

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday March 10, 2017

Avery Johnson Braxton Key Riley Norris

Alabama

Alabama - 64, South Carolina - 53

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to begin with Alabama. We'll ask Coach Johnson for some general thoughts on the game. And then we'll take your questions just for the two student-athletes. And then we'll finish up with the Coach. Coach Johnson, if you'd be begin.

COACH JOHNSON: First of all, take our hats off to an outstanding South Carolina team. Coach Frank Martin has done a great job with his team all year. Twenty-two wins, and from all indications he'll be heading into the NCAA Tournament.

They're an outstanding team with Sindarius Thornwell, SEC Player of the Year. He's tough to cover. I'm glad we don't have to see him again. He's a handful. He rebounds, passes, tough on defense.

But I'm really proud of our guys. We've had an up-and-down year in a lot of ways and haven't been able to put together complete games, especially in back-to-back games. But we did it tonight. I'm proud of our guys. They were hardnosed, they fought, they were scrappy. And these two gentlemen that are up here now, Riley Norris and Braxton Key, are huge reasons why we're advancing in the SEC Tournament.

Q. First question for Riley. You had a great second half, 12 points in the half. You made a lot of big shots. Just talk about your mentality in the second half offensively and especially taking the ball to the rim.

RILEY NORRIS: Yeah, Coach always preaches, you know, be aggressive, be smart but aggressive. And, you know, you kind of coming off a rough half, got to put it all behind you. All of my teammates, they got me shots. They got me the open layups and the open 3s. Give credit to my teammates and coaches.



Q. Braxton, yesterday was a little rough on the offensive end, but today you got it started and got going quick. How important was it for you to get going that quickly and be able to get the confidence going on offense?

BRAXTON KEY: It was huge for me. My guys found me in open positions to score. Ran some plays to get some easy baskets at the rim to start off. The past couple games I haven't felt I was a threat offensively, Tennessee and then Mississippi State. I haven't been doing that well. Today I did a pretty good job.

Q. Just talk about how important the second chance points you were up 16-6 in that category. Talk about how big that was in a hard-fought defensive game.

BRAXTON KEY: That's huge. Guys like Bola, he got 10 rebounds today. Jimmy was doing great. Donta. When those two are rebounding, we're a tough team to beat. They protect the rim well and then when they rebound, get us second chance points. Just leaves a wide open 3. Extra possession is all offense and back it up or slow down a little bit.

Defensively when they're rebounding, limiting teams to one shot, I think we're one of the best defensive teams in the conference. Limiting them to one shot, we're even a better team on defense.

Q. For Braxton, how much today's performance and getting a chance to play in the semis tomorrow in Nashville kind of a homecoming, how good does that feel?

BRAXTON KEY: It's awesome. I came to SEC with my friend "Braxton Barnes" not too long ago. He's at Tennessee. I came with him awhile ago. But it's awesome. Growing up I went to SEC Tournament just about every year. And now it's crazy that I'm playing in it and going to be in the semi finals. Great feeling, actually.

Q. Riley, there's around four minutes to go and it's a 1-point game. You step out and hit a 3-pointer, get the offensive rebound and kick it out to you. You hit a 3-pointer from straight on. Talk about taking those shots. You hit one earlier. Talk about what you're looking at when you're looking to take a shot and how you reacted in those situations.

RILEY NORRIS: Like I said, confidence. Coach has a lot of confidence in there. He wants me to shoot the ball. Having that in the back of my mind, I don't really think about anything. I think about the ball going in, and I just give credit to my teammates. They found me when I was open and I knocked down the shot.

THE MODERATOR: One more question for either Riley or Braxton, anyone?

Q. This is for both players, talk about the challenge of Kentucky. I know you haven't had too much success against them the last couple years. A golden opportunity on a huge stage tomorrow.

RILEY NORRIS: Kentucky, what can you say? Really well-coached, got a lot of young talent, really skilled. Going to be a tough competition tomorrow afternoon. But I think you got to be focused, learn from this game and move on and turn -- turn our focus towards Kentucky and go out and play hard tomorrow.

BRAXTON KEY: Everyone knows Kentucky. I mean, play a little better. You play harder and better, rebound better. So we've got to do a lot of things better. We had a great performance tonight. We have to carry it over to tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you. We'll excuse you into the locker room. We'll continue with questions with Coach Johnson.

Q. Coach, to kind of follow in that same vein of thought, what are your thoughts of Kentucky? What do you know about them at this point, and what do you think you can take out of your previous meeting into tomorrow?

COACH JOHNSON: When I look back at our game against them, we were very lethargic in the first half. When you're 9-26 from the free throw line, that doesn't bode well for you. We just have to do a better job of starting off the game better. We didn't start off this game great, but we got it going eventually. But we got to play more of a 40-minute game against them and not, you know, 18, zero minutes, because they're too good.

But, you know, hopefully we're a team that's trying to put something together during this time of the year. It's not really about what happened during the season. This is just a moment in time where you know if we continue to get better independent of the team that we're going to play, we'll give ourselves a chance to win.

Q. You outrebound them 42-27 and 16-6 on second chance points. What was working for the guys on the board, not necessarily the guys who were

scoring but Bola and Donta and those guys?

COACH JOHNSON: The main thing is we just talked about moving our feet, stop using your hands, picking up cheap fouls. When you have to use your hands, that means you're late. So you got to be the aggressor.

You got to move your feet and make legal contact. Get in a legal guarding position on their drives. We need all five guys on the board. That's what I told the team, if you want to have a chance to win. When I look at the stat sheet after the game, we have to at least be plus 5 on the boards. You're not plus 5 on the boards, minus 5 that means we're going to take a loss.

I thought our bench would need to help us tonight either win the points game off the bench or at least tie them off the bench. Because our bench, if you remember, in the four overtime games, was huge for us.

Q. Coach, at the 12-minute mark, that's when Riley scored his first points on back-to-back layups. Y'all never gave up the lead after that. What does that say about your team and willingness to be able to hold off whatever run they gave y'all?

COACH JOHNSON: You're right. I didn't really feel like it. We couldn't put them away and -- Riley hung in there. I thought he rushed the shot early in the second half, sometime in the first half. We talked about it at halftime. And we watched it, and I told him just be patient. Don't be impatient. It's going to come to you. Your teammates, trust them. They're going to find you when you're open because we all believe in you.

He trusted his teammates and the system, and when he was open, he just let it fly. We believe when he shoots, it's going to go in.

THE MODERATOR: Hands up. Other questions for Coach Johnson.

Q. Coach, two questions. First of all, what did you guys do differently against Sindarius Thornwell? You talked about yesterday what a tough cover he is and great player.

COACH JOHNSON: We started Bola on him tonight which -- because they went small, I told our coaches, I can't allow them with their small lineup for us to take Bola off the floor. So let's start Bola on him, try to stay in front of him as best we can, and we have to do a good job on him getting off his rebounds and getting to the free throw line.

So, Bola did a nice job of matching his physicality early in the game. Sure, he made some shots, but besides Thornwell, we thought Notice was the guy we were going to have to limit his production from behind the 3-

point line. And fortunately, they didn't have their best the night.

Q. Talk about how far your team has come closing out games, 15-21 from the free throw line.

COACH JOHNSON: We really closed this game out strong. We talked about finishing. As I shared with our team, if you can win a four overtime game, you can win back-to-back games, you can win -- if you got to play seven straight days, we should be capable of doing it.

There's no excuses. Play with energy, you know, and we'll just take whatever the result is. We want to know that we gave our best, because there have been too many games this year where we only played one half and not two halves.

THE MODERATOR: One more question.

Q. Coach, you remember the first Kentucky game you mentioned your team was iffy from the free throw line, lethargic --

COACH JOHNSON: You're being nice.

Q. -- lethargic in the first half. From a coaching standpoint, are you going to change much going into this game, or do you feel like you had the right game plan the first time around?

COACH JOHNSON: I thought our game plan was good, but it wasn't great. We talk about going from good to great. And we're much better from the free throw line tonight, 15-21. It's not bad for our team, if you've been following us a little bit.

But I don't think we have to be under so much stress where we have to be perfect, because that adds too much tension. I don't see a tense team in our locker room. We play well on the road. This has been road games for us. So, you know, 5-4 on the road and we had two other games that were very winnable games.

So, I just think for us we just have to take care of whatever we can take care of. I just don't really know -- we weren't Alabama in the first half of the Kentucky game. Little bit more in the second half, but we were playing catch up too much. They're a talented team. We respect them, but we got to be ready to continue to do what we've been doing, which I think is playing balanced basketball.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.