

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

Friday, April 4, 2025

San Antonio, Texas, USA

Alamodome

Houston Cougars

Coach Kelvin Sampson

J'Wan Roberts

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



of our success this year, for sure.

Q. I talked to some of the guys in the locker room yesterday. Some used last season's loss as motivation to come back this year. Some wiped the slate clean. Is there a healthier approach for last season in terms of using it this year or is it better individual player basis?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Last year has nothing to do with this year for me. I mean, we have a new team, so... It's irrelevant to me.

Q. Poking around on the Internet I saw your loose ball drill. I was wondering if you could kind of explain the origin of that, what you're trying to get out of it, how well it works or doesn't.

KELVIN SAMPSON: What was the first part of that about the poking around? What did you say?

THE MODERATOR: He was on the Internet and saw your loose ball drill.

KELVIN SAMPSON: I've never seen that.

Q. It's out there.

KELVIN SAMPSON: So I've got to find the culprit that filmed that.

No, I've always done that. Usually it's the first drill. There's probably a couple drills that I do. First drill of the year. Then I don't do it anymore because something happens once, it could be an accident. Happens twice, it could be coincidence. If it happens three or more times, it can and should be a habit.

As coaches, whatever it is we're teaching, we're trying to create habits, good habits. As long as they're doing that naturally, I don't need to do a drill. As a matter of fact, I don't even like that drill. I don't like doing drills. I'd rather them be like that anyway.

I've had some kids that I've had not necessarily... Like

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by the head coach of Houston, Kelvin Sampson.

Coach, having a good day so far?

KELVIN SAMPSON: So far, yeah. We've been doing this now, conference tournament, SIU. We had to beat BYU to get to Arizona. We had to beat SIUE to get to Gonzaga. Beat Purdue to get to Tennessee. Now we're here. We've been doing this for, like, four straight weeks.

THE MODERATOR: We'll keep it rolling. If you have a question for Coach Sampson...

Q. Terrance Arceneaux. You know his history in this building, his two championships, the junior year probably the more significant. Does that give him a little bit of an advantage? Can you tell me about what he's done for your team this year.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, there's always one guy I think on your roster that you feel like you could have or probably should have gotten more minutes for. As a coach, I needed to have gotten Terrance in there a little more tonight.

Like in the Tennessee game, 'Wan picked up two quick ones. Terrance goes in and scores eight consecutive points, or thereabouts. But he's capable of that. Terrance is a 6'6" basketball player. He's not a four and he's not a three, he's not a two. He's just a really good player. He's bailed us out a lot of nights.

A lot of nights Sharp and Cryer have had it going. I've closed games with Mylik Wilson because of his ability to guard multiple positions. But Terrance is a huge, huge part

ASAP sports . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Emanuel Sharp. Emanuel Sharp doesn't need to do that drill. Milos Uzan did when he got here. L.J. Cryer probably did. Most of our guys, every loose ball in practice. If we're having practice, and I don't care what day it is, could be today, if there's a loose ball, there should be a habit of getting on the floor after it.

Q. Are there any rules to that drill other than get the ball? Looked like it was a basic free-for-all.

KELVIN SAMPSON: I've never really had anybody look at that, then give me their expert analysis of it.

Yeah, it's pretty much technically whoever gets it is on offense. Whoever does not get it is on defense.

We try to be multi-effort with that drill. Now, sometimes I just do the drill with an individual against nobody, you know? Sometimes I may just drop the ball, let it pitter patter to a stop. When I blow the whistle, see how quick they get to it.

Everything is a competition. But like our kids say, it's not for everybody, but it is for the ones that are here.

Q. I wanted to follow up on something you said yesterday about how nobody talks about Coach Scheyer replacing Coach K anymore. How difficult is it from your perspective, with your history in the game, what they've actually been able to pull off to make that transition as relatively seamlessly as they have?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I've been knowing Mike for a long, long time. Since he's moved into you guys' world as a media guy, I've been on his radio show. We've had conversations.

I don't like it when people say he's the G.O.A.T. Mike Krzyzewski is certainly a goat. But a lot of that stuff is so generational. Mike Krzyzewski, during his generation, was the standard for everybody.

I think Mike deserves a lot of credit for being involved in the process to pick Jon. He coached Jon. He worked with Jon. So Jon had a head start. When he had his press conference, a lot of people talked about that. He's replacing a legend. And he is, he was.

But this is Jon's third year, right? In his third year, it's not talked about as much. That's a credit to both of them. Mike for having a huge part of choosing the right guy, then Jon for being independent enough to become his own person with choosing his staff, doing that general manager thing. I still don't know what that is (smiling).

We got managers. They wipe the floor up, though (smiling). They bring me water halfway through. I mean, they have important roles. Probably not as good as a general manager (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: Different competition, too, probably.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Probably (laughter).

Q. Of all the teams in the Final Four this year, you guys are the most reliant on returning players. I think about 80% of your minutes are from guys who were on the roster last year. Is that continuity important to you?

KELVIN SAMPSON: It is to us. When Cooper Flagg chose to reclassify, I think he showed up at 17 years old. Am I right in saying that? That's how old J'Wan Roberts was when he came to us, too. We had five guys 17 years old. Jamal Shead was 17, JoJo was 17, J'Wan Roberts was 17, Ja'Vier Francis was 17. I'm missing somebody.

A lot of our guys turned 18 either in the summer or in the fall. I have a great staff. I think the strength of our program is maybe not recruiting the five-star guys that a lot of the schools that are here do. But we develop guys into five stars. We take a lot of pride in that.

Marcus Sasser was probably ranked 300-something. Wasn't in the top 10. He was in the top 300. He was the 25th pick in the draft. First round draft choice. Jamal Shead was probably a 2-something.

I've got a great staff that's been with him a long time, either played for me or shared a house with me growing up, my son (smiling). They're really good at that. I give them a lot of leeway, a lot of responsibility. That's why our success is a shared success. I give a lot of credit to my staff for doing an awesome job.

Q. I know Pop reached out to you this week. Did you get a chance to talk to him or see him this week? Do you still consider the year you spent here, the few months you spent here, as being transformative and important for your career?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, Pop and I have been in contact and we're going to hook up here. Transformative? It was important. But, you know, we all had friends, all of you have friends that have helped you along the way. I like to think I've done that with a lot of young coaches, helping them along the way. That's our responsibility.

My dad was a high school basketball coach. Even until the week he passed away, he was helping somebody. I just

think that's important to do.

Pop and I are -- I'm not a former player. When I was with San Antonio, the thing that jumped out of me is he runs the Spurs very much like a college program. He talked to Tim and Manu and Tony very much like I would talk to Galen. Maybe not that. Close, though (smiling). I saw him get on Tony.

But there was mutual respect there. That's what makes Pops special. He shows great respect and he gets it back. What he did for me, I've tried to pay that forward many times.

Q. Could you kind of talk a little bit about how critical your time in Montana Tech was to get you to where you are now? The importance of maintaining relationships with people like the current head coach there, Adam Hiatt, your former assistant, John Thatcher.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, John sold New York Life Insurance. He would come over and help us in the afternoons. He was a Butte guy. He taught me a lot about Butte.

My wife and I got married when we were 23 years old. She was a schoolteacher. She gave up her career to help me chase this crazy dream I had.

But Jud Heathcote, his freshman year, just a semester, but he went to college at Montana Tech. He coached high school basketball later in Spokane, Washington. I think West Valley High School. Then he played for Marv Harshman at Washington State. He hired me as his grad assistant at Michigan State, which is a roundabout way of saying that's how I got to Montana Tech, through Jud Heathcote.

They named me the head coach, but they never had a winning season. Everybody there that played, every student, was an engineer. I could never have gotten into school there, and I'm coaching those guys in basketball.

I think every curriculum required 30 credits of math, metallurgical engineering, petroleum engineering, mining engineering. Yeah, I could never go to school there.

They hired me as their basketball coach because it was not important. If it had been important, they would never have hired me (laughter). I felt a lot of those guys that were seniors were older than I was, or the same age. I was 24. They were in their fifth or sixth year because they were doing something extra onto their curriculums.

Coach, I can't make practice today. They didn't ask me. They just said, Hey, I'm not going to be at practice today (laughter). Now that would be taboo. I wouldn't listen to that. Then it was...

Sometimes we'd only have seven on a road trip, which meant we didn't have to take a bus, we would just go to motor pool, they'd give me the keys to the van. No credit cards, I'd have enough money to go fill. They knew how far the trip was, so they gave me enough money to get gas. I had to turn in all the receipts for those trips.

I wasn't very good. It was a great coach's league. I learned a lot from them. I felt bad for our kids at Montana Tech because they had to have me as their coach. Our first year we went 4-22. Jud Heathcote called me up the day after that Monday, season ended on Saturday, my phone rang. This would have been in 1982, 1982. Jud calls up and said, Hey, Kel, I just want to congratulate you. You're the only coach in captivity that possibly could have taken Montana Tech from obscurity to oblivion. Got to go, Kel.

True story (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: That was a question from NBC Montana. We welcome J'Wan Roberts to join us.

Q. Obviously these Final Four runs, people tend to think back and ponder. What do you hope your legacy is when you do finish?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Kind of what the gentleman asked me about Pop. You can't control what people think. The thing I've noticed about being in this position is most people that have opinions of you don't know you. So they're basing their opinion on what someone else said. I would encourage people before you make statements about somebody, get to know the person. Might not be what you think.

But I would hope my legacy would be I tried to help my kids be the best they could be so that when they got older they were in a position to help somebody be the best they could be.

If that's my legacy, then I think I've had a career worth having.

THE MODERATOR: The next portion of our news conference availability is with the Full Court Press journalists. We'll continue with questions.

Q. One thing that really touched me was how you spoke about your relationship with your father, calling

him after every single game. What does it mean to you to have your son next to you?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, he doesn't have to get off the bus and find a pay phone, you know? He can walk up the aisle and tap me on the shoulder. A little bit easier for him.

My dad, when he was coaching, and this is why he was my hero and I admired him so much, is that high school coaches in North Carolina in the '60s and '70s, '80s, '50s, you only had a nine-month contract. There was three months he had to hustle. He had to go find jobs.

I can tell you what his jobs were. He taught drivers ed. He sold Lincoln life insurance. He sold World Book Encyclopedia, which was Google before cell phones. My mother used to make us read that so we'd do good on the SAT. The fourth thing, he worked at tobacco markets in Lumberton, North Carolina. We were from this little country town called Pembroke.

I learned a lot from him, so... During those days, during segregation, like tobacco markets were different. Three different bathrooms, white, colored and other. That was it. That's where he worked. He would take me to work with him.

All of a sudden when I got older, I had a job with him.

Those three months I probably learned more from him in those three months than I did in the other nine months. You got a family. You got to feed your family. That's your job. Coach all you want, but you got to take care of your family.

Q. I would love to know is 'Fella' something that you call your son now?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, my father called Kellen that, too, so... Hardly ever. I played for him, too. He was inducted into the North Carolina High School Coaches Hall of Fame. I don't remember the year. I was coaching at Oklahoma. I remember flying in for it.

I realized the same year he was inducted, David Thompson's high school coach in Shelby, North Carolina, and Dominique Wilkins' high school coach in Little Washington, North Carolina, and John Willie Sampson from little old Pembroke.

I said, You know, the coach from Shelby Crest's best player was David Thompson, coach from Little Washington's best player was Dominique Wilkins. One of his best players was me. That probably tells you why he got in the Hall of Fame (laughter). If he could win games

with me, he must have been a Hall of Fame coach.

He never called me 'Fella' during games or practices. As soon as he'd flip over, he never called me Kelvin, he always called me 'Fella'.

Q. How do you guys draw on your experience when that is one of the advantages you have over a young team in Duke? J'Wan, you've been in the program for five years now.

J'WAN ROBERTS: Six (smiling).

When I first got here at 17, I had a lot of guys that I could learn from. DeJon, Bryson, Justin, Fabian. Those guys, they took me under their wing as vets. I didn't know what I was getting myself into when I first got to the University of Houston. I didn't know what culture was. I didn't know the ins and outs of it.

I think those guys helped me along the way, especially when I redshirted. I took a lot of notes from those guys, learned as much as I can. As years went by, I kind of understood the system. I just surrendered.

Be with coach for six years, I kind of understood what he was doing. At first I didn't know why he was screaming at me so much. I don't know why he ran me so much. I didn't know what it was until I see that he only wants the best for me. He always wants me to go out and play to the best of my ability and help as much of those guys that I can.

Having guys like L.J. coming over from Baylor, he won a national championship. He knows how to win. Playing with Marcus, playing with Jamal, Quentin, all those guys are great players that helped me along the way.

Me being in my sixth year, I have a different role on this team now. Mercy, Ced, Chase, those younger guys, look at this program as a winning program, see me as being here the longest.

I learned so much from Coach Sampson on how to be a practice player every day, how to be a leader every day. I will probably text coach once every two months. I appreciate him for giving me the opportunity to play at the University of Houston. I appreciate him for taking the time out to coach me and make me the man I am today.

I can honestly say I look at him as my second father. I can honestly say that he taught me so much from 17 years old to 23. I feel like being a vet on this team now, I play for him. He put in so much blood, sweat and tears into the program, into us, to want to see us do good.

Just being a vet, I try to do the best to lead by example and try to make him proud.

Q. There's a recent viral video on Twitter of your practices. People are commenting on the intensity of them. Talk about how that intensity transfers from the practice to the game.

KELVIN SAMPSON: What video was it? I'm finding out there's some leaks in the system (smiling).

Q. Actually a clip of two videos. Diving for loose balls, players crashing boot tears.

KELVIN SAMPSON: That would be the floor.

Q. The floor, you calling the chairs the floor?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I'm calling the ground.

Q. The court floor, excuse me.

KELVIN SAMPSON: So what's the question?

Q. How does that intensity in practice translate to the games?

KELVIN SAMPSON: You answer the gentleman.

J'WAN ROBERTS: I mean, that's all we know. Coach has a standard that he comes into practice with every day, and that's play hard and compete.

He always says, Competing is a competition, whether it's a rebound. It's who wants it more. I feel like when we go into games, it makes it a lot more easier because practices are so hard. When you practice a certain way in practice, when you get to the game, it's like the team's not ready for this, but we are.

If we ever match up with a team that's similar to us intensity-wise, I feel like we always have the upper hand because we've been doing this since June, before the season started.

Going into games with the intensity of making teams uncomfortable or playing hard, I think that's what gets us going.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, I think that's one of the things that impresses me most about Duke's team. First of all, they don't have any freshmen. They were freshmen in November and December. They were sophomores in January and February. March and April, they're vets.

I watch Cooper Flagg. One year we were playing Syracuse in the Elite Eight to go to the Final Four. Syracuse's best player was Carmelo Anthony. I coached against Gary Payton as a freshman. Sean Elliott. Jason Kidd. Paul Pierce. T.J. Ford. A lot of great players. This guy is right there with all of 'em.

It's hard to say what he's not good at. Now, he's not as great at some things as he is at others. His floor is really good at everything. But his ceiling is just his size, finishes with his left hand around the paint, right hand has a floater, can make a three. Really good free throw shooter. If you double him, you better get there quick 'cause he can pass.

I think the guy that doesn't get talked about enough is Proctor. Seen his numbers? Guy is shooting 64% from the floor. He's shooting higher than that from the three.

Knueppel. I'd love to coach Knueppel. He plays hard, tough, smart. You can tell this team has Jon's imprint on it.

We scrimmaged Duke a few years ago. I don't remember what year that was. I think Proctor was a freshman, though. You could tell he was a freshman.

You remember that scrimmage?

J'WAN ROBERTS: Uh-huh.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Who else was on that team? Filipowski. I don't remember the other players. Who else was on that team?

Q. (No microphone.)

KELVIN SAMPSON: Roach, yeah. But Proctor didn't play very good that day. I remember Jon called and said would I mind giving him a scouting report on his team and he would give a scouting report on ours.

I remember talking about Proctor to him. Talked about how important his growth would be. Now when you look at him, he's elite in every area. But the area that he's improved the most in is his toughness. Proctor is tough. Knueppel is tough. Flagg is tough.

Sion James, we played against him two years at Tulane. He was probably the fourth best player on his team at Tulane. That's true. That speaks to Jon Scheyer's ability to put his team together.

He chose Sion James. His intelligence, his basketball IQ, his toughness, he's a winner. He doesn't require shots. He can make 'em, but doesn't have to have 'em, which is important on that team.

The guy you want to be shooting all your balls is those three. You want Proctor, Knueppel and Flagg shooting all the balls. Offense is not an equal opportunity position. Best shooters should be shooting the balls. That's what Duke's really good at.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

