

Atlantic Coast Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Tuesday, March 12, 2024

Washington, D.C., USA

Capital One Arena

NC State Wolfpack

Coach Kevin Keatts

Jayden Taylor

Michael O'Connell

Postgame Press Conference



NC State 94, Louisville 85

KEVIN KEATTS: A couple things. I thought Louisville came out very, very aggressive. I thought Kenny made a really great decision kind of starting four guards and starting Ty-Laur, it gave them a tremendous advantage. I thought they moved the ball, they came out very aggressive, they drove the ball, got to the free-throw line.

We talked about it at halftime. It was a shootout. Our defense wasn't very good, and we talked about making some adjustment guarding the ball.

When you get a guy like Skyy Clark who was in the tournament who's playing well, you've got to really defend him, and I thought he had a tremendous game against us. He played really well.

Give Louisville a lot of credit. That was a heck of a battle all the way until the end, and we're fortunate -- neither team played any defense. We just happened to score 94 points.

I thought guys stepped up. Jayden Taylor had a good time, scored the ball, had eight rebounds. I thought Michael was really solid, made baskets when we needed to, and Casey Morsell was really, really good. Maybe we should play all our games back at the DMV because he was really good.

Q. Is there an update on DJ Horne at this time, and for the players, how much did you feel like you guys needed to step up with him not being on the court today?

KEVIN KEATTS: So as you saw when we practiced yesterday, he shot a little bit, and we wanted him to go through kind of our warmups to see how he felt. I wasn't going to play him unless I knew we absolutely had to have him. We'll do the same thing. He'll have around the clock treatment. And the great thing about it is we do play a 7:00 game tomorrow.

But he'll still be a game-time decision. He's starting to feel better, but he's not moving well. Probably should have played him because our defense wasn't very good. He can't guard anybody, but certainly nobody else did.

He can play offensively which is who he is, but defensively he's not sliding well, so we'll know a little bit more towards game time tomorrow.

Q. For the players, at halftime did you kind of feel the urgency of your season being on the line, and Michael, your career being on the line? How much did that play into --

KEVIN KEATTS: You know he's got another year left --

Q. Never mind.

KEVIN KEATTS: Give him credit, now. He graduated from Stanford in three years. He's got a couple years. That COVID year is still there for him.

Q. Either way, it's win or that's it. What kind of urgency did you feel in the second half, both of you guys?

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: Like you're saying, it could be our last game of the season and we don't want to end it on this note. So we were down one, but we all banded together and we had a common message that we have to go out there and just play the right way and do what we do.

And we know when we're playing well, moving the ball, and hopefully getting stops that we can compete and win games and we had that urgency coming out in the second half.



JAYDEN TAYLOR: Yeah. I would agree with him. I would say it was urgency from the beginning of the game honestly. I didn't ever think we was ever going to lose, so we kept the same faith and just kept competing.

Q. Kevin, you got them in the bonus so early. They had seven fouls to your one, I believe. Did it change your strategy to take advantage of that in the last 10 or so minutes?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, you know what, we talked about it at halftime. I thought we settled for too many outside shots, so we wanted the first two minutes of the second half to drive the basketball, and I thought it worked for us.

We were really, really aggressive. That was by design. We felt like we had an advantage getting DJ back in the game, starting the game playing inside out. I thought we were able to throw the ball to him and get some good shots, and I thought Jay drove the ball, Michael did a good job getting into the paint. So it helped us down the stretch because obviously we got to the free-throw line.

Q. What did the performance of Casey Morsell mean for this team today?

KEVIN KEATTS: You're asking me or you want Michael to answer that? Michael is his roommate. He can answer that.

MICHAEL O'CONNELL: I think it's huge. He's obviously one of the leaders on the team, one of the captains on the team. When you see a guy playing out there with such passion and playing hard, you just want to follow suit.

I think it was huge from the beginning. He had the energy and he was pushing everyone to be the best they could out there, and when you have a guy leading like that you want to follow. Definitely propelled our team forward and helped us get the win.

KEVIN KEATTS: I couldn't have gave a better answer.

Q. Without DJ, how does that affect what you try to do, especially on offense, and how did you compensate for his absence out there tonight?

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, I mean, he's a scorer. The guy can put the ball in the hole, one of the best in our league. What we've asked is guys like Jayden Taylor to step up. I've asked Michael to be a little bit more offensive minded. I think Breon Pass came in in the first half and really gave us a big-time lift.

But everybody has got to step up. When you lose a guy that can score the basketball the way he does, I would have never guessed that we would score 94 points without DJ Horne, but we did. I thought everybody was aggressive. Casey Morsell had a little bit to do with it, but without him we have to have a little bit more player and ball movement.

We're running more plays. He's really the guy that can kind of create for himself, but with everybody else, we're trying to get everybody involved.

Q. Coach, you mentioned in your opening statement just about Louisville running the four-guard lineup. Syracuse is a pretty guard-heavy lineup, as well. What did you learn from today going against a guard-heavy squad?

KEVIN KEATTS: I thought Kenny made a -- I don't know if it was -- maybe their starting 4 man Glenn was late. I don't know what it was, but he hadn't started that lineup the entire year, and I thought he did a good job putting his four or five best players on the floor and just getting after it.

We're prepared to play both ways. Typically we switched 1 through 4 and then guard ball screens with our 5, but we started big today. Obviously playing a team like Syracuse, you guys seen it, those guys, they can score from different positions. We've got to be prepared to guard them. They did a great job at our place and certainly at their place. Great game towards the end at our place, but we didn't finish the game.

Q. Coach, looking at the first two games against Syracuse, what would you like to see in this game that didn't happen in those first two games, and do you feel like one or both teams have changed a lot since the last meeting between you two?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, I thought the Syracuse games are really funny. At Syracuse, it was a good game, and then probably six minutes left in the half, we just stopped scoring. Then when you look at the game at our place, they came out as red hot as you could come out, made shots. And then we cut the lead and did some good things. In both games we trailed because we had five or six-minute stretches where we just didn't play well.

I don't think either team is playing different than they played before. I just think it's tournament time, and everyone knows what's on the line. I think everybody is prepared to survive and advance.

Q. After the Duke game, you basically said that all your eggs are now in this tournament basket here, and

now you have another one coming up tomorrow. What's your message to the team? How do you approach it to keep them from looking big picture and what's ahead?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, I said this, and this is a disappointment for our league. It's 11 teams, and now I think it's nine maybe that has to win the tournament to go to the NCAA, and we're one of those teams.

We'll stay focused. To be honest with you, our guys won't know, nor do I, who we play after we play Syracuse. All we know is we play at 7:00 against Syracuse, and it's a one-game tournament, and you've got to be able to win that one game to be able to advance, and we'll be locked in.

We're glad that we do play a 7:00 game. We got a little time to get back to the hotel to get a little rest, and obviously try to prepare tonight with a little bit of film and do a walk-through tomorrow and get ready to play a good Syracuse team.

Q. With DJ Burns playing some limited minutes with some foul trouble, talk about what Ben Middlebrooks brings to this team, his energy, how that affects y'all?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, he's a change of pace from DJ Burns. He's a great ball screen coverage guy. He's starting to score with his back to the basket. Our team is starting to trust him in a lot of different ways.

He's just a hard-nosed dude. He rebounds the basketball. They're completely different. So when you get a chance to play -- when I need defense, I'm typically going to go with Ben. If I need some offense, some scoring, I'll go with DJ. I thought Ben and both Mo -- especially in the first half, I thought Mo did a good job, also.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports.