

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Wednesday, March 11, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach Lamont Paris

Kobe Knox

Meechie Johnson

Postgame Press Conference



Oklahoma 86, South Carolina 74

THE MODERATOR: We'll go straight to questions for the South Carolina players.

Q. Meechie, coming into this tournament as a veteran playing your final college basketball game, what are the emotions surrounding that? What are your big takeaways?

MEECHIE JOHNSON: Yeah, all the glory to my God and my Lord and savior Jesus Christ. Also, thank you to the SEC, to the University of South Carolina, all the professors, my coaches, my teammates, the trainers. Everybody that I've been in contact with, they just made a better person off the court.

Just thankful to be able to play tonight with no injuries this year. Just a blessing to be able to finish my career out here. I couldn't ask God for a better way to go out. I wish we won, but just being here with these guys, it's always a blessing.

I feel like I ended up the right way with Coach Paris and these guys.

Q. Meechie, tough shooting night for you from outside. What was going on defensively with them that took you out of your shooting game tonight?

MEECHIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I mean, I would just say I didn't hit shots. I don't think it was really anything that they did to me that caused me to do that. I got great looks from these guys. Just one of the nights it's unfortunate to go out that way. I definitely take that if I find shots, it could be a completely different game.

Just one of them nights. Not a good night to have that night.

Q. Kobe, big night offensively. Second half you came out and they took control. What was the difference?

KOBE KNOX: Yeah, I feel like just the foul trouble from me and Mike in the first half kind of slowed our momentum down. We got to be smarter not to pick up those two fouls and put Coach Paris in a tough situation by having us in the game.

We have to be better coming out in the second half. They came out and hit us first. We had to respond. Just little defensive cues that we weren't executing on, some bad fouls. That's kind of the whole thing. Shots kind of weren't falling in the second half how they were in the first half.

We just have to be better. That's kind of all.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you. We'll continue with questions for Coach Paris.

Q. Obviously not the year that you hoped for when you started off.

LAMONT PARIS: Yep.

Q. What can you as a coach learn from the experience of the struggle this season was?

LAMONT PARIS: Patience I think is a big part of it. Trying to get a particular message across, trying to get guys to pick up on certain things.

We did. We improved. We got better at a lot of things. I always say growth happens on your timeline. You can't force growth. It just happens on whatever the timeline is as you absorb and can process information.

This team, while it grew significantly, grew slower. So I think in some ways that led to part of it. Early on we also had a lot of different lineups. It was a combination of not

only consistency on behalf of some guys' parts but we also had some injuries. We had three different concussions early on in the season. We didn't have a long stretch of the same lineup for a long time.

You try to take some time to process the season after, immediately after the season. But it's just how to keep on persevering and learning more about how the guys process information. It changes from year to year. I feel like in the last couple years it's changed even more for a variety of reasons.

Just you're constantly always trying to learn your team. I think I've heard probably more coaches saying that this year more than any other year I've been around. Constantly trying to learn your team and push buttons that can help them be better.

We did have a resilient group. Even if you look at this game, the way we came out and played, it wasn't for any lack of effort certainly that we didn't come out on top. Hopefully it will be a good experience for some of the guys, some of the younger guys.

Yeah, really just how to always learn and taking in how to get a message across and what buttons to push. The buttons continually change. That's a part of your job as a coach, find a button that incites a particular reaction.

Q. Halfway through the first half, it didn't feel like you were able to get many stops defensively. What was going on?

LAMONT PARIS: Yeah, yeah, we came out and were doing some good things defensively, then they got into a groove with some of their ball screen stuff. We switched. We changed ball screen coverages a few times. And they had a good answer for each one.

Their bigs did a good job of catching the ball on a short roll, making some good decisions. They also threw the ball away a couple times. By and large their bigs made some good decisions. A lot of it stemmed from we switched it some, so the ball screen was slightly less effective. They attacked us off the dribble when we had some matchups that weren't ideal.

Ball screening, the process of screening, is changing. There's a thing that's happening, without getting too deep into it or getting myself in trouble, there's a thing that's happening in ball screening. It's different. It hasn't been this way in recent years.

They performed it well. We had a hard time adapting to it. It's on the cusp of whether it's a legal -- just like so many

things are. I can block out very aggressively. Sometimes it's going to be a foul, sometimes it's not going to be a foul.

We were navigating that this game specifically in how to figure out how to guard that particular ball screen situation in an effective way. I think a lot of it came down to that.

They also made some shots. In the first half I think we played some pretty good defense in a couple situations, and they made shots that we normally would concede that a player at this level is going to settle for that shot above all other things. They made a couple of those shots.

But yeah, our offense didn't keep pace. For the first two-thirds of the first half, maybe three quarters of the first half, I thought offensively we were getting a lot of things, playing well, making shots. Ultimately our offense did not keep pace. That allowed them to get back into the game.

With what they were doing offensively, they extended the lead in the second half. Again, we had some guys that didn't shoot the ball well, generated pretty good shots. It was a little harder in the second half. They were being physical with us.

Overall we had some guys that would like to have the day back, like to have those shots back. Runs would have been normal runs to where you're within a window of four, five, six on either side of being even.

Instead it got up to double figures. We tried to make one more charge, cut it back down to 10 maybe at one point I think. Again, we were being aggressive at that point. They took advantage of it.

Q. You're up 13 with seven to go in the first half. They're on their heels. Walker taking a long three and misses. I think you made one shot the rest of the half. Was that one you would prefer not to be taken by him at that point, considering you had your offense going in a groove?

LAMONT PARIS: Yeah, I don't know that one shot would derail what you were doing that way.

Guys have to have freedom to play offensively and know who they are. I mean, he's made some threes. We are on the side of -- we try to get guys that know who they are as a player and pretty much stick to the things that they do well.

A big part of it, too, like Kobe mentioned, you had Mike and Kobe in some foul trouble. That meant extended minutes for some other guys. I thought Meechie was tired at one point in the first half. What's your substitution going to be

at that point?

We rode with that group for a long time. We had a good flow. That group had a good flow going. We were moving, cutting, passing. We called maybe a little more plays, a few more plays in the first half than we did in the second half. Maybe we could have gone back to that a little bit more.

Still, as I look at it, we still had some good shots that didn't go down that maybe don't necessarily win the game, but they put the game within a range, just making a reasonable amount of those shots. It puts the game within a range that you can play well for the next couple minutes and you'll be right where you need to be.

Yeah, I think those guys, that group, was in a group. Then when the fouls happened, it forced some substitutions. We just never got it back in that first half.

Q. Now that you know you're back for next season, pardon me asking, but what will the first steps of the off-season look like for you? If there was an opportunity for you to potentially play in the NIT, would that be something you're open to?

LAMONT PARIS: Yeah, so immediately after this, I mean, you process what's gone on. You end up getting back to campus. We'll have meetings immediately with all the guys, the guys that are out of eligibility, then certainly all the guys that have eligibility still. That's par for the course in any year. In this landscape, certainly those are important meetings to have.

A lot of honesty in those meetings, self-reflection on both behalves. Ultimately there's so much mobility that in conjunction with a player and their family, any of the people that are in their circle, you come to a decision on who will be here the next year and who won't be here the next year. Those will generally happen relatively quickly, relatively quickly. Then you'll have an idea of what you need to bring in to fill some of those voids.

Some of that stuff happens, will start happening, immediately. Even just evaluation of players and what that looks like, that will happen pretty quickly. In fact, probably some of it has been happening to some degree. That will start to happen pretty quickly. It's pretty universal, I would guess. Even the people that are going to continue to be playing.

What was the second part of your question?

Q. (No microphone.)

LAMONT PARIS: NIT? I don't know. Some of it will depend on I'll talk with a couple of guys. Guys have to be motivated to play in the NIT. God bless the NIT. I've always really liked the NIT. But guys have to be really motivated.

We live in a different world now. You got guys that are going to start training for the NBA combine or for any workouts that they may have. It's just different now. That was the deal last year with Collin Murray-Boyles, who went ninth in the draft, but he was already preparing and working with a trainer. He wasn't going to be available. That was a large part to why we decided not to play in the NIT last year.

I think if you look across the landscape, particularly with high majors, that's happening more frequently. I'll consider it, but a lot of it will be dependent upon if we were invited what our older guys, where they are in terms of their appetite for playing in the NIT.

I don't think it does you any good just to play in it if guys aren't really excited. I've been in it as a mid-major, too. I'm telling you, if you come in as a high major and you're not ready to play, you're not excited about playing, you're going to lose. You're going to lose.

It just doesn't do anything to do it just because, oh, I want to do it selfishly to get a couple more wins or maybe we'll do it for, you know -- if I thought there was real merit and excitement about it, it would be a good experience. But a lot of that will just depend on the guys, too.

Q. You said earlier you can't force growth. It seems like next year has to come about quicker. How do you spur a team to grow more quickly than it did this past year?

LAMONT PARIS: That's a good question, fair question.

The process of recruiting has changed so much. There's some level of the unknown just with a smaller window that you have recruiting guys than you have in the past. Used to recruit guys out of high school, you'd recruit them when they were in ninth and tenth grade. There's a little bit of the unknown that way.

Some of it is recruiting some players that specifically already do certain things. Recruiting some guys that will have less growth needed. Some of our growth was as a team, but I think that happened pretty well for our group. I think we played together. I think we shared the ball. I don't think we had anybody that was selfish that we were spending a lot of time on determining what was a good shot and a bad shot. We grew pretty quickly that way as a

unit.

The growth that I'm talking about was by and large some individuals that needed to improve this or improve that. In some ways, in the recruiting process, you can recruit guys that do certain things a little more advanced in certain areas.

I mean, don't kid ourselves. Now the more advanced players are, there's a price tag that's attached to those guys. I hate to even say it that way, but that's kind of what it is. Versus if you think about a seasoned veteran, a fifth-year senior that was All Conference in some other league, versus a young and proven player, those guys are going to command different amounts.

Some of it is just trying to in the recruiting process identify some players that are a little more advanced in this area or that area to begin with.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

LAMONT PARIS: Thanks.

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