

# Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

## Mississippi State Bulldogs

### Sam Purcell

#### Women's Media Day Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll turn it over to Coach.

SAM PURCELL: Good morning. I'm extremely excited to talk about my team this year. Right now we are one team with one goal. But before I dive into our new slogan for this season, let me look back at why not us.

I'm forever grateful to Mississippi State. In this profession, especially as a first-time head coach, you need one school to give you a chance. Thank you, Bulldog family, for believing in me and my family and providing me with that first opportunity.

Next, I want to thank my all-star staff for joining me and having faith and support to have my back, but also provide me with an incredible work ethic that allowed us to sign the No. 16 signing class and the No. 3 transfer portal class.

Last and most importantly are the players. You believed in me, the school, and most importantly each other, and together through your hard work we defied the odds to get Mississippi State back on the map and have everyone talk to us nice.

Now I stand here before you in year two. It's now about the next steps. Each one of those steps looks different. But the culture is set. How can we give back more this year? How can we give back more to a community and a state who has given so much to us?

Our fans have showed out to support my young women, and we've been ranked in the top 15 no attendance for nearly a decade.

But my challenge to our fans is to continue our energy that we currently have going in the hump. I've got some great news. We have currently sold out the lower bowl and all club seats this year, which is unbelievable. But I've got one more challenge for my fans. I need our first sellouts,



all right, that we can sell out the Hump. I'm confident if we can get one, we can get one more.

We had an unbelievable run last year, but can our daily habits and no one outworks us mentality get us to the next level? No doubt we have the talent on paper, but paper doesn't win championships. Waking up every day and stacking days to have one special season.

I love where we're currently at, with 18 days to go before opening day. Ranked No. 25 in the country with a squad of hungry players who want more.

The key will be sacrifices that we have to make for each other and not play as open hand of individuals but instead one closed fist. Together for 40 minutes.

With that, we can't wait for our first game on November 6, game number one.

Ready for questions, one at a time, please.

#### **Q. Talk about the time you spent at Louisville and what you learned under a very outstanding coach in Jeff Walz.**

SAM PURCELL: Wow, how much time do I have? I could go for days.

First and foremost, he's a future Hall of Famer. What makes Jeff Walz a Hall of Famer, is the way he manages people and players. To be an assistant for Jeff Walz, I'm going to be honest with you, that's why I was able to have success, confidence and a swagger in year one, because of his leadership style that he mentored me.

He set me up for success, taught me the ropes, but he gave me opportunity as an assistant. When given the opportunity at Mississippi State to lead my program, it was an easy transition.

I'm forever grateful to a guy that poured into me, but not only poured into me that is a great person, a great father, and just a fortunate situation for nine years at Louisville.



**Q. Jessika Carter, what are you expecting to see from her going into her last season?**

SAM PURCELL: The first thing I'm going to say, ooh wee, okay? Let me go ooh wee for a couple things on Jessika Carter.

Career highs last year, all right? Almost 15 points a game. Two blocks per game. My girl can also pass. She also can take charges as she had a huge charge for us against Kentucky that helped seal the deal.

Ranked third in the SEC in blocked shots. Outside of that, Jessika Carter is an awesome person. I mentioned this last year, all right? She's one of the best stories in women's basketball, if you look past what's gone on in her college experience. Not only what's gone on, but what's to come.

Her best basketball is ahead of her. We named her our leader this year as a fifth-year. Her body right now, she crushed it in the weight room. When you look at her size, for most tall girls there's a label at times, maybe slow or not mobile. She defies all the odds. She's able to get out in space. She can guard a big. She also can guard a point guard.

Her presence on the floor gives us a chance to compete for championships. Like I mentioned earlier, I think her best year is to come when we're talking about All-American team, First Team All-SEC, and then ultimately her big goals is to play in the league, and I think she can achieve it this year.

**Q. Last year was your first year. What did you learn about yourself as a coach and a person?**

SAM PURCELL: That is a great question. Thank you.

I learned, first and foremost, you know what, you're successful in life with people, right? This game also is about X's and O's, motivating and speeches and rah-rah-rah. When you have great people, you know what, you can overcome anything that may be thrown at your way. You can take dreams and actually make 'em realities.

The energy that we were able to have to take over a program that had a lot of success at the highest point, 2017, 2018, a little drop-off, but then give the keys to a program that had energy, that our fans were just waiting to come out and get it back, and a group of people from them too to give support whether we won or lost, made for a magical season and magical opportunity for our young women.

Again, it's people. I'm the first to say, as an awesome season, everybody mentioned 22 wins. We got to the NCAA tournament. Unbelievable job. Again, I can't thank my staff enough. I would be lying if I said it was just an easy transition. Like I mentioned earlier on the question before, I was prepared. I had great mentors. I've been in some excellent programs where we've been in the NCAA tournament year in, year out. I had great opportunities to grow.

When you sit in that seat, it is different. So you're going to rely on the people you hired. But then most importantly, the kids that were willing to stay with me, the returners. They could have left. Of the kids who transferred into the portal, they didn't have to come to me. Again, that's why I reference people. They stuck with me. We cleaned some things up. I learned how to be a better coach as the year went on. That's why you saw us have a February like no other.

**Q. You were so close to making the Sweet 16 a year ago. I don't think you got a single top-25 vote all year last year. What does that say about you and your program?**

SAM PURCELL: You know what, we're taking the country on notice, all right? That was a big part of talk to us nice. We're humble. We're thankful. Again, another compliment to the SEC. To think that we tied fifth in the SEC, the conference, never received a vote, but then thank God for the Selection Committee. Let me give a shout-out to you, to the NCAA committee, who put us in. There was an opportunity that we weren't.

Like I told my young women, when you are put in, what do you do with it now? For us to make history as the first play-in team, get to the second round, be five points from making the Sweet 16, never receiving a vote, just a credit to my young women again that, you know what, sometimes you don't need a number in front of your team, it's all about your heart and mind. When you're dialed in, you can't be denied. Man, what a great ride it was.

**Q. You had six transfers out, four more seniors graduating, then bringing in one of the top transfer classes in the country. With those six players transferring out, what was the conversations with them and what were the conversations to bring in the transfers?**

SAM PURCELL: That's a great question.

First of all, when you take over a program, you come in with a vision, most importantly you come in with a goal. The media at times might like storylines, but each one of

those transfers were for healthy reasons. They wanted different opportunities.

As a head coach, that's my responsibility. When the season ends, we have one-on-one conversations, and you project where I see them, where things could go. Every player is entitled to a bigger opportunity with today's climate. It was a welcoming thing that we were thankful for their opportunity and wish them nothing but the best of luck.

The second part of the question?

**Q. (No microphone.)**

SAM PURCELL: Yeah, how we bring 'em in? A credit to my fan base, all right? The same way I brought them in is the same reason I took the job. Women's basketball at Mississippi State matters. I talk about it all the time. We're top 15 in the country. One more time, top 15 in the country in women's basketball. The numbers that we're producing are unique around the country. Again, I want to say this. Top 15 in the last seven years. That was during the glory years, but also during the years we might have went down.

When I talk to a recruit on the phone, I tell them one thing. You're going to get consistency. Boy, it's a vibe and an energy like no other. Also, in case we don't win, you see the commitment of my community, my state and the people that are going to support you no matter the good or the bad times.

With that kind of environment, the hard work these student-athletes put in day in, day out, they were dying for that opportunity and that stage, for us to get recognized this year to have three ESPN games on the big stage, bright lights, is why they transfer here as we try to compete for championships.

**Q. We talked about this a little bit a few weeks ago, but your two veterans, Jess and JerKaila, they didn't have to stay, but they chose to remain committed to your program. They're the leaders with the newcomers. What does it mean to you that they continue to believe in this vision and are now the veterans of this group?**

SAM PURCELL: It's a statement. That's what I said in year one. How many positive statements can my program make? The statements are multiple ways. One, giving back to this community, all right? Two, in the classroom. Then three, giving back to this program. That third one was a huge statement to show the culture's right. You know what, I actually believe in the vision, all right?

Last year, like I said, they let us in, so we've got a taste

about us that, you know what, we're hungry for more. That's why the slogan that we have this year is: One. Can we stack days one day at a time. Can we take a left foot, right foot and get this program past the second round to the Sweet 16. You get past the Sweet 16, we're talking about Elite Eights and Final Fours. Get what, we back.

For my two top players to believe in that, it's going to help me in recruiting right now. That's a big thing going on in the country. Successful programs, when you look at the Tennessees in my league, the South Carolinas, LSUs, there's a consistent behavior about them: attendance, recruiting and developing players.

So right now I've got the attendance. I've got the coaching staff to develop the players. Now I'm trying to stack another top 25 so we can stay at the top of the top in the SEC. If you stay in the top of the top of the SEC, the stats prove, all right, you got a chance to compete in Final Fours and win national championships.

**Q. Back to Jessika Carter. The final press conference of March Madness last year, people asked if she was coming back. You said you didn't know. What was the conversation specifically with her to bring her back?**

SAM PURCELL: This is the fun part, right? You all have a responsibility and a storyline to tell. For me, I told her to enjoy the journey. She's the best story in women's basketball for multiple reasons.

At that point, and I mentioned some of the stats, she led our team in scoring, rebounding, blocked shots and field goal percentage and had career highs. At that point that's not the time or place to have that conversation.

We were on path to make history and shock the world, all right, and finish the slogan of why not us. And then why not her was going to happen once that magical run happened. And then to give her grace and time, because that's the type of coach I am. It's not about me, it's about you. I ask them, what do you need in your life? What can I provide for you in your life? Are we the best fit? Just the general questions that are in today's climate.

Thank goodness, all right, she said yes 'cause, I'm not going to lie, I was out in the streets in Starkville tootsie rolling, screaming, Let's go, and it was time for the next hashtag because Jessika Carter is coming back.

**Q. You scored 71 points a game a season ago. Can you talk about your offense, just your goals for a new year, how you would like to see progress.**

SAM PURCELL: I can't say enough great things about the



excitement for me as a head coach for next year. This is why, all right? Again, I'm forever grateful for that first group that I inherited, all right? We were able to retain a special group, then immediately get in the portal late in the season and put a team together.

Now having a full year with some returners who understand my style, then being able to get in the portal and adding some electric, one more time, electric players, all right, our fan base could see points go up, the speed and the quickness that I want to get after now, because I've got depth.

This is the thing about coaching, I always joke about this. I think they're bad coaches when you got a team and you're determined to play your way. I always say, what if you don't have the players? Are you going to play that style? You're going to be determined to play your way?

In year two to be able to recruit the vision I have with the pieces I've got, our fans should be ready. I think that's why they've already bought out the lower season bowls and the club seating because there's an excitement like no other. That excitement in the gym is only going to make my young women play harder. When playing harder, you can see a lot more on the offensive end, quicker tempo.

Then on defense, we're dogs. You're going to have that same mentality where I think we gave up -- I want to be correct -- we gave up last year, what, 52 points. I want to make sure. I think that's right. 52 points a game, somewhere around there. You're going to have that same defensive mentality. I could not be more excited for next year.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

SAM PURCELL: Thank you, everybody.

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