

Atlantic Coast Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 11, 2021
Greensboro, North Carolina, USA

Virginia Cavaliers

Tony Bennett

Postgame Press Conference



Virginia 72, Syracuse 69

Q. Tony, I caught a little bit of your TV interview and you said that's exactly the play you drew up. Syracuse was leaving Reece open for a lot of the game it seemed like. Have you just impressed upon him the need to take open shots even if he's not hitting them to keep the defense honest?

TONY BENNETT: Well, maybe you need the last seconds of a game to get him to do it. But no, what I liked is he -- okay, if you don't want to take it -- there's a time when you take it, but at least try to attack off the dribble to create. And I thought one of the best plays in my mind of the game was in front of our bench. He attacked baseline and Sam sort of floated it behind him, and he pitched it to him and we got a three. I thought that was significant.

I thought he got more aggressive, maybe not so much shooting but attacking a little more in the second half, and he was playing pretty good defense at times, which we had to have. But that zone is tough if you're not making shots or you're not real confident. You even saw Sam and Trey, they were having a hard time and they kept shooting. But when you're not going to take a lot, it can mess with you. But I thought Kihei made the play to get it there.

And at the end, we wanted a quick -- I said, Kihei just attack the lane. So maybe a quick little ball screen where we tried a few sets and they get on it. But I thought it was terrific what he did, Kihei. And I can't tell you, so happy for Reece. He's been through so much, and just overjoyed for him, of course the team. But there's some special meaning for him and his mom being here and all that.

Q. You've been a part of some of these emotional wins in a tournament setting before. What are the keys to moving on from it and still playing well the next day with obviously such a short turnaround from the

emotional win?

TONY BENNETT: Yeah, I mean, that's tournament play. Yeah, you know, you get an opportunity, and it is -- survive and advance is the saying. We survived. We had -- basically we gave up too many early second chance points, offensive rebounds, threes. We dug ourselves a hole, fought back at the end of the half, played some solid basketball, stretches of good defense, as well.

I'll look at the tape, and again, Boeheim and some of the plays they made were good, but we had to make some plays down the stretch offensively and defensively, and again, you just keep plugging. You keep being steady. And just like an example of Reece shooting that shot, okay. He got a wide open shot, he knocked it down. Trey kept shooting, Sam kept shooting, we kept battling. And it's the steadiness of the effort over the -- whatever course of the game, whatever possessions that is on both ends.

You've got to -- you might fall into some ups and downs, but you've got to win the majority, and that's sort of the mindset is get ready to play. We'll play Georgia Tech or Miami. Obviously Miami is playing good basketball now, and we know how good Georgia Tech is. So be ready, get your feet up and come back with everything you've got tomorrow.

Q. Of course, it's been a difficult year with the pandemic and then of course we heard the unfortunate news with Duke today having to cancel and be out of the tournament. Can you talk about what it is to have a game like this where it comes to the last second, you hit a shot, and not only just being good for Virginia but being good for ACC and good for college basketball in a time like this?

TONY BENNETT: Yeah, I mean, it was here, almost probably 365 days -- it might have been where it got called. You're getting ready to play or the day of your game and the tournament got canceled and then shortly after the NCAA Tournament.

So just to get out here and to play in a game, and then to

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have it end like this. And then to hear the news right before I had to do an interview with Alyson, and she told me that about Duke. And I was so discouraged for those young men and Coach K because obviously they were playing two really good games, and I know they wanted to play.

That's so unfortunate, but to have excitement and obviously to be on this end, I hope for the league, Syracuse can get into the tournament, but good. And it wasn't lost on any of us the ability to play. Even to have -- I don't know, 5,000 fans, that felt like -- it was great, as opposed to zero or just a couple hundred.

Q. What did they do defensively different on your shooters, especially in the first half? Were they just staying home more compared to the earlier meeting?

TONY BENNETT: No. I think they made it a little harder to get in there. I thought we got some pretty good looks. We just didn't shoot it as well. And when you're not hitting the three ball, that zone starts either -- it either tightens up a little bit and then you think you've got a look, you know they can take away some stuff.

But we ran very similar stuff. It just comes down to being free and playing, trying to get the ball into the high post through a pass or attacking off the dribble or moving it quick and knocking down threes, getting some transition buckets, which we got the first time. So similar actions. Yeah, they shade off. They say, okay, we're going to let Reece and Kihei shoot a little more. I thought they may be more mindful of keying to our shooters, but the shots were there, and just we didn't shoot at the same efficiency.

Q. You kind of just teased it, but do you think that Syracuse should be an NCAA Tournament team this year?

TONY BENNETT: I hope so. I think Coach Boeheim does a great job. His son -- having played for my dad, what an experience that is for a father and a son, and they have very good players. They're well-coached.

You know, our league is -- I believe it's better than people think. I really do. I think you battle and you play, and you want your league to get as many opportunities. And they're a team that -- as you can see, what they did to NC State, who's been playing good basketball yesterday -- and if you're not accustomed to playing against that kind of zone, they're such a talented team, and they're a dangerous team with their system. So I hope they get that opportunity. I don't know. I have no idea, but I hope they get the opportunity.

Coach Boeheim would fight for us, so we'll fight for him. Get him in. I know him. He's that way. I don't know the numbers and all that stuff, I just know they fought and they played close games and good basketball. I do, but again, I'm not as astute to knowing where everybody is at, in, out. We've got enough -- we worry about our own team, that's all I know, and try and get ready for tomorrow.

Q. Talk a little bit about Reece Beekman and how he's grown and matured this year as a freshman. Seems like he's always kind of steady handed out there.

TONY BENNETT: I think you asked about Reece?

Q. Reece and his growth as a freshman.

TONY BENNETT: Yeah, really good defender. Again, at times you saw it. At times they made some shots over the top and made some tough contested shots, a couple I can think of where I don't know what Reece could have done. We tried to put some length on him with Trey, and he still made some shots. For a guy that doesn't look to shoot that much -- and his shot is going to improve in time. He does impact the game with his feel, and he's taking the challenge to try to be as good as he can defensively.

And then to stick that shot at that time, what an opportunity, what an experience for him. He's played a ton of minutes, so I can see it -- this was his first ACC conference tournament game. You could see it was a little different.

You forget, I'm an old guy now. These guys are young and these are new experiences for them, and I thought then he adjusted and settled in and did what he could do to the best of his abilities.

Q. You referenced Kihei's play on the last possession. I think he finished with 10 points, six assists, just a couple of turnovers. He played the middle against the zone quite a bit tonight. How would you evaluate the floor game he played, and also defensively with his pestering of Syracuse's guards?

TONY BENNETT: I thought he played two really good games back to back. When we played them the first time I thought he was so good offensively and defensively, and I really thought it was important. He stuck a couple of threes, and yeah -- he hit a couple threes, but he was making some plays in the high post and touched the ball a lot, certainly guarded hard. And then that last play just was -- our veteran players, the guys who have the experience, I thought stepped up and did some important things as the game wore on.

And Jay and Kihei and Sam -- really the most experienced guys -- and Trey you could say, too, because he's been in those games -- this was his first ACC Tournament game. But yeah -- no, Kihei both times against Syracuse in the last two games, I thought he's been rock solid.

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