

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 10, 2023

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Chris Jans

Tolu Smith

Postgame Press Conference



Alabama 72, Mississippi State 49

THE MODERATOR: We are ready to go with Mississippi State.

Coach Jans, general thoughts?

CHRIS JANS: Tough day. We're best when we get off to a really good start. Obviously we didn't. They had great energy out of the locker room. Kind of punched us in the face. We were playing from behind, playing uphill all night long. We just couldn't find ourselves to legitimately get back in the game.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for Tolu.

Q. Tolu, what would you say to folks who are looking at your résumé and trying to decide whether or not Mississippi State is an NCAA tournament team?

TOLU SMITH: I personally say for me I think we have a really good résumé. I think we have some really good wins early in the season, even late in the season. I think we had a well-rounded season.

But it's not for me to decide. It's for the guys on the panel. We're just going to wait till Selection Sunday, so...

Q. Do you think there was any sort of fatigue that set in yesterday, having to play the extra overtime period?

CHRIS JANS: I mean, obviously it would be. But we can't use that as an excuse. We knew that coming in we're going to have to play multiple games back to back. It's not just us doing this. It's more than one team doing that kind of thing.

Yeah, there was fatigue, but, I mean, you just got to play

through it.

Q. Obviously you've talked all season about you wanted to come back to have that chance to go to March Madness. You said you feel like you have a pretty good résumé. What would it mean to you in the last year to have that opportunity?

TOLU SMITH: It would mean the world to me. It would mean the world to me, not just myself but my teammates, my coaches who did a tremendous job of coaching us from the start of the season till the end.

Just having that great feeling that we will get in the tournament, so...

Q. How much do you think the experience of this week with the quick turnaround, the non-conference play you had in Florida, can help you when you get to the NCAA tournament?

TOLU SMITH: Yeah, I think it's good for us. Different environments, different types of situations, different tournaments and scenarios. We played it all. We done it all. I think it's going to help us, so...

Q. You guys had three tough games with Alabama. You scored in the 60s the first two. What did they do different defensively to limit you on offense today?

TOLU SMITH: It was a lot. They got out early, got out fast. Punched us in the mouth, like Coach said, early. We was just clawing back the whole game. I think we cut it to like 11 at one point. We just couldn't convert, so...

Q. I know you've been dealing with some free throw struggles in the season. Perfect day today. What was working for you today? Practice before the game?

TOLU SMITH: No, I do the same routine before every game. I come out and I shoot with KeShawn Murphy. We play this little free throw game. We just do that before every game.

I guess today I was just feeling it, so yeah.

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Q. How were you able to be at your best over these last several weeks?

TOLU SMITH: Man, it's a lot. Personally I'd say God. God helped me through a lot of things, even all the adversities that I've been through. My teammates, my coaching staff, I think everybody did a great job of going back to the drawing board, just figure out what we need to do. I think we did a great job of doing that.

We had a tough stint early on in the conference play. We did a great job of overcoming all that, so...

Q. The way you guys have responded since the slow start, how much confidence or momentum do you feel this program has going into next week?

TOLU SMITH: Man, it's everything. I think there's no team that we can't beat in the country, honestly. I think we got a great shot at anybody. We're going to give everybody our best. It's going to be hard. I don't think anybody wants to play us really, so...

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Tolu. We'll continue with questions for Coach Jans.

Q. When you look at your résumé, body of work from this year, do you feel like you deserve a spot in the NCAA tournament?

CHRIS JANS: Again, it's out of our control now. That's been a mantra that we've had for a few weeks, to be honest. We felt like we were in position to control the outcome of being selected or not, just like you have a lot to do with the outcome of each and every game. Now it's sit and wait. That's the situation we're in.

But, yeah, I personally think that we should be selected, of course. I mean, I coach this team, I know how tough they are. We got I think eight quad one, quad two wins. I think four of them are in the top 27 net. We got some higher quality wins.

The thing that I've loved about this team all year long is we got a bunch of wins away from home. We're not one of those teams that has a great -- we have a great home-court advantage, but we're not one of those teams that just won all of them at home and survived on the road one or two. We won a bunch of games. Obviously that's where the NCAA tournament games are played, away from your home site.

We'll see. Time will tell. Certainly going to be a long weekend sitting around and waiting.

Q. What level of fear is there with how hard you push the team, a group of guys you don't know all that well? What is that mindset like as a coach at that time? Looking back on it now, pressed the right buttons, it seems.

CHRIS JANS: Yeah, I mean, I talked about it locally when we were going through it, and then when we got to the other side of how impressed I was during that time with their mental approach. That's the time when you got a new coach, in most cases doesn't matter if he's new or not, you start questioning everything. It's just human nature for the players to question themselves, the players to question each other. The players can certainly question a new coach and lose belief.

I didn't sense any of that when we were losing those games. We kept talking about staying the course, we'll reap the dividends later, and they did.

Coaching for 31 years, you have a lot of moments and stretches where you're really proud of your team. But that's as proud as I can remember being for a group of guys that stuck with the process.

That phrase is thrown around a lot. But when you're 1-7 in the SEC, to climb your way out of that, put yourself in position that we are in now, it's pretty impressive for these young men. Says a lot about who they are, a lot about who they're going to be when they're done playing college basketball.

I'm super proud of 'em.

Q. You had a chance to see Alabama three times. What has impressed you with them as they have evolved?

CHRIS JANS: There's no shame in getting beat by Alabama. I mean, that's what I told our guys. Got a tremendous basketball team. They got a great talent. Got a great coach, great coaching staff.

There's a reason they've been ranked in the top five, top 10 all year long. They're just so dynamic. They're so explosive. They have a lot of confidence in their system. They believe in what they're doing.

It's obvious to everybody that watches them that has a clue, they're shooting threes and getting to the rim. That's kind of what they built their program on. They've recruited to that system.

They're just really, really good. They're a team, in my

opinion, that can obviously play with a lead, and they don't hold back. They keep doing what they do. You would imagine if they get in tough spots that they can get themselves back in the game because of the three-point proficiency and how many guys on the court can shoot the ball. They got great rim protection.

We struggled obviously, especially early. We got the ball kind of where we wanted to, but knew it would be difficult because of their length and the shielding that they do. Didn't matter who it was, we just really, really had a hard time finishing at the rim.

But a lot of credit needs to go to their defense and their individual players. They're obviously a really good basketball team.

Q. Having coached NCAA tournament teams in the past, how much have you seen with other teams the experience from those non-conference invitationals and tournaments pay off when you get to the structure of March Madness?

CHRIS JANS: It helps just with the routine of the turnarounds, understanding what's at stake. Certainly playing in this tournament with the stage of the SEC Tournament, the lights are a little brighter. I think that helps if you're chosen to play in the NCAA tournament.

You can't teach experience. We've had some success with that. Obviously played in Florida in the fall, and we beat Marquette, Utah. Marquette has gone on to have an unbelievable season.

It goes back to what I said earlier. We had so many good wins, and the majority of them have been away from home with some high-level teams.

If you really look at it we have zero bad losses. Georgia is our only Q3, Q4 loss. You know how this goes. Georgia was playing much better. I like Mike White. He would tell you the same. They just beat Auburn.

It was a close game. We didn't get it done. Then their numbers dissipated. They went from a quad two to quad three loss.

On the road against Georgia is certainly not a bad loss.

Q. It seems like shooting struggles have kind of persisted throughout the season. Today that was a thing. What do you think wasn't working for you? Was it the defense that Alabama was showing you?

CHRIS JANS: Yeah, obviously we haven't been a great

shooting team, especially from three, all year long. We've had our struggles at the free-throw line, as well.

I was just always hoping that we'd catch fire at some point, just change it. As a coach you just hope they find that rhythm and that confidence. We shoot the ball better in practice for whatever than we do in games.

Tonight, I don't know, I can't get inside their heads, but we struggled early finishing at the rim. Their length, their rotations were on point. We had a hard time getting off clean looks. They've got big guys all over the court, obviously at the four and five, and they give a lot of people problems with that.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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