

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

Tuesday, March 14, 2023

South Bend, Indiana, USA

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Ahlana Smith

Anastasia Hayes

JerKaila Jordan

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: I'd like to welcome Mississippi State student-athletes JerKaila Jordan, Anastasia Hayes, and Ahlana Smith to the podium.

Q. For any of you girls, what was it like sitting through the selection show knowing you guys were on the bubble and then waiting for Mississippi State's name to come up? And now that you're here, just the experience you've had so far.

ANASTASIA HAYES: Just an honor to get to come to March Madness. We were really excited when we saw our name up there playing in. We've just got to show who we are.

But just to get the honor to be able to see our name up there was just amazing. We were all excited, and we're ready.

Q. Anastasia and Ahlana, I know you guys have previous NCAA Tournament experience. What do you guys just remember from those years and sort of playing in this environment?

AHLANA SMITH: For me, this is what we worked so hard for from the start, from the summer. But this is an awesome month. This is an awesome feeling. I'm nothing but grateful just to be here.

We're through the door. We're here. Now it's about what we're going to do while we're here.

ANASTASIA HAYES: I would say for me we worked all year to get to this moment. It's March Madness, and this is where you want to be during this time. To be here again,



it's just amazing, and I'm blessed, and I'm honored that I got to play my last year in March Madness.

Q. A followup to that, just how important is it to have sort of that experience -- I know there's a few other girls on the team that played in this environment as well -- at this point in the year when you're in a one-and-done format?

AHLANA SMITH: I think it's super important knowing that the people on the team that have not had the chance to make it to a tournament yet and this is their first time, I think it allows them to kind of be settled in and understand that I've got teammates that have been here before and knows what it takes. So it kind of eases the pressure off the freshmen and the people that haven't made the tournament yet.

So I think it's great that we're here and we're able to walk them through what it means and what it takes.

Q. Ahlana, you were a higher seed when you were with Middle Tennessee --

AHLANA SMITH: You switched it (indicating).

Q. Oh, sorry. My apologies.

ANASTASIA HAYES: It's okay.

Q. What is the mindset you have when you have the higher seed next to your name and maybe not many people think much of you in this game?

ANASTASIA HAYES: That's the underdog mentality, but at the end of the day, like why not us? That's been our thing all year. We've just got to come in and prove everyone wrong, play our game, play how we play.

Being the underdog, that doesn't matter at this point because we know who we are and we know what we can do.

Q. JerKaila, what gives you some confidence that this team can make it to not just Sunday's game but even



beyond that?

JERKAILA JORDAN: I want to say the last game we played, it didn't go our way. Luckily the season wasn't over for us. So we've got a second chance, and we're just here to prove who we are and what we can do basically.

Q. When you guys look at Illinois, just what shows up on film, and what are you going to be focusing on tomorrow night?

JERKAILA JORDAN: They're a really scrappy team. We know we've got to do our part, rebound, play defense. They've got some great players that's going to give us a run, but I feel like it's going to be a good game.

Q. I'm going to start with Ahlana. You decided to come to Mississippi State. Obviously you played for Sam Purcell at Louisville. What was it about Coach Purcell and Mississippi State that attracted you to Starkville and this program?

AHLANA SMITH: Just Purcell and him and how he operates in and what he believes in. Like I always said since I first got here, it's more than just in between those four lines. He cares about you as a person off the court.

One thing he prides himself on is making sure that you leave college better than how you came in, as a person and as a basketball player.

So I think all of that above the fact that he's just a phenomenal coach, that's what definitely attracted me here.

Q. For any of you, just his coaching style and the energy he's brought to this program, what's it been like playing for him this season?

JERKAILA JORDAN: I just think Coach Sam is like a really passionate person, and you can tell that he cares about each and every one of us. So just seeing all the passion he has while we practice or while we play just makes you want to run through a wall for him. Just give it all you've got because you know he's going to do the same in return.

Q. Anastasia, you getting to the NCAA Tournament this season, I know it was a goal of yours when you came down to Starkville, how does it feel? Obviously it's a new season. Is it a new mindset for you and this team?

ANASTASIA HAYES: Yes, it's definitely a new mindset, new season. Everyone is 0 for 0. Nobody has no wins. So I feel like at this point, new season. Yeah, I would say

that.

I'm very excited. This was one of my goals coming here to Mississippi State to get to an NCAA Tournament, and not just get there, but to make a big run. I feel like with my team, I feel like we can do that.

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