

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 14, 2024

Arkansas Razorbacks

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Coach Eric Musselman Khalif Battle

Postgame Press Conference

South Carolina 80, Arkansas 66

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to go with Arkansas. We'll ask Coach for some general comments on the game.

Coach.

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Just give South Carolina a ton of credit. Defensively they were really good. Start of the second half, the 8-0 run, probably too much to overcome tonight. We had four free throws attempted through about 30-some minutes of play.

Just like fast-break teams, got to get out and run in transition. Three-point shooting teams, need to knock down threes. We didn't get to zone one enough and draw free throws attempted. We're second in the country in free throws attempted, we're second in the country in free throws made.

That wasn't the case tonight. South Carolina is a great defensive team. We tried not to settle for threes, which we only took 13. But the turnovers, 14 turnovers, a lot to overcome.

The field goal percentage for us, 53 one half, 50 in another, you think you're right there, 52% for the game.

Difference for us offensively was, like I mentioned, the inability for us to draw fouls tonight.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Khalif.

Q. You're a guy that's been taking 15 free throws a game. How tough was that, that you weren't getting the calls?

KHALIF BATTLE: It's tough. I mean, that's part of our



game plan. I mean, I thought we were going -- we could have went to the basket a little better. The refs didn't call it that way, so... Sometimes how the game goes.

Q. You had a really good season when you got cooking late in the year, but not the season people expected. Is there a way you can sum up the season, why things didn't go as expected overall?

KHALIF BATTLE: I don't know. I mean, I hear a lot of things about -- like I know Coach gets a lot of negative attention, but the whole coaching staff works really hard. At the end of the day, it's on the players. These guys, they spend overtime working on the game plan, watching film, doing a lot of detail-oriented stuff. It's on the players, the season.

Q. You said you're a Razorback. You have to make a decision when you have time to think about it more. What's the process now because you do have a year of eligibility left?

KHALIF BATTLE: I don't know. We just lost. I'm not even... I don't know. Right now, like, my mind is getting ready for next year. I don't know. That's it.

Q. South Carolina got in the paint. They look like football players to me. What were you impressed the most about them today?

KHALIF BATTLE: They play together. That was the difference in the game. I think we're just as talented as anybody in the country, but they just play together. They were a team out there. They were a team.

THE MODERATOR: Khalif, thank you. We'll continue with Coach.

Q. You were pretty much trading baskets most of the first half. They went on an 8-0 run to end the first half and start the second half. What happened in the stretch where they took control?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Yeah, I thought they attacked the rim. They did a great job in paint points the entire game,

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52 points in the paint. We didn't guard the paint like you need to against a really good, talented team, a team that's ranked, a team that's got a chance to play in Sweet 16s or Elite Eights or Final Fours.

That's how good they are. That's how connected they are. That's how well-coached they are.

Q. As far as the season, you had a big game against Purdue, beat Duke, but inconsistency. How would you sum up the season? Have you been able to figure out why things didn't go?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: No, this is new territory. Right now the season ending stings. I have not been in this position. Hopefully the program is not. Hopefully we're playing deeper in this tournament, but more importantly hopefully we're playing in NCAA tournaments.

This is a new experience for me, and one I hope our group of players will be here next year, and the coaching staff, we certainly hope that we're back making tournament runs, not just making the tournament.

A unique and different feeling right now than what many of us have experienced.

Q. T. Mark has been your top scorer. Today they held him to two. How tough was that? What did they do in your mind to limit him?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Yeah, I mean, in my opinion, I don't know who was assigned to him every possession, but Cooper is one of my favorite players in the league to watch. I think he's phenomenal. I think he's a great defender. I think he's a true point guard. He's got great size.

I think NBA teams have to take a serious look at him 'cause he's a connector. The team is super connected with him on the floor. I think he's one of the best defenders in the league. Doesn't matter how many steals he has. He understands spacing. He's got great length, and he's really strong.

Again, I'm not sure, 'cause I haven't watched the film, of who was assigned to T. Mark every possession. I do know that Cooper does a great job on scoring guards in our league, even though he plays the point position.

Q. It's tough to look at it now, but this tournament is going to look different next year with the two new teams. How much tougher is an already tough league and tournament about to get?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Yeah, I'm not really concerned about who comes in. I think when you add great coaches, great programs, everybody rises. You know what I mean? You have to.

So maybe we get more tournament teams in. I don't know 'cause it's new for us. Again, after a loss, I'm not really thinking about Oklahoma or Texas, I'm thinking about this game and our season.

Q. With Baye, how tough was it that he got in foul trouble when he got off to such a good start?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I think anytime you have a guy that can space the floor, 6'11", played well the night before. Certainly his two fouls affected the flow of the game for us, for sure.

But credit to South Carolina for attacking the paint and putting pressure on the rim.

Q. I don't know how you could be any more intense than you already are. When you have had a great eight seasons, NCAA tournament runs, then a season like this, what does that do for your motivation, or can you not be any more motivated, if that makes sense?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I'm probably more motivated right now at this moment than I ever have been. So, yeah, I can't wait to work.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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