

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Auburn vs Houston

Saturday, March 18, 2023

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Legacy Arena

**Houston Cougars**

**Coach Kelvin Sampson**

**Marcus Sasser**

**Tramon Mark**

**Jarace Walker**

Media Conference

Houston - 81, Auburn - 64

THE MODERATOR: We will open the press conference with opening comments from coach Sampson, and then take questions for the players.

COACH SAMPSON: I thought the first half, Auburn played up on their toes. They were getting down hill. Broome was ducking us in. The way we play was obviously not very evident in the first half -- I thought we were playing hard, but I didn't think we were competing. There's a big difference of playing hard versus competing. At halftime, you know, we made a couple adjustments. I don't think anything major. I think the biggest adjustment was in our attitude. Sometimes that's the most important thing. I knew if we could -- I was almost glad it was Auburn's ball first. Because I thought we needed to set the tone with a stop. And then just play the way we've played all year. You know, we have a good team. And we're used to playing on the road. And this felt like a road game. Marcus's second half, you saw how we play. Marcus and Jamal at the point of attack was much better. But I thought our big guys, J'Wan Roberts, Jarace Walker, Reggie, JDA, especially Jarace and J'Wan. Their activity, you know, Bruce likes to run that baseline flex, instead of fighting over the screens we started switching it, that helped. Instead of running our offense set plays, we spaced the floor. And the other thing was composure and poise. Nobody did anything tonight that we haven't seen. You know, this isn't Tramon's team, it's Marcus's team. When Marcus doesn't practice -- we play a certain way when Tramon is in there. When Marcus went out and Jamal went out, we knew exactly what we



were going to do, and Tramon was ready for it because he's a really good player. Tramon is probably our best iso player. Marcus is better playing off Jamal. Jamal is better playing off-ball screens. They all have their weaknesses. But as far as just iso, we stopped couple times. I think it was Jarace or J'Wan ran to set a ball screen for Jamal, and I instructed them to stay flat. So we just one 1-4 flat. That's right in Tramon's wheelhouse. He's a really good one-on-one player. And he's an excellent free throw shooter. Making our free throws the second half, knowing how we wanted to play, no panic, our composure. And then our toughness on defense. You know, we held that team to 4/24; is that right? Second half? 4/24, I think. Something like that. What we were capable of. I mean, we are a good defensive team. You didn't see it the first half, but you did the second half.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for players.

**Q. Tramon, if you could tell us your mind set was when Marcus and Jamal were out there and you were taking them iso. And Marcus I would kind of like your interpretation watching from the bench, watching him take over.**

TRAMON MARK: I just realized that I could get anything I wanted in those iso's, so I just continued to go. And coach trusted me in them, so I continued to go at them, and got what I wanted, got to the free throw line, got to my mid-range, I just got what I wanted.

MARCUS SASSER: My reaction, you know, I see that all the time. I have been seeing that since the summer. So I wasn't really surprised at it. You know, he knew what time it was. Me and Jamal went down, so my reaction was really just, it's time for him to go. And he did what he had to do.

**Q. Marcus, you weren't your typically self out there. How you were feeling going into the game. The early how big was that to get you going?**

MARCUS SASSER: It was, you know, real big, just to get my confidence going. I ain't been really going live in practice. Just to get that, you know, that game feeling, you know, early, it was good. And I felt like it helped me



throughout the game. It was good to hit my first couple shots.

**Q. Marcus, what was halftime like, and what if anything did Kelvin or the coaches say to you guys to get that attitude adjustment that you clearly showed in that second half?**

MARCUS SASSER: We all just hold each other accountable, you know, in this program. That's something we hang our hat on. It wasn't no yelling or anything like that. We just came in, told us to fix our attitude. Don't want to go home. It's me, Reggie, and maybe Walker -- for sure Walker, last year was here. We ain't want to go home. We want this season to go on as long as possible. We went out there, changed our attitude, and came out with the win.

**Q. For all of you y'all, you knew it was going to be a heavy Auburn crowd. There at the end the Houston crowd break out to a Sweet Sixteen chant. What's that like? You are in Auburn's territory but your crowd comes through.**

TRAMON MARK: It's a great feeling being in front of all the fans, all the Auburn fans, knowing that most of the stadium is cheering for Auburn, and knowing we could come out with the W. Pull that victory out in a hostile environment. It's great for us. I'm proud of us. I'm proud of the team. I'm proud of our fans.

MARCUS SASSER: I think we, you know, were comfortable, on the road environment. So I feel like we played with an extra chip on our shoulder. And then our fans, I couldn't thank them enough. They traveled here. And they was big for us.

**Q. This question is for either one of you guys. Did it feel like Auburn was pressing there when they started to miss all those free throws? What was the feeling like on the court when that was happening?**

TRAMON MARK: When they was missing all the free throws, it was just, you know, we were happy they kept missing them. We kept coming down, scoring, and I don't like how we kept fouling them, but they were missing the free throws. It was good for us. Because we were making ours, and they were missing theirs.

THE MODERATOR: Okay, gentlemen, you are dismissed.

**Q. Coach, I know you said that there weren't a ton of halftime adjustments. But what was your message to the team being down like you guys were?**

COACH SAMPSON: Well, right above the three-point line

every day we tape a line down. So our pick-up point, our defense is condensed. You don't ever see us press. You don't ever see us pick-up at half-court. So our pick up point is probably a little bit higher than the three-point line. But underneath that, you know, we try to use pressure as a disruption. And I thought that, you know -- I don't know what we were doing the first half. We were helping them more than were helping ourselves. The Jasper kid -- no, who was that that made the two 3's the first half? Donaldson. Donaldson kid. We don't give up those shots. Those are shots that you just don't get against our defense. And they didn't get them in the second half. We were up on them. You know, sometimes it's not always about fussing and cussing, hollering and yelling. I didn't holler or yell. I just said, "If we will play our defense, we will get back in this game." And so the biggest thing was Shead. I thought Shead was out there BS-ing first half. I thought Marcus's leg or his groin was bothering him laterally. I said, "You are either going to play or not play. If you are going to be out there, you have to guard." So I think both of them were more interested in their injuries than they were competing. So once we got out there and played our defense. We're a good defensive team. Look what we did -- you know, you can look at their free throw percentage all you want, but look at their field goal percentage. That's what changed the game around, we started getting stops way before they started missing free throws.

**Q. That period of time where Sasser and Shead are both on the bench with four fouls a piece, and you kept them on there for a while. But the rest of your team stepped up. Marcus specifically. It seemed like everything that you guys build, that you work for, all season was kind of represented in that moment. Where you're able to keep that lead on the road like this with your two best players, in many ways, remaining on the bench.**

COACH SAMPSON: Yeah. We define our culture the way we define it. You know, people can jeer it or make fun of it all you want. We don't care. We are who we are. These are the moments that define programs. You have to step up in these moments. I think I was most disappointed in our competitiveness in the first half. That first half was ridiculous. And that's taking nothing from Auburn. They played great. But I don't think it took a whole lot to play against the defense we were playing. Second half, we made it hard for them. Hard for them to score. Broome kid is a big kid. And he's pretty good at splitting double teams. But our monsters, our post doubles were much better. How we scrambled out of it was much better. And then once we get going, you know, our defense is always the key for us. You know, whether we're at Oregon or at Virginia, or here, wherever we play, at Memphis. We have always been good on the road, and it's because of our defense and our

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

unity, our togetherness. Our kids do a great job of playing for each other.

THE MODERATOR: Okay, Coach, thanks.