

National Invitation Tournament: North Texas vs UC Irvine

Tuesday, April 1, 2025

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

UC Irvine Anteaters

Russell Turner

Devin Tillis

Justin Hohn

Semifinal Postgame Press Conference



UC Irvine 69, North Texas 67

RUSSELL TURNER: Appreciate everybody who is here. The opportunity we had to compete tonight was special. Our team performed well down the stretch, enough to win, and I'm grateful for that.

Credit North Texas for the quality of their team. They really punched us in the mouth to begin the game and played at a higher level than we did. Over the course of the game, we settled in, made plays and did what we also are known to do.

I couldn't be prouder of these guys sitting next to me, and of our whole locker room because we had so many different guys contribute. So it's a great night to be an Anteater.

Q. Justin, I think every single one of the threes was consequential, getting a lead or tying. How clutch did you feel on those, especially that last one, and the degree of difficulty on the last one.

JUSTIN HOHN: It's a pretty answer. I've been here six years now, my fifth year playing.

Before every game I've always heard "shoot with confidence." That's the last thing Coach Turner says. That's going through my mind. And then, have butter, get to your best stuff. We might not say it like that, but get to your best stuff. Clock was ticking. Just got up a shot, and it went in.

Q. They are known for their defense, obviously. The way that they were doubling, especially in the first half, seemed to at times throw a wrench in things, but other

times opened things up. Talk about the pressure and how you dealt with it?

DEVIN TILLIS: Being double-teamed in the post is something I've had to deal with all year. Theirs was just a little bit more overwhelming, I would say.

But you know, Coach Turner always tells me to lower myself, take your time, make the right reads, and stuff will open up. And that's what happened at the end of the game. Guys started making shots and plays, and my post-up was more crucial and it opened up more for me.

Q. To take the team where it's never been before, playing April ball, it is the NIT, but it is April basketball. How proud are you of this achievement to get this far?

JUSTIN HOHN: It's a very special feeling. I can't really quite put it into words right now. I think I can speak for everyone in the group. We are kind of just trying to soak it all in. And then, you know, finish the mission on Wednesday -- or Thursday.

Q. In your mind, what are you playing for Thursday, other than an NIT Championship? What does it mean?

DEVIN TILLIS: I'm playing for pride, man, and respect. You know, we came up short in our own tournament. And obviously that was disappointing a little bit. But we have another chance to kind of redeem ourselves in a way and come out on top.

And I want to play for the name on my chest, my community, all the people who always support us, and obviously my brothers who don't have any more years left.

THE MODERATOR: Talk about the resiliency of coming down from 15 with eight minutes to go in the first half, and what you guys maybe said in the previous time-out or whatever you had to do, but that's a special accomplishment in any game, let alone in a winner-take-all game.

ASAP sports . . . when all is said, we're done.®

JUSTIN HOHN: Just to reiterate, that's one of the things Turner says before every game. "It's going to be 40 minutes or longer." You know, basketball is a game of runs. Can't get too high, too low. Trust your guys, trust your coaches, and everything will fall in.

DEVIN TILLIS: I don't know if you guys know, but every game we've been losing in either the first half or early in the second half.

But something that we always reiterate is having that belief that we are going to win, and you know, even in a game where stuff's not going your way, you get punched in the mouth early. I feel like there was no point that we didn't lose that belief. Like we always feel like we're going to come back and win, and that's what we've done in every game in the NIT.

Q. Talk about the adjustments that you guys had to make there to get back into the game, you could kind of see it late in the first half with it being tied at halftime, and then you got down in the second half. What adjustments were made in the huddle to get you back in the game?

RUSSELL TURNER: Yeah, early in the game, we just didn't rebound the ball well, and we turned the ball over. We had 17 turnovers, and credit to North Texas for that. We knew the defensive level that they would bring would be really high.

What Devin said is the double teams were a little more devastating, or whatever word he used. They really were physical and aggressive and took the ball from us in large part because we continued to take the ball into the baseline where their players were able to shrink the court and really attack the ball.

We got them in foul trouble in the first half. That was really important for us. And then the second half, they got us in foul trouble, and that affected the way that we could defend. The adjustments we continued to make, you know, Atin Wright is an outstanding scorer. We know that. We used different guys on him. We had a hard time doing the things against him that we said we were going to do. But we usually can find a better matchup within the different varied talents we have in individual defenders. I thought we did that.

I thought Kyle Evans and Eli Chol were excellent in the first half, and the minutes that they played for Bent Leuchten, and then Bent really raised his level of play in the second half. That's not so much as an X and O's adjustment as it is what it takes to play and win big games. So really, credit to Bent for that.

Figuring out the right guys to have on the floor in this game was a puzzle. Can't credit Torian Lee enough for coming in and playing with confidence in the first half his shooting. He made two big threes; and then the defensive level he gave us on the ball, he's a young player, the impact that he had. When we played smaller, our ability to rebound, got stronger as the game went on, in part because we adjusted to how physical and aggressive they were in attacking the boards. So we played better.

You know, we were super fortunate in the first half. I talked to my team about winning the mental game. You know, North Texas, when they were ahead, they were rightly feeling good. They took technical and they took a flagrant foul, and I thought those two things were big for us.

And I thought our team did win the mental game. There was a double technical in the second half but that's growth for this group because we're an emotional, passionate group. And we won the mental game tonight. So I thought that was really big.

Q. I watched you guys against San Diego both times and against Santa Barbara. You seem to be indicating that North Texas's defense was stronger than what you had faced in the season, and the second question is, the vision of Myles Che is pretty tremendous.

RUSSELL TURNER: Yeah, first, about North Texas, I think they have got the 42nd ranked defense in the country, which may be the top we played. If it's not, it's close. The style that they play is difficult. That's why they win.

We also play a simple style. Ours is rated a little bit better than theirs. They hold teams to fewer points but a lot of that is related to tempo. Our defensive efficiency is actually better when we are at our best.

I didn't believe we were at our best early in the game. We kept allowing their players to go to their strengths. We didn't execute as well as I thought we would as the game wore on, and then we made some huge plays in the stretch, like we typically do, because we're always between the ball and the basket.

We fouled out and right on a three late. That one was disappointing because of how much of an emphasis we made to not do that. Other than that play, I thought we mostly made a lot of great plays, and then we were fortunate. I joked with my team at the end of the game. The air-ball pass play was perfect tonight. We executed it for lay-ups twice, and that was probably the only two easy layups we got. We were fortunate.

You said something about Myles. You didn't really ask a question, I don't think. But yeah, Myles was terrific. Myles is as intense and high-level a competitor as I've had. He and I fit well because of that. He's a little nutty sometimes, which reminds me of myself.

And so I can't give him enough credit for coming in here as a transfer and acclimating himself into a veteran team in such a crucial role as the one he plays for us. Really, really proud of him, because he's fighting. He's fighting some difficult stuff. You probably see him holding his shoulder. He's going to be ready for the next game; I know that.

Q. You mentioned the first half a couple times already but just the amount of ways that it seemed like they were beating you. I mean, how disappointed and kind of surprised, and then, you know, what did you, you know -- what did you say to your team and to kind of get them back on track?

RUSSELL TURNER: I encouraged them to raise their level of play. I did that with some language of intensity at times, which is what I often do. We needed to raise our level of play and performance in the first half.

The message I gave to my team coming into this game was that playing against them would be a lot like playing against us in practice. But the level they reached early in the game was not a level that we could handle. Some of that is because we haven't been able to practice as much or intensely. There was belief that we could handle what they would throw at us. We very clearly did not do that early in the game.

So we had to play our way into the game, which when you're playing a new opponent, sometimes that takes some time. We've had some games like that this year in a really difficult schedule that we've played.

And so you heard the players mention the belief that we have; that we can get it figured out and get some things adjusted, and execute better the things that we say we're going to do when we come into a matchup. That's what I think we did tonight, and then we made big plays in big moments with a little bit of luck on our side coming down the stretch, which is often what it takes to win these games.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports