

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Final - Tennessee vs Houston

Saturday, March 29, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Lucas Oil Stadium

Houston Cougars

Coach Kelvin Sampson

L.J. Cryer

Milos Uzan

Emanuel Sharp

J'Wan Roberts

Elite Eight Pregame Media Conference



whole staff, I think we were in there by 8:00. Kellen and I were in there 7:00-something and we prepped until the players came in. I don't remember what time that was, but you got a one-day turnaround. You got seven days to prepare. You almost over prepare for in between the first weekend and the second weekend and then you get to your second game and you got 24 hours. Just go play.

Q. For any of the players, I was curious, what was last night like for you to come down from that high and try to get to sleep, and was it difficult for you guys, as well?

L.J. CRYER: Nah, it wasn't too difficult for me. I was tired. It was late. I got back to the room, went to sleep and I'm on to Tennessee.

EMANUEL SHARP: Pretty much more of the same. It wasn't too hard. I was tired. Stayed up a little bit, but tried to get to bed as fast as possible, but tried to flush it as quick as possible because we got another game.

MILOS UZAN: Yeah, pretty much same as them. We're on to Tennessee now, so.

Q. Kelvin, Coach Rick Barnes has been in the game a long time. What do you have to say about his coaching style?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, Rick and I coached against each other in the Big 12 when I was at Oklahoma and he was at Texas. We've been good friends for 40-something years. His style is solid. There's not one aspect of the game that Rick's team is not always prepared for. He's one of the best coaches I think there's ever been.

Q. For Kelvin, we can look at numbers and say, hey, both of these teams are really good defensively, do a lot of similar things at least on paper. How similar is what y'all try to do defensively to what Tennessee does? Are there similarities or is that just something those of us who don't know basketball as much would say?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Probably not as many similarities as you think. I think when you're the head coach and you're getting your defensive rules and things that, your core

THE MODERATOR: Coach Sampson, we'll ask you to make opening remarks and we'll have questions for anyone up here on the dais.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Just proud of our kids and how they hung in there last night. You know, whoever you play this time of year, as you advance, you're always going to see a good team. Gonzaga was really, really good last week. Purdue, really good this week. And tomorrow, same thing... face a really, really good Tennessee team. We'll try to prepare, get our kids ready to play to the best of our ability and go play.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

Please direct your question to somebody specifically, thank you.

Q. Kelvin, what were the hours after last night like for staff in terms of how you prepare the quick turnaround and sort of getting back into it so quickly?

KELVIN SAMPSON: I didn't prepare last night. I prepared for bed (laughter). That's the only preparation I had. Biggest decision was how many melatonin because it's hard to sleep. When you get out of something like that, it's really difficult for me to go to sleep. I was up early this morning with Kellen. K.C. had the Purdue scout. Kellen has the Tennessee scout, so I met him early this morning and he has clipped a bunch of edits for me to look at. The

values of your defense, usually it's based on things you run a lot. We play out a lot of pick-and-rolls, so we try to be really good at pick-and-roll defense and every team we play comes up with a plan to try to beat it. Rick's team, we just played Ryan Nembhard from Gonzaga, Braden Smith from Purdue and now Zakai Zeigler from Tennessee, three of the best point guards in the country, that we can play against and all three have different styles that force you to have to play different defensively.

I think the best defenses can adjust to how the other team tries to beat you. What is their fastball? Where do they go to try to beat you? Like last night, it was Kaufman-Renn and Braden Smith. We gave up some baskets, but at the end of the day, they scored 60 points. We needed to score 61 to win. Against Tennessee, you know, Zeigler presents a different kind of front because he uses ball screens probably less than the other two, but he impacts the game probably more dynamically with his athleticism and his speed and the different ways that he can get a basket. He can get a rebound and go get a layup. He can get a steal, go get a layup. He can use a ball screen, curl it, force the big to help and throw it behind for a dunk or throw it over for a dunk.

And I remember when he was a freshman. I don't know him, but I'm proud of him because of how far he's come from his freshman year. He's smart. He's a veteran. He's tough. He's a winner. He's everything you want your point guard to be. We just lost one last year that reminds me of him and we have one this year that's on his way to being that guy, too.

Q. I want to ask about Milos. When you rewind to going through the process of recruiting him out of the portal, what were the things you identified in him as a player that made you want to recruit him and bring him in and how have you seen him develop in his role specifically since he got to Houston?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, our program is different than a lot of programs in that we only brought one kid in in the portal. Most kids who live in the portal, it's hard to get off that portal cycle because how do you? Our kids come back. In the last ten years, we've only had three kids transfer that was in our top ten players and that speaks volumes to our program. Not our teams, but our program. So when you're only bringing in one kid and he's very specific to a certain position, it's easier to do all your vetting.

One of the reasons why our kids don't transfer is how high-character they are. We don't have any issues on our team. We have no problems. A discipline on our team would be what? One cell phone going off in film this

morning? You think I didn't hear that, huh? That's about it. Last three or four years, I don't think we have had anything other than that. If you've got a program that's sustainable over an eight-year period like we've been, it starts with the character of your players and the kind of kids you want.

Milos' father was his high school coach, and in talking with his dad, I could tell they were looking for something very specific and we felt like we could help him. We also felt like he could help us. We didn't need a shot-first point guard. We needed a distributor. If you're sitting literally where he's sitting right now between L.J. and Emanuel with Wan a little bit on the outside of those two that we're going to play through, that kid has to be comfortable being the point guard, not the shooting guard. There's a lot of team that have shooting guards playing point guards. Those aren't point guards, those are combo guards. Our point guard has to be a point guard and Milos was exactly that. He was a point guard.

Another thing is he chose us, too. By saying that, when I say he chose us, he chose us for all the good and the bad. We're not a perfect program... don't try to be. It's not easy. L.J. Cryer the year before when he transferred from Baylor. Somebody showed me something where he said one time that he chose Houston because it was hard and he needed hard. I think at the end of the day, that's why Milos chose it, too. He knew he'd get pushed and find out how good he really was if he came to Houston, because if you look at our track record, all the guards we have had drafted in the NBA the last four or five years, not just that, they're playing. Marcus had 27 the other night. Quentin, I think, is averaging 27 over his last 10, 12 games. Jarace here with the Pacers. Jamal starting a bunch of games now for Toronto.

We got a bunch of guys in the NBA. We have had a ton of success. It's been consistent over a long period of time. When L.J. or Milos or other kids look at schools to transfer to, they choose us and that means that they want to come to Houston.

Q. Kelvin, you referenced knowing Rick Barnes for a long time now. How would you describe how that relationship has grown over the past few decades and what's your best Rick Barnes story from those Oklahoma-Texas days?

KELVIN SAMPSON: You know Rick, right? He's a prankster, jokester, funny as all-get-out. Country boy, little Ricky from Hickory. All that. Used to have long hair. We actually played against each other in college. That's a long time ago. They actually did have seams on the basketball, but not very indented. You know, Rick is... his faith is really important to him. He and his wife, Candy, are two of

my favorite people in the world. Sometimes Rick will call me at night and he'll say -- he won't even say hello. He will just say, you still run your 3-2-zone? I'll say, yeah. He'll say, I'm gonna call you tomorrow and talk about that, all right? And just hangs up. Who does that (laughter)? Rick Barnes. Two days later, Kelvin, I just called to tell you I love you, brother. That's Rick Barnes. He's one of a kind. I wish we had more like him. He's just a jewel among jewels. He's one of the great ones. I've spent a lot of time with that guy, different places, on the road, recruiting. If we don't win it, I hope he does. That's how much I respect him.

Q. Kelvin, if I can follow up on that, given how far that friendship goes back, is it also a little rare that, depending on what side of the Red River you're on, Texas-OU, OU-Texas, you can have two coaches that even when you're coaching against one another you have that relationship? I don't think it works like that, right? Or is that more fan bases?

KELVIN SAMPSON: That's more fan bases. I got along with Tom Penders, too. I always liked Tom Penders. He's a good guy. He and his wife, Susie, were always good to Karen and I. Rick is -- we used to play. We used to go to those Nike trips. Four guys that always hung out together, me and Rick, Gary Williams and Tubby. We would play golf every day. Go to dinner with our wives, just hang out. Rick was always the funniest one. His sense of humor. He's always cracking on somebody, playing jokes on somebody. It's always easy to joke Tubby, so Tubby was always the brunt of most of the jokes, but Rick is Rick. He's something else.

We used to have this -- I think I went to 12 straight OU-Texas football games, Saturday afternoon at the Cotton Bowl with the Texas State Fair. Went there 12 straight years. It was a three-and-a-half hour drive from Norman to the Cotton Bowl, but on Thursdays they would have this fundraiser for the golf programs, University of Oklahoma and the University of Texas and they would have the basketball coaches of the two schools come out there on Thursday morning and the basketball coach from Oklahoma is the captain of the OU contingent. About 100 players, all paid a bunch of money. It's a fundraiser for the golf programs, and then the Texas coach would come and be the coach of the -- but here's the most nerve-racking thing about it. They would take you to a par five and they would tell you -- you didn't get a warmup shot. You just had to hit a shot. Wherever the ball landed, they took this big, ol' round thing and put it in the ground in the OU logo or UT logo and where your ball stopped or rolled to is where each group had to play from. There's a bunch of trees over to the right by the water. Rick's ball didn't quite make it to the water, but it made it to the trees and it was

such a bad shot you couldn't even see the damn sign (laughter). Look through the trees over there and there was something white. Whoever was running the tournament when you guys come up, you have to go hit. Where? Over there in the middle of the trees. So the old ball coach from the Sooners, though, I play left-handed and the first time I hit it on the fairway would be the first time ever. I managed to slice one in the water and so they got a boat, joking me, of course, making fun of me. I didn't mind it, of course, I'm used to it. A sign on the water, you have to get on the boat to hit. They put mine by the water. So that tells you -- you know what that tells you? How good basketball coaches we are because neither one of us can golf.

Q. Coach, you guys haven't been to a Final Four since 2021.

KELVIN SAMPSON: Really? It's been that long?

Q. What's your message to this team ahead of the biggest games you guys have played so far this season?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, you know, I've coached Emanuel for three years. I've coached J' Wan for six, on the court five. Actually, on the court six. L.J. for two and Milos for one. I think they would be shocked if I approached this game any different than any other game we play. We'll have a game plan and try to hit as many areas with our plan as we can. They know, based on your question, obviously -- these guys are smart, really smart. High basketball IQs and really, really smart people. L.J. was the Big 12 Scholar-Athlete of the Year. What's your GPA, L.J.? 3.84 or something like that? These guys are -- they can do the scout report probably better than I could. But the big thing here is just stay within yourself.

We're not going to play harder because it's the Final Four. I think our kids play as hard as they can anyway. I don't think I'm going to try to coach better. I try to coach every game to the best of my ability anyway, but you ask a great question. They know what comes next, but whether it's Houston or Tennessee that advances, I think a really good team is going to advance.

THE MODERATOR: We will now dismiss the student-athletes to break-out rooms and continue for another 15 minutes with Coach Sampson.

Q. Coach, I know there's been a lot of talk about your success with point guards and the continuity you guys have had at that position. I guess, as you sit ahead of the biggest game of the year, if you could reflect a little bit on Milos' emergence throughout the season and

whether he's picked things up maybe even faster than you could have hoped for.

KELVIN SAMPSON: I think it was slow-going there for a while because he broke his nose and had surgery right before we went to -- we played Auburn so early. We played them on November 9th. I think the first day you could play a game was November -- that Monday. What was that? The 4th? So the first day was -- and he broke his nose toward middle... toward late October and he had surgery. It's not like they moved it over. He was out for 21 days from practicing. He got to the point where he could shoot free throws and Coach Quannas would do some one-on-one stuff with him, shooting and stuff like that, but it took him a while once he got back, I think, to not be gun shy. That's a tough deal. He wasn't ready when went to Vegas. I think we're a lot like him. He played pretty good. We had a chance to beat Auburn. We called time-out like we did last night to win the game against Alabama. We're up four with under 2:00 to go and the Mark Sears guy hit a tough, tough three against us. But we had the chance to win the Alabama game, beat Notre Dame and probably the worst game we played all year was San Diego State and they play good, so we were 4-3.

I don't think Milos had an identity yet. If your point guard doesn't have an identity, your team doesn't. One thing I noticed about him is he doesn't foul very much. We foul. I wish we didn't as much as we did, but we do. I got on him about fouling. I said, son, why don't you just try fouling somebody? So I had Mylik Wilson, old Mylik out there playing point guard one day. I said, every time Mylik puts the ball in his left hand, I want you to try to steal it. Now, if you happen to run into him, that will be all right. Mylik can handle it. But I was just looking for ways to get him more aggressive. That was not his nature, but I think that's part of why his father wanted him to come to Houston. He needed that. He wanted that.

As a coach, you have to have the ability to push kids to places they would not push themselves, and I think that's why a lot of these kids choose Houston. I know that's why L.J. did and Milos' looking at the end result, I think it has helped him, too.

The thing that Milos had that I had nothing to do with is it talent. He's a talented kid. There's a big difference in playing hard versus competing. I think he knew how to play hard. I don't think he had any idea how to compete. That's a threshold that you all have to get -- they all have to get over, is understanding the importance of competing. Some guys learn it quicker than others. I was looking at the Braden Smith kid last night. That was the first time I had seen him in person. The thing that jumped out to me, what makes him so good, look at his size. Not very big,

right? But he knows how to compete. He changes the game with his competitiveness. He's not only Purdue's best player. He's their identity.

But Milos was a long way from being any of that for us for a while. Once he crossed over -- and he had some big games. At Kansas, that was a miracle we won that game. Should never have won that game, but we did. Milos had 17 points, nine rebounds, nine assists. At Texas Tech, he had a big shot in an unbelievably hostile environment on the road. He hit a big shot, gave us some separation to win that game. His confidence grew and grew and grew, but I give all the credit for that to his teammates. These three guys sitting up here probably had more to do with his development than I did. They gave him permission to be their point guard and then they would push him to do more, to be better, to be vocal, to be the leader, to be the point guard. They wanted him to be their point guard and that's what he needed.

Q. Kelvin, do you have any new information on Mylik and how he's feeling that you can share with us?

KELVIN SAMPSON: He's not practicing. He's back at the hotel. Other than that, I think they're just observing him.

Q. Can you speak to Chaz Lanier, Tennessee's leading scorer. He has 66 points in the NCAA Tournament, just what you see in him?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Yeah, Rick's got the golden touch with those one-year transfers, doesn't he? Will Chaz be back next year? So he's a one-year deal? Last year it was Dallas Knecht [sic] and now it's Chaz Lanier. To make 121 threes, knowing that you're the best three-point shooter on the floor and that people are going to try to limit you and he still made 121 threes, that means he's made a lot of tough ones. But he picked the right program for him. That's one of the things that I wish that every kid could choose the school for the right reasons. Chaz Lanier chose the right head coach and the right program for him and he's benefitting from it and may benefit, change his whole life because of what he's done. Probably going to get him drafted and hopefully have a pro career because he chose the right coach and the right program for him.

But he's tough. He makes tough twos and tough threes. He stretches you. He does a great job of ducking in and out of those screens. If you try to shoot the gap, he fades. If you chase him over, he gets in the paint. He's 6'5" and can shoot over you. He's a tough matchup.

Q. I apologize if you have talked about this in previous interviews during the season, but when you look at college basketball as a whole right now, in your

opinion, are we progressing in the right way when it comes to NIL and the transfer portal and everything that's upcoming during the summer or do you feel like we're years away from figuring this thing out that started four-and-a-half, five years ago?

KELVIN SAMPSON: You know, when Tony, who is a good friend of mine, retired, well, Jay Wright, I remember we played Villanova the year that Jay retired. I remember Jay talking to me about some things. Tony's caught me off guard. I didn't know about that one, but Tony and I both coached at Washington State. If you both coach at Washington State, you have a lifelong bond. He's somebody I respect a lot. You know, college basketball is so good to so many people. Look at all of you out here that have jobs because of college basketball and how it's grown. It's grown into this phenomenon. It's so big we couldn't keep up with it. We can't keep up with the governance of it. College basketball is smarter than anybody in the room without trying to be. It grew too fast. It grew to the point where we didn't know what to do with it.

Look at what was behind NIL in the summer of '22. How did that even start? Think of all the coaches that didn't think it was -- think of all the ADs, forget coaches. Think of all the ADs out there who said it's not going to last. Nah, it'll go away. One year, two-year deal. It'll go away. Therein lies how smart college basketball is. Smarter than all of us. It's forced us all to take an inventory of what's really important. It forces you to do that -- it used to be in the summers, but you have to do it every week now. You have to take inventory of your program, of your roster, of your staff, of your athletic department, of your sport administrators, of your president. It's smarter than all of us. It's put us on our knees. It's forced us to have to react to things we never thought we would have to.

You know, if you're in control of something, you're usually proactive with it. You can think ahead. Not college basketball. You can't be proactive. There's no guardrails. So we're just trying to make up things as we go. There's so much that's going on that it's difficult to stay in touch.

You know, because of NIL, they thought you go to Final Fours and you see whether it's -- no matter what school it is, you see that school's jerseys being sold at the concession stand or at the team store, wherever they sell all that merchandise. Everybody is buying a Duke jersey with Grant Hill's name on it and you think, wouldn't it be nice if Grant Hill could get 10% of all his jersey's sales? Okay. It's 2025. Grant Hill owns all that. Jersey? He owns the company. That's one of his deals. You should see the other stuff he's got. And we're coaching them.

Smarter than all of us. There's nobody that is smarter than

college basketball. I can't speak to other sports because I'm ignorant when it comes to them. But college basketball? Smarter than all of us. It's outsmarted us. And we're trying to catch up. The more we catch up, the more we find out we're that much further behind.

Think about that. You think about collectives. How quickly did that go by the wayside? Collectives. What is a collective? I thought I knew. Shows you how dumb I am. I know nothing. Point guard business. Here's what they go for, they say. Hmm. Not anymore. Here's what it is now. It's so fluid. It's a moving target.

You know, Rick and I talk about this. I talk about it with Tom Izzo and we all came up together as young coaches, and now I guess we're all on our way out here pretty soon. We have a great game. We still have great kids. Our kids do well in NIL and I'm thankful it hasn't changed our kids. I'm thankful that I still get to coach good kids. I hear the horror stories. I think the horror stories are more the minority, but it's still a great game. It's a game where you can teach good values, teach kids that it's okay to make mistakes. It's okay to get up when you get knocked down. It's okay. You still got to learn life's lessons. While everything is growing exponentially in areas I had no idea even existed, it's still a great game.

Tomorrow's going to be a great game between two very proud programs in Tennessee and Houston. I hope just for two hours people realize it's still a great game.

THE MODERATOR: We have time for one more.

Q. Kind of along those same lines, have you had to balance any conversations or preparations for the upcoming House settlement hearing coming up getting ready for the tournament and the game coming up this week and so forth?

KELVIN SAMPSON: Well, not this week but we've all had to have those conversations. The real conversations had to -- the athletic directors and the presidents. That's where the conversation started. Just like the University of Houston... right now probably the best thing that's going for the University of Houston right now is our basketball program because we're on the front news. We're on the front page. I guess there's not pages anymore. We're on the front screen. What do you call it? I'm a little old. But the conversations between the ADs and presidents, the football coach and basketball coach are right behind them and what are we doing here? How are we going to handle this number? What's the disbursement like? What percentages are we looking at? We have to know because we have to recruit a roster. And that's this year. Here's a number for this year. I think it's \$20,500,000. Something

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

like that. That's this year. This game is going to tell us what they're going to do. Here's your number next year. That didn't come from a president or an athletic director or a coach. It came from the game. The game will tell you what we're going to do and all we're doing is reacting to it. We used to be in control of this game. No. Nobody controls college basketball. We just sit and figure out what to do next. So right now, here's what we're dealing with. Next year, who knows where it's going to take us. So you never know.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach. See you tomorrow.

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