

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Northern Kentucky vs Houston

Thursday, March 16, 2023

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Legacy Arena

Houston Cougars

Coach Kelvin Sampson

J'Wan Roberts

Media Conference

Houston - 63, Northern Kentucky - 52

THE MODERATOR: Okay. We will begin with questions for our player.

Q. What did they do so well against you? They took almost 20 more shots than you guys. You guys had 17 turnovers which was very uncharacteristic. You were able to get that win. But it seemed like from the opening tip you guys were never fully the type of team we've seen all season. What did they do to cause so much trouble for you guys?

J'WAN ROBERTS: Just be more aggressive. I feel like they wanted it more. Attacking the glass way harder than we were. And we have to own up to that, and we just got to get better from that and learn.

Q. Obviously you haven't had time to look at them yet. But any quick thoughts on Auburn knowing they are come up on Saturday?

J'WAN ROBERTS: Try not to -- no

COACH SAMPSON: You got any thoughts on Auburn?

Q. Any thoughts about having to play them in Birmingham. You saw the crowd --

COACH SAMPSON: There's nothing we can do about it. So, you know, Auburn is really good, but, you know, anybody that makes the NCAA Tournament would like to be in their situation right now. But good for them. That's a great break, but we got a lot more pressing matters to



worry about than that. You know, we got to go see how many healthy bodies we have right now. That's probably our most important thing right now.

THE MODERATOR: Any more questions for the player. Okay, you are dismissed.

Q. Kev, what is the status on Sasser? I know he tried to go and what was the halftime discussion on whether or not to keep playing him?

COACH SAMPSON: I asked Marcus, he's a talented -- you know, he tried. I just basically told him, you know, just rest it. You know, this time of year, this time of year it's, you know -- the team we had on the floor is not the team we played 34 times this year -- or 33. Everybody kind of shifts around and you have to reassign roles, all that stuff. You know, let's stop right there and let's give Northern Kentucky some credit. We keep talking about us and Auburn and all this stuff. I don't coach Northern Kentucky, but I was proud of their team tonight. They fought. They are well-coached. Their kids were tough, they are smart, they are old. They got a bunch of grad kids, seniors, older guys. I was impressed. And they play a style that forces you to have to play subjectively, you know. It's concepts. You know, and concepts equals basketball IQ. You got to be really smart to play against that stuff. You know, Tommy Lloyd made a statement last year after we played Arizona, he said, you know, the second or third time you play against Houston, the second time you play against Houston, you will have a better feel of how you play against them. I think the same way they play their defense. They don't play zone and they don't play man-to-man. It's kind of somewhere in the middle. So the stuff we run -- like, we came out of timeouts -- our stuff out of timeouts tonight was great. I think we scored after every time out. It's the in between stuff where it's subjective. I could direct it. We got a bunch of high lows tonight. But if you noticed, those all came out of a timeout. We got the ball inside to J'Wan and skipped it across to Emanuel. That was after a time out. We weren't very good tonight conceptually. If you were taking a test and it's a true or false test, you can get the answer. It's true or false. That's objective. When you're playing against that kind of defense, you just got to figure it out. Jamal Shead, to his credit, Jamal has been battling through an injury. But you



know, I hate it when coaches get up here and talk about what they didn't do or how poorly they played. And I have been one of those teams like Northern Kentucky where we played our butts off and fought. That team had 21 points on second chance shots. Credit to them, man. You know, they were tougher than we were tonight, and that's not easy for me to say. Disappointed in that. But hats off to Coach Horn and Northern Kentucky. I was proud of his team for him. And I told him that in the handshake lines. I'm proud of you guys. Happy for you. They fought. They went down swinging. We had a freshman come in and banged a couple 3's. Now granted, we missed every open 3 we had all night. We couldn't make a shot. And that's -- usually is what offense is. When you're open you have to put the biscuit in the basket. And we have one of the best shooters in the country in Marcus Sasser. Tramon had pretty good looks. Terrance had some good looks. J'Wan is probably the only guy I thought who played hard-nosed tough cougars basketball, but we live to fight another day. And that's what this is all about this time of year. I'm proud of our guys for winning. We'll go regroup. See how many bodies we have for Saturday and see who's available and go play.

Q. Can I ask again back to Marcus, the decision -- what went into letting him start tonight and play a good chunk of the first half. Did he injure again during the first half?

COACH SAMPSON: No. He said he felt funny. You know, going into -- after the game he missed on Sunday, you know, he didn't do anything Monday, or Tuesday, Wednesday. Yesterday was really the first time I really saw him do anything. And we've got a great trainer. And I have been with Marcus for four years. So I trust Marcus and I trust our trainer. I leave those decisions up to them. Marcus knows his body better than anybody in this room, including me. So I would have been fine if Marcus had decided not to play tonight. But he wanted to give it a try because he thought he was at a high enough percentage of 100 that he could. So obviously he got out there and didn't feel like he could, so he shut it down, which is the right thing to do.

Q. You mention toughness. That's such a huge component of your team. Obviously, it's just one game. And you guys win this game and move on. But how do you get back to where you were just a few games ago? Pieces have changed a little, the player have changed a little, but toughness is always the core of everything that you guys do so well.

COACH SAMPSON: Yeah. There's a reason why you spend so much time establishing roles early in the season, as the season progresses. We have roles. And everybody

has a role to play. One of the things that -- one of the beautiful things about our team is how Jamal and Marcus play off each other. They have such a great symmetry and chemistry about them. And Marcus, like, shot clock violations tonight. Are you kidding me? I think we had three. Maybe four. Maybe a couple that should have been. Now some of that is a credit to Northern Kentucky's defense. Some is a credit, everybody trying to move up a weight class. If you are a welterweight, stay a welterweight. You don't get to be a heavy weight because our heavy weight out. He's our best player. He's the most valuable player in our league, he's a First Team All-American. We don't have another Marcus Sasser. But everybody has to stay in their lane. I think everybody is excited when they found out tonight. I didn't know Marcus was going to play this morning. And I would have been fine had he not played. I think our kids got excited and just like they got a little bit let down when he didn't play. You are dealing with emotions now. We're not the team we were that was 31-3 and a 1-seed. The team on the floor tonight is not a 1-seed. The last time we were a 1-seed the team was probably when we played Cincinnati. That team was a 1-seed. Memphis, no. And tonight, no. And we have to figure it out. But that's my responsibility, and I will do the best I can with that.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you.

