

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

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San Antonio, Texas, USA

Alamodome - Mercado

## Texas A&M Aggies

### Gary Blair

#### Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference



Arizona 74, Texas A&M 59

GARY BLAIR: We made good shots to open up the second half, but when they made their roll, we couldn't answer back because of our turnovers, guards wanting the ball at the right time. We've got to be able to break the press, not get back-tapped by guards hustling to make plays.

We looked like the younger team. They looked like the veteran team. I told my team the first thing has nothing to do with the game, but what these young ladies have gone through this year, never opted out of a game, the sacrifice that these 18- to 23-year-olds had to make, is unbelievable. That's probably the same as any coach would say right now, what we've had to go through.

A lot of adults could say, Well, we went through the same thing. Not if you're trying to be that student-athlete and pay the price that they had to pay, the mental price they had to pay. Being away from their loved ones, their friends, boyfriends, everybody. It was an unbelievable thing.

Our medical staff did a great job at A&M. That's the most important thing about this game today, is what these young ladies and young men over there on the men's side have sacrificed to make this thing happen.

We didn't do it just for the great television money of all this. We did it because we needed it and we wanted to give hope to the people out there that had lost jobs for over a year or were having to change jobs and be on unemployment. We did this to give the American people some hope. This is what student-athletes can do.

I'm just so proud of my team, particularly my seniors who

have given it all for me for the last four years.

Questions.

**Q. How frustrating was the defense that Arizona and their press, was that kind of what tipped the scale with how well they pressed you, weren't able to break their defense?**

GARY BLAIR: Sometimes, yes, we probably turned it over out of however many times, 19 turnovers, about six or seven out of the press. But if our strength is the guard play, they went for it and attacked. They didn't let us run our stuff. They didn't let us run our fluid offense which we were running in the first half, taking great shots, got off to a good start.

All of a sudden we'd make a stop, they would hit a three or something. They made the big plays to get the lead. But we see the same type of pressure from Georgia or from South Carolina. But we didn't handle it well. Arizona just had their hands in everything. They were deflecting balls. Then when we would drive the ball because we couldn't get it inside enough to Ciera, we didn't finish, we got it deflected or were not getting the calls going down the lane.

Sometimes you got to play through contact because they let you play more in the NCAA tournament. They do not call the little silly, handshaking fouls, all that type of stuff. They let you play.

As a coach and as a player, you've got to learn to play through it. We didn't play through it very well. Arizona did. But they were a step quicker to almost every loose ball than we were.

If I'm not mistaken, also they only got only four offensive boards in the whole ballgame. It's not that they were killing us there. They were killing us with our turnovers and their pressure and in their corner threes they were hitting the heck out of.

**Q. As this season comes to a close, can you reflected on your biggest takeaway from your team this season?**

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GARY BLAIR: I thought I did in my opening statement. But this year means more to me as a coach than any team I have ever coached because of what these young people have had to go through.

Winning the national championship was great, but that championship team did not have to go through what these young ladies and all the people in our country have had to go through. There will be a thousand books made on this. CNN, 60 Minutes. It was probably tough on you, too, because you're young just like most people, actually younger than me.

But this team is beautiful. We had zero problems all year. That's the character and the chemistry and who we bring into this program. We've got some talented kids coming back next year with a lot of leadership. We've got four freshmen who gave me everything they had this year knowing they were not going to have minutes. We've got three very good freshmen coming in next year.

Next.

**Q. Obviously not the ending you had envisioned tonight. When you look back, you won the SEC regular season championship, regular season title. How do you judge a successful season when you evaluate start to finish?**

GARY BLAIR: Did our kids enjoy playing together as a basketball team? Did our kids enjoy the bonding that they had to do separately with the four walls that surround them either in the hotels or their apartments or their dorm rooms?

I mean, that's tough. I'm not sure if I could have done it at that age. But these kids, they found a way. That's what makes the future of these kids so well. I've got five of 'em working on their masters. We graduate kids, we recruit good kids. Hopefully this coaching staff can realize how much work we have to do to replace the ones that go on another direction.

But if they decide to come back, I guarantee I love every damn one of 'em. We'll toss it up and do it again.

**Q. Back to the quickness, you mentioned Georgia. Are their five players quicker than Georgia's five players? Was that the scheme they were running? Your players inside missed a lot of shots again early with contact. How much of a factor do you feel that was?**

GARY BLAIR: That's huge. We talked about that. We've been having problems with that. But I'm not going to trade

those post players inside. They've got to learn they're not going to call these cheap fouls. One of our keys on the board was be able to score the conventional three-point play - the basket and the foul. Don't worry about the foul, but make sure you score the basket.

We missed a lot of layups. We missed a lot of post play. We didn't have the three-point shooters that Arizona had. Our matchup zone was not as good. When we did press, we forced a couple turnovers, but not enough to really bother them.

They won the game because 18-19 in turnovers, just like we won the game the night before, seven versus 24, 11 versus 18 in the first ballgame. Turnovers can kill you. You can overcome the missed free throws or the blown layups, but you cannot overcome the turnovers.

What was the second part? I was in another world there.

**Q. The five players, their overall quickness. You mentioned Georgia. Do you feel Arizona was quicker than any player you played or was it the fact their schemes played off?**

GARY BLAIR: No, not their other kids. I think Georgia is just as quick and South Carolina is. But the point guard, McDonald, that's different. That's different. She was so good at coming off. You cannot get her in foul trouble. She doesn't foul. Her help-side defense, her steals, everything about her. She is the real deal. She's going to have a long career.

Now, I compared her to Pointer and to Henderson, Pointer of LSU, Henderson of South Carolina. This kid, 18 at half, we generally do not allow 18 for a whole ballgame for any individual. But she sliced us up at the top, knew when to come off. When we would play our matchup zone early, she would still get the ball with three to four seconds and make something happen herself. That was the quickest.

Pellington, the backup guard, did a very good job for them, as well.

Isn't it funny we've lost the rebounding, the last three games, and we won the rebounding tonight? But all of a sudden turnovers and sometimes not finishing cost you the ballgame.

When we shoot 47%, that's going to generally win 90% of the time. But today the turnovers, their quickness, their ability to make plays, the loose balls, they were a step quicker the whole night.

**Q. How encouraged are you about the future of this**

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**program? You could be losing some key pieces, but just the experience that a lot of these younger players have moving forward.**

GARY BLAIR: Well, when you look at what Jordan Nixon did in the first two ball games, particularly from about January the 10th on, she had a great, great year. That's a great place to start from right there. They were going to make sure she didn't beat us herself.

What she did in those first twoball games, she became y'all's darling, the media's darling. You would not believe how much attention she has given to Texas A&M and to herself and to her teammates, what she has accomplished here.

We were America's team for a while. But as soon as you start patting yourself on the back, that's when somebody's going to make up, they were not going to give her. She had one open shot the whole game. That's what she hit the step-back three. Other than that she probably forced a few more.

What a young lady to have coming back. Very similar to Johnny Manziel when he got all that attention for beating Alabama back then. Then we still had the rest of the season to play.

Our strength is getting four people in double figures and sharing the basketball. That's our strength. We were doing it early. We got out of that. We started playing too much one-on-one basketball. That's on me. We were not running our offense near the end of the second quarter and we were still only three points back.

**Q. I know you did not reach the ultimate goal for this season, but were there some goals that your team reached this season? What did you say to the team as you walked off of the court tonight? What were your words to them?**

GARY BLAIR: When I got to the locker room, we didn't talk about the game itself. We talked about what this team had overcome and gone through, just like other young ladies in other locker rooms or dugouts or football fields, what we've all gone through. That was my message, just a "thank you".

When I looked up in the standing knowing 90% of the fans were Aggies up there, I felt like, gosh, we wanted to give it to them so much. A lot of people drove from all over the state of Texas and other places to come see this ballgame. We wanted to be that little team that could. We just didn't get it done. Just like NC State in the first game, didn't get it done.

Sometimes execution is the most beautiful thing you see in basketball. They executed a lot better than we did. When they execute better than us, that comes back to me. I'm the head coach. I'm in charge of execution.

We'll work on it. We'll get it better. But it will hit me later as we drive back home. But I wish like anything I could just sit there and take my kids out to dinner and have a room by ourselves and just laugh and talk about and have the reflection on this year, what it has meant to each one of us individually.

We're not pointing fingers on this team. We always look ourselves in the mirror and then we realize how lucky we are to play in game of basketball and have the opportunity.

The number winning thing that A&M is known for is leadership. And we have leadership right here. If I'm a boss, I'm out there saying, Gosh, I want every one of your seniors, if they don't go play pro ball, I want them, because I see the heart and soul that they have. That's what this team is all about, it's about the heart and the soul. We try to give you our best every day.

I appreciate everything y'all done for us this year. I've got another young lady coming up that's a whole heck of a ballplayer. You just realize how much effort she gave in the whole game with her 17 points, coming across that lane, just tearing in there. She's a special, special lady. I know she hasn't played her last game. Thank y'all.

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