

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - NC State vs Texas Tech

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

PPG Paints Arena

NC State Wolfpack Coach Kevin Keatts Ben Middlebrooks D.J. Burns, Jr.

Media Conference

NC State - 80, Texas Tech - 67

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, what a great game, and obviously we played against a really good, well-coached Texas Tech team, and they pushed us to the limit. Though we had an incredible size advantage, when you look at D.J. Burns and you look at the way Ben played and then Mo, I thought those guys really delivered for us inside and did a lot of good things. We got stronger in the second half. We started defending. In the first half was more of an offensive game and we decided to sit down and defend and did some good things and we completely did the game throughout our post. Went inside out and it really worked for us. Questions?

Q. Ben, 21 points, season high. Was there anything particular about this match-up or about the game flow that you were able to pick up on? You had a very strong half, obviously continued into the second half as well.

BEN MIDDLEBROOKS: Yes, sir. I gotta give a lot of credit to the guards. You got D.J. Horne drawing attention to himself, drawing traps and things like that, makes it easy for pick and rolls. Michael O'Connell, the vision he has being able to find me on some of those things for easy layups. I mean, they really just make it easy so I gotta give a lot of that to them.

Q. D.J. and Ben, yesterday your coach said that he was going to have to maybe come up with something because it's not an ACC team, some kind of motivation, compare Texas Tech to an ACC team to give you guys an edge. What did you find, what kind



of motivation did you find going up against a team that you didn't know very well before tonight?

D.J. BURNS, JR.: To be honest, our coaches gave us all we needed. They gave us all the tools. The way they handled the scout they did really well and we did a great of job of being able to execute the things that set up for us.

BEN MIDDLEBROOKS: They definitely seemed to give us a great game plan. Really, a key point of that was just to be ourselves, play our type of game and we knew if we did that we'd have a good outcome.

Q. D.J., you have obviously been a crowd favorite the last couple of weeks or the last week, and every time you touch the ball it feels the energy gets higher. What is your mindset when that happens and how does it affect you?

D.J. BURNS, JR.: It's an awesome feeling, whether they're cheering or not, my mindset is going to be find a good shot and get my teammates involved in a way that can win games and it's nice to know they trust in me and believe this everything we're trying to do here and it just happened to be me tonight.

Q. Ben, you were in there most of the time when Warren Washington was kind of out there. Did you kind of make a concentrated effort to kind of test him knowing he hadn't been out there for a little while? Was there a little extra there for you?

BEN MIDDLEBROOKS: Absolutely. We knew he had been out for a good number of games. So it was absolutely we were trying to kind of see what we could do, how much of a percent he was back. But honestly, really we just had to focus on trying to get through our game plan. It really wasn't too much of a focus on what they were doing, more what we needed to do to succeed.

Q. D.J., so when you go out with foul trouble and you see what Ben does, how does that make you feel to see him backing you up when you're in foul trouble?

D.J. BURNS, JR.: That gives me life, man. When you see



someone at the same position as you who is giving you that, it makes you better. I can't go out there and not play my best and he's going out there giving it his all. That would be letting him and my team down.

Q. As you heard Coach Keatts said, you guys got strong in the second half. You played five games in five days. Tech came in with an extra day of rest. Were there any concerns about stamina and what was able propel you in that second half where this came from a close game to a double digit lead fairly quickly?

D.J. BURNS, JR.: I don't think that was the focus too much. You definitely don't want to sit and be lazy after winning a game -- the games the way we did last week. But I think the coaches did a good job of keeping us moving, focusing on what's next and we'll celebrate after the season is over.

BEN MIDDLEBROOKS: Absolutely. I mean we've heard a lot about fatigue through our ACC tournament run. And even now, no matter how many times people keep saying it it seems like we keep getting stronger with every game we play, so try and keep that going.

Q. D.J., you're getting a lot more attention from outside of your program. You have fans cheering when you get the ball, booing when you don't get the ball. How do you react to all this and what's happened to your stardom over the last week?

D.J. BURNS, JR.: I think it's awesome. It's a great feeling, when people are behind you. But you try not to get too high or too low. I think it's awesome, but that's not what makes us win. So I want to still stay focused, even though I do enjoy it a lot.

MODERATOR: Questions for Coach Keatts.

Q. Asked you yesterday about how you were game planning with Warren and without Warren. What were you guys trying to get accomplished with him out there?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, you know, he's such a unique target offensively. So we sacrificed a little bit of giving up a few threes because we wanted to go under all the ball screens so he didn't have the ability to rim run. I thought he got loose on us a couple of times, but he's such a big target and those guards do a really good job of getting it in the paint and throwing it up to him late. So we knew the way he scores we had to change our ball screen coverage a little bit to take away his rim runs.

Q. It felt like earlier in the season the ball would stick a

little more like one guy, but now, especially since the ACC tournament run there's been a lot of ball movement and different guys scoring like tonight, like four different guys in double figures. All three of your big men were scoring and obviously the guards were helping facilitate that. What's gone into that?

KEVIN KEATTS: I just think we were following game plans. When you got transfers, I know people think it's supposed to happen right away. We lost 34 points from our guards, and it took us a little time just to get clicking on both ends of the floor and understanding scouting reports. Like that's the one thing from the ACC tournament and here we've really understood. We thought we had an advantage throwing the ball inside, and it worked out. We got 49 points. I think it's 49 from our post play, and that was because we were very aggressive and guys were understanding.

So we're going to make some mistakes, yes, but we're going to limit our mistakes, and one of them is the ball sticking. We gotta move the ball. We talk about a lot of player and ball movement.

Q. Coach, Texas Tech is a strong three-point shooting team. What were you able to do defensively to limit them 7 to 31 tonight?

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, I thought we did a good job on pop. Pop's been good. He was one for ten for three. I think they had taken 14 at the half, and I told the team they would at least take 30 and they did. But that's so much of a big part of their offense, and we wanted to be there on the catch and take them away, and I thought our guys did a good job guarding the three-point line.

Q. Kevin, how much fun is it for you to see D.J. when he gets the ball on the post and the crowd starts going crazy. It's just built up so much more over the last couple weeks. What's that like for you as a coach on the sideline?

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, he was a local star for a whole year and now everybody in the national media is starting to understand that. I mean, he's just fun. He scores and he gets beat up all the time. And he's almost gotta play through contact. But it is so fun to watch him. And you know, I consider him a closer for us. We put him in the game and he closes the game. And it's so tough because every coach that we play against, he's gotta a major decision: Are you going to trap him or are you going to let him play one on one? And we've seen it different ways. And tonight they let him play one on one and he kind of started off slow, but got going at the end.



Q. Coach, can you talk about Mohamed Diarra's growth through the ACC tournament tonight, excellent on the boards, contributing offensively. From the beginning of this season to where he is now, has any player taken as big a leap as he has?

KEVIN KEATTS: No. He's grown. And I'll say this. Our league, he's battle tested. We got a great league, and going through the ACC, playing 20 games in the ACC, and obviously the tournament has really helped Mo grow. And he's become the forward that we expected, can pick and pop. Can handle a little bit, can be a really good defender, can score around the basket. And I think just playing against the great players in our league has really helped him grow to this point where he's at right now.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

KEVIN KEATTS: Thanks, guys.

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