

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Four - Samford vs Southern U

Thursday, March 19, 2026
Columbia, South Carolina, USA
Colonial Life Arena

Samford Bulldogs Coach Matt Wise Sierra Godbolt Alyssa Tarpley

Media Conference

Southern 65, Samford 53

MATT WISE: I thought that this was a matchup between -- if it was a boxing match, it was going to be a heavy hitter versus a counterpuncher. I thought Southern would try to be the heavy hitter and try to knock us out with physicality, their pressing, their pressure, and I thought for us to be successful we were going to have to have great counterpunches. So we were going to have to attack their pressure, get downhill, get collapses and get kick-outs.

So obviously what they do best is they force turnovers, they get offensive rebounds and they get to the free-throw line. They're one of the best teams in the country at getting to the free-throw line. So for them to win all three of those battles heavily, they certainly hit us with the heavyweight shots.

I thought our team did an unbelievable job of, despite their physicality, despite the fact that because it's the NCAA Tournament, that -- I think teams can be more physical in that setting, and Southern played to it.

What I was so proud of was our team, our players, they didn't back down. They didn't flinch, and I think more than anything, it was just closed out by a team that's been there. They won in the play-in last year, and all the credit to them.

But this group, the fight that we had tonight, while being uncomfortable, is the same fight we had being uncomfortable when we were 1-6. They didn't flinch then, and they didn't flinch tonight. For that, I couldn't be more proud.



Q. Alyssa, you've been here for four years. Talk about what it means to spend all four years at Samford and going out in the March Madness tournament?

ALYSSA TARPLEY: Yeah, it means the world. You can't ask for a better ending to a basketball career than playing in an NCAA Tournament. Honestly, Samford has been such a blessing. It's been so amazing to people that have come through.

But especially this year. I told Coach Matt I can't thank him enough for what he's done in this program this year because I haven't had this much fun in a really long time. The relationships with these girls are relationships that are going to be there for the rest of our lives. I just wanted to say thanks again and really just it means the world. I couldn't ask for anything else.

Q. Sierra, it took you guys a few minutes early in the game to get comfortable. Can you share what throughout the game made it difficult to get comfortable in that early first half?

SIERRA GODBOLT: We knew their pressure was going to be tough coming out in the first quarter. We knew we just had to stay the course and eventually they would fall back. We knew we had to push it, get past and get past that first layer of defense and then bring it back out and execute from there.

Q. Being a senior, this is your last game here, but it looked like you were a vocal leader on the court today. Can you expand on that?

ALYSSA TARPLEY: Yeah, I feel like that's something the coaches have really challenged me with since my freshman year and just as I went through the program. I feel like it just makes it mean that much more because we've got a really solid core. Sierra here, too, another vocal leader. We need that in a point guard.

We had four seniors this year that really made an impact like that. But this was a young team. And so there was a lot to learn and a lot of growth, and I think that that was



very evident in our season and how that went.

But honestly, it's just -- I don't even know. It's absolutely amazing to get the opportunity to lead these girls and be a part of it and get to play in this game and do what we did this year.

Q. What are you most proud of of your careers, even like the last week? If you could just share what the last week was like for you all? I bet it had to be a lifetime full of memories.

ALYSSA TARPLEY: Well, I think if anybody saw our regular season in the conference, it was a struggle at first. Honestly, even leading up to the SoCon Tournament, going on a run and getting hot like that, it just became really, really fun. We wanted to play together. We wanted to show up to practice every single day. And that just makes it so much more fun.

And then getting into the conference tournament as a 6 seed and beating the three teams that shared the conference title, that was absolutely incredible. It made it mean that much more.

And it just meant that we got to go play some more games together. That's what I'm taking away from all of this, is the relationships that I've built with each of these girls because that's what makes it special. And I don't feel like you can get that in every program, but that's something special about Samford that I will never take for granted.

SIERRA GODBOLT: Yeah, the way we ended our SoCon Tournament, we were so grateful and happy that we were able to make it to March Madness and be in this environment. And we took on the challenge, and of course this is not the way you wanted to end things, but we're so grateful and we have fun. And leading up to this, we just stick together, and that's all we could do.

Q. Just as a quick follow-up, I know Coach Staley spoke to you all today or yesterday. What was that moment like for you all? And if you're able to, if you want to, if you could share any takeaways from her message to you all.

ALYSSA TARPLEY: Well, first of all, that was just a really cool experience. You've got to have a lot of respect for her. She's an incredible coach. To get to hear her and have her talk to us, it meant a lot. Talked a lot about bringing the habits from practice into the game. That's what's gotten us to this moment is what we've done in practice since August when we got back into school.

Sticking with the habits, and we talk about that a lot as a

team, so to hear somebody like her say that was just really cool and meant a lot.

SIERRA GODBOLT: I agree.

Q. What does it mean to finish your career at the NCAA Tournament in March Madness?

SIERRA GODBOLT: For me, it means everything. We worked hard for this moment. I've been playing basketball for I don't know how long. To end my senior season like that with a great group of girls, I love them to death.

And thanks to my coach for building so much confidence into me, bringing me to Samford. I'm so grateful and wouldn't want it to be any other way with any other group of girls, any other group of coaches, supporters, everyone. I'm so thankful.

ALYSSA TARPLEY: Yeah, just piggyback off of that, this opportunity is absolutely incredible. You can't ask for anything else going out to end your basketball career. This is what you work for all season, especially for us in our conference.

This is what we work for is that conference championship and the chance to play in the NCAA Tournament, and we made that happen this year. To do it with the people that we did it with, the girls, the players and the support staff, it was incredible. I'm just so thankful.

MATT WISE: On that, I'll say what was so special about this group is we talk in our culture about the quote from Atomic Habits of you don't rise to the level of your hopes and dreams, you fall to the level of your systems and habits.

So this group, they normalized hard work. They normalized competing in practice. They normalized taking charges and putting your body on the line and the elements of toughness required in the game to win.

So yeah, finishing in the NCAA Tournament on the heels of a championship is incredible. But that doesn't happen because you want it to happen. 365 teams want it to happen. They had to work for it. They had to work for it when it seemed daunting as a possibility.

So instead of trying to be perfect, they chose to be brave and authentically them and to give everything they have, when they could have held back, they could have reserved out of fear of judgment, and they didn't. They gave 100 percent.

That's the only way this happens. For that, I think it is such



a special group.

Q. You spent three years at assistant coach. You've seen these girls develop over time. And now being a head coach in your first year leading up to a NCAA Tournament, what kind of statement does that make for recruiting and in the future of the program?

MATT WISE: I told them before the game that I wanted them to show the world our program's identity, and for us it's IQ and toughness. So I wanted people to see us run all of our different funky offenses and different zones and everything. I wanted people to see us dive on the floor for loose balls and take charges the way that that's been our identity.

So I wanted, in this setting, for any recruit that watches, for any fan that watches, for any of our alums or our current people back at Samford back home, I wanted everybody so watch and go, man, that is a smart and tough group. It is awesome that they represent Samford.

Q. You challenged yourself early in the season. How do you look back upon that now? You questioned yourself on whether that was the right choice. How do you feel about that now?

MATT WISE: Yeah, when we played the schedule that we played, the things I said publicly was that, one, it shines a floodlight on your flaws, and not a spotlight. We saw our flaws, and we had to battle through them.

So for this young group to have to experience that, them battle, then you go to conference play, and you've got to understand, look, it's college basketball, everybody has injuries. It happens to literally everybody.

But I rattled them off the other night around the other assistants, and you I said we were without Kaylee in conference play. We lost Jada in January for the rest of the season with an ACL. We lost Bo for five weeks with a knee procedure. Two of those weeks we didn't have Carla, our other 5, because she was coming off of a concussion. We didn't have Sierra for three of our games when we went to Georgia State because she was sick. It goes on and on and on.

So when you go through that, all of that, it's really hard to see beyond the six inches in front of your face. It's really hard to see the big picture.

But I don't think you get to the end result by seeing the big picture. I think you see it by solving the next problem and what's the next problem to solve. We had a staff and a group of players, but especially the staff that were

unbelievable problem identifiers and problem solvers.

And that's what we did, was as we went through problem after problem after problem, they identified it, they solved it; they identified it, they solved it. And you solve enough problems, you end up where you end up.

Q. Aside from the physicality of Southern, what made them hard to guard, or if they were hard to guard for your program, because they don't have one leading scorer, they have a posse of players that can just score the ball or lead?

MATT WISE: Yeah, I think with Southern, I think what makes them hard is they make you pay, right. Like if you're in position, you can get the stop. Our goal is always to be below 1.0 points per possession defensively, and they had 65 points on 67 possessions. So it wasn't -- we weren't drastically good defensively, but we were right about where we wanted to be.

But they make you pay on the pick sixes, and when we gave up as many lay-ups as we did on pick sixes where there is no defense for that and when they get the put-backs, which there is no half-court defense for the put-back, once they keep taking advantage of those easies, now you play just a little bit tighter on the half court because you know you almost got to be perfect defensively on the half court in order to offset the number of easies that they get.

To me, that's what makes them so challenging is the high percentage twos that they can go generate.

Q. You had your sophomore Briana Rivera go off for 16 tonight. Can you talk about what impact that made to the team and for her future career?

MATT WISE: Yeah, you know, Bri, as of today, is still first in the country in made threes on the season. Of everybody in the country, 365 teams times 15 players, whatever that comes out to, she's first.

She's an incredible talent, like, she's an incredible player, and she is such a joy to coach.

Obviously the shooting ability is phenomenal, but she's a competitor. She's an unbelievably good teammate. I mean, we lose in heartbreaking fashion, and everybody is in tears in there, and I look out at our team, and as the clock is winding down, she's not burying her head. She's not sprinting off the floor. She's literally going to the other four players on the court and giving them high fives and hugs of support.

That's the person she is. You combine the person she is with the talent she is, and yeah, I thought she could get loose for some threes against them just because of the way they make it so chaotic, and she certainly did.

And the other thing, and I said this at the SoCon Tournament, is what she does for us in terms of because she's out there and everybody has to game plan around her and everybody has to go face guard her, deny her, switch everything to deny, whatever their game plan is going to be, and everybody game plans against it, despite the fact she didn't get First or Second Team SoCon and led the country in three-point makes, it creates open gaps for all the rest of our players, and it's one of the things that makes our offense as good as it can be.

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