

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Mississippi State vs California

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Galen Center

## Mississippi State Bulldogs Coach Sam Purcell

Media Conference



**Q. Coach, Jerkaila Jordan has been with you your entire three years in Starkville. She had a lot of high praise for you a moment ago. Matter of fact, it was a great recruiting pitch. What has it been like coaching someone of her caliber, not only the talent, but the person that she is the last three years?**

**SAM PURCELL:** Just the luckiest coach in the world. In a climate where players can leave, her story is very unique and very special.

First and foremost, she's a young lady that started at Tulane and believed in herself, believed that she could play at the highest level in the SEC and took that chance. Then moving to Mississippi State, we've had some unfortunate situations within our program... a coach passing away, an interim coach, and then obviously given the opportunity to coach this program three years ago. She never left. She stayed.

It's just a credit to that young lady's belief and core that, you know what, God placed her here and that whatever he's thrown on her shoulders that she'll be able to handle, and boy, has she handled it as good as anybody in the country.

For her not only to stay, but help me recruit over these last three years and, most importantly, in my first year get to the NCAA Tournament and then last year obviously being one of the first four out and being determined that she went out with a bang to get us back in. You can't say enough great things about that young lady.

I'm just glad the West Coast gets an opportunity to watch her play because the East Coast, they definitely know about her. She's going to be a household name. Then there's no doubt she'll be playing in the WNBA after this.

**Q. I'm not going to ask you to give your game plan away for Cal, so I'm going to move on to go else. Cal is the first opponent.**

**SAM PURCELL:** Stop the three.

**THE MODERATOR:** We have Coach Purcell with us. We will take an opening statement from Coach and then open it up to questions.

**SAM PURCELL:** Thank you to USC for hosting. What a beautiful campus and a beautiful place to be here in L.A. I cannot tell you how excited our entire team is. One, to be here in March and back in this tournament after a year off of last year, but most importantly, just where women's basketball is and to be to come out here to Los Angeles with so much excitement, so much growth, so many stars.

We've got our work cut out against a great Cal team, but again, just thankful and grateful for the opportunity that's going to be before us tomorrow.

**THE MODERATOR:** Questions, please.

**Q. I was talking to your student-athletes earlier about the game coming up. Obviously Cal, they've hit ten-plus threes in the last six games and averaged almost nine threes the whole season. One has to think that's going to be a factor tomorrow. I just wanted to talk to you about your preparedness for that and how you see that game going offensively.**

**SAM PURCELL:** Well, we try to prepare as good as we can. Obviously we've watched a lot of film, and film doesn't lie. To your point, they can flat out shoot the ball. I think the only practice player that I have good that can simulate what Cal can do is Victoria Vivians, who just retired from the WNBA. So I have one person that is going to get us ready. What they do with four to five kids at a time, you just can't match up. It's something that's very unique.

She's got a special team. We're well aware that we're going to have to have our best defensive effort this year if we want to find a way to win this game tomorrow.



**Q. There's a lot of great coaches here in this arena this weekend and across the NCAA Tournament, but you have a special relationship with Beth Burns. I saw you were able to see her earlier when we arrived yesterday and give her a big hug. What has she meant to the game of basketball, being a legend type coach that she is? Talk about your relationship with her.**

SAM PURCELL: Thank you for asking that question because obviously the coaches here, especially Lindsay and Charmin, I can't say enough great things. They're what's right about women's basketball right now. They're women of class, the way they carry themselves, and there's no doubt that's why both of their programs are in the top 25.

Like anybody knows, there's people behind the scenes outside of the head coaches that make programs special, and that's Beth Burns. Those who are here at USC, you know the change since her impact has come here. What I love about Beth Burns is, first and foremost, she's a woman who really fights for cancer research. There's a lot of coaches that come for paychecks, but she fights for lives.

Then outside of that, she's just an ultimate warrior. Her success here in the state of California, starting off at San Diego State, was legendary. I got the opportunity to work with her at Louisville, and there was no doubt she was a huge part of those Final Four runs.

Then it's just really cool to see her come back here and help Lindsay and get this program at the top. You are starting to hear more of the Hall of Fame mentioning going outside of the normal head coaches or the players, and that assistants will get their opportunities. Beth obviously was a former head coach and has been a long assistant. I hope she gets the flowers that she deserves because she's a legend here in California, and she deserves to be in the Hall of Fame.

**Q. Obviously playing in the SEC, the toughest conference in women's basketball, obviously over the course of the season you started with South Carolina. Then you moved on to LSU. Then Texas. Each step you got progressively better. Your team played more competitively. Talk about what that progression over the season was and what kind of adjustments you were making to just eat away at this tough conference. Especially with the conference realignment, you have all these new teams switching around, it's got to be tough to game plan for a Texas that comes into the conference after being in the Big 12 for so long.**

SAM PURCELL: Great question. My message to them

was, own it, and own it had a lot of different meanings behind that. Own it with the climate of today's college athletics. You know, you saw a lot of weight and energy at the beginning of the year of people complaining, but complaining gets you nowhere. You got to own what the climate and the rules have been put before us by the NCAA, and you've got to put together a team. And, boy, do we have to put together a team like anybody.

In the SEC besides Kentucky we had the least amount of returned experienced players at three. So, again, Jerkaila Jordan helped me go out there with Debreasha Powe and go recruit a team. Once we put together the team, I said, all right, this team has a chance to go to the NCAA Tournament, but we've got to fail fast, and we've got to learn quick.

That's where, to your point, you saw the changes and the growth and the journey that was like no other. I told them, you know, the whole key is to be playing your best basketball come March. What we were able to do in February was awesome, and I couldn't be more excited of where we're at today. But like any team, I think we're a little bit different because we've known we've got to finish this month out strong.

For a lot of teams waiting for their conference tournament to fill in that pressure of one and done, we've been living this for probably about seven or eight games, which is in our favor. Now I think there's a relaxed mindset that our kids understand the pressure that comes behind this, but there's not pressure if you have proper preparation.

When preparation meets opportunity, that's how you can seize the moment, and that's what we're going to try to do tomorrow, but we've got our work cut out.

**Q. You alluded to having some new players. I think you had three returning players from last season. That's not easy to do to get everybody. What's been a key piece in this team gluing, and who are some of the other unsung heroes we've talked about. We've mentioned Jerkaila Jordan, but there are many other important pieces to this puzzle that is this team this year?**

SAM PURCELL: I probably speak for every coach at this time of year in the NCAA Tournament. You don't want this to end. The journey has been awesome because I think what I love about this group is their personalities. I've got several third school transfers. Like a lot of us where they've been blessed by the NCAA to get an extra year, and boy, are they maximizing it.

First in their education with a master's degree, and they



bring that knowledge and that just wealth and pride of a college experience on to the court. I'm going to give a shout-out to Eniya Russell and Chandler Prater. Just two first-class individuals who have been starters, have come off the bench, who play multiple positions for my team, but they no attitude or any problems. They just want to win.

That's what I love about them is they're actually dogs. They just happen to be Mississippi State Bulldogs. So they're a pleasure.

Then you have Denim DeShields, who comes from -- those who know Diamond DeShields. It's her little sister, but she's made a name for herself. Also, her family, and her father was a Major League Baseball coach. There's a huge story line, but this young lady is trying to make her own, which has been really cool. Started off at UAB. Also someone who believed in herself and wanted to play in the SEC. Came here, and it's been an absolute joy to coach.

Then I think I've got one of the best post players in the country in Madina, a young lady from Kenya who has just now started to play basketball. When you watch her tomorrow, you're going to think she's been playing since she's probably about 6 or 7, but she's only been playing for five or six years.

When you watch her on film, she just continues to get better and better, which makes our team special. Then you've got to have other special players who are willing to do things. Nir and Kayla, two of my post players are willing to come in and could be starters, but everybody can't start. Then I've got the No. 1 junior college player in the country in Destiney McPhaul, who is absolutely electric.

When you mix that all up, that's why we're here in the NCAA Tournament, and we're going to have to bring it together and bring it for 40 minutes, again, if we want to have a chance against a really well-coached Cal team that's going to make us work for every possession.

THE MODERATOR: Two years ago you're in the NCAA Tournament as your first year there. What have you season from that as a head coach? What have you imparted to your team about that?

SAM PURCELL: I think always, especially our journey, is you never take it for granted. Obviously I was blessed in my first year ever being a head coach to coach in the NCAA Tournament, which is very unique.

As easy as that looked, there's nothing easy about it. That's the message I try to relay to my young women is we started off this summer pushing out F150 trucks. I don't know if you guys know what those are here at California

because of the gas prices. A lot of Teslas and big boys, you know, but out on the East Coast in Mississippi we've got Ford trucks.

My young women would get in the back of the trucks and we would push them up hills and try to do unbelievable workouts. If you are a college student-athlete, you ask yourself, Why, why am I doing this? The why is because it's moments like this.

You've got to separate yourself from everybody else in the country, and you've got to be willing to do things other people don't want to do. If you do it right night in and night out, it teaches you life lessons that I can roll up my sleeves and be special. That's why we're here today, and that's why I want my young women to enjoy it.

We have a work hard, play hard mentality. I apologize to the whole city of Los Angeles for anybody on the freeway that thought there was a party about 5:00 because we were on a double-decker bus dancing like no other. You could tell we were not from Mississippi, but boy, we were loving the bright lights, and that's what I want them to enjoy today.

I don't know how many games we're going to get to play, but we're going to make this one very special come tomorrow, and I want them to enjoy it on and off the court and be thankful for the good Lord and the opportunities that came in front.

THE MODERATOR: Your three straight 20-win seasons, what's the magic potion?

SAM PURCELL: People. In a time and era where you have major turnovers, when I started in this business, turnovers meant red flag and smoke. We know that that's not the climate of college athletics today. You have to wish the best for people who choose to leave because they think better things are ahead, but then you also have got to do a heck of a job to reconnect and hurry and build relationships because, yes, you can go out and recruit great talent, but we all know it's not about Xs and Os. It's the Jimmy and the Joes.

If you can learn people and people will fight for you and run through a wall and they understand I've got a coaching staff that will fight for them and love them more than just being basketball players, then success follows.

That's what I'm very proud about in my three years here and 20-win seasons is we've done it the right way day in and day out, and it hasn't been easy, but we've found a way. So very blessed.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

