

# Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 14, 2025

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

**UNLV Rebels**

**Coach Kevin Kruger**

**Jalen Hill**

**Jaden Henley**

Postgame Press Conference

Utah State 70, UNLV 58

THE MODERATOR: For UNLV we have student-athletes Jalen Hill, Jaden Henley, Head Coach Kevin Kruger. Coach?

KEVIN KRUGER: Well, what an awesome fight. I mean, what an awesome 40-minute fight by our guys. Obviously came up a little bit short, but going into a Utah State match-up you know you're going to have to play incredibly hard for forty minutes because of how hard they play and how together they play.

With some of the mileage that we've asked the guys to put on their legs over the last couple of weeks I thought it was just an absolutely awesome fight by our guys to compete and really do everything in their power to have a chance to win a ball game against a really good team.

Especially obviously the two sitting next to me, just fighting and playing forty minutes multiple times over the last couple weeks and competing and doing everything they possibly can. I remember what it's like to be tired and try to make decisions and try to get your body and your legs to move. It doesn't always go the way you want it to.

But these two guys, along, of course with the other guys that played such heavy minutes over the last couple weeks. When we went back and watched the film, there weren't a lot of times where we pointed at a play and said, well, they're just tired.

Well, they're too tired right there, that's that mistake.

That's just a testament to these guys, this group, because they've done nothing but fight and nothing but compete,



and obviously it's a tough way to go out, because as hard as we played and as many good plays as we did make for each other, and the opportunity that we had to kinda make a run. Utah State is a great team, and anytime we made it -- threw a punch they threw one right back.

Hats off to them. Congrats to them. Even when you're scouting them, watching film, they're fun to watch because of how hard they play and play for each other. But I couldn't be more proud of our guys and just more happy that I had this year with this group, because, you know, they enjoy fighting and competing. That's the best part about it.

**Q. For both Jaden and Jalen, you guys basically played the full game and Coach mentioned a lot of mileage on your legs. Mentally and physically I'm wondering how you guys are doing after this last stretch is over?**

JADEN HENLEY: Um, obviously I mean, it's tough out there, like he said it's tough to get your body going sometimes when you're tired, but for us it mental toughness and pushing through. The staff did a good job of making sure we were fresh and ice baths daily and getting your mind right before the game just knowing you have a long game ahead of you and it's going to be tough.

JALEN HILL: Just going off what he said, just -- I think during the game we don't really think about it. We just try to play as hard as we can. I think that's what we did for these last three, four weeks that Coach asked us to play 36, 37 plus minutes so that's it.

**Q. Jalen, what can you say about this team coming together the past seven games shorthanded and Coach Kruger and his effort the past couple games?**

JALEN HILL: Just with the team I think it shows the fight that we have every game, every practice, next guy up. Everybody is in film, locked in. Doesn't matter who is out there.

I would say for Coach just the confidence that he has in



every single one of us. Guys like Ice who hasn't played all season, and for him to come in and hit a couple big shots, I feel like for me and him, there's been games where we haven't played our best. For him to have that confidence in us just allows us like these last stretch of games to just play our best basketball.

**Q. Jalen, obviously you came back to Las Vegas; your final two college years here. How was that experience for you? What would you tell a younger player who was considering come to UNLV in the future?**

JALEN HILL: I wouldn't change anything, getting hurt. I learned a lot about myself, about the team, just seeing basketball from a different view.

For everybody that's from Vegas or that wants to come here, I would say it's a great team, a great program to come to. Your coach is going to fight for you every single day.

**Q. Jaden, what can you say about the foundation maybe that this season built, in your time with the program what have you seen that the team can build on for next season?**

JADEN HENLEY: I think the biggest thing we can build on is the fight that we had. Day in and day out. Every game we fought, we gave it our all, even in the huddles we're active, no matter -- like DJ is hurt. He's active in the huddle. Rob is active in the huddle. I think we can build on that family aspect and keep it going.

THE MODERATOR: We will dismiss the student-athletes. Thank you, men. Questions?

**Q. I think the team was something like 24% from the field tonight. Is that something that you credit to Utah State's defense or just shots weren't falling on your end? Maybe they just weren't going in?**

KEVIN KRUGER: A little bit of both, probably. You gotta primarily give the credit to Utah State and their defensive activity and just how well they play kind of in unison and for each other. The way they react is as good as anyone in the country in terms of just the anticipation of the next play; if they're not involved, where the ball is moving so they can force tougher shots and lower percentages.

So you have to give them credit because when you've had three or four tough contested shots that even when you do get that open one, there is a little more pressure on it because it's an open one and they're few and far between against a really good defensive team like that. So you have to give credit to Utah State before you -- of course we

will find some that maybe we could have -- or hoped would have gone in but it's one of those things it wears on you over time.

And that's what great defensive teams do, they make -- those open shots are that much harder to come by and they add a little bit of pressure to it, so you've got to knock those down when you get those opportunities, because you know you may not get another one for a few minutes.

**Q. Coach, considering that this team has had to learn how to win in different ways over the last seven games, how much confidence did that contribute to you guys feeling like no matter what happened -- obviously Bear picked up two early fouls and being adaptable and your confidence that you could win it tonight?**

KEVIN KRUGER: I think over the last month it braced the team for adversity. Of course there was some early on in the year, but that's kind of -- you're still finding roles, finding where you're going to fit in and make an impact.

Over the last month when things like that happen you've got to adjust pretty quickly. Of course when D.J. we want out the guys adjusted really well and had a great defensive game against Colorado State just couldn't score enough which was kind of to be expected to struggle on the offensive side, but found a nice little groove.

If I could paint, I would paint a pretty clear picture of even when Jailen Bedford got hurt last night. The morale didn't change. It didn't shift. It wasn't, well, here we go again. Guys were ready. They were still locked in regardless of whether or not he could come back after he got his eye cut.

Tonight with Bear it was kind of the same thing. Bear picks up two quick ones, which Bear does a very good job of playing without fouling, so to get those two quick early ones, same thing, guys were locked in and ready. We could have asked anybody on the bench to go in and I think they would have been really ready.

A lot of that is just kind of from the adversity that they had gone through. When you are asked to do something, you've got to do your best to go do it. There is nothing about well that's not my position, that's not what I do, that's not me, it's just, okay, I'll try my best to do it.

And over the last handful of games to finish the season, even finishing the game in The Pit when Julian went out, there was no -- I've never run that spot, I've never done that, it was like, okay, and same thing last night when Jailen Bedford went out, DeMarion goes in, bangs a three. Awesome to see. Isaiah goes in, bangs a three.



So I think all that kind of wrapped into one prepared them for the tournament, to prepare them for anything that might happen.

**Q. I know this game is still fresh but the off-season is starting. The portal is less than two weeks away. What are your priorities now as you pivot to the off season in terms of building a roster for next year? What did you want to see happen now?**

KEVIN KRUGER: First you've got to meet with the guys. Of course meet with them individually, talk to them, see where their brain is at. It's a whole new world. It's a whole different world than it used to be. So of course we will give them some time to decompress and kind of have those conversations.

But we've also got a great opportunity to retain a lot of guys, and retention right now in college basketball is showing. Teams that have good retention rates and the guys that come back that were impactful and want to be back when you add a transfer or two are usually the teams that have a lot of success. With the portal, it might be two weeks away, but we're already seeing everything. Guys are announcing they're going in the portal, so I mean, it's a -- it's interesting. An interesting few weeks; we'll put it that way.

**Q. Coach, Utah State shared their respect for you bringing the guys together and the adversity that you faced in the last seven games or so. Can you talk about your experience dealing with the adversity, the injuries and how your guys have only gotten better and rallied together down the stretch?**

KEVIN KRUGER: Yeah, it was kind of a learning experience in a lot of ways. To have guys go out when they did was something now that will be in my memory bank and of course just like I think any coach after any game or practice or any situation, of course, we're going to pick apart mentally what we would do differently next time.

Of course there are also some things that you're going to remember that worked well. As much as anything, though, it's just -- of course it's tough to finish this way, because we were feeling so good. But like I told the seniors, I just couldn't be anymore appreciative of them. They did nothing but fight and compete.

They had a lot of curve balls thrown their way but there is no question that I don't think I would be able to look back at this year and once -- kind of I take a day or two and decompress a little bit and think back on it, I don't think I would be able to look at it as much of a learning

opportunity as I can if it weren't for that group of seniors.

When you talk specifically about Julian, Jalen Hill, of course Ice, an absolute home run of a human, never batted an eye, never raised a fuss, stayed ready, worked hard every single day, and I know Bedford walked on Senior Night, but, of course, he's got another year with the JUCO rule. But it's such a fun group to be around and go fight with, and yeah there is a little bit of a "what if" but as a learning experience as a coach, I think there are a lot of things I'll be able to take with me for the rest of my career.

**Q. We talked about the off-season. If the NIT or the Crown called, is the roster too thin? Would you want to play on?**

KEVIN KRUGER: Me personally I would love to keep playing, keep competing, but that would of course be up to the guys, just because of -- yeah, I mean, obviously Julian is not coming back. He's on crutches and a knee brace, but if that group of seniors wanted to keep playing with some of the younger guys and Mari and Faris and the guys -- Luke that were walk-ons wanted to keep going and practice a few times and go play, I would be all for it.

But it would be something that would be up to them. I think the seniors would want to do it, when you talk about -- again, Bedford is not technically a senior anymore, but when you talk about Ice and Bedford and Jalen Hill, I think they would be intrigued to keep competing, because, again, they have had a lot of fun these last couple weeks.

If they can kinda keep trying and keep competing and have an opportunity to get in one of those tournaments, I think they would. But at the same time, if you got six people that want to do it, you probably have to have a different discussion, although we played the last couple of games with a handful of people, so maybe they would want to.

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