

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

Tuesday, March 14, 2023

South Bend, Indiana, USA

Mississippi State Bulldogs

Sam Purcell

Media Conference



I couldn't be more excited to coach this group this year.

Q. For you being a head coach for the first time in the NCAA Tournament, just how different is this experience in terms of preparing for an NCAA Tournament game?

SAM PURCELL: It's not much different because, if you work with great people, it's the same. That's where I've been fortunate my whole coaching career. It's basketball. I tell people at the end of the day we're not trying to save lives or anything. When you're fortunate enough to coach a great group of young women, my job as a coach is just to set them up for success.

My assistants have done an unbelievable job scouting film and putting a great game plan together, and now we've got the best seat in the house to just let them go out and do what they do best and make plays. We'll provide them the support they need throughout the game, but we're excited as a unit.

Q. When watching film on Illinois, what just stands out about them?

SAM PURCELL: How much time you got, okay? Listen, I could say a lot of great things. Shauna is obviously -- I've known her in my coaching career. So much respect for her as a coach. She's a winner.

I think it's a cool story line with both of us opening up for women's basketball as the first game, two programs that have gotten back to the NCAA Tournament, two programs that are hungry, and then you look at the players on both rosters. You've got returners, and then both of us have brought in newbies.

What she's done has been awesome because they're playing together, obviously, or else they wouldn't be here. They play really fast in transition. She's a phenomenal coach because she runs a lot of great stuff.

^^ so we've got our work cut out on the defensive end, and they're just great scouting report defense on the defensive end. So it's going to take four quarters if we want to try to

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. It's time to get started. I'd like to welcome Mississippi State head coach Sam Purcell to the podium.

Q. After going through the selection process and sort of sweating out the show, now that you guys are here and preparing for tomorrow's game, what does it all feel like?

SAM PURCELL: Just an unbelievable experience. First want to give a major shout out to the South Bend community. I've been up here multiple times in my coaching career, and what a special place. They value women's basketball. The people who work here are the nicest people in the world.

I'm going to go ahead and throw this out there. I'm trying to go for some votes for the Notre Dame fans that attend and are not watching their team, I'm going to try to reach out for some support. So this is me calling out my presidential campaign here, and Sam Purcell approves. We would love your support.

But this is what you live for, March Madness. I've talked to my team all year. You come in the summertime, you put the work in the fall to get to this point. So we're embracing it. We love it. We can't wait to play tomorrow.

Q. For a program that hasn't been to an NCAA Tournament in three or four years, there's still a lot of girls on this team that have experience in their past NCAA careers. How advantageous is that heading into tomorrow's game?

SAM PURCELL: It's going to be huge, but at the same time, it's about the unit. I think the cool thing for me, to your point and your question, is we've got a group that is hungry despite some that have played. It's more about where we're at as a unit and where we're at as a team, and



find a way to win.

Q. One day out, what's your message to the team?

SAM PURCELL: Just enjoy it. You don't get here if you don't know how to win and what it takes to win. So we're going to have the same preparation. It's an honor to be here. It's an honor to be selected. But don't change your routine. You know what to do.

It's obviously magnified because it's win or go home. So there's an urgency about what we have to do. Obviously we're about to go out here on the court. We have a short time window. We're going to try to maximize it, watch film tonight, get great rest, and put a good product on the floor tomorrow.

Q. In your first season, did it meet expectations as far as being a head coach? What were some of the things you learned? What have been some of the most difficult things, challenging things, and some of the -- I don't want to say easy things, but some of the glamorous things about being a head coach.

SAM PURCELL: It did meet my expectations. I talked about it all year. Today's generation and today's rules with the NCAA landscape, you no longer have to wait three or four years if you do it right. I couldn't be more happy with the meetings I had when I got named the head coach to ask the players who were here who were special to return.

And then for us to get in the portal -- again, I can't talk enough great things about my assistants because this is more than just me. It's a group of people. They rolled up their sleeves. We got on the phone, and we found some great supporting cast members to come join these players.

So when you put all that together as a coach and you look at it on paper and say, man, I think we've got a really good team here. For it to come to life full circle and obviously to have your name mentioned for the NCAA Tournament and get in, that just solidifies what we thought we had on paper, and it's great to see that come to life.

Then the highs and lows, it's like anybody in coaching. Man, we've had some great games. I love that one of our mottos has been all year is bend but don't break.

We had some heartbreakers earlier this year. South Dakota State at South Dakota State, which is an unbelievable environment for women's basketball. We lose a two-point game there on the road. Then we go for Thanksgiving Classic and lose in overtime to Nebraska, who's a really good team. So our team was hungry at that point because we won every other nonconference game,

but we never just had that signature win.

Then you get into conference play, which SEC is the best conference in the country. I still believe that because, first and foremost, you've got the No. 1 team in the country and the national champions in South Carolina. So they just set the tone for what our league is about.

We've got the bruises and bumps, but you saw a team in February that knew how each game was important and that we had to come out and do what we needed to do, and they did that.

So I couldn't be more proud of the group of young women that I have who are fighters, and they've been an absolute joy to coach in my first year.

Q. You mentioned a slogan about bend but don't break. You've also used a slogan this year of why not us. Can you tell us about that meaning?

SAM PURCELL: Yeah, the cool thing about Mississippi State, obviously when this job came open, I told my former boss Jeff Walz that I always wanted the right fit and the right situation. When it came up, I said, oh, Jeff, this is the one. And the reason it was is because women's basketball matters in Starkville. There's been some great coaches before me that have put this program on the map.

So when given the opportunities, I knew, if we put a product together real quick to restore that roster and get the right transfers, then why not us? Why not get back in year one and get this where we're talking on a national stage and making national news?

And just pouring that into my young women too because I wanted them -- because I have several young women where I might be their fourth head coach, and some of them at their second school, their third school. But with all that being said, they're great players.

So what we said in the room when we sat down to talk, I said why not us now? We have the same opportunity as every other school across the country where we get the same amount of days to train and prepare. And if we outwork our opponents in our own gym and we think we win each day, then why not us? Why not us have a special season, and why not us get back on the national stage and compete for a National Championship?

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