

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

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San Antonio, Texas, USA

Alamodome

Houston Cougars

Coach Kelvin Sampson

J'Wan Roberts

L.J. Cryer

Finals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're joined by University of Houston head coach Kelvin Sampson. How is your day going so far?

KELVIN SAMPSON: What time is it (smiling)?

THE MODERATOR: 1:44.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, just real proud of our guys from just being able to hang in there and wait for something good to happen. Sometimes if you keep playing and you get an opportunity, then you're in a position to do something with it. But if you don't have the right mindset or the right maturity, that's why coaches are constantly searching for some kind of advantage, either from the personnel you have on the floor, personnel they may have on the floor, where do we have an advantage.

We used Emanuel Sharp last night in the pick and roll because we felt he had the best chance to get in the paint and get the ball in the rim. If we got the ball in the rim, we thought we could offensive rebound it.

It comes down to Roberts makes the two free throws. But our defense was really good there, about the last 10 minutes or so. So I was proud of 'em for hanging in there.

Lives are so consumed by our next game, your next game. I'm glad last night was not our last game, that we do have a next game. That's a good thing for this group, because I've enjoyed coaching this team.

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions, Coach.

Q. As you savor the journey that you've been on, this year or the years before, what does a moment like last night when you walked into the team hotel mean to see that crowd that maybe wasn't there seven or eight years ago, or was just starting to build up?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I don't know. I'm not very good at that stuff. I'm sure somebody... Certainly something to savor and enjoy. It's indicative of our journey, our success.

My mind was focused on getting Kellen by himself and getting to a laptop and looking at Florida. I'm not very good at that.

My mother always used to tell me that I had to learn to smell the roses. My mother passed away in 2014. I never did learn.

Q. It's not big on your radar screen right now, if you win, you'll be the oldest national championship coach ever. Would that mean anything to you, particularly at an age where there's some question about how long guys are going to stay in this profession?

KELVIN SAMPSON: It's probably a good question. When you're pressing 70, you look at things a lot differently. I mean, you're grown up now. You're 70 (smiling).

I've spent a little time this morning with my grandkids. First time I went to the Final Four in 2002, my son was on the team, or he was on the bench with us.

Over the years, things kind of come full circle in some ways. Last night I got so many texts. I haven't returned any. There's too many to even look at. I didn't even get through all of them.

I saw Tubby and Rick Barnes, Tom Izzo, Pop, a bunch of the older coaches. They all kind of had similar messages to me. Win one for the old guys, something like that (smiling). We were all young at the same time coming up.

But I haven't thought a lot about what's next. I get so focused on the team, trying to figure out how to help them.

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But I know we've been working with the portal since we've been here. I mean, there's some things going on that require our immediate attention.

I remember when we were in the Final Four in, what was it, '21? That was COVID, right? I remember Josh Carlton, Kyler Edwards and Jarace Walker. One of my assistants had me on the phone with those guys a couple times a day, 'cause we had nothing to do. I mean, they let us go out to the yard, which was Victory Park. We had a football to throw around. Couldn't see our families 'cause they had us in that quarantine thing.

But I see all our kids now. I'm happy for them. I'm happy for their families. They're creating memories that will last them forever, you know?

I used to come to the tournament when I was a young coach, I would sit in those stands and look at the two coaches in the championship game. You think you'd like to be there one day, if you could ever get a chance.

So for me, it's a lot of gratitude, a lot of appreciation for having this opportunity. But you owe it to so many people. You don't do things like this in a vacuum. I got a great team, a great staff. I'm able to work independent of everything. I run the program without any resistance. I make all the decisions. I do everything on my own, so...

With my staff, of course. We've kind of done it our way. It's worked out pretty good.

Q. When you're in that situation last night, down 14, how much does being in your 36th year and having seen just about everything you can see in the game help you get them through it?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, so my biggest decision was when they were up six. I kept churning about fouling. I said, Nope, we're not going to foul. Because whatever shot they get, I just thought that we were going to contest it. It'd come down to whether we get a rebound.

I was so proud of JoJo because we worked so hard on staying down on shot fakes. My rule has been be the second guy off the floor, don't be the first guy, but be the second guy off the floor.

When Knueppel drove in there, shot faked, JoJo didn't flinch. Had he shot faked a second time, we probably would have been screwed (smiling).

But when Knueppel got to the rim and he shot faked once, he went up, I knew he wasn't going to get it to the rim, JoJo was going to block it.

Then we come down and bang a three. So instead of taking the risk of fouling them, they go up eight... If you look at all their free-throw percentage, they were all high-percentage free throw shooters. The one if I would have fouled somebody would have been Proctor. He wound up missing one.

That was really the biggest decision, is not to foul them. Most people would say, Why don't you foul? We're only down two possessions. If we can get a miss and a rebound, we have the ball down two possessions. If you foul them, they make both free throws, you're down three possessions with the ball. You have to think the game entirely different. The climb becomes a little steeper.

You've been in those situations so many times. It doesn't always work out. JoJo goes for the shot fake and draws a foul, we're down nine. All of a sudden I'm the dumbest guy ever.

So I get all that.

Q. Could you reflect on the journey from Robeson County to the cusp of a national championship? Have you given any thought as to what your success means to the folks back in Pembroke, especially Lumbee?

KELVIN SAMPSON: What's your name?

Q. Brett Friedlander.

KELVIN SAMPSON: From Fayetteville. What's up, Brett? Right down the road.

Most of the girls in my senior class went to Fayetteville on the weekends because that's where Fort Bragg was. Yes, I'll leave that there (smiling). Not all of 'em. I mean, I married a girl from my high school senior class. She didn't go (laughter). I better get off the subject.

THE MODERATOR: Good idea.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah.

It's hard for me to think about the journey without thinking of my mother and father. My mother was a nurse. She worked 12-hour shifts. Her shift was either 8:00 to 8:00 or 7:00 to 7:00. My dad was a high school basketball coach in a little country community at Magnolia High School. I'm not even sure if I would know how to get to that.

But I had a twin sister, younger sister, and an older sister. My twin sister passed away a couple years ago, so... (Tearing up).

But, no, I always think of that. I have a lot of friends back there. Some of them are actually here right now. I haven't seen 'em. My wife, Karen, she does a good job of running interference on stuff like that.

But coming from a small town where you had to kind of out-work everybody was perfect for me 'cause I didn't get to be an assistant coach for somebody and learn as much as some of these other guys do.

If you look at Jon, his path versus my path, or Todd's path versus my path. Two people that helped me the most was my father and Jud Heathcote. Those guys were just old school, discipline, do things the right way, coach 'em up, and play ball. That's kind of what I was raised with.

Just proud of where I'm from, though. I know there's a lot of stuff going on back there politically that I stay in touch with 'em about.

Karen is on the board of trustees for the university that we graduated from. Really proud of her, for her contributions there. The chancellor at university actually graduated in our high school class. Graduated from Duke medical school as a cardiac surgeon, then had some health issues. I don't know how he became chancellor at the university, but...

A lot of good friends. I don't get back much. I'm not sure when the last time I've been to Pembroke. I know I have a lot of support there. There's a lot of people there I still care about and love.

Q. L.J. was sensational last night.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah.

Q. When you think back on your recruitment of him, what stands out most about what you were interested in and the ways you've seen him grow the most?

KELVIN SAMPSON: We recruited L.J. out of high school. He's from Katy, which is about 25 minutes up the road. His brother plays linebacker for Florida State. I think he was at the game last night. They had spring football workouts, and they let him come to his game last night.

L.J. was a bucket-getter in high school. He'd get buckets. Little guys like L.J., they know how to be really good at being a good little guy. I don't know how I would describe... People that don't play this game a lot focus on things that's really not that important, like height, how tall someone is. Like in our league, everybody's taller than us, so everybody was saying, Here is how tall Duke is...

You ever seen BYU's team? BYU's point guard is 6'9", man. Two guards are 6'5". 6'9", 6'5", 6'9", 6'7". Everybody's tall. Central Florida is much taller than we were. What's that got to do with anything? If you can score, you can score.

Little guys know how to score on big guys. Big guys don't always know how to score on little guys 'cause the little guys, they get help with the double-team. You can make it even.

Marcus Sasser was 6'1". I think he scored 1,500, 1,600 points. I'm pretty sure most of the guys that guarded him were 6'5". There's a lot of really good 6'5" defenders in the Big 12 that L.J. gets 20 on them, too. We played against Sion James, he was at Tulane, for three or four years. I think we played against him for three years. So we scored on him before.

Knueppel, Cooper Flagg. I'd seen Cooper Flagg play a lot on the recruiting circles. I saw him play against the Boozier kid that's going to Duke, in the NBA Top 100 camp a lot.

He's as good as advertised. He's really good. But JoJo, J'Wan, Ja'Vier I thought did a great job last night on the boards.

But our best player, the guy that kept us in the game, was L.J. He kept us in touch with them. So when the time came, we had an opportunity to get the lead down where we could put some game pressure on 'em, L.J. was the guy.

Q. I wanted to ask about JoJo. I read last night that you recruited him, committed him in the spring before his senior year. You said once he signed, you knew he was going to blow up in the summer, wanted to get him in the fold as quickly as you could. What did you see in him that made you think there's such a ceiling for this guy?

KELVIN SAMPSON: So yeah, one of the first things we do when we bring a kid on campus is we measure their wingspan because of how we play pick and roll defense. There's a lot of seven-foot kids that are very lumbering. They have a hard time moving. Those kids would not function well in the way we play defense.

JoJo had good feet, he had great length. Ja'Vier is 7'5". JoJo is seven six and a half. On our wingspan wall, we have Hakeem Olajuwon's wingspan. We also measured JoJo's mother's wingspan. She was 6'7". He has twin sisters that play at Louisiana Monroe. One of his twin sisters has a Ph.D.

I've had some really good second and third jump guys. When I watched JoJo play before we recruited him, his second jump is the best, and this includes the NBA, I've never had a kid second jump like him. His third jump is as good as most people's first. He just has that ability. He has impeccable timing in blocking shots.

He was named the Lefty Driesell Defensive Player of the Year. He was the Big 12 Defensive Player of the Year. Has the Naismith awards come out yet?

Q. Yes.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Who got the defensive player?

Q. Kalkbrenner.

KELVIN SAMPSON: He's worthy. He was good, too.

JoJo would have been a worthy one, as well. He's a Defensive Player of the Year type guy.

His offense is really coming along. He played well. I think he had 10 or 11 points against Gonzaga. Certain games he played well in this year and scored.

Next season he'll take a big jump because we'll spend the off-season helping him get there. But he is a unique, unique player. Normally when a kid gets a technical foul, I take him out. When JoJo reached across the line and slapped that ball last night, I'm sure most people were appalled or amazed or surprised. I just rolled my eyes, JoJo. Anybody's ever going to do that, it's JoJo.

We had a 14-point lead against Gonzaga. We had the ball. Off the ball for no reason, JoJo kind bumps this guy. Of course they go to the monitor. You go to the monitor, it's never a good thing. Go to that monitor, they're going to find what they're looking for. They gave him a flagrant one. Made the two free throws. Instead of having the ball up 60-46, we had the ball up 60-51. Then it was a ballgame.

Around our program, if I say, That's JoJo being JoJo, everybody would understand.

THE MODERATOR: Want to thank Coach Sampson for joining us. We'll be joined by L.J. Cryer and J'Wan Roberts in just a moment.

We're joined by L.J. Cryer and J'Wan Roberts. Looking for questions for them.

Q. L.J., J'Wan, obviously you guys want to win every game. What did it mean to you to extend your season

as your college career is coming to an end?

L.J. CRYER: We just wanted to keep this thing going as long as possible. Everything comes to an end, but why not go out there and try to get to the last game?

Definitely means a lot to be able to continue putting this jersey on, playing with our brothers. I'm enjoying it. Just living in the moment.

J'WAN ROBERTS: Basically what he said, having an opportunity to wear this jersey one more time, having one more film session, one more team meal, one more bus ride. I feel like us getting to the last game, we might as well just go out on a good note.

Q. J'Wan, could you describe or characterize your relationship with Coach Sampson.

J'WAN ROBERTS: I mean, too much to say. I think I first saw coach at AAU basketball. I thought he talked with Kellen that he liked me, wanted me to be a Cougar. From that day he kind of kept me under his wing as much as possible until I committed.

For these six years that I've known Coach Sampson, I can honestly say he's like a second father to me, especially on and off the court. He makes sure I'm good, randomly calls me, randomly texts me, tells me he loves me.

When you come across people like that, you have to keep them with you for a long time. I feel like in the next five, ten years, Coach Sampson is going to be a person I can call. Hopefully in the future when I have my kids, we can all sit down and have a great conversation about what we've been through.

Q. Everyone has the same dream growing up. Final Four, game on the line. If that moment arises, whose number are you calling and what shot do you want to get?

L.J. CRYER: I mean, that's up to coach, who number he calls, but...

If it's up to me, I'm going to call on 'Wan.

And the shot? It's whatever the defense gives you. I don't feel like I go out there and try to predetermine anything. Just go out there and read my defender and take what he give me. That's just my mindset.

J'WAN ROBERTS: I was going to give the ball to L.J. regardless (smiling).



THE MODERATOR: Two great answers in a row, J'Wan.

Q. Going into the game tomorrow, Coach Sampson last night talked about unscripted points, how you got a lot yesterday. Tomorrow, what is the focus on how to get more points when it comes to your offense and how you run it?

L.J. CRYER: You can ask that again.

THE MODERATOR: Coach talks about how you create opportunities on offense. He wants to know how you're going to score more within the offense within the game plan.

J'WAN ROBERTS: Going into games, we know we're not a first-shot team. L.J., how many you have last night? 26?

L.J. CRYER: I think, yeah.

J'WAN ROBERTS: Some games he have 26, some 30, some 10. We don't go into games thinking he's going to have this amount of points. Sometimes guys have bad shooting nights. I feel like we have to find different ways to impact winning and find ways to get second shots when the first shots ain't falling.

I feel like when you get offensive rebounds, second-chance points, points off turnovers, I feel like that can get you back in the flow of the game if you're having a bad shooting night.

We know we're not a first-shot team. I think that's why we crash the board so hard trying to get second and third shots.

Q. L.J., I know you were part of the team at Baylor that won a national championship. You were a freshman. It was of COVID tournament. Anything from that experience that you are taking with you into tomorrow's game?

L.J. CRYER: Nah, not really. Obviously it being a different -- me having a different role on that team, it's hard to take that because I kind of had to sit back and watch.

I did get to sit there and see what it takes to win those type of games. So as far as that, I feel like that's all I'm taking with me, just the leadership, how to go about winning those type of games.

Q. Hakeem was at the game last night. Can each of you guys tell me how much interaction have you had with him. Coach said a short time ago his wingspan is posted somewhere in your locker room area. What

does it mean to be in a title game for the first time since Hakeem was playing at Houston?

L.J. CRYER: I mean, it means a lot. I haven't had too much interaction with him. I only been here two years. I seen him a few times.

I'm sure he poured his heart and soul into this program, just like a lot of the guys that came before us. We standing on those guys' shoulders, everyone who came before us. It would mean a lot to get this done, not only for us, but for them.

J'WAN ROBERTS: We've had a couple talks, especially knowing that he was a great post player, so... He'll give me certain tips or certain things to do, how to attack certain defenses, offensive moves and stuff like that.

But us getting back to the Final Four, now playing for the national championship, you can see on their face that they're especially happy knowing they went to the University of Houston, for us to be back at the top from where they was at, too, so...

I just feel like they're proud of us, all the accomplishments that we've had. Especially with Coach Sampson, too, as much as he put into us and all the hard work, long days that he's tried to get us to be our best. Now we're showing it on a national level.

I feel like everything that Coach Sampson has built here goes way back with Hakeem, too. But us being who we are now, I feel like it just means a lot to everybody.

THE MODERATOR: We want to thank L.J. and J'Wan.

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