

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - UAB vs San Diego State

Friday, March 22, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena

UAB Blazers

Andy Kennedy

Yaxel Lendebord

Lamont "Butta" Johnson

Media Conference

SDSU - 69, UAB - 65

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

ANDY KENNEDY: First of all, congratulations to San Diego State. You know, when you see your name pop up on that line and we had to -- we knew that our only opportunity to participate in this tournament was to get the automatic bid. We get that automatic bid on Sunday through great play from my guys, earn the right to be here, and then you see San Diego State pop up. Great respect for the job that started with Steve Fisher and now continues with Brian Dutcher.

As you start preparing for an uncommon opponent, the thing that just pops out at you is their physicality, their toughness, how they literally give you zero free. I think, honestly, that has allowed them to continue to play on in this tournament. Really, really tough. We had no answer for LeDee. Congratulations to them.

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

Q. Yaxel, how difficult was dealing with the foul trouble in the first half and how frustrating was it when you had to sit over there for awhile?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: It was terrible for it to be such a physical game. I feel like if I was to touch anybody in any type of way, it would be a foul. But that's maybe just me making excuses and getting in my head. But I tried to



match LeDee's physicality. As soon as I did, boom, foul, and it messes with my head all game. It took me awhile to even start being aggressive again because I was scared of the charge call or anything with just messing up for my team anymore than I already did.

But hopefully, next year we'll be back in the same position and I can avoid that foul trouble and we can get out with a win.

Q. Yaxel, on that last sequence, you guys are in man and you decide to front. Take me through that. What was the decision there and what are your thoughts when you see the ball going over?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: Yeah, well, what we were practicing pretty much is I'll be fronting him and then once the ball gets thrown over, I get around him and get behind him in a defensive position. But it was kind of hard to do that when I get shoved a little bit, but no complaints. I tried to get over there. I jumped. I guess I fouled him. So that was on my end for not getting there quick enough.

Q. You're down 12 early in the second half. What did you feel like you did really well during that stretch to get back in the game and take the lead?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: Butta stepped up big-time. He started making a lot of tough shots for the team and so were the other players. At first, the shots weren't falling and we weren't playing aggressive with the ball and we started to pick it up a little bit more and started making the extra pass and just handling those tough shots. That's what gave us the energy to keep fighting.

EFREM "BUTTA" JOHNSON: Yeah, I think I was able to knock down a couple shots to bring the lead back down and bring energy to the team, to the people on the floor, guys on the floor, guys on the bench. And once we started to make a little run, we started to come together, play as one, offensively and defensively, and we felt like in that moment, we had 'em, we had 'em rattled a little bit, we felt like they relaxed a little bit, and we started -- they started throwing punches and we punched 'em back right then and there, and I think that they really felt us at that moment and



felt like UAB's not a team to sit here and play around with, so, yeah.

Q. Take us through that last shot. What did you see and what was the idea there?

EFREM "BUTTA" JOHNSON: Coach called open. Just with Eric Gaines, put the ball in his hands and just to open the floor up for him, let him make a play. CC gave me a screen coming off to try to get a three off and I caught it. I couldn't catch and shoot immediately, and then pump faked, tried to get him to jump in the air, tried to get the foul, and I just couldn't get into him and I just missed it.

Q. You said it there, that you all showed that UAB's going to punch back and fight back. For both of you, what do you feel you all showed as a team tonight and as, Yax, you said, hoping to be back here next year, show where UAB is going to continue to go as a program?

YAXEL LENDEBORG: Yeah, well, all year we've been playing with toughness. We're pretty much a team that never likes to go away. We can struggle with a lot of aspects in our game, but we always have that fight in us to make sure that it's a close game or we end up out on top. I feel like the point that's going to get us back here is that same aggressive, playing more as a family, trusting each other again, and just giving it whatever we got.

EFREM "BUTTA" JOHNSON: Yeah, we fought hard. We fought all season hard. We started off with a rocky start. I think we went 6-5, and people started to doubt us, people started giving up on us, and we just stayed together as a team. Unity, you know, has been in our player meetings and our team meetings. We talk all year long that -- we basically, from that point on, we been through it all. We done got blown out, we done -- basically been down, came back, won games, so we knew going into the stretch, from the middle of the season going into conference to the end, like, there wasn't a position that we haven't been in, and so we've been here before and we fought all season long.

I'm proud of my team, proud of the coaches, and proud of everybody, proud of the fans, proud of everybody that's representing UAB, and I promise you we'll be back here next year.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, guys. We'll dismiss the student-athletes and then direct questions to Coach.

Q. Obviously you saw on film how good LeDee is. Is there anything that when you saw him maybe in those first opening minutes of the first half that seemed a

little different, seeing him play in person?

ANDY KENNEDY: No. They don't give out those All-American accolades just on a whim. You have to earn those. Tremendous player. As we were diving into San Diego State, I mean, this kid averaged eight points and five rebounds last year, granted, on a really good team that played for a National Championship. But I don't know the young man, but, man, he must be a worker. He must be a worker. He really seized the opportunity that this team presented. He is, without question, their anchor. For those of you old enough in the room, he reminded me on tape of Danny Fortson. Remember Danny Fortson, Cincinnati guy? I didn't coach him. I was there after. He ended up being a multitime NBA player and played over a decade in the league. He reminds me of Danny Fortson, where he's just so rugged, every trip down he's looking for contact, he's great with his motor. Even in that big body, doesn't get tired. Tried to wear him down a little bit, and he just didn't get tired. And they do a great job. Dutch does a great job with their spacing and he's going to touch that thing when it's tight, and we knew that, we knew that, we tried different things on him, obviously to no avail.

Q. Take us through that last offensive possession for them. You've been playing zone, you've been playing pretty well zone, and you switch to man.

ANDY KENNEDY: Yeah, you know, our 1-2-2, back to 2-3 was a little more effective than our 1-3-1. The reason that our 1-3-1 wasn't effective was because LeDee, when he got out of the game, we would go back to it, but he was just swallowing our back guy, who is typically a 6'-2" to 6'-4" guard. We just -- they were -- he was getting swallowed and they were going right through him. So, we were a little bit of 1-2-2, back to a 2-3, reason being, LeDee would flash to the high post. Now, he made some of those, one crucial one, end of clock, where he hit a Christian Laettner like catch-and-shoot turnaround at about 16 feet right at the end of the clock when, honestly, we had all the momentum. But that's what good players do. That's what All-Americans do. Yax has been playing out standing. He was the MVP of the American Athletic Conference tournament, and this is the first time he's ever been in this stage, obviously, but also the foul trouble just, we couldn't really execute some of the things we wanted to do because of the matchups, we just had fouls across the board, but we had no answer for him. Now I know what it must feel like to be a linebacker in the old AFC trying to tackle Earl Campbell.

Q. The decision to go to man on that last possession versus?

ANDY KENNEDY: Well, it was, we were really small



because Javian Davis had fouled out, so we're just trying to pick up an and apply some pressure, switch on the perimeter. Yax, we didn't front LeDee very much the whole game, but that was the idea at the end because we were small and we knew they were going to go to him. So we were trying to be a deterrent. They made the play over the top -- obviously I'll see the tape - but when that thing's over the top it's usually kind of a 50/50 ball and, boy, he certainly won the majority of those.

Q. Y'all were down 12 early, y'all were able to come back and make it a very close game at the very end. Talk about how your team fought throughout the entire game.

ANDY KENNEDY: Yeah, I realize that we're new to the scene for most of you, and justifiably so, but our group has fought most of the year. We're kind of a scrappy group. We're not as physically strong or as tough as San Diego State, but our mantra is somewhat similar, in that we want to continue to be relentless in everything that we do. I thought we lost the physical battle today, bodies on bodies, it seems like they were playing through us more than we were playing through them. And that's who we are, that's what we've done, that's how we've earned the right to be on this stage. So I had no doubt that my guys would fight back. I thought the foul trouble not only with Yax, but with Chris Coleman and Javian Davis, it took away some of their assertiveness. I think Yax alluded to that earlier. And then they do such a good job. I mean, Lamont Butler is, well, he's something, man, on that ball defensively. A couple of times when he got Eric Gaines in a smaller space, they were able to turn us over and run through balls. We only had 20 turnovers in our three wins in Fort Worth to capture the tournament championship. I said that right. We had 20 turnovers in three games. Tonight the physicality forced us into 14, we lose points in the paint, we lose points off turnovers, and we lose second chance points. We're sitting here now at 23-12 and I can promise you we haven't won one of those 23 when we were 0-3 in those categories.

THE MODERATOR: All right, thank you, Coach.

ANDY KENNEDY: Thank you.

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