

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

Saturday, March 22, 2025

Wichita, Kansas, USA

Intrust Bank Arena

Houston Cougars

Kelvin Sampson

L.J. Cryer

J'Wan Roberts

Media Conference

Houston 81, Gonzaga 76

THE MODERATOR: The Houston Cougars are with us. They're on their way to the Sweet 16. We have Kelvin Sampson, L.J. Cryer, J'Wan Roberts. We'll begin with a statement from Coach.

KELVIN SAMPSON: First of all, congratulations to Mark and Gonzaga's program. They're a tremendous role model for everybody. The consistency that they've had. That's why winning the game is significant. It's not just winning the game. It's being a great program like Gonzaga.

That was a high-level, high-level 1-8 game because they were not an 8 seed. That was a game that would have been awesome in the Elite Eight or Final Four. Gonzaga is really good. Ike, Huff, Nembhard, Battle, the way they just kept battling.

We made some bonehead plays. We were up 14 and Tugler made an unnecessary play. I wish they had not called that, but you almost have to because of the rules. They have to enforce the rules. I mean, that's why they're there. Hopefully the young man that did that -- it's just unnecessary. It had no bearing on the play or the game. Nothing. It was a nothing play, but what he did, he gave the referees no choice, and I told him that.

You know, we had a big enough lead. Made a couple of boneheaded plays down the stretch, but I'm not going to sit here and go through that this time of year. It's about advancing.

Proud of our guys. Cryer and Roberts played the way they



played all year. I mean, they're both first team All Big 12 players. Cryer is an All American and Wan is the winningest player in the history of University of Houston basketball.

Very blessed that I get to coach these two young men. Survive and advance, right?

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Coach, you talked a little bit about the relationship you have with Few going back to the Wazu days. He's now a finalist for the Hall of Fame. Did you see that in him all those years ago, and how remarkable of a story is his career?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, it is a great story. No, I didn't see that all those years ago. I didn't know what the Hall of Fame was all those years ago. You've got to remember, I was the head coach when I was 31. Who hires a 31-year-old, right? Just think of all the people that had to turn the job down to get to me.

But Mark is -- Dan Monson, I coached a USA team. I think we went to Halifax, Nova Scotia. I remember Chris Paul was our point guard, but Dan Monson was my assistant, and that's when I got really close to him.

I always knew him through his dad, but really just fell in love with Dan on that trip and Mark hasn't changed. He's still the same humble guy that we all started together on the Palouse, and I'm proud of that. I'm proud that I started on the southwest mountains of Montana and southeastern Washington seven miles from Idaho's campus. I'm proud that I came from that, and I'm proud that Mark and I have grown.

Just like Karen and I, Marcy and Mark, our wives have meant so much to us. There's no chance we're where we are without our wives. Mark would be the first to tell you that.

Q. Coach, what made them so hard to really pull away from and put away tonight? Then, also, what did you say to Khalif Battle at the end of the game in the handshake line?



KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, first of all, they didn't miss any free-throws. They were 15 for 15. That's a pretty good recipe, and they're good.

KenPom analytics are pretty spot on. That's the eighth or ninth best team in the country. They should have never been seeded where they were seeded. I get the analytical component, but I also think the eye test should come into play too.

You look at that team. I mean, we just came from the Big 12. We're in a league with Kansas, Iowa State, all those schools. Gonzaga is as good as anybody we've played all year. Personnel-wise too, Ike and Huff, Nembhard, I mean, that's a really good team. Had they been seeded somewhere else, that's a team that probably has the chance to get to the Elite Eight, maybe even Final Four. They're that good. Why we couldn't pull away is, number one, let's give them credit. They kept playing.

We made a couple of turnovers that we can't make down the stretch. Missed some free-throws you can't miss. We're missing free-throws, and they're making free-throws. That's a pretty good recipe for a lead shrinking.

I was proud of our guys for finding a way. I think in the last five or six years we've played Ohio State, Rutgers. Who else have we played, Wan, in this game? Texas A&M. No. Rutgers, Syracuse. It seemed like we're always playing a really good team in this Round of 32.

Like I said, Gonzaga, I mean, the respect I have for them is a little bit different because I grew up with them a little bit, and I know how good they are. I know how much respect Mark and his staff -- Tommy Lloyd is in our league now. What Tommy is doing and will do at Arizona is going to be unbelievable.

You know, to beat the best says a lot about your program, so proud of my kids. Proud that we found a way to win the tough game, and that's what this tournament is about this time of year. I'll sit around and analyze it or spend ten minutes on how we lost a lead. No, just win and advance. That's all that matters.

Q. J'Wan, you and Graham really had a big battle down low. What can you do offensively against him? He had 27. He had 18. It was a great matchup in the front court. Just comment on that.

J'WAN ROBERTS: Going into the game, we knew they wasn't going to help off our shooters, which is the main goal. I think playing to the short roll and shooting the shot that I rep every day, I just tried to continue to shoot that shot.

Ike is pretty good. He can score on both blocks. It was a good matchup. He was hard to guard, but I feel like at the end of the day we kind of still did the job, though. You just find a way to win, like Coach said.

Q. Coach, to look at the level of success this program has had over the years knowing that the collegiate model has changed with NIL and the transfer portal, just what can you say to sustaining success and the next-man-up approach year in and year out for Houston continuing to go deep into this tournament?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, I think it starts with our staff. You know, our staff has been together. The way we run our program, I like the fact that we run our program independent of anything else. We make all our decisions in house, and that's why we're winning. That's important.

You know, basketball coaches got to know how to run this program, and he's got to have the leeway to make the decision, especially if you are winning. I work at a university that allows me to make my own decisions for this program.

Kellen, Quannas, who just had a -- he'll become the new head coach at University of Louisiana, and he'll kill it, by the way. Really proud of him and the opportunity he has, but what our staff does with our player development, you know, we don't really live in the portal. I believe in it, though. You know, this year we only took one portal kid, and that was Milos. Everybody else returned.

Year before that we took two... L.J. and Damian. We've always believed in recruiting high school kids and developing them, and that's how we've had a great culture.

I think two of the great cultures in our country is Gonzaga and Houston, and I think that's one of the reasons why they've been to the Sweet 16, what is it, nine in a row, right? Who does that? I mean, who does that? Please don't take them for granted. They're just awesome. I mean, I have so much respect for them.

This is number six for us, and I hope people don't take this for granted either. The staffs and the program, the players at those schools have to be high-character kids that care more about winning than statistics.

You asked me about Khalid Battle. We played against him when he was at Temple. First of all, I admire the young man for choosing to go to Gonzaga, because that tells me winning is important.

A lot of guys jump in the portal because they're not getting



enough shots, not getting enough touches. They don't care about winning. When Battle chose to go to play for Mark and his staff, it shows some maturity because it's not easy to go somewhere where you are going to get coached the right way.

He'll benefit from this. Those tears at the end of the game told me how much he cared and how much this mattered to him. It's always a little sad because we were there last year when we lost to Duke, but proud of our guys. Gonzaga is not going anywhere. They'll be back.

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