

Atlantic Coast Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Wednesday, March 13, 2024

Washington, D.C., USA

Capital One Arena

NC State Wolfpack

Kevin Keatts Coach

Muhammad Diarra

DJ Burns, Jr.

Postgame Press Conference



NC State 83, Syracuse 65

KEVIN KEATTS: Well, give Syracuse a lot of credit. Reg has done a tremendous job at Syracuse obviously taking over for a Hall of Famer.

To be quite honest with you, they won two really good games against us, and we talked about it.

I give our guys a lot of credit. I thought we locked in and understood the scouting report. I thought we did a better job of knowing how to guard certain people. Judah Mintz has killed us every time we played him, and we wanted to do a good job of making him -- backing off, keeping him out of the lane, and I thought we did a really good job with that.

We knew going into the game that we would have an advantage in the post. Obviously with DJ, Mo and Ben, and we wanted to throw the ball to those guys and obviously play inside out.

Proud of our guys. Another win. When you get to this point, we understand that if you win, you go home, and obviously for us, it's a good win for us, and we stacked a win, and obviously now we've got to prepare for a really good Duke team.

Questions?

Q. Just talk about your halftime adjustments because you outscored Syracuse 48-33 in the second half.

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, we talked about getting back in transition. I looked at the stat sheet and I knew it was

wrong because they only had them for two points in transition, and I thought they got out -- see, somebody else behind me believes the same thing. I didn't think we got back. I thought they drove the ball down our throats a little bit. We did a better job getting back, but we did a better job understanding scouting report and who could score and who couldn't score, and I think it was completely our defense.

We're the type of team when our defense is really good, our offense tends to be elite, and I thought it got good because of that.

Q. Mohammad, DJ, you guys are both taller than Syracuse's tallest guy on the floor, Maliq Brown. Your coach said you won in the post. How did you use your size to get that battle and win it?

DJ BURNS JR: I just wanted to focus on I knew he was their primary big, and he didn't want to get in foul trouble, so we just wanted to go at him as much as possible.

Q. Kevin, the two glaring stats to me are the rebounding and the points off turnovers. Were those an emphasis going into the game, and how did your team do so well when you created the turnovers? What was it about them that they were able to score?

KEVIN KEATTS: Coming into this tournament, it's the team that makes the least amount of mistakes is the team that typically can advantage, and those were two areas that -- the last four games of the regular season we didn't do well. Another area is we lost the turnover battle those four games, and that's just not NC State basketball.

So when you look at it tonight, we did a great job rebounding, 17 offensive rebounds. Mo had eight at halftime, and I challenged him to get 16, so he only got 14, so we've got to talk about that.

But we wanted to get out and turn them over, and I think we did. We forced them into 19 turnovers, and we got 30 points off of their turnovers. I thought that was really good for us.



Our team has made some adjustments in the things that we didn't do well finishing the regular season, and it's paying off for us in the postseason right now.

Q. You talked about that you did some things differently. You did get the turnovers. What specifically did you do to Mintz tonight that you didn't do in the first two games?

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, blame that on me, idiot coach. We're a pressure team. Probably my ego more than anything. We were getting after him and trying to pick him up, and obviously pick him up full court 94 feet, you can't pick a guy up like that.

We decided to drop back to the top of the key and let him operate and shrink the floor, and we were going to live on any of those threes that he made. He's one of the best paint touch guys in the country.

Obviously at his size, he's the only guy at his size that gets to the free-throw line, so we talked about staying down on pump fakes, we talked about not pressuring him, don't flush him to the hole, and I think it worked for us.

Q. I'm curious, your team seems to have found some remarkable chemistry late in the season, and all of a sudden your players are believing. It's clear as day. What do you attribute that to, and how will that play into the next game against the Blue Devils?

KEVIN KEATTS: We're fighting. We're fighting. I've got guys in that locker room that really believe, and we're talking at nighttime and every day about what it takes to win and the will to win, and I think our guys understand that part of it.

It doesn't get any easier. Every team in this league can beat you.

We've got to -- obviously we've played two games in a row and they're coming in fresh, and we've got to try to figure out how to find some energy from somewhere else, and we will. I think our energy right now is our motivation.

Q. Your team is playing with their backs against the wall. They're playing really, really well. They started hot. They stayed together all game. I think you have seven players here with at least one assist. Talk about that teamwork aspect.

KEVIN KEATTS: Yeah, I'm getting leadership from guys like DJ Burns. I'm getting leadership from guys like Michael O'Connor. I'm getting leadership from guys like DJ Horne. And we're asking those older guys to step up, and

it's weird because most of these guys except for DJ are transfers, and so it takes them almost a year to feel like they've got a voice in the locker room, and I think they all have the mentality now that we don't want to go home, and obviously stay together, stick together, fight together.

Q. For the players, Coach talked about some of the adjustments that you guys made coming into the postseason, but how much of the last two games has just been the reset button that it's a new season and you can get that attitude back?

DJ BURNS JR: Honestly, from our point of view, we didn't really lose it. We were just waiting until we played a complete game, and I felt like tonight was one of those nights where we handled business.

Q. Mo, how much of the last two nights has been resetting, you can just flush what happened before?

MOHAMMAD DIARRA: My point of view, we play with desperation, so we have to win every night to play the next game. That's why we played so well.

Q. DJ, you only committed one foul. How did you stay out of foul trouble and what did you think of the physicality?

DJ BURNS JR: Just stop swiping. It's pretty simple knowing that I'm not much of a shot blocker right now.

KEVIN KEATTS: What do you mean right now?

MOHAMMAD DIARRA: You'll see what I mean --

KEVIN KEATTS: He's got five blocks in his career and he says right now.

DJ BURNS JR: Yeah, so just not swiping at dumb stuff. Just making smarter plays on defense.

KEVIN KEATTS: Mo loves that. He can't stop laughing at that part of it.

Q. Coach, when you played Duke last time, you punched them in the mouth and got up to and? 9-0 lead. Obviously it didn't go well from there. Is there anything you learned from that game or that start that you think can carry over tomorrow?

KEVIN KEATTS: I learned they're a really good basketball team. I had a college coach that taught me a long time ago that early leads don't last. I knew that they would make a run. They did a good job. It's a really good basketball team. They're talented. Every ranking that they

have, that's what it is. Obviously we're excited about the opportunity, but the reason for the comeback is because it's a good basketball team.

Q. Kevin, Diarra, his growth this season, his game tonight, could you speak to that, and DJ, what is it like playing with Mohammad?

KEVIN KEATTS: You know, he has grown in so many areas. Rebounding the ball he's tremendous. He's one of our best rebounders. He really goes after it. When he has great games, he shoots really well behind the three-point line. He's been trying to convince me for the entire year that he should be a small forward, and I'm considering it. I just haven't made the choice yet.

But no, he competes every day. I think what's made Mo and his biggest growth is his maturity. He and I talked about that. He would come into practice early in the year, and he would act like a 65 year old man. He was grumpy.

So when he comes in, the first thing I say, how you doing, Mo, and I can tell what mood he's in, and if he's not in a good mood, I'll keep saying how you doing, Mo, until I finally get a smile. I think his mind, his adjustment, playing with other guys his size has really helped him a lot.

DJ BURNS JR: For me, playing with Mo, it just opens up a lot for you. He has the ability to shoot the three, and every time a shot is up they've got to find him and that usually opens up some opportunities for me.

He just plays hard. He doesn't really care about all the extra stuff going on. He doesn't care to argue with people and be a part of the show. He's just here to get business done, and that's why I love playing with him.

Q. You really haven't touched on the lift that DJ Horne gave you, and it seemed like when he came in at the start of the second half that he was in the middle of that big 18-2 run that really changed the momentum.

KEVIN KEATTS: He was a secret weapon. Typically you don't have your leading scorer as a secret weapon. We're doing shootaround this morning, I watched him, and I kind of stayed away from him.

I just wanted to see what he would do. I think about 4:30 I got a text from my trainer that said, DJ is going to try to go, and I just simply said, okay.

Then I get here, and I said, DJ is ready to go, and he said, we've got to look and see how he does in warm-ups. I was like, you already told me he could go. What a tremendous lift. He played well. We needed him to play well.

Obviously he's played well for us the entire year, but that was an up lift that we had to have, and I thought he provided it for us.

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