

March 13, 2009



Missouri – 67
Oklahoma State – 59

An interview with:



CHARLIE FISS: We are ready to begin with the University of Missouri and Coach Mike Anderson, his student-athletes are J.T. Tiller, Leo Lyons and Zaire Taylor.

Coach, congratulations.

COACH ANDERSON: Thank you. We talked about coming to this tournament. I guess the motto is always survive and advance, and that's what we did. We survived tonight.

It wasn't a thing of beauty, but sometimes ugly is better for us. I thought our defense was pretty good. Hats off to Oklahoma State. I thought they had momentum. They played well last night. They played well tonight. Unfortunately, Eaton went down. I thought some of their guys stepped up.

What can you say about Eaton? He has the heart of a lion. The guy came right back and still continued to have an impact on the game. Can't take away anything from our guys. I thought Leo, J.T., Zaire, Matt Lawrence, DeMarre Carroll, I thought all those guys, really, really stayed the course.

I thought our bench came in and played well. So it was certainly -- we are going to be the ultimate team. I thought the second half was much, much better than the first half and much to

our liking. It seemed like the second half was big for our basketball team.

Ford has done a tremendous time with his kids. I thought they were worn out. I thought conditioning was a big part of this game and Eaton being hurt but the shooting was what it was. I always say shooting comes and goes, and it went tonight. I thought our defense was also constant.

Q. Obviously you would like to be leading at halftime. At this point, if you are still close, do you kind of think, we got them where we want them, the way you play in the second half?

ZAIRE TAYLOR: I feel like you always got a chance to win the game. You don't play the game to be down at halftime, of course. Whether you are down 20 or you're up 20, it is always a ball game. You got to play every play to win.

You can't play the game to win, you have to play every play at this point because everybody is hungry, as you can see. Eaton, that was incredible that he even came back out and played after that. The whole team, they gave it everything to the last -- to the wire. I mean, we were up and they still were knocking shots down to the very last shot. We couldn't give up.

Q. Zaire, at this point last year you're sitting on the bench watching. Talk about how that felt for you and how you're feeling now having the weekend that you are.

ZAIRE TAYLOR: It is just a blessing. I thank God every day that I even had this opportunity to come here and play on a level like this. Just playing -- for a team to play this good makes it that much more better.

It is just a good feeling. It is just a blessing. You just have to thank God every day for all our blessings.

Q. Leo, can you talk a bit about where you guys were as a team last year and a lot of the adversity you were facing to be in a

situation now where you will be playing for a Big 12 title game tomorrow?

LEO LYONS: The difference between our team last year and this year is probably our leadership. Coach puts a lot of stress on us to lead. Seeing last year and going through that and going through the ups and downs taught me how to be a better leader and when it's time to speak and time to show with your actions.

This year we got four good leaders out there plus our guards. It helps our team stay in the right direction.

Q. Zaire and J.T., can you describe what happened the second half and how you saw it turning around? Zaire, can you share what you were talking to, I think -- who was it? Paige at the end of the game on Oklahoma State, you guys were talking with about 15 seconds left on the court.

ZAIRE TAYLOR: I don't remember. (Smiling).

COACH ANDERSON: J.T. is tired. I'm telling y'all, J.T. is tired.

ZAIRE TAYLOR: I don't remember what we were talking about.

J.T. TILLER: I think in the second half, we just -- when we went in at halftime, we saw that the guards were really making the difference on their team against our defense. They were the ones making the plays and getting it inside. We weren't pressuring like we should have.

When we came out in the second half, we knew we had to pressure them to actually get to their team.

Q. This question is for Leo. Your next opponent, the Baylor Bears, it seems with these last couple games their trademark seems to be sort of the upset special. Does that put any more pressure on you as a player?

LEO LYONS: Not at all. I don't consider it an upset because we are not that type of team you have to come out and dominate somebody. We are going to stop what they are doing because their guards have been hot. We witnessed it before. This is a chance for us to show where our team is at now comparing to the past years.

Q. Zaire, can you explain why the number of threes and the strategy of spreading the floor so much.

ZAIRE TAYLOR: For us or for them?

Q. You.

ZAIRE TAYLOR: The first play -- after the first play, I realized -- I think Leo set a screen for me and they went under the screen. Typically when you go under the screen, it gives them a shot. I felt like they didn't respect me as a shooter.

I missed that first one, but after the first one, things started to go in my favor as far as hitting the shot. I just had to keep shooting. We work on shooting every day. Coach just kept -- Coach believed in me after the first miss. And he said go ahead if you got the shot. Because I didn't shoot for about six plays after that. Coach had to tell me to shoot. Once he told me, I felt -- it made me feel that much more confident in my own shot, just knowing that he believed in me and that my teammates believed in me because they set the screens.

Q. My question was: Why so many threes?

ZAIRE TAYLOR: Today? They were sagging. It gave us opportunities to hit open shots. We got good shooters. Kim was going through a slump. Matt Lawrence, he is clearly a good shooter, one of the best in the country. J.T., everybody, even Leo and DeMarre can knock threes down if you give them the opportunity.

LEO LYONS: I can get a three (smiling)..

Q. Zaire, all year it seems like you have been coming up with clutch performances, winners. Today you had a big game. What is it about the pressure situations that makes you -- that brings the best out in you?

ZAIRE TAYLOR: I don't know. It is a good feeling. That's what we all live for, even when we are little, if I remember correctly. When you are five years old, you always count down before you take your last shot, you count down five, four, three, two, one and then you shoot it and hope it goes in. If you miss, you get a chance to do it again. (Smiling).

LEO LYONS: You are telling a story.

ZAIRE TAYLOR: Honestly, it is just -- everybody has that feeling of wanting to be in that atmosphere. As student-athletes on this stage, we all get a chance to do it. That's what we live for. It is a blessing and a good feeling.

Q. Following up on Mike's question, was it -- were there too many threes?

Obviously it worked out. Were you worried that you were taking too many threes?

COACH ANDERSON: I thought early on -- obviously they were packing the paint and we didn't make any shots. And I thought we got tentative about it.

At times we did attack. I thought in the first half we did attack it. As Zaire said, they packed it. I mean, so they are going to give you something. I think we got some guys that can knock some shots down. Same thing with them, they didn't knock shots down either.

It was a game that had to come down to defense tonight. It just seemed like it was a lid. We couldn't find anybody until the second half. Zaire made a couple of them in the second half, in the first half. Once Matt started making them, I thought you saw us in attack mode. I thought in the first half we settled.

We played a lot of guys. I have young guys that they think every shot is a good shot. They will let it fly.

You got to be careful with that. There is freedom but at the same time you want our guys to understand what is a good shot and what the defense presents. I thought we did a good job of getting into the heart of the defense in the second half and got to the free-throw lines and we had some -- knocked down some shots.

Q. First time you guys played them, they scored 95 points against you. Did you use that as motivation for your team to try and stop a little bit? And talk about the job you did against them tonight defensively.

COACH ANDERSON: I thought this game had nothing to do with the last game. Obviously, I thought in that particular game I mean, you use the things that happen to your advantage. We were up almost 19, 20 points, and I look up and, boy, I tell you what, it was a nine-point game with maybe like a minute or something to go.

I look up, it is a three-point game. We had the intentional foul. We learned from that. So we knew that they are never out of a game. And I thought we are the same type of team. We are never out of the game. We keep talking about the thing that we are going to hang our hats on is our defense.

Offense can come and go. And it went tonight. I will tell you, it went south tonight. The thing you got to continue to do is play defense. I thought at halftime, I thought we were in pretty good shape. We made a stop right there at the

end and I thought coming out in the second half, it was important to get the momentum.

I thought we did -- and we were more in attack mode, I thought, and we attacked them. As I said, Eaton, he is like Superman tonight. He showed up. When he showed up for those guys, I think it just energized those other guys.

They hadn't made any threes either. They started making them and, boy, you could just see the crowd got into it. But to our guys' credit, we answered every call. Leo makes a big shot. Justin Safford makes a big shot, gets a big rebound. Zaire makes some big free throws, and J.T. makes big plays down the stretch.

You got to have guys make plays. It was a gutsy performance by our team as well as theirs.

Q. Last night you called the semifinals uncharted waters for a lot of members of your team, or for all of them in that manner. When you look back to last year, just how special, just how fortunate is it for your team to be playing for a title tomorrow?

COACH ANDERSON: It tells you the makeup of the guys that are here. I got to give credit to the nucleus of the guys that have been through the storms, been through the downs.

Now they have listened. I think they have worked extremely hard. They have shown the leadership, as Leo said. They have shown the ownership. When that takes place, I think they have engaged the young guys to where the young guys feel like they are really, really a part of what we are doing.

That's important. So I go back to the nucleus of those guys have been here, Leo, DeMarre, J.T., Michael, Jr., my son, Justin Safford. Those guys have been through here. Zaire, he was sitting out. But those guys, they are spearheading, infusing the young guys, I think that helps our basketball. It kind of completes it a little bit.

It is special but it can really, really get special. I think these guys have paid a price and you are seeing the rewards.

I said, I always think the tournament format, it favors a team like ours because of the depth that we have and how we play. I thought it was true tonight. Neither team shot the ball well. I thought our defense and just the energy coming off the bench was huge.

Q. Do you think Zaire has a little bit of a knack for rising to occasions like this? I mean, he did demonstrate it at the end of a couple games and coming through tonight with a season high in points.

COACH ANDERSON: I think he is a gamer. He is a gamer. The guy makes plays going down the stretch.

I like those guys that can have an impact on the game. Sometimes it is not even about their offense. But the great thing about him, he is going to do the things defensively. He has big deflections going down the stretch. It gets contagious. I think J.T. is one of those guys.

When you got a guard tandem like that, I tell you what, J.T. alluded to it, he talked about the guards got the best of him in the first half.

I thought in the second half our guys really, really stepped up to the plate and I think that's -- if you are going to have a good team, your guard plays, it has got to be good. I think we got some good guard play, and I think we have young guys coming off the bench to give us quality, quality minutes.

It is a fun team. I said it earlier in the year. It is refreshing with some guys that, number one, they are coachable, they listen. They are having fun. If you watch our basketball team, they are just out there having fun.

Q. Coach Anderson, you mentioned conditioning was a major part of this victory here tonight. And your next opponent, the Baylor Bears, they have had to fight through tough battles with the Kansas Jayhawks and now the Texas Longhorns. You yourself have just overcome persevering Oklahoma State team. How do you keep your own team refreshed while at the same time maybe playing off the fatigue of your opponent?

COACH ANDERSON: It is going to be interesting. I think they're playing -- they are playing -- there is a lot at stake for both teams. And so I think sometimes the conditioning and all that stuff kind of goes out the window. You get an opportunity to play in the championship game, that's a big deal. I'm sure it is for them.

They are playing awful well. As a matter of fact, it brought back some flashbacks from two years ago. You got Jerrells and Tweety playing well, Rogers playing well. Of course, LaceDarius Dunn. He was unconscious. We have a chance to play -- play them earlier in the year. That game had no bearing on this game.



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There is a championship at stake, and I'm sure Scott will have those guys ready to play. I'm sure we'll have a chance to go get a few hours of rest and hopefully put on a better performance.

I know everyone didn't come to this particular championship game in, but it should be an exciting game to say the least. Thank you.

CHARLIE FISS: Coach, thank you. Good luck tomorrow.

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