

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - South Florida vs Tennessee

Friday, March 21, 2025

Columbus, Ohio, USA

Value City Arena

## South Florida Bulls

## Jose Fernandez

## Mama Dembele

## Sammie Puisis

### Media Conference

Tennessee - 101, South Florida - 66

THE MODERATOR: Coach, Mama, Sammie, thank you very much for your time.

Coach, if you could open up with opening comments, please.

JOSE FERNANDEZ: Like I told our team, we played a very good Tennessee team today. The first quarter was probably really fun to watch on TV. Then you've got to hand it to Tennessee, they shot the ball really, really well. They made shots.

The one thing, you're down one after a quarter, and I don't know how many turnovers we had in that first quarter, we had 10, and we go into halftime with 16, that's really tough. You're giving a very good offensive team extra possessions. The glass wasn't hurting us because they made so many shots.

But I'm really proud of this group. I enjoyed coaching this group every day. And it doesn't deter the fact that we played one of the strongest nonconference schedules in the country. We won 23 games, and we won a league title.

I had the pleasure to coach these two young ladies. I wish I had -- I told Sammie I've only coached her for two years, and she's been a pleasure. She's going to go on and do great things on and off the basketball floor.

I'm glad that Mama was able to play in an NCAA Tournament and win a conference title because I know that's something that, when you're a basketball player, you



remember these moments. Then she's going to go right along and do great things and continue to play this game.

So it's tough. It's tough at the end of the year. You have three postseason tournaments, and only three teams finish the season with a win in women's basketball. I'm going to miss these two young ladies immensely.

I think we can open it up for questions.

**Q. Sammie, you finished your career with one of our best games, 28 points. Talk about your knee injury at the beginning of last season to coming to this. Can you start to think about what that process has been like from the lowest all the way to the top today?**

SAMMIE PUISIS: I had a lot of support going through my knee injury, getting back on the court. I'm very thankful for God and everything He's done for me and all the strength He's given me.

This year it was really special. I'm just so glad I was able to come back because some people have tough injuries, and it kind of takes them out of it. So I'm just really grateful for my teammates and my coaches and just getting to play on a big stage like this again.

**Q. Mama, what's next for you both inside of basketball and outside of basketball? Can you start to talk about what your, I guess, nine, ten months in Tampa, how that's been sort of a nice cap to your career and what you're going to do next.**

MAMA DEMBELE: Definitely being here has been an amazing experience. I've been surrounded by amazing people that have lifted me up, from Coach Jose to all of my teammates and all of the staff members.

I'm just very proud of this team. I think we've proved every single day while we're so successful. Today doesn't define who we are. It's just games happen, other teams play better, and we just have to give it to them.

I guess in my future just continue to play, hopefully closer to my parents a little bit. I've been far away from home for

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too long. So I think that's the main goal right now.

**Q. Mama, the big story has been Coach bringing you to an NCAA Tournament. Can you just talk about how it felt taking the court tonight?**

MAMA DEMBELE: I was nervous. I'm usually not nervous, but today felt different. I feel like we worked so hard, all of us, to get to this day, and I just wanted to go out there and make everyone proud and just be happy about myself too.

It's not the outcome we wanted, but as I said, just taking the court with every single teammate just feels like a blessing. There is nothing else I can say. Playing with Sammie has been just rewarding. For a point guard, it's easy. She's such a great person on and off the court and makes everything so easy for all of us.

All I can say is thank you.

**Q. Lastly, can you talk about how much Coach means to you this whole season and how much he's pushed you to be your best?**

MAMA DEMBELE: He means a lot. From the beginning, he just trusted me. Even when I was going through my lows, he's always been there. That tough love that parents always give you but you always appreciate.

He's such an honest person. He's always going to come to you and tell you exactly what's on the table. With everything I've done this year, he's just behind it. People don't get to see it, but he's been a big part of it. So I'm just grateful for him.

THE MODERATOR: Sammie, Mama, thank you very much. Congratulations on a wonderful season.

Folks, we'll open up the floor for questions for Coach Fernandez.

**Q. Coach, when you see a team with 10 players pulling hockey shifts like that in the SEC, you've always been able to compete in the previous version of how we recruited athletes. At the edge of the top 25, been able to consistently be in the tournament as an at large, even from a conference that UConn dominated for years. When you see a team that can just throw waves at you and waves at you, how does that change how you want to build a team in this new era, where it's going to be tougher for you to put up the kind of money to be able to compete at this highest level?**

JOSE FERNANDEZ: First of all, you've got to give a lot of

credit to them. They practice daily to play that way, right? And I think they've got to be in immense -- their conditioning level is really, really good because, if you're going to play that way for 94 feet and also shoot the ball as well as they did, this was a night that they beat a lot of people. Because there's been nights where they don't turn people over and they don't make shots, and now things are a little different.

Well, tonight they turned us over, they made shots, so they didn't really give us an opportunity to do that.

Speaking to that, you know what, we got some really good guys returning. We're definitely going to go in the portal and fill some positions that we're going to fill with guys that are going to fit our system and they're going to fit as student-athletes at the University of South Florida.

But the landscape, you can't compare the landscape in the SEC and some of those conferences as far as what they're going to have. We've got to worry about what we have and do a great job with what we have to win our league and to get back into the NCAA Tournament. That's what we will do.

**Q. Coach, just what does Talaysia Cooper do so well to impact the game for Tennessee?**

JOSE FERNANDEZ: A lot. She's really good. And not only that, I thought -- I mean, in that first half, she knocked down the 3. She's just really, really good downhill, and she's a tough matchup. Not only that, she causes -- she gets deflections, and she creates steals. She's really good.

But you look at their roster, they've got a lot of other guys that are pretty good too that are going to move on and have some pretty good pro careers. I mean, Spear is good, Spencer's good, Cooper's outstanding. You can go right down the line. Spearman, who was at Miami. Then they got Darby and Puckett that can come in and shoot it, the Hollingshead kid who's long and athletic.

They've got a lot of nice pieces, even if they didn't play that way, five in and five out.

**Q. Just with how much you asked of your team, your five starters all playing 33 or more minutes, do you think they sort of did as well as they possibly could just with how fast Tennessee was going and how aggressive they were playing?**

JOSE FERNANDEZ: I thought the first quarter, second quarter hurt us because we turned it over so much. If we don't turn it over, now the game changes, right? The deal was let's get through the first line of defense and score

early or let's run offense and try and shorten the game.

But sometimes the pressure speeds you up so much that you've got some driving lanes and you've got some ball reversals or you've got some wide open shots. But it's the live ball turnovers that hurt us in the second quarter. That did us in.

**Q. Considering everything in the totality of the season, can you look back on this now and say, you know what, this team, we got everything out of it we could have had?**

JOSE FERNANDEZ: Again, Joe, I really enjoyed coaching this group. We put this group through a lot in November and December playing the type of schedule that we played. Again, you don't beat Duke before Christmas if you don't go on the road at Connecticut and at South Carolina and play Mississippi State and Vanderbilt and Louisville and play that type of schedule, and TCU.

So I think it definitely helped us in league play. Then you get into league play, we've been so successful you're going to get everybody's best shot in January, February.

Again, losing those two that we shouldn't have lost and then coming here to win -- going to Fort Worth and winning three in three days. Winning the conference championship is hard. It is. Because there's only 31 automatic bids, and now it's even harder if you're not in a P4 conference to get an at large bid. It is.

The landscape of the conferences has changed. It's a lot more difficult. You've got to schedule well. You've got to win some of those games you schedule. You can't afford bad losses at the end of the year.

Hopefully, I think some things have to get looked at in regards to margin of victory and the NET formula and offensive efficiency and defensive efficiency. There's different ways to win basketball games, playing fast, playing slow.

If that's the case, Harry Perretta, Villanova boy, his NET definitely would have been in different shape as far as offensive efficiency. And Coach Stringer at Rutgers, right, her offensive efficiency number, and those are two NCAA Tournament teams every year.

So I think we've got to rethink that. I think we've really got to look at the Quad 1, Quad 2, Quad 3, Quad 4 system as well because I think it puts P14s in a little bit of disadvantage, and these are things that need to be looked at. And I'm going to push forward in my position as WBCA president coming up.

The one thing that you can control is how you schedule. Then the next thing is win games. Win games. So then you can be in the conversation if you don't win your league, but you're in the conversation to get an at large bid.

**Q. You stuck with your iron five tonight for quite a bit. Did you consider going to your bench a little earlier?**

JOSE FERNANDEZ: The guys that played tonight were the ones that deserved to play, that have been doing the right things at practice, that have been good teammates, that have been good in preparation. That's who I decided to go with.

**Q. I haven't had a chance to talk to you about this. How has NIL affected you famously recruiting all over Europe, South America? You probably recruit internationally more than any other non-P4 team in the country. How has NIL affected you when you go abroad? Are kids asking you about money? What has it changed in the pipeline that you've built over the last 20 years from both Europe and South America?**

JOSE FERNANDEZ: No, it's definitely changed. Now they all have representatives and agents now, which is unfortunate because education for a lot of the international student-athletes in regards to shared revenue and NIL is not there, and they're getting advised by people that are brokering deals with student-athletes and families and taking 20 percent of their shared revenue in NIL, which is an absolute crime.

So it's really disappointing to see what some of the stuff that's going on.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you very much. Congratulations on a great season.

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