

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 11, 2022

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Ben Howland

Iverson Molinar

Tolu Smith

Postgame Press Conference

Mississippi State 59-Tennessee 72

BEN HOWLAND: I thought that we came out really strong tonight, had a very good first half. We were really good particularly offensively other than the turnovers. If we hadn't turned the ball over 11 times, we probably would have had the lead, so I was really proud of how we played in the first half.

Second half, they came out and jumped on us at both ends of the floor. Obviously, Josiah Jones hit four threes I think in the first five minutes of the half. The second half, they were huge. That was a problem because James is such a good shooter, and we knew that. I mean, he is shooting great. He shot 50% in the last four games going into tonight, and he is 4 for 6 from three.

We made a couple of mistakes not going with the body on him, and he read it well and faded for wide-open looks. He doesn't need a lot of time. They're a very good shooting team as a club. They were 8 for 7, 19 from 3. I think they shoot 37% as a team in conference games.

I thought that we got tired. I thought that was evident tonight that in the second half you could see that the -- some of the guys that are playing a lot of minutes, like these two were really getting worn because when you play back-to-back nights, it's just hard. And when you are playing against a team that's one of the top ten teams in the country that is fresh that didn't play yesterday, and that's the advantage of the double bye is having that opportunity to play a team that's already had to play the night before and getting them.

So credit to Tennessee. I think they got a really good team. I would not be surprised if they go deep, deep into



this NCAA tournament. They've got a very, very deep team with a lot of size and excellent guard play that can really shoot.

Q. Iverson, I know teams have been doing this all season, but is there anything in the second half there particularly from Tennessee that you saw them done defensively to try to slow you down a bit?

IVERSON MOLINAR: I feel like when they were trying to pressure the ball in full court, they tried a lot of face-guarding me. They face-guarded me a lot, and we had Shak bring up the ball, which is not -- you know, the plan was for me to bring the ball down and make him make plays for others, make plays for him so he could shoot, but at the end of the day, we all -- I trust him. I trust them with my life, and I knew that he was going to do the right play at the end of the day.

In the second half, they came out strong. They came out strong on defense. They tied it up a lot more than in the first half. They executed. That's a good team, so ...

Q. For both of you guys, at what point did you sort of start to feel the legs and the fatigue of the two straight games? Is it more of a second half thing, or was it not much of a problem at all?

THE MODERATOR: Tolu, would you take that first.

TOLU SMITH: I would say it was the second half. Probably around the first media timeout I felt it, but we just had to keep pushing. And I think that's the great thing about Mississippi State and our team, we never quit. We saw that tonight even though the results isn't what we wanted. I have a lot of pride in our team. I have a great thanks in our coaching staff and our team to show the fight that we have.

IVERSON MOLINAR: I would say starting the second half, I was going on one of the best players on the team. He is really smart. He does a lot of things a lot of people don't notice. He cuts. He screens. He curls. He makes other players get wide open shots, so I feel like I had a huge responsibility on him. I feel my legs in the second half



because in the first half, I ran a lot.

Q. For both guys: Obviously the expectations you guys talk about coming into the season and now being eliminated and likely not making the NCAA tournament, what's the tone like in the locker room, and how do you try to stomach what the result is this season?

MODERATOR: Iverson.

JOSIAH-JORDAN JAMES: You know, like Tolu said, we're a team that we're never going to quit. We have a lot of -- we have a lot of players that have high character on the team, so we feel like out there, we just got to keep pushing, keep being positive.

And as both of us being the leader of the team, we are going to tell them that we got to keep pushing. There's a lot of game left. There's a lot of game left to prove to people that we're a good team. The mentality is going to be the same going into the SEC tournament as it's always been. We're just about to talk to them.

TOLU SMITH: Obviously, our chin is up high. We don't quit. I feel like this season we had a lot of adversity, and I think the coaching staff, Coach Howland did a great job of handling it. Knowing we had adversity, we still had to push through and show that fight and grit even though we didn't convert on those games. Just having all those obstacles we had to go through, I know it made us a better team.

Q. For both of you, again, what makes Tennessee's guards so tough defensively in both of your opportunities to go up against them this season?

TOLU SMITH: They're very quick, very small, very crafty. I know all of them are very good shooters. Vescovi is a great shooter, very poised. They have a young core of guards that's really active on both ends of the ball. They're a really good team, and they're a good set of guards.

IVERSON MOLINAR: It's a really smart team. I feel like a lot of teams can be successful just from the ability to shoot and the ability to have smart guards, and they have -- I feel like they have a lot of bodies. It's like I was telling Tolu earlier that when, let's say, Vescovi comes out, another guard steps in, and it's like he never left because they all produce the same amount of things.

They are all smart. They are all aggressive on the defensive end. Not just that, on defense too, they wore players down. I feel like that was one of their goals today was to wear us down, both of us.

Q. Ben, Tolu kind of touched on it there with the adversity the team has overcome. Him specifically, today wasn't his best performance, but he started to find that groove late in the year after everything he has overcome. What does it mean for you to reflect on everything Tolu has done this season to get to this point and whatever his career holds moving forward?

BEN HOWLAND: He really went through a lot. You think about four different things he had to battle through; a broken foot, a broken toe, COVID where he was out for two games and about two weeks, and then he had the knee dislocation. He has had a lot of adversity.

I'm so proud of him the way he continued to fight through it all and be positive. We had a lot of guys that had to step up and play bigger roles and different positions. Like I've said before, Garrison ended up playing a lot of minutes at the five where we planned on him playing almost all his minutes at the four this year. That affected us when he went back to the four defensively because he is not getting the reps in practice or in games guarding power forwards that space the floor, and that was an affect on our team as well.

There was a lot of adversity, especially surrounding the fact that one of our top two players missed a ton of games, but I'm just proud of the way the guys handled it and continue to battle and continue to fight and continue to support each other.

Q. Coach, a tricky question. I hope I word this correctly. Was this a game where Tennessee just was a little bit better than you, or is it stuff you didn't do?

BEN HOWLAND: You know what, Tennessee is really good. I mean, we had them down one with five minutes to go at home, and we're playing really well. I thought that tonight fatigue was an issue for us. We actually didn't really do anything on Tuesday in preparation to try to win tonight by not going three days in a row before we even played our first game on Thursday, and I thought that that was going to help us, but their depth and their physicality, and they're really good.

Again, I think that Rick is one of the best coaches in the country, not just our league. They have tremendous players, high-character kids, so you have to give your hat off to them. They played really well, and they could easily win this tournament.

Q. I know 2020 was an odd year, but three straight seasons without an NCAA tournament appearance, what's kind of the message you kind of try to send into the locker room as you stomach the results of this

season?

BEN HOWLAND: Unfortunately, three years ago after we went year four, year five, that was the one year we've had a double bye going into this. I remember crying in front of my team coming back learning that, first of all, we weren't going to be able to play in the SEC tournament and having to tell my team, tell Tyson Carter, who was a senior, that it's over. We don't even get a chance because we were probably going to get Florida, which was going to be another quality win. We felt like we would have beat them and had a chance to play Kentucky. If we win, we were in. We were about where I think the second four out or first four out. I can't remember which, but we were right there. We were really playing well. We won 11 of our last 15 conference games that year.

So when you talk about three years in a row, one of them was that year. Last year was, obviously, a tough year for us because -- and this has happened two years in a row, and it's no fault of anybody's, but we lost Robert Woodard, which I didn't anticipate having a player that would be able to jump right to the NBA, not even being an all-league player in the SEC.

Then this year, obviously, again the same thing happened with D.J. Steward. That being said, it's very hard and very difficult because I thought we had a chance to really get there this year, and you covered the team. We had so many close losses during the year, so many losses that would have made the difference.

Whether it's Colorado State on the road or Florida on the road or Arkansas on the road or Alabama on the road, you can just keep going. All those games where you really felt like we had a great chance to win and just couldn't close the deal. That is probably the part that is most frustrating for me.

When you look at what we've done this year, we're 18-15, probably the biggest thing that we didn't do as well as was shoot the ball. I mean, at one point after four-game run, we were 237-3, and you're not going to win at this level shooting the ball that poorly.

Q. Ben, I asked Rick this same question. I'm not sure if you have seen the news. Cuonzo Martin is out at Missouri. I just kind of wanted to get your thoughts and your kind of immediate reaction to that.

BEN HOWLAND: I'm sorry to hear that. I think Cuonzo is a quality guy and a really good coach, and I also think that the one thing I respect about him, they do it the right way at Missouri, and he is a class act all the way around, leadership with an A, B, C, and really cares about his kids.

He is an incredible person, a really good mentor for those young men being an African-American coach. I'm sure that he will end up landing on his feet because he is -- they went to tournament twice in his five years, and I didn't even know that until you just told me that, in fact, is the case.

He will definitely land on his feet. He got hurt this year by the transfer portal. Xavier Pinson is at LSU and Mark Smith is at Kansas State because of the ability to just transfer and go somewhere else and who knows how that happened. Both those kids played a ton of minutes for him last year, and if those two kids were in their program this year, he is still the coach, so a lot of this comes down to personnel.

Q. Do you guys -- if there's an NIT invitation, do you plan to accept that, and then what's next for you? Do you plan to be back next season?

BEN HOWLAND: We absolutely want to continue to play if we're invited to the NIT. Obviously, we wanted to be in the NCAA tournament, but it would be an honor to continue to play for our players and for our coaches. And so I hope that happens for us.

In terms of me next year, that will all be determined after the season is over as it is every year when I sit down with my boss, John Cohen, and discuss the program and the future.

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