

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Mississippi State vs Baylor

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Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Lenovo Center

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Chris Jans

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good morning once again. We're now ready to start Coach Chris Jans' press conference.

Coach, could you please give us an opening statement.

CHRIS JANS: I'll be brief. We're obviously excited to be a part of March Madness. It's the greatest show on earth, and we're looking forward to tomorrow.

Q. Talking to the players and obviously excited to get here, but it seems a different feel around the locker room this year. It's almost a little more business-like in that they really want to get a win this year. It's been a while since that's happened in Mississippi State. Just how important has that been for you to kind of, I guess, impart that on them this year about getting that win?

CHRIS JANS: I love hearing that. I appreciate you sharing that with me. You would know better than I would about historical perspectives of players that you've talked to and interviewed over time, and I love hearing that.

Obviously if you look back at when we arrived until now, we made the NCAA Tournament as a First Four game, then last year we improved our seed to an 8. We got to wear the lighter colored jersey for the first time. Then we're doing it again.

Obviously we've talked about there's progress in the program, but I think it's fairly understood by everybody in our room that that wasn't the goal. Getting here certainly was a goal, but it wasn't the ultimate goal. I love the fact that that's the feel that everybody's getting around our players.

Q. Coach, I know you made it into the NCAA Tournament three years now. How maybe has this

journey been different with this team as opposed to maybe years past?

CHRIS JANS: That's a good question. I don't know if I have a great answer. It's been similar. We probably place higher expectations on ourselves than the outside world does. Certainly there's ups and downs to every season, and we've had our share. We've had our share this year where we got out of the gates obviously very, very well, which has been typical for us, fortunately, since we've arrived and took care of business in the non-league part of our schedule.

Then had our patches, if you will, throughout SEC play, which again, for the majority of teams in the SEC, is pretty normal, especially this past season. Then for whatever reason in the end, some of it scheduling, some of it poor play, we just haven't played quite as well as we would have liked.

Very, very similar journeys with handling some adversities and tough patches, but the vibe of this group is really, really good, like they've rebounded to every tough situation in a way that every coach in America would want to in terms of their reset button in the video room or on the practice court, and their stick togetherness has been really, really good. A lot of that is due to the great leadership that this year's team has with Cameron Matthews, who is as good a leader as I've ever been around.

Then Josh Hubbard, even as a sophomore, has really found his voice, and he has got so much respect in the locker room because of how he carries himself and how he works at his craft, and just how he goes about doing his daily. So I think that's been really, really good that way too.

Q. Just wanted to ask you how important was that first round win over UConn three years ago to you and to your career? Just the fact that three years later you're still the last coach to beat them in the NCAA Tournament.

CHRIS JANS: Yeah, it was awesome. Everybody wants to win. It was our third appearance, I think, at New Mexico State, and I've been a 12 seed every single time. That whole 5-12 hasn't worked out for us. We had a close call against Auburn the year before, when they went to the



Final Four. It was a one-point game, last second situation.

Then obviously we were able to get over the hill against UConn and played Arkansas really, really well before we came to Mississippi State.

I think just for me, the more experience that we have in the NCAA Tournament, the more comfortable myself or my staff gets and certainly the players that have participated.

But in terms of the UConn deal, don't think about it that much, but it gets brought up once in a while. Obviously when you're getting close to Selection Sunday or even that day when you have a little more time to have a chance to scout everybody before you find out your opponent, then your mind wanders, and you take a glance at what the bracketologists are saying, and that was a real opponent for us. The conspiracy theorists were probably out there saying they're going to match them up.

My thing was I don't really think half the room knows or really cares about that, and there's so much more that goes into it. Certainly a lot of my friends were like, you know they're going to do it, and I'm like, if they do, they do. It will be a nice little story line. But obviously that didn't happen.

Q. I'm curious, with considering the success of league of the SEC with the bids and everything else, kind of how much that prepared you, do you think, for what you might see in March? Also, it seems like a pretty withering schedule in the league as far as the quality teams you're playing. How did you manage to keep the team -- one of the guys was talking about not getting too up or too down with playing in that type of competition.

CHRIS JANS: We were real open about it from the jump. It's one of those things in December, mid to late December when the numbers are coming in and it looks like it's going to finish as one of the best non-league records, resumes, metrics, however you want to split it, by a league ever, so it's fun to think about it knowing there's going to be a bunch of Quad 1 and Quad 2 opportunities and very few Quad 3s.

So from that way of trying to build your resume, it's awesome. I wish it was that way every single year. I would love to have that type of quality of teams in your league because, at the end of the day, they're opportunities, and they're always going to be there. Certainly you've got to take advantage of the opportunities.

But we talked openly about the strength of the league from day one and how you're going to have to play your best, more so as motivation. Guys, you're playing an historic

season this year. You have a chance to be a part of playing in arguably the best basketball conference for a long, long time. Maybe, who knows, historical perspective, I'll need people smarter than me to talk about that.

So I just talked about jumping into it and being a part of it and playing against the best of the best, what an opportunity. Time will tell, obviously, as the tournament unfolds -- I'm sure I'm speaking for everybody else in our league, we're back to rooting for one another. In the fall, everybody I would hope would be rooting for one another, even though it doesn't matter the outcome of the games, but it's fun to still do it. I know I was every game that we played, paying attention to the other teams in our league and how they were doing.

Certainly now, I think to back it up, we need to have a successful March Madness.

Q. Josh Hubbard had a great year last year, helping lead you all to the NCAA Tournament last year. Speak about the development that he's had kind of in the off-season and through this season to kind of get you all to this same level, back to another NCAA Tournament.

CHRIS JANS: Josh had a great off-season. You can't teach experience. It's one of my favorite things to share with players, in life or basketball. I think, depending on the person, how they use that experience is the difference maker.

Someone like Josh, who really soaks everything in, will use that experience at a higher level than maybe an average person would. So in the summer he got with Dominick Walker, our strength coach, who's terrific, and you have to really watch him like we do, but his strength, his speed, his durability, his ability to play at a higher level for longer periods of time -- and he's always been obviously always been very athletic and very strong, but it was different come the fall.

Like his burst, his explosiveness, his willingness to buy into being a better defender, his understanding of his decision-making had to get better. I wish I was smarter than this, but like in the league last year he was like 61-42 assist-to-turnover, and this year he was around 100-35, if I'm not mistaken, right around those numbers, give or take a couple. That's a big jump in terms of understanding the pressure and the athletes that he's playing against and the decision-making, not just scoring the ball.

He's been scoring the ball since he came out of the crib, but now he's developed into more of an all around player, and I think he'll just continue doing that. I think he'll take

this year, wherever it ends, and do the same process mentally and get with the right people and then come back even better year after year because that's just how he's built.

Q. One of the more interesting dynamic ins this era when you have the transfer portal is taking players from other systems and other schools, and you're having to mold them into what you want to do, and that's different than a high school guy, I guess. Riley Kugel is one of those guys you brought in from the SEC, and I talked to him in the locker room about your dynamic with him and how he's taking the coaching and all that. How would you describe y'all's relationship and how you coached him this year and tried to develop him in your way?

CHRIS JANS: I'm proud of Riley. We knew Riley had a consistency issue when we brought him into our program. It's something we talked about with him and his family that that was going to be one of our goals. Certainly the basketball goals are easy, right? Make him better, help us win, elevate your game, put you in position just to be a better basketball player.

But the human side of it, he's had tremendous growth. His consistency, his mental approach in practice has been -- I wouldn't say a 180, but it's been a 90 degree improvement. Just being better on the daily, even though maybe some of what the public sees on the court, there's still some inconsistency, which there is for every player in America. It's not a video game.

Behind the scenes, being coachable, wanting to be coached, buying into the other parts of the game besides when the ball is in his hands, since we're talking about Riley.

I just feel like -- I hope someday he's going to look back, again, regardless of how this thing ends, and know that he got better this year on the floor, off the floor, more prepared for whatever is next in his life whenever that is, when he's done playing for us. Certainly the older you get in this profession, the more that means to you. The perspective changes, and you're really trying to help these young men prepare for what's out there the rest of their lives.

I don't know what he said to you -- I'm going to run back and ask him -- but I'm hopeful that he feels like maybe that he has grown and gotten better and more prepared for whatever life throws at him as he progresses.

Q. Coach, just want to know your thoughts and what kind of stands out to you about this Baylor team?

CHRIS JANS: Obviously we're playing against a national champion coach, a national champion program. I have the utmost respect for Scott Drew and what he's done at Baylor over the last couple decades-plus, just how he runs his program, how he goes about doing his business, and how his team plays.

From a historical perspective, I think everybody has to feel the same way about that. But this particular team, they've just got a great lethal inside-out combination of strengths with Omier around the basket, being an inside-out undersized guy that's a matchup nightmare.

Then certainly on the perimeter with all the talent, not just the freshman in Edgecombe, but the other guys with Roach and Nunn and just their ability to get in the lane, their ability to make plays for themselves and for each other.

They only play seven guys major minutes, but they've got eight or nine that play spot minutes, foul issues if need be, but I think they're very comfortable. Even though they've had to survive some injuries in some tough situations in their rotation, and everybody knows sometimes that's a good thing. Obviously everybody knows they're going to be playing a lion's share of the minutes.

Then defensively they're a multi-look team, so at this point in the year you've got to prepare for different looks, different presses, different zones, which is a lot to contend with when you're not familiar with a team like you are in league play.

Like I said, they've got a great program. They've got a great team. Hopefully we'll be up for the challenge tomorrow.

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