

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 10, 2022

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Head Coach Ben Howland Tolu Smith Shakeel Moore

Postgame Press Conference

Mississippi State 73, South Carolina 51

BEN HOWLAND: I thought that the second half, our defense was incredible. To hold a team to 12% from the field with two of those baskets coming off of our turnovers that led to two easy baskets. I mean, and obviously, they -- I don't know. They're a good shooting team. You saw they shot in the first half. They came out and shot like gangbusters from three.

We did a better job pressuring the ball. I thought our defense really picked up in the second half. Really excited about the performances of our guys. We got out 4-0. We really struggled offensively. At one point, we were 4 for 16 in the first half.

Did a much better job in the second half. Free-throw shooting was really big for us in the first half keeping us to where we actually had the lead because of our foul shooting. Getting the ball into Tolu. I thought Tolu had a great game today. He had a double-double, 20-12. Did a lot of nice things. His teammates did a good job feeding him.

Garcia gets 14 rebounds in 24 minutes in his first start, which was incredible. When I look at Shak Moore's stats tonight, I went to the plus-minus. When he is in the game tonight, we're up 31, so he has five assisted. One turnover. Great defense. Shot the ball.

When you are in there and your team is up 31, that's big. I thought Iverson, obviously, did a good job for us and manufactured points and handled a lot of the press and pressure that they were throwing at us all night long. Fountain gave us good minutes off the bench. Fountain gets six points in his 12 minutes, and we need to continue



to play him because he gives us an offensive threat off the bench at that power forward position.

Questions?

Q. Tolu, this year the rebounding dictated which way it went. How much of a point of emphasis was that, especially there in the second half?

TOLU SMITH: It was a point of emphasis. I think Coach Howland did a great job of emphasizing that. Like he said, it was a point of emphasis in both games. For us to come out and do what we do, I think Andersson did a great job. He had 14 rebounds. That's great for a wing man, so just getting all those rebounds helps us, and I think it helps us continue with this tournament.

Q. Shak, we talked about it before with you this season. Maybe some of the struggles from shooting. As Coach Howland mentioned there, the plus 31, how much is that reminding you of just making plays outside of scoring and obviously contributing the ten points as well tonight?

SHAKEEL MOORE: Like you said, it's not all about scoring. There are other ways to affect the game. Getting rebounds, finding the open man, getting our teammates better, so it's real important, but I still continue to keep that confidence shooting the ball.

Q. For either of you guys, they got that missed dunk there in the second half, and you guys go on a huge run after that. How much do you kind of think that dictated momentum? It went from potentially being a one-point game to being a five-point game, and you didn't really let up after that.

SHAKEEL MOORE: Just battling to the end, all 40 minutes. That's what we did. We came out the second half, held them to 12% shooting from the field. And after that dunk, momentum completely went our way. We took advantage of it, and it was up from there.

Q. Same one for Tolu.

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TOLU SMITH: You want me -- okay. To branch off what he said, it's just the momentum shift. After that dunk, just really helped us, and ever since, we were just playing how we needed to play, so it was great.

Q. Hey, Coach. You guys had 38 layups. Like a layup drill for you there in the second half. Is that just like a dream type of offensive performance from your vantage point?

BEN HOWLAND: We got a lot of them in transition because we got so many stops, so it took them out of their pressing mode, and we got out. We really pushed the ball. I bet that we had -- I don't believe there were that many layups. How many did you say there were?

Q. (Off microphone)

BEN HOWLAND: 38 points?

Q. (Off microphone)

BEN HOWLAND: So 19 layups for the game in the second half?

Q. (Off microphone)

BEN HOWLAND: I would say this, that we're trying to get it inside to Tolu. He had a bunch of those, and some were definitely guarded, but I think we got a couple of really big transition baskets that were easy layups, and I thought we got a lot on offensive rebounding. Garcia gets six offensive rebounds tonight and had a number of those that were put-backs or got fouled on him.

So really proud of our team, though, the fight that we showed and the toughness we showed. Two-point lead. Came out and really had a big second half. Love to start out a game like that one time.

Q. When did you decide to make that move to start Andersson today, and what did you think of his performance, especially the way he came out on that first possession with the block and then had a bucket a couple of possessions later?

BEN HOWLAND: I decided that after our last game. I thought we needed -- I'm wearing a suit. I'm starting Andersson. We're changing it up. I'm glad that we get to play another day against a great team, arguably the team that was the hottest at the end in our league in Tennessee.

Q. What was your sense on how the game changed for both teams after that missed dunk?

BEN HOWLAND: I don't know that it was just that one play. I mean, that happened. I was very happy that he missed, but we missed one too later in the game, but I don't know that that one play was the key play, but it certainly suggested there was a lid on the rim for them.

Q. Coach, apologies for not knowing this, but when was the last time you did wear a suit?

BEN HOWLAND: Pre-COVID.

Q. So you just switched it up because things weren't going your way?

BEN HOWLAND: I just thought it would be good to be really good-looking here. (Laughing)

I've got to work at it, so I figured, hey, I better -- I got my family here, my daughter came out, my sister and her husband, my brother-in-law and his wife, my cousins, so I want to look good.

Q. Did you bring enough suits for the whole week?

BEN HOWLAND: You know what, I can wear this one every day if I have to, but I have another suit. It will be a different one tomorrow.

Q. Ben, what did you think of Shakeel's performance and kind of how he -- I think there was that assist late in the game to Tolu on the end, where you pointed at him right away while everybody was celebrating the bucket. What did you think of his performance and contributions in ways different than scoring?

BEN HOWLAND: I thought he was phenomenal tonight. Look at the numbers. Plus, he played really good defense, which doesn't show up all the time on a stat sheet, but he was very good defensively. The second half, he had zero defensive rebounds in the first half. He had four in the second half. We talked about that at halftime. We needed him and Iverson to get more boards, and he really took it to heart.

I thought he was really good all the way around. I thought he was really good in transition getting the ball. He had another really good pass, but he was really good. And I was really excited for him. That really loosened him up, and that dunk at the end was fun for him, as you saw.

Q. A couple of questions on Iverson. It looked like he maybe banged up his knee a little bit at the end. How is he doing? That altercation he had kind of earlier with the double techs, he rarely gets emotional to that extent. What did you kind of tell him after that and did

you kind of cool him off a bit?

BEN HOWLAND: I told him the guy pushes you, the rule is be a good Christian, don't push back. Right? Review the film. We'll say whatever we're going to say, and then we're shooting. So it's tough. That's what I told him. He iced his knee, but he bumped knees with someone. I think he'll be okay.

Q. You mentioned Tennessee there towards the end, one of the hotter teams. Tight game at least in the first half and pretty much throughout the last time you guys played. Just generic scouting report with Tennessee at this point.

BEN HOWLAND: We were up with five minutes to go and gave up a three to Jones on the inbound, but they're really good. I mean, I'm so impressed with them, how they move the ball. They're top ten in defensive efficiency in the country. They have depth. The way the bigs have stepped up and taken over for the kid they lost, who was really a good player -- how do you say his name again? Nkamhoua. A very good player. They've really stepped it up.

And I love Vescovi. I voted for him first team. I can't believe the media got that wrong. I was stunned. He is their most important player. Those two other guards are great. I mean, I love Chandler. I love Zeigler, but Vescovi, man, all the coaches voted for him. I bet he was unanimous first team. He is really good.

Then James, the lefty, phenomenal. He is having a great year. I voted for him for all league second team. I had three players on their team on all league. That's what I think of Tennessee.

Q. Obviously, with Andersson coming into the starting line-up, you had some struggles today from D.J. Jeffries. What was the message to him to kind of keep him going as you go down the stretch?

BEN HOWLAND: I didn't think he struggled. He has been doing what he does. He came and gave us good defense, made a nice pass in transition to Tolu, and Tolu I think missed the shot, but it was a really nice pass, and I told totally trust D.J. I just think that Andersson has played so well that he deserves the nod.

Appreciate it.

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