

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 10, 2021

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

**Texas A&M Aggies**

**Buzz Williams**

Postgame Press Conference



Vanderbilt 79, Texas A&M 68

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we have some questions waiting on you.

**Q. Why do you think you got off to such a slow start, given how much momentum you appeared to have coming into this game?**

BUZZ WILLIAMS: I thought we were a little caught off guard from no momentum. I thought we were really good against Arkansas in that regard. I actually thought we were really good against Mississippi State in that regard, considering the long layover. Did not think we had the energy required on either end of the floor in the first half.

The thing that was so important in this game was our ability to finish the possession with the rebound. They offensive rebounded 38% of their missed shots. That's an incredibly high number to overcome. We did not play with the energy required or even the pace required. Just the feel, not we got to hurry up and shoot, but just the pace required on both ends of the floor in the first half.

I thought we got back to that more in the second half. But we gave them too many missed shot/offensive rebounds, and our guards didn't do a good enough job in the first half of rebounding. I thought that was a big difference in the game.

**Q. The second half you made two big runs. You never could quite get the lead. They would run it back out with threes.**

BUZZ WILLIAMS: We did a lot better in the second half on the glass, not only finishing the possession with the defensive rebound, but we created opportunities for ourselves on the offensive glass.

I thought our effort and the pace at which we played, our talk, all of those things were much more conducive to

winning in the second half than they were in the first half.

Obviously there was a lot of kids playing in their first SEC tournament of any kind, including Eman. Not justifying our lack of energy, but it was distinctly different in the second half than it was in the first half.

**Q. How tough a guard is Pippen?**

BUZZ WILLIAMS: You know, what makes him so good, obviously he has a very high usage rate, as we talked about the other day. 96% of the ball screens Vanderbilt has set this season has been for him. It doesn't matter what the defense is that you're doing, there's probably going to be some level of ball screen.

What I think he does best, he can score, he's crafty with the ball, he gets fouled at a high rate. But I think what he does best is he makes the game easier for his teammates because he draws so much attention. He's worthy of that attention. But then it's what he does when he doesn't shoot that hurts you almost as much as what he does when he does shoot.

Yeah, I mean, he was 3-17. So specific to him we did a good job. But those six assists, I mean, that's a very high percentage where he's creating an open shot for somebody else. I think that's the thing that he does so well.

**Q. I know it's pretty soon to look at the 35,000-foot view, but when you think back on this season, what is the first thing that's going to stand out to you?**

BUZZ WILLIAMS: Well, I think everything that's transpired since the last time we were in Nashville has been unprecedented. I don't know that I have the view I should have just because we've been in the tornado, so to say, the last 11 months.

I think the response of our guys, considering all they have been through, has been tremendous. There's no way to necessarily articulate that because they're all going through it for the first time, as well.

I think not playing a game from January the 30th until whatever it is, the first week in March, like, how do you even know how to explain that? The one thing is, you miss all of the games, that's part of it, you miss all of the practices, that's part of it, but it's kind of the rhythm that you lose during that time. It's not only the rhythm as far as your team, it's just the rhythm that's lost and the routine that's lost individually, in the weight room, in your shooting extra program, in whatever we're doing in practice.

Obviously, we completely changed what we were doing because multiple times we thought we were going to come back and not have our entire team. So there's just been tumultuous change. How they've handled it, I have great respect for. I think as of right now, that's kind of my view from 35,000 feet.

**Q. It didn't end like y'all would have wanted it to. But is there some level of peace or happiness that y'all were able to get through a season, play games, get to a tournament, play basketball with how everything looks at the start of things?**

BUZZ WILLIAMS: Yeah, the last time we were here I don't think anybody, not necessarily in college athletics, I just think across the country, this time last year I don't think anybody knew what was about to transpire.

When we left Nashville last year and went home, we told our guys, Hey, you got another spring break and we'll see you in a week and we'll kind of figure it out from there.

Obviously over the last 50 weeks, everything that has happened, yes, we're thankful that we can play, all the different protocols, all the things that the NCAA has done, that the SEC has done, that Texas A&M has done, I mean, they've done all that you can possibly do to give us a chance to play.

For our kids, after not being able to play for five weeks, for them to be able to at least play the last week of the regular season, then to be able to experience this, for sure that's a better way to finish the season than not playing.

But I just don't know when you think about when this all started that anybody could have thought this was what it was going to turn into. But I think how our guys have handled it, considering all of those changes, they couldn't have handled it any better.

**Q. How does your heart go out to your seniors? This is their senior year. What did they play, 18 games. It was just a mess.**

BUZZ WILLIAMS: I don't know. I think that's why I don't

really know how to answer Travis's last question, not because I'm dodging it. But the flip side of that question or that answer is your question and that answer.

Do they want to play? Yes. Do they want to play every game? Yes. Do they want to practice? Maybe they don't want to practice as much as a coach does. But, like, for any senior in any sport, there is some compassion and empathy that goes into that because it's not normal.

I don't think you can coach them normal because of all that has went on. That's not an excuse. There's multiple teams that have had way more success than we have. But I think any coach, regardless of their record, would have that same empathy towards their seniors. To some degree, I would even say regardless of age, it's kind of the same, right?

It's not like these kids grew up dreaming of an opportunity to play at this level, then kind of go through all that we have been through. So there's not really an easy answer.

I don't think there's an easy answer to anything, to anything that any of us have had to make decisions on, not just as a coach, but just as a person. These kids, their parents, there's just been so much uncertainty. To try to handle what it is that you can control, and your response to those things that you can control, that's kind of been the smallest thing that you have the ability to handle.

I think our guys and our staff have done a good job of that.

**Q. Were you surprised that Vanderbilt was able to shoot as well as they did from beyond the three-point line?**

BUZZ WILLIAMS: Yeah, they had attempted the second most/made the second most in the league, so we knew they would shoot a lot of threes. If you study their numbers, that's kind of what they've done.

I think the thing that was important for us was two things: we know they're going to shoot a lot of threes, so long shots equal long rebounds, so we have to finish the possession with a rebound. There was 38% of the time we didn't do that.

One of the reasons why we were able to have success without the result that we wanted against Mississippi State and against Arkansas was we did a phenomenal job on the glass, not only on the offensive glass, but on the defensive glass.

To give up as many offensive rebounds as we did, that kind of led to more three-point field goal opportunities for

them. I think that was the difference in the game in many respects.

**Q. What gives you confidence this train is moving in the right direction? We talked to Eman. He gave one heck of an answer to moving into next year and moving on. What gives you confidence this train is headed in the right direction?**

BUZZ WILLIAMS: We've got to do better. Eman, whatever he said, and however he said it, he's a lot better at this than I am.

I think we'll take a couple of weeks off, kind of let these guys kind of process all of this emotionally, get caught up in everything that maybe they're lacking in over the last month with all that's happened, then we got to get back to work.

We've got to diagnose every part of our program because Texas A&M deserves better. We're going to do better. Despite the pandemic, everybody has had the opportunity, just like we have, and we didn't do good enough.

We're going to end up going home later tonight and then we need to get back to work, get back to work on what were we not good enough at and how can we get better, whether that's in the office, whether that's on the floor, whether that's in recruiting.

I like a lot of what we've done, but I don't think, if I were to be honest, that we're at the point that we need to be. We need to start taking steps on the mountain that we have to climb. We can't put on our hiking boots right now or our climbing boots right now, but we're going to have to put them on every morning early and start making steps in the direction that we were brought here to do.

**Q. The month-plus that you guys had off, how much frustration was there? Take me through you as a coach, your mental state, the fits and starts, the uncertainty of all that, the absolutely unprecedented nature of taking a month off in the middle of a season.**

BUZZ WILLIAMS: Yeah, I'll be as succinct as I can. I don't know how much you know about what took place at Kansas State on January the 30th, off on Sunday, January the 31st, full day of work on February the 1st, then the first positive test in our program since we came back to school on February the 2nd. That was a Tuesday. We were scheduled to play Vanderbilt on that Wednesday.

What ended up happening for us is we continued from that Tuesday, February the 2nd, we continued to have multiple days of multiple positive tests in our Tier I cohort. So

without explaining all of it, because every situation is a little different, the second Wednesday in February we were able to have four scholarship players at practice. We were able to do that on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. Then on Saturday, the second Saturday of February, we had two more guys join us. So we had six players.

You still have to follow NCAA rules despite whatever is going on relative to COVID protocols. So we took off that Sunday. On that Sunday, the worst snowstorm in the history of Texas took place.

So we practiced on Monday. By Monday night many of our kids lost electricity. We were able to, relative to those that could, because of COVID protocols, find them a place that had heat and water. That Wednesday that we were scheduled to play Alabama, that game was postponed till Thursday.

That Tuesday we practiced with seven guys, then we found out Tuesday afternoon during practice that the Alabama game was canceled. We took Wednesday off and practiced on Thursday.

Now, because of a snowstorm, the doctor's offices, the cardiologist's offices were beginning to open. Some of our people that had had positive tests were behind in their protocol to get back into the program. Then on that Friday, the day before we were to play Arkansas, we had continued to test for COVID, but the lab that runs the test had been closed because of the snowstorm.

On that Friday morning, we actually had two kids at the cardiologist and at the physician's office. Our trainer found out about the Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday PCR test that we had taken that the lab had not run. We found out on that Friday that we had another positive test, which created the second pause.

The last week of February we could have one guy on one rim with one ball and one guy on one rim with another ball. Texas A&M had purchased, when all of this began, two weight racks that could be at Kyle Field. The last week of February, the first 6 hours every morning we had two guys at a time, 45 minutes at a time, then you could have three guys lift weights outside. We would do that 4 hours in the afternoon.

So we practiced on February the 1st as a program with everybody, and the next time we practiced with everybody was March the 1st, which was last Monday. So we practiced Monday and Tuesday. I thought we were as good as you possibly could be after all of this that I just explained.

Took Thursday off, practiced Friday morning with everybody again, and then I thought we were even better against Arkansas than we were against Mississippi State. We were off on Sunday, practiced Monday, then worked again yesterday prior to coming here.

So I know that's the longest answer ever in a press conference. But, like, other than the facts, I don't know how to explain it more clearly than explaining what transpired.

**Q. How disappointing is it that your team never got to fully come together towards the end of the season? When you're supposed to be peaking and playing your best basketball, you're sitting out with COVID. The level of disappointment that this team never really got to reach its full potential this year.**

BUZZ WILLIAMS: Yeah, I didn't think we started great at the beginning of the year. Then I thought we started showing signs. Then I thought the week, the last week of January, was arguably the best week we had had. I thought we competed against LSU. I thought we had a low-turnover game. I thought we were trying really hard.

Then I thought we were a little better against Kansas State. Without explaining the answer any further, you basically take five weeks off. So the inconsistency, most of which we have no control over other than being vigilant about the virus and following the protocols, doing what we're supposed to do, those things were out of our control.

We had a week to get ready prior to this game. In some ways I thought we were good last week. I did not think we were good in the first half today. But over the last 10 days, that's how long we've been back, obviously it's been a lot.

**Q. As good as Emanuel was for you on the floor this year, he seems equally impressive off of it in talking to us. How much are you going to rely on his leadership moving forward?**

BUZZ WILLIAMS: His story is great. His life story, where he's from, who he is, what he's about, how his mom raised him. He has an incredible spirit. From the first day I met Eman, first day I met his mom, Carlene, first day I met his brother. He has a younger brother, has an older brother. Man, it's just their spirit.

I think whether you know him or don't, when you watch him, you sense it. Then if you're able to interact with him the way that you guys have been able to, there's a purity about who he is.

He's not looking for an excuse. He wants you to tell him

the truth. He receives the truth the right way. And who he is in regards to his spirit on the floor, that's exactly who he is off the floor.

I think his growth in the four semesters he's been here has been phenomenal. Who he was last year in conference play, then what we've all been through over the last 11 months, his spirit, despite all that has happened, has never altered. I think that speaks to how Miss Carlene raised him.

**Q. With this good recruiting class you have coming in, you have to be excited about what's coming around the bend?**

BUZZ WILLIAMS: We have to be better. Thanks for saying that. I don't like to put pressure on guys that have yet to be at this level. We've got to get better. We've got to get better in every possible way, not just in recruiting. We need to continue to find ways to make our roster better. We need to continue to find ways to make what we're teaching and what we're coaching better. We need to find ways in every category of running a high, major program how we can be better regardless of the year.

I think we were really good last January and February, how we closed down the season. Then to describe all that has transpired, we lost all of that momentum. Then as we tried to gain that momentum back in all of those categories, it was just one thing after another, most of which we couldn't control.

I told the kids in the locker room, Take a couple of weeks off, then we got to get back to work. I think I've already said that. I do think we have some momentum from recruiting, but we need to continue along that same path because we've got to get better.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

BUZZ WILLIAMS: Thank you guys for being nice.

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