

Mountain West Men's Basketball Championship

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Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Thomas & Mack Center

UNLV Rebels

Coach Kevin Kruger

Jalen Hill

Jeremiah Cherry

Postgame Press Conference



So, again, couldn't be more proud of them. Couldn't be happier for them, but they also know that my brain is going to switch here pretty quickly towards prep tomorrow. So they need to spend as much time as they possibly can over here, getting right mentally and getting their body as fresh as possible because, as we know, we got another incredibly tough challenge tomorrow.

UNLV 68, AIR FORCE 59

MODERATOR: Coach, we can start with you and get your thoughts on today's game.

KEVIN KRUGER: Yeah. A good game. Obviously if you're watching it as a fan. A lot of good plays made by both sides. But for our guys specifically, just, again, how proud I am of them and how appreciative I am of them for continuing to fight over these last handful of weeks, no matter what comes their way.

It just keeps -- that respect level just keeps getting higher and higher. And they did everything they could possibly do to be ready for this one. Being obviously with Julian going out in the New Mexico game. So they didn't have a lot of time and opportunity to get live reps.

So it was a lot of conversation and a lot of film, and Air Force also did a great job, I thought, of kind of helping themselves on our heels, with throwing some defensive looks at us that they probably knew we hadn't seen very much, if at all.

But the guys did a good job taking care of the ball in those situations. So we just didn't give up free ones, those pick sixes that hurt you so much. But did a really good job there, especially in the second half, of really locking in together and just forcing the ball out away from the rim as much as they possibly could.

But Air Force is a tough cover. Anybody who's played them or coached against them or watched them knows that, but they're also an even tougher cover when you got multiple guys going 37, 38 minutes plus.

MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes first. Jalen Hill and Jeremiah Cherry.

Q. Jalen, you played 40 minutes tonight and nearly get a triple-double. How are the legs and what was working for you?

JALEN HILL: I think the legs are good. Gotta get ready for the next game, got to get in the ice bath and that's pretty much it.

Q. What goes into that 17-0 run in the second half that ultimately buries it for you?

JALEN HILL: I think we went into a break and I think we just figured out we need to feed him every time, feed Bear, and just get the shots that we want. And the second half, I think we showed that by shooting, I think, above 60 percent.

Q. Bear, what was that like for you, just being relied upon like that and also stepping up at the free throw line, as well?

JEREMIAH CHERRY: It feels good. I think it feels good, because they have trust in me. Jalen came into a meeting and was telling the whole team, like, we gotta give him the ball, we gotta give him the ball. Yeah, it really makes me feel good and confident.

Q. How tough was it to guard Ethan Taylor tonight?

JALEN HILL: He's a great, great player. I just think that what he does for their team you can't replicate that in practice, and he had a great game. He had 20 points and he was hitting shots. So just tipping my hat to him.



Q. Jalen, what can you say about guys stepping up this week? Ice and Bedford and even DeMarion hitting a three before the half?

JALEN HILL: Well, I'll say that in practice it just starts there. It starts in film. They don't ever get down about not playing, and when their name is called, they just step up.

Q. Bear, just talk about the fight you saw in the second half and how you want that to carry over to tomorrow night?

JEREMIAH CHERRY: I do. I want it to carry over. I think we came out and started off slow. And Coach definitely told us that we did, and I think that we realized like, okay, we lose this, it's over. So we kind of just came to a realization and went out and we came and fought and we're going to bring the same energy tomorrow, and Coach is going to keep the same energy. So we're ready.

Q. Coach mentioned it a second ago, Air Force threw a couple of different defensive looks at you guys. I think I saw 1-3-1 at one point. There was half court traps. There were full court defenses. Could this game kind of serve as a trial by fire considering whatever the rest of this tournament stretch has for you guys?

JEREMIAH CHERRY: Yeah. I think it definitely was different. We haven't seen it before, and definitely not having D.J. and Julian and people like that. Our main ball handler, D.J. really does, it hurts, but we prepare for it. I think it was just very different. But Coach told us what to do and we listened and executed.

Q. Jalen, could you take us inside that ice bath for a minute? How long is that? What are you doing while you're in there? Are you on your phone? What is that process like for you?

JALEN HILL: For me, just getting in there. Personally, I don't like it, hate it, but it's something that we all gotta do just to get ready. But I'll probably just be in there on my phone, listening to music.

Q. For both of you guys, you won a drawing, 17 fouls on Air Force and you went to the line 22 times. How did you do that? What did you do well?

JALEN HILL: I just think feeding the ball to the post, getting the ball right in the middle, just getting it there, making them guard, making them lift up out of the zone. So, yeah.

JEREMIAH CHERRY: I think in the first half we were kind of playing a little scary, didn't want to take the contact and Coach Kruger was like, pump fake and go into their bodies and we started being aggressive and it worked out.

MODERATOR: Anything else for our student-athletes? We'll dismiss them at this time.

Questions for the coach?

Q. Coach, you said your brain's already onto Utah State and getting ready for the Aggies. What have you seen from them down the stretch during their season?

KEVIN KRUGER: It will be season soon. We're going to enjoy this one a little bit at least until we leave the arena because I can't put into words how proud I am of them. So I want to make sure they feel that from our staff and the appreciation of how they continue to fight and compete no matter what's thrown their way.

Yeah, when you start talking Utah State, I mean they're such a good team. They play so well together, and they play off of each other and make plays for each other. So we've gotta really be dialed in.

One thing that kind of makes them, I think, unique in terms of teams across the conference is they have kind of the ability to speed it up. They can throw some pressure at you, but they can also be very sound in the half court and just kind of -- you know, that's not usually that common.

It's usually the DNA is more one way or the other. But I think they do a great job of kind of doing both.

So it'll make the prep or the game that much more difficult, but it also almost, in a way, helped kind of get the guys' attention pretty quickly, because we've gotta expect with the minutes the guys have been playing the last two weeks that we're going to see some pressure, and we're going to see some quick rotations from their side.

And we just have to be secure and confident that we're going to get good looks, limit the turnovers, because you can't give them free ones. Obviously, you can't give anybody free ones, but if you give them free ones, you don't have to give them very many for them to go on a pretty big one.

So priority number one is making sure we get the ball across half court, get the ball to where we want to be and get good looks at the rim every time, and on the defensive side, you got to be locked in, help each other as much as possible. And kind of like DeMarion and Ice did tonight, whatever is asked in whatever situation, they didn't bat an

eye at it.

Neither one of them played any portion of their minutes tonight at any spot that they had practiced at, not just the last two days, but even throughout the year. So for them to kind of go in there and, I mean, if they were winging it, they made me feel pretty good about it because there was eye contact and it was like I got you, and it made it look pretty good.

So it's going to be the same tomorrow. Everybody has gotta be ready because we know that they're going to come out throwing haymakers and we gotta do a really good job, especially in those first ten minutes of eliminating that haymaker as much as possible and kind of going from there.

Q. Coach, what sort of adjustments did you make in that second half that kind of sparked that 17-0 run?

KEVIN KRUGER: Like I said, in the first half, I think we gotta tip our hat to Air Force just because by giving us looks that we hadn't seen, you know, in terms of the lineups that we had and the guys on the floor.

Guys did a good job, like Jalen and Bear said, but we were still kind of, like, it was, like, nine-tenths of the way. We'd get there and we'd be a little timid or we'd kind of get there and not really have the same assertiveness that we needed.

In the second half, after having that first half of kind of those repetitions of going through it, Bear was obviously the difference maker, because he just drew so much attention in the paint, and we were able to throw it down to the paint cleanly, or down the gut, middle of the paint to him, and he was able to finish, and make his free throws.

And when you have somebody like that that is always going to draw that much attention around the rim, it opens other things up. Bedford hits his two threes.

So you can start playing a little more of an inside out, and in the first half, I just thought they did a really good job of not giving us those looks to where it was going to be as clean or as things that we were able to prepare for.

So nothing but complimentary to them for kind of getting us on our heels there, but then I also want to be complimentary to our guys in the second half of just being a little more aggressive and assertive.

But without any doubt, it all kind of revolved around getting that ball down into Bear, making their focus kind of shift there so that we could play inside out.

Q. You've talked a little bit about, obviously, the lineup tinkering that you've had to do over the last couple of weeks, but what conversations have you had with guys about, as one guy goes down, kind of an opportunity presents itself to kind of create that signature moment on a stage like this?

KEVIN KRUGER: Yeah. We don't really have anything other than when we're watching film or when we're going -- we like to watch the practices with the guys, of course, in the next day. So we try to put guys, obviously Ice is just a home run of a human. So he was ready. Even if he was frustrated, it's not something that carries over.

So having those conversations and putting him in those situations even over the last couple of weeks, I think hopefully prepared them as much as possible so that it doesn't have to be a sit-down, you know, hey, it's all on you now.

You know, it's more of a, hey, just make sure you're ready, watch film, grab a coach, get some shots up. You need to stay ready as much as you possibly can, and every time I've said that, it's been met with absolutely, I'm ready, let me know.

And Mari, JB, Ice, they've all been consistent in that regard, and tonight was -- it was just great to see Mari's three go in, wasn't it? I mean, that was awesome, to see him step in there, for somebody who played the scout team for five months of the year, and then all of a sudden he's flipping over red, and then having him to memorize plays and defensive schemes and to go out there and make a really big three, it was great to see, and I think it got the guys going a little bit.

Q. Jalen, with all you're asking him to do, he almost gets a triple-double. Can you talk about his effort tonight and everything he's having to do now?

KEVIN KRUGER: Yeah. He's been just, he's just been so good over the last couple of weeks, and you don't want to play him 40 minutes, of course. You don't want to play anybody 40 minutes if you don't have to, but just his versatility in terms of guarding Taylor, guarding Kearney, and then also on the offensive side, being able to put pressure on the rim, rebounding it the way he does.

There was -- there wasn't an opportunity not to have him on the floor. And tonight was a great example of 18, 10 and 7. And the ball is going to be in his hands. He's going to keep making decisions like he has over the last couple of weeks, and tomorrow is not going to be any different.

So his cold bath, cold tub probably needs to be a little bit longer because, as I told the guys in the locker room, we'd rather you be as fresh as you can possibly be tomorrow body wise versus anything we're going to do mentally for you Utah State at this point. We need to be as fresh as we possibly can to have any chance to be out there chasing those guys around.

Q. When Jalen Bedford left the game in the first half, did you know at the time that it wasn't that serious and that he would be back or were you thinking just, like, oh, here we go again?

KEVIN KRUGER: Wasn't that serious? Did you see his eye?

Q. Did you know that he would come back or did you think --

KEVIN KRUGER: Oh, no. No, no, no. I was certain at that point, I was like, I mean, that's kind of been par for the course for us for the last, how many games? Four games? You know, where somebody's gotten hurt pretty early and then guys have had to rally and figure it out.

But, yeah, when he walked over toward the sideline, I mean, it was about the size of a golf ball when Amy Bonner saw it, the ref, and she stopped play, even though the ball was coming down the court because she saw -- I mean, it was the size of a golf ball, and there was no way he could see out of it at that point.

But, yeah, I mean, at that time it was kind of, brain just kind of shifted over to, all right, first of all, who's going in? Second of all, how do we make sure guys are fresh and how does that next rotation look and what can we run, because, like I said, Mari hadn't had a lot of reps offensively or defensively.

You have Ice and Jalen and Bear out there. You got kind of a three big look at it that we didn't have a lot of plays put in in the last few days for them.

To kind of get out of that first half, especially with that Mari three at the end, still not letting them get enough of a cushion, I thought was as big of a part of the game as there was, because even, I know they went on a run in the second half, Bedford coming back, still kind of gave us that three point shot fire power, where we knew we'd be able to get some looks and hopefully go on a run of our own.

Q. With Bedford, so the injury happened how? How did they get the swelling down, and then what did you think of his play in the second half going out and playing 16 minutes and finishing with 13 and 9?

KEVIN KRUGER: So your first two questions, I don't know how it happened. I'm not going to ask any questions on how the swelling got down. I don't think -- I would imagine -- you know, this is a boxing town. I'm sure they just cut it, and we've all been there in a sense.

Yeah, I mean, the way he stepped up and knocked down that first three, I mean, it was huge. It was probably -- you could make the argument it was the difference in the game for us, especially offensively.

But he's a confident guy and we have to have his shooting ability and his confidence at a high level because he spaces the floor out.

And, again, him and Bear kind of have that good balance, because when he's out there, he can make shots and keep people away from Bear, and when Bear is in there, he can take bodies toward the rim and try to get Bedford more open.

So hopefully now that it's been an hour and change, the swelling won't continue to get worse. Hopefully it's kind of in a situation where now it's just about getting the swelling down from where it was in the second half.

Yeah, I mean, there was a moment there where we were down another three point shooter in the first half and would have had -- needed to figure out things pretty quickly in the second half. So it was good to see him come back.

Q. First full game without Rishwain, I know you're used to your guys stepping up and you're proud of them for doing so. What else did you learn about your team today in terms of composure?

KEVIN KRUGER: Yeah. It's something we'll be able to show them when we took risks, when we kind of experimented a little bit, it wasn't in our favor. It was, Air Force did a good job of when we tried to do something the other four guys weren't expecting, they capitalized on either forcing the turnover or getting a good look.

So, you know, going into tomorrow, we have those opportunities of -- and there weren't very many. I thought the guys did a pretty good job for all 40 minutes of being on the same page, but we can also heighten the awareness toward it of that we've gotta get shots that the other four people expect to be taking.

On the defensive side, we've gotta force shots that the other four guys not guarding the ball expect to be taken so we can rebound it.

Every timeout, they're locked in. Every film session, they're locked in. And in a way, when Bedford went out, it wasn't -- people weren't looking in the crowd. They weren't off chatting on their own. They weren't discussing anything other than what was going on in that timeout and going on on the floor.

And that's just kind of a compliment to them that they're a good unit right now in terms of just trying to problem solve and figure things out no matter what's thrown their way.

MODERATOR: Thank you for your time, Coach.

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