

Billie Jean King Cup

Thursday, 14 April 2022

Team USA

Captain Kathy Rinaldi

Jessica Pegula

Shelby Rogers

Alison Riske

Asia Muhammad

Desirae Krawczyk

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Open floor here for Team USA.

Q. Talked a little bit on Tuesday, you had a few days to play on the court. Just want to hear how they're playing this week here in Asheville.

JESSICA PEGULA: Well, I think it's all pretty fast. Obviously it's indoors. I think it's always going to play quicker. The surface definitely seems like it skids a little bit.

Yeah, felt pretty good today. I think we're all pretty used to the conditions, ready to get going. Hopefully serve some aces and hit some winners (laughter).

Q. To that point, Kathy, you've been here before. Any differences noticeable as you watch the players practice and get ready in terms of the court and atmosphere?

CAPTAIN RINALDI: Well, the court's playing great. They really did a nice job laying the court down. It's playing very well, very consistent.

As she said, it's a little bit quick, it's medium fast. We've had a couple of great days of practice, two and a half days of great practice. Everybody is hitting the ball well and we're ready to go.

We're looking forward to a full, full arena.

Q. Many of you have played for your country in different respects. I've often heard from athletes the pride of playing for your country. Jessica, the pride

BILLIE JEAN KING CUP

BY  BNP PARIBAS

playing for the USA.

JESSICA PEGULA: Yeah, Ali and I were Olympians actually. We got to play together on the same team in Tokyo, which was an amazing experience. We got to walk, do all that. That was definitely something super special that, yeah, you can't really put it into words. It's a different feeling than what we're used to playing.

This again is the same type of feeling, it's playing something bigger than yourself. Especially the situation this week, playing Ukraine, I think we can look at it much, much bigger than ourselves. To come together with them, play, put on some good tennis, it's going to be great.

Q. Ali, can you speak to that point, please.

ALISON RISKE: Anytime you have an opportunity to represent your country, I think it's truly an honor. It's something that I personally don't take very lightly. I know none of these girls do either.

So just to be beside them, you know, when we were usually playing for ourselves, it's something really special. To have the week with them, too, just to be with them doing fun things outside of the tennis court, too, is really awesome.

I usually don't leave my hotel room when I'm at a tournament by myself. When I'm with the team, this atmosphere, it makes things a lot of fun.

Q. Lightening things up a little bit. What is the next couple hours like for y'all till tomorrow? What are you doing, eating, getting your minds right?

CAPTAIN RINALDI: I'm going to let you know we have a couple rookies on the team. They are preparing. They have their last few hours of preparation for their song. That will be their rookie initiation.

DESIRAE KRAWCZYK: I'm so excited to do it. I'm just counting down the hours till it's over.

CAPTAIN RINALDI: We're obviously going to have a nice dinner. We'll finish up practice today, get together this

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

evening. We have a few fun things again as a team, then we'll be ready to go tomorrow.

Q. Jessica, Shelby, Alison, the nature of what the other team is going through personally, do you think that's going to change the atmosphere, spirit of the competition at all? Do y'all have to put that out of your mind on the court?

SHELBY ROGERS: I mean, I think it's a very emotional situation for sure. We're so happy to welcome them here. We had a nice dinner the first night with everyone there. We exchanged some gifts. We want to just make sure they feel our hospitality and feel welcomed and know that we're supporting them.

At the same time we're all coming together to try to play the best tennis that we can and put on a show and enjoy the crowd I think.

We've exchanged friendships and handshakes and smiles this weeks, but I think this weekend is going to be about tennis for all of us. I think, yeah, we made it a very important point to make sure they feel welcomed, hugs and everything, so...

JESSICA PEGULA: No, yeah, we play on tour with all of them really. We see them week to week, see all the Ukrainian girls. We've all been supportive. I know a portion of the money is also going to the Ukraine Relief Fund. We gave them a gift as well at the welcome dinner, talked to them.

I think they're going through something really hard, but it's also nice just to be normal for them. What they're dealing with I can't quite imagine. I don't think we're ever going to be able to really understand that.

Sitting down at dinner, talk about what's on the menu, what we're going to get, drink, where we're going to go for dessert afterwards. I think that was just really fun to connect with them in that way.

Yeah, it's always going to be about tennis, but like I say, it's much bigger than that. I think we're excited for the crowd, too. I think they're going to have a lot of support, which I think will make it a real fun atmosphere.

Q. Shelby, can you talk about what it means to be playing in the Billie Jean King Cup compared to the Fed Cup, whether that name change makes a difference to you all in terms of how you welcome it, tackle the weekend?

SHELBY ROGERS: Of course. I think the pride and the

honor, that part, is still the same. But following someone like Billie Jean King, everything she's done for this sport, we wouldn't be here without her. I think it definitely makes it extra special.

It's so cool that she is going to be here as well, we get to see her, greet her, she'll be behind us supporting us. That's something you can't really put into words, I think. All the support she's given us, like I said, everything she's done for the sports. We owe everything to her.

Q. Asia, how much thought goes into this song thing? Do you go back and look at previous performances and get inspiration or kind of wing it?

ASIA MUHAMMAD: I was going to go with the wing it. I took the time to try my best and come up with a rap. It's not something I do every day (laughter). I have it in my notes. I'm as prepared as I can be. Excited to hear Des's rap also.

Yeah, I'm nervous. We really don't know what it's going to be. Just trying to breathe and just be ready.

CAPTAIN RINALDI: They're under a lot of pressure because Shelby Rogers pretty much...

ASIA MUHAMMAD: Shelby is absolutely remarkable. I can only imagine what these two are going to come up with.

CAPTAIN RINALDI: What was yours, Ali?

ALISON RISKE: We're not going to go into that.

CAPTAIN RINALDI: Jess, did you do one?

JESSICA PEGULA: Yes (laughter).

Q. Is this a karaoke deal or acapella?

ASIA MUHAMMAD: We wanted to do it together, but we aren't allowed. We tried to do a rap battle. We're just overthinking it a lot. We're just going to do mine. I do mine, Des does hers. Hopefully the team enjoys it.

Q. Shelby, you being a low country South Carolina native, how cool have these couple of days been for you? I would think with friends and family, short drive...

SHELBY ROGERS: Yeah, it great. That support is amazing. Anytime you're close to home, there's some really special feelings and memories that come with it.

I think the best for me the other day, the first question he said 'y'all.' Now we walk in here, it smells like fried chicken. Pretty unique (laughter). It's great.

Q. Des and Asia, more broadly about being named to your first Billie Jean King Cup tie, what has that meant to you? What has that been like so far from the tennis perspective, not singing?

DESIRAE KRAWCZYK: Yeah, no, it's definitely amazing to be on the team this year. I think Asia and I are really honored to represent our country, be with these girls and Kathy. It's been amazing.

ASIA MUHAMMAD: Yeah, what Des said. I only found out a few days ago. Kathy called me. I think I was just shocked. She was like, Oh, I mean, you didn't sound too excited.

I was like, I was. I was just shocked.

It was so last minute, but I'm so grateful to be here. I mean, the group of girls I get to be here with, they're amazing. We've been having so much fun. I'm so excited to just go out, cheer, whatever happens. I'm so excited.

Q. Des, as someone who played college tennis, what is that team environment like? What is different about it for you?

DESIRAE KRAWCZYK: Yeah, this definitely brings a lot of college memories. Being on the team is so much fun. You get the camaraderie of all these ladies. We just have really good team chemistry. It's just been a lot of fun. I'm so excited.

Q. Anything this week in Asheville that you are hoping to do or you have done that stands out as a highlight off the court?

JESSICA PEGULA: The escape room. We did an escape room last night. It was amazing. We got out in 40 minutes, so that was a success. We've eaten at some really good restaurants. I mean, I don't know. I got married here last fall, so, yeah, I'm back, which is weird.

Asia was at my wedding. Who would have thought we would be in Asheville in six months. I live in Florida. She lives in Vegas. It's not something we thought would happen.

They're throwing a baseball pitch tonight at 6. Make sure you cover that, 6 p.m.

If you have any recommendations, let us know. So far it's

been escape room and eat.

Q. Kathy, why Asheville to get married? Just because it seemed...

CAPTAIN RINALDI: I, like, Googled scenic weddings, and it came up. We came and we visited. It was beautiful. It was at the Biltmore. It was amazing. It was also kind of central to my family up north and me being in Florida. It was a good drive both ways. Yeah, it was awesome.

Q. The thought of your throwing out the first pitch, you could ask them if you could do a national anthem as a duet and that's the song.

ASIA MUHAMMAD: Remember we were joking (laughter).

DESIRAE KRAWCZYK: (Indiscernible).

Q. Kathy, you had to replace some players because of injury. In putting together a team like this, what is the mindset? Again, you put together other teams, lots of different players. Some of the things that went into your process of putting this team together to compete against the country you knew you'd be going against?

CAPTAIN RINALDI: Sure. It's always tough. I think when someone asked me what's the toughest job as a captain, it's putting the team together. We're so fortunate here in the U.S. that we have so many great players, singles and doubles players. I'm really proud that we have, like, 16 to 18 players in the top hundred in singles, but also that same exact number in doubles.

I'm very fortunate that we have so many players that raise their hand, that want to represent their country and play. It means so much to each and every one of these players. It's such an honor to me to be their captain.

It wasn't hard. As you see the team we have, it's incredible. It's unfortunate when a player is injured and they have to back out, but it's also great to know the depth we have in the U.S. to call on and they're willing to do that.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, everybody.

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