

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - UCF vs UConn

Sunday, March 20, 2022

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

**UCF Knights**

**Coach Katie**

**Abrahamson-Henderson**

**Masseny Kaba**

**Tay Sanders**

Media Conference

Storrs: Off Day

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**Q. Masseny, obviously this is a familiar foe that you're facing. I was just rereading some of the stories from the last game you guys played. Very physical contest. You got an intentional foul in that. Diamond got an intentional foul. What do you remember of those games and how physical do you expect it to be tomorrow and are you expecting it to be that kind of a game?**

MASSENY KABA: I mean, it's always a physical game no matter who we're playing because that's just our intensity. I mean, we can't well really talk about what's going to happen. I'm not sure if there will be technicals called. I'm not the refuses.

It's always going to be physical. We always go out there ask play hard. I really don't know. We're just going to go out and play hard tomorrow.

So they might be, but nothing that's going to be really intentional.

**Q. Tay, after beating Florida, which had won I guess 20 in a row or so against UCF, now you face you team you haven't beaten in a long time; 13 in a row. Does yesterday's win give you guys an extra boost of confidence that you can do this tomorrow night?**

TAY SANDERS: I mean, I guess you could say it would,



but, I mean, we have had confidence for our team this whole year because we've been successful. We've played together. We followed Coach Abe's plan.

So as long as we keep doing that, I feel like we'll continue to just be successful. So that's pretty much it.

**Q. Masseny, we were unable to talk to you last night. What did you think of Brittney Smith's perform? Is that surprising to see from her?**

MASSENY KABA: That's my dog. No, Brittney is a great player. She's phenomenal. It's hard to guard her. She has that turn-around jump shot. It can't be contested. Even if you try to contest it, good luck. She's just a great player. Been a great player. I've always told her that.

We put out confidence into her and she can see that, and last night she performed great and we're glad that she performed that way because it helped us move on to this next round.

So we just hope she keeps on bringing it to the game.

**Q. Ladies, this year has been so many different firsts here for UCF women's basketball. What does that mean to both of you individually to be a part of a story like this and a run like this?**

MASSENY KABA: For me personally it's a great feeling. I'm helping build this program. I been here for five years and they been here for six, so for the five years I know what it's like it lose, what it's like to win.

For us to now make history and make records that was never set at UCF and I can come back and say that I was a part of that, it's just something that makes me feel happy, something that I want the players that are coming to UCF to see.

And just for the whole world to see UCF is a great program. They have great coaches, great layers, and we're considered -- we're not considered that big of a program or school, but it's coming. Their time is coming.



It'll be a school that recruits would like to go to. That's just something I'm glad that we were able to do for this program.

**Q. Could you both speak to Nykesha Sales impact on you and how she's helped you throughout your time at UCF?**

TAY SANDERS: Well, Nykesha is my position coach, so I've been here since my junior year. This is my third year now. So she's really been helping me just continue to just play hard and she always helped me with my shooting. She's always just competing when she's in practice with us.

So I feel like she's really just bringing that energy, intensity to this program. We need all of our coaches. They all have different personalities. I don't know, she's just a really great coach to just have under our wing.

MASSENY KABA: They call her Cool Kesh for a reason. She's just a great coach, someone that's really laid back and chill. So like if my position coach is yelling at me that day, she'll come up to me and be like, You got it, Mass. Don't worry about it.

She's just someone that's there to help us. She is not the one that is always going to yell at you and this and that, but she is going to let you know what you did wrong.

If she's speaking to you you know it's coming from deep down in there. She doesn't speak much, so when she does she really cares for you and we can see that.

I just think she's a great coach overall.

**Q. What do you all call her?**

MASSENY KABA: Cool Kesh.

TAY SANDERS: Pretty sure everybody calls her that, Cool Kesh.

**Q. Masseny, talk about specifics in terms of what you have seen in the growth of this program over the five years you've been here. Where have the biggest improvements been. What's the buy-in amongst the team, and especially the defensive end?**

MASSENY KABA: I mean, being here five years I feel like our defenses has always been a key factor. UCF has been No. 1, No. 2 in the nation in defense, and I don't think that was ever the problem.

But I think offensively we've grown as a program over the years. I can say now we have threats on the perimeter and

inside the paint, and that's just something that our coaches really enforced in us this year, being that we need to score more.

I feel like everyone is scoring more, and I see improvements. If we can become an offensive and defensive team, we're going to be hard to guard and play against, to be honest.

**Q. I guess for both of you, you both came back for your fifth year this year, right? Was there any question of whether you wanted to come back, and how happy are you that you came back and got all this accomplished this year? It's been an amazing year.**

TAY SANDERS: Well, there was no question about coming back, because we knew that everything we went through last year is going to mean something next year for us. We proved that. We've become a better team, we've become closer.

Basically the same team back but adding some more keys to our team, so it was meant to happen, you know. Everything is meant to be, and I'm happy to say I came back and I made history.

MASSENY KABA: Just piggybacking of Tay, like she said we back and we made history, and that's something we talked about. Being that we were seniors last year were we were like, I can't believe we just lost this championship game. Like if we come back next year we really have to be locked in as a team to want to win this championship.

And ever since we flipped the switch and we put what we wanted into our teammates and into the new players that came in, it's just nice to say that we were able to actually achieve those goes we set in the beginning of the season.

**Q. Playing UConn can be intimidating. You played them tough over the years. What's the mindset heading into Monday's game? It seems like you're not going to be intimidated at all.**

MASSENY KABA: For me, I think basketball is five-on-five. I don't like -- it's five players against five players, no matter if you're UConn, no matter who are. No matter if we're playing pick up on the street. It's our five against your five, and in the end it's going to be -- one team is going to win.

It's going to be either our team or their team, and it's going to be who really wants it more. I just feel like that's what it always is when it comes to basketball for me.

TAY SANDERS: Yeah. We have to approach every game



as is. That's all we're going to do. We're going to have the same game plan, we're always going to approach every team, have the same intensity, same defensive plan. Nothing is going to change.

Nothing in our heart is going to change either, so, yeah.

**Q. Ladies, with so much success that you had this year, yet from a national level maybe not until the end of the season did you really start getting on maps of voters and coaches and then finally getting into the top 25. And then coming into the NCAA tournament and beating Florida, do you feel as if you guys have now finally -- have you retained of the respect you probably should have been getting in the middle of the season and towards the end of the season?**

MASSENY KABA: I mean, I hope we did. But if we didn't, that's on you. I mean, I would hope so. I would hope you respect us.

We show it every game. We show our work ethic, how hard we play on court. We show all that. If you don't respect us, that's on you, to be honest.

There is nothing we can do about that but come out the next game and play harder even more harder. But like I said, we've always been the underdogs. At this point it's up to you if you want to think we're the underdogs or not.

We know where we were and we know where we stand in our hearts, so it doesn't matter what the outside thinks about us because we're playing for each other. We're not playing for everybody out there who has something to say about us, negative or positive, to be honest.

We're a family. We stick with each other and we're going to play for each other, that's what matters to us.

TAY SANDERS: That was so cute. (Laughter.)

**Q. When you walk in here and see the plaques on the wall of all the great UCONN players and Nykesha is one of those, I know it was before you guys were around that she helped hang banners here, but in terms of her as a player, do you guys ever watch what she did? Do you know the kind of player she was? Do you emulate anything she did? Do you know anything about Nykesha the player?**

TAY SANDERS: We know a little bit about her. She showed us what she can do. I know she hasn't played in a while, but I can see, I definitely can see what she can do.

As her player, like I've had individual workouts with her.

She showed me a lot of the workouts, like a lot of different things I can work on.

I feel like she'll continue to help me after the season, so I really am glad to be her player.

MASSENY KABA: For me, we can just see like how hard she played and how hard she wanted to impact us. Even like when the scout team do something wrong she starts screaming at them and we're like, Oh, Kesh not playing with ya'll no more. You guys better stop.

But you can just see that's the type of player she was.

TAY SANDERS: Yep.

MASSENY KABA: She was about business when she was on the court, and then off the court, you know, she's Cool Kesh. When she's playing and the ball is in her hand, she's no joke.

We have to practice against her every day so we understand what type of player she was.

TAY SANDERS: I feel like that's where we're competitive, because of her, because of all of our coaches. But Kesh is competitive; Kesh not playing.

So it's funny because like we love defense, so when I'm guarding Kesh we always playing, Kesh score on me, I'm like, Yeah I'm getting you back, Kesh. You not about to score on me again.

So it's fun.

**Q. Mass, you said the offense is the last piece that needed to be put in place. Do you believe that you need to beat a team like UConn, which usually has four or five different elite scorers to get over that hump and prove that you finally arrived now? And who is going to score for you offensively?**

MASSENY KABA: I mean, offensively anybody that gets in the game can score. Whether it's me, Diamond, Tay-Tay, Lish, Destiny, Shania, it could be anybody's night and we're all scorers, so I don't think that's something we're worried about.

I mean, our defense, it speaks for itself. We have a great defense. We're No. 1 in the country for a reason. I can't really talk about what's going to happen tomorrow until I get on court because then again I'll be trying to predict the future and I can't do that.

I'm just going to wait and see tomorrow and we're just



going to play together and try our hardest.

**Q. Ladies, first of all, Tay, give me a sense of what Alisha Lewis and Shania Meertens have meant to this team since coming over. How have they fit in as grad transfers?**

TAY SANDERS: Alisha is not a grad transfer. Oh, I'm sorry, well. As far as Alisha Lewis, she's a great leader. She really like sets the tone for us, even though she doesn't start. Once she get in she's a great passer, great defender, on-ball defender.

When we're down she bring us together and she just like, Ya'll we got to get organized, we got to stick together. But she's a really great point guard.

As far as Shania, she's a great defender. Top of our press we really need her. She tackles the basket. She hit good shots for us yesterday in the game that we really needed.

So she's really key and I'm glad she came this year, because she's part of big success we accomplished this year.

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: No opening comments.

**Q. Coach Abe, can you discuss how different your team is now from when you last played UConn in 2020? Where are the improvements? Obviously you made progress each and every year?**

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: Yeah. I think I watched a little of a game the last time we played them. I don't know which game it was.

But it's just what Masseny was talking about just in terms of got a lot of experience back and just balanced scoring, honestly.

I mean, looking at those teams, I mean, we had some really good scorers then, too. Obviously we had Kay Kay and Sianni Martin and Brittney, and I was looking at Brittney and Desto and they were just so young.

Now we got a lot of experience. I think offensively it's just kind of a difference for our team.

**Q. We talked to the players earlier about Nykesha. How does she impact your team?**

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: She's Cool Kesh. She'll tell you she's Cool Kesh. I think that's a name that they gave her in the WNBA. I think she's got some shirts

that say, Cool Kesh.

So, you know, she's just very -- if I back up, when I hired Kesh, she was coming on to my staff of really, really high level coaches, and Kesh was just hanging out in our gym playing pickup.

So I walked into the gym -- if you want a cool story -- I walked into the gym and my coaches, Tahnee Balerio and Isoken Uzamere were playing pickup without football team -- football coaches, and I walked in the gym just tease and heckle them because they were really good players, too. All my coaches were really good players and played in the NCAA tournament.

They're good coaches. So I walked in and I was like, Hmm, who is that? She was jogging up and down the floor. I'm going to say it, she's going to get mad at me, but hands were on her knees. Nobody would like you to do that when you played.

So anyway, she was playing and she came over to us and she introduced herself and said congratulations on getting the job here at UCF. So I kind of was like, oh, okay. That's pretty cool. She didn't have to do that. That's what Cool Kesh does.

I had a position open, and all of my members of my staff have either played for me, have coached for me for years, so she was the only one that I interviewed her first because, if you're going to coach with me, you're going to have to handle not me, my staff and the tight bond we have.

Just everything about my staff is super protective of me because they all played for me. When we interviewed her, it's just so funny, she was Cool Kesh. They were just like, She's cool. We like her. You know, it's her personality that makes her the way she is, and that's why everybody just loves her.

**Q. Coach, there was an moment where Diamond I think got called for a foul or there was a foul and she got pushed down in front of the Gators' bench last night and she was all emotional and passionate. How much do you love seeing that from her, continuing on as she grows in confidence?**

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: Yeah, that's -- I mean, that's -- I mean, that's how I want -- when I recruit that's what I look for. That's what I saw in Masseny when she played coming out of high school. Tay, Diamond.

That's why seeing all of our players -- I mean, that's something that you got to love this game at this level, at





the level we're at. You got to love this game so much more than you hate working hard. You know what I mean?

All of them are passionate. She just shows it, you know, a little bit more. It really pumps up Tay, really pumps up our team, pumps up Masseny. Everybody kind of feeds off that a little bit.

And Diamond knows and Mass and Tay also know. Our three captains know if we need some energy, they're the ones that need to step that up. Obviously Diamond is just -- that's just innate in her.

When I watched her in high school she did that. You know, it was great. I was like, I love that. That's something that's very hard to teach. You can't teach that, that little thing that she has.

I mean, she's been doing it for five, four years for me, so it's normal. She does it in practice, too.

**Q. Everybody talks about your defense. What is it that makes it so good? Is it aggression? Is it discipline? Has it gotten better this year with everybody being older and more experienced?**

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: Yep, you just answered my question. That's everything. It's all of the above. We were really good last year; No. 1 last year, too.

So, I mean, I think it's just -- I say it all the time. People are like, you know, you're only a defensive team, Coach Abe. No, we're not.

But ours is consistent. We don't mix it up like everybody. Like I love it when I we play teams and they play man and zone and they do a different defense. Like I know as a coach that those players aren't comfortable in it because you're mixing it up so much.

We just stay so consistent with what we're doing.

Now Masseny has been here five years, and so it's actually super -- they're super confident because it's not going to mix up and it's not going to change. Our press is not going to change.

And then obviously you get -- I've got to recruit people that have that mindset that want to play the way we play. Not everybody can play the way we play. You got to be in really good shape to play the way we play.

Everybody says, Oh, I would love to press, but do you want to be in shape to press? Do you want to work on it every day? You want to run down and backs and run the mile

and get your body and your body physically fit to do that?

Because what we do, it is really hard to do. I think the consistency and just we have a lot of players back that have been playing it for years.

**Q. Coach, has the American evolved or changed at all since UConn left in two years? Obviously they have a certain presence about them, and I imagine when they leave it's kind of a different world. How is the conference different?**

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: It's not, no. I think our conference is really good. We have really good coaches. We have really good teams. I mean, I was saying it back even when UConn was in the conference.

I feel like we just get overlooked all the time. We're not Power 5, but we're not mid-major either. So what are we, people? It's just like Jose has been there for years at USF and he's a great coach, has great players.

So is Lisa at Tulane. She's been there for years. They have great players, great coaching philosophy.

So it's just -- I just think it's a really good conference that gets overlooked, because I don't think we've been put into any -- because if we were in mid-major we would all be in the mid-major polls. We aren't even in any mid-major polls ever, so we're kind of like the Big East.

We're not Power 5 -- that's football -- but we're not mid-major either. I just think our conference is really good and it's going to stay that way. Obviously we'll be leaving, but I really enjoy it.

I've been in a lot of different conferences, and the strength of our coaches is really good.

**Q. Speaking of defense, since UConn got everybody back, they now have nine players that they just rotate in and out. I think one team scored 55 points in the last 11 or 12 games. So can you talk about their defense and what do you do against that, and does the fact that your team has to go up against your players every day in practice, does that help when you face a team like UConn who doesn't let people score?**

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: Yeah, and there you go. Great teams play great defenses. I mean, it's not just our defense. I think everybody at this level going forward, you're going to have to play defense to win a game.

You know, so obviously we -- I mean, we played

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Tennessee, played a bunch of teams out there that play really good defense. So I think our players have prepared themselves. Played Iowa, played a lot Arkansas, played a lot of really good defensive teams.

USF is a ridiculously physical team. They play really hard, they play personnel. I mean, so we've just been -- I thought Florida did a good job playing defense, too.

So we've prepared ourself all year to play really good teams, and that's really why I preached offense this year a lot, so we could have some really balanced scoring.

Last year when we played in the NCAA tournament against Northwestern, it was really Diamond looking to score, and that didn't get us very far. You know, I think we've evolved in terms of an offensive team.

So how they're going to play us tomorrow, I don't know. We're going to go out there and see. We'll know how they're going to guard Mass in the first five minutes, how they are going to guard Diamond in the first five minutes, how they will guard Brittney Smith in the first five minutes, how they're going to guard Tay.

That's pretty much how it's been all season long and our players know that. So we go out there, we play hard. I know our sets we're going to run, exactly what we're going to do to start of the game.

I'm going to be watching to see how they're going to guard our players, and then after I see how they're going to guard us, then we'll switch up the sets and switch up how we're going to do what we're going to do offensively.

**Q. Coach, what has it been, and maybe even to the point you just mentioned, their first quarter evaluation, adjustments. And then you guys have been extremely successful in second halves of basketball games.**

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: Yep.

**Q. Is that a testament to the way your ladies take in that coaching and then are able to then execute on the floor?**

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: Yeah, I think it has to do with our captains, and they have a really big basketball IQ now. They've been listening to our coaches talk for five, four, three years, so their basketball IQ is good.

So once they go out and see -- so if right when Mass goes out and sees, she catches the ball, are they coming to double or not? She knows. So there is just different

situations.

So if people are going to start doubling Mass, then I'm going to start moving her around. So I think they all understand by halftime how the team is going to guard. Not a lot of teams switch up a big amount on how they're going to guard.

For us now this year, it's just so much harder to guard us. If you can double Mass, then Brittney is open. If you're going to double Diamond than Mass and Brittney or open or Tay is open.

If you're going to play off of Tay, then we're going to screen her, screen, screen, and she's going to get to the basket. So there is all kinds of things we do different.

I think this year everybody has been doing a bunch of different things against us. Iowa played a box in one and triangle in two on us, you know. So that was fun, you know.

So if they're going to do that, if they're going to play triangle two and box one, then Desto is getting every rebound. So it's been interesting. Everybody has really tried to play different styles of man defense on us, and if they can't guard us man, then they go zone.

So obviously that was Florida last night. They went zone. So we just kind of wait to see how people are going to guard us and then we adjust.

**Q. It's obvious what the significance of tomorrow's matchup is. What do you want your team's approach to be heading into it?**

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: I think Masseny -- I don't why I'm here. Masseny and Tay can answer every question. It's the same. We're going to look at it the same. Everything is -- we have been for years taking one game at a time.

Like when we came here we weren't thinking about the next game. We were thinking about Florida and thinking about -- it could have been Iceland on the shirt for all we care.

We got to worry about what we're going to do and what we're great at. We're great at a lot of things, so coming into this game we were only thinking about -- coming into this tournament we were only think about Florida.

Today, this morning is the only time they've watched film on UConn. Obviously I was up watching film and doing stuff and my assistants had the scout ready.



So now we're going to go practice and work on what we need to do for tomorrow. So we just prepare one day at a time, one game at a time. I think that's just how we've been successful at UCF.

**Q. The last time you guys met it was an extremely physical game. Is that kind of your style? Do you want to go out there and just physically challenge other teams and see if they'll break?**

KATIE ABRAHAMSON-HENDERSON: No. I think it's everybody's style. When we played USF we were both like -- it was super physical. I think also it depends on how the three people are going to let us play.

You know who the three people are? Okay. So every game is different. When we go out there with those three people -- I can't say their names -- so we got to adjust to them, too, you know what I mean?

At this level I think every team is going to be physical. They're going to be physical. We're going to be physical. It was super physical yesterday.

I don't think it has to do with any team we're playing. I just think at this level everybody is going to be that way.

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