

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Four - Mississippi State vs Illinois

Wednesday, March 15, 2023

South Bend, Indiana, USA

Purcell Pavilion

**Mississippi State Bulldogs**

**Sam Purcell**

**Anastasia Hayes**

**Jessika Carter**

**JerKaila Jordan**

Media Conference

Mississippi State - 70, Illinois - 56

THE MODERATOR: Good evening. Time to get started. I'd like to welcome Mississippi State head coach Sam Purcell, student-athletes Anastasia Hayes, JerKaila Jordan, Jessika Carter.

We'd like to start with coach's opening statement, please.

SAM PURCELL: Wow, what a game to open up women's basketball. What a week for my young ladies.

To think just the other day we're sitting at my house crossing our fingers, looking at each other going, come on, just let us in. Let us in. Because we put so much work in, and then for us to see our name go up and we're going crazy celebrating. Then the next thing you know, we're like, hey, we're in the play-in game.

But they just have an attitude right now, an appreciation for the game, a love for the game, which you saw tonight. I'm the luckiest coach in the world. But like I keep saying, they're determined for big things and big goals, and our mindset right now is one game at a time.

We have so much respect for Illinois because you had two teams -- again, I think it was great for women's basketball tonight, especially when there's not many games across the country. Everybody has an itch for March Madness. I know my team does. So to have two highly competitive teams just absolutely get after it, what a great night for us.



**Q. Jessika, you were on the 2019 tournament team. What did tonight just mean for you getting back to this stage and having the night that you did?**

JESSIKA CARTER: It just felt good being out there and being out there with my teammates and my coaches. Just having fun really.

SAM PURCELL: I was going to say she was having fun tonight, and I was having fun too watching her.

**Q. Anastasia, what have the last couple weeks been like for you guys? Obviously getting out of the SEC tournament earlier than you would have liked. Was there a mentality you saw from this team, a hunger to get back on the court?**

ANASTASIA HAYES: Yes, definitely we were hungry. We've worked really hard for the past two weeks. Losing first game in the SEC wasn't what we wanted, but we knew we may have another chance to get to March Madness.

When we seen our name on TV, we went back and we worked really, really hard. That's all we did the past two weeks, worked hard, worked on our execution, and just worked on just having fun.

**Q. You raised the bar in the second half. What was the difference? You guys outscored them quite a bit and held them to just eight points. What was said in the locker room at halftime, and what do you guys think was the difference?**

ANASTASIA HAYES: Coach told us we were doing well but just to pick it up on defense. We kept getting caught in ball screens. That was the main focus to just go over the ball screens. When we did that and we played defense and our defense turned into offense and we were just playing, we had fun.

It was just like AAU out there for a second. So that third quarter was just fun.

SAM PURCELL: Amen, amen. I'll second that. They just had a look. Again, I got a special group of upperclassmen



that are sitting up here. I've been saying it all year that, you know what, it gets to a point where we as coaches need to get out of the way and it's player led.

They were leading the huddles. They were leading those moments we had breakdowns. They were together in the locker room. And they were just a team that was determined they're not going to lose.

We've been saying it all year why not us? We just love what's coming our way. We love when people doubt us. That's what motivates us. That's what drives us in the gym. We believe in each other, and when it comes to March, that's the only thing that matters.

**Q. For Jessika and JerKaila, I know Coach Purcell won't talk about it, but what does it mean to you guys that he gets his first March Madness win as a head coach?**

JERKAILA JORDAN: Well, this is my first win too.

SAM PURCELL: Amen.

JERKAILA JORDAN: So honestly I'm just grateful just to be here. I'm enjoying every moment of it. Like Coach Sam said, that's just the first win. When we get back to the hotel, one game at a time. And I had fun.

SAM PURCELL: And to add to that, this is that special sauce that we've got going on right now. We've talked about it all year, especially these three up here, they're really, really, really -- can I say it one more time -- really good individuals.

But for teams to get to this point, it's more than just an individual, it's a team. So that's what is the special bond that we've got going on. I've got a group of people back there at that hotel that, whether they're the athletic trainer, our senior women's administrator, our DoWBO, we're all hands on deck right now. We're all trying to lift each other up and stay connected, and it's a vibe that it's fun to coach.

When we all win, we all eat, and that's our mindset right now.

**Q. Anastasia, for you guys, Ahlana only played four minutes in the first half because of foul trouble, and when she gets back in the second half, you guys go on that big run. Outside of the stat sheet, how much do you think she contributed to what you guys were able to do in the third quarter?**

ANASTASIA HAYES: She contributes a lot. She's a leader. Even though she didn't play the first half, she was

still picking us up, leading us, encouraging us.

I told her at halftime, new game, and she stepped up. She's a really great teammate. Yeah, she helped us a lot.

**Q. I've got two for you. In the first half you guys get 20 bench points on the day. How important were the supporting roles?**

SAM PURCELL: It's huge. I know I keep repeating myself, but I keep telling my young women when we saw this roster when we first started, if you trust me and you're willing to work together, we've got something special here because we've got depth. We've got multiple people that can step up night in and night out.

I think I speak for any coach across the country, sometimes the hardest thing in our job is when a certain power individual doesn't have that night, for them to be okay because you had a team win. What you're seeing right now is my team wants to win. It's not about an individual. So when one goes down, the next one steps up.

It was just a beautiful performance from my young women that they just didn't want to lose. It was awesome to see.

**Q. You guys shoot 32 percent in the first half, get to the line 12 times, hit 10 of them. They don't get to the line in the third. How important was that aggressiveness in getting to the basket and getting those free looks?**

SAM PURCELL: It was huge. Illinois is such a good defensive team. They make you work for everything. They clog the paint. We didn't want to come in here -- because, again, it's been a wild week. We found out we were playing here. We had a shootaround the other day, but we had to go over so much of our opponent, we didn't get a lot of shots up.

Today we only had one hour, and I spent probably 40 minutes. So I knew there were parts of it that wanted to feel the gym -- which I love this gym, by the way, Purcell Pavilion. Thank you, thank you.

But just again, don't settle for outside shots. We felt like we could have depth. We could go at them. We wanted to try to get them to their bench, and I thought we executed the game plan.

But I also want to give a major shout out to my staff. Again, with this play-in game, people understand the work that goes behind the scenes. When we found out, we were celebrating. I was celebrating with my wife and kids. But



my assistants had laptops right away, and they went to work.

Again, that's that commitment that I couldn't be more proud to be the head coach. This was Corry Irvin's scout, but everybody on my staff contributed. There was moments in the game where I didn't make a right substitution, and that's that trust factor you see with me and my staff. They made some great calls. They gave me some great input. We were dialed in, and we didn't want to lose.

Now, I'm going to ask them again when we get to the hotel, enjoy your meal, but we've got to run it back. We've got another one in two days.

**Q. Sam, first career tournament win as a head coach. Could you just take me through your emotions.**

SAM PURCELL: Here you go. You know you always get me. You get me. I'm not doing it.

Again, it's not about me. I appreciate all the love and the recognition, but I would not be sitting here today if I wasn't coaching a great group of young women. For me to have my first year to get Annie Hayes, JerKaila Jordan, and Jessika Carter, come on, that's the lottery.

So again, my goal as a head coach was just to restore the love. Love, like Annie said, she was talking about AAU. These folks who play AAU, they love the game. We've got to Christmas. Let's turn it up and become a team.

So to answer your question again, it's awesome. I'm blessed with a group who believes in me. They trusted me. They've got my back. And then you'll see in the locker room videos, they also dance with me. I love it.

**Q. I know you and Shauna are both first year coaches here. What's the key to earning that trust in the first year? And what do you see from her as well?**

SAM PURCELL: I have a great respect for her. I think we're both fortunate because, if you look at our pedigree and the people before us, we've had great mentors and great coaches who pored it into us. So when we get the opportunity to run our own program, we're prepared.

We know what winning looks like. We know what it takes. But we also understand, when you get hit in the face, how to maintain that and don't fold and panic, but you know what, bring them back up.

And sometimes the best coaches also have to point the finger, which I know she is because I've listened multiple times at Final Fours and speaking events, that when things

aren't right, we'll also take the blame and not just put it on the kids.

So when you have that culture and right kind of mix, that's why you see two teams where they're at in the first year.

**Q. Sam, you had mentioned this being the only game on TV, the first game of Women's March Madness, I guess. On top of that, you're playing against a Big Ten team, and I know you've said in the past you believe the SEC is the best conference. How much did that all add to wanting to go on and put on a show and get a win on behalf of the conference?**

SAM PURCELL: Great question. I'm glad you asked that. The coolest thing for me in year one, when you talk about being a first year head coach, my phone started going crazy an hour and a half. My wife and kids are with me, so I know it's not an emergency. Who is blowing me up? You know who it was? It was every SEC head coach.

We have a thread, and they're all like, Sam, you set the tone, man. Good luck. Which again, it's a special conference because you've got special people. Do we want to beat each other night in and night out when we play in the conference? You'd better believe it. But there's also a class with how we go about things, there's a pride in what our league stands for.

For them to text me, being a first year coach, and wish me good luck and wanting us to set the tone, again, I couldn't be happier to be in the best conference in women's basketball.

**Q. I know you always talk about why not us and how maybe people had written off Mississippi State women's basketball because the glory days may be in the past.**

SAM PURCELL: Amen.

**Q. Getting to the tournament was a big goal of yours and now you have a tournament win on top of that. What do you think that means for the program and proving those people wrong?**

SAM PURCELL: Based on the phone and all the recruits texting me, it was a statement. Again, there's so many narratives that could easily be put out there. Why go play for this guy? He's never been a head coach. He has no earthly idea what he's doing. The program's done. Why go there? Obviously there was great coaches before me, but they lost the juju.

So for us to kindle that fire and embrace one of the best

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

fan bases in the country -- which I have. They're top 15 in the country. For them to join and believe in my young women and rekindle something special and then obviously for us to get here and get to this point -- we didn't just play, but we won.

So now I think it's a statement across the country like, okay, they really have something special, which I know when this is over it will help a lot in recruiting and us moving forward.

**Q. Sam, you had to know that getting the ball in the paint was going to be your friend all night, but when you noticed Bostic was on one leg, was there talk at halftime we have to throw it inside and get it inside?**

SAM PURCELL: Yes. My coaches, give a shout out to them. What are you doing? You're calling too many plays. Jessica Carter is the best thing out here right now. Get her the ball.

That's the chemistry I love with my staff. I'm never perfect. I'm never going to come across that way. I make mistakes. They clearly got me back in line, and we gave it to her.

Outside the matchups, I've been saying it all year. Jessica Carter is one of the best stories in women's basketball. For the young lady to take a year off and to see her come back better than ever but most importantly have a smile and a joy that she plays the game at the highest level, it's awesome to watch.

She blocks shots, but again I think she had a charge, right? Who does that at her size? Who's willing to block shots but also sacrifice her body? But my favorite thing about Jessica Carter is she's the best person and the best teammate you could ever ask for. So in return, this coach had better find a way to get her the ball more.

**Q. I know you talked about NCAA experience heading into the tournament and you talked about Ahlana only gets four minutes in the first half and comes out and plays a huge part in the run you guys had in the third quarter, I guess. What did you maybe learn about her today that maybe you didn't even know in the past?**

SAM PURCELL: I've always known her because obviously I coached her at Louisville. It's just her core.

If you go back, there's a video that I'll never forget when I was listening at media day, SEC Media Day. They're like, Ahlana, what's your goal? She says, you know what, I've been voted a captain, but within that captain, there's a responsibility that I take serious on my shoulders that I'm going to lead these young women, and my biggest joy is

when others succeed. I get a smile on my face. Who says that, right?

So things aren't going well for her tonight, and that's what I thought right back to that moment. She was so happy for her teammates. It speaks volumes of her character, and I'm a big karma guy. Good things will happen to people like that who continue to act that way.

Thank you, everybody. Thank you, South Bend, especially the workers here. They're the nicest people ever. I've been saying that. I love this place.

And thank you, Jesus over there. I went to the church. My wife did too.

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