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NEW YORK -- *Three things we learned from Mississippi State's 67-57 victory [Recap | Box Score] over Arizona in the finals of the 2K Sports Classic benefiting Coaches vs. Cancer at Madison Square Garden.*

1. The emergence of Arnett Moultrie makes the Bulldogs a darkhorse contender in the SEC.

We've spent way too much time talking about Renardo Sidney. About whether the 6-foot-10 forward would ever get eligible at Mississippi State; whether he would make an impact once that happened; whether he would ever get in shape after ballooning to well over 300 pounds; why he was fighting a teammate in the stands in the Bahamas last year; why he wasn't allowed to join the Bulldogs on their exhibition tour of the Netherlands this summer; why they would need him to be a force to make the NCAA tournament. He is one massive, irresistible subject of our speculation and our laments, over what the former No. 1-ranked prospect might have become.

But you know what? The guy who really matters in Mississippi State's frontcourt -- the one whom Arizona coach Sean Miller called the Bulldogs' "difference-maker" -- is Arnett Moultrie. Friday night at Madison Square Garden was a very nice one for Moultrie, who had 19 points (on 8 of 9 shooting) and 10 rebounds in 25 minutes, and was named the tournament's MVP. He booted up his cell phone afterwards and was bombarded with texts -- most of them congratulating him about something other than the game. "They're telling me 'Happy Birthday,'" he said. "I turned 21 today."

Moultrie took a twisting route back to New York since being born in Jamaica, Queens, on Nov. 18, 1990. He moved to Memphis in middle school, but wasn't a recruiting target of John Calipari's hometown Tigers. Former Memphis assistant Tony Barbee, who knew of Moultrie and thought he could be a sleeper prospect, offered him a scholarship to play at UTEP, and he accepted. Moultrie posted a strong freshman season (8.8 ppg, 8.2 rpg) there, but didn't really take off as a sophomore, because a New York-area import, Derrick Character, soaked up the majority of the post opportunities -- and the majority of the attention.

When Barbee left for Auburn and Tim Floyd arrived, the new coach did not exactly click with Moultrie. "I couldn't risk staying there," Moultrie said. "[Floyd] made it be known that he wanted his own players, that it was his way or no way, so I thought it would be best for me to leave."

Moultrie transferred to Mississippi State, sat out all of 2011-12, and was often the best player in practice during the Bulldogs' 17-14 season. "Some guys might be frustrated by sitting out, but [Moultrie] worked hard every day," senior point guard Dee Bost said. "The first thing he told me when he showed up was, 'I want to lead the country in rebounding.'"

In the Coaches vs. Cancer final on Friday, Moultrie was the best rebounder -- and best player -- on the floor. He logged only five first-half minutes due to foul trouble, but keyed the Bulldogs' surge in the second, playing all 20 minutes and finishing the game with a plus-minus rating of 16. Moultrie said his role is "just to lock down on defense and try to get every rebound," but he did much more than that. (As Mississippi State coach Rick Stansbury added, "It's nice when he can get 19 points with it, too.") It's evident that Moultrie and Bost are the keys to the Bulldogs being a darkhorse contender in the SEC.

Stansbury's wife had him sample three different kinds of cookies on the night before the game, to decide which ones to give Moultrie on his birthday. The kind they chose was Subway chocolate chip -- not exactly a treat befitting a major early-season tournament MVP, but at the time, they hadn't known just how well he would do against Arizona. No one had, really.

"It's nice for me to get some attention once in a while," Moultrie said. "But I'm fine with [Sidney] getting attention, because I've been under the radar my whole life. I play well like that."

Moultrie may soon have to acclimate to being a star.

2. Renardo Sidney remains a work in progress.

As for Sidney, he was better on Friday (4 of 8 shooting, eight points, zero rebounds, two turnovers in 20 minutes) than Thursday (0 of 8 shooting, three points, three rebounds in 22 minutes). But he has inexplicably regressed since last March, when he ended his sophomore year by scoring 22 points in 18 minutes of an SEC tournament loss to Vanderbilt. Because he's so large -- around 290 pounds -- and gets winded so quickly, it seems that Mississippi State has to play a slower-than-optimal pace when he's on the floor, to give him time to make the paint-to-paint run. Sidney has made progress with his weight since he went to Houston to train with John Lucas during the Bulldogs' foreign tour; he said he showed up there weighing 320 pounds, and at one point, after he laid out for a ball, Lucas said "somebody go get that whale off the floor."

"I knew he was just playing, but it kind of hurt," Sidney said. "But I know that's just [how] John Lucas [talks], so no hard feelings."

The good memory I'll have of Sidney from two games at the Garden is of his one assist, when he flashed a rare burst of aggressive energy to grab an offensive rebound off his own miss, then drew a defender into the air and made a slick wrap-around pass to Moultrie for a bucket. Sidney has so much skill for a behemoth; he just rarely harnesses it.

Unfortunately, this is the Sidney moment I'll remember most:

With 8:07 left in the first half against Texas A&M on Thursday, he received a post-entry pass on the right block, and had Aggies forward Kourtney Roberson on his back. Sidney made an excellent move, using a hard drop step and dribble to seal off Roberson, and clear the way for an easy score. Because Sidney lacks the explosiveness to dunk on such plays, he put it up one-handed off the glass. As it was rolling around the rim -- and not yet a sure thing -- he inexplicably turned and ran upcourt.

It rolled out. Roberson grabbed an easy defensive rebound.

At about 8:03, as Sidney has crossed halfcourt and left the TV frame altogether, Bost steals Roberson's outlet pass, and Mississippi State is stuck playing 4-of-5, because Sidney has disappeared. He said someone hit him in the stomach during that time, but it can't be seen on film.

At 7:59, Sidney reappears in the frame, re-crossing the giant 2K Sports sticker at midcourt, shuffling with his head down.

He glances with no interest at the action on the right wing, where A&M's defensive specialist, Dash Harris, is picking Bost's pocket. The typical player in Sidney's position would immediately retreat to protect his own basket, but Sidney just keeps shuffling, and then starts holding his face.

Harris covers three-quarters of the quart for a wide-open dunk.

Sidney motions to the bench, so he can get taken out. A whistle blows, and his cheeks are ballooned out as he sits. He empties their contents into a towel.

I asked him afterwards what happened.

Sidney said he threw up in his mouth.

3. The Wildcats have no clear star and have plenty to sort out.

Friday's loss shouldn't be too damning to Arizona, because the Wildcats are still very much in flux. The only spots they have solidified are the 3-4 combo of Jesse Perry and Solomon Hill, who combined for 23 points and 19 rebounds against Mississippi State. "Right now, they're our best two players," Miller said. "They've proved it through five games. We need a couple more guys to add to what they're doing."

Who will those guys be? When Momo Jones transferred away from Tucson in the offseason, it was in part because five-star freshman point guard Josiah Turner would be arriving -- and the expectation was that Turner would take over as the starter, if not from Day 1, at least by late in the season. Turner started Arizona's opener, against Valparaiso, but has since been bumped from the first five by sophomore Jordin Mayes -- first, as a punishment for being late for a shootaround, but later, because Mayes was the steadier player. Turner didn't play crunch-time minutes in the close win over St. John's, sitting out the final 4:22.

Sophomore Kevin Parrom had a devastating offseason due to the deaths of his mother and grandmother, and a gunshot incident that left him with a severe leg wound. He spent seven weeks away from basketball, and is still not back in the flow of the game; he scored just three points in 14 minutes on Friday, but when he returns to full strength, he may emerge as Arizona's best player. Freshman shooting guard Nick Johnson, who like Turner was a five-star recruit, is serving as the sixth man early in the season, but appears to be the Wildcats' best perimeter scorer, and they could turn to him for offense if the starting backcourt of Mayes and the defensive-minded Kyle Fogg are struggling to put up points.

In it first year after losing Derrick Williams, Arizona has no clear star -- and no sense of how it's going to look by March. Miller has sure things in Perry and Hill, and the coach knows he's going to have a balanced scoring team. The rest, he said, has yet to be determined.

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