

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 11, 2021

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Ben Howland

Postgame Press Conference

Mississippi State 74, Kentucky 73

THE MODERATOR: We're now joined by Mississippi State head coach Ben Howland.

Q. Kind of felt like a tale of two halves. How much was getting the ball into Tolu and Abdul part of the plan today? How good of a job did those two guys do with shot faking?

BEN HOWLAND: The first game we played in Starkville against Kentucky this year, they blocked I think six or seven of our shots in the first half alone. We didn't shot fake at all. But yet they're the leading shot-blocking team in the country. We knew we had to take it right at them, which is what we were trying to do in the first half.

I thought Abdul in particular was fantastic. Six baskets all in the first half, they were all on really good passes, dump-offs to him. He had a couple really nice moves, was very aggressive. I'm really, really proud of him for how he showed up today. He was a man out there.

I thought Tolu was very good, nine points in the first half, got to the foul line, did some really good things for us.

It was the game plan to go at them inside for sure in that first half. I thought we did a great job on the glass. I think we were up 14 on the boards in the first half. We did a great job defensively in the first half.

As you mentioned, it was a tale of two halves. They came out and Sarr scored three baskets right away. We did not defend him well. He was facing up. We got to be into him, making him dribble. Can't let him shoot. That got them going.

Dontae Allen has something to do with Mississippi State. I don't know what it is. Whenever we play against Kentucky, he gets to be the best player on the court. He was phenomenal again. Going to the last shot of the game, my



heart was all the way down in the pit of my stomach watching that shot go up. I am so thankful to God that shot curved off and Abdul got the rebound. Our guys deserved to win the game today. I'm really proud for them.

I thought Iverson Molinar's two threes in the last 4 minutes of the game and back-to-back threes to go from being down five to up one was huge. Then for him to get fouled and to have the one-on-one, or two-shot foul there at the end. Bottom line is, I told him he's making these both, and he did. He showed a lot of toughness, a lot of mental toughness. We're really proud of him.

D.J. Stewart's 10 assists today were fantastic. Absolutely phenomenal. They were trying to double him, get it out of his hands. He made a lot of great decisions today. Really proud of how D.J. handled the ball and their pressure.

Q. How proud are you of your guys as a whole? Your team won five road games in the SEC this year. That's not easy to do. They had every reason when Kentucky erased that 15-point lead to have some doubt. They didn't. How proud does that make you as a coach?

BEN HOWLAND: I'm really excited for them. They handled the adversity of the moment, of them coming back, of those threes. Really, it was Allen that led that charge coming back after Sarr made those first big threes. Mintz made a three.

Give Kentucky credit. They fought their way back, had a five-point lead. We found a way down the stretch to turn it back around for us.

Q. You didn't get a chance to play here last year because the tournament got canceled. Today, skipping that cancellation last year, your team has won four consecutive opening games at the SEC tournament. Is that a big step for a program when you can consistently come to the post-season and get that first win?

BEN HOWLAND: Yeah, the big step will be trying to advance and get further. We were obviously disappointed last year to not be able to have our double bye, only have



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to win three to win out.

Tomorrow we're playing the best team in our league, the league that was dominated by Alabama. We've got our hands full. We're going to have to have a similar effort as we had today to have a chance in that game to beat Alabama.

They're really terrific. I voted for all their players to get the awards. I thought Quinerly deserved to be the Sixth Man of the Year. That's who I voted for. Herb was the defensive player and MVP. He and John Petty are both first team. Obviously Coach Oats was the Coach of the Year. They have a great team. Primo is an unbelievable freshman, who was all freshman. We're going to have to really rest up and recover here because we're playing the best team in our league next.

Q. Obviously it's been a long time since Mississippi State beat Kentucky. 15 in a row until today. How monumental is this for this program to get a win over a program with the history that they have, carry that momentum into tomorrow?

BEN HOWLAND: Yeah, I'm really happy for our guys. We talked about the fact we haven't beat them since I've been here. Then you're adding some games on before that.

They're the best program in our conference. When you go back and look at SEC wins, they have more wins, more tournament victory championships here in the SEC than the rest of the league combined. 31 to 28 I believe. So it's just an incredible program. John is a Hall of Fame coach.

For this win today, it's really special for our team and for our program.

Q. Abdul has been scoring a lot better lately. Is it just the sense of urgency with him with his career winding down? Is that what you see?

BEN HOWLAND: Yeah, I think he was really aggressive, really tough. His teammates did a great job getting him the ball. I got to give his teammates a lot of credit. In particular D.J. I'll go back and watch this film, which won't be until next week sometime. It will be interesting to see how many of those dump-offs came from D.J. He had a lot of nice passes that were interior passes for our bigs to score on.

I thought Deivon, same thing. Deivon did a really nice thing. Three assists, zero turnovers in the first half. I'm not sure what he ended up with. I'd have to look here. Deivon ended up with three assists, one turnover. He did a nice job of sharing the ball, too.

Q. What is it like to have a guy like Molinar that stepped up in the moment, scored the last eight points for your team to advance?

BEN HOWLAND: I'm not surprised that he did it. Honestly, he's such a good player, great competitor. He's worked so hard at his game and his shooting. His teammates set some great screens for him. The first one was wide open. The second one, they knew it was coming because we called it back. Still got open. He made a much more difficult shot there.

For him to have the one-up at the end and get fouled, knock them both down, I couldn't be prouder of Iverson and what he did for his team.

Q. Third meeting with Alabama this year. Played them tough both times. What do you think is going to be different this time around?

BEN HOWLAND: I mean, we've got to continue to battle the way we have in the first two games. We've got to do a better job offensively. We really struggled against their defense, and they're top three in the country in defensive efficiency. They're a very good defensive team. We've got to do a better job executing offensively and being able to score against that defense.

We still got to be able to defend our tails off to give ourselves a chance.

Q. That first half specifically your guys looked like they were really playing to their strengths, working to the inside, beating them on the boards. Is that when you feel like your team is just at its best playing the game?

BEN HOWLAND: Yeah, because we're basically playing two bigs. When you're playing Tolu and Abdul, even Quinten and J.D. By the way, Quinten and J.D. gave us very good moments today. J.D. had a couple big baskets in the first half. Quinten had a huge three to put us up 10, a couple foul shots. Their minutes were very important.

Our bench did a great job for us today. I thought Derek Fountain's minutes were really important. He did an outstanding job. Hit a big three for us early in the second half. He made a push to keep them away.

Everybody contributed today. It was really a good team win overall.

Q. The way that the game ended, that last shot for Kentucky, did it really make you realize this is March,



it's officially arrived?

BEN HOWLAND: I'm just happy he missed. It would have been really gut-wrenching to have that go in after the fight that we showed to take the lead with 7 seconds left. Just very thankful. He's a heck of a player. Allen really, really played phenomenally against us this year. We know he's had 46 points in two games.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

BEN HOWLAND: Thank you.

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