced guards like Milos, Emanuel, and what kind of difference does that make?

KELVIN SAMPSON: They've been in those moments. They've been in those moments before. But they had three seniors with them, not only young guys.

But one thing about all the teams here, whether you play good or you don't play good, those experiences are important. It's important to have good experiences, but it's also important to have experiences where maybe you don't play so well because this is not the last time that that's going to happen.

But how do you win on nights maybe when you don't play very good? How do you figure it out?

I think we had -- what was our biggest lead, nine or 11? Yeah, we had 11 and they run a simple big-big screen. You treat it like it was a great chess move. We've still got to get it done. They missed a free throw, we go in there and jump early, takes another bounce, they put it in. So those kind of mistakes. But those stop right there because I hate it when other coaches do that.

Let's give credit to Coach Adrian Autry and let's give credit to Syracuse. Their kids played hard. They played good enough to win.

We played good enough to win, too, and I'm glad we did. But I was impressed with Syracuse tonight. Their guards played good. No. 42, Kyle, he's tough. He's got a lot of



This is not last year's team. I'm not saying they can't be eventually, but they're certainly not now. Look at the mistakes we make.

It's hard to beat any really good team. It's hard to beat both. When you're making just silly mistakes. It's, what are we doing here.

No, I don't think -- I try not to overreact to things in November. These guys that cover us on a -- not daily but yearly basis know, we came out of here last year 4-3. Could have lost all three. We lost in overtime to Alabama, we lost in overtime to San Diego State and we won a close one against Notre Dame. We could have lost tonight. But we won this one in overtime whereas last year we lost it in overtime.

So we'll see tomorrow. I think coming out today was a good experience for us. You're not going to play great every day. (Audio indiscernible). We also fouled 33 times. It's hard to have flow when the other team is at the free-throw line. We've been a pretty good defensive team over the years but not today. We had more blow-bys and missed rollers today than we had in any three games in conference play last year.

But we're also dealing with freshmen, and they're trying to figure out whether they're pitching or catching.

But we'll get better. We're going to stay with them. I like this group, like this team. We've got good kids.

Q. Kelvin, I'm wondering when you found out Donnie Freeman was not going to play today if that changed your strategy or the way you game planned against Syracuse at all?

KELVIN SAMPSON: No, I've never really seen him play before, but we prepared for him on tape -- I mean, in person. I saw him on tape a lot. You can tell that he is a good scorer.

But we had to scrap our defensive game plan. We had a game plan for him. But sometimes guys bond together and play better when they don't have a guy. That happened to us last year with Texas Tech and JT Toppin.

They lost him in a situation where -- they should have never kicked him out of the game. That wasn't warranted. But they did, and I think that made Texas Tech better, and they beat us.

Same thing with those guys tonight. I'm sure Coach Autry and his staff and his Syracuse kids are disappointed that

they lost. They should be. But they should not be disappointed with their effort and how tough they played. They played good.

Q. Emanuel, Syracuse put the pressure on for a lot of that game defensively, but you do this a lot, especially right out of a break, you get hot, and that happened right out of overtime, you had those five straight points and that three. What does that say about you in those moments when the pressure is on but still having the ability to hit those tough shots?

EMANUEL SHARP: We've played in a lot of games since I've been here, and we've played in a lot of close games.

We've been in a lot of those moments. But it wasn't just me; Kalifa played great in those moments. He had five O-boards that we really needed in clutch times in the second half.

We prepare for these moments, especially in practice. We go really hard in practice. That defensive pressure that they gave us today, we get the same thing out of Cordell, Ramon, Ced, our whole white team in practice. We go against that every day and I think they prepare us for a lot of these games sometimes better than the teams that we play in the game.

I think that really helps us. But, yeah, coaches give me and 'Los confidence and we won today.

Q. Emanuel, what were you dealing with out there first half? You left the game briefly.

EMANUEL SHARP: Just tweaked my ankle a lit bit but it was fine. Just went and got it taped.

Q. Kelvin, the last play of regulation where they tried to feed it inside and JoJo comes up with the block, we've seen him make those plays, but talk about the impact that he made on that particular play.

KELVIN SAMPSON: This was not certainly one of Joe's better games. We know how good he is. But he still had five blocks. He's an elite shot blocker. The Cleveland kid, he didn't start practicing until about the middle of October, something like that, kind of toward then. So we really haven't seen him a whole lot. He was out from June until around October 20th maybe. So he's been taking baby steps.

He played pretty good against Auburn last week and did some good things today. But we need JoJo to play a little bit more like a veteran than he played tonight.

He's capable of playing a lot better. But the freshmen are going to be up and down. They're going to look -- like Flemings was really good against Auburn. Tonight he looked like he was in the witness protection program half the time.

I always get a chuckle as an old guy how people overreact to freshmen. Don't worry; he'll come back down to earth. They always do.

Q. Milos, how did the four guards, having them out there together, help open things up for you guys in overtime? Seemed like you were running some big actions there?

MILOS UZAN: I think it helped space the floor out a little bit you're saying with me, King, 'Siah. Yeah, it definitely helps space the floor out. You got four shooters out there.

But yeah, I think down the stretch we did a good job defensively, as well. And then shoot, finishing the play with a rebound. I think we played well.

Q. Emanuel, you had 12 free throw attempts tonight. I believe that's a career high for you. How much of a confidence booster is it for you when your shots aren't falling but you're still getting to the line?

EMANUEL SHARP: I mean, it's good. That's one of the areas of my game that I've got to keep improving at is attacking the basket and getting -- not just getting fouled but finishing.

But free throws, we work on that every day in practice. We were all prepared to shoot it well at the free-throw line.

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