

March 11, 2015



Auburn - 74
Mississippi State - 68

AN INTERVIEW WITH:

MISSISSIPPI STATE

THE MODERATOR: We'll take an opening statement from coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

COACH RAY: Obviously disappointed about the loss here today against Auburn. I thought we could take a next step in the program here and have a chance to win a couple ball games here at the SEC tournament. The past couple years we won our first game and went on to lose the second game. But I was looking forward to hopefully continuing to stay here and winning more games.

I thought that we did a really good job in the first half of trying to guard, but I thought we guarded with fouling. I thought in the second half there, we didn't do a good job of guarding because we were so tentative about the fouls there.

So we got to do a better job of guarding without fouling and figure out how to get to the flow of the game. The last thing here in the opening statement is, our guys are hurting right now, and especially our seniors, because that's the last time they get a chance to put on a Mississippi basketball uniform.

And more so than anything I told those guys that they have been committed to me and this program for two years, three years, four years, and my commitment to them is a lifetime commitment. So if those guys ever need anything from me or my staff, it's not the fact that they're done and we forget about them, we want to make sure that they know we'll always be there for them to help them.

THE MODERATOR: Take your questions for the student-athletes, please.

Q. I know you wanted to continue with the first round wins, what happened offensively. I know you and Chicken were able to kind of carry the offense. What happened that another third scorer didn't emerge?

I.J. READY: Really don't have scores. We go and try to play within the offense. Sometimes we have one scorer, sometimes we have a team full of scorers. It just worked out that me and Chick was playing good today. It wasn't like that on purpose.

But offense just wasn't flowing, we didn't get too many stops to start the second half and that pretty much was it.

Q. You got off to such a strong start but that second foul that you picked up, how crucial was that?

CRAIG SWORD: It was terrible. I hurt my team. I can't take it back. If I could, I would. That hurt us a lot when I sat out the first half.

Q. I know you said you hurt the team, but you led the team in scoring, rebounding and assists. What was working for you that allowed you to have such a good game in regards to rebounding and assists as well?

CRAIG SWORD: Well, I wasn't forcing the issue as much. I was taking my time and I generally got the ball in the key points and I had to box out and do all I can to try and get the win.

Q. Kind of what I asked I.J., what does this do, I know the last two years you got first round victories. What does the loss do in the first round in terms of momentum, what does that do for you guys?

CRAIG SWORD: We just got to move on and get ready for next season. Get this game over with. We can't look back on it.

Q. For both of you guys, what do you guys need to do in the offseason as a group to

take that next step as a program?

I.J. READY: I think that team chemistry and bonding. I know right now I think we're looking at an earlier offseason than most. So I think we're going to get to it. A lot of drills, a lot of -- really main focus is working on what we need to improve on, not our strengths, but our weaknesses. So I think that we'll get to the weaknesses quicker and try to come back stronger next year, so we won't have this same feeling.

CRAIG SWORD: I feel that we had the advantage. Now that our season is over, everybody going to have to work on their individual game to get better.

Q. In terms of you personally, where does this rank in how well you've been playing at Mississippi, where does that rank in your career? Are you playing your best basketball right now?

CRAIG SWORD: I really can't tell you. I probably am, but nothing don't matter right now because we just lost. So there ain't much I can talk about right now.

THE MODERATOR: We'll excuse the student-athletes and take questions for coach.

Q. Was Fred available in this game?

COACH RAY: Yes, he was.

Q. Is there any reason why -- was it just coach's decision?

COACH RAY: Yes, sir.

Q. I know we talked about it yesterday, needing that extra piece, that one piece away, was that kind of description today, I.J. and Craig did everything, there just wasn't that extra guy to put it over the hump?

COACH RAY: Well, I think offensively you could say that. But I think what you got to focus in on is on the defensive end for us in the second half. I believe they shot 56 percent from the field in the second half. So we got to do a better job of limiting people in the second half with their opportunities.

Now, obviously, you would like to have a third guy to go along with the scoring. I thought I.J. did a really good job of running the team and Chicken was out there attacking and getting to the rim and making plays.

We wanted to get the ball inside to Gav and Roquez more, but the way they were guarding the ball screen and swinging it down like that, we

didn't allow those opportunities. So any time you can get a third guy to go along with that, that helps it. But I think at the end of the day on the defensive end in the first half we didn't guard without fouling. I think the second half we didn't guard because we were worried about the fouls.

Q. You went on a 12-0 run in the second half to get the lead back. What happened late in that game for Auburn to kind of swing the momentum back the other way?

COACH RAY: Well, I thought we did a really good job on the defensive end during that run and we were able to get some steals and get some defensive rebounds and run out.

I thought once that spurt was over with, we didn't get defensive rebounds. We had some opportunities to get a couple defensive rebounds and didn't do that. I thought Alex Thompson really hurt us. He got a key offensive rebound. So we just need to do a better job of making sure we get a stop, and a stop doesn't end until you get that defensive rebound.

Q. 25 of 40 on 2s today, but 1-12 from three. Long distance shooting has kind of been a problem all year. Is there a recruit that you feel like can help fix that or is that something that you still have to address?

COACH RAY: There's always a recruit that can help. But getting is them a whole different key. We have got some young men signed up that are going to help us. Quinary Weatherspoon is a kid that's going to be playing for us and we think he can come in and help the program.

Tookie Brown is a young man scored over 3,000 points and had a chance to win back-to-back championships.

Joe Strugg is a young man who just took his team to a state championship.

So we got some guys coming in the program that are winners.

And then Johnny Zuppardo, who tore his ACL and is out at this point in time, but he's a young man who led his team to a national Junior college championship and he can shoot the basketball as well.

But if you look at our stats in the SEC, I'm not exactly sure, but we finished fourth or fifth in three-point field goal percentage as far as shooting the basketball. So the biggest thing that we improved on is our shot selection throughout the

year.

I thought in the early season we took on some bad 3-point shots, but now I think we did a much better job of taking some good 3-point shots. Some of those guys that are missing those shots are more than capable. Travis Daniels doesn't normally go 0-4.

Obviously we would like to have somebody come in and make some more shots for us, but what we have right now is a good returning talent of nucleus guys coming back in and we already got some guys signed up that we think can really help us.

Q. What would you like to see this team improve on before you take the court again next fall?

COACH RAY: Well, there's a lot of things, but the thing I think we need to focus in on is getting guys healthy, first and foremost. We need to come into the offseason here and make sure that we're doing the right things, that our guys come in healthy.

I think we're the only back court in the nation that had guys out with back surgery. I think it's probably the only time it's happened in the history of college basketball having your starting back court out with back surgery. So we want to make sure we are doing everything we can to improve our guys, but along with that, improvement having everybody come back in healthy.

I think the second thing is, just working on becoming a better team. What that means is, that you do everything you can do in the offseason in order it make yourself a better basketball player. And if you did that, that's helping the team right there. And the other thing is, sitting down and seriously considering what are you doing to help the team every single time you go work on your game. So, if we can do that, I think we have a chance to be really good.

Q. I.J.'s performance tonight, and obviously Chicken's performance down the stretch in the SEC. Is the back court kind of solidified? Is this the best they have been playing in the three years they have been here?

COACH RAY: Yeah, I'm really proud of the way that Chicken has improved as a basketball player. And he's a guy that when he came back from that back surgery really was a shell of himself. I was really worried about was he going to be the guy that we thought he could be coming into his Junior season.

When Chicken was named to the all-freshman team I told him his next step is to make sure he doesn't leave this program without being an all-SEC performer. So he did that by being second team.

Now his maturation process is to go and be a first team all-SEC guy. So, I think our back court has a chance to be really good.

But the thing that we lack when it's all said and done is we need consistency. We need consistency from not just I.J. and Chicken, but consistency from everybody else on our team. So if we can get a consistent performance especially on the offensive end, I think we have a chance to be improved.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

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