

NCAA MEN'S 1ST AND 2ND ROUNDS: HARTFORD

March 23, 2019

Murray State Head Coach Matt McMahon
Senior Shaq Buchanan
Sophomore Ja Morant

Hartford, Connecticut

Florida State - 90, Murray State - 62

MATT McMAHON:

Obviously a tough afternoon for us. Congratulations to Florida State. They have a terrific team, and they played outstanding today. I can try and sum the game up fairly quickly.

I thought in the first half their ability to make open threes was huge. We were not very good defensively there, but they did step up and knock down shots. And in the second half, I thought we were much better defensively. Five or six straight stops there, but we couldn't get the defensive rebounds. They just crushed us on the glass there in the second half. And credit to them at their defensive end of the floor.

We've been fifth in the country this year in two-point percentage, up around 58 percent. They've been one of the top teams defending the two-point shot. And they just made it extremely difficult on us to finish plays around the basket. I think we were under 30 percent from two. So that's a great credit to them. They're an elite defensive team.

But lastly, I'll just say, especially since they're here with me. It's just been such a great privilege to coach these two guys, Ja and Shaq. It's been a tremendous two-year run for our program, and I'm extremely proud of our team and what we've been able to accomplish this season with the back-to-back regular season championships, the back-to-back OVC Tournament championships, and now an NCAA Tournament win. I'm very proud of these two and our entire team.

Q. Ja, obviously a disappointing finish, but what has this 48-hour stretch been like for you with the triple-double and all of the buzz and hype around that that you've experienced?

JA MORANT: The experience has been good for me and my teammates. Being able to come in the tournament and get a win our first game and just prepare for this game, it's been great.

Q. This is for Ja and Shaq. I'd love to know -- this is clearly a season of incredible highs. When did you both realize this was a special season, not just a good season?

JA MORANT: I'd say since we all stepped foot on campus, getting to see what kind of team we have. We have a very special group. And since day one, we came in and worked and I felt like that's when I knew this would be a special season for us and it turned out good.

SHAQ BUCHANAN: He touched on when we first stepped on campus. We jell together and we didn't have to worry about bringing nobody in. We all was as one, and everybody just played their role. We knew that was going to be great for us. And we didn't have nobody stepping outside of their comfort zone.

Q. Ja, what's going through your head when you had the towel over your head and you know the season's about to end? Just walk us through the emotions of that moment.

JA MORANT: I'd say I was just hurt not being able to take the floor with these guys for the rest of this season, for another game, or possibly two, three, four. But it's been a great season. I really was just thinking back on what all we have accomplished this year. And I'd say I was more hurt by not being able to play with these guys for the remainder of the season.

Q. Ja, I'm curious, the first five minutes, I think you had three threes, a couple assists. Were you getting too winded out of the start. That's A? And, B, did you tweak your ankle, knee, in the first half there?

JA MORANT: At the beginning, I just got to my spot and stayed, was going under the ball screens, and I was able to knock down shots and make plays. I didn't get winded. I was just playing our type of basketball, was running the sets. Coach was calling for us and late in the first half, I was coming off a screen and one of the defenders just pushed me, and I went knee to knee with one of the players.

Q. Ja, what will you do as you sort of evaluate the next steps and the NBA and everything attached to that? How will you evaluate the right decision, your next move?

JA MORANT: That time will come. My focus is not on that right now. It's just celebrating what a great season we had with my teammates.

Q. Ja, I just had an opposing coach say they watched film and concluded you were unstoppable, but they respected the rest of your teammates almost like they were going to give you points, but you couldn't have another huge assist team. Did they give you different looks? Did they look like they were all over your teammates than maybe Marquette?

JA MORANT: Honestly, no. We took some great shots, but they just rimmed out. Obviously, if I pass the ball and a shot rims out, I can't have an assist. So that's the assist part. I've been seeing a lot of defensive schemes all season. They just played great defense tonight.

Q. For both of you, it just seems even though not everything was technically a block, that their hands and arms were in every shot, especially the ones in the paint. Did you feel that way? Was it harder, Ja, for some of the passes that you found holes like against Marquette. Did their length kind of feel overwhelming at times?

SHAQ BUCHANAN: I feel it bothered us at first, but once we got used to it, we knew we had to finish with power, and we started doing and made a couple lay-ups.

JA MORANT: I'd say after our first offensive position, I got very comfortable. Really just seeing what type of defense they were playing, and really just was trying to get to my spots and make plays for me and my teammates.

Q. Ja and Shaq both. Ja, your fourth assist to Devin Gilmore on the hoop, you passed Don Mann all time in assists. Any thoughts on that knowing that you broke what was a four-year career in two and, Shaq, just your thoughts on that as well?

JA MORANT: Obviously, something good. I feel good about that, but it's assists. I wouldn't be able to get it without my teammates. Again that record goes to them.

SHAQ BUCHANAN: It's great for him. We knew we had to finish plays for him to be able to break that record. I'm happy he got it. Just another award for him.

Q. Matt, at what point in the season or before the season did you think that Ja could have the sort of performance that he's had so far?

MATT McMAHON: Really when we recruited him, we thought we had a very special talent. We were thrilled to get him. And his first day on campus, I think I talked about it after the Marquette game. We had a point guard Jonathan Stark who averaged 22-6 as a junior and was going into his senior year at the point guard position, and he walked in after the first day and said, hey, Coach, Ja's going to start for us from day one.

So we played the two-point guard attack last year in Ja's freshman season, and he put up historic numbers last year almost 13 points, 7 rebounds, 6 1/2 assists. Then he's just shown great growth here this year, had a tremendous spring and summer. You see all of the talent and ability out on the floor and how he makes everyone better, but he's got some of those intangibles that really separate him. He loves to play. He's just a relentless competitor. He's tough and he's a winner. His growth as a leader this year was a big key in the success we were able to have.

Q. Matt, I'm curious if that tempo in the first half, is that how you wanted to play? Because it did seem as if your team got a little winded.

MATT McMAHON: We have to play fast. We've been top three in the country all year in scoring and transition. Ja's the most electric player in the country on the open floor. So, it really wouldn't have made sense, I don't think for us, to sit in the half court and try to grind out a game against Florida State. I thought those would be our best opportunities to score and score efficiently. But they did.

I know there's been some questions of Ja and Shaq. They impact everything around the basket. They are an elite defensive team. That's why they are top ten in the country in the stats that matter. We just weren't able to finish some of those plays around the goal. But I thought we got some good looks. But, again, credit to Florida State. They were just terrific today.

Q. Coach, how was it managing the outside world around Ja on campuses here with him being talked about being a top-three pick in the NBA?

MATT McMAHON: It's a great question. It was really easy. And I think it's because of the humility that Ja has. I think it's because of the great family, the support system he has in place, his parents back home and then his surrounding family, they really keep him grounded. And he's a winner. So he's about the right things. I thought he was able to really do a tremendous job of blocking out all of the noise and just staying focused on becoming the best player he could be. Growing as a leader, as I mentioned, and then really helping this become a very special Murray State team.

And I've said it before, I look back to when I was 19, I couldn't have done it. It's amazing the way he's handled it and just a great credit to him and his family.

Q. Matt, I wonder if you would be able to share with us what you said to him when you knelt down. He had the towel over his head and you, for a good solid minute, you were talking to him there.

MATT McMAHON: I just thanked him for what he's done, not only for our program, not only what a joy he's been to coach this season and through the whole recruiting process, but thanked him for what he's done for Murray State University. He's been an incredible ambassador for our school, for our community, and has really shined the light on the great tradition we have at Murray State.

Q. Coach, bringing it a little bit back to basketball, when Florida State opens by making 8 of its first 11 three-pointers, did that change anything for you guys from a defensive standpoint, or what do you do at that point when they're that efficient from behind the arc.

MATT McMAHON: If they shoot the ball consistently that well, they're going to be a tough out in this tournament. Some of them were some breakdowns on our part certainly, but they don't have many weaknesses. And I don't know if I should call three-point shooting a weakness, but if you go through the numbers, that's one of the areas where they aren't as good. And they just stepped up and blasted shots on us.

Like I said, the second half, we were better defensively. We're down 16 at that point, but then we couldn't keep them off the glass. They just dominated us on the glass in the second half.

Q. You took a lot of your starters out. We talked about Ja's emotions. What were your emotions as you were hugging your players?

MATT McMAHON: It's tough. You don't ever want the season to end, especially when you've had a special group like this. They've been very easy to coach, a very close-knit group. Going to practice every day, it's been a lot of fun, so you want to keep playing. It's tough. And you hate for it to end that way. I mean, we got whipped. That's the bottom line.

Coach Hamilton is one of the most underrated coaches in the history of the game. He's a Hall of Fame coach. He's won for a number of years. They got a great, great team. You hate for it to end that way. But again I told our team it doesn't take away from what we've been able to accomplish, not only this season but over this two-year run with guys like Shaq and Ja.