

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Yale vs Texas A&M

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Denver, Colorado, USA

Ball Arena

Yale Bulldogs

Coach James Jones

Bez Mbeng

John Poulakidas

Media Conference

Texas A&M 80, Yale 71

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Yale. We'll get some comments from coach.

JAMES JONES: First of all, I'd like to congratulate Texas A&M. I thought they played a great game. Buzz does a great job. Really good group of young men he has there that play really hard.

In terms of our team, I couldn't be prouder of our effort today. It wasn't our best performance. For us to be successful in a game at this level, a lot of things have to go right. We have to make our free throws. We have to take better care of the ball. We didn't do those things tonight.

What didn't dwindle was our energy and our effort. These two seniors here, John and Bez, have led us through thick and thin throughout their four years. They've been tremendous assets to our program. One of my assistant coaches, Justin Simon, said it, they came into a winning program and they helped bring us to another level. They won four championships in their time at Yale. As I said, I couldn't be prouder of them and their effort as well as their teammates'.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Bez, the rebounding battle. You kept Texas A&M to within the one rebound margin in the first half, open up that gap in the second half. What changed in how they approached that?



BEZ MBENG: As far as our approach, we knew that they were big on the glass, a great offensive rebounding team. We put a big emphasis on that coming into the game. We did a good job, credit to our team, on that in the first half.

In the second half, we had some foul trouble going on. I feel like that was the big piece of that. But overall I guess some of the balls just went their way. I don't know. I guess they out-hustled us on some of them, as well. Credit to them on that, yeah.

Q. John, can you talk about what you'll remember most of being a Bulldog, proudest moments on this team.

BEZ MBENG: My brothers, man. Me and John came in our freshman year, like the bond. Just crazy. We saw how much each of us loved it, loved the game. We just put so much time in. We just (tearing up). Oh, my gosh.

JOHN POULAKIDAS: Yeah, man, it's just a camaraderie. We built a brotherhood here (tearing up). Thinking that this is the last game I'm going to put a Yale jersey on with Bez Mbeng just breaks my heart. It just breaks my heart (tearing up).

I'm so grateful for Yale for giving me everything that it has. I'm grateful to Coach Jones for everything he's given me. It's just a brotherhood. All the trips, the bus rides, the dinners, the early mornings, the late nights. Everything.

Q. John and Bez, Coach Jones spoke a moment ago about how proud he was of both of y'all. You've been here during the most successful era in Yale basketball history. What has it meant to have Coach James Jones and this staff with you during the four years? How will you carry these lessons as you continue on?

JOHN POULAKIDAS: It's meant everything to us. Coach Jones, Coach Kingsley, Coach Simon, Coach Paul is now at Boston, Coach Sherrrod who is with us now, they've played pivotal roles in our development, not just as basketball players, but as young men. They've done a tremendous job at letting us grow into our ourselves as young men. They've given us a great deal of rope that has fostered a certain sense of creativity in all of us.

They've been so pivotal in our development, not just as basketball players, but as human beings.

THE MODERATOR: We'll dismiss the student-athletes at this time. Thank you, guys.

Questions for Coach Jones.

Q. I assume when you play Texas A&M, most opponents focus on Wade Taylor. I don't know if that was the case for y'all. If it was, did the impact that Pharrel had inside, did that catch y'all off guard or were y'all prepared for him?

JAMES JONES: As has been stated, we got in a little foul trouble. Samson Aletan ended up playing 15 minutes in the game. We just didn't have the size, the matchup against him inside. Didn't take us by surprise. We didn't think that Samson was going to be limited to 15 minutes. The young man had a great game.

If we went out and played again tomorrow, I'm not certain if he had those similar numbers. But today he had a really good game against us, and credit to him and their team. I heard Buzz talking about his teammates finding him and him being able to go up and finish. He had a real nice game. As I say, credit to him.

Q. Texas A&M likes to muck it up in a game. Were you kind of surprised that they came out with that kind of tempo on the offensive end?

JAMES JONES: I'm not certain what you're referring to in terms of their tempo.

Q. A lot faster than what they normally operate.

JAMES JONES: No. I wasn't surprised about anything that they did. I thought the game started, and they looked to me what I saw on tape for the most part, the games I watched. They looked very similar. They were getting into that three-quarter court press, back to switching to man-to-man. Played a little matchup zone, a few possessions of that. It looked similar.

Offensively they had opportunities to take shots, try to score. I thought it was basically about the same what they've been doing all year.

Q. You got within six. Texas A&M called a timeout. They responded with the run. Did you feel like you captured momentum at that point? Why do you feel like you weren't able to sustain it?

JAMES JONES: So right after that happened, right after

the timeout, they banged a three, they got an offensive rebound putback. That just pushed momentum back to their side.

Again, in these games, you have to be almost perfect, right, to get it done. So we wasn't perfect, so herein lies a loss.

At the end of the first half, I thought was the biggest momentum problem we had. I think we had it to five. We missed two free throws, we missed a layup. And then they hit a three-pointer at the buzzer for the halftime. Instead of it being like a three-point, two-point, one-point game, it was an 11-point game. That's a huge difference. We won the second half by two points. If we do a better job of finishing off the first half, who knows what happens.

Q. Can you reflect on John and Bez and the rest of the senior class, what they've meant to the program.

JAMES JONES: Yeah, you saw how emotional those two young men got. I'll tell you this. There are few people that put as much time and effort into their craft as those two guys. They care much about each other and their teammates as much as these two guys do.

I'm reflecting back on them, they're two wonderful young men. John is a character. More funny than you would expect. Just being around him has been great over the four years, watching him grow. I remember when I was a freshman telling him he would lead us in scoring someday. He didn't play much as a freshman. We were in NCAAs against Purdue. I don't even know if he played in that game. I told him one day he would be our leading scorer. Four years later he's the leading scorer in the league.

Bez, his whole life people told him about his scoring, he couldn't do it. He put in time and effort. Increased his three-point shooting, points per game. They've had a wonderful run at Yale. They will certainly be missed next year.

Q. You mentioned Samson getting into foul trouble. How much did that specifically impact things for Texas A&M the way Payne was able to operate in the paint?

JAMES JONES: Yeah, size matters, right? Size matters in the game. We don't double the post much at all. And we didn't. Nick Townsend, who is like one of the best college basketball players I've ever been around, tough and gritty, I've said this before, if you were to cut him open, you might find a metal skeleton. He's like The Terminator kind of guy. He's only 6'5", going up against a guy who is 6'11". Was very difficult for him to guard that.

Having Samson, not that body on body, made it difficult for us to be able to stop him at the basket. He goes 10 for 12 because of that. That hurt us.

Those things happen. We have a young man that's coming in next year, seven foot, so we have more size. I think in this case it mattered a lot.

Q. Can you talk about the contributions you got from your first years tonight.

JAMES JONES: Riley Fox was tremendous. He came in the game. He's happy-go-lucky kid. He doesn't realize he's playing in the NCAA tournament I don't think because he didn't care. The ball hit his hands, he was going to shoot it as quick as he got. That was really good for him.

Isaac Celiscar has been tremendous for us. He's been really good for us all year long. I actually would have liked him to be more aggressive tonight than he was offensively because he's that caliber of player. Much like Nick Townsend who played limited minutes last year because of the people we had in front of him, Isaac played limited minutes. I suspect those are going to increase next year.

Both players are going to be really good for us, as well as Jordan Brathwaite, who you got a little glimpse of. Next year and beyond I expect those guys to be part of our program and sitting up here with us the next time we're in the NCAA tournament.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much, coach.

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