

GEICO Players Era Men's Championship

Tuesday, November 25, 2025

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

MGM Grand Garden Arena

Houston Cougars

Coach Kelvin Sampson

Emanuel Sharp

Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee 76, Houston 73

Q. Kelvin, you had that seven-and-a-half-minute stretch in the second half where you didn't score. What did you see bog down there --

KELVIN SAMPSON: Nothing. The ball didn't go in, but we got good looks. The ball has got to go in.

The biggest difference in that stretch was everybody kind of makes too much out of a team that goes on like a drought or something. They're not trying to. The thing that keeps you out of that is the free-throw line. That's the difference. Look how many free throws they shot. They shot 29 free throws. We shot 11. We're driving.

Tennessee is physical. They're really good defensively. They're physical. One team shot 29, the other team shot 11. Go to the free throw, make seven or eight, there is no drought. You've got to go to the free-throw line. That's what I told our guys, drive it, drive it, and they did.

Q. Emanuel, that second foul in the first half, I think they went to a review and when it came back from the break it went to you. Obviously it was a big moment. How much did that throw you off in terms of not being able to be in there and help?

EMANUEL SHARP: It wasn't the review. I fouled him. I made a dumb mistake, and I can't be doing that. I've got to be on the floor with those guys and can't be sitting 15 minutes in the first half because of dumb fouls. That's on me.

Q. Kelvin, obviously didn't get the win, but Kingston had a pretty dominant display. What's a game like this mean for a young guy like that?



KELVIN SAMPSON: I have no idea what his ceiling is. He puts the ball on the floor and goes to the basket. He's a good free-throw shooter. He only shot two free throws tonight; it's mindboggling.

I thought we did a good job guarding -- Gillespie is an older, experienced, played at the highest level his entire career. Is he a senior? He's really good. He scored 22 points, but he took 16 shots, but he made nine free throws. The difference in the game is the free throws.

He went 9 for 9; Kingston went 2 for 2. I'm not saying we weren't fouling, but they were, too. Both teams were playing aggressive, tough, defense. Boom, boom, boom, boom. Shouldn't have been 29 to 11.

I thought we did a good job on Ament, but there were some plays there. I can't remember who it was that missed a lay-up, and Ament -- was that his only basket when he fouled out? It was heavy play by him. You have to give him credit for that.

We didn't make the heady play. We were ahead of him, we just got out-hustled. We own that. You can't just sit here and start throwing stuff out that is not true. Whatever I'm saying here today, I think it's true. He out-hustled on that play.

There was another one, too, where they made a really good play. But I wouldn't expect anything less out of Rick's team.

You had two really good teams out there tonight. Somebody is going to lose it, somebody is going to win it. We have a good team. It's not like we got beat by 20. We had the ball down two there down the stretch, and from a coach's perspective, I know you guys are media so I don't look at the game like you do and you don't look at the game like I do, but the thing I kept going back to was we've got to get to the free-throw line.

I was saying that in the huddles, drive it, and we did, we kept driving it. We just got to figure that out. If it's something I've got to do better than I'll do it. I'll try as hard as I can.

But in a game like that, the free-throw line was the



difference tonight.

Where Rick and his staff have done a good job, too, is their front-line bench. Carey and Estrella are starters, so give them credit for building that kind of roster. Last year we had three starters up front, Francis Roberts and JoJo. This year we have JoJo. The guy beside him is probably going to be a good player one day, but he doesn't have the physical stature that those guys have.

You can tell that Carey has a high basketball IQ. He's a play maker. He's huge, thick, but he's also smart. How do you pronounce his name? Okpara? Okpara, Estrella, and Carey. Those three guys are men.

But I think as the time goes by, Cenac needs a lot of games under his belt to figure out why, why this occurred at this time and how I can do a better job of making an adjustment on the floor. That's the problem with freshmen. It's not that they're not trying. Chris tries. When we were down five on the boards at halftime and we came back and out-rebounded them. So that was a positive. Chris had 11 rebounds. That's something he can hang his hat on. All good players have to have something they can hang their hat on.

Proud of our guys for continuing to play. We kept playing. It was a good game. What was the day today? 25th, two good teams, they're going to get better, and I think we will too.

Q. There's not a lot of guys in this business with more wins than you, but you faced one of them tonight in Rick and you've got Calipari next month and Self in conference play. From a coach's perspective, is it just the next game on your schedule, or do you liken it to something like a championship heavyweight fight or a chess match against a grand master or something else?

KELVIN SAMPSON: The thing that all three of those guys have in common, they're all good friends of mine. I've known them -- Rick Barnes and I played college basketball against each other 50 years ago. I used to call him Little Ricky from Hickory. He was from Hickory, North Carolina. No, those guys are all high-character guys. They are great for the game. Rick Barnes and John and Bill, all three of those guys are great husbands, great fathers, great role models for a lot of younger coaches.

It's been a thrill for me in my career to have guys that I can look across from that's from my generation. Not a lot of baby boomers left.

Q. Going back to the line, they had a moment late

where I believe it could have been a one-possession game, but they made the first free throw and then carry gets the tip there --

KELVIN SAMPSON: Two nights in a row that's happened. I mean, those are winning plays, man. Winning plays, you've got to make the winning plays. The kid for Syracuse last night did it. Cenac -- JoJo was sitting there, we went over it last night. Come on, JoJo, block your man out.

You look up, it's a one-possession game, and you know what, I'll fix that with my team. At the same time, give Rick's team credit for taking advantage.

Q. For both players, you hear Kelvin talking about the importance of the line. How would you assess the level of physicality you played with tonight and how you responded to Tennessee's?

EMANUEL SHARP: I feel like they were the tougher team. Like he said, they made the tougher plays. They made more winning plays. That's just something we've got to improve on. It's a tough loss, but we can also learn from it and see that we've got to be tougher. That's pretty much it.

KELVIN SAMPSON: The kid that should be mentioned, though, not a lot of people will remember his impact, but it was Bishop Boswell. He impacted that game. No idea what his future holds in this game, but that kid is a winner. He was the toughest guy on the floor tonight.

Our kids did a lot of good things. We're up nine or 11 -- what was our biggest lead, 11? Yeah, right about then is where the foul line started to come in. They scored a bunch of free throws down the stretch the first half.

It has nothing to do with Boswell. A lot of respect for that young man. He's tough and he's a winner. Every coach in America would love to have Boswell.

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