

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Ole Miss vs Iowa State

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Fiserv Forum

Iowa State Cyclones Coach T.J. Otzelberger

Media Conference



MODERATOR: Questions for Iowa State head coach T.J. Otzelberger, please.

Q. You've obviously coached against Chris Beard before in his time in the Big 12. What are some of the hallmarks of his teams that he had at Texas, and do you see some of those same traits in this Ole Miss team?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. His teams always exemplify tremendous toughness and togetherness, and I think that shows. Defensively, they're a very connected team. They communicate well. They play for one another on that side of the floor most definitely.

I think offensively the way they move and share the basketball, some of the motion concepts, those are similar things that he did that made him successful as a coach at all the places he's been, but specifically when we were competing against each other when he was at Texas.

So, again, I think toughness and togetherness are things that really stand out to me about their team.

Q. T.J., what has Conrad Hawley meant for this program and why come up with such a unique role for him?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Conrad reached out and -- he learned about our program, some of the things that we believe in in terms of daily habits, disciplines, and commitments to just our work habits. And those were things that he could relate to and that meant something to him.

And we talked very candidly that in terms of on-court basketball opportunity that there wasn't a lot of need for that on our end, but we were looking for leadership. We

were looking for selfless, somebody who could really care about their teammates, bring tremendous energy every day and be a great person. And he's absolutely lived up to that billing and done a terrific job of that day in and day out for us.

Q. T.J. when you first came as an assistant at Iowa State in 2006, was it a personal goal of yours to maybe come back one day as the head coach of the Cyclones?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: I'd say I loved Iowa State from the minute that I was fortunate enough to get the opportunity. It was so much about the pride in the program, how people treated me. You know, I realized at the time it was an opportunity that I hadn't necessarily earned based on my resumé and what I had accomplished up to that point. But I was so appreciative and grateful.

I don't think as an assistant I ever looked too far ahead that way. Whatever head coach I was working for, to try to do the best that I could in whatever job or responsibility that they defined. Certainly, you know, when you care about a place as much and you believe in a place as much as I do or we do with Iowa State, of course, that's like a miracle or a distant dream that maybe, if everything lines up some day, who knows.

But it wasn't something really in the moment that I probably could, you know, put in perspective because I didn't think it was necessarily something that could be possible.

Q. And more present day, what are your thoughts on Ole Miss and what is your breakdown of this year's team?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. Their team's got a lot of experienced players. Very versatile. A group that takes tremendous pride in turning over their opponents, and then also doing a great job taking care of the basketball. They do those at a very high level.

Their defensive versatility is terrific, their switch ability. Guards on bigs, bigs on guards, they do a great job. Their defense really tries to frustrate you by not allowing the ball to get in the paint and trying to keep it on one side of the floor. And when they're at their best, they're doing that



really well.

Then offensively, they have such balance through their first six or seven guys. Everybody scores the ball at a fairly consistent rate. Certainly Pedulla has hit some big shots and had some big moments yesterday and many other games this year.

But when you really look at their team, it's challenging to focus on one particular guy because so many guys do so many things well. So they're just a really good basketball team and a team that plays with tremendous purpose. And as we talked about earlier, their toughness and togetherness.

Q. Coach, Nate Heise told me yesterday that around the time of your game at UCF that you pulled him in and had a conversation about helping him find confidence, and it seems like that really worked as he's shooting over 50% from 3 since that game roughly. What do you remember from that conversation and why was it important for you guys to have that one on one?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. I mean, I try to spend time as much as we can connecting with all the young men in our program as continuously as we can. I didn't know that that one conversation had such an impact on his shooting. I guess I'm the moron. I probably should have had that one at the start of the year.

I would say overall, man, Nate is a great player. I think it's just reminding Nate what his greatness is and what he does. I think sometimes he can focus on one aspect of his game. There's so many things he brings to the table to make our team successful.

Defensively he's ultra competitive, can guard any spot on the floor. He gets loose balls. He chases down rebounds. He makes shots. He makes plays. He's a great cutter. And so I think sometimes with guys when things aren't necessarily going their way, they can be putting too much focus or emphasis on just one aspect of the game.

And so I think for Nate, just really connecting with let's focus on all these winning things and then the shots will take care of themselves if you do the work and you trust the work. And that's what he's done.

Q. And to follow up, as he started to see more shots fall, he's kind of seemed to let his emotion come out after making a shot, staring down opponents, whatever it is. How much do you think his confidence in those things has risen, I guess, over the last few weeks? As he sees a shot go in, he seems to kind of puffing his

chest out a little bit.

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. You can see it. Like you're mentioning, you can see it. He believes it. He feels it. His excitement and energy is good. Now I've just gotta continue to urge him to not cross that line and turn a three-point shot into a technical foul going the other way.

But, no, he's done great. He works so hard. He's earned it over the long haul. He's earned it in our program over this season and the work that he's done. There's no greater joy you can have as a coach than when young men do that work and they put the time in, they're about the right things, and then when they see that work pay off for them, that's truly rewarding.

Q. You being from Milwaukee, going to Thomas More, playing for Pat Ross, what do you carry with you from that all these years later?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: You know, Coach Ross was really an important mentor for me at a time that I certainly needed it. And he was my coach my freshman year, and then became our varsity coach. And so as I played for him, you know, his message was always hard, smart, and together. Let's play hard, let's play smart, and let's play together.

And particularly the team in the group I had my senior year of high school, it was more of like five guards just flying around defensively. And at times I was like our small forward at whatever height I think I am when I'm walking on my tiptoes.

It was a fun experience. He was a coach that was demanding, yet was somebody that you loved to play for because you knew he cared about you and he always made time. And so just really neat that we carry this relationship forward now and he comes out to see games. And the ones he's not able to see in person, he's always texting his feedback.

So I'm really appreciative and grateful for the belief he had in me and then our continued relationship.

Q. T.J., a couple of questions on Diante Garrett. Everyone's talked to you, I'm sure about coming back to Milwaukee, Milan as well. But what it's been like for you to be back here, have Diante on your staff, and I imagine probably one of the first Milwaukee guys that you recruited to Iowa State. And also another question about maybe how his role has evolved throughout this season with maybe the lack of depth at guard and being a practice guy that you could count on to work with those guys?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah. I can say for sure that when we got to Iowa State, he was the first high school player that we really focused our attention on recruiting. And he was somebody that his ability to just create advantages with the basketball and just beat his man and the speed he had at 6'4" with the ball in his hands was so tremendous.

And there's not been a guy to this day I've been around who just loves playing basketball more than him. There's other strengths that others have, but what you see from him every day is the joy he has just in playing.

Our current players will joke that -- I mean, he's in the gym all day getting shots up. Whenever they're not in there, he's still working on his game. Now he just loves playing basketball. He's got tremendous character. But that zest and that passion for the game really helps him to be a great teacher.

Our guys have an inherent respect because of what a great player he was and how accomplished he was in college and as a pro. But they also see how much he loves it. They see how much it means to him, how much he cares about it. And I think that has a great impact.

So for him to be back here -- you know, his father, Dick Garrett is one of my favorite people I've ever met, just one of those guys you feel like he's never had a bad day. He was a heck of a player in his own day. But you see where Diante gets that spirit and that joy from.

And so to be able to come back here in a place for both of us that means so much -- and Diante was one of those guys from a recruiting standpoint that he was being recruited, but it wasn't probably to the magnitude that it should have been or could have been. So when somebody enters into that belief with you and feels like you guys can do some great things together, that keeps that chip on the shoulder. And it something he's carried forward and we've brought back here to Milwaukee.

Q. T.J., what advantage does Joshua give you with his size and skill at that four spot?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Well, he has the unique ability to create an advantage in so many ways because he can do that facilitating as a point guard. He can do it in isolation situations where he has space to drive the ball. He can do it backing down smaller defenders or scoring over the top in the post.

You know, to run offense effectively, you have to have guys that can create advantages and have an inherent advantage, and Joshua is a really tough cover for anybody

one on one in any situation. So as the year has moved forward, we've continued to elevate the opportunities he has because he's done such a great job. He's a guy who wants to make the right play every time, a guy who probably takes more pride in getting an assist than he does scoring a basket.

I mean, he's a matchup nightmare. We're fortunate to have him. He gets his teammates great shots, and he's somebody that's going to continue to improve and develop because of the work he puts in every day.

Q. T.J., you were in the exact same position three years ago. I'm wondering what's changed most about you as a coach and about your program from that point to where you are right now?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Yeah, I'm not sure a whole lot has changed. I mean, we've been fortunate that in between that season and this one, we've had young men in our program in the years to help establish a consistency of habit. We've tried to continue each year moving our offensive game forward without compromising the integrity of the things that we do defensively. And we've tried really diligently.

Coach Crawford and Coach Schmidt work with our offense. They do a tremendous job and have really put the work and the time in. So hopefully it's consistency of habit. Hopefully offensively we're continuing to improve and move forward.

But most of all, I would say that we want to have great young men and great people to be on this journey with. When you're playing on this stage, the character of the people you're around is so important. And we've been really fortunate to have such great young men, great coaches, and just great people to be on this journey and experience with.

Q. Maybe it started in those high school years you mentioned, but when was the first time you decided you wanted your philosophy of basketball to be built on physicality and defense?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: It actually probably started because it was my only chance to actually get on the court, especially in college as a player. My college coach, Coach Vander Meulen was really firm with like you're not faster, you're not smarter, you're not -- you better find what your advantage is and what your edge is going to be.

And so for me, it felt like that was my way to earn minutes as a college player. That was my way -- how I saw the game was if you don't have immense talent, you have to

find ways to be better at the doable things. And that was something I lived in the time that I played, or if you want to call it that.

And then I would say that I've just always believed in controlling the things that you can control. You control your enthusiasm, your attitude. You control your effort. Be great at the doable things. Be great at those things that you can consistently perform to that level.

Year in and year out with different teams, there's going to be a different strength offensively, shooting, point guard, post player, you name it. But being great at doable, effort-based things is something that every team has the choice to do. And so to me, we want to make sure that we run a program and have a team that always makes that choice.

Q. This is a two-part question. In the old days, five years ago, if you won here a big game in a tournament game, it would help you in recruiting, recruiting in the state of Wisconsin. Does that matter now? Iowa State has a TikTok, you have NIL. Does it even matter, number one. And, number two, I know you don't limit yourself. You will go anywhere in the country and recruit. But what do you like about the Midwest or particularly about Wisconsin when you get kids out of here?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Well, I believe that certainly success is always going to help you in recruiting, and every game is important. You get to this time of the year and everybody's watching, and so there's so much put into how far you're able to go in this tournament and the games you're able to win.

So I believe that every time we're able to take advantage of that opportunity and be successful, it's helping build our brand. It's helping create a belief. It's helping validate the work habits and those sort of things. So certainly I believe it is important and it does make a difference, and we want guys to want to come to our program that are winners.

We want to recruit winners. We want to recruit players and young men that have tremendous character. And when we're able to show those things through the experience and they get the visual picture from watching us play, that's even that much more helpful.

When you talk about our focus in coming back here and continuing to recruit, we've had such great success with the young men that have come. They've done very well in our program, they've developed. Many have gone onto great professional careers, NBA, you name it after. So I think there's a lot of underrated players here.

I think high school coaches in Wisconsin are as talented as any in the country. I think they do a great job developing the young men in their programs. I think that defense is an engrained part of basketball in Wisconsin. I think there's so many great defensive coaches.

I think that goes back a number of years, but I give Coach Dick Bennett a lot of credit for the defense that he played at Wisconsin and then on from that point, because so many coaches, including my own, really tried to model that for him. So I just think there's -- and for me, I take a special sense of pride in a young person that puts their trust in us, coming from a similar place -- where I'm from, that you want everybody to be successful.

But, again, when you can relate to somebody from their background and people that they know and you have that trust built in, I think that really helps for them to be successful when they get to Iowa State.

Q. T.J., you're recruiting the portal, you may only have a week or two weeks to really get to know a kid. I'm curious from your perspective. There's so much intangible stuff that you're evaluating and things. You talk about wanting winners, guys who are tough, guys who hit fit your habits and culture. How do you find out whether a guy fits that in a very short?

T.J. OTZELBERGER: I think being a great listener is probably the most important thing. So many people talk in the transfer portal about it being transactional, and hey, this is how many minutes and this is how much it costs, and we're on the opposite end of that. We understand that NIL is a part of this equation, and obviously that the window of time in recruiting is -- you don't have as much time as you might like.

But I think it's understanding what they're looking for, how hard they're going to work, how they handle adversity. I will say you've gotta have people that you can lose with before you have guys you can win with. You have to have young men that you want to be with on the tough days and they want to be with you on those days. So I think asking questions that are more challenging is appropriate.

And then also, it's about this isn't about a sales pitch. We're not trying to pitch you on why to come to Iowa State. We tell you what the work habits are going to be every day and what we're going to demand and the standard and the accountability. And truthfully, that's not for everybody. And that's fine. We want guys who want to do the work every single day, who are really excited about their development to play for the best fanbase in the country, and to have a great experience.

And I think listening is the key component, because you'll see if you ask the questions, how they've handled challenges, adversity, hard things, what the work ethic is, what kind of teammate they are. They'll communicate that verbally if you ask the right questions, and that's what we really look for.

MODERATOR: Coach, thank you. Good luck tomorrow night.

T.J. OTZELBERGER: Thank you.

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