

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal: Arizona vs Texas A&M

Saturday, March 27, 2021

San Antonio, Texas, USA

Alamodome - Mercado

Arizona Wildcats

Aari McDonald

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference



Arizona 74, Texas A&M 59

THE MODERATOR: Aari, if you could start out with an opening statement.

AARI McDONALD: I am extremely proud of my teammates and my coaches. We just beat a great team that's coached by the legendary Gary Blair. I'm excited. We're peaking at the right time and ready to make some more history.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up to the floor for questions.

Q. Do you take it personal that people were questioning your offense?

AARI McDONALD: Oh, all the time. Anything someone says about our team, we take it personal. We show them literally the next game.

Q. Can you talk about the defensive energy out there tonight. You caused 19 turnovers and had 28 points off of those turnovers.

AARI McDONALD: Yeah, we know that our identity is on the defensive end. It starts our offense. We know we have to be aggressive. They have a tremendous point guard, very skilled and solid. It started with us. We have to lock her down. I think we did a great job tonight.

Q. Obviously with your scoring tonight, did you have a green light or was that something that kind of developed over the course of the game that you could just take that many shots?

AARI McDONALD: I mean, I was feeling it. I know that Coach Barnes is not going to stop me from shooting. She's always going to encourage me to keep shooting. My teammates kept doing that, as well. I kept telling her I'm feeling it. She didn't say no. So I'd say I had the green light tonight (laughter).

Q. What did you eat today? I mean, you scored double figures in 90 straight games, the longest active streak in the nation, 31 points, most by an Arizona player in a NCAA tournament game since 2000. What does this mean for you to take this team to the program's first Elite 8?

AARI McDONALD: Yikes. I wasn't surprised how I was scoring. I'm confident in my abilities. Once I get going, I'm hard to stop. I think I'm hard to stop as it is. I'm not being cocky at all, I'm just confident in what I can do, yeah.

I'm just excited. I'm liking how things are looking. Like I said, my teammates, they're stepping up at the right time. We're playing well together, offensively and defensively. So the sky's the limit right now.

Like Coach said, we're here for the long haul. We do not want to go home. It's do or die and we want to get to the championship game.

Q. Your defense set up your offense again. Did you see on film their size? You wore them down. Talk about that.

AARI McDONALD: Oh, yeah. That was the game plan, was to play solid defense, tenacious defense and run. That was the game plan. We know in the span of their two game, they played 84 minutes, played seven players. That was the game plan, to run. We did a great job, was looking for each other, and we were converting.

Q. You were playing so well. You brought up that you guys are peaking at the right time. I was thinking about the two games you played against Stanford, how bad the first one was, how much better the second one was even though you lost. How much do you think games like that in the Pac-12 prepped you for this

moment?

AARI McDONALD: The Pac-12 was the best conference in the country. We're stacked. We have, like, multiple teams that are really great. That really helped us. Like I said, they're talented, like we're a talented conference. I think playing against talented people, iron sharpens iron. We beat a great team tonight offensively and defensively. They're great. That says a lot about where we're going.

Q. You've had an interesting trajectory here at Arizona coming from Washington. After you sat out the three years, you've had a trajectory every year helping take this team to a higher level. What has that meant to you as far as taking the risk of coming to another program?

AARI McDONALD: That says a lot. That says I trust Coach Barnes with my life pretty much.

I knew what it was going to be like transferring to Arizona. I had to take everything with a grain of salt, I have to be positive knowing I was sitting out. I knew I had to get better, make my teammates better.

What a feeling. I'm just speechless. It's crazy. It's exciting. Trying not to get emotional. Man, nobody believed in us. We're coached by a great person, individual. She's like a big sister to us/mother. It's exciting. Just the other coaching staff, give props to them. It's been amazing. It's been a wonderful ride. It's not over yet.

Q. How much of the defense was focused on No. 5 Nixon? She scored 35, including the game winner the other night. Was she a focus? Was that where the defense started or was it just across the board?

AARI McDONALD: I will say it was across the board. But Coach Barnes challenged us to win our defensive matchups tonight, don't let them score. I take everything personal. I have the mentality nobody is going to score on me or go by me. I took it personal.

She's a really good guard. I give her credit, a lot of props. If we wanted to win, I knew I had to shut her down. She's a primary ball handler, it starts with her. I had to lock her down.

Q. At the end of the third quarter, you hit that three, where it sort of bounced up and went on. Did you feel at that moment that was it? You still had another quarter to play, but that was sort of the moment where maybe you felt it?

AARI McDONALD: I felt it in the first half honestly. I

mean, although the score was close, we controlled the tempo, the game the whole game. Texas A&M only led one time, I think it was 10-4. I knew once I started hitting, my teammates started hitting, my defense, it was the moment. I had no doubt we were going to win at all times. We did a great job of controlling the tempo in the game.

Q. You mentioned before how you came back to do something special at Arizona. Clearly you have. Still have a ways to go still potentially. What does it mean to get this team to the regional final for the first time ever?

AARI McDONALD: It means a lot. I just want to thank God. I mean, without Him, this wouldn't be possible. I'm proud of these ladies that are alongside of me. We put in the work. Through this weird year, we controlled what we could control.

I'm just so happy. We're not done yet. Like Coach said, we haven't arrived. We still have work to do. I believe we can go all the way.

Q. About you guys hitting your stride at the right time, I feel like that's something we hear in sports all the time, we're peaking or hitting our stride at the right time. What goes into that, especially when you think about this season, so many factors that feel inherently they would go against that. How are you hitting your stride at the right time right now?

AARI McDONALD: Focus on one opponent at a time. In practice getting better, making each other better. Staying the course and staying diligent and resilient. I think our coaches have done a great job putting us in great positions. I'm playing alongside some coachable people.

We're just focused, really hungry. We want to do something special. I think we have the chance to.

Q. The shooting percentage on the season was 38%. In the post-season you're shooting 53%. What do you think the difference is? Why are more shots going in for you? Do you feel like you're doing anything different than what you were doing throughout the regular season?

AARI McDONALD: I think I'm letting the game come to myself. I'm not forcing shots. I'm taking what the defense is giving me. I'm setting my feet more, making sure my mechanics is right. Yeah, pretty much nothing really different, but just not trying to force it, letting the game come to me.

Q. You talked about how much Coach Barnes meant

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

to you. What ways do you think she's helped make you a better player and inspired you?

AARI McDONALD: Just challenging me on and off the court, putting me in positions that are going to happen in game. She lets me call the shots. She helped me read the game the year I sat out. She's continuously helping me.

Like I say, if you have a relational person like a coach, you would run through walls for them. I trust her. Hey, she trusts me. I'll do anything for her.

Q. Do you think this is the best game you've played in an Arizona uniform?

AARI McDONALD: I will say it's one of them. I think that Texas game was a big one. Like she said, something about Texas. I might say this might be number one. This game meant a lot. A lot was at stake. So I would say, yeah, that was probably the biggest game.

Q. Can you just talk about after the buzzer went off, seeing all the fans and Coach Fisch, everybody being there to watch you celebrate this moment.

AARI McDONALD: I didn't even know Coach Fisch was here (smiling). That means a lot. They support us. That's amazing. They empower us, they support us. I love it. It doesn't get any better than that.

We're just going to keep trying to win for them. We're going to play with our hearts knowing they're out there cheering for us.

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