

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 13, 2024

## Missouri Tigers

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

## Coach Dennis Gates

## Connor Vanover

## Nick Honor

### Postgame Press Conference

Georgia 64, Missouri 59

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Missouri.

Coach, would you begin.

DENNIS GATES: I'll say this: I'm absolutely proud of our guys. They've done a tremendous job all season being available to me as a head coach mentally and emotionally, being able to do the exact things every day, not just in games, but every day showing up to practice, going to class on time, walking around with their shoulders high, chin up, wearing the Mizzou logo with pride.

I commend our guys and also hurt for them. I hurt for them in this journey because ultimately our core values of friendship, love, accountability, trust, discipline, unselfishness, enthusiasm and toughness was put to test. Our guys always carry those core values close to their heart. They never let it go.

In times of obstacles or the ups and downs, they had a decision to make, they never let it go, they never turned on each other, they never did what every single coach in our conference mentioned when we play them.

It stood out on film, their pride. It stood out in games. It stood out in every situation. I'm proud of them for that.

When we talk about developing young people, we talk about together in the huddle, we talk about certain things, and it was put to test this year. Our guys were together, and they have been together. So I'm proud of our guys.

Hats off to Georgia. Outstanding game. Great comeback. It was a game of runs. They started the game on a run.



We had the middle half of the game on a run. They ended the game on a run.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Connor, big night for you coming back from the concussion. What went into tonight's performance, playing well tonight.**

CONNOR VANOVER: Well, we knew it was survive and advance, win or go home. I was just taking how I did before I got hurt at Florida, I played a good game, and I felt like it was something I could continue on and carry on. I brought that into tonight and just tried to fight as much as I could.

**Q. Nick, not quite the season you wanted here. Is there anything memorable you take away from your time in Columbia?**

NICK HONOR: It's hard to just pick one. Obviously last year, went to the tournament and everything like that. This year just being with the guys. We just built such a strong culture. A lot of teams would have quit as soon as you get to 10 games. A lot of guys start arguing, talking about next season, spring break and stuff like that.

My two years in Columbia was memorable. I'm glad I decided to come here. I can't really just pick one or two things. Just the overall experience made me a better player and a better person.

**Q. You mentioned a lot of teams would quit. What was it about Coach Gates' approach that kept you engaged?**

NICK HONOR: I would say it's just his approach as a person. He never really overreacts to anything. He obviously lights a fire under us, you know what I'm saying, to get us to do our job.

I think we have strong leadership. During those tough times, you don't panic. It contagious to everyone else. If your head coach is not giving up on you, your coaching



staff isn't giving up on you, there's no reason to give up on yourself.

He stays positive. Sometimes I wonder why he is so calm. I'm just thankful that he's always in our corner, just telling us to always keep our heads high.

CONNOR VANOVER: Yeah, I'd just say Coach has been a great role model. He always preaches about consistency. So just taking everything one day at a time. We just take it one day at a time and cherish each moment (tearing up).

**Q. There's a saying in sports: you either win or you learn. What would you say both of you have learned the most about yourselves and grown as people?**

NICK HONOR: What I learned this season? I learned a lot of things. Most importantly just, I mean, you got to go put your work pants on every day, whether it's a good day or a bad day. Just be around those who love you. Just focus on that positive energy. Just show up every day regardless if things are going bad, good, in between. Just show up every day and give it your best.

CONNOR VANOVER: I think I was able to learn the physical side of basketball. Everybody thinks basketball is just shoot and score, play a little defense. It's a very physical game. For a lot of big men, I think that's something I really learned and kind of took to heart this year.

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

**Q. Despite the disappointing season, what are some of the positive things your team did that you can grow on for next year?**

DENNIS GATES: Well, it's not disappointing when guys give their effort. I think we kind of look at sports a little often in different columns, but really learn what's taught. I think our guys learned a lot.

For me personally, I believe as a head coach I've been prepared by my mentor in several ways. I'm going to be as consistent as I can be to lead a certain way and make sure guys are giving their very best. And our guys did.

There's some circumstances that our team has gone through this year. We've had five surgeries in-season. Every wing player in our program has had a surgery except for Tamar Bates. I would like to see someone else's results if they were put in that same situation.

John Tonje, his injury, projected double-figure score. Caleb Grill was playing his best basketball at that moment. Right under nine points a game. Unbelievable leadership. Kaleb Brown had an unbelievable summer. Trent Pierce had an unforeseen ear infection, required surgery. Was out 10-plus games during that time. Danny Stephens, another walk-on kid that we had, had surgery.

We've been disrupted several times. Connor had a concussion. Sean East was out. There's some unforeseen circumstances that don't allow and didn't allow our team to get better how most teams mature and mature.

It's not disappointing to me when I lead guys. The results isn't what I've wanted, but the journey and the work ethic and the lessons that my guys have learned, I'm absolutely honored to be their coach and I'm excited about what they were taught.

**Q. What changed in the second half early on that allowed y'all to take the lead? What changed at the end?**

DENNIS GATES: I think if you look at the ability to knock down threes, they were 12-29, right? There were some rotational errors that we probably allowed them to get that far open. We still had the lead at the end of the game, the last two minutes.

The one thing that stands out to me is what allowed us to get the lead is we rebounded well, we closed the possessions, we executed. I think we held the lead all the way throughout the entire second half, at least the first 18 minutes. We had a costly turnover underneath the basket. That hurt. But we still had the lead in that situation.

We wasn't able to manufacture points in the paint at the end of the game like we were during the first 38 minutes.

The other thing was we didn't get to the foul line. We only shot three shots from the foul line. I think that has something to do with us losing the lead.

It's a tough deal for referees. They're not going to be 100% in every game. I just thought our guys fought. Our guys deserved to win. And they didn't.

**Q. Some of the issues with the rotations on defense, was that the pace that Georgia was running their offense?**

DENNIS GATES: No.

**Q. Anything you can attribute that to?**

DENNIS GATES: I think physical fatigue and a combination of the minutes our guys were required to play. Also the mental fatigue, emotional fatigue in those moments. We just wasn't able to close it. We had opportunities. We had several opportunities to do it. It just didn't go our way. Whether it was a bounce, layup by Noah Carter at the rim. That was right there. I'm shocked that didn't go in.

But we didn't get to the foul line. We didn't force the whistle. It was low foul count in the second half for both teams. I thought there were situations where Connor Vanover was penalized for his height. The calls didn't take place in the body because eyes were at 7'5" and the body was taken out.

I thought we were penalized in certain situations that you have to adjust. We wasn't able to adjust, secure the ball in those situations and make the baskets.

**Q. What went into the decision to keep those five out on the floor for most of the second half?**

DENNIS GATES: Well, again, Jordan Butler had a severe ankle sprain. That's why he was out of the starting lineup, only played two minutes. He sprained his ankle, couldn't practice a day ago. That caused a rotational change.

I just thought those guys were playing. And we were playing zone, so the fatigue wasn't there as much. I didn't want to disrupt the rhythm. That's where I wanted to go. These guys deserved to be out there and close the game.

**Q. Looking back when you lost Grill in December and obviously Tonje, how much does that limit you with your rotations when your scoring options are limited? How did you coach around it this year?**

DENNIS GATES: Well, no one's going to have pity for us or pity for me. Records does not have an asterisk by it and tell everybody the trials, tribulations of a season. You have to continue to move forward, find solutions.

Our staff did that. Our strength and conditioning coach was outstanding. Our trainer. Sean Conaty and Chris Perrin was outstanding during this time. Our doctors have been outstanding. It's just unforeseen things that takes place.

I think several teams are going through it now. It may impact their implications on Selection Sunday. Ours began well before a lot of other people's and it never stopped.

For me, I think the ability to have resolve and resilience,

give confidence, ask guys to do things they're not accustomed to doing, the ability for players to adjust to what I'm asking and learn on the fly different things.

We've had to change a lot because of our injuries. I think the straw that broke the camel's back was Caleb Grill's injury. A flagrant foul in the game against Wichita State at home. He went up for a dunk and landed pretty much on his chest and he braced himself with his hand. Turns out he broke a bone.

At that point we had great wins against Pitt, who is an NCAA tournament team, at Pitt. We had a great win at Minnesota, who finished in the top half I believe of the Big Ten. We beat some teams, but it allowed us to galvanize and be consistent. Once that injury took place, we had to move so many different parts and ask guys to do different things. We just wasn't able to settle in on the traditional rotations that we started out in June.

**Q. Looking ahead, how do you feel about the future of the program? What needs to change for a bounceback to happen next year?**

DENNIS GATES: Right now I think it's important to be with our guys and make sure we debrief properly. Some guys' college careers have ended. I remember my last game like it was yesterday. It is an experience that will last a lifetime in terms of the pull, the mental pull that it has.

I want to be there mentally for our guys. I want to be there emotionally for the returners and our staff. Our program hurts right now because we're not who everyone think we are. I think we displayed the amount of character and courage, but also our entire culture, we displayed that.

We've been in several games. It didn't matter who was ranked where, our guys showed up and competed. I'm proud of them. I'm proud of the fact that they allowed me to coach them every single day. I didn't have to coach effort in practice. I didn't have to coach certain things that other coaches may have had to coach.

The record is one thing. I am not excited about our record. But it's more importantly I'm excited about being able to be there for our players how I need to be as a head coach.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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