

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship - Final Four: Houston vs Duke

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Alamodome

Houston Cougars

Coach Kelvin Sampson

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: At this time we'd like to welcome to the Final Four the head coach of Houston, Kelvin Sampson.

Coach, we'll ask you to begin with an opening statement, then take some questions.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Really proud of this team. Every team has a journey. It has to start not knowing what they're going to be. Just kind of figure out how to stay in the moment early. June, July, September. We start the season so early now. Of course, I'm so old, I remember when seasons started after Thanksgiving. Now you may have five guys transfer by Thanksgiving.

The team this year is very much a player-led team. We have great player leadership. We have players that really care about each other and the program. I think that's reflected on how they have handled adversity when they went on the road.

We weren't a great team early in the year, but I've seen that many times. Over the course of the year, your team gets better and better and better. Guys like L.J. Cryer and J'Wan Roberts, Emanuel Sharp, JoJo Tugler, Ja'Vier Francis, Mylik Wilson, Terrance Arceneaux, we had all those guys back. That really helped. A guy like Milos Uzan, he made great progress as the year went on. I would give a lot of credit for that to our returning players.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we'll take our first question.

Q. There were six players starting for the Final Four teams who are 23 and older. Obviously that reflects college basketball in general getting older. How hard would it be to coach a team like Duke? Obviously they have great, talented players, but a much younger team in this era to get this far?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, of course I had an up-close look at Sion James. They didn't start five freshmen, they started three. The brilliance of Jon is how he insulated those guys with veteran guys. They don't get talked about enough.

Sion James, when he was at Tulane, smart, tough, winner. For them to identify him, evaluate him and say that's what we need with these three.

Then Proctor, this will be my third straight year seeing this kid. Duke came to Houston when Jon first got the job. He came to Houston and scrimmaged us in October. Proctor and Filipowski, I can't remember the other big kid, with the Dallas Mavericks now, but I remember watching that team.

Proctor is a pro. I don't know if Sion is or not. He is a professional role player. Exactly what they needed.

I think you can get away with playing some freshmen as long as you got veterans around 'em. But those guys stopped being freshmen somewhere around Thanksgiving. By Christmas, hell, they might have been sophomores. Now they're just pros.

But they have a good team. Jon and his staff have done an excellent job developing this team. I think they lost to Kansas, is that right, early. Lost to Kentucky early. That was probably part of the plan. You may lose those games. People lose their mind. People didn't lose their mind ain't coaching the team. He is.

I think he had a plan. Let's throw 'em out there, if we have some success, fine, if we have some failure, that's fine, too. We want to be the best version of ourselves when we get to February, March, and now we're in April, so...

I have a ton of respect for him.

I'll tell you how good Jon Scheyer has been. Nobody talks about him replacing Coach K anymore. He's Jon Scheyer. He's got his team in the Final Four. I think that speaks volumes for him.

Good for him.

Q. You just talked about the transfer portal and all the changes that have gone on. How much has that affected your enjoyment of the job and the challenge of building a championship team, considering how drastically different it is from 10 years ago?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I don't think necessarily that applies to my program, though. Last year we brought one kid in the portal. Our program is very much a homegrown program. J'Wan Roberts is in his sixth year with me, this basketball program. Emanuel Sharp came in as a freshman. Dan was talking about the 23-year-olds. When J'Wan Roberts came to us, he was 17. Jamal Shead was 17. Ja'Vier Francis was 17. JoJo Tugler was 17. All our guys come in as freshmen and they stay.

I've talked to some of the coaches that have retired this year 'cause I wanted their perspective on things. But we just do the best we can running our program the best way that we know how to run it.

I love coaching basketball. I love teaching. I love teaching. I don't know what I would have been good at had I not been a coach 'cause that's the only thing I've ever been. But I think I would have enjoyed being a teacher, too, because I enjoy teaching stuff and seeing kids learn and apply it, have success with it.

I choose to focus on that stuff more so than the portal. I believe in the portal. You better (smiling). But in the last three years, I think we've had three portal kids, L.J. Cryer, Damian Dunn and Milos. Those have been our three portal guys. Damian left and went to Pittsburgh, where he did good this year for Jeff. But L.J. and Milos have been great.

Q. In that discussion about the players that have stayed with you for so long, what is it about how you are able to retain guys in this atmosphere? How much of it is the culture that you built through the program?

KELVIN SAMPSON: That is all it is, you know? I think our secret sauce has been our staff. When the tournament is over, whenever it's over for us, Quannas will be taking the head coaching position at the University of Louisiana. Used to be Louisiana Lafayette. We all got sophisticated and changed our titles. So they're the University of Louisiana.

But to the old guys is Louisiana Lafayette. C'mon, man. Don't forget where you come from now (smiling). He got the head coaching position there. He's going to kill it. He's going to be awesome.

This is Kellen's 11th year. Hollis Price's 11th year. Quannas' 9th year, I think. K.C. Beard's 11th year. Lauren's 10th year. Our players look at our staff as family. All of my auxiliary staff that we have in our program were former managers. I don't take résumés and I don't take phone calls. I hire everything from within. Everybody thinks they need to go hire the best recruiter or the best this. We develop our staff like we develop our players. That's culture. We don't have a lot of signs in our building. I don't know what those signs mean anyway.

There's one sign that you'll see a lot in our building. It just says 'culture'. How you do anything is how you do everything, right? Being on time, treating people with respect, having the right attitude every day, giving great effort every day in whatever it is you're asked to do. Our kids are pretty good at that.

Q. There's obviously been a lot of talk about you guys. We've seen an uptick in three-point shooting this year. What do you attest that to? How has that changed your ceiling this year?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I think the difference has been Milos. Emanuel was a sophomore last year. Emanuel had a horrific, traumatic leg injury in April, I think it was April, of his junior year in high school. His dad was his high school coach at Bishop Catholic in Tampa. Because his dad got to let him graduate a year early, so he could come and do all his rehab with our doctors and trainers.

But he was a really, really good player. And we knew that once he got going here, he was going to be good. But the key, all our guys have stayed. They've allowed us to develop them.

L.J. Cryer, he was outstanding shooter at Baylor with Scott. The Baylor staff did an awesome job with L.J. I think he had 30 against Creighton in the tournament before he got with us. It's not like we got these kids and turned them into something they weren't good at. That's why we recruited L.J., was his three-point shooting. It's why I recruited Emanuel.

Last year in between those two was Jamal Shead. Jamal was not a three-point shooter. I said, How can we make our team better? I never worried about losing players. The narrative with most guys when the season's over or before the next season starts is how will you replace this guy. How are you going to replace Jarace Walker, Quentin Grimes, Marcus Sasser, Jamal Shead? I've never worried about that. I mean, I'm going to miss 'em.

The challenge of the coach is, Okay, we're losing Jamal.



How can we get better? I thought that's where we had a chance to get better, be a better three-point shooting team. We weren't going to be a better defensive team. Jamal is the best guard defender I've ever had. Hard to get better. But the team can get better.

Name on the front of our jersey didn't say Jamal Shead, it said Houston. How do we make Houston better?

Milos was a kid that shot really good his freshman year at Oklahoma in the Big 12. Not so much his sophomore year. So we tried to research why. Why did his shooting go down? Is that something we can develop?

So we figured that out. The answer was yes. His three-point shooting has really helped this team.

Terrance Arceneaux off the bench. He and JoJo didn't get to play in the tournament last year because they were both injured. Everybody talked about Jamal Shead's injury, but the injury that hurt us more than any other one was JoJo Tugler not playing. Mylik Wilson has gotten better as a three-point shooter, Terrance, and then the three starters. We collectively have more guys that can make a three. We've gone from being a three-point shooting team to a three-point making team. There's a difference.

Q. How much does 1980 to '85 at Montana Tech, early wake-ups, taking snow off the car, when you went those types of days, mentored by Jud and others, how much does that build you for your first days when you got on this job? What made you believe the things that Houston says they're going to do to elevate our program as I'm elevating it are actually going to occur?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, Tom Izzo and I text each other a lot. We actually used to be roommates at camp, Michigan State's basketball camp. We had about bunk beds. I can't even remember who was on top, the top bunk or the bottom bunk.

You know, when you're a grad assistant for Jud Heathcote, you're really a manager. If you think you're more than that, he'll find a way to remind you if you screw up. I was always really good at screwing up.

But Tom and I would get up so early and go out behind old Jenison Field House -- the old guys know what I'm talking about. The new guys only remember Breslin. There used to be Jenison Field House. We would line a court off in the parking lot so we could play. We had these portable baskets we'd stick up.

Jud is the only reason why I got the job at Montana Tech. He's the only reason why I became the head coach at 31

years old at Washington State University.

Tom and I talk about Jud a lot. Tom said yesterday, he said, If you and I had been playing each other in the Final Four, Jud would have probably been up there wanting to know why we didn't play any zone or something. He's right. Jud would have found something, that's for sure.

But those days form me, as all four coaches here. There's far better coaches out there than I am that didn't make the Final Four this year.

That's why the feeling of coming here is not one of accomplishment for me, maybe because it's my age, but it's more gratitude, just grateful that you still have an opportunity to do this.

Houston, the only reason I took the Houston job was to get my family back together. We'd been apart. I had just gotten fired. Kellen got fired. Lauren didn't like her job.

For me, it was where can I go where they'll let me hire my children? If they had had an nepotism law where I couldn't do it, I wouldn't have taken that job.

Q. There's kind of a divide in this Final Four. You got you and Bruce Pearl, then you got two guys that are young enough to be your sons.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Thank you (smiling). Appreciate that. I hadn't quite looked at it like that, but I will now.

Q. You and he have negotiated difficult waters and been through adversity. How much does that mean? Could you also just address the trend toward younger head coaches being hired these days.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, I coached against my son Kellen in scrimmages all the time. He's always kicking my butt. So I'm used to being beat by younger guys.

I think it's great for the game 'cause the game should always be about the future. We should honor the past, but we shouldn't live in the past. Sometimes we do that too much. I saw that at Houston. All people ever talked about at Houston when I got there was Phi Slama Jama. I'm thinking none of the kids that I'm recruiting, nor their parents, have ever heard of that. That's the past. Honor it. Let's honor those guys. But for God's sake, don't live in the past.

When I look at Todd, Jon, makes me feel good about the future of the game. I still think Bruce has got a lot of good years left. He's a youngster. He's only 65 (smiling). Maybe not so much for this old one.

The game is in good hands with the young coaches. I think they're better set up to navigate these choppy waters that we have in front of us than maybe the old guys that coached the game when there was no shot clock, no three-point line. Then we had a 45-second shot clock. Most of these young ones don't even know that.

I know I learned from 'em. There's a lot to be learned from these young guys, how they do things, their ideas, their energy. There's a lot of things I don't know. I've always been pretty good about not knowing what I don't know. I've learned a lot from Kellen and Quannas and Hollis and K.C. I learn a lot from my staff. I encourage them to call up other people and ask how they're doing this stuff.

I didn't know anything about NIL. I used to think it was sacrilege if you transferred inside your own league. That would never have happened.

Now it's just a different time. But with guys like Todd and Jon and so many other great young coaches, I think they're better prepared to handle this stuff as we move forward.

Q. Karen told us a story when you were gearing up for your first Final Four at Oklahoma, the excitement was you were going to get to have that Friday open practice. With COVID, you probably didn't. Did you get to enjoy 2021, or how does this feel because of everything the first time around?

KELVIN SAMPSON: No, that's a great point. I think everybody that was in the bubble in Indianapolis got cheated out of the experience. The only place we could go was the floor. The elevator opened onto your floor. That was it. You couldn't go down a floor, you couldn't go up a floor.

We had to stand in line to get tested before every time we went outside the building to come in. It felt like we were going out to the yard in prison because they took us over to Victory Park to let us run around on the grass. Somebody had the great idea of, Go get a football or horseshoes or something. What do you want us to do? Look around and see how we can break out of this place (smiling)? That was a different time.

It's hard to explain it. I didn't see Karen during the entire time. We played our first game against Cleveland State, then we played the game to get there in Lucas Oil. First two games, next two games, then the next two games was the Final Four. When we left, there were 68 teams in two hotels. Indianapolis has those little walkways you can go from one building to the next.

One day I had Porter Moser from Loyola next to me. At the end I had Porter Moser from Oklahoma next to me. I had Mick Cronin over here. Then I had Musselman from Arkansas. God only knows where he is now (smiling).

That was something else.

Coming in here yesterday, the bus we were on had the Final Four logo with our team. The hotel we're staying at - what's the name of the hotel here staying at? - Rivercenter - the staff was awesome. We had a mariachi band.

For me fine. But for those kids, for them to get that experience. Then last night we went over to get a meal. People stopping 'em because they've seen 'em play the last three or four weeks. That's what this is all about. It's a reward. They should be rewarded for what they've accomplished.

Tomorrow the public scrimmage... Of course, you're just entertainment for 50 minutes. Not like we're going to go out there and bust some drill-out. Our guys know what we're doing. We just had a public practice somewhere. Where was that?

Q. Indianapolis.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, Indianapolis.

No, it's awesome. The fact that you guys are here, I mean, we didn't do anything in Indianapolis. We won four games, then lost to Baylor. We could have played Baylor 10 times and not beat 'em once. That's how much better they were than we were.

THE MODERATOR: I want to thank Coach Sampson for rewarding us with his time. Congratulations and welcome to the Final Four.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Thanks, guys.

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