

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 12, 2021

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Ben Howland

Postgame Press Conference

Alabama 85, Mississippi State 48

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

We'll open it up for questions.

Q. The end of the season, how do you summarize what has gone on this year, how up and down and tumultuous it's been for everyone?

BEN HOWLAND: First, I just want to talk about the game a little bit. Today was really a bitter pill considering that we played Alabama very competitively both in Tuscaloosa where it was a three-point game with less than a minute to go, they hit a three to go up six, and at our place with a minute and a half to go we had two three-point shots. We had a chance to tie it in a minute and a half. So to get beat this badly was really, really a bitter pill.

Give them credit. Alabama's got a great team. They're the best team in our league. They're a team that has a chance to go to the Final Four. Outstanding leadership in terms of Herb Jones and Petty, their two seniors. Really phenomenal players. Quinerly has been great against us every time, he was again today.

We were 1-19 from the three-point line. You're not going to win many games doing that. I thought our turnovers in the first half, they really got into us defensively, turned us over, turned them into a lot of easy baskets. That's been a problem for us the entire season, something we have to get better at.

When you talk about the season as a whole, it's been up and down. We started out the season without Iverson Molinar the first three games for protocol reasons, played two really good NCAA tournament teams in Clemson and Liberty. Started out 0-2, came back and got a win. Got off to a great start in the conference, 4-2. Could have been easily 5-1 or 6-0. It was frustrating to go into the slide. I



think we lost four straight conference games before finally getting a win down at South Carolina.

Overall I think the guys that are young and that will be returning on this team will have garnered a lot of experience, a lot of learning that's going to help them here in the year to come, which is what we're praying for now.

There's an outside chance that we could be invited to post-season play in the NIT. We have to wait till Sunday to find that out.

Q. Alabama's defense, it seems like in the last year they've made their biggest jump. What is it about their defense that allows them to be so disruptive?

BEN HOWLAND: I thought they really added to their depth this year. I think some of their younger new guys, you look at a guy like Primo and how good he is. Quinerly was fantastic this year defensively for them. I thought that the depth they had, when you look at the guys Ellis, Gary, they have a lot of bodies that keep coming at you.

Herb is where it starts. He was the MVP. And Petty I thought did a much better job defensively this year than he had done in previous years. That's something I heard their coach talk about, is really getting him to buy into being a good defender. They did. They went from the defensive efficiency being in 110 range last year to being in the top three this year. That's a credit to their coaching staff and a credit to their players.

Q. Iverson and Tolu tried to shoulder the load for you offensively today. Iverson is going to leave here with two really good games. What is it that he can build off of as a guy who seems like he can step up when you need him to offensively?

BEN HOWLAND: I think we've got to continue to get Iverson to be a catch-and-shoot guy first rather than catch-and-bounce it first, which he has always done. He had an open three in the first half that we wanted him to take.

He's really made huge strides when you think where he



was a year ago to where he is now. He's got a great work ethic. He's a wonderful young man. He's going to get better at his ball handling and creating for others. That's going to be a big part. He's so good offensively, he garners so much attention, creating for others will be a big thing for him.

Keep getting better defensively. He's got to keep growing in that area. He improved in every way from a year ago to where he is now. I'm proud of the progress he's made in this past year.

Q. Tolu got to the foul line a lot in the two games. The free throw stroke is getting better for him. From the start of conference play to where you are now, how much better is he overall, better equipped to compete in this league going forward?

BEN HOWLAND: He had a solid year. Think about it, he led the conference in rebounding. That's a huge accomplishment right there in itself. He was the leading offensive rebounder. He's going to keep working. He has an unbelievable work ethic. I know he's going to put in the time this coming off-season.

We hope it gets back to normalcy where we're able to work with our guys a little more like we normally in June when they come back for summer school. I have no doubt he'll be better in every way. I think he'll improve his shooting, his post play in terms of scoring, having more of post moves around the basket, growing in that area. I think he's going to get better defensively.

He grew a lot. Think about it, he's really played five all his life, center position, power forward all year. That's going to help him because he's going to grow as a player in terms of his ball handling and passing, which is something he needs to do.

Q. How beneficial is this post-season experience for your whole young team considering you get a win yesterday, they learn how to make close plays down the stretch, then they also see a team today, what it's like to face the top of the league?

BEN HOWLAND: Yeah, we faced them twice before, as you know, played them incredibly tough, had a chance to win both those games. That's why it's so frustrating to lose so poorly and so badly the way we did today.

But give them credit. They shot 32% against us the last time we played in Starkville two weeks ago. Today it was a much different game. They really did a good job finding the open guy.

What was a struggle for us, though, is that we struggled to score. We struggled to score offensively the last two times we played them. We've got to be better. I think in Tuscaloosa we scored in the mid 70s, had a pretty good, fluid game at that end of the floor.

Q. You mentioned kind of building towards next year already, wait and see what happens Sunday with NIT. With this young team, most of them coming back, what do you think the identity of this team could be next year with you losing Ado and Jalen Johnson only?

BEN HOWLAND: I think we're going to add some good pieces to this team. I think we're going to be a team that will play four out, one in, with Tolu being the main guy inside. We'll definitely grow.

You look at Tolu and D.J. and Iverson, that's one of the top scoring trios in our conference. We've got to keep growing around them. I think Derek Fountain has made good contributions to our team here late in the season when he finally got his opportunity.

Deivon is going to keep getting better, improving. I think he sees all the things he's got to do to grow his game where he can be a really effective player in this conference. Cameron I think is going to be a good player. We're counting on Quinten, for example, to get bigger and stronger in this off-season, take advantage of his opportunity to play more. J.D. will be back.

We've got a lot of guys back obviously.

Q. Obviously this year was a little bit of you could call it a transition year for you guys after losing your four top scorers of a year ago. A lot of young guys, a lot of them probably will be back next year. Maybe too early to ask the question, but looking ahead to next year, how do you view it? Do you view it as another year these guys have to develop? Is there a sense of urgency for you or the team?

BEN HOWLAND: I think there's always a sense of urgency. But now the guys that played this year have a lot more experience. We started three sophomores and a freshman at the end of the season with Derek in the starting lineup. We expect those guys to be the leaders of this team moving forward.

We'll add some other pieces. That will be a key factor for us moving forward. But there's definitely a sense of urgency to have a really good season next year and get ourselves in the post-season, get back to the NCAA tournament. That's obviously the goal for us a year from now.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

BEN HOWLAND: Thank you.

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