

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 15, 2024

Alabama Crimson Tide

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Coach Nate Oats

Aaron Estrada

Mark Sears

Postgame Press Conference

Florida 102, Alabama 88

THE MODERATOR: We'll continue with Alabama. We'll ask coach for general thoughts on the game, then take questions.

Coach.

NATE OATS: Obviously not the outcome we were expecting or hoping. Got to give Florida a lot of credit. They've played us really well two straight games. I thought we had a good start to the game, things were rolling. Kind of took the timeout, they got readjusted.

I didn't feel we had a killer's mentality to kind of just put 'em away early. We could have I thought maybe buried them when we got them down 8-zip. They kind of took the timeout, they started making a comeback.

We kind of chart every four minutes, get the media timeouts. We were up .56 and .88 on defense the first two. The next six straight, they were over a 1.4. 1.5, 1.6, 1.57...

Our defense just kind of, I don't know if it was coming too easy, the offense. For whatever reason, our defense has been our Achilles' heel all year. We had a good start today, couldn't maintain it for 40 minutes.

So disappointing, but we'll be in the NCAA tournament, so we had a good enough regular season. We had quality wins. We've got a pretty good tournament résumé. We'll see where they send us.

These guys are going to have to decide how bad they want to win in the NCAA tournament, how much we want to



continue to play defense for 40 minutes. If we play defense for 40 minutes, we can play with anybody in the country. If we decide to take 24 minutes off from the defensive end, it's going to be hard to beat anybody in the NCAA tournament.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for either of the student-athletes.

Q. Aaron and Mark, as far as the effort that you bring on defense following a bad offensive possession, where do you feel like the team is right now in terms of how you respond defensively when things don't go well offensively?

MARK SEARS: Yeah, like coach said, we did really good when it was 8-0. We just got to be better when times go through adversity. We all got to lean on each other and bend but not break.

AARON ESTRADA: I kind of just agree with Mark and coach. I don't know. I don't know what it is. We started out great today. We really haven't been starting off great our last couple games. I feel like we started out great today. Then they scored a little bit. We kind of folded from there every time. They scored more and more and more, so...

Q. What were you doing defensively to start the game that led to the 8-0 run?

MARK SEARS: I'd say we got stops and we got out in transition and the ball was moving. That's what really led us to getting an 8-0 start.

AARON ESTRADA: I feel like our intensity was high coming out. Guys was blowing everything up, getting over screens. I don't really know what happened, but I just feel like it died down as we were playing throughout the game.

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

Q. You talk about when offenses don't work, how that affects the defenses. How much do you think that's



playing into right now defensive struggles?

NATE OATS: I think it's a big part of it. I talked to them after the game. Like, adversity happens. You miss a shot, ref misses a call, teammate misses you being open. I mean, you can see it. Intensity is not there on defense. Bad defensive possession, they score. We don't come back pushing the ball with pace on offense. Makes the next offensive possession harder. Just a snowball effect.

It goes both ways. You play really hard on defense, you get stops, transition, we score in really long transition. You don't play hard on defense, you can't get out in transition as much, we're not as good. Snowball went on and on and on for, shoot, at least 24 minutes today.

We got to be better. I got to do a better job. I probably should have called a timeout in the middle of the six minutes at the end of the half. Maybe should have used an extra timeout on top of the one I actually used. We got to do a better job trying to keep guys in the game that are focused on defense. Coaches, we got to do a better job.

Q. Is this the hardest time of year to turn it around when things aren't going right, or is it like any other time of year?

NATE OATS: That's a good question.

I thought we had a good, positive attitude coming into this tournament. I didn't think we played particularly well against Arkansas. That would have been our third loss in a way. We came back, got the win. We've lost three of the last four. We haven't been healthy. We just got Wrightsell back, Griffen back from the previous Florida game. Felt like we finally got our group together. We got a little healthier.

I mean, it's hard to change at any point during the year. Shoot, if we don't change, we're not going to be playing too many more games at this point. They're going to have to decide how much more basketball they want to play together. This will be the last time this group gets to play together.

I felt bad for Aaron. I felt he played pretty hard most of the day. Next time we lose, he's done, his career's over. He's been a great teammate. He's helped the program a lot. I would hope these guys would want to try to play a little harder for him at least.

Q. You just talked about Rylan and Latrell. You talk about how valuable they would be. How much do you think the injuries factored in? How did that impact the game?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I mean, his first game back. He hasn't even practiced. We haven't had a live practice that he's been able to participate in. You're hoping he can step back in and play like he was playing before he went out, but it's probably unrealistic. Hopefully the next time he plays... He'll be in practice with us all week getting some live reps. He's been pretty good for us all year.

Wrightsell has been banged up over the last month. He's a lot better, to be honest with you. Having a healthy Wrightsell and Griffen obviously make a difference.

Still go back to I just think the biggest problems is our defensive intensity. Those two have been some of our better perimeter defenders. Maybe if they can get a little healthier.

Obviously you're judged a lot on what you do in March in college basketball. We need to try to make a deep NCAA tournament run. I think Rylan's legs looked pretty good, his individual skill workouts. Probably needed some game reps. Hopefully he plays a lot better this next weekend in the NCAA tournament.

Q. You mentioned the team had a positive attitude. Coming off a loss like that, how do you rekindle that positivity and mindset going into the NCAA tournament?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I mean, we're just going to have to come in and figure out who we're going to play Sunday night. Put together a game plan. Tell them exactly how we're going to have to do it. Talk about doing it every possession for 40 minutes regardless of what happens on offense.

They're teenagers, young adults, young men. I've had issues like this with guys in the past. Seems like as a collective whole, this has been a little bit bigger issue with this group, not being able to forget the play before, move on to the next play.

I told them again tonight, it really doesn't matter whether you missed three wide-open shots, your teammate missed you, the ref blew a call. It doesn't matter. Your effort on defense shouldn't be affected by what happens on offense. We've got too many guys where I feel like it does.

We're going to have to try to get the attitudes back right, just change. We want to win, this is what we're going to have to focus on defense every possession. We're going to try to reiterate it for the next week. Whether we play Thursday or Friday of next week, we have to be ready to go right out of the gate.

Q. You said the defensive intensity has been there in practice. Why do you feel it hasn't translated to the game? How frustrating is that?

NATE OATS: I think we got a lot of guys that are too worried about what happens on the offensive end. In practice you can run a defensive drill, and it's defense, defense, boom, boom, boom. They're working on their defense. You get in the game, and they're worried about what their offensive number is, whatever it is. The offense goes bad. Whether it's their fault or not. Shoot, sometimes they're upset with the ref or the teammate or they miss a shot, haven't got a shot in a few possessions. Defensive intensity lags.

The teams that can make deep tournament runs are teams that have a defensive mindset. Look at our group last year. Two out of the last three years we've been top three in defense, two out of the last three before this year. Those are teams that also won the SEC tournament. The two that were ranked right around a hundred, this one and two years ago, we got beat in the first round.

These guys are going to have to decide that other group got beat in the first game in the NCAA tournament. We have a week to decide if they can guard for 40 minutes or not. If we can, we can make a deep run in the NCAA tournament.

It's not for lack of quality defensive personnel, in my opinion. Obviously we're missing some guys here and there. We've got guys that are more than capable of being better than solid defenders. We don't have to be a top three defense in the country when we have a top three offense in the country. If our defense was top 30, we'd be easily a top five, top 10 team in the country right now.

You've seen it from various teams this year where they figure it out and play hard on defense. We got to try to figure it out over the next week.

Q. It was announced on social media before the game that you've signed your extension, it will be approved by the board next week. How nice is it to have that commitment?

NATE OATS: I've had a really good five years here working with Craig, Dr. Bell, the board. Just everybody around the school. I love it here. We've turned the program around. A little disappointed tonight obviously. We'd like to be playing tomorrow, playing for the SEC tournament championship.

More than the NCAA tournament, the 13 years before we

got year, they'd only played in two. This will be four straight for us. We've got the program headed in the right direction, we've got the commitment from the administration that they're going to continue to support us in a way that I feel like we can compete to be a top 10, top 25 team year in, year out.

I appreciate their support in keeping me here. Take my name out of some of the other job openings that are there. Probably not great timing with this loss tonight, to be honest with you.

Q. You talk about the makeup and character they have on the defensive end of the floor. Do you feel like this team is lacking that?

NATE OATS: We're definitely lacking it. It's not there enough. (Indiscernible) let offensive possessions affect his defensive energy. Some of those guys had a little bit more competitive character on the defensive end, which is why we were top three in the country in defense.

Some of these guys have it at times. It's just not consistently there enough from the group as a whole. I love this group of kids. They're a bunch of really good kids. We got to compete harder on the defense end for 40 minutes, and we're not right now. We didn't tonight. It's been a problem with us through large parts of this year, to be honest with you.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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