

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Charleston vs Alabama

Friday, March 22, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena

Alabama Crimson Tide

Nate Oats

Letrell Wrightsell Jr.

Mark Sears

Media Conference

Alabama - 109, Charleston - 96

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

NATE OATS: I thought our rebounding and defense picked up in the first half after we got down six, when Mo Dioubate and Mo Wague came in and really got the energy turned the right way. We really had problems rebounding the whole game. They did a great job on the glass. Give them a lot of credit. I thought they played hard. I think Pat does a really good job. They got a good plan.

I think our athleticism in some areas overwhelmed them and they couldn't stay in front of us on their defensive end. But they did a great job on the glass. I thought once we started to get some stops and rebounds, we were able to open it up a little bit. I thought Mo and Mo really helped us in that regard. They say you win games in March with guard play. I think that's true. These guys here combined for 60 points. It's pretty good play out here your guards.

Aaron and Mark had 13 assists to two turnovers and Trelly and Mark combined 8-12 from three, which is shooting it pretty well. So I thought our guards played well. I thought our bigs were pretty good at times too. I thought we did a good job rebounding it when we were able to open up a lead and then this is a team in Charleston that likes to play some similar to us. It's two teams that want to run. So it was a heavy possession game and that's kind of why you end up with the points you end up with.

But our offense was pretty good. We had a 1.33, which is



pretty efficient. I thought our guys did a pretty good job for a large parts of the game.

THE MODERATOR: Take questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Latrell, how is your nose?

LATRELL WRIGHTSELL JR.: It's good. I feel better. It doesn't hurt that bad anymore, so I'm pretty good.

Q. Mark, you were at the line a lot. You were knocking down shots. Just being able to get to the line and leading your team for the third most points you've had all season, what you saw out there, how you were able to do that?

MARK SEARS: I just wanted to be aggressive early, get by my guy and make something happen for others or if nobody was in front of me, have a layup.

Q. Mark, I think you guys set another scoring record for, I think, most points, something like that, in an NCAA tournament game. This offense has been so high scoring all season. What keeps making it work and now doing it in March?

MARK SEARS: With the guard play we have, all of us can handle, all of us can shoot, and just how fast we play, it makes the game very easy. With all the space we have on the floor, it makes the game very easy.

Q. Latrell, you were kind of talking out there, chirping with one of the fans from Charleston. Just kind of what he was saying to you and how you kept your focus on the game all game.

LATRELL WRIGHTSELL JR.: That's what fans do. I'm not really too worried about it. I just looked at him and laughed. I didn't really say too much. He just said we're bad and I just laughed. Move on, next play. That's what fans do, so, you know, that's just part of the game.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll dismiss the student-athletes and come back with questions for Coach.



Q. I wanted to ask about the defense first. You mentioned the first half versus the second half. I think it was like 34 points allowed in the first half and 62 in the second. Kind of what did you see that was working in the first half that you can build on and then what wasn't there in the second half?

NATE OATS: We've had this issue with this team all year. I think they play the scoreboard too much. We built a 31-point lead and I would have to go look and see what the last seven, eight minutes of that game. We just got up 31 and we quit guarding, which is a little frustrating, but it's not the time of the year to really kind of jump these guys right after you just scored 109 points in an NCAA tournament game.

So we're playing on Sunday. There's only going to be 32 teams left playing after tonight and we'll be one of 'em. It's a big accomplishment. We're trying to be one of 16 playing left after Sunday, so I'm trying to keep the energy positive. But, yeah, we have had a tendency to play the scoreboard a little too often. So I think we played the scoreboard a little bit there in the second half because I thought when we were -- when the offense wasn't going well in the first half, we made -- I thought we did show a lot of maturity because at times we've -- offense is going great, relax. If the offense is bad, we feel sorry for ourselves and don't play D. Like, offense wasn't going very well, we're down 19-13, I think, and we just locked in and got stops and were able to make a 10-0 run and another 12-0 run.

So I think we showed a lot of maturity in that way to really guard in the first half, open up the big lead in the second half, and then, yeah, it would be nice if we didn't take our foot off the gas when we got up 31, but we're playing on Sunday.

Q. I know obviously leading the nation in scoring offense, so maybe not as much of a surprise, but I would like to hear your assessment on the offense overall. It seemed like pretty consistent, tough to stop throughout the game. What were you most pleased with on that end?

NATE OATS: You know what? When we took care of the ball, we were able to get the shots we wanted. I thought our pace was pretty good. We've got our own box score. The official box score has us 25-10 and fast break points. We like to play fast, attacked 'em. And they do too, which we thought we would get them in transition. We had to make sure we got back in transition. So we want to play fast, we like to spread the floor out, like to open it up, take a lot of threes if they're available. We didn't take really that many tonight. They ended up taking 10 more than we did.

But I thought we were able to get to the rim a lot and get out in transition. Teams think we really want to shoot 40 threes. We'll take whatever they give you. We're going to spread you out and if they want to take us off the three-point line and open up the lane for us, you know, we scored 46 points in the paint. So we can score in the paint or score from three, depending upon what you want to take away.

Q. When you guys got together in the summer, you touched on maturity and how this team has kind of grown. Can you touch on how this team has gelled from the time that you guys first got together and how they have matured going into the tournament?

NATE OATS: Yeah, this was a team that kind of got put together slowly over -- I had three assistants leave, it affects recruiting a little bit, some guys left, the portal -- went to the portal late, guys went to the draft late. So we didn't have the whole team ready first week in June like we usually would, so we kind of added some pieces. We were able to get Grant Nelson midway through the summer, added Jarin Stevenson late. I think they started bonding over the summer. We do a team retreat right before fall classes start, so we did that in August. I thought that's when they really kind of got to know each other.

And these guys are pretty close knit. Coach Murphy with softball came in and talked to our guys midway through the season. He's got the big word mudita, which is kind of vicarious joy through someone else's achievements, and we've tried to make that a big deal. Like, are you as happy for Mark or Trelly or whoever is playing well that day. Are you as happy for Mo Dioubate, that he comes in and he gets a lot more minutes than he typically would have got as you would be if yourself was in there.

I think these guys have embraced it a lot. I think when we've embraced it more than other times, we've been better. But I think these guys have grown together and really come to love each other and love -- they want to keep playing together. That's why people compared this team to two years ago because both teams' defense wasn't great. I think this team's different. I think they really want to keep playing for each other. They got a bunch of really good guys that want to keep this thing going as long as we can.

I think we showed tonight when we're locked in, we can be a good defensive team, because we were a good defensive team for large parts of the night and then they're obviously an offensive firepower, Charleston is, and if you take the foot off the gas on the defensive end, they scored a bunch of points in a hurry and made it look like our

defense wasn't that good when in reality, I thought it was pretty good for awhile.

Q. Just what's the most rewarding part -- I know you said you're going to be in 32 teams of the 300-plus that are still remaining, but what's been the most rewarding part of this season up to this point in your experience with these guys?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I think that we're playing for each other and as hard as we are right now after we've gone through a little adversity. We were No. 1 in SEC all alone I believe after 13 games. I think we were 11-2. We played really well against Texas A&M and we beat 'em 100 to 75 and then we got some injuries, and then we dropped four of six and got beat in the first round of the SEC tournament. So to go through a little adversity and still have these guys come together and really play as hard as they did tonight, as hard as they played for each other, as good as they did on the defensive end when we struggled to guard at times, I think that's the most fulfilling.

You want your team trying to peak late. I don't want to blame it all on injuries. There's multiple issues, but this is the first time we've had our full team available for no minutes restriction since that Texas A&M game, which over a month ago.

So I'm happy that they were able to fight through some adversity and still play as well as we did here in March when we're supposed to be peaking.

Q. The part of the defense that you were pleased with tonight, how much of that is predicated by what Mark does at that end? It seemed like he drew Smith most of the night just trying to stay up on him and not give him anything clean outside the three-point line?

NATE OATS: Good question. Pretty keen observation. I think when Sears is locked into playing defense, we're pretty good on defense. Until I put him back in there -- you know, we don't really have a third point guard and trying to rest Trely a little bit, so juggling between who is going to play, Aaron or Mark there. Up until I put him back in there, after he kind of sat, I don't know, maybe he just checked out, thought he was done for the night, I thought he was great, like, unbelievably good, like, blowing pick-and-rolls up, handoffs, end of stuff. We chart these blue collar points that are kind of hustle points and he won the hard hat tonight with the most blue collar points. That means he was getting deflections. He only had one steal, but I think he caused disruptions on the defensive end.

So when our leader is playing as hard as he was for large parts of tonight, you're defense is pretty good. We need

'em to be that way every game the rest of the year.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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