

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

Saturday, April 5, 2025

San Antonio, Texas, USA

Alamodome

**Houston Cougars**

**Coach Kelvin Sampson**

**J'Wan Roberts**

**L.J. Cryer**

**Emanuel Sharp**

Semifinals Postgame Media Conference



Unscripted points for us is second-chance points. I think we had 19 second-chance points. What's the difference in that, running the most beautiful play in the world, somebody comes off a screen, you go Bravo, great play. That's two points. That's us. We're probably more of an offensive rebound, put it in for two, than a run the greatest play ever and have everybody go crazy because you executed something.

We had 19 second-chance points. We scored eight points off their turnovers. We were under 10 on turnovers.

I knew we weren't going to turn Duke over much 'cause they don't turn it over. They're so disciplined.

Flagg got 27, Knueppel made some shots. We were really focused on those other guys. We did a great job of not allowing Proctor to turn the corner and get in the paint off pin-downs. He's so good at that.

We stayed down on every shot fake that he had. He shot fakes and gets in the paint. When we ran at him, we stayed down on shot fakes. When he would come off a pin-down, the guy guarding the ball would jump to the ball and make him pass it.

We did a great job on all the other guys. Knueppel, he made some tough threes. Cooper Flagg, Cooper was not going to beat us by himself. I felt like if we could just hang in there, even when we were down 14, these guys will tell you what I was talking about in the huddle was, Just hang in there, hang in there.

I thought if we get it down to single digit, five, JoJo had just the boneheaded play. He was so apologetic, almost in tears. I couldn't even get on him. He knew what he did wrong. That's one of those, just leave him alone. He'll learn from that.

With that, it put them up six. Got a rebound, bang a three. Once we get the three, now there's game pressure. It's a lot easier to finish the game when you have 20. It's a lot harder when you got to finish it up three or up four, even up six. That's why I said, Don't foul. It's six points, that's only two possessions.

Houston 70, Duke 67

THE MODERATOR: We're joined now by head coach Kelvin Sampson of Houston and student-athletes.

Coach, we'll take a statement first.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, awesome win for my kids. Obviously we have great respect for Duke and their team, their tradition, what Coach K and Duke has meant to this game for so long.

I said the same thing after we beat Gonzaga. You're not just beating a good team, you're beating an unbelievable program.

I knew that Duke's defense was going to give us some problems because of their length. We spent a lot of time matchup hunting in the second half, trying to get the right matchup. When they got up to 14, that's where a couple things go right for us. Emanuel hit a three. We got an offensive rebound. They missed a couple tough ones.

But we held them to 37% the second half. We held that team to 67 points. That was a tempo we could live with. We could not win this game in the 80s. We couldn't score 80.

I felt like we could win the game in the high 60s or low 70s. I felt that way going in.

We have to depend on unscripted points a lot of nights.



I put JoJo on the ball. We tried to deny. Encouraged him to throw it long because JoJo's wingspan is seven six and a half. I thought we could take everything over the top, force them to throw it east and west. The referee was counting so slow a couple times, that's why I told him to go check. Then when I was looking at the replay, I said, It's probably only three as slow as he was counting.

But getting J'Wan to the free-throw line. When we lost to Duke last year in Dallas, I didn't think we lost because we lost Jamal. I thought we lost because we lost JoJo Tugler to a broken foot at the end of February and Jamal. But the real reason was the free throw line.

Ja'Vier was 2-7, J'Wan was 3-8, a three-point game. When we got to June, when our kids came to June, I gave a very impassioned talk about that. I don't know if these guys remember. I told them, I said, We have got to change our mentality at the free-throw line.

Even though we only lost four games all year, a couple of those, the free-throw line impacted two of those. So we had our kids make 150 free throws seven days a week. I don't think J'Wan missed a day from June 2nd till we left on Wednesday. We left on Wednesday, right? So Tuesday night I looked at what he shot from the free-throw line with his 150 makes. He shot 87%. That was his highest percentage he ever stopped. When he started this, he was at 66.

On his own he went from 66 to 86. That wasn't the coaches. Give all the credit to him. He went to that free-throw line every single day and made himself...

In that moment tonight, in the moment tonight when everybody was watching, he prepared himself when nobody was watching for that moment tonight. So God bless him. Proud of him.

I told him last night at midnight I loved him, so... Probably almost midnight now, so... Just proud of these guys for what they've accomplished.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach. We're taking questions for the Houston student-athletes.

**Q. L.J. and J'Wan, when they went up 59-45, I think a lot of people thought it was over. Why wasn't it over for you all?**

L.J. CRYER: I mean, it ain't over because they still got time on the clock. As long as there's time on the clock, we're going out there and give it our all. We've been in positions like that before at Kansas, I don't remember how

much we was down, but it was late in the game, that game looked like it was pretty much over, too. Somehow we ended up winning it, so...

We just had to keep that belief and keep faith. We got it done.

J'WAN ROBERTS: What he said. Believing we can win. I feel like basketball's a game of runs. They went on their run. Once we started pressuring them defensively, turning them over, I think that triggers us offensively.

Looking at the time, looking at the clock, I feel like we just believed in ourself. Like we had a feeling that we can still win the game, so...

Coach always tells us just keep playing, fight, never quit. If you lose the game, and you didn't quit, you didn't really lose.

Going into games like this, you never want to go down, but it happens. But once you don't quit and you believe, anything can happen.

**Q. J'Wan, how prepared were you for how much you would have to guard Flagg down the stretch? Seemed like you picked up your responsibility. Was that your mentality going into the game?**

J'WAN ROBERTS: Kind of 50/50, not trying to get too selfish focusing on one player because it's a team game.

But knowing going into that game he's the Player of the Year, brought his team to the Final Four. We know it was going to be challenging. But the main thing was just to make him shoot contested jump shots, make him as uncomfortable as ever.

I feel like it was a team effort. I guarded him, Emanuel did, JoJo did. I think it was a team effort to make him uncomfortable and try to slow him down.

**Q. J'Wan, yesterday you shared one of the biggest things you'll say from Coach Sampson was never have a fear of failure. Going from 3-8 in the last game of last year, how excited were you to step towards the free-throw line to put your team ahead?**

J'WAN ROBERTS: To tell you the honest truth, going up to the free-throw line, I wasn't really nervous at all just 'cause of the work that I put in, just believing in it and trusting myself. I try not to get sidetracked by how big the stage is or the crowd getting into it. I just try to trust myself, focus on my routine, and trust my work.

Like coach said, I shoot 150 every night. I don't treat those two free throws any different than if I'm in there by myself.

Just stepping up to the line just believing in myself and just trusting my work.

**Q. All week long here I heard about Duke, Auburn, Florida, and nobody was talking about Houston. Was that extra motivation? Did you feel sort of a level of disrespect?**

L.J. CRYER: Nah. I mean, I don't really pay attention to what other people say honestly. This whole year, I've been trying to stay off social media and stuff like that. I really don't see those type of things. I try just to listen to Coach Sampson and he believed we were the best team in the tournament, so that's the only person I listened to.

J'WAN ROBERTS: I mean, everyone has an opinion. They can say what they want to say. When you put 40 minutes on the clock and you put Houston against whoever, they going to get our best shot.

We don't have to be mentioned in the greats or this and that. We'll take the underdog spot and we'll just do what we do.

EMANUEL SHARP: Yeah, pretty much the same thing. The whole year we've been focusing on ourselves, not focused on outside talk. That's how we operate. We just keep within our circle, in our circle, try to keep a chip on our shoulder. That's how we play.

**Q. J'Wan, you've been at Houston, been wearing that jersey for five years now. What has kept you coming back? You've seen so many things happen, now you get to play for the first national championship game.**

J'WAN ROBERTS: Family, that's number one. I call all these guys my brothers. All these coaches, too. They took us under their wing, make sure we're good.

I feel like when you come across a bunch of people that's genuine and love you for you, I feel like you want to keep those guys close to you as much as you can.

If I could be here for another three years, I would. But eventually got to come to an end, but I have respect for my coaches and players for even giving me an opportunity to play at the University of Houston. Just know what comes with this and the culture. I wouldn't trade this for anything else in the world.

THE MODERATOR: We thank L.J., J'Wan and Emanuel. First question for Coach Sampson.

**Q. To hear from your group that they are so locked in on everything, you've referenced culture, what can you say about this group's resolve and how much a moment like when you won at Allen Fieldhouse earlier this year you can recall in these moments?**

KELVIN SAMPSON: Actually, I don't think we could play any worse. We were down six at halftime. I mean, our bench was very good the first half. That's something that we've been good at. I'm not going to call out who, but all three of those guys can play better.

So instead of ranting and raving at halftime, I was probably more calm and positive 'cause I thought that's what they needed, you know? They know they played poorly. But we're only down six. We're not down 16. We're down six. We were down to Purdue the other night I think five. We were down to Arizona in the Big 12 championship game I think by five.

I mean, being down, what's the problem? Didn't matter to me that we were down to the team we were playing. We were down six. I say a stop and a basket away from four.

We started off, our offense, we changed some things offensively the second half, then started scoring. The problem was we were stopping them. Their first shot wasn't beating us. It was their second shot. They kept tracking down offensive rebounds. That's what was hurting us. I thought if we could hold them to 30 something from the field, be plus 10 on the boards, I thought we could win. Call me crazy, but I did.

I think we were top three or four in the nation in field goal percentage defense. We've always been a pretty good rebounding team. It took us a while to become who we are. At some points if you have a culture... Quitting is not part of the deal. We're not going to quit. We're just going to play better.

So what we did was not foul. I think that was a big choice that we had to make there down the stretch, was we were going to put JoJo on the ball and create problems throwing it vertical so they had to get east and west. Those are the easiest ones to deny because the sideline, at some point you can't go past that.

Once they got the ball inbounds, if they caught it anywhere near the corners, now you have JoJo coming to trap. If they got the ball out of that, then we were thinking about fouling Ben. But we came up with the turnover when we needed to. Mylik, he dribbled out there to hit that three. I can't remember what the score was. What were we down?

**Q. Three.**

KELVIN SAMPSON: How much time was left?

**Q. (No microphone.)**

KELVIN SAMPSON: I said we don't need a three. Thank God I had a timeout. Let's just get a two. Get a two, two free throws. We don't need a three there. A three just reeks of desperation. A two means we have an idea of how we want to win the game.

Then obviously when Jon called timeout, everybody knows who's going to get it. When he turned his back, we were going to actually go double him with JoJo, which means that Emanuel would have to take out Maluach. Not get the rebound, just make sure he does not get the rebound.

'Wan I thought did an awesome job of getting his hands up high enough that it wasn't an easy look. Some tough shots all night. There's no such thing as a dagger shot when there's eight minutes to go. J'Wan's free throws were daggers. He hit some big threes under 10, under nine, that put it up to 14. Just keep fighting.

I think the one thing we did that helped, as a coach you're always looking for something. We put the ball in Emanuel's hands because he had the matchup we wanted in the pick and roll. Their best defenders were on L.J. and Milos. We thought Emanuel had the best chance to get the ball in the paint. Even if he didn't make the shot, Maluach or one of their big high school to come help, that frees us up for offensive rebounding. That's a huge part of our offense. If we make it or not, it's going to be a soft miss. A three is a long miss, paint is a soft miss. We can tip it, keep it alive, get appear offensive rebound.

We had 18 offensive rebounds. I just noticed this. We held them to 39%. So there you go.

THE MODERATOR: We want to congratulate Coach Sampson and thank him for coming down to the main interview room.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports