

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Missouri vs Miami

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Enterprise Center

Missouri Tigers
Dennis Gates
Mark Mitchell
Trent Pierce

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We have Trent Pierce and Mark Mitchell on the dais.

Q. Mark you spoke about the feelings you had coming out of here in December. It was a little bit of a lost feeling and, Trent, you weren't healthy yet. I wonder how you guys reset at that point?

MARK MITCHELL: After we played here, we went home and we met as a team, we met with the coaching staff and psychologist, and really just kind of talked about what does it look like going into SEC play for us. I think that really helped us just kind of get things off our chest. And the frustration we had, and it really helped moving forward. That's kind of why we are here where we are now.

TRENT PIERCE: I think you come across something like that happens, that was a really bad loss. You can choose to go either one of two ways: Either go up or get down and sulk. We got back from Christmas break, took some time off away from each other and the coaches and everything. We reevaluated what we wanted in the season. We knew we were going to come out and attack the second part of the year and we did that.

Q. Mark, what do you think your role is within this team and how have you seen it change throughout this season?

MARK MITCHELL: I feel like my role has been the same the whole season. Just someone the guys can look to on and off the court as a leader with my experience. My abilities on the court, I think I just kind of fall into that role. I think I have done a pretty good job of being someone the



guys can look up to whenever.

Q. What was your guys reaction when you saw St. Louis was the location and how excited are you to be this close to home?

TRENT PIERCE: I see it as a game for us to redeem ourselves here.

MARK MITCHELL: Being this close to home is pretty cool having the home-crowd advantage. A tournament is a tournament. The location can't play for us.

Q. Obviously the SEC has a ton of good point guards, where do you think Donaldson matched up in those rankings?

MARK MITCHELL: I feel like he'd be right in the mix. He is a good player. When he was at Auburn and he was in Michigan he has been pretty good. Him being with Jai I'm sure helped his development. He's having a great year.

He would be right in the mix. He can shoot it. He can facilitate, he can do a little bit of everything. He is a pretty good player.

TRENT PIERCE: Yeah, his numbers show the kind of game he has. He has helped his team get to where they are now. We are going to play them just like we play all of the SEC guards. Excited for that opportunity.

Q. Coming off of the three losses in the Tournament, how do you reset as you enter into Friday night?

TRENT PIERCE: Focusing on the details. We know the losses are other games, and focusing on other things, moving forward from them, not sulking in those losses, not allowing it to hold us back but pushing forward and forgetting about those.

MARK MITCHELL: As Trent said, just focus on the details. Can't dwell too much in the past. Basketball is an up-and-down game. Sometimes it is not going to exactly go your way. It is game of margins, game of possessions.

So just find ways we can close some of those possessions better, close some of the margins, I think we will be in a



really good spot.

THE MODERATOR: We have the head coach of the Tigers, Dennis Gates. We will ask him to make a statement about his team playing in St. Louis then we will have questions.

DENNIS GATES: Definitely excited about the opportunity to represent our SEC conference, but also the tenure that I am in here as the head coach of the University of Missouri, to be able to be here in the city of St. Louis, congrats to St. Louis. Not only are we here, but you have an unbelievable fan base, unbelievable institutions that is also going to bring excitement to this city as you guys host March Madness.

With that being said, two programs similar in identity, great coaching staff at the University of Miami. Great players. Our guys are definitely excited. No different than our opponents will be excited.

It is going to be a nip-tuck game, I truly believe, trying to figure out what that separation point will be will bring us there.

A lot of relationships. Obviously a former assistant coach former head coach Charlton Young. Marcus Allen, who was just diagnosed with cancer, on that team, but also the relationship of Mark Mitchell and Coach Lucas, who was on the staff at Duke when he was there. And Ant Robinson and Tre Donaldson, high school career crossed paths in the city of Tallahassee coached by the great Charlie Ward.

A lot of things at play. More importantly players make plays. We will do our very best. We are excited to be here.

Q. Last year's matchup with Drake were different styles. You mentioned a similar identity with Miami. Is that something that is easier to prepare for in terms of mimicking in practice?

DENNIS GATES: Nothing is easy in this month as we embark on games in March Madness. Last year is last year. This team is a completely different team with a completely different identity. What we do is look at what we have done this past year against our SEC opponents. If you look at the last game at there SEC, there are so many ramifications, you can either finish third or fourth or all of the way to tenth.

Even in our conference tournaments. It was a feel of a tournament atmosphere because so much was on the line. That's what this is. Every possession is going to either indicate a separation or something different. A lead or

trying to cut a lead, everything is on either defensive execution or offensive execution. You either win or go home.

Q. Hey, Coach. For you personally coaching an NCAA Tournament game, whether it is successes or not so much successes, can you describe maybe something you have learned that can help you guys in tomorrow's battle?

DENNIS GATES: When we speak of successes and not successes, I look at it as a success. Coaches get fired left and right for not taking the team to the Tournament. Some coaches have gotten fired and have gotten fired for taking their team to the First Four.

For me being in the Tournament four times in my seven years as a head coach, three in the last four and obviously, you know, we put a team together in that year that we did not get into the Tournament that I thought was even the most talented team that we dealt with injuries.

There's no school in this Tournament right now that has dealt with the cards we have been dealt with. So I am proud of my staff for how we have handled our team, because we went through a lot of injuries, and we had to put things back on the track so to speak to move forward. While other teams may have been in the stages of development because they had their core together since the beginning of November, we hadn't had a core until January.

We are really young whether it comes to the experiences this season. But where there's youth there's also experiences. We have a lot of experiences. That's what the SEC has given us.

For me, I don't look at it as a negative at all in terms of us getting in the Tournament. The history of our program is a storied history. This program has never gotten to the Final Four, never won a championship. So for me in the last 25 years we have done some things that has never happened: Back-to-back seasons in an NCAA Tournament, two ten-win, double-digit wins in SEC conference play.

I am proud of the staff. I am proud of the players who believe in me as their head coach to want to decide in the transactional world to take less money because they want the relationship with Coach Gates and they want me to motivate and push them.

Those are the wins and I am proud of our donors and crowd and fan base that makes our home court an advantage. It is a true advantage in there. To be able to win or only lose I think four or five games in the last two

years is awesome. Would love to be undefeated, but we are not. There's a lot of positives before I think about the negatives. This SEC schedule prepared us for NCAA.

You cannot complain, you cannot sit here and over analyze seedings, you just got to make sure you are excited about the opportunity, and we are excited about the opportunity to be in the NCAA Tournament.

Q. Hey, Coach. I am wondering if you view this as a home game of sorts, even though we are at a neutral site just being so close to Columbia and what that means for the program.

DENNIS GATES: I don't view anything as a home game because it is not at Mizzou arena on Norm Stewart Court. I can't project the ticket sales. We look at it as the NCAA Tournament. And NCAA Tournament is all about neutral sites. That's why the growth of MTEs took place, so you can have a postseason sort of experience in a preseason. Once you get selected and once you get the site you are supposed to go to.

For us we are looking at it as a game at a neutral site court. Purdue travels. So I am sure their fans are going to buy a lot of tickets. Queens, first-time tournament team, Coach has done a tremendous job there, they are excited. They are going to buy a lot of tickets.

So whatever allotment that was given to us, I know it is not the entire arena. I do know that. We will see what it looks like, what it sounds like. But I am excited about the opportunity, that's how I see it. And our guys are excited about being a participant in this tournament and our staff are excited as well.

Q. Trent has had a big year. How do you get him more involved as a three-point shooter instead of just drive and kick?

DENNIS GATES: Talking about Trent Pierce? He is definitely an impact player for us. Our season had not changed without him being a part of it. He and Jayden Stone's health was very important in that. You could see our team grow from there. Kid with a high basketball IQ.

With that he is not a one-on one player. So sometimes kids continue to develop. That's what we want for Trent continue to get better and develop, not just physically but mentally and emotionally. Making sure he is healthy.

6'10", 6'11" catch and shoot guy is an NBA player in my mind. High basketball IQ on both side defensively and offensively. Progress has to be patient, simply because whether it is offseason, whether it is growth, whether it is

mental, whether it is physical, you have to have your own race, and he is running his own race.

I appreciate his patience. I appreciate his parent's patience. It has been very refreshing when you can connect with a family and they cut away all of the other things and they just concentrate on the development of their child, and it is not just all basketball talk. We talk about life.

For me being a mentor is also something I take pride in. I mentored guys in a way that have a lasting relationship, and I am excited not only where he is at now, but in this transactional world, him being a graduate from the University of Missouri, being one of few players in the SEC or the country being at an institution for four years and then let's see what that pro career looks like.

There's no bigger champion for Trent Pierce than I will be. I will push his name and my contacts will become his contacts, and I am excited to see him not only as a professional player, but as a husband and a father, and also the relationship continuing.

Q. You all have faced some big deficits in the first half of your last two games. I believe it was 15 against Arkansas, 15 against Kentucky. Things start faster at a neutral site in the game here against Miami.

DENNIS GATES: First, my hat is off to those opponents. They have done a great job. When you look at who they were, the two opponents were Arkansas who won the SEC Tournament championship. Who did we play before Arkansas?

Q. Oklahoma.

DENNIS GATES: Oklahoma who is one of the hottest teams in the country. You look at how and why, we have played and faced some unbelievable opponents. I am excited about where we are, but then you look at even Kentucky at the SEC tournament. That was a road game, I can tell you that. We just got to continue to watch film.

What I am proud about is how we respond. In both those games we put ourselves in position to get the lead. So it says something about our character. Says something about our ability. Now can we do that over 40 minutes, and you know, that will be what you and I will see at the same time. (Laughter).

Q. In conversations I have had with Jayden throughout the season, a lot leading up to this point has been about his desire to prove that he was meant for this stage and sort of coming to grips with the fact

that he knows he is talented enough to play at this level. How have conversations with him and lead up to the game finally since he finally got this opportunity to play in March?

DENNIS GATES: I think it is awesome. Both he and Shawn Phillips first-time NCAA Tournament kids and their experiences, they are looking forward to it. They are excited. Sometimes the season takes its toll, so we have to make sure we continue to take those baby steps and focus on the little things, the impact on defense, the impact on the intangibles and not just a stat sheet of points. He will continue to do that.

Q. Coach, when it is a win or go home NCAA Tournament game, do you talk to your guys about that, about the big stage, or try to treat it like any other game? What's your approach there?

DENNIS GATES: We talk about it in June. We prepare for it. We build teams around it. It is part of our recruiting conversations. When you look at the big picture you talk about your seasons as it relates to the summer. Obviously preseason, leading into that month or two and a half before the games, and then regular season play.

And what those obstacles present and the identity of your team will change and you will see guys lead, you will see guys become vocal, you will see guys grow right before your eyes, but there's no doubt we talk about the entire course of the season, and these guys have been in tournament play. They have played high-level basketball their whole lives, and it is nothing new.

So they talk about it amongst themselves. If a conversation starts with a player-first convo, that helps us as coaches. I am just thankful our team talks about those things and they are experiencing them.

They are fans of basketball. They understand what the NCAA Tournament is, because the prelude to that is obviously being able to play in the SEC conference tournament.

Q. Along similar lines to that question, in your playing games you went to the NCAA Tournament with Cal. How much of that experience and wisdom do you impart on your team, or is it more of an approach you will offer that experience or perspective if a player comes up to you? How do you strike that balance?

DENNIS GATES: That's a good question. I keep in contact with all of my coaches. My elementary coach and his family will drive down. My high school assistant coach will drive down. Ben Brown is probably doing TV but we

often talk and converse. Leonard Hamilton somebody I have worked for, he will be watching as he started his first job was at -- or second job was at Miami. I have a close relationship with those guys.

For me, I take my identity as a coach. Ever since I knew that would be my path I put the dos and don'ts, the things I would do, things I would change sort of in a book. In that book I have written things down on how I want my process to go.

I don't lead with, I am a former player. My identity is coaching. I am not a player. I don't talk about my playing career. I talk about winning, and I talk about winning championships. I know how to win. That's where I summarize it to.

I am not standing on a soapbox talking about I had 30 this game and 15 this game. I don't think I ever scored 30 anyway. (Laughter) But I don't talk about that, right? I don't talk about that. I talk about winning. Winning behavior. And silently, I measure winning and losing behavior and eradicate certain things that need to go. I use it in my intuition. When I can foresee something coming, I use it in my adjustments that I have to make in game.

And it is just a plethora of experiences, because I have worked for some great coaches, like great Dennis Johnson, Alvin Gentry in the NBA. I worked for Tom Crane. I worked for Leonard Hamilton. I worked for Ricardo Patton, I worked for Ben Brown. I worked for David Carter. I have worked for a lot of guys that have won a ton of games, and that is not remotely close to where I usually pull from. I pull from others. That's what I have always done in my life.

Great question. I appreciate the question. I appreciate you guys.

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