

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 2, 2023

Greenville, South Carolina, USA

Bon Secours Wellness Arena

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Coach Sam Purcell

Ahlana Smith

JerKaila Jordan

Postgame Press Conference

Texas A&M 79, Mississippi State 72

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Mississippi State head coach Sam Purcell and student athletes JerKaila Jordan and Ahlana Smith. Coach?

COACH PURCELL: First and foremost I want to congratulate Texas A&M and Joni. Obviously we have a lot of respect for them. We played them twice this year. They're a young team, but those freshmen are growing up.

Sydney Bowles is shooting as good as anybody in the country tonight, and then they're just a different team with Janiah Barker.

When you look back on the year they didn't have Jeniah, but they stuck together. We knew coming into this game it was going to be an absolute battle for four quarters.

I love the start for my team. We were up 25-19, but that second quarter was the game. We did some things that were uncharacteristic for us. We took too many shots. We quit talking in ball screens, and ultimately they punched us in the face.

But ultimately at the end there we fought like no other, but it just wasn't enough. We will take this. I still believe we are an NCAA tournament team. I talked to the team earlier. I was in this situation last year as an assistant at Louisville. We got upset in the first game against Miami, and you know what? Instead of just saying, whoa is us or having this bad anger, we got back in the gym, we came together, we learned from those moments, and we made a run to the Final Four.



So this is a team that is hurting. We all are. Again, we are going to give credit to Texas A&M. We will get back in the gym and await our fate come Selection Sunday.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student athletes.

Q. JerKaila, I don't know if I pronounced your name right. Miss Jordan. It seems like you brought a lot of intensity, particularly out of the half. Can talk you about your mindset tonight?

JERKAILA JORDAN: Going to the half, really was just focusing on my defense. Shots weren't falling, but I tried anything I could. Cut the lead to five, cut the lead to as small as I could. I knew my teammates had my back and I just trusted them and I just gave it all I had on the floor tonight.

Q. It felt like there were multiple moments in the fourth when you were so close to tying the lead or getting it back. Why weren't you able to get over the hump?

ALAHNA SMITH: Honestly, I think we caved in and kinda got in our heads. I feel like credit to them, they're a great team, but I think tonight we beat ourselves mentally.

Q. JerKaila, your coach said he believes you are an NCAA tournament team. What needs to improve before that?

JERKAILA JORDAN: I 100% agree with him. This game is a learning one for us, a lesson. We're not going to hold our heads down. Like he said, we're going to get back in the gym and we're just gonna -- like he said, it's not over for us.

ALAHNA SMITH: Definitely have to grind it out. Next week we gotta grind for sure.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. What is different about this Texas A&M team from the first part of the season?



COACH PURCELL: I think they're growing up. When you have freshman that get punched and they get a lot of playing time, guess what? Those freshmen get better. When you watch them on film, they don't have bad body language, they're together, they know every game they play they're learning from their mistakes.

Just like us, they're trying to peak at the right time. Joni is one of the best coaches in the SEC, and she has great freshmen. Janiah Barker was one of the top players to come out of the country in high school last year.

I thought she was the difference maker, because that stretch when they were losing games early they didn't have her. When she comes off the bench, even though it's 26 minutes, she is 2 for 5. I thought she had an unbelievable pass there, I think it was the beginning of the fourth quarter, where she throws a skip and finds Sydney, who was one of her former AAU teammates, and it was just a dagger 3 as we were trying to fight back.

Again, a lot of credit to them for not quitting, getting better as the year went, and now you're seeing a team that is getting hot at the right time of the year. Unfortunately we had to face them tonight.

Q. Sam, you said your team is an NCAA tournament team. What would you say in defense of that?

COACH PURCELL: That's life. It's a life lesson. That's what I tell my young women, never take a day for granted. It's an opportunity. That's the mindset we have had all year, is every day is an opportunity; let's make the most of it.

Today is one that hurts, it hurts, but at the same time I think we have to look back at the course of the other opportunities we had, and we seized it. We had serious games where we had injuries but we fought. We had people out and we found a way to win.

So we will learn from this, but, again, this one hurts a little bit.

Q. What can you learn from this tournament experience going into March Madness?

COACH PURCELL: Everything. We could go for days. First of all, shout out to SEC. This was a heck of a tournament. The city of Greenville is first class. Obviously we learned from sitting in the hotel and watching film what it takes to prepare, and then you gotta come out and put four quarters together.

I couldn't be happier. LSU, we go down to LSU in front of

15,000 fans. We're up 15-14. We come out tonight we are up 25-19. We have to look and find a way from the last two games of how do you maintain and ride the wave, but most importantly don't have too big of a quarter where you get punched in the mouth and it's just too hard to come back.

We will stick together. We will be hungry, but, again, talk is cheap. We have to get to work and we'll see how bad we want it next week.

Q. Your players said you felt like this was a game y'all lost for yourselves, to a certain extent. Do you feel like that?

COACH PURCELL: I do. I do. The second quarter was just too much. It was uncharacteristic. I hate to say this, but back-to-back games now, second quarter we are at LSU like I mentioned, we are up 15-14, we start the second quarter with three straight turnovers.

Tonight, we had a bad second quarter. That's on me. I got to figure out whether I got to go with different sets and a different flow, or something I'm saying in the timeouts.

So we will watch this. We did too many good things tonight, but, again, I think the game was lost tonight in that second quarter, unfortunately.

Q. This is your first season as a head coach in the SEC. You led your team to nine wins. This tournament has been incredibly competitive every single game. What can you say about the competition in the SEC and how difficult it is to win in this conference?

COACH PURCELL: Great question. This is the best conference in the country. The athletes, the rebounding, the speed, the shooting is next level. So there is something we will take from this, a confidence, because we know we have played the national champions, all right, to a 7-point game.

We played Tennessee, LSU, who I think could be a No. 1 seed, closely. So you gotta take something from the wear and tear that the SEC provides.

Again, we have to make sure most importantly we learn from this tournament, to the questions y'all asked earlier, and make sure this doesn't happen again, given the opportunity.

Q. Can you assess the intensity of your team and what they brought, whistle-to-whistle?



COACH PURCELL: I thought it was unbelievable. I thought you saw a fight there where Jessica Carter, right, we thought fouls out. We call a timeout, challenge it, we win it. My kids never quit. We're diving on the floor, hustling.

There are moments we will go back and watch film where we are one or two plays from executing that could've turned that momentum.

But I've got winners. They subbed in. I wanted a lot of people because it was just an ugly game for how it was called, but we had to get after it and exert so much energy. Again, I couldn't be happier for how they fought, but, again, it was that second quarter.

I can't say it enough. 18-5 is the ball game. Unfortunately we gave up too many turnovers and then that momentum in the half I think set a tone and urgency for my group, but it was just too late.

Q. Going off that what did you say to your team at the half? The first four possessions of the half were incredible. What did you tell them?

COACH PURCELL: I told them get back to playing Mississippi State basketball, which I think you see. Third quarter we loose 25-23 and the fourth quarter it's 19-17. We were going way too much one-on-one, we weren't making them move. We were playing way too fast. I called a timeout early. If I could go back I would have called another timeout, but that's on me.

And then we went zone at the end to try to steal one in the house. We don't talk, and she goes all the way down the line and throws a 2-foot pass for a back breaker. At that point we're going man, we're going zone, I should have called a timeout. That's why we gotta look in the mirror, but most importantly not point fingers, but find a way to make sure those moments don't happen again.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions? Thanks, everyone.

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