

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

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South Carolina Gamecocks

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Frank Martin

Jermaine Cousinard

Erik Stevenson

Postgame Press Conference



now. Some guys could possibly be -- James Reese's last game of his college career, so he is obviously feeling it right now. Could be the last game of a couple of guys' careers in that locker room, so it's a tough moment. It's a tough way to go out. Like Jermaine said, we're going to try and stay optimistic, and hopefully Sunday night we see our name on an NIT board somewhere and go from there.

Q. For both of y'all. Just offensive consistency has been an issue all year. When this offensive isn't clicking like it wasn't tonight in the second half, what's going wrong for you guys especially in the back court?

ERIK STEVENSON: I mean, the ball is not dropping. Guys' individual confidence level goes down, and when those confidence levels go down, then the team camaraderie goes down, and the team energy and the team moxie and all those things start to drop.

When you are getting killed in the paint like that, it's just -- it's just deflating. We got some open looks and didn't shoot some open looks. And when we got some open looks, we didn't convert. 12% in the second half crunch time, it's not going to get it done. Yeah, just it's a bad offensive night.

Q. For either of you guys, you all want to run on a ten-point deficit down to three. Keyshawn had the dunk and missed. How did that play change the game? What did you all -- what did you all feel after that?

ERIK STEVENSON: That would have been huge. I think we were, what, down three at that point or five at that point, something like that. Got a turnover, had the most athletic guy maybe in the league on the break, and he couldn't convert, and I think they came down and had an and-one. That's a four, five point swing right there.

Instead of cutting it to one, the one-possession game, it went back to a two-possession game. I'm not saying that that should have led to a 22-point loss, but it did, so that was a big play in the game. It is what it is.

Q. For both Jermaine and Erik, this is a question I'll ask for Frank, but obviously as a team, you had an

Mississippi State 73, South Carolina 51.

FRANK MARTIN: We just couldn't deal with them inside. They made a consensus effort of attacking the paint on offense. In the first half, we made some threes, and it offset the fact that we're getting outplayed in the paint. And then the second half, we shot 12% from the field, so we couldn't offset all the lack of production in the paint offensively and defensively because it wasn't just them driving the ball and scoring it. We just couldn't come up with the ball, and we got beat to loose balls. We got beat to the offensive glass.

Andersson Garcia, his personality on this team was clear as day today. I think he had three offensive rebounds in the first five possessions of the game. He created the personality that -- how the game evolved. And whoever wins in the paint wins the game, and they dominated the paint. We had no answer there.

Q. For both the players. What are the emotions like right now coming off that win -- I mean, coming off the loss, and what do you view going forward for the team, NIT, and all that kind of stuff?

JERMAINE COUSINARD: Say that again.

Q. What are the emotions coming off of this, and what's your view going forward with the NIT or whatever might be next for you guys?

JERMAINE COUSINARD: Just everybody just -- I feel like we will see what happens on Sunday, see if we can play again.

ERIK STEVENSON: Emotions are obviously down right

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opportunity to play twice this season, was there anything differently that they showed especially as the game went on? I'm sure you would say mainly from an execution standpoint, were they doing anything than you guys maybe expected?

JERMAINE COUSNARD: I just feel like they beat us to every loose ball. That's what they did differently. They just played harder than us. Just out-rebounded us and beat us to every loose ball.

ERIK STEVENSON: He hit it on the head, man. Obviously, they annihilated us in the paint. 42-16 in the paint. Yeah, it was the hustle plays for me. 50-50s, offensive rebounding. When you get beat like that in the paint, you have no chance to win. That's their MO. They have two really good bigs, and they showed it tonight.

Q. Frank, you ever sat through a worse 20 minutes in your coaching career in terms of offensive performance, defensive performance, the whole ball of wax?

FRANK MARTIN: I mean, I don't think our effort was bad. They did shoot 39% from the field. It's not like we didn't defend. We started fouling them too much towards the latter part of the second half, but offensively I was disappointed in some of the shots we took. I thought -- the question that was asked earlier about Keyshawn's play, that wasn't the only one. It was a -- I want to say -- I'm going off the top of my head here, but there was about a five, six possession segment where we go Keyshawn break-away, Devin creates a steal. We end up Devin and Jermaine in the two-on-one, and Jermaine decides to shoot enough to dribble three in the open court. Then Devin comes down and makes a great pass to James Reese, and he has a wide open three, and he don't let it go, and instead he passes it to Brandon, and Brandon shoots an air ball. Those are three really deflating plays.

You say, well, Jermaine makes that off the dribble three. Yeah, he does, but when you are in the two on one, you have to go get the rim. That's not the time for that shot. Players make decisions. As coaches, it's our job to trust in them that they're going to make the decisions, and they're human beings. Sometimes they make good decisions. Sometimes they don't. It's part of the deal, but I have never been on a team that shot 12% for a half. That's a first for me, and I'm going to use this moment to kind of answer Mike's question from earlier.

Our deficiencies offensively all year comes from when teams hound us hard on the perimeter, and Mississippi State has size and athleticism on the perimeter. So people get after us on the perimeter. Any time you're playing

basketball, if people are going to hound you on the perimeter, you got to get the ball inside the defense in the paint. And that's been our weak point all year is we can't score in the paint.

We've done different things to get the ball in there this year, and the game is where we can create paint -- not touches because we get paint touches, but paint points, we've won. In the game that we haven't, we don't win. It's hard to win shooting 12%.

By the way, Tolu Smith, there was a reason he was a preseason first team all-league player. He has been battling injuries all year, but now he has played for the last ten games, I would say, eight games maybe. He is a handful, and he created major problems for us.

Q. If you were given a bid to the NIT, would you take it, and I guess this is now three of the four tournaments that they've had you not made it. Just how frustrating is that, and what's kind of the message to the team?

FRANK MARTIN: Say that again.

Q. Three of the last four tournaments or four of the last five tournaments that have been played, you haven't been to. Just what's the frustration level like?

FRANK MARTIN: What tournament?

Q. NCAA tournament.

FRANK MARTIN: Oh, I thought you meant the SEC tournament right now.

Q. Just how frustrating is that, and what's the message to the fans and the team coming up knowing that you're probably not going to go to the NCAA this year?

FRANK MARTIN: I don't see how we make the NCAA tournament this year. We had opportunities, obviously, tonight, at Alabama and at Auburn, and we went 0-3 in those games. That doesn't take away from the fact that we're a winning basketball team.

Disappointed, disappointed, but then again, the journey for every team is a little different. A couple of years ago, we had rebuilt post final four our team to get ready to make a run. And, obviously, the season was canceled.

And then last year, I am not going to keep talking about last year, just what kind of show that whole deal was last year. And then this year, we had nine first year guys, and we figured out a way to win the games that we did and put

ourselves in a place where we play meaningful games at this time of year and games with purpose.

Unfortunately, I think we came up a little short there, but I would love to coach again. I have enjoyed coaching. That's the thing that hurts the most right now is that these kids, they gave me life when I was dead, and I don't want to stop. I want to keep coaching them, so hopefully -- this is the one thing that I will say, and I'm not going to get into all the this and that and all that other stuff, I have a tough time believing that the sixth place team in the SEC who has the same exact record as us and Mississippi State can be a five or a six seed in the NCAA tournament, but the seven, eight, and nine teams don't play postseason? I struggle with that one. That would be a confusing thing for me, but for whatever that's worth.

Q. Just to piggyback off that, I know you might not necessarily want to talk about this specifically, but this might be the only chance we have a chance to talk to you until Sunday. Obviously a disappointing loss in the committee when they make that decision for the NIT, what would you tell them? The resume speaks for itself. The 9-9 in the conference specifically, but what would you kind of say because I'm sure some fans, people on the outside, maybe people that don't make those decisions, they look at it and look at today and they're accident like, oh, you know, what would you say to those people?

FRANK MARTIN: You know, Mike, I tried to express this the other day, and I have called. I don't say stuff publicly that I disagree with unless I speak with the people that are responsible for it first. I'm not a -- I don't call people out. That's not what I do. When I spoke about the net the other day, I had already made comments privately to the decision makers in the NCAA.

Team sports are about winning and losing. It's about who you play and where you play, period, end of story. You either play good teams or you play bad teams. Some people play bad teams. You play bad teams, you probably are going to win. Well, those shouldn't count as much as when you play good teams.

It gets back to what I just explained. I think with this game today, we're going to end up with a top 30 strength of schedule in the country. That means we played good teams. When you take into consideration that and then you couple the fact that we challenged our team in non-league play. I mean, you know, we went and played at Coastal Carolina. We went and played at a tournament away. We played Florida State on a neutral site. I could have placed bye games at home. I could have just picked certain teams and played them at home. We didn't have to

play those games.

After the year we had last year, I could have said let's just play home games and get as many wins as we can. That's not what I do. Never has been. Never will be. It's not the right thing to do. So we scheduled to prepare our team to win in the SEC, and that's why when a lot of people thought our guys were going to throw in the towel, we battled and battled and battled and got back to a place where we finished tied for fifth in the league.

I said this the other day too, I think it's pretty sad where -- because I've been in other leagues. I have been in the Big East, been in Conference USA, been in the Big 12. I was in the Big East when it was the old Big East with 19 teams or whatever you had in there. When you finish .500 in that league back then, your team was celebrated.

I have been in the Big 12 where teams finished .500, and they were celebrated. For some reason here, we have to apologize for being .500 in the number one league in the country. That doesn't make sense to me.

I think Calipari said it best the other day, and it's not about going to the NCAA tournament. All these teams that finish 9-9, this league has no bottom, man. It's really, really hard. But, I mean, if decisions are made based on the net, then we probably ain't going because that means that it's style and point differential.

I'm going to give you a quick example. I'm sorry I'm dragging. I don't mean to. We beat LSU, who has a net of 19. Our number moved up one spot. So we won by two. We beat Mississippi State, whose net at the time was 48 or 49. Beat them by ten. Our net moved up nine points. Now, you tell me that makes sense. You tell me that makes any sense.

At the end of the day, you either win or lose. This isn't gymnastics. This isn't diving where the guy that does or the woman that does a triple somersault has more points because of the degree of difficulty than the one that does two somersaults.

At the end of the day, you either play a good team or you don't. If you play a good team, you either win or lose, and I'm really proud of these kids and what they've done. Two years ago, we won ten league games. The league was really hard. This year, we won nine. We're .500. We're right there. Just, unfortunately, this didn't go the right way tonight.

Q. Forgive me for kind of an offbeat question. Cuonzo Martin, you have always spoken highly of him. Seem to admire him a lot. What's he meant for the league?

What kind of coach is he for the conference?

FRANK MARTIN: I would be disappointed. Last time I checked they went to the NCAA tournament last year, if I'm not mistaken. I don't know what this business is coming to when men like him get questioned on what they can and can't do and get judged this year in this league coming off the year he had last year.

We got major issues in this business if somebody that had that team top 20 in the country pretty much all season last year and went to the NCAA tournament. We got issues in this business, and he is the man that he is. That's about making things right, improving people's lives.

When is the last time you read about Cuonzo Martin's teams in any kind of negative connotation? You're not. When is the last time you read a player for Cuonzo Martin in any kind of negative connotation? You're not. He just came off an NCAA tournament, and people start talking like that? That's sad. This business isn't right if that's the way we go.

I'm biased because I just got to know him really good over the last three years. We've always known each other, respected each other, but it all started with the NABC Board, and then during COVID, just a lot of conversations.

This business needs more Cuonzo Martins. It needs a lot less of some of the nonsense that it has and a lot of the buffoonery and the silliness and the phoniness that exists. It needs more Cuonzo Martins. If you got more Cuonzo Martins in this business, then college basketball can get back to being great again.

Q. If this was your last game and you know who is coming back next year, perhaps maybe the bulk of your players, with what you have coming in, I mean, what kind of feeling do you personally have about next year to maybe elevate another couple of positions and not be on the bubble, but be in the tournament at this time of the year?

FRANK MARTIN: Yeah, Phil, I think our team is in a great place right now with the guys that are in place that are returning players. Obviously, the two guys that were here, they walked on senior day just to make sure that they had a senior day, but I don't know. We got to have a conversation when we get back, but I'm under the impression those two guys want to come back and play next year, but those are conversations that -- you don't have those conversations -- as a coach and a player, you don't have those conversations in February. You don't have those conversations in had March. You are trying to win games. You're trying to get to the postseason. Now the season ended. Now it turns to individual stuff, but we

have signed some really good players. We obviously signed two, and there's one that I can't talk about right now that is a really good basketball player.

And then you have to rely on what my career has shown people is that I tend to help players get better, so all the guys that are in our program take a step forward and improve, and so I'm excited. I'm excited. I couldn't be happier than what I am right now, and I'm excited for all those guys. I'm excited for what our team can be next year.

If I don't say this, I would punch myself in the face, big shout-out to Bruce Weber. I think he is one of the classiest men and one of the good people in this business, and I tried to win a Big 12 Championship in that league. He won two of them. That thing is really hard over there. Big shout-out to Bruce. This business needs Cuonzo and Bruce Weber in it. Thank you.

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