

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Longwood vs Houston

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Memphis, Tennessee, USA

FedExForum

Houston Cougars
Coach Kelvin Sampson

J'Wan Roberts

Jamal Shead

L.J. Cryer

Media Conference

Q. Jamal, welcome back to Memphis. I assume the last time you were in this building, pretty good memory for you. What do you remember from that day? Is that the kind of moment that gives you a little extra pep in your step when you arrived here?

JAMAL SHEAD: It was a moment that was really awesome for our team last year. But you know really not trying to look back on that, just trying to focus on tomorrow night.

Q. J'Wan, I know you got banged up in the Big 12 Tournament with the shin. Do you expect to play tomorrow?

J'WAN ROBERTS: Definitely. Not planning on missing any games. Getting ready for the game at 8:00.

Q. The fact that you guys have played in this building before with the sight lines and the depth of the baskets, does that matter at all?

JAMAL SHEAD: Of course it matters. You're not going into new territory; you're going to somewhere where you've been before. And you're going to a place where you actually have been able to win before. So it's good that we're going to a familiar environment.

J'WAN ROBERTS: Same thing. Been here before, especially being in the American. Been there a couple times. I don't see it as anything different. I just see it as another opponent that we haven't played against. Just



going into the game with the right game plan and trying to execute.

Q. Obviously the Big 12 Tournament didn't end how you guys wanted. What have the conversations been the last couple of days about recentering and getting back on track with what you're here to accomplish?

L.J. CRYER: We just have been trying to clean some stuff up and we just started looking forward. Didn't really look back on that game because there's nothing we can do about that. We're trying to get to the last game. So we had some practices, some tough practices and we're looking forward to get out there tomorrow.

Q. J'Wan, Kelvin shared with us that I think Jacob McFarland mentioned that you were his favorite player based on past NCAA Tournaments. He said something to you and Kelvin was behind you. Is that accurate?

J'WAN ROBERTS: Yeah.

Q. I was curious how you felt about that. And is it a role that you embrace, being one of the older guys on the team?

J'WAN ROBERTS: Yes, definitely. I would say when I first got to UH in 2019, there were guys I looked up to. DeJon Jarreau, Justin Gorham, Fabian White, Chris Harris -- they were the guys before me.

My first year I just wanted to do a lot of research, watch a lot of film and try to be like one of those guys. Now five years forward, now I'm one of those guys, and I have a freshman coming in that was in my shoes.

So just try to play that big-brother role. I'm just trying to lead by example and let them know how hard it is to win a game, just being on the college team, you build a lot of memories. You get closer. You go through adversity. You go through injuries. You go through everything.

And just trying to just lead by example. Not even just Jacob. I try to find ways to even help Mal and L.J. They've been at a winning program before. Just the main focus is



leading by example. I'm just showing them the ropes and just trying to keep help them every step of the way.

Q. Media members, fans, everybody likes to look at the path for their favorite team in getting to the Final Four, Elite Eight, whatever they want. For you guys, as a 1 seed, how easy or hard is it to stay locked in on the next opponent when a 1 seed got knocked out by a 16 just last year?

JAMAL SHEAD: We try not to look toward anybody else. We try to look at our path because, as you know, last year, we lost to Miami in the Sweet 16. So everybody's path is different. Everybody has different challenges. Every team presents different challenges.

So we're just trying to look forward to Longwood tomorrow. And if we are able to get past them, then we'll look to the next team. We don't try to look too far ahead.

Q. Jamal, first, the team's kind of struggled with injuries and depth issues this year and a tougher conference. How have you guys maintained that same standard that's been set previously at Houston this season?

JAMAL SHEAD: Because of the way we practice. Every guy that's playing now, regardless of injury, we all practice against each other. We all made each other better. Ced practiced against J'Wan, against Jay, against JoJo every single day. Ramon practiced against Terrance and J'Wan and me every single day. Our mindset is next man up, but we really believe in that because of how hard we practice.

Q. Knowing those challenges for you personally, does it change your mindset or approach to this particular tournament?

JAMAL SHEAD: No, because I've been able to build trust with every single guy on this team, whether it's Cedric or L.J. It's about building trust and getting those guys who haven't been here before some experience. And I think we're ready for any challenge that comes our way.

Q. I know you said you're locked in on the next opponent, but do you let your mind wander a little bit? This is a proud, both in the past and in recent memory. But it hasn't won a national championship yet. What would it mean to be the first Houston Cougar team to do that?

JAMAL SHEAD: It would be awesome if we can get there. Like I said, tomorrow's our first challenge and we're just going to try to focus on that.

J'WAN ROBERTS: To add on to that, just taking one game at a time. We watch a lot of film, find a lot of ways we can score, find different ways to defend them. They're a pretty good team because they made the tournament. Even every game we play we're going to have everybody's best game.

We want to get to the national championship, but you've got to get to the first game first and then work on the second game. Just taking every game step by step, day by day. Get a lot of recovery. It's more mental. It's not too much physical around this time of year. It's not about three-hour practices anymore. It's just about locking in and executing your plays, because one mistake can cost you a game. Just try to going forward as a group we just try to eliminate mistakes. Just try to play our best basketball in March.

Q. This is for each of the student-athletes. 63 wins to 8 losses in the past two seasons and you switched a conference in between from the American to the Big 12. Why has Houston remained top of two conferences and so successful despite the adversity of change that happens?

JAMAL SHEAD: Our culture. Our culture allows us to be good because we practice the same way regardless of the conference, regardless of the opponent. We treat every game the same and we have the best coach in America, Coach Sampson prepares us the right way. He knows his guys, and he knows how to get us going. He's the best motivator and best coach in America.

L.J. CRYER: I wasn't here last year, but transferring here from the Big 12, I saw the culture and it's real. We have proper preparation here and I feel like that's why we go out and perform.

J'WAN ROBERTS: Same thing, like Jamal said. It's a culture thing. Just our toughness. Doesn't really matter what conference we played in. Once you carry that culture on the road or wherever we go, I think we'll be able to be pretty good.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Houston coach Kelvin Sampson.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Honored to be here. I never take making the NCAA Tournament for granted. It's something that's really, really hard to do. I congratulate the other 67 teams that made the tournament.

I mean, they had a good year, and we look forward to playing a really good Longwood team tomorrow night.

Q. (Indiscernible) we asked him earlier in the year, which nonconference match-ups he would like to see back on the schedule future. He said he'd like to schedule something with you again, but he said part of you might not want it because the match-ups were bare-knuckle brawls over the years. Is that something you would be open to in the future?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I don't know. I hadn't thought about it. We have 18 bare-knuckle brawls in the Big 12. I know that.

Q. This is Houston's, if they make to it the Final Four could be your seventh time back there in program history. What makes you think that this is the time that you could actually go all the way and win the championship?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I didn't say we could. I don't know. I just worry about winning the next one.

Q. When you were in the AAC there were always some questions about you did it at a mid-major level, could you do it against the high major teams. You've proven it over the course of a full season in the Big 12. How good has that felt to really prove what this Houston program can do on a night in, night out basis?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Nobody ever said that to me. So sometimes you guys live in a world that's not common to maybe coaches and players. So when we started getting the team ready back in the summer, the only thing I was concerned about was how would we replace Jarace Walker, Marcus Sasser, Reggie Cheney and Tramon Mark.

That's basically four starters from a team that I thought was pretty good.

So whatever it is you think about and you ask us about it, a lot of times it's like him asking me about playing a schedule. I don't know, obviously he's put a lot of thought into it. But I've put zero thought into it. I have no idea about the schedule for next year. Wouldn't even know how to start to answer that.

But playing in the Big 12, I never thought about playing in the Big 12. I was more focused on losing four starters and how we're going to replace them because it's not easy to replace your starting point guard or your leading scorer. So we had to deal with all that.

I think the Big 12 schedule came out in early September. Really the first time I thought much about it, and I saw where our first game was at home against West Virginia. I think our second game was at Iowa State. Third game was at TCU. I know it's going to be a tough schedule.

But if you looked at who we beat on the way to the Final Four, the Elite Eight, that was the Pac-12 champion Arizona; the Big Ten champion, Illinois; Syracuse; Rutgers; Ohio State. We play with all those teams every year.

So to say, how we're going to get prepared. I would just say people didn't do their homework. The question was already answered, if you looked at our records and who we played over the years.

Q. J'Wan was up here, said he's good to go, expects to play tomorrow. How does he look from your perspective?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Going into the Big 12 Tournament, I thought we were okay for the TCU game. Texas Tech game, I knew we were getting wore down a little bit. Our team's not built to play three games in three days. After we beat Texas Tech, I knew that was kind of it for us.

Then when we walked on that court Saturday against Iowa State, that wasn't a fair fight. First of all, they're really good, and they're really deep. They've got 10 guys. I don't know how many in here have seen Iowa State play, we played them twice. We could have won both of them. But they could have won both of them, too, because they're really good.

But the game on Saturday was of little or no consequence to me because they knew what was most important. I think J'Wan played seven minutes in that game. I think I sat Jamal Shead the last, whatever it was.

But the story of that game, I didn't think, was either team. I thought it was Iowa State's fans. They had 18,000 fans. That's incredible -- 17,000. 17,000 fans.

It was tougher to play Iowa State at the conference tournament than it was in their own gym. That's how tough that place was.

But for our team right now, I'd say the biggest difference now and, say, two weeks ago is practice. When we lost Arceneaux, it was a long time ago. So we overcame that because of JoJo Tugler and Ramon Walker.

When we lost JoJo and Ramon, the thing we lost besides players, really good players and depth, we didn't have enough to practice anymore. So we haven't practiced since -- we played 5-on-5 the night before we played Baylor in Waco. That was the last time we actually have been able to practice.

But J'Wan, he looked the best I've seen in a long time. He

just got wore down. He probably shouldn't have even played the Texas Tech game. It's been such a long year for all those guys in terms of minutes played and depth.

He got seven stitches in his hand against Oklahoma. He's just been fighting a lot of injuries. But I think he'll be good to go tomorrow.

Ramon Walker is getting close. So we'll see what happens there. I don't know if he can play tomorrow or if we've got -- if we're fortunate enough or got lucky enough to get to next weekend, which is, who knows, he might can play. But we'll see.

At least we're getting some bodies back versus this past weekend and Kansas City. That was a tough one there.

Q. Kelvin, how familiar are you with Griff Aldrich, the Longwood coach?

KELVIN SAMPSON: He came up and introduced himself to me last summer on the road. I can't remember where it was. But he told me he was from Houston. And I just remember having a really nice conversation with a really, really nice man.

Then I heard about his story, being an attorney, chasing his dream of coaching. It's kind of neat. Kind of courageous. A lot of guys won't do that. Hats off to him for doing it.

Q. You look at coaches, you know it's players against players, but you've been in the business a long time. You gotta coach against coaches as well.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, but it's not going to be that. I can't remember who it was, Oklahoma State was playing USC when I was at Oklahoma. They were trying to say it was Coach Sutton against Henry Bibby. And I remember thinking, people don't get it. It's Coach Sutton's players against Henry Bibby's players. And I think USC won, if I'm not mistaken.

If you won a championship this year, you're a really good coach. You've got to be good to make this tournament. So there's a lot of great coaches that did not make the tournament, for whatever reason, just because all the best coaches in the country aren't just in this tournament.

Some of the best stories aren't even being told this year because of injuries and things didn't go their way for whatever reason. That's why I respect coaches so much.

But Griff, watching his team play, that's a great story. And they're good. They're well-coached. You can tell. He

knows what he's doing. He's got a very well-coached team.

Q. You're a 1 seed obviously for the second straight year. You mentioned all those great players you lost from last year's team. Besides that, is there anything that stands out that is fundamentally really different about this squad compared to last year's team?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Define fundamentally.

Q. Your philosophy.

KELVIN SAMPSON: My philosophy, it means I'm here. Philosophy hasn't changed much. I would say that, I mean we don't have a guy that's as good as Jarace, who was the eighth pick in the draft.

Last year's team was dragging too. We had a lot of injuries at the end of last year. I remember Marcus, one of the best, probably the last good game we played was against Cincinnati in the conference tournament. Marcus really didn't play much after that.

This team's similar to that team. This team's facing a bunch of injuries, too. But nobody cares about that stuff. Lace them up, let's go play. That's what we're going to do Friday night.

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