

Atlantic Coast Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 15, 2025
Charlotte, North Carolina, USA
Spectrum Center

Louisville Cardinals

Pat Kelsey

J'Vonne Hadley

Postgame Press Conference



Louisville 76, Clemson 73

PAT KELSEY: I want to give a lot of credit and shout-out to Clemson and Brad and his staff. It's a very, very good team, a very, very well-coached team. They're tough. They're physical. We knew it was going to be a tough, physical game, and it exceeded anything that I even thought it would be.

I told our guys in the locker room, standing on the sidelines, that was as physically demanding of a game as I've ever coached in. From the very beginning, it was established early on how the game was going to go and how it was going to be called, and both teams accepted that challenge. They're a championship-caliber team, and they fought.

You know what, so did our guys. J'Vonne sitting next to me right now, and I could name a ton of guys in our locker room, and I just told them how proud I was about how hard they fought. There was just a desperation about every loose ball. There was a desperation by both teams for every ball in the air. There were bodies crashing into each other. It was two teams that were vying for a championship and gave it everything they got.

We're very fortunate to come out with the win. Obviously, the end of the game, we have some learning moments that we could improve on as we move into tomorrow and then into next week. But at the end of the day, I'm proud of our guys, and we're fortunate to advance and have an opportunity to compete for an ACC championship tomorrow.

Q. J'Vonne, when we talked at ACC Media Days, ACC championship was obviously in the vision. Now it's

become a reality, you have a chance to compete. How are you feeling right now?

J'VONNE HADLEY: I mean, it means the world that we get the opportunity. It means we've been working for it since we all got together. None of us knew each other. Maybe a couple of us through Instagram. It just means the world. It shows us how far we've made it. We have so much further to go.

Q. J'Vonne, Chucky had six steals during the game. From your perspective, what was it like to see a fellow brother of yours is able to pickpocket the ball so well?

J'VONNE HADLEY: Yeah, Chucky is a menace. We don't really have to worry about the other team's point guard much. Chucky is the best defender I've ever played with. He could pick up 94 all game long. It's just amazing to have, especially at the point guard position.

Q. J'Vonne, I think at the beginning of the season, everybody talked about this team and shooting a bunch of threes and the kind of offense that Coach Kelsey has run, and you've done that, but it's become a team that you're having to get in the lane and score, and Terrence and Chucky, and it's a different type defense and getting loose balls. Talk about that evolution and what it's been like having to kind of evolve into that.

J'VONNE HADLEY: The evolution has been amazing to see, and our guys are bought in. That's the big piece right there. Our guys are bought in. It starts with our defense.

After the Eastern Kentucky game, we sat down in the film room and, obviously, we set goals, and we met them, and now we're trying to exceed them. Like I said, it all starts on the defensive end. It only makes our offense better when our defense is humming and moving around and being physical and disrupting and us being us.

Q. J'Vonne, how would you describe the highs and lows and the roller coaster of emotions of the last two games?

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J'VONNE HADLEY: I mean, this is March. Welcome to March. I was fortunate to be in a couple of them last year, as well. The only thing I can do is just be a leader, talk to the guys, help them understand that -- just do what we do. I've just got to be a veteran. We have a lot of veterans on our team that come from playing deep in March, as well. We just have to be those veteran guys and get together and just understand and just be us.

Q. J'Vonne, the last time y'all faced this Duke team, you gave them the largest deficit before Georgia Tech that they had had all season, and that was with Coop and Malik. Now they don't have Coop and Malik. So going into that game, how do you prepare for this team?

J'VONNE HADLEY: I would just say recovering our bodies, first of all, making sure that we're ready to go. It's going to be another battle in the paint tomorrow, same thing. Transition, rebounding, rock fight. Just do what we do. We know it's going to be another physical game. The team that's more physical, the team that disrupts more, and the team that wins the backboard is probably going to win the game tomorrow.

Q. Coach and J'Vonne, whenever Clemson brought that pressure late in the game, that's when they started that run. If Duke were to do that tomorrow, what do you do differently?

PAT KELSEY: Handle it better. You give them credit; they were desperate at that point of the game, and they were -- the officials let stuff go at that point of the game, and the traps were ferocious. We made some ill-advised plays and could have handled some situations better, but we work on those situations every single day.

We sure as heck don't make any excuses, and we don't give any explanations, but our guys were low on fumes there at the end of the game.

At the end of the day, they gritted out a tough win, and fortunate to advance, and we're in those situations tomorrow, we'll handle it better.

Q. Looking at tomorrow, it's been a long time since you guys played Duke. What do you feel like you've learned about yourselves as a team since then?

J'VONNE HADLEY: I would say we found our identity on the defensive end. Like I said, when our defense is humming, buzzing around and disrupting and us being us, we're an athletic, versatile team that can disrupt at all five positions. When we're doing that and we're locked in, we're a hard team to beat.

Q. Coach, also talking with you at media days, you were ecstatic when you took this job. You talked about what it meant to you. Here you are in the ACC championship, Louisville's first appearance in the ACC championship game. What does that mean to you, Coach of the Year?

PAT KELSEY: Staff of the year. I've got great people around me. I'm humbled to receive that honor, but embarrassed a little bit, as well. There's great, great coaches in this league.

Gosh, it's been a whirlwind of a year. It's coming up on 12 months since Josh Heard made that call to me and offered me the job to be head coach University of Louisville, and when I still say those words, I still can't believe it's real sometimes, and I get goosebumps on my arm.

Listen, I've said this at my press conference and I've said it a million times, I mean, this brand, that cardinal head there, it's one of the greatest brands in collegiate sports, and I'm fortunate to be the head coach here. I thank God every day for this amazing opportunity. We live in a world-class city with people that are passionate about basketball and passionate about the University of Louisville.

And when we accomplish things like this and have an opportunity to play for an ACC championship tomorrow, it kind of makes you feel like you're doing your part and you're earning your keep.

That group of young men in that locker room is special. I've never had a team that has the seriousness of purpose every day in preparation like they do. You can see the caliber of competitors and dogs that they are when things get hot in big moments. They're taking me on this ride with them. It's a player-led team with phenomenal leadership. I mean, heck, J'Vonne Hadley should be sending out resumes and business cards back there in the back. What a world class kid and an absolute warrior on the court, as well?

I'm fortunate and blessed. We're excited about the opportunity to compete with Duke tomorrow for a championship.

Q. Previously said, you play Duke tomorrow. What is the message to the fans to keep the momentum rolling as you play the No. 1 team in the nation and look forward to Selection Sunday?

PAT KELSEY: The message to our fans? I'm sure they're all still up because they're basketball crazy, and after that game, the emotions of that game, how it ended, I'm sure



they're all staring at the ceiling not able to go to sleep right now. I won't be able to either, although you don't get much sleep during conference tournament play anyway.

But we'll see y'all tomorrow. There's probably some tickets available or some scalpers out there on the sidewalk. Charlotte is not too bad of a drive for Louisville, so come on up. As much of the Red Sea as we can have out there, the better. Love to have Card nation here in Charlotte.

Q. How would you describe the way the team has progressed throughout the season to how they're playing at this point?

PAT KELSEY: Well, I think J'Vonne said it. Right when we started conference play, we barely beat Eastern Kentucky late in December right before conference play, and he's right, like, we had a team meeting where we really stopped and we said, all right, how can we be great? How can we be the best version of ourselves that we can possibly be? And we all decided that we had to up the ante on the defensive end.

We picked out some metrics that we were going to look at every single day and we were going to build, and we said, if we can get there, we can be an elite team. We're hitting those metrics right now.

Now, you're only as good as your last game. Defensively, our guys were beasts tonight. That's a hard team to prepare for. That's a hard team to guard. They're very, very well-coached. Our guys were on their assignments and they played with unbelievable effort.

To answer your question, I would say just the commitment on the defensive end starting at the beginning of conference play to where we are right now, which has really allowed us to take off.

Q. You obviously believed in all these guys because you recruited them and you study the back of the bubble gum cards, as you like to say, but how much tougher and better are they than even you thought they were? Obviously, your staff has developed them, but there's something there that you don't understand until you see it, it looks like?

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, you've got to recruit toughness. It's hard to coach that or teach that. You either have it or you don't, in my opinion. Or you don't have the time to teach it if it is possible to teach it.

We go to great lengths to try to do our research and talk to as many people as possible to -- we want great competitors and guys with great toughness, and you could

see today we've got a team full of them.

Q. This was a game, and you've had them before, where you had pretty big foul trouble and you guys don't talk a lot about foul trouble, and it's hard to see any visible effect on you and your staff when you get guys in foul trouble. How do you deal with that with such limited numbers as you've had?

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, it gets a little tricky. And it got a little tricky tonight when Noah fouled out. James had four, and we had other guys with three or four fouls, as well.

Like I said, they were on fumes. We were on fumes. We were crawling to the finish line, as you could tell, and crossed it just in time.

But when those things start happening, you have a plan of how you're going to do your rotations and divvy up the minutes, but all those go away once the game starts based on how guys are playing, who's in trouble. Our staff does an unbelievable job with that.

Q. Back-to-back games, it's been a little bit too close for comfort for the team with the scoring and everything else. But what is the biggest fundamental thing that needs to be worked on or tweaked before you head to Duke tomorrow?

PAT KELSEY: Well, we're playing the No. 1 team in the country. They have -- I know No. 2 is out from what I understand. But when I looked the other day, and I'm starting to prepare and get my stuff all together for who we could potentially play, you look at some of these things online, and they have like five guys that are supposed to get drafted in the first round, first two rounds or something like that. It's like Noah's Ark; they have two of everything.

Biggest thing we've got to improve on right now is our guys getting to sleep, our guys getting some rest, recovering our bodies, hydrating like crazy. Coaches will pour over film all night. We'll try to be short and sweet with our preparation tomorrow and have a smile on our face and be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed when the ball goes up tomorrow at Duke.

Jon is a phenomenal coach. Class act, too. When the award was named the other day, he called me. He reached out to me. I thought that was really, really, really classy because you know what, he could have very easily gotten it. Maybe he should have. But I thought that was a really classy move on his part, and all the interactions I've had with him over the years because we were both coaches in AAU tournaments and stuff like that. He's doing a heck of a job there. He's one of the best coaches in the country.

Q. The biggest lead you had was with 3:50 left in the second half of 15. What seemed to be clicking on offense this game?

PAT KELSEY: Yeah, I felt like our transition, which is part of our DNA, who we are as an offense team, and we always say, the cumulative effect of how we push the ball and rush to offense on every possession can wear teams down. I thought when we really expanded the lead, we were getting kick-outs, kick-aheads. We were getting uncontested lay-ups at the other end. So I thought that was a big, big part of it. And then we were obviously getting stops.

How we handled their barrage late when they were coming after us and pressing us and trapping us and things like that, we had some ill-advised plays and turnovers, but we'll clean that up.

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