

American Athletic Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Thursday, March 10, 2022

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

Cincinnati Bearcats

Wes Miller

David DeJulius

Jr Mike Saunders

III John Newman

Postgame Press Conference

Cincinnati 74, East Carolina 63

WES MILLER: Yeah. It's been a tough stretch here over the last month. And we've been in a number of really close games. And haven't been able to close them out down the stretch. We've also spent the year in practice working at it and talking about it, about having an identity being built around our defense, being able to get stops when it matters. And it was great to see that come together tonight down the stretch.

There's a number of great individual performances. I thought Dave was really good early, just kind of loosening up the game for us offensively and finding the basket.

I thought John Newman defensively, that's one for my memory bank there as a coach. In terms of his effort defensively that one will go down because he was phenomenal in the first half and then we put him on Newton in the second half. I know Newton still got 11 in the second half but they were a different kind of 11. He had to really earn them, and I thought that disrupted their offensive rhythm a little bit.

I thought Abdul some of the plays he made around the basket late in the second half to alter shots, I think he had three blocks. His communication defensively. Some of his screens out there out front on the ball or off the ball were a big factor down the stretch.

You know, then I thought Mike Saunders, man, he makes a bunch of big plays for us tonight. He makes a huge three in front of our bench that I thought gave us a lot of



confidence. Made someplace in transition. So it was good to see him play that confidently offensively and I thought that gave us a boost.

The first game in a conference tournament is always the most difficult one from my experience. They're always just -- the nerves are there. Sometimes you can want it a little too much. I've never felt that this group didn't want it. This group wants to be good, they work at it every day. I've been really proud of that. And I think at times tonight we almost wanted it a little too much, especially in the first half.

You could just kind of feel that, coaching staff and players included. So I'm glad we found the right column in the win/loss column and I hope that can give us some confidence to get back to how we were playing back in January.

Q. Coach, you mentioned putting John on Newton seemed like late in the first half. What went into that decision? John, if you could speak to it too what your game plan was against it?

WES MILLER: Just give him more length. It's funny, we talked about it in both of the first two games because you look at his numbers. I mean, even going into the first game that we played them at home, and we kind of felt like, you know, Number 1, Dave's done such a good job this year taking on the challenge of the best defensive player on the other team. I thought in January he was about as good of a two-way guy as I've coached. He was guarding the heck out of the other team's best guard and sometimes he's giving up four or five inches, and then we're doing so much for him offensively. I'd be saying this if he wasn't sitting here anyway.

But in the first two games other than the last four minutes of that second game, I thought we defended him or he had as much difficulty as he did against anybody else in the league. So ironically Dave brings it up in a meeting last night, like, hey Coach, what about putting John on Newton? Is that something you all thought about? I almost wanted to say shut up. We hadn't had to do that yet.

But so listen, we talked about it the first two games. Hadn't

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had to do it. We talked about it in the front of the team last night when Dave brought it up and it did feel like the right thing to do with the kind of first half that he had.

JOHN NEWMAN III: I think he's a good player this his. Obviously still had himself a pretty good game. But I just go in the game, just try to make an impact any way I can and tonight that was where I was needed, so I just kind of keyed in on him. Just tried to stay in front of him, use my length and it worked out.

Q. Wes, what was the plan against Vance Jackson. He had 16 points, 10 rebounds tonight but those 16 points compared to what he's done to you guys earlier this season is nothing. So what was the plan?

WES MILLER: We talked a lot about we'd done a nice job on Newton the first two games given the kind of player he is and we hadn't done that job on Jackson. We didn't want to neglect Newton. But I think it's just human nature. Somebody's averaging 30 on you over the course of two games, like you're going to have a sense of urgency about it.

I thought our group had a sense of urgency to try to defend him. I thought it was almost took it personal in a good way, like hey, we're not going to let somebody come in and average 30 on us again. So I thought that was part of it. Scheme-wise, yeah, we talked a lot about different actions they run for him, kind of their special plays for him, the best ways to defend him. I thought the guys did a nice job executing that. Early on we made some mistakes on them leaving our feet around the basket in the post but over the course of the game I thought we did a nice job.

Q. This question is for Wes Miller: Jeremiah had a slow shooting shot but he came down with a 5-0 run late in the second half. What was the message for him late in the game?

WES MILLER: To Jeremiah Davenport? Shoot. I mean, it's pretty simple. I think these three guys about will agree, shoot the ball. We all love it when he shoots. We do a lot of things for him to shoot the ball, and I think we have utmost confidence in him.

You know, I always identified as a player as a shooter and I always thought the next one was going in. I think that's the way Jeremiah thinks about it. I think he's got the confidence of the coaching staff and his teammates. So we wanted him to just keep shooting. I thought he made a really big one in front of our bench when they went zone. That just shows you he was having a tough shooting night and makes a big play in a big moment in the second half of a conference tournament game.

Q. Coach, looked like there was some exchanging of words, a little scuffle at halftime going into the tunnel, as much as you could tell us about that. And did it give any kind of a spark in the second half?

WES MILLER: I was so far behind it, I was just a part of the break-up process. I don't know what happened. We didn't have time to unpack what happened in the locker room at halftime because we're trying to prepare these guys for the second half. So I do not know what happened. But obviously you don't want those type of things but I thought our guys handled themselves well from everything that I was able to see.

Q. David, there was a play in the first half where you were going to the basket, you were sandwiched between two defenders, hard play to the ground. There was no foul called on that play. Did that set the tone for the day? Did you know at that point it was going to be a physical game?

DAVID DeJULIUS: Yeah, most definitely but it's tournament play, it's March play. Some things may have to carry on. But I just kind of want to stay resilient through that and my coaches and my teammates as well was on my side as well, just telling me to play the next play

Q. Mikey, second half you provided a spark offensively hitting a couple shots. Did you feel like that was something that the team needed in terms of being a little bit more aggressive in those moments?

MIKE SAUNDERS JR.: Honestly, I was just playing in the flow of the game. I wasn't necessarily thinking about scoring or anything. Just thinking about how we were going to win the next possession. So when the shots came I just took them. I'm just out there trying to make winning plays and worked out for us.

Q. Coach Miller, I know you talked about Jackson a little bit but he did get going in the first half with 12 on 4-of-7 shooting. Was there any change in the second half? He was 2-of-11, 0-of-6 from three, only scored four points or did you just do a better job assignment-wise on closing him out and keeping him out of rhythm?

WES MILLER: Yeah, the short answer is we did a much better job executing our assignment and game plan in the second half. I think in the first half we really tried to stay down on him around the basket. As great of a three-point shooter as he is and guys he can really shoot it, when he gets inside the three he's really searching for angles. So we worked on it in practice and we talked about it a ton and

watched film and we left our feet a couple times on him that got him loose. We fouled him. We got him to the free-throw line. We didn't make him score over us inside of a three. Then we messed up a couple of assignments on him out on the perimeter. He missed one, made one or two.

So a lot of the first-half success, and give him credit because he made the plays, was missed coverages and missed assignments. And I thought we did a better job of that in the second half. I think the only one in the second half he makes over top of us, he makes about a 10-12 footer in the face-up in the post against JD, and we've told our guys we can live with that. That's the only basket I can remember in the second half where we executed an assignment and he still scored.

Q. Coach, you mentioned Abdul, he had a couple weakside blocks in the second half. Was he able to get healthy over this time off and what impact, especially in the second half, did he have overall on defense?

WES MILLER: I think the word healthy is a relative term with Abdul. I think these guys know that. Healthy, he probably hasn't been healthy in four years. Right? Real healthy. I don't think anybody at Cincinnati has ever been able to see Abdul at 100 percent but I do think just watching him this week in practice, he got to run and when he was playing at I thought the healthiest point he's been this year in January, he was running like a deer in practice and in really good shape and moving a little differently, and then he had that injury at South Florida and I don't think he ever got back to that.

This week he was running in practice again and getting in better shape and moving a little differently. So I do think he's feeling better than he felt over the last month, but I think if you asked him if he's healthy he'd laugh at you because he's nowhere near 100 percent.

Q. You guys got 26 points from your guys off the bench. Mikey, can you talk about as one of the leaders of that unit, how important those guys were in this win today?

MIKE SAUNDERS JR.: It was big for us. That just showed the depth that we have on our team, you know, we have bodies and that's the most important thing is having enough guys to just play. So the fact that we was able to produce offensively, that was like I said really big for us. And we got to keep it going. Just look on to the next one.

Q. David, that game earlier at ECU you had the floater to win it, you had a couple of those today, you had the

stepback working. Offensively do you feel like you have everything at your arsenal right now?

DAVID DeJULIUS: Yes, I do. That's just a testament to hard work but most important, it's a testament to my coaching staff believing in me and my teammates believing in me as well. And I wouldn't be nearly the player I am without them.

Just to shed some light, them guys as he said about John Newman, I feel like he don't get enough credit for our team. He's literally him and Abdul like the backbone of our team, especially on the defensive end, and they erase a lot of our mistakes. And then Mike and Mason and them guys coming in off the bench giving us a great stretch. It allows a guy like me, my job to be easy and allows me to be the best player I can be.

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East Carolina Pirates

Joe Dooley

Vance Jackson

Tristen Newton

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JOE DOOLEY: Obviously we're disappointed, appreciate the contributions and the effort that the guys gave during the year. I thought we did some good things. I thought the guys tried hard. Had a good group of guys to work with. I really can't complain about that.

The game today I think obviously points off the turnovers were a big key. And then at the end they go on an 18-5 run to finish the game which, you know, we had some good looks. We had some times we needed to get some stops and wrap up possession; we didn't. Give Cincinnati credit for it making some plays. Davenport made a couple of big plays. Saunders made a couple of big plays and we answered some and didn't answer others.

Q. Coach, you guys had 41 in the first half, 22 in the second half. I know they talked about changing some things up on how they were guarding Newton but what did you see from your perspective on what Cincinnati did and then the struggles on offense for you guys?

JOE DOOLEY: We had some looks that we missed which was a big part. I thought those were some things. I didn't think our shot selection in the second half was as good as the first half. Like what we talked about, we gave up some transition baskets and we did miss a few open shots, which would have helped, it would have helped if we had another guy or a collective group of guys add a couple more points along with these two guys.

Q. Vance, you've had so much success against Cincinnati this season and only 16 points tonight. Did



they do anything differently defending you today?

VANCE JACKSON: Not really I just feel like I missed too many shots, wide-open shots. I feel like, yeah, just missed too many shots. To be honest, they're all shots I know I can make. My teammates believe in me, the coaches believe in me, so I just felt like I had to just do better. I'm shooting 2-for-10 from three. That's not good at all.

But, man, I tried, and I'm just thankful for like just having an opportunity, and coaches and my teammates just trusting in me.

Q. Tristen, you started 6-for-8 in the first half, what did you find that was working for you in the first half? And then in the second half they transitioned John to you. What did you find was working early and going on you finished with 26 points tonight?

TRISTEN NEWTON: I just felt like it was really my teammates setting good ball screens. They set good ball screens, which allowed me to get to my spots. I feel like second half I think I was forcing a little bit too much. Like I could have came off the ball a little bit more.

But, yeah, that's pretty much it. I feel like just got to work on shot selection. So in the first half I was getting to my spot, second half I wasn't. So just got to work on that.

Q. Coach, it looked like there was a little bit of a scuffle at halftime going into the tunnel. Just curious if you could speak of what happened from your perspective.

JOE DOOLEY: Nothing happened. I mean, everything's fine.

Q. A couple times you went zone for a possession or two, that's something that Cincinnati struggled going against zone in the season. Did you see any change in how they played against it tonight?

JOE DOOLEY: We came back out and Davenport hit a big three. I thought we did a nice job, we turned them over with a little soft press, you know, changed it a little bit.



They ran their overload, you know, Davenport hit a big shot. That was a big play. But I just think we're comfortable. I thought for the most part we guarded well enough man-to-man. We mixed in some zone. Seemed like we're in a little bit of a scramble mode. Obviously Davenport had that one but we had a couple of time where we didn't guard the dribble off the zone also.

Q. Joe, you guys I think Tristen hit a three just under four minutes to go to put you guys up one, and then don't score again. Just how do you sum up those final four minutes where things didn't go your way?

JOE DOOLEY: Frustrating. I thought we had a couple looks. We had a couple ones that we probably wish we could have had back. We talked about that. And then, you know, when you get stops, you've got to rebound the ball. We had a couple where we didn't defensive rebound the ball in situations we needed to. I think so those are all things that are, you know, they're the difference in the game as we recognize.

Q. And Vance, you only got one year at East Carolina but obviously a really good season for you. How would you sum up this one year in Greenville playing for ECU?

VANCE JACKSON: It's been great. I'm thankful for the opportunity. Not many people could have six chances at college. So I just feel I took advantage of my opportunity and I found a home in Greenville, representing ECU and I'm just thankful for that and I'm excited for my next chapter.

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