

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 11, 2023

Vanderbilt Commodores

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Coach Jerry Stackhouse

Colin Smith

Paul Lewis

Postgame Press Conference

Texas A&M 87, Vanderbilt 75

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to begin with Vanderbilt. Take comments from Coach Stackhouse.

Coach.

JERRY STACKHOUSE: Obviously we're a little disappointed with the outcome of the game, but definitely not disappointed in our effort. I thought our guys, after getting hit kind of with a haymaker early on, we started off a little sluggish ourselves. I think it was a quick turnaround for us.

But those guys came out with a ton of energy, making a lot of shots. Our guys continued to battle, battle. We talked at halftime about coming out and maybe getting at the 10 by the 10-minute mark. We got it super close. Proud of our guys, the way they fought, competed. Our veteran guys, Jordan Wright, Ez, played a ton of minutes for us. Tyrin, Q. They left it all out there. They knew what we was playing for, fighting for. So proud of them, proud of their effort. Proud of these young guys. Our future's really bright.

The way Kyle stepped in to keep us in the game. Paul yesterday, the same thing. We're excited about how we finished the season, our first 20-win season since we've been here. We got some positives. Obviously a little disappointed right now because we had a little bit of aspirations for finishing the tournament.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Colin, a few nights ago you mentioned you started to hit more shots, now you're playing your best



basketball. Anything more to it than hitting shots?

COLIN SMITH: Coach Stack here and the rest of the staff, they have confidence in me, Paul, all of the young guys, really everyone on the court. It's really easy to go out there and knock down shots.

We're in the gym all the time working on it. Why be scared when you're out there. We started off in a hole, pretty bad. I saw the first one go in, and I felt like I have to be the person to try to keep us in the game, just being as confident as possible.

Q. What changed around February 1st with this team? How hard is it now to know you can't prove the team you are any more?

PAUL LEWIS: I would say nothing's really changed. We stuck to the same stuff we always been doing. Every day we go in and do the same things in practice, work on the same stuff. Coach always says just work the season, work the game.

I think what's what we did. We're just reaping the fruits of our labor.

Q. As young guys on this team, what would you say with the veteran leadership?

COLIN SMITH: Yeah, I think they're very wise. They've been in these positions before, making these runs. Just learning from them, just taking what they have to say, putting it in the back of your mind when you're playing. Having guys like Jordan and Myles come before me, just watching them play. Just something to look up to.

PAUL LEWIS: I'd say the vets, they make it easy for us. They always telling us, showing us how it's done. They lead by example in a really good way.

Ez is always talking to me, helping me figure things out even when I'm struggling with something. He'll help me out. They make it, like, very easy for us.

Q. Obviously the goal was to get to tomorrow. For it

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to be done now, do you think you've done enough to hear your name called tomorrow?

PAUL LEWIS: I think we have. We beat some really good teams. We finished in a decent spot in the best conference in the country. I feel like we've done enough.

All we can do is wait and see what happens.

Q. For you guys as a team, you responded so well after you didn't perform the way you wanted to in Tuscaloosa. What was it that got you in this position?

COLIN SMITH: After that game we all kind of just really locked in. It was an embarrassing loss. We all wanted to bounce back. At that point we really had nothing to lose. Coming off that, we wanted to go out there, play hard. We just brought that to every game.

It turned into a run. This game kind of started off the same way. They punched us in the mouth. They could have been like Alabama and gave up. But we kept fighting, never quit. I think we should earn some respect for that.

THE MODERATOR: We'll excuse the student-athletes and continue with questions for Coach Stackhouse.

Q. Do you feel y'all have done enough to hear your name called tomorrow?

JERRY STACKHOUSE: I think we have. Again, it's not up to us. I think we handled our part of it. We've done all that we could do as far as playing the game I think the right way, playing hard, tough. I think as the kids just said, in the best conference. There's no doubt about it in my mind that we play in the best, toughest conference.

When they talk about us getting eight or nine teams, there's no way you're going to tell me that we're not one of the best eight teams in this league. We finished fourth in our league. We've done it in a number of ways. I think you take any First Team All-SEC player, Defensive Player of the Year, any candidate that was up possible for the Defensive Player of the Year or even a Second Team SEC player, you take them out of the mix, do they still get where we are right now, still play with the same energy, effort and passion that these kids play for?

Like I said, they deserve a taste, especially for our guys that have been here four years and labored through this rebuild. For us to get an opportunity to hear our name called tomorrow would be very, very rewarding to all of us, and especially to those guys.

Q. How much did you think tired legs were part of the

early stages of the game? How did you handle that quick turnaround last night?

JERRY STACKHOUSE: Yeah, I mean, it was tough. Again, it's no excuse. Again, it's part of it. I think we made a run. We had an opportunity. We had some great looks there in the second half to close the distance, put a little more game pressure into the game. We just couldn't find a way to knock those key shots down.

But I definitely felt like we were a little bit running. I don't know why, though. I thought the first minute or two of the game, just getting into our sets, we were a little bit slow. Halfcourt trap that they do, it's just to kind of stall you. I thought we could have been a little bit more aggressive.

We started to get a little bit more aggressive with it there in the second half, not just getting into the corner, getting back out, getting stagnant. We had a little bit more fluidity to what we were doing there. It was just getting -- a little bit of a struggle getting into it. I can't put my finger on exactly what it was. Felt like we were ready to play, knew what we were playing for.

Proud of them. Kind of the same thing that happened to us at Alabama. Teams came out on fire. Whatever we did, whatever we tried, still saw the ball go into the basket, and they got some separation there. What happened then, we got two of our leaders collided heads and went out. I didn't play, probably, arguably, another one of our best players that game. Then it just kind of spiraled out of control.

I think this was a case where it could have spiraled out of control tonight, how confident that team was playing, how slow we got off. Our guys just kept fighting. That's what I'm proud of. We got back into the game after being down big. I think that's the sign of a good team, the sign of a team that could do something special with the opportunity on the one-and-out format.

Q. How did you and your team create this turnaround over the last month and a half? What does it mean for your program moving forward?

JERRY STACKHOUSE: Didn't just start at that game. Everybody kind of started. We played some good basketball before that. We won three games early, lost three games. Had a tough schedule.

I say it all the time. Again, we finished fourth in the conference, but our 11-7 record is a little different than the other 11-7 records. We played Kentucky twice. We played Tennessee twice. We played Alabama twice. The slate is not the same.

We tied with the same record with Missouri. We went there. If you really watched the games, saw what happened in that game, there was a lot left desired by some missed opportunities that we could have had that could have changed the game. That's happened a couple times.

That's part of the game. You go on the road. You battle adversity. You might not get the benefit of the doubt. We definitely didn't get the benefit of the doubt in that game.

Again, with that said, we really built a tough schedule. I think strength of schedule should mean something 'cause that's what we went out to do.

I talked with Coach Andy Fox about building our schedule. We could have got some more cupcakes. We didn't want cupcakes, we wanted teams to help us play for SEC play. We felt like there was plenty of opportunity for quad one and quad two wins within our league if we won enough games in our league.

We played, what, 20 SEC games, won 13 of them. You tell me a team that went 20 games and went 13 SEC games in the toughest conference in the country.

Yeah, we belong in the NCAA tournament. Ain't no doubt in my mind about that.

Q. Obviously it stings today, but you got to Saturday of the SEC Tournament the first time since 2015. How do you evaluate this week in general?

JERRY STACKHOUSE: I thought we had a great opportunity to get there last year. Again, the game was in a balance. We had an opportunity, but we didn't quite get it done. We were able to get it done this time around.

But, again, we want to try to improve our seeding. That's what it's about. The lower seeding, the less turnaround you have, especially when you get to these days.

Having a few hours of rest, it means a lot at this point of the year, this point of the season. Now it's like not any more back-to-backs. Now you can really sit down and prepare and get ready for what's next.

Q. Manjon and Wright, what they've meant to your team?

JERRY STACKHOUSE: Manjon is special. He's unbelievable, competitive. He's a warrior. He played 38 minutes out there. I knew for us to have any chance, we needed him to give us everything he had. He did that constantly. Got downhill. It's a tough team. Buzz does a

good job of mixing up those kind of zone defenses and different things. It's not necessarily zone, it's more of a matchup. I thought he did a good job of reading and still being able to get downhill and make plays.

Jordan the same way. He's a competitor. He didn't shoot the three well. Make a couple more threes, maybe it's a different game. But I like the fact that he took 'em. He was aggressive. He knows a lot of our success rides on him playing well and competing at a high level and playing with urgency.

I thought over the stretch he did that. There's no secret about it, I don't think he had his best season this year, there were some ups and downs. At the end of the day, when we needed him the most, he stepped up and was the leader and the Vanderbilt man I expected him to be.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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