

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Stetson vs UConn

Friday, March 22, 2024

Brooklyn, New York, USA

Barclays Center

Stetson Hatters

Coach Donnie Jones

Stephan Swenson

Jalen Blackmon

Media Conference

UConn 91, Stetson 52

DONNIE JONES: First of all, let me start off by saying thank you to these two guys to the left of me here. You know, Steph and Jalen, what they have meant to this program this season has just been incredible.

What this team, along with these two guys have been able to accomplish at Stetson for the first time in the history of the school is something that cannot be taken away from tonight's performance. I want to start off with that. As much as it hurts that we fell short tonight, I've never been around a group of guys like this. I've had some special teams I've been a part of but these two guys have been so servant, so sacrificial, and so impactful with how they show up every day, and come to a place that has never done it and took a chance on us here. Just want to thank those two guys to start this off.

Q. Can you appreciate what you guys did this year, doing something that had never been done in the history of the program before?

STEPHAN SWENSON: Been here for four years and this year was really special. Every year I've been part of has been special, but this year was a group that understood the sacrifice it takes to make it this far, and it's just been unbelievable what we've been doing. Obviously we fell short tonight, but just appreciate all my teammates and my brothers that made all the sacrifice for this year.

JALEN BLACKMON: Yeah, being around this group has been the best year of my life. I've gotten so close to everybody in the program. And it's tough to lose this



game, but we've done so much this year. It's our first NCAA Tournament, and it was a great year.

Q. Such a big lead so quickly.

JALEN BLACKMON: They are a really good team. This is our first time being in the NCAA Tournament, so maybe a little jitters. But when we settled down, we proved that we could compete with them. So we'll be back, and try to do better next time.

STEPHAN SWENSON: Like he said, obviously the beginning of the game, we never found our rhythm. Kind of hurt ourselves there. But we saw the second half that when we just kind of play our game and play loose and we kind of embrace the stage, great things can happen for us. So it was a great experience.

Q. What are some things you're looking forward to really building on this year? Like you said, jitters this time. How do you plan on building this season and continue to go lead this program?

JALEN BLACKMON: Well, first, we don't want to wait another 52 years or 53 or whatever it was to get back to another NCAA Tournament. We want to make this a thing where we're getting here every year.

And just getting used to it. Getting used to playing in big games like this will be helpful.

Q. What do you think in the second half, you guys had a little bit of run, fan base was into it, every trip down and dunk was a loud experience. What was it like hearing the fans tonight?

DONNIE JONES: Absolutely. You walk in there at halftime, and obviously a lot of guys were discouraged because they felt they didn't get off to a great start. A lot of nervousness. I knew hopefully some shots would go down early for us to break the ice a little bit and get some momentum. Thought we had some stops there and hung around and all of a sudden go down 8-0.

But I thought at halftime, biggest thing I told the guys, pick



your head up, it's 0-0. I wrote it on the board. I don't care about the score right now. I care about how we play for 20 minutes. So pick our head up, you guys made it this far, and we are going to go out and we're going to show everybody that you guys belong here.

So I thought we took a breath, thought we came together. Those guys battled. I wrote the word "proud" on the board because this team has been about pride all year long. We've overcome a lot of stuff on our team. We lost Josh Smith who is an important piece, and we had a lot of different things where guys have stepped up. But these guys have continued to be a team all year long. My biggest thing with them was it's going to be how we finish today, and we're going to be proud when we walk off this floor.

Q. Obviously they are very good, and you could see that from the film. But when you play them, is there something that is, do you think maybe catches your kids off guard a little bit; oh, they are this good, especially when they were really locked in today?

DONNIE JONES: Yeah, outstanding. I mean, you can't create that environment in practice. We could practice for 30 days, and the size, length, athleticism -- in Florida we had those same guys. There's a reason we won national championships because after the first five, there was another five, and they just wear you down with length. They have got a lot of different weapons, big guards.

And so our guys, you know, just trying to learn to play against that. You think you're open, but you're not. The physicality for our guys was at a different level. We have played some teams this year that have that in the Big 12 and different things, but not to the level that we saw today. I give Dan Hurley and the staff credit to what they have done for this team.

Q. You mentioned the Florida teams, so obviously they are getting compared to that, last team to compete. Maybe a cliché question, but can you compare them -- you said there are some similarities, but can you compare the two?

DONNIE JONES: They have got four bigs that can play, which is important, and we have that as well. The other thing they have is experience. I think they have got a lot of guys -- some guys that have been a part of that. I know they lost some pieces, but they have five guys averaging double figures, which we had.

So it's not one or two guys that's going to get you to the Finals. It's going to be your team, who can score on a given night. So they are very efficient offensively. They

don't beat themselves. They rebound. They defend. They do a great job. Obviously they are terrific, their staff is terrific, well-coached.

So that doesn't guarantee you are going to win it, but it gives you a chance. We always felt, can you put yourself in that circle and have a shot. And with those kind of weapons, I could see them having a great opportunity for that.

Q. Seems like you guys came out with more energy at halftime. Do you think so, and what was your message at halftime?

DONNIE JONES: Yeah, yeah, as I mentioned earlier, my message was, you know, just about those guys, 0-0 at halftime. Pride was what I wrote on the board. Did not care about the score at that point. Just wanted our guys to go out and show the level that we could play at that got us here, and to go out and have no regret in these last 20 minutes.

So I thought those guys manned together. They are a different group. This group wasn't picked to win. This group believes in themselves, all the way to the final buzzer. I told these guys they are a special group with how they continue to handle themselves through winning and losing.

There's no loss with our group tonight. The victory has already been won. The brotherhoods, the relationships, the stories these guys will have for a lifetime, the history they made at Stetson. To see the fan base change at Stetson, how the university has come together, it's only going to rise. We are thankful they have been the pioneers to take this place, this school, to a place they have never seen before.

Q. First of all, what are the last 12 days like for you? You were one of the first teams to clinch a berth? Got to enjoy it.

DONNIE JONES: Yeah, we did. We had a celebration, which was great. We had a lot of practice time, believe it or not. Maybe we didn't look like it in the first half. But it was a great community opportunity for us and our school to really celebrate this milestone that we accomplished.

Q. The fans were pretty into it the second half, came up a long way from Florida. What's it like sharing that with them?

DONNIE JONES: Yeah, absolutely. Thanks for asking that question because I love to talk about that. I love to just thank the Hatter fans, our administration, Jeff Altier,

our athletic director, for believing in me and giving me a chance here, our president, Roellke.

Just thankful for what -- these past players, past fans, past students, it has been humbling to see the amount of people that's come out and celebrated this year in New York, all across the country, parades on our way out of town.

I have never seen such a community come together during this situation. It's been very, very humbling.

Q. I don't want to make you sound like a broken record, sounds like you are very happy with how they went out, but you've been discussing pride since the start of the second half. Did the guys give you that?

DONNIE JONES: They did. I definitely felt like we accomplished that and that's who we were this whole season. This group was a unique group. This is a group here that never quit regardless of the score. They have been very resilient. There's a lot of tears in that locker room. There's a lot of respect in that locker room. These guys truly love each other and there's something we don't see in teams a lot.

A lot of guys are individuals. They play for themselves and even some teams that are winning, they are not tight like this. But this group, really come together and really believed.

Thank you so much. Appreciate it.

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