

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - SIU Edwardsville vs Houston

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Wichita, Kansas, USA

Intrust Bank Arena

Houston Cougars
Kelvin Sampson
Emanuel Sharp
L.J. Cryer
J'Wan Roberts
Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: With us on the dais is L.J. Cryer, J'Wan Roberts, Emanuel Sharp. Questions, please.

Q. J'Wan, the obvious question for you is how is the ankle doing? Do you expect to play tomorrow, this weekend? What's your availability look like?

J'WAN ROBERTS: I'm doing pretty good. Being in a lot of treatment and just taking it day by day, so I can be 100% for tomorrow.

Q. When you guys throw on the film of SIUE, what do you see? What do you notice?

L.J. CRYER: Obviously they're a really good team. You got to be a pretty good team to get in this tournament. You know, they have a lot of guys that could create for themselves. They play well together. You know, they kind of push the pace a little bit on offense, and they're a pretty good rebounding team, so...

J'WAN ROBERTS: Yeah, they have some really good guards. They throw a lot of defenses out there to have you on your toes, you know, make you make decision. They play hard, and I think their greatest strength is playing with each other and trusting each other and making the right play.

EMANUEL SHARP: Pretty much more of the same thing. They play hard. They crash the glass. They've got a lot of guys that can score the ball, create for themselves, and they just play well together. They won their conference



tournament, and they're in March, so they're a good team.

Q. Just wanted to get your perspective on what the pressure of being a No. 1 seed is like and how you guys approach that?

EMANUEL SHARP: I don't think it's no pressure. You know, we're used to being a good team in the tournament. We're grateful to be put in this position every year. So as long as we play true to ourselves, you know, play hard-nosed basketball and compete, there's no reason to play with pressure.

As long as we go out there and do what we're supposed to do, we're able to play freely and with a free mind.

J'WAN ROBERTS: I feel like for the opposing team, knowing that you are the No. 1 seed, it's more urgency to want to win and to want to beat that No. 1 seed because it's been a lot of 16 seeds beat No. 1 seeds all the time.

I feel like going into this game we're going to get everybody's best shot, no matter what round it is. So I just feel like as a team us just coming in mentally prepared and just focusing on what the main goal is.

L.J. CRYER: Like he said, we're a 1 seed and definitely going to get everybody's best shot, but at the end of the day we try not to focus on what other people are saying. We kind of just stay in our own little bubble. I feel like that eliminates a lot of the pressure.

Q. I think there's three of you guys that are left from that Final Four team a few years ago. I think Kelvin might be maybe one of the best coaches never to win a national championship. You've gotten real close. What would it mean to you guys to be the team that was able to do that for him?

J'WAN ROBERTS: It would definitely mean a lot. I feel like he put in so much love and effort into this game. You know, he's been everywhere, especially winning-wise.

I feel like it's one more accolade that he needs to solidify everything. We're going to try our hardest to give him that one last push.



THE MODERATOR: Head Coach Kelvin Sampson is with us.

Please, Kelvin.

KELVIN SAMPSON: The thing I would say about our kids is I think our strength comes from our team. I don't know that we have one guy that stands out and says, well, this guy is definitely their best player. I think we have a lot of guys that are pretty good, veterans, some new guys. Have been competitive every day in practice. They understand what a program is versus having a good team. Then their consistency day in and day out.

The season always offers opportunities for growth. I think kids that want to get better, put the team before themselves, care more about winning than statistics, those teams usually tend to do pretty good.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. A little off topic, but I hope you can indulge me. In 2018 you came here with Houston. You beat San Diego State in the first round and then got to Michigan and gave them all they could handle. That was the first time you guys had been in the tournament with Houston. I'm curious, going back to that, if you remember, did getting in the second round maybe help you in terms of progress with the program, credibility, all those sorts of things?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I just remember how pissed off I was. I don't remember all that fancy stuff you just said. I remember how crushing it was for that group of kids.

Saying that we gave them all they could handle is an understatement, and we led by -- we were up by four with under a minute to go, were up by three with under 30 seconds to go, up by two. Then we went to the free-throw line to ice the game, had a chance to go up four. Missed. John (Beilein) calls a time-out, and their kid hits an amazing shot down two. I think it was 44 feet, 42 feet at the buzzer.

So I remember that.

What was the last part of your question?

Q. Just getting to the second round as opposed to if you lost in the first round, does that give more credence to the season or help you establish yourself, do you think?

KELVIN SAMPSON: That year?

Q. For the program.

KELVIN SAMPSON: I don't know about that. You know, Houston was in such horrible shape when we got there. You know, the apathy, nobody caring, having to fight for scraps and scrums and doing all that. No one will ever have an idea of how difficult it was that first year.

People that just showed up this year, last year, they have no clue. I can't even relate to them, and they can't relate to me either. Making the tournament that year gave us hope. I always thought that was the most important word in the Bible, hope. Hope is an amazing thing.

And it gave us credibility that we were on the verge of doing something. I think we went from we were 13-19 our first year. That year we won 27, if I'm not mistaken. Then we kind of took off from there.

We were at the bottom of the American when we started in every way. Then by the year you're talking about, we were moving up the food chain. Memphis, Connecticut, Cincinnati, SMU, those were all national programs at the time. Then we added another national program with I think a really good brand name in Wichita State. So it made the conference. It was a great basketball conference then.

My first year Connecticut was coming off the national championship, but SMU was the best team in the league. Memphis, Cincinnati was the bell cow. I thought they had the most consistent program. One of the most consistent in America.

Then when we added Wichita State, we added another great basketball brand. So for us to be able to accomplish that in that league and as consistent as we were, I think told us we were on the right path.

Q. Coach, Brian Barone was talking about your guys' long-term relationship, your families. Could you just speak to that a little bit?

KELVIN SAMPSON: So my first year at Oklahoma, I think my first two or three years we were in the old Big 8, which shows you how old I am, I guess. It was just eight schools.

Then I think in 1997 we went from the Big 8 to the Big 12. That very first year I remember going to Texas A&M, and they played in this old, old gym called G. Rollie White. I remember them building the new one they're in now. I remember when they started construction on that thing.

Their coach was Tony Barone. The next couple of years their point guard was Brian Barone. Tony was a character, excellent coach, but really good for the game I thought.



Brian was just a tough, hard-nosed, scrappy winner. He did all the things you would want a point guard to do.

So Tony and I became good friends. Then when I was in the NBA for those years, he was with the Memphis Grizzlies. I think we got to be closer after that.

Tons of respect for that program. Brian and my son, Kellen, are really good friends. I know he's visited with us on different occasions. I'm just thrilled for him.

I haven't seen him, but I would tell him how proud his mother and father would be.

Q. You noticed the SEC with 14 teams out of one league. You said you've been around a while and seen many of those years myself. Thoughts on one league having that many teams? Not to get too far advanced, but a lot of teams look at the whole bracket when they go into a weekend. Do you know anything about Asa Newell or comment --

KELVIN SAMPSON: I wouldn't comment, but I will comment on Ray'Sean Taylor, if you want to talk about him. Do you know who he is? He's the best player for SIUE. He's pretty good.

Q. (Off microphone).

KELVIN SAMPSON: I think they got what they deserved. It's easy to attack a league when you don't know a whole lot about them, but I saw Texas play. Texas deserved to be in the tournament. If you play in that league, somebody is going to have a losing record, and you may have gotten beat at the buzzer.

The difference in -- how many conference games do they play, 18? So the difference in 6-12 and 9-9 might be three possessions. So it's not fair to say here's what their record is without knowing context.

I've seen all of them play. They're all NCAA Tournament teams. Some of the teams that didn't make the Tournament out of that league probably could win a game in the Tournament. Maybe two.

Last year I thought the best conference in the country was the Big 12. This year I think it's the SEC.

Q. You talked about when the Shockers joined the American. Is there anything that stands out about those games against the Shockers when they were there, and what was it like playing in Koch Arena?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Awesome fan base. Awesome fan

base. Tough games. Excellent history. Great basketball history.

You know, when I was the head coach at Oklahoma, I knew a lot about Wichita State and the state of Kansas. It's a great basketball state. I'm not just talking about Division I schools. I'm talking about the junior colleges.

Back in the day this is where it was at, man. I remember going to, is it Fort Scott? Fort Scott, walking up those fire escape stairs to Chris Beard's office recruiting one of his kids. The gym was separated in two compartments. One was the -- you had a rodeo on the other one, so you smelled all that cow crap and horse stuff, and on the other side was the gym. I was sitting there watching a kid play, and all I could hear was the cows mooing. I said, Where the hell am I? Oh, I'm at Fort Scott (laughing).

Garden City, Neosho. Unless you are a basketball guru, you wouldn't know some of the places that I've been in the state of Kansas. I always had a ton of respect for Kansas State basketball. Obviously Roy (Williams) and Bill (Self). Then Wichita State has always had great tradition, great name, and that Roundhouse is the toughest place to play as anybody.

Q. Just for Wichita State you talked about the history. A bit of a down sling since all of the national rankings and everything --

KELVIN SAMPSON: What is this, an infomercial for Wichita State?

Q. For you to be a top 10 team when you were playing in the American as a midmajor, what do they have to do to replicate that success in the American?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Win. That's a short way of saying that's the answer. Win.

Q. You referenced Ray'Sean Taylor. Can you talk a little bit about his game and how you guys hope to slow him down tomorrow?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, I would start by the story. I think his story is what's special about him, overcoming two ACL surgeries and the relationship between the coach and the player, which most people don't know.

People on the outside looking in have no idea what the coach and the players go through when nobody else is around, but for Brian to have that relationship with him and for Ray'Sean to show loyalty and commitment to SIUE and to Brian and his staff tells you a lot about that young man.



A lot of guys wouldn't come back from one. Very few would come back from two. Not only did he come back, he's the Player of the Year in that league.

I always ask my staff to give me a comp, you know, on teams and players. Who is his comp? What would his comp be? A kid that was probably a month ago was one of the top three or four players in the Big 12 was Javon Small from West Virginia and this Ray'Sean Taylor reminds us a lot of him. That's high cotton because Javon Small is First Team All-Big 12 and Ray'Sean is that kind of player.

Q. A couple of weeks ago you mentioned about how Milos, you needed him to be meaner. I was curious, what is the process of that?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I didn't mention that a couple of weeks ago. I mentioned that seven months ago... June, July, August, September, October. First thing I noticed about him when we first started in June and July, he never fouled. I said, son, we foul a lot. You got to learn to foul.

But, you know, sometimes the coaches get way too much credit when kids do well. I would give the credit for his development a lot to our players. This culture that we have has been here for a long time, since well before we started getting in the tournament eight years ago.

All of our returning players, L.J., J'Wan, Emanuel, Joe Joe, Ramone Walker and Mylik Wilson, all of those guys that returned, they had as much to do with his success as any of the coaches. This is very much a player-led program, which usually are the best programs because that means they're holding each other accountable.

I probably need this team more than this team needs me actually.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

