

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - North Carolina vs Ole Miss

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Fiserv Forum

Ole Miss Rebels Coach Chris Beard

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Ole Miss head coach Chris Beard.
Ole Miss plays North Carolina tomorrow.

Q. Chris, you got to know the opponent a little later than everyone else. How much time have you been able to devote to North Carolina and just what's it look like getting to Milwaukee and film study in between?

CHRIS BEARD: We've had plenty of time, period. Carolina's a special team. To me, it starts with their coach. A lot of respect for Coach and everything he's done in basketball, not only at North Carolina but basketball in general. Used to love to watch him as a player.

Coach Williams has been a friend and mentor to me. I have a special relationship with Coach. So always respecting the Carolina program from afar has been real.

I think their team, it's an interesting team to look at. I know there's a lot of dialog. But when you get in the guts of their season, just a lot of one- or two-possession games that could have gone the other way and Carolina's seeding could have been completely different.

It's March. It's a 68-team tournament, and everything you've done before doesn't matter. They're talented, have great guard play, good interior play, have a balance between young talent and experienced players who have been around a long time.

Defensively, they have a real identity. Offensively, they have an identity, and it's still North Carolina. The way they can get the ball up the court, feels like Dean Smith's still sitting over there.

Q. Sean's got some familiarity with this team and some of the roster. Has that helped in preparedness with him over the last couple days, maybe with his

teammates?

CHRIS BEARD: More than anything, Sean can share some personal experiences of some of his games against North Carolina. I think he played them five times. So in terms of the core game planning, scouting, not so much, but not just this game. In today's world of college basketball, with so many transfers and new players, every single time we play, we're going to have a player that either played with one of the opposing players or played against them.

So it's something that we do kind of mention the first day of scouting. We let our players have a voice when we introduce the opponent.

Q. I know Mikeal Brown-Jones didn't play in the SEC tournament. Can you explain his status for these games?

CHRIS BEARD: Mikeal, we hope he joins the team this weekend. He's been great supporting the team from afar. We would not be here today if it wasn't for Mikeal. He had a great season. We hope we can play long enough to get him back on the court with us.

Q. Chris, I know you addressed this the other day. You had an expert question, whether maybe you were -- I think he labeled you guys as a fraud and a possible early round exit. You're facing a team that was also heavily criticized for their selection into the tourney.

How do you address the noise that comes with all of this? Do you use it as motivation or do you just try to block it out?

CHRIS BEARD: First of all, I don't know. Was the guy doing us a favor, giving us some locker room material? We don't need that. If I had a younger team, I would have called him and thanked him for saying that because that's great motivation.

But with this older team that we have, experienced guys, we spent zero seconds talking about it. I got asked a question in the local media the other day so it was brought to my attention.

It's what's great about college basketball. Everybody's got an opinion. It's the spice before the game. Really spent no time worrying about that.

Q. Chris, obviously, winning any NCAA Tournament game is an accomplishment. But how tough is it and how big an accomplishment is it just to get out of the first weekend?

CHRIS BEARD: Very, very difficult. A couple things. One, you never take for granted coming to the NCAA Tournament. It's really difficult no matter what your conference, no matter what your situation. These things don't just happen because of what's on your jersey.

So every team in this tournament has earned the right to be here through different paths. Just always remind myself and our staff and our players, this is really difficult. Just take a deep breath and smell the roses a little bit like, you know, we're here.

In my opinion, the most important game in any tournament is the first game. It's something Coach Knight talked about often. The first time he said it, I didn't have to put it in my journal. I heard it, I thought about it, and I think about it every day since.

For us, with our team, we set up every tournament as a four-team tournament. We never look that far ahead, whether it's the conference tournament or now the national tournament. We're in a four-team bracket here. We had to wait a couple days to find out who the fourth team was, North Carolina.

The first game in the tournament is the most important, period. Sometimes, or often, the most challenging game too for so many reasons.

Q. Whether it's been Little Rock, Tech, Texas, or where you are now, what has been translatable or parallel that has allowed you to have success at different places?

CHRIS BEARD: Appreciate that question. We also made the NCAA Tournament when I was at Angelo State, the NCAA Division II tournament. I'm proud to have coached so many great players and great teams to play in national tournaments.

I think if there is one similarity between them all, it's pretty simple to describe. It's the players. We've had good players on all the teams that we've coached that have played in the postseason. This year's team is no different.

We have a balanced team. We have a lot of individual

good players, but I think the coaching gets conversation. The games, the match-ups is a big thing. You hear people talk about it. But above all, it's the players. If you're in this tournament and you get to the second round or the second weekend or ultimately that Monday night, the thing that you can be assured of is you've got good players playing their best basketball when it matters most. For us, this is March.

Q. Chris, during the SEC season, a lot of talk about when it comes to NCAA Tournament time, the league was so tough. Is it an iron sharpens iron thing, or is it going to be teams are so beat up, having to play a monster game night after night, they'll not have anything left for the tournament. How do you feel about that?

CHRIS BEARD: Interesting question. It's something that the older I've got, or more experienced, whichever way you look at it, I've thought about more. Earlier in my career, you heard that. What are you talking about? These guys grow up playing every day. They play three games a day sometimes in the grass roots circuit of AAU. They're young by nature.

I think the more you really think about it, there is a valid question, something on the other side of the coin. Is your team healthy this time of year, not only physically, but mentally?

I think a big part of what we tried to do is when our last game happened in the SEC tournament in Nashville -- the first thing was twofold. We've got to rest physically, and we've got to reset mentally. Because this really is a new season, and you've got to come into this season not thinking about anything from the past and certainly can't look too, too much forward.

It will be interesting to see. Statements like that this might have been the best conference in the history of college basketball, I think, are fair and valid up until the last game of the regular season. Now we'll see what happens in the tournament. I think if the SEC can represent, then I think the statement that this is one of the best conferences ever will be true.

But a lot is still yet to be determined. If you're going to write an article or a book about this, there's a lot of chapters left. Because this is the NCAA Tournament, where a win, where it matters most.

Q. What's your favorite eateries in Oxford, Mississippi?

CHRIS BEARD: That's a tough question when you ask a



coach that. You don't want to offend anybody. The political answer is I like all the places in Oxford, which I do. But I eat lunch at Rascal s a lot. It's a gas station that has grill food. Get a piece of pizza at Funkys. I get fine dining at Lenora's.

Oxford being a college town, late-night options are not many. I've been happy to get back to my roots of just McDonald's. 24-hour McDonald's. Filet-O-Fish on a healthy night. Quarter Pounder with cheese is the go-to. Ask for the fries to be fresh, even if you have to wait a little bit.

Thanks.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, sir. Good luck tomorrow.

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